

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Paul's Constant Prayer Colossians 1:9-10

Intro: After the initial greetings with which Paul opens his letter to the church in Colosse, he provides them with a prayer report. We don't know how Paul came to know there was a church in Colosse; maybe he was still in Ephesus, or maybe it was after his arrest in Jerusalem and subsequent incarceration in Caesarea. But, regardless of when Paul was made aware of this congregation of believers, he assures them that after he heard of their faith in Christ Jesus and their love for all the saints (4), he began to pray for them and he had prayed for them ever since (3b).

Now Epaphras had arrived in Rome and had informed Paul that there was a doctrinal issue developing in the church and Paul is writing to address that problem. Despite this unfortunate news, Paul is still convinced that the Colossians truly knew Jesus Christ and were definitely born again. They had heard the true gospel and had responded to it in faith. But, Paul was also aware that, even though they knew Christ, there was still much more that they needed to learn *from* Christ and *about* Christ. The purveyors of this new false doctrine were trying to convince these believers that they needed to have a new spiritual experience to advance in their faith but Paul is telling them, "You only need to grow in the experience you have already had."

In light of this, Paul now returns to the subject of his prayers, which are also loaded with messages to his readers. The instructional aspect of his prayers doesn't mean they are any less sincere. The sincerity of these prayers are demonstrated by the fact that Paul's personal prayers are now offered in this public setting. This means they are intended to not just be understood but also even appropriated by his readers. This prayer is presented in terms that invite the Colossians to share his concerns and make his prayers their own. He wants them to desire for themselves the very things that he is praying to the Lord for them to receive.

The contents of Paul's prayer for the Colossians run to the end of the chapter and contains much that would be helpful for any believer to understand and appropriate into their own prayer life. And, because it is important to understand what Paul is praying for, we're going to take our

time as we go through this prayer and discover what doctrines, truths and actions were considered important enough to the Apostle Paul that he would not only pray for them himself but desired the Colossians to pray for them as well. There is some lofty, even ethereal theology given in this prayer as well as some very practical instruction. I pray this study will challenge you as much as it has me.

9a- There are 2 things in this passage that are important for us to understand about the Apostle Paul and his prayer life. First, Paul is praying for Christians he's never personally met. In our study of Ephesians and Philippians we saw Paul pray for each of these churches but he was praying for people he knew personally. In fact, they were churches he had founded himself. But, here he's writing to a church he's never visited and he assures them that he is praying for them and has done so since he heard about them. He's added them to his prayer list and every new report he receives of God's work in that church becomes fodder for his constant intercession to the Father for them.

We need to ask ourselves how extensive are our own prayers? Do all our petitions revolve around our own families and church, our own cherished but rather small circle of friends? Sure, we're primarily responsible for praying for our own circle. If we don't pray for our own circle, who will? But if that is the furthest our prayers ever reach then we run the risk of becoming spiritually insulated, even introverted. Our prayers may be an index of how small and self-centered our world actually is. We should remember to pray for our missionaries and the believers who have benefited from their ministries as well as believers in countries that are plagued with persecution or suffering from natural disasters. We should pray for fellow believers around the world, even if we don't know them personally. This would be an expression of true fellowship that will enlarge our horizons and help us become world Christians.

Second, Paul prays unceasingly. Let's dispense with the obvious misconception: Paul didn't sit around all day and night praying. No doubt he maintained a spirit of prayer as he went about his daily task but besides this, we can see that Paul also maintained a set time for prayer. He's telling these believers that since hearing about them he's made a point to intercede with God on their behalf during his regular prayer times; he's not stopped praying for them. You may say, "Well, sure, he's praying for them.

He just heard about all their doctrinal trouble.” But that conclusion fails to recognize the time line. Paul just found out about the theological problem but he has been praying for them since he heard of their existence. Which begs the question: what was he praying about all this time?

The point being emphasized here is that there are some things for which we should not stop praying. We’re often so keen about making a prayer list and then scratching out the prayers that get answered, and there is nothing wrong with that. We should desire to see the results of our prayers. But when Paul tells the Colossians that he has not stopped praying for them, he implies that there are some things for which we must pray again and again. Prayer is God’s appointed means for appropriating the blessings that are ours in Christ Jesus. Many of the best of those blessings we need again and again, so we must constantly ask: for ourselves and for those we love and care about.

For instance, we learn early in our Christian walk to thank God for our food at each meal. The prayer the Lord taught us to pray assumes that we should ask for food on a daily basis. By the same token, it won’t do much good to set aside time today to ask God to sanctify us if we fail to return to that prayer for 6 months or more. We need some of God’s blessings constantly and as we ask for them constantly, so He constantly meets our needs. These were the things Paul had been interceding with his heavenly Father for on behalf of these believers. The unceasing nature of Paul’s prayer serves as a model to encourage us to also learn persistence in prayer. But, more importantly, it should pique our curiosity: what things does Paul think he should pray for constantly? Should we not pray for them as well?

We will never be Apostles but that reality doesn’t, in any way, prevent us from praying like an Apostle.

9b- Paul asks that the Colossians would be filled with the knowledge of God’s will. We need to discern what Paul means by this. We Christians tend to use the expression the will of God to refer to God’s will in relation to a career, a spouse, even a major purchase – for some aspect of our future that is determined by an impending choice. We seek the Lord’s will over whom we should marry, what college to choose, what church to attend in a new city. None of this is bad. There are many ways in which the Lord leads us and we should not disregard them. Still, this focus is often misleading,

even maybe dangerous, because it encourages us to only consider the Lords will in terms of our future, our needs and that just another form of self-centeredness, no matter how piously we put it.

Worse than that, it removes from our minds the dominant ways in which the Bible speaks about the will of the Lord. See **Ps 143:10**. To do the will of God in this passage is synonymous with obeying what God has already mandated. What God has mandated is His will; our responsibility is to do it. The psalmist here doesn't encourage us to find God's will; he assumes it's already known. He's primarily concerned with the performance of that will. When he says, "Teach me," he doesn't say "teach me Your will," but "teach me to do Your will." Paul famous exhortation in **Rom 12:2** assