

The Content and Purpose of Prayer

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[0 : 00] For these nations which are about to dispossess, listen not to the fortune tellers and the diviners, and the diviners.

But as for you, the Lord your God has not, sorry, but for these nations which are about to dispossess, who listen to fortune tellers and diviners, but as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you to do this.

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers, it is to him that you shall listen. Just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, or see this great fire anymore, lest I die.

And the Lord said to me, they are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers, and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I commanded him.

And whoever will not listen to my words, that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. Well, may God bless us in that command.

[1 : 17] Well, as we're led through this service, we'll come to now another song, a more reflective one, before we enter into our intercessions. Thank you.

To the 14. 14. 14. 14. 14. 14. 14. 14. 14.

14. 14. 14. 14. So Colossians chapter 1, verse 9 through to 14.

Now hear God's word. And so from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

may you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

[2 : 42] He has delivered us from the kingdom of the kingdom of the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Well, may God bless his word directly to us. As I introduced last week, this is a letter to a church, and for that reason, the letter would have been read.

And therefore, there's an element of understanding that the people need to have on their side in order to understand what's being read to them. Either, let's imagine this letter is read out by one individual, Epaphras, let's say, or someone else, or the letter is passed around the congregation. Either way, the congregation needs to be able to understand what has been written to them. And so, what we find here is that Paul prays that to God, that they would be given understanding for the very obvious reason, that they may understand the letter that he has written to them.

We know that God gave teachers to the church in order to teach people. And this is just another way of saying that God wants his people to understand.

[4 : 07] And in order for them to understand, God accompanies his grace in giving understanding with a teacher to explain that understanding. That's in absolute simple terms.

Paul, you must remember, has never met these Christians. He only knows what he knows about them because of reports given to him. But once he finds out that they are Christians, once he finds out that the gospel has just done a great work there, he gives thanks to God, and then in verse 9, he turns that thanks to God into praying without ceasing for them.

So, it's a bit like saying, now I recognize that this is true about you. I now need to move on beyond thankfulness, not that I stop being thankful, but now into an element where God is telling me that I

must pray this for you.

Now, this is important because he knows no individual in this church, directly speaking, Epaphras, of course, but the others, the Christians. He doesn't know anything about them.

He doesn't necessarily know. He might know, and we don't know it. But whether they've got a job or lost their job, whether they're widowed or orphaned, he knows none of these things.

[5 : 28] So, how do you know what to pray for a people when you don't know the people? And, of course, the answer is far more simple than you might imagine, and it's because God is the one who is to direct the content of our prayer for others, not them.

Now, that isn't to say that we overlook people's desires or their wants or anything like that. It's simply to say that the first course of prayer for a person is directed by what God desires for that person.

What does God want for you? And how am I as a pastor to understand that so that I can pray for that? That's essentially what Paul is doing here.

And they have received God's grace. And as we said last week, grace is a reminder that we have received that which we don't deserve, though we're not being reminded that we're undeserving.

In the same way that if I say, I forgive you, you might say back to me, what for? What have I done wrong? The very act of forgiveness highlights a wrong somewhere down the line.

[6 : 38] Well, God's grace is a reminder to us that what we have received, we don't deserve. We don't even deserve to be sat here listening to the word of God if we're going to measure it on a deserving level.

But grace, grace removes that and says, it's all for you. God is pouring it out to you because he wants you to have it. And therefore, your Christian life is the grace of God made visible.

What does the grace of God actually look like? It looks like your Christian life walking, we're walking in a manner that is worthy of the Lord. That's what the grace of God looks like.

It looks like prayer. It looks like forgiving others. It looks like loving God and loving others. That's what the grace of God looks like in the Christian life.

So, as we sort of make our way through this letter, we, in this section here in particular, we are simply learning what the content of prayer ought to be for a church that is maturing or needs to mature, needs to grow up.

[7 : 50] Now, the reason for growing up is not because, well, when we were young, it was fun. Now, when children play with mud pies, it's fun for the child, it's a nightmare for the washing machine, and the mother who has to strip clothes off, right?

So, what is fun on one level isn't quite the same kind of fun on another level. And that maturity of growing up doesn't diminish fun in the Christian life.

But it's maturity in the same way bones grow stronger. That's how you're to think of maturity. It's something's becoming stronger. It's becoming more stable.

It's becoming more understanding. That's the type of maturity that we're thinking about. Not that we're growing up to where we can't have fun anymore. No, we can still have that fun and that good and that blessing.

Um, but the maturity that the Bible speaks about is, is like bones getting stronger. That you are to become stronger in the Lord. So, here's the sort of summary of the section that we have looked.

[8 : 58] You'll notice that Paul has committed himself that he will not cease to pray for them. And the reason he will not cease to pray for them is because the only way their lives will get what it needs is through prayer.

God has to give it to them. So, the very foundation of the church's maturity here is God answering that prayer. Not a Bible study, though that is necessary.

Not the letter of Colossians, though that is necessary. But Paul fully understands that if they are to understand the letter that he has written to them, then he first has to pray to God to give them understanding.

Or else, how can they understand? Everything that he is about to say after this prayer depends on this prayer being answered. And so, he prays that they would be filled with knowledge, with spiritual wisdom, with understanding.

Why? Because how are they meant to understand what he's going to write next, unless they have the understanding to read this letter wisely, as intended, with all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

[10:09] Now, what is the fruit of understanding? Well, verse 10, the fruit of understanding is that they're then able to walk in a manner that is worthy. Their lives will produce fruit in every good work.

And that every good work, can I just say, shouldn't be limited to what we classify as Christian work. It's something which happens within the sort of Christian sphere.

Every good work has to be, and we teach this at Branch Hub, has to be teleological. In other words, every time you put your hand to something, whether it be learning mathematics, whether it be learning a branch of mathematics, like probability, or, or doing a bit of woodwork, whatever it may be, it has to have a teleological purpose, which means, or teleological, it has to have a purpose, which is, how does this fit in the new kingdom?

Because if it's, if it's not within the new kingdom, if it's not within that framework, then it's in the old kingdom. And why am I working in that sphere when I have been called out of the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of God?

I want to be able to make things. I want to be able to draw pictures, if I could draw and paint beautiful pictures and make great cakes and make, that'll make it through the fire.

[11:33] I don't want any of my work to be burnt up. I want it to make it through. I don't want the type of work that I do to sort of come to nothing when the fire comes.

So every good work must be, must, you must keep in mind the teleological, you must have in mind the kingdom of God. Or else what we do is, I mean, how we could do something purposeless would be soul-destroying.

That you spend 10 years working on something only for it to be met with fire in the 11th year. I just, how could anyone commit to something like that?

And so Christians are to understand, well, what is every good work? And some work is what we call taking dominion, where God gave us dominion, he told us to take dominion.

And in other kinds, it's sort of interference, that we're interfering in that dominion, that we're not seeking to use the work that God has given us to extend anything.

[12:40] Everything gets reduced down to more immediate needs, and we don't plan for the fifth generation to come. We only think of our generation. And what, the type of mindset that the Christian is to develop is that, you know, if I had my own house, I can't even decide where to plant a tree unless I think of my great-grandchildren.

Because that's the way God wants me to think. I have to think that far ahead because I'm biblically optimistic. Okay? I don't believe that the world's going to end in my lifetime, or my son's lifetime, or whatever.

It might, but that's not the way we're to think. And so the every good work that we do is purposeful. And it bears fruit. And now it's full of purpose.

And that's why you can engage in something without getting tired of it, without getting fed up, without thinking, oh, can I just move on to something else? I just need to do something else. I feel like a change.

Well, when you're investing, investment happens slowly over a long period of time. What starts off is something small, becomes something big, only after a very, very long time.

[13:59] And relationships work like that. There's a number of things that work like that. And so the idea here is that the understanding will then lead to the every good work. Now that I understand this, I'm able to do a type of work that has this fruit bearing.

It's not bad fruit, it's good fruit. And we know from Psalm 1 that the reason we work so hard at this is so that other people can enjoy the fruit.

Remember the tree in Psalm 1, the righteous man who dedicates himself to the Lord, his God, who seeks to understand, who is committed is like a tree planted by streams of water bearing fruit in its season.

And the lesson is, of course, that trees don't eat their own fruit. Other people eat their fruit. So what you produce is for the benefit of others. It's not even, it's not a hint of selfishness there.

Now, of course, if you're amongst other people who are doing the same, you get to eat the fruit off their tree and that's what we mean by every good work. That's what it, it doesn't just mean the kind of service that perhaps happens within a church.

[15:10] Every good work, indicating, of course, that there are some work that is not good. Now, we have this and we have also obtained an inheritance.

God has given us something now and he will give us something in the future to come, recognizing that the reason we have this is because we have gone through a dramatic change.

Verse 14, we have received redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Everything that we have, we have because we are forgiven.

We are redeemed. That's how we can be given it. So, into the prayer itself, how does Paul know what to pray for when he has never met these people?

The answer is he knows what to pray for because he knows what God desires for people. He wants these people to be mature. He wants them to be involved in every good work, bearing fruit.

[16:09] And he recognizes the only way they can walk in a manner worthy of their calling, worthy of the Lord, is if he prays that God would give them knowledge, spiritual wisdom, understanding, that the information that Paul gives them through his word is not just explaining, it's enabling.

And that's what Paul is praying for. That the word of God would enable God's people not just explain to them certain truths. I have to be enabled by the truth, I just cannot have my reason changed.

I just cannot be a person who understands everything, but enabled in nothing. I mean, there are certain aspects in life where that is possibly true.

I can understand, for example, how some things work in physics, but I'm not enabled in any way to be able to go and perform those tasks.

If I can put it in a slightly different way of being able to understand concepts without it, I mean, we've all seen, or perhaps we haven't, but maybe you have, those textbooks of Leonardo da Vinci, you know, inventing everything from a helicopter to a swimming pool to a blending machine.

[17:27] You think, well, and yet he never made a single one of them. Why? Because it's entirely possible, it's entirely possible to be able to conceive in the mind what's possible, what could be, and then not have the resources around you, the enablement, to make that happen.

And so that is, that is exactly the same it is with the Christian life. Not only are you to understand these things that are true and possible, the every good fruit, the walking worthy, you then have to be enabled to be able to do that.

So here's Paul drawing these pictures out of what's possible, but it cannot afford to be like Leonardo da Vinci's sketchbook, where he can draw a helicopter, but one cannot be made for several hundred years.

There has to be an enablement that comes with this, and this is what Paul is praying for. He is essentially praying that you would be enabled by God to do these things that Colossians is speaking about, the letter is speaking about.

So why does the content matter? The content matters because the results matter. And it's not to say that Paul is results-driven, but he recognizes what the Lord wants to come out of your life, and he also recognizes that the only way for that to happen is if he asks God to give it to you.

[18:56] Now you know each week, I mean, I don't tell you this, but now you know what a pastor prays for his congregation because God makes it very simple for pastors because they're not the brightest, that he has to write it down and says, you need to pray this for your people because this is what I want them to be like.

And that includes the pastor within himself. This is what you are to pray for your people because this is what I want them to be like. I want them to be a fruitfully productive people.

I want them to be involved in every good work. I want them to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. I want them to have all of this and the way they will get it is by you praying.

I will give, but the connection between them getting what they need and them being what they could be is here located in Paul's prayer.

This is why he says, I have not ceased to pray for you. His desire for these people is the same as the Lord's and therefore, what does he do? He commits himself to prayer.

[20:12] He commits himself not only to praying but actually to the content of prayer. Are they going to be a people who are able to understand the word of God that I am speaking to them?

And so, if they are to understand the letter that he has written, it's absolutely dependent on God giving them spiritual wisdom and understanding. Remember, this letter is essentially about a true definition of Christian spirituality.

The focus here is not so much on a practical application of Christianity, though it's included, but what does it mean to be a spiritual person biblically understood?

So, Paul's prayer is not seeking to inform only. Paul's prayer is seeking the enablement of these young Christians.

He wants them to be enabled. He doesn't want them just to know what the Christian life is and how it ought to be lived. He wants them to be enabled to do it.

[21 : 17] It's no good sketching out what's possible without the following enablement to be able to complete what's possible.

And therefore, it's fair to say, I think, that Paul was able to pray in this way because he understands more than the Christians that he's speaking to. In other words, if I can put it bluntly, they don't know what they need because they've experienced a new life that they don't even know what it's, what is it meant to do?

I've been given this life and yet, what do I do with it? What am I meant to do with a forgiven life? What do I do now? And so, this is what much of the New Testament is about.

This is what you do with what God has given you. So, walking worthy. Now that we've looked at the content of the prayer and the reason for it, we now have to look at the outcome of the prayer and that is ultimately that these people would walk worthy of the Lord and part of walking worthy is, of course, understanding, being a spiritual person, producing fruit, bearing fruit in every good work, increasing in the knowledge of God, ultimately that these believers who are young would grow up and become mature, that their understanding would improve through prayer and God gracing his people with understanding, that they would be a people who would eventually produce a good work and everything starts off small.

Jesus said himself that the way that he has designed that God's people would be blessed is not by having something great to show when the Lord returns, but by having lots of little things.

[23 : 07] He who is faithful in a little will be faithful in much. But that isn't necessarily an increase. It could be an increase in small things. The accumulation of small things could be much.

And so this is the type of thing that Paul has in mind, that God would enable his people to be a worthy people, that they would be able to produce things in their life that would be pleasing to the Lord, not just be a people who pray a lot, who repent a lot, who confess their sins, who love others, who serve in the church.

No, this is total, that every aspect of thought, word, and deed is sort of maturing. Imagine this in a slightly different way of maturity.

You're explaining to a child how to pray. And the child comes up to you and says, well, hang on, if God is in control of everything, then what do I need to pray? What difference does it make?

And that little question of an eight-year-old can stump, you know, even some of the greatest theologians. Well, how do I get around this one? Because the child knows how the sovereignty of God works.

[24 : 24] But what the child needs to understand, like many growing Christians, is how understanding works. And so you say to the child, well, you ask, seek, and knock. You just do what Jesus says.

You ask, you seek, and you knock. And then when you do that, you're seeking because you're conscious of the fact that God is wanting you to have his will, that his will has been done on earth as it is in heaven.

And therefore, your prayers ought to be lining up with his will. And so Paul's prayer is exactly the same. There's just no difference here.

He's simply saying, I am praying for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. I am praying that God's will will be done in your life as he intends it to be.

And as you understand that, you are then filled with endurance and patience and joy. Because though the sort of muck I'm going through at the minute is not removed from me, it is improved by the fact that I have an understanding and a hope that tells me it won't always be this way.

[25 : 38] So you've heard some people say, if I could only understand what was happening, I think I would be a little bit more at rest. Well, there you have it. And that's what Paul is praying for here, that they would receive this endurance and patience through the understanding that they would be given.

I mean, how else do you receive endurance and patience? Well, it comes by understanding this isn't going to continue. Or the future is better than the present. That's how patience and endurance happens.

That happens as a byproduct of understanding how it happens. Because you have been given hope. Now, as we sort of wrap this up and sort of draw to a conclusion, one of the things that we have to consider here is that all spiritual growth never goes beyond your understanding of grace. You will grow proportionately to the measure of how appreciative you are of the grace that you have received, of how much you've actually understood the grace that you have received, of how thankful you are for the grace that you have received.

And you will find yourself growing the more you spend time thinking through just how graceful God is being to you. The whole area of your life will grow.

[27 : 01] Everything is a product of God's grace to us. The fact that we will come to share in his inheritance, the fact that we have been given a hope that won't perish, the fact that we've been taken out of a dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of his son, the fact that we concentrate on those things is just another way of saying I'm appreciating your grace.

Grace isn't just located in the forgiveness of sins, that is just incredible. It's not incredible, is it? Because incredible means unbelievable. That wouldn't make sense, would it? Because it is believable. Incredible means unbelievable, not amazing, by the way.

It is believable that we have been forgiven or else we would never rest in the assurance of it. But it's also, the grace of God is also seen in the realization that we have been removed from the dominion of darkness, that sin no longer has dominion over us.

That's grace. And the more I think about that grace, I'm then able to grow out of perhaps some of the man-made self-imposed shackles that I have on me. And I'm not sort of a health, wealth, and prosperity guy at all.

[28 : 19] It's not even biblical to say that there are versions. But it is to say that there is a biblical positivity here, an optimism here, for want of a better word.

Now, we must remember that Paul is explaining this in a church that also has false teachers. And therefore, pastors historically throughout the years have always had to put up with people who have different views that don't line up with scripture.

And it's always a battle of, well, who are the congregation going to listen to? And pastors recognize that it's not even a battle even worth contending with because the Lord wins.

And as long as the pastor is committed to speaking God's words and not trying to manipulate people with his own, it's not a battle that he even has to engage in. And so Paul is just here declaring the truth.

He's not going after the false teachers directly. He's just declaring what's true. Why? Because only God's word will enable. Now, God's word creates and it upholds.

[29 : 23] And therefore, speaking God's words to God's people is a way of upholding them. They cannot be upheld by human words and therefore human reasoning.

Sin, by its very nature, is irrational and grace builds. Faith builds. Mercy builds. The word of God builds. So Paul prays like a wise builder.

He recognizes that this is how the people of God will be built up. But he's praying this with the backdrop of false teachers who are trying to manipulate these Christians into thinking that there is something beyond what they are hearing.

That what Paul has said is great, but it's not enough. That what Paul is teaching in Colossians is great, but there's more that he hasn't told you.

And that's simply not the case. It's simply not true. And yet how many of us, because we don't know how to navigate our way through the word of God, then look for other things that are easier.

[30 : 29] I mean, how many of us have a calculator that we're only able to use a few functions on? People. You know, we're all prone to having something in front of us and only able to use a very limited amount of its true potential.

Well, the same is true with the word of God. The reason we move off into other things is not because we've explored all the potential of God's word, but because I don't know what that does. I'll move off into something else now. And that's the way false teachers pry on that, that they give you something that is easy, you know, that it's easy to achieve.

And as long as they can keep you on the thing that it'll turn up eventually, then we recognize that this is the blessing that God will give from Paul's point of view.

God's word will bless you, false words won't. So, obviously we're getting close to our time. So let me just introduce as we close the words and their meanings.

[31 : 38] It would be very easy to say that people can spot lies and therefore don't believe them. But biblically that's not true. People are quite content it seems listening to a lie because of their ability to detach the words from their context.

And an example of this, of how people can be taken in through deceptive words, is because sometimes people don't even mind hearing deceptive words.

An example would be Jacob and Esau. You know the story how Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a pot of stew and yet I've always found the story confusing because a birthright blessing is words spoken to you.

So why would Jacob want to go in and hear words that he knew his father thought that he was speaking to the other brother?

Why would you sit in front of your father and hear words? Remember the father says he sounds like Jacob but he feels like Esau. Why would you sit under your father knowing that the words, the blessing that he's just about to give is not meant for you?

[32 : 50] Why would you want that? Why would you be willing to sit under words in a deceptive situation? Why would people do that? Well, number one is because people separate words from their context and from their facts.

Words have this power to shape and destroy. God created the world with his words. Satan spoke words and destroyed it. That's how words work.

Lies destroy God's word upholds. And I think one of the reasons why Jacob puts himself in that position is like any woman who's struggling to find love in her marriage would be quite content to have her husband say to her, just tell me that you love me, even if he doesn't mean it.

Because she's able to convince herself that the words in themselves are powerful, that they'll do something for her, even though she's detached them from the person who's saying them.

So people, even Christians, are really quite content listening to lies because of what words does for them. So how much more important is it to listen to the word of God and be able to distinguish the difference between the two?

[34 : 06] So the prayer is this as we close, or Paul's exhortation is this, that we must pray that God enables us to hear his words. And we must recognize that his words are like wise builders.

They build up and not tear down. Where the words of the father of the devil, you know, where it says your father of the devil in Galatians and what have you, and in the New Testament, he's the father of lies.

That's his title. And when he spoke in the garden of Eden, he's tearing down. God used words to build up a beautiful creation for you to live in, and Satan's lies tears that creation down.

And therefore, we must pray that we would have the understanding to tell the difference between lies and what is true, and also that we wouldn't be a people who separate words from their content and their meaning, just because we know the good that it could possibly do us, or we think that it's doing good, like Jacob hearing a blessing that was never meant for him.

What was he possibly thinking? Well, his desperation to hear those words from his father, that he would never have heard otherwise, could have been so great that he was even willing to hear them under deceptive circumstances.

[35 : 21] Well, may God bless you and keep you in your understanding of Colossians, and we're going to listen to this song as we close, and then we'll have the exhortation.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.