

Growing to Maturity:

The Message of Colossians" #2

"Paul's Priorities in Prayer"

Col. 1:9-14

--CEFC 7/12/20;

Topic: Prayer

One of my unfulfilled life ambitions in life

is to be able speak a second language.

I've studied languages,

I can read somewhat in some languages,

but I have never been fluent in anything but English,

I have great respect for people like Samuel Juma

who, I think, can speak at least five languages.

I just don't think it's going to happen for me.

I shudder at the thought of the endless hours of tedious study it would take for me

to learn a language like Mandarin Chinese,

but, you know, there are millions of two and three-year-olds

who do it effortlessly every year!

How does that happen?

It is an amazing thing, when you think about it.

Essentially, we acquire language as children by being immersed in a sea of words.

Certainly we are instructed and corrected,

but most of what we learn about a language

we learn as we listen to other people speaking.

We simply absorb it.

We begin to recognize meaning and associations--

we say "Mama" and "Dada";

we learn to say "no" (usually very quickly);

and other useful things, like "I want".

We begin to identify certain words with certain things--

bottle, blanket, bear.

As we are a part of a language community,

we soon learn, almost by osmosis,

the sounds and patterns of that language.

I think a similar process takes place

in learning what it means to live as a follower of Christ.

Certainly there is instruction that takes place

on what it means to become a Christian

and how Christians ought to behave.

We are taught by the Bible--that authoritative word of God.

But there is another dimension to that instruction--

it doesn't replace Bible teaching, but it supplements it,

and, in practice, it shapes how that Bible teaching is understood.

We learn to live as Christians as we are immersed in a Christian community--

and in that community we pick up
Christian beliefs and values and ways of living
by observing other Christians.

This, I think, is what is associated with the notion of **discipleship**--
a disciple is a learner, but a disciple is more than just a student
as we in our Western world understand that term.

We think of students as those who receive information--
and that information can come from a book or a lecture or a podcast--
it doesn't matter.

But a disciple is a learner who is attached to a teacher.

A disciple listens to the teacher and observes the teacher
and seeks not only to gain the information that the teacher has to convey,
but also to actually become like the teacher in some way.

The word "**mentor**" begins to get at this, but perhaps a better one is ***apprentice***.

A person becomes an apprentice to a plumber or a violin maker
because the knowledge they have to convey
goes beyond mere information.

It is a skill, a way of life, an art form--
you actually have to see it done,
you have to experience it,
to really learn it.

So it is with the Christian life--
we have to see it done to learn what it's all about.

This is why Jesus chose twelve men to be ***with him***.

He didn't just say, "*Listen* to me," but "*Follow* me"--

"Do as I do, live as I live."

"A disciple is not above his teacher,

nor a servant above his master," Jesus said.

"It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher,

and the servant like his master" (Matt. 10:24-25).

The Apostle Paul understood this, too--

To the Thessalonians, he wrote--"You know how we lived among you for your sake.

You became *imitators* of us and of the Lord;" (1Ths. 1:5)

To the Philippians he said--

"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or *seen in me* --

put it into practice." (Phil. 4:9)

And to the Corinthian Christians he writes--"I became your father through the gospel.

Therefore I urge you to *imitate* me.

For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love,

who is faithful in the Lord.

He will remind you of *my way of life* in Christ Jesus,

which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church." (1Cor. 4:15)

and "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." (1Cor. 11:1)

We learn as disciples by following the example of others.

I have to say, this notion of modeling was very important in my life.

I enrolled in college in the summer immediately after I graduated from high school.

I was a very young Christian,
and as a freshman I was pleased to get invited to church by a 4th year senior,
who took me under his wing
and introduced me to some of his friends from the church.
That summer I hung out with upperclassmen and even graduate students
who took their Christian faith very seriously.
I observed their lives,
I noticed what their priorities were,
what was important to them,
how their faith impacted their behavior.
I saw them read the Bible;
I heard them pray,
I watched them share their faith with unbelievers.
It was a great summer,
and many of the patterns I take for granted today in my own life,
I learned from them.

And isn't this the way learning takes place in our homes--

Dads, Moms, the kids are watching!

That's why I always tell parents that they can never depend upon

church programs alone to impart Christian faith to their kids.

Kids may be in Sunday School and Kids Worship and even some Kids Club

only a few hours a week.

Even a Christian school can't do it.

The most formative influence on kids will always be their parents.

I love the illustration of the father and his son climbing a mountain together--

on one particularly dangerous segment, as they are scaling the face,
the son yells up to his father,

"Take the good path, Dad. I'm right behind you!"

This is the greatest responsibility of parenthood--

to be the kind of person you want your children to become.

That's why I tell the parents

that in the end, their own spiritual health and vitality--their own Christian lives--

will shape their kids more than any other factor.

For good or ill, kids will often take after their parents.

As with language, that's the way we learn.

We are imitators.

We learn by example. //

This has all sorts of applications for us

as we think of how we make disciples in our church

especially our need to build

meaningful relationships with one another.

But this morning I want to focus on one thing the Apostle Paul has to teach us--

by his example.

In our passage from Paul's letter to the Colossians

the Apostle is speaking about his prayer for the believers there.

What can we learn by examining the prayer life of Paul?

How does he pray?

What are his priorities in prayer?

How can we imitate Paul as he imitates the Lord?

But before we consider Paul's priorities *in* prayer,
we have to take note of Paul's priority *of* prayer.

Col. 1:9--"since the day we heard about you,
we have not stopped praying for you"

Now I don't think that Paul was engaged in some perpetual prayer meeting--
one that never ended,
or that he existed in some persistent mystical state
that enabled him to pray no matter what else he was doing.

There are indications that Paul did have regular times of prayer (cf. Rom. 1:15,16),
and that in those times
he regularly brought these Colossian believers before God.
He prayed for them persistently.
He made prayer for them a priority in his life.

And remember, these were people, most of them, that he had never met.

But he was connected to them through his fellow worker Epaphras,
who, presumably, had been converted under Paul's ministry,
and who had then taken the gospel to the town of Colossae.

Paul was in a sense their spiritual grandfather--
and these were people that he cared for deeply
and he prayed for constantly.

And by praying relentlessly for them in this way,

Paul shows us that there are some things for which we will always need prayer.¹

There are some blessings of God,
some things that are central to our flourishing as human beings,
for which we must never stop praying.

We need to pray for these things,
for prayer is the means by which we appropriate
the blessings God has for us as his children in Christ,
and he wants us to keep asking him for those blessings.

Our respectful request in prayer reminds us that they come from his hand
and through his power.

There are divine blessings that are only brought about by divine power,
so we are to keep asking God for them.

You could say that prayer represents the antithesis to self-sufficiency—

Prayer is the posture of the son before his father—
a recognized dependence before a loving and gracious benefactor.

If we are not praying, we haven't understood what James says,

that **"Every good and perfect gift is from above,
coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights,
who does not change like shifting shadows"** (Js. 1:17).

Paul says **"we have not stopped praying for you."**

So here, in this passage, we see Paul's priority *of* prayer.

¹So Carson, *Call*, p. 99.

And what is it exactly that Paul doesn't stop praying *about*
when he prays for these people?

Let's turn now to **Paul's priorities *in* prayer.**

There is one central theme, one chief petition, in Paul's prayer--

He says, "For this reason,

since the day we heard about you,

we have not stopped praying for you

and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will

through the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives,"

Paul's prayer is that God might fill these believers

with the Spirit-driven,

Spirit-empowered, knowledge of his will.

Now when we think of "knowing God's will"

immediately we think of questions like

where should I go to college?

or whom should I marry?

or what job should I take?

or should buy a new dishwasher?

God's will is his answer to our questions about direction in life.

Which road should I take?

And it is right that we should take those important questions to God—

and not to some fortune teller or palm reader,
for God alone has perfect wisdom,
and he alone knows where those roads may lead.

But that is a very limited understanding of what the will of God is all about,
and in the grand scheme of things, those questions
are far less significant than we think.

Paul's prayer here is for something much bigger than that.
What he's talking about here involves a far broader vision
of God's "**wisdom and understanding.**"
It involves the way we look at the world
and how we interact with everything in it.

God's will, in the Bible, is the expression of his righteous rule in the world
and in our lives--
as in "**Thy kingdom come; thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**"

That is what Paul wants these Colossians to know—
the good and gracious will of our King,
who is our heavenly Father.

And this is not mere intellectual knowledge,
the kind that can come in reading a book of theology--
though that certainly couldn't hurt!

The word Paul uses for "knowledge" here, *ejpivgnwsi*,
has a more personal content--
it is knowledge that is experienced and appropriated—

it is the knowledge of the disciple;
it is knowledge that has become truly mine;
it is a knowledge that impacts the way I live.

For Paul, the knowledge of God's will was more than a list of rules--

do's and don'ts for every situation.

He had no interest in instituting a new law.

This knowledge of God's will was something that was embodied

in the person of Jesus Christ.

It was made known in his teaching,

and it was displayed in his actions,

and it is brought home to our hearts

by the power of the Holy Spirit,

that same Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures.

The knowledge of the will of God was nothing less than

developing the mind of Christ.

As Paul says in Romans 12—

We are no longer to conformed to the pattern of this world,

but we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Then we will be able **“to test and approve what God's will is—**

his good, pleasing and perfect will” (12:2).

That's what Paul prays for—

that we may know that good, pleasing, and perfect will of God for our lives.

That's his highest priority in prayer.

He wants these believers to be filled with the knowledge,

that internalized and life-transforming experience,

He wants them to think the thoughts of God,
to share the heart of God,
to enter into the rule of God in this world
in every area of their lives.

Just imagine what such a life would look like—
it would be life full of goodness, truth, and beauty.
It would reflect the very life of Jesus.

And the rest of what Paul prays here flows from that central petition.

v. 10--"And we pray this
in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord."

Paul talks elsewhere about,
conducting yourselves "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27)
or of living a life "worthy of the calling you have received" (Eph. 4:1).

This is the language of privilege—
There's a lot of talk these days about "white privilege,"
well, here Paul is assuming a certain "Christian privilege."
It is the recognition of the privileged position you now hold
and the weighty responsibility which that privilege entails.

You are recipients of the gospel of Christ.
He has called you to belong to him,

as a sheep in his fold,
as a child in his family--
he is now your Lord, your Master.

How ought you to live as a result of who you are and **whose** you are?

What is appropriate for a person in your privileged position?

I think of the military expression which speaks of "behavior unbecoming of an officer."

That's a court-martial-able offense.

Paul says, since you are on active duty as a soldier of Christ,

you are not to engage in behavior unbecoming of a Christian--

No, you are to live a life "**worthy of the Lord.**"

This is what knowing the will of God will enable you to do.

It means you won't do stupid stuff that brings shame on yourself,

and even worse, shame on the name of Christ.

Instead, you will do things that "**please him in every way.**"

We are loved by a gracious heavenly Father—

we don't earn his love,

we respond to it.

As his beloved children, we want to please him.

Dads, Moms, isn't that the kind of response you want to see from your children?

So before you act, you have to ask yourself,

"What would Jesus think of this?"

What would he think if he were here with me? (and of course, he is!)

Would my words or my conduct bring shame to his name,

or would he be pleased?"

The knowledge of the will of God for which Paul prays
would result in behavior that will please the Lord in every way.

Another result of the knowledge of the will of God is mentioned in v.10--
that we might **bear fruit in every good work**
and grow in the knowledge of God.

The image is of a vineyard or a fruit tree--
which, if it is healthy, at the harvest, brings forth abundant fruit,
and then it sends forth new shoots
so that next year it can be even more fruitful.

