

Your Best Prayer Now

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! Again, we're thankful to gather.

Philippians 1. We'll start reading in verse 9.

There the Apostle Paul writes, It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and the praise of God.

It's such a joy for us to open God's Word this morning, and I trust learn from Him, receive from Him. In my 17 years of being a Christian, I've met very few people that are satisfied with their prayer life.

[1 : 42] Prayer is one of those spiritual disciplines. Almost all Christians feel that they just are inadequate. They just don't have it quite like they like it.

They feel barely even able to talk about it. You know, it's one of those disciplines. We just kind of move on, change subjects. The great 20th century British preacher, Martin Lloyd-Jones, says he approaches the subject of prayer with great diffidence, meaning kind of uncertainty, much hesitation, and a sense of utter unworthiness.

Now, he wrote many books, but he said for those reasons, he concluded he was unable to write a book on prayer, even a booklet. He wouldn't write. Another well-known scholar from the 50s said, it's difficult, even a formidable, intimidating thing to write on prayer.

Now, I'm sure if some booksellers were in the room this morning, or some publishers were in this room this morning, we'd probably add our name to the list. Now, I might be open to writing another book, but I'm not open to writing a book on prayer.

Maybe you don't have any books in your head, nor do I, but we would be hesitant to write or to talk even on this subject. And why? Why it's so difficult to talk about prayer?

[3 : 01] Because it's that discipline. It's a discipline we fail most. You know, it seems like it should be so easy to pray, right? We're just communicating with our Father, who's adopted us into His family.

So it should just be effortlessly, we should be able to pray and offer our request to Him. But it's not. It seems like it should be so simple as well.

But we're often thrown off by so many nagging questions, like how do I pray? When do I pray? I mean, what specifically do I pray?

How do I prepare to pray? And how do I keep on praying when my mind begins to stray? I know I'm not alone in that. How do we keep praying, though it doesn't seem to change anything?

I mean, for the same thing for 10 years, how do I pray when I feel dry? You know, I felt dry. How do I pray when I don't feel like it? So far too often, rather than praying without ceasing, we have trouble even starting and stumble into prayerlessness.

[4 : 11] And it's not okay. It would be very easy for me to preach this morning in such a way that would lead us all deeply convicted about how we don't pray, but that wouldn't help either. So that's not what I'm going to do.

This morning, I believe God wants to help us to pray. I believe God wants to help me to pray. I believe God wants to help you to pray. He wants us to pray more deeply and more directly.

In this passage, after expressing his confidence that God is going to complete the work he began in the Philippian church, Paul prays for them. In his prayer, he unveils the heart of what they need to mature and endure in this life.

His prayer, ask God, essentially just ask God to push the gospel deep into their hearts so that it shapes all that they do, all that they say, and all that they think. And his prayer indeed would be that all of Christ, they would receive all of Christ and live out all of life in light of it.

And so this morning, as we overhear, as we study, as we give attention to this prayer, Paul's prayer, the Philippians, God seeks to build our faith for prayer, to help us know how to pray directly and deeply.

[5 : 20] In a word, to pray to be so shaped by Christ that you always choose the best. Pray to be so shaped by Christ that you always choose the best.

I'm going to define the best as we get going, but that's where we're going. First point is, think deeply. Think deeply. As we seek to mature and endure in Christ, Paul seeks to push the gospel deep into our hearts, and he begins in a way that's quite surprising, honestly.

He says, I pray. Now what is love? Song that starts with that chorus. You know, love, folks say, is the cardinal virtue. You ever heard that phrase?

It just means the most fundamental, the most basic virtue to being a Christian. And so Jesus says, you will know, or they will know, you are Christians by your love.

They'll know you're Christians. Biblically, love is doing undeserved good to others. One writer says, in this passage, in this reference to love, that God helps us.

[6 : 26] Love is to shape all of our lives. He says, in this passage, more than any other passage in Scripture, defines the way love is to shape every aspect of who we are, our thoughts, our affections.

Love may abound more and more. He's essentially saying, there should be no limit to your love. But notice, it doesn't say that your love for God may abound.

Others may abound more and more. I think what's going on here is that your love for everyone, your love for God, your love for everyone, therefore, because they're one and the same, if you love God, you're supposed to love your neighbor, that it will grow and grow and grow.

The idea is that, literally the word is, overflow its banks. You know, we don't like floods. You know, but the flood of love, that's what we need. We need to overflow its banks again and again and again.

