

“Lord Teach Us To Pray”

A Study in the Exposition of the Prayers of Paul: Excuses for Not Praying¹ Two Week Study Guide for July 16,23, 2017

Introduction: A Petition for a Biblically Discriminating Love

There is a deficient, perhaps even vulgar, misrepresentation of love in popular culture today – this goes well beyond the casual reference to love’s expression of affection and/or intimacy, but a violation of its theological beauty and integrity. Love is bundled up into a disposition of having no actual standards or aim beyond securing everyone’s universal happiness in whatever way, area, and means they choose so long as it does not unduly infringe on another’s happiness. This lack of actual standards itself serves as a precise code of conduct that fundamentally wants the advantages of a pure and biblical love without its requirements, expectations, and sacrifice. Such is the pursuit of this world and so is its influence among those in the church who have submitted themselves to a standard less than that secured and expressed in the Scriptures. By contrast to this, Paul prayed that the Philippians’ discriminating, high standard, eternal perspective, and God glorifying love would abound more and more. He did not petition the Lord for the Philippians to have a more delightful experience in this temporal life, to have a pleasant warm feeling as they secured their every fancy, or that they would be satisfied with all things at all times. Paul prayed for the church to have a profoundly robust love that is spiritually informed, discerning, and fruit bearing. Paul loved the Philippians; therefore he prayed for them. And in loving them he prayed the best for them – an abounding love that is restricted and freed with Christ honoring elements, and therefore a genuine love.

1:3-8, Textual Introduction to Paul’s Prayer for the Philippians

After introducing the letter in 1:1-2, Paul introduces his prayer in 1:3-8. In this introductory section Paul makes statements about himself, his relationship with the Philippians, and their common hope in Christ. These elements inform how he speaks and executes the service of prayer as he articulates it in 1:9-11.

Philippians 1:3-5

As Paul was consistently giving thanks for the Colossians² so also is he consistently giving thanks for the Philippians. He expresses here that recollecting thoughts of the Philippians produces thankfulness in him toward God for them. With this we observe that it is a consistent pattern for Paul to reference "remembering" someone in direct connection with his praying for them - almost as to communicate that remembering them will inevitably be identified with praying for them so as to remember is to pray in this context. In view of this it is curious that an unbelieving world so frequently requests “the thoughts and prayers” of persons amidst tragedy, when for Paul prayer was a sure dynamic of being in relationship with him and to be thought of likely was to be prayed for too.

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ALL Scripture Quotations are from the ESV Bible unless the Scripture reference is in a quote from another author – their original translation was kept.

² “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you....” Colossians 1:3

Also, note the relationship of thankfulness and joy here – they are not required companions, but they are natural companions. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Paul's consistent gratitude before God for the Philippians expresses itself in joyful prayer for them.

Paul then goes on to express a precise reason for his joyful prayers for the Philippians: "because" of their partnership in the gospel from the time of their identification in Christ to the present. A measure of this service in relationship to one another fleshes itself out through the letter and includes the personal service of a Philippian, Epaphroditus, and the providing of a personal or ministerial need to Paul. So, the Philippians' service was both quite personal and quite tangible. It was this relationship and service that presently informed and fueled Paul's praying for them – one form of service yielding fruits of blessing and service in return to the other.

Philippians 1:6

Seeming to build off of his reference to their introduction into the faith, Paul goes on to affirm that what began in that moment of conversion will continue on through completion. This view to the future day of Christ and its subsequent completion of the sanctifying work of Christ in the believer and their expectation of reward was not just a pious delight, but a foundation for magnificent confidence and encouragement. This day also gives a very precise aim to the culminating efforts of Paul's prayer for the Philippians – the abounding love that he prayed for was expected to produce definitive results, as we will see, and these results yield their chief returns on the day of Christ.

Philippians 1:7-8

Paul again affirms the closeness of relationship with the Philippian church as they have faithfully served alongside one another even in greatly challenging circumstances: imprisonment and gospel defense. Such is the nature of struggling together, it will either bind or disperse persons that endure hardship together. This however was not a struggle common to mankind, but one rooted in commitment to Christ, and as such it was a struggle in which they together, both Paul and the Philippians, experienced the grace of God as they persevered in mutual service to the Lord.

Personal Examination & Response

What is the nature of your relationship with other believers? Is the relationship rooted and expressed in such a way that thankfulness and joy are what comes to mind and prayer?

Do you frequently give thought to other believers and does such attention produce thanksgiving and petition for them so that being in relationship with you means to be prayed for by you?

Does your service to other believers and the church body as a whole produce gratitude and thanksgiving in prayer? Note being too mindful of such matters will necessitate a caution against pride... so be careful – live a praiseworthy life for the glory of God and not yourself.

Do you find special confidence and encouragement when you give thought to the day of Christ when the continued work of being conformed to the Savior is completed?

Has gospel faithfulness required any degree of struggle, sacrifice, or hardship from you? If so, did the church walk with you through such times in mutual struggle, sacrifice, or hardship? How has this impacted your affections for the church? How might you anticipate this affecting your affections for the church should such days be ahead?

1:9-11, Paul's Prayer for the Philippians

In 1:3, Paul thanks God for the Philippian believers. In 1:4, Paul prays for the Philippian believers with joy. In 1:6, Paul is confident of the Philippian believers' sure hope in Christ. In 1:7, Paul has a great affection for the Philippian believers because of their mutual service. In 1:8, Paul longs for the Philippian believers with the affection of Christ. Now... with this great affection for the Philippian believers clearly expressed, Paul states not only how, but what he is praying for them.

Paul Prays For What Is Excellent³

Paul begins his prayer with the petition that the Philippians' love would abound more and more, but with a precise focus to it: with knowledge and discernment. This was a qualified love – one that was informed (not blissfully ignorant) and discerning – having a sharp application to its knowledge, that of discernment.

Knowledge: A mature and deep understanding.

Discernment: Distinguishing the best.

Note that “all” here was communicating not a perfect discernment, but a generous range of discernment – a matter of breadth versus totality.⁴

As the passage progresses we quickly observe that Paul's qualified petition had a reason: "so that" their approving, examining, or testing may be properly informed - their approving, examining, or testing of what is excellent, that which is of greater esteem or value. Paul was praying in view of the Philippians' securing that which is best in view of God's truth. D.A. Carson further explains that this process of approving was one of experiential conclusions – emphasizing that the process was one of active involvement: experience coupled with discernment.⁵

Carson goes on to explain that the aforementioned love that Paul has prayed for the Philippians to experience was a necessary requirement for them to know and experience this measure of discernment.⁶ Therefore it is important for us to appreciate that this love was not intended to be relegated as a means of no independent value, but a means of great and even necessary value – *it informs the discernment that directs to the excellent.*

Carson again speaks to the qualifying elements of love as expressed here in Paul's prayer: “The ever-increasing love for which Paul prays is to be discriminating. It is to be constrained by ‘knowledge’ and ‘depth of insight.’ Without the constraints of knowledge and insight, love very easily degenerates into mawkish sentimentality or into the kind of mushy pluralism the world often confuses with love.”⁷

This is not the only place that love is provided precise parameters or elements of qualification. 1 Corinthians 13 qualifies love as follows, “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Approving What Is Excellent

As stated, the aim of this qualified love was to discern the excellent – a skill or attribute that was necessarily informed by a love abounding with knowledge and discernment. Therefore, this love helps the believer to parse between that which is reasonable, that which is acceptable, and that which is excellent or best. Further, it is here that one can strike a helpful balance to the craving to know the precise will of God and submitting to wisdom in

³ A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Praying with Paul; D.A. Carson; Baker Academic, 2014; (Hereafter: Carson), Pg.104

⁴ Word Biblical Commentary, Philippians, Gerald F. Hawthorne, Word Publisher 1983, Pg.27

⁵ Carson, Pg.105

⁶ Carson, Pg.105

⁷ Carson, Pgs.105-106

obedience. This love provides a context in which one can make decisions that are optimal in terms of God's desire for a child walking in obedience and in accordance with his articulated and providential desires. So, while not knowing the "exact" will of God one can discern and pursue excellence, and this by God's means of an abounding love. Finally, what one will soon discover in this pursuit and securing of excellence is that the excellent is ultimately rooted in that which the Scriptures plainly articulate as the expressed means of growing in grace and truth, being conformed to the image of the Savior, putting the old self to death while walking in newness of life and resurrection power. And while these elements may already have been plain enough, it is this abounding love and the discernment that flows from it that provide clarity on how they might be fully executed and enjoyed. So, Paul's prayer here is one of magnificent pastoral care and affection for this church and a prayer that all the body would do well to extend for its members.

This matter of discerning the excellent is as "practical" as any other expressed discipline, and as with all matters of consequence its application will ultimately either affirm or betray one's worldview and theology. Carson states, "The pursuit of such excellence does not turn on transparent distinctions between right and wrong. It turns, rather, on delicate choices that reflect one's entire value system, one's entire set of priorities, one's heart and mind."⁸

Further, when pursuing that which is excellent the objective is not to legislate every nuance in life, but to develop the spiritually mature skill of intensive discernment – not prescribed directions and carefully crafted guidelines so much as the application of holiness in wise and dynamic insightfulness. And all of this must be informed by love abounding in knowledge and discernment. This is the kind of perceptive shrewdness that Jesus demonstrated at various times when engaged by the Pharisees who were operating off of principles and structures that were not properly informed and that could not be sustained in dynamic situations. An example of this is in the exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew 12.