This is what knowing and living in the will of God does for us--
it gives us life, which issues in fruit,
and then results in even more growth.

And what is this fruit?--

Paul calls it "**fruit in every good work.**"

it is a tangible sort of fruit--

it is something that can be seen--

"By their fruit you will recognize them," Jesus says.

"For we are God's workmanship," Paul writes in Eph. 2:10,

"created in Christ Jesus to do good works,

which God prepared in advance for us to do." /

What good works are you engaged in?

What good fruit is issuing from your life?

How are you helping others?

How are you bringing love and life to others?—

giving aid those who are poor,

defending those who are weak,

seeking justice for the oppressed.

And isn't that a hot topic in our culture today

that we as a church will be talking more about.

How are you displaying Christ to those around you—

sharing him and so pointing to the kingdom of God?

Doing God's will will issue in just those kinds of deeds.

And as a result, you will grow.

How?

"in the knowledge of God."

Isn't that circular--

Knowing God's will will result in bearing fruit,

and bearing fruit will result in growing in the knowledge of God.

This is just another way of saying what Jesus said in John 7:17--

"If anyone chooses to do God's will,

he will find out whether my teaching comes from God

or whether I speak on my own."

In other words, knowing and doing God's will

leads to a deepened knowledge of God and his will.

But really, it's not a circle, it's a spiral--

God entrusts more of himself

to those who entrust more of themselves to him

and who do what he says.

So don't expect more from God

when you refuse to put into practice what he's already revealed to you.

Doing the will of God leads to an increased knowledge of God.

Is there something God wants you to do—

if you want to grow in your knowledge of God, you must do it.

That's why Paul's priority in prayer is that we be filled

with the knowledge, with the living experience, of God's will,

because he wants us to grow in our knowledge of God.

Paul prays for this filling with the knowledge of the will of God,

next, because through it,

we will be "**strengthened with all power**

according to his glorious might

so that we may have great endurance and patience."

You see, this is why we need to pray--

because, as we said, prayer is an expression of our weakness,

it is a declaration of our need,

it is an act of dependence on God.

Prayer says, "I need you, Lord.

I need your help;
I need your strength.”

And Paul is confident that the Lord will respond to that prayer--

he will give us the strength to accomplish what he commands us to do.

He will enable us to persevere when we feel like giving up.

He will empower us to be patient,

when everything inside says,

"I'm fed up, and I can't take it anymore."

For when we know that God's will is what really matters,

and when we recognize that God is really in control of our lives,

and when we believe that all that he allows to happen to us

is ultimately an expression of his love for us,

then suddenly we have good reason to be patient.

My agenda may be frustrated by sitting in this traffic,

my plans may have been rudely interrupted by this virus,

my life may be turned upside down by this cancer,

but God knew all about it--

he's got it under control,

he feels our pain,

but he's going to use it for good in my life.

It is his will, his agenda, not mine, that is most important.

That's how patience can grow, as we grow in our knowledge of God's will.

Finally, being filled with the knowledge of God's will
will result in our "joyfully giving thanks to the Father."

This makes perfect sense, doesn't it,
for a knowledge of God's will
is a knowledge of his saving work in Jesus Christ;
it is a knowledge of the gospel message.

It is a knowledge of the message
that though we were in rebellion against God and his rule in our lives,
and we were justly condemned and ripe for God's judgment,
in his mercy, he loved us enough to send his Son into the world to save us.
Jesus died on a Roman cross for our sin,
and he was raised from the grave as Lord of all to give us new life.
We now have an eternal hope that not even death can destroy.

We have done nothing to deserve God's favor.

Our sin has disqualified us for entrance into his presence.

But it was God, as Paul says in v. 12--

"who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of God's holy people
in the kingdom of light.

13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness

and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves,

14 in whom we have redemption,

the forgiveness of sins."

This is God's work--not ours.

He has done this--not us.

He has qualified us to share in a great inheritance,

he has forgiven us for all the ways we had offended him,
he has rescued us from a dominion of darkness
so that we might enter into a new world filled with light,
he has bought us out of our slavery to sin
into the moral freedom he gives,
and he has transferred us into the kingdom of his Son he loves,
that sphere in which Jesus rules as Lord.

We can now live in the glowing light of his loving rule.

And for all that, we are to joyfully give thanks to him. //

This is the message of the gospel,

and a knowledge of God's will must include an understanding of this good news.

That's why knowing and doing God's will

will include an attitude of joyful thanksgiving,

and those who make *doing the will of God* a sacrificial drudgery—

they have missed it.

They have forgotten what that will is all about.

9 For this reason,

since the day we heard about you,

we have not stopped praying for you

and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will

through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

10 And we pray this

in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord
and may please him in every way:
bearing fruit in every good work,
growing in the knowledge of God,
11 being strengthened with all power
according to his glorious might
so that you may have great endurance and patience,
and joyfully
12 giving thanks to the Father,
who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints
in the kingdom of light.
13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves,
14 in whom we have redemption,
the forgiveness of sins.

What a glorious prayer this is--

Parents, let me encourage you to pray this prayer for your children.

It will help to remind you of what you should most want for them--

not wealth,

not positions of power,

not popularity with their peers--

but that they may be filled with the knowledge of God's will.

This prayer ought to be prayed by all of us--constantly.

Please, when you think of it, please pray it for me.

Prayer was a priority of Paul—

and these were his priorities when he prayed.

How about us?

How about you?

"Oh, but I'm just too busy to pray," you may say.

That's what we all feel, isn't it.

I like the illustration I came across in a book by Don Carson on prayer.²

A woman named Lillian Guild and her husband were driving along

and happened to notice a late-model Cadillac with its hood up,

parked at the side of the road.

Its driver appeared somewhat perplexed and agitated.

Mrs. Guild and her husband pulled over to see if they could offer assistance.

The stranded driver hastily and somewhat sheepishly explained

that he had known when he left home that he was nearly on empty,

but he had been in such a hurry to get to an important business meeting

that he had not taken time to fill up his tank.

So he ran out of gas.

²Cf. Carson, *Call*, p. 111, citing Lillian Guild.

The Guilds happened to have a spare gallon of gas with them,
so they emptied it into the thirsty Cadillac.
They told the other driver of a service station a few miles down the road.
Thanking them profusely, he sped off.

Twelve miles or so later, they saw the same car,
hood up and stranded at the side of the road.
They again pulled over and greeted the same driver who was even more agitated.
You guessed it:

he was in such a hurry for his business meeting
that he had decided to skip the service station and press on
in the dim hope that the gallon he had received
would get him to his destination. //

It's hard to believe that anyone could be so stupid,
until we remember that that is exactly how many of us
go about the business of Christian living.
We are so busy, and so intent on getting to the next item of business
that we forget or, worse, put off stopping for fuel.

And I confess that Christian leaders,
who are sometimes the busiest,
are often the worst offenders.

No, we've got to find time to pray,
or we can give up trying to live as Christians, real Christians,
Christians who live in the power of God
rather than simply in our own power.

For as pioneer missionary Hudson Taylor said,

"When we work, we work,
when we pray, God works."

Have you got it when it comes to the priority of prayer?

And have you got it when it comes to priorities in prayer?

Do Paul's priorities in this prayer reflect your priorities?

Or do you just pray when there is some physical problem--
when someone is sick or injured?

Or do you just pray when it is a pressing concern in your own life
or in the life of someone very close to you?

Or do you pray just when there is some decision to be made?

Is it just, "Lord, make me feel better"!

or "Lord, get me out of this mess!"?

Do you have to see immediate tangible results when you pray?

And if not, do you just give up?

Well, if so, look again at Paul's prayer--

It wasn't for any immediate, felt need.