The idea is that love should grow in such a way that it grows beyond our planned expressions of it. Now, all of us are good at loving when we got it planned out, right? When you can add it into your calendar on Saturday morning, I'm going to love from 10 to 12.

[7 : 30] You know, I'm going to be nice to my kids, but it's when they come and knock on the door or walk into your bedroom in the middle of the night that it's hard to love. And that's when they're really watching. That's the idea that we should love and do good to others in such a way that it just grows and grows and grows.

But he quickly adds, love should not begin in the heart. It begins in the head. Now, look at that. It just strikes me. Look back down there in verse 9.

It says, your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment. How would you complete Paul's sentence? That your love may abound more and more. Perhaps you'd say with openness.

I think that's what God wants. He wants our love to abound with openness or maybe you complete it with acceptance. That's what God's after. That your love would abound with acceptance or compassion or gentleness.

But that's not what Paul stresses at all. He says, the first characteristic of your love is that it would be, it would come from deep and right thinking. Our love is to begin with knowledge.

[8 : 41] It's to be directed by content, by truth, by knowledge. Not mere knowledge as Paul said in 1 Corinthians. Mere knowledge puffs up. What God has in mind is true knowledge.

Now, if you take, if you open your book or you go to the back of your Bible and you look through the concordance, there's numerous reference to know in the Old Testament. To knowledge, this idea of knowledge.

And all throughout the Old Testament when it talks about knowledge of another person is talking about an intimate relational knowledge. It's not talking about how you know something about someone.

I can scroll through Twitter, I can scroll through Instagram, I can know about someone, but that doesn't mean I know them. And that's what Paul's getting at. He wants us to know God in such a way that we know how to love.

Not just know about Him, but to truly know Him. To know His likes and dislikes. To know His joys and fears, His thoughts and feelings. To know Him so well that He shapes our life.

[9 : 42] Have you ever noticed that when you hang out with someone, you start sounding like them? My kids came back from overnight the other night and one of my friends that kept them, he told them that something, this or that.

He said, just go with it. And the other day we were driving down the road and I said something and Rev just said, Dad, just go with it. What do you mean just go with it?

Where did you just get go with it? But we become like those we are around. Yeah, I remember meeting a Vietnamese man one time from Alabama.

And though he was born in Vietnam, was an immigrant to the United States, he had this thick, sideways, Alabama accent. And he loved hunting.

He was all out in his camo and his name. He'd taken on the American name Dean. I was like, this is such a collision of worlds for me. But that's what happened. We kind of become like who we're around.

[10 : 39] I mean, you see this in marriage. There's nothing more beautiful than an older married couple that's grown close to one another. You know, they just kind of reflect one another.

They mirror one another in a way that's uncanny. It's just amazing. They finish one another's sentences. They finish one another's thoughts. They anticipate one another's questions.

Their facial expressions even look like one another. Well, that's the type of knowledge that God wants us to have of him. He wants us to love in such a way that we would love like him.

He wants our hearts to be dominated by this intimate fellowship and relationship we have with him where we think like he thinks, where we hate what he hates, where we love what he loves.

Our love is to grow more and more with knowledge. Now, that's not the way our culture talks about love. Part of understanding true love biblically is understanding God may not agree with what we call love.

[11 : 40] You know, we think of love as accepting us for who we are, as agreeing with what we think, as approving of how we feel. One author recently said, people don't think anymore, they feel.

They don't believe what's true, they regard what's true, what they feel to be true. That's so true. You see this everywhere in our culture. It just says, you know, it just says, go be you.

I'd like to add, maybe, you know, be you, maybe, if it's directed by God. Be true to yourself. I mean, how many times have you seen that?

You could go flip on the TV this afternoon and you'll see that message somewhere. Be true to yourself. Be honest. Important to tell what the culture says that love is approving us for who we chose to be, for who we think we are, who we feel ourselves to be.

Ray Ortlund wisely warns us, and I think we have this quote for you. He said, let's never think that just because we feel something honestly and effortlessly and sincerely, therefore, it's an okay feeling.

[12 : 50] Wow. Let's never think that because we feel something honestly, because we come by it honestly, because it's so effortlessly, we not think about it, we just fall into it and sincerely, we really believe it, therefore, it's an okay feeling.

That's not true. You know, we see it in the culture, we see it in our hearts. Our bitterness, you know, our defensiveness. You know, this week has not been a good week for me.