"At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, 'Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.' He said to them, 'Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.'" Matthew 12:1-8

⁸ Carson, Pg.108

Personal Examination & Response

Significant attention was given to the qualifying elements of biblical love – particularly as expressed in this context. Why is it important to provide restricting elements to love and its proper application?

Regarding the “practical” nature of discerning what is excellent – how have you submitted your life in applying what you to present *plainly know* to be excellent? In other words, if you would affirm on the large level (that does not require the level of discernment expressed in the passage) that certain things are excellent such as reading the Scriptures, meditating on the Scriptures, consistently and robustly praying, and executing other Christian disciplines, then are you living as though such things were excellent? Or would an evaluation of your life appear to present that you more accurately have concluded that work, family, relaxation, sports, entertainment, and like matters are more excellent? Think through these matters carefully and honestly and recognize that Paul is praying that the Philippians would have greater skill and perception into that which is excellent in Christ. If we are not living as though the plain, large, and easily discernable matters are excellent, then to what end would we be praying for these more precise insights? To be more plain here... I have argued that this was an extremely pastoral emphasis with which Paul is praying for the Philippians, and in many ways I pray in a like manner for the people of Pray’s Mill Baptist Church. But petition must be accompanied by action. This progress is ultimately God’s work... but it is God’s work exercised in no small measure through your effort too.⁹ Evaluate where you are in this matter of discerning, pursuing, and executing what is excellent.

“...Paul is passionate about pursuing spiritual excellence, and as he pursues it himself (3:10-14) so he prays for it for others (1:9-11).”¹⁰ Do you have a passion of a like nature and does it inform your praying for others?

⁹ “...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”
Philippians 2:12-13

¹⁰ Carson, Pg.110

“Paul prays for what is excellent, and it is quite certain that this sort of excellence cannot be attained without prayer.”¹¹ Does your life of prayer appear to conclude otherwise? How will this inform your praying for both yourself and the larger church body?

Paul’s Prayer Is Tied to the Long View¹²

We also observe that an element of Paul's prayer for the Philippians here, as well as his aforementioned confidence in 1:6 and later reiterated confidence in 2:16, was with a view to Christ's revelation, return, rapture, and reward – the day of Christ. An expectation also expressed in 1 Corinthians, “...so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” 1 Corinthians 1:7-8

The testing and approving that Paul had in view here had a larger objective or aim beyond the immediate dynamic of good decision making – it was with a view to the day of Christ. With this day in view he desires that the Philippians be pure and blameless.

Love → Knowledge and Discernment → Excellent → Pure and Blameless

(filled with righteous fruit) → Day of Christ = Glory and Praise of God

Putting the line of thought together, “Paul prays that the love of these Christians might abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that they will be able to discern and approve what is truly excellent – and all of this so that they may be pure and blameless and filled with the fruit of righteousness, with a view to the day of Christ.”¹³

Carson goes on to rightly petition for a right view of the day of Christ... that this is not a day for which Christians must live in trepidation or that is called to remembrance as a caution, but as a joyful expectation that informs present living. “Paul is telling them that they must live with a view to the day of Christ – that is, they must live in such a way that they show they remember they are moving toward that day and are utterly constrained by it.”¹⁴

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” 1 John 3:1-2

¹¹ Carson, Pg.112

¹² Carson, Pg.112

¹³ Carson, Pg.114

¹⁴ Carson, Pg.114

Personal Examination & Response

How does living in view of the day of Christ impact our conduct and praying?

What does our pursuit of excellence and the bearing of the fruit of righteousness have to do with glory and praise of God? How does this impact your conduct and praying?

Reflect on your past week of prayer: your commitment to maintain a disciplined focus, who and what you have prayed for, and the nature of how you prayed. Is there tangible progress since the beginning of this season of study on The Prayers of Paul that we began over two months ago? If there has been tangible progress, then continue pressing on in maturity – I am confident that this has been a delightful season in life. If there has not been tangible progress, then now might be the time to further self-examine and even schedule an appointment with one of the pastors to see if we cannot help shepherd you through a lack of growth and maturing. Rejoicing in the *concept* of abounding love and its capacity to provide discernment for that which is excellent and thereby providing a means of so walking and bearing fruit is one thing. Experiencing *actual* abounding love, discernment in that which is excellent, and bearing fruit to the glory of God is quite another, and that is where we aim for the body to be in our progress of maturing in Christ.