It was for the ultimate and deepest need of people he didn't even know--
their need to know the will of God.

And in Paul's mind, this kind of prayer was worth praying constantly.

There was something intrinsically good about this kind of prayer--

It was necessary--for without God's power, we can do nothing.

And it was valuable--

it was valuable because he was praying

for what was most dear to the heart of God--

that we human beings might know him

and live according to his good will.

Paul's prayer was valuable because, as strange as this may sound,

by praying in this way, Paul was participating

in God's rule of the world.

That's what we do when we pray.

You know, in the beginning God created human beings to rule over his creation

under his authority.

And one of the great promises of the Bible is that in the new heaven and the new earth

those who have followed Christ will sit on thrones

sharing in his rule.³

If the Lord had an application for that job--sitting on one of those thrones

and ruling over his creation--

what sort of qualification,

what sort of experience

would he look for on your resume?

³cf. Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 22:5; 1Cor. 6:2; Matt. 19:28 Luke 22:30.

Theological degrees?

Management training?

Church leadership positions?

I think he would look for how you *prayed*.

It is in praying that we participate in God's rule in the world.

Paul in this passage this morning has given us an example to learn from.

Here we have a model prayer.

Models like this are important.

I remember once going to one of my son Matt's football practices in college

and toward the end of the practice one of the players got hurt,

and the trainers were attending to him, and it looked fairly serious.

Well, they finished the practice and the players gathered around the coaches,

and I saw them all take off their helmets and bow their heads.

Afterwards I asked Matt what had happened.

He said that one of the coaches suggested they pray for this injured player.

So they took their helmets off;

there was a moment of awkward silence,

and then someone staring praying--

"Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name, . . ."

and he continued with the Lord's prayer.

My first thought was, That must be the only prayer he knew.

That's the only language of prayer he had learned,

that's the only prayer had ever heard.

Now, don't misunderstand me, that's not a bad model--

and when prayed with understanding,

that prayer can cover just about everything that is worth praying for.

But Paul has given us another model--

a model to expand our language of prayer,

to give us a broader vocabulary

in the way we speak to God.

Let's listen to it,

and let's learn to speak it ourselves.

So that what it says may also be true of us.

May we imitate Paul as he follows the Lord;

may we know and live the gracious will of God.

Prayer—

Our Closing Song is in the form of a Prayer--:

#379 Take My Life and Let It Be [VV. 1,2,5,6

May it reflect the prayer of our own hearts.

Benediction:

2Pet. 3:18—

“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.”

Growing to Maturity:

The Message of Colossians" #2

July 9, 2020

"Paul's Priorities in Prayer"

Col. 1:9-14

We learn more from what people do than what they say. So what is Paul doing in our passage from Colossians that we are looking at this morning? He is praying (or at least reporting on his praying). How can we follow Paul's example?

I. Paul's Priority *of* Prayer--

"we have not stopped praying for you" (v.9)

II. Paul's Priorities in Prayer--

To be filled with the knowledge of God's will--

- Living a life worthy of the Lord
- Bearing fruit and growing in knowledge
- Being strengthened to endure

•Giving thanks to the Father

Have you got it?

Sermon Response:

"Paul's Priorities in Prayer"

Col. 1:9-14

- Apparently Paul did not know many of the Colossian believers personally (cf. 1:8), but he still prays for them "constantly" (v.9). What Christians do you pray for regularly (even if you don't know them personally)? What might be the value of such praying? Pray for someone like that today.
- What can you do to grow in the knowledge of God's will? What have you learned about that will in the last year? What has this prayer of Paul taught you about that will?
- What can you do today with the express purpose of pleasing the Lord Jesus? List five possibilities and go and do two of them.
- In what areas do you feel you need endurance and patience? Pray specifically that you might be strengthened with God's might to meet that challenge today.
- Reflect upon your membership in the kingdom of Christ in light in which you have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Thank God for it, and ask that you might live in a manner consistent with it and worthy of it.
- Take time to pray this prayer for one another.