I probably shouldn't say it like that. The Lord has exposed my temptation to impatience and anger on several occasions.

I would say to some of my friends, he's filleted me. I don't know what that means, but just kind of, I guess, cut me like a fillet, cut me like a steak. I need to change. My love's not growing with knowledge, it's growing with what I want.

Our love has to grow with knowledge. Not with what we feel is right, not with what we think is right, but with how God thinks that we love what he loves and hate what he hates.

[13 : 55] You know, and it also adds all discernment. Knowledge and all discernment. If knowledge is love, the idea is that discernment here is just godly tact.

I love that word, tact. You know, it's just this awareness, a sense of being in touch, being in touch with the needs and concerns of those around you. Now, we know somebody that has tact and we know somebody that doesn't because we see the foot in there.

That, I'll pray for you. You know, discernment is godly tact. It's the ability to say and do the right thing all the time. Life's not clear cut.

Love's not planned. That's why we need discernment. We need this ability to rise up and to love with whatever comes our way.

And so we need to think deeply. So often, we just pray things. You know, we just pray for needs to be met. We pray for doors to be opened. We pray for bodies to be healed.

[14 : 59] Honestly, you can learn more about anatomy in a prayer meeting than you can at the doctor because you're praying for grandma's toe and somebody's arm and somebody's whatever, their deltoid or something like that and that's fine.

But this scripture urges us to pray for folks to be shaped by Christ so deeply that they think deeply with true knowledge and discernment.

That's what we need to pray. That's what people need. That's what will rescue. Second point, choose carefully. Choose carefully.

So think deeply and choose carefully. Thinking deeply and thinking right is not enough. That's what Paul's praying. There's a progression going on here and he says we must choose carefully.

Our thinking deeply is to give way into a life of choosing carefully and walking wisely. Look at verse 10. He says, so that so that you may approve what is excellent.

[16 : 03] Anytime you see that word in your Bible that's an important word. There should be a ding going off. So that. So what Paul's saying is that he's praying that their love would abound with knowledge and all discernment so that in order that they might choose and approve what is excellent.

Excellent. Approve literally means examine and choose. This word is used in the Old Testament again and again throughout the Proverbs for testing things like metals.

Your gold would be tried by fire to burn off the impurities and to see if this is really gold. That's what our love is to do. It's to be fueled not just by discernment not just by knowledge but by this examining this testing process.

One writer says the ever increasing love for which Paul prays is to be discriminating. Now we don't like that word but it just means to look carefully at to discern to discriminate to taste and see what's there.

The point is our love is not to be accepting of everything it's to taste and choose only certain things and those things are the excellent. Look again in that verse 10.

[17 : 24] so that you may approve what is excellent. Means what's the best what's supreme what's most value the things that really matter.

That's what our love's after is to choose to discern to choose excellent. A recent business book poses the question to us like this.

will you devote yourself to the vital few or the trivial many? Will you devote yourself to the significant few or the insignificant many?

Now he argues that in business it's often true that 80% of profits come from 20% of its clients.

That's the idea with this 80-20 rule is what it comes from.

So the idea is that if you own a restaurant maybe there's 10 families in there this afternoon two of them are repeat customers. and what the principle says is that you get more out of those repeat customers than the eight that come once a year.

[18 : 35] And so you gotta devote your attention to the repeat customer. Maybe ignore those other eight a little bit. Maybe that's why your drink hasn't come so fast. You know maybe you don't give the attention to them so that you give your attention to the vital few.

Do you see? Do you see what he's trying to say there? Is that the vital few nurturing and caring for the vital few customers is what's most important for your business?

But the same and it should be applied to our work but this morning we're going to apply it to our own hearts to our own lives. What are the vital things? What are the things you cannot fail to do?

Several weeks ago well-known author Eugene Peterson died at the age of 85 died of dementia and Alzheimer's he translated the Bible for the message wonderful beautiful translation he was a great he was a pastor and a great pastor of pastors so many guys followed him but he was also a great father and that's what I enjoyed reading about around his death at his funeral his son said that his father only had one message to him now listen to this he told him this message over and over and over again for 50 years he said as a boy his father came in and whispered this message into his

heart and literally into his ear while he was sleeping you know what it was message was God loves you God's on your side he's coming after you he's relentless

God loves you God's on your side he's coming after you he's relentless and he's just whispering that into his boy's ear and into that young heart do you whisper that we got time to whisper that are we carving out time to whisper that can you do you believe that are you willing to say that to your kid for Peterson this is the one thing this is one of those things he could not fail to do and it altered his what are the things you must not fail to do what are the few things you want to be known for what are the few things you what are the few things you want them to take away because those years are just passing by like that what are the things you want to do with your spouse every week what are the non negotiables for life in your marriage each week what are the few things you want to grow in what are the few things you want to make what are the few things you want to continually do for others and what are the many things that are in your way what are the things that we must cut out so that we devote ourselves to the things that really matter so that in the daily mundane things and the innumerable choices perhaps statistically more than anything else that trivial thing is social media

[21 : 42] I'm not going to rant and rave but it's designed to eliminate any chance of boredom but the the rhythm of grabbing our attention distracts us from the vital things that's all I want to say this the rhythm of grabbing that attention just in little bursts a little burst distracts us from the vital things and those are the things we need to see one more thing the accent here is positive the accent is positive now I obviously hit on some of the trivial things we must avoid but the accent here is the accent is on the excellent what Paul is saying is what matters is not what we don't do you can not drink not smoke not swear not watch TV and still do very little earthly good what matters is what we do the idea is that the mature

Christian is to think deeply and develop a habit of choosing good things moment by moment throughout the day throughout the week life's not planned and so we have to be ready we have to be on our toes so to speak I love the way the Puritan Richard Siv says it he says the person that's truly anointed by the spirit is nimble quick and active in that that is good nimble and quick and active in that that is good I love that nimble on their toes ready to see a need and meet it ready to run after something and help one of most anointed people in our church is Ron Clayton that man sees something and jumps on it that's somebody who's mature that's what we're to be like don't you just love that doing good is to be a way of life more than that doing good is to be the strength and satisfaction of our life

Jesus said it is my food to do the will of him who sent me you know what that means it is the strength of my life it's the satisfaction of my life to do good now Martin Luther says God doesn't need your good works your neighbor does little tongue in cheek but don't just do your good works for your neighbor according to Jesus right there do them for yourself do them because you want to walk in the strength and satisfaction that God promised to supply and rewards us with when we walk I want that I want my life to just feed on those things that my joy would not become from delaying things or from avoiding things but we've come from meeting needs for the glory of Jesus Christ now the strength and satisfaction of following God in this way doesn't come immediately you don't feel strong when you go to bed early so that you wake up slow to anger the next day you don't feel satisfied when you work hard and quietly refusing to tell the supervisor how you're out working everybody around you when your rotation is not in between great worldly things but in between diapers dishes laundry and sweaty noses diapers dishes laundry sweaty noses you don't feel important you feel passed by but let me raise the awareness this morning that's the most important job on the planet in some ways

I'd say it's the hardest job on the planet but it doesn't feel that way does it but trust me the strength and satisfaction is coming you walk in maturity and God supplies that strength that satisfaction that you need those are the some of the good some of the best things we can do and the joy and satisfaction will come it will come the joys of following Christ in humble quiet ways don't often pop out like the joys they did when we were young but there's so much better oh there's so much better I gotta move on start to preach another sermon pray that we be so shaped by Christ that we choose what's best what's best moment by moment thirdly bearing fruit bear fruit bear fruit think deeply choose carefully bear fruit bear fruit we're to think deeply and choose carefully so that in the end we bear fruit what kind of fruit look at verse 10 be he says so that you may approve what is excellent and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ filled with the fruit of righteousness filled with the

fruit of righteousness it seems that all three of these qualities are talking about what flows from that progression these qualities of godliness and of righteousness so he says pure positively genuine perfect clear no impurities of any kind you look at a diamond and it looks pure most diamonds look pure when you get them under a microscope you begin to see

I don't know what you'd call it like the shadow and the diamond but a pure one glistens that's what we're to be pure blameless now this is not a word we typically use but it's just the flip side of perfect the idea is that you're not you're not just positively perfect in a negative way you're you're absent of blame the idea is that there could be no reasonable accusation lodged against you nothing in your heart or life that would cause the lord or someone else to recoil nothing that could bring judgment upon your life filled with the fruit of righteousness he continues the idea is righteousness points to an obedient life it's a way of conduct and word thought and deed that God deems to be right and so you're established in a life of right in this passage the idea is that the seed that sprouted when the word of God or the love of God was poured into our hearts by the Holy

[28 : 23] Spirit has abounded more and more such as it shot out breast grown that's where we're headed we're headed to a full grown fully fruit bearing tree that's what he wants us he wants us to bear fruit in that way but the point is obvious here is that maturity and growth will always be seen maturity and growth will bear fruit it cannot remain hidden lives are not the godly man or woman has a tone a taste a character a way of life unlike other people it's discernible it's visible is that fruit visible in your life is that taste there that's what we want that's what we want that's what we need in order to make it to the end that's what we look in verse 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus

Christ to the glory and praise of God and praise of God now if we looked at this whole letter this is the sixth explicit reference to Jesus Christ both tied us to something and making sure we don't miss the point yes we must think deeply yes we must choose carefully yes we must strive to be pure and blameless but while our work is part it is not conclusive while it is necessary it is not determinative while we work another works in us another works with us we are filled with the fruit that can only come through Jesus Christ and you are supposed to say amen to that that is amazing news the idea is that we work hard to plant and to water and to fertilize and to prune but we know that apart from Jesus Christ the vine does not bear fruit that's what he's saying it bears fruit only in relationship only in communion only with the life blood of Jesus Christ coming through us such that we bear that fruit the idea is that it is through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we live move love and bear fruit so that all the glory and all the praise goes to where it belongs not in our thinking not in our choosing not in our striving gosh knows not in our good works but to God to the glory and praise of God and so Paul ends where he began I thank my God he ends to the glory and praise of God because all of life is wrapped up in giving God the praise he deserves and that's what I offer to you maybe you come into this room this morning having trusted Christ but lost in devoting your life to things that don't matter and so you've strayed quite a bit away oh beloved this is the best news on the planet and it's news because it announces to you you can be right with Jesus Christ and right with God right now by believing that you are in a desperate condition that you have sinned and gone astray and that there is only one mediator between God and man that's Jesus Christ and you believe that he died on the cross for the sins of sinners like you and me and if you trust in him he will shoot his

Holy Spirit into your heart and life and begin to bear that fruit that will last until the last day but maybe you came in and you're a believer and this word right here is to protect you God wants to protect you don't walk out of this message with introspection don't walk out of this message striving to do it on your own walk out trusting in the finished work of Christ we don't have to be our best we don't have to be the best we don't have to be perfect more than anything else we just got to keep going just got to keep going you know in 2002 winter olympics Stephen Bradbury won gold in a most surprising way the Australian skater came to Salt Lake City to race in the 1000 meter short track race now I had never watched one until I watched it on

YouTube on Friday though he finished third in the quarter final qualified so here he is only there by disqualification in the semifinal yet another skater was disqualified and so Bradbury went on to the final in the final all the other racers jumped out in front some of the commentators are even mocking Bradbury who had fallen quickly behind lap after lap he continued to fall further back he remained dead last nearly half a lap back into the final lap then on the final lap all the other skaters collided and fell one by one by one by one and barely without notice Bradbury skated on to gold he won he

got in he qualified by disqualification and he got in at one he didn't win because he was the best skater he won because he was the last man standing that's all

[34 : 07] God wants of us he doesn't want us to strive he don't want us to try to be perfect there is already one in heaven who was perfect and settled our accounts on our behalf God just wants us to keep on standing and when we get knocked down to stand again and again and again to patiently and resolutely keep on moving and thinking deeply choosing carefully and bearing fruit motivated and knowing that the perfect one is working perfectly in our lives so that we might be presented perfectly before him to the praise and glory of his grace all of Christ is for life and this is how we're to mature this is broad brush the Christian life this is how we should pray yes pray for specific things pray for bodies to be healed that's all fine but remember Jesus knows what you need before you ask I would say I would submit underneath your prayers pray this pray that we would be so shaped by Christ that we live in this perpetual moment of choosing the best how to serve him and the strength he provides may God help us

I know he will let us pray Father in heaven thank you oh Lord we need you in so many ways so we cast ourselves upon you God we thank you that you have done the greatest work by causing us to be born again by the Holy Spirit and now we pray that you would produce in us a life devoted to the things that matter that you would shape us even as you pray for us in these verses that we would live this way before your face God I pray that you would guard every heart from introspection ungodly introspection back them God so that we all might live appropriately convicted in different ways but more we thank you we praise you we join with Paul with this scripture to give you the only praise the only glory for all that you've done in us and all that you promised to do within us you've been listening to a message given by Walt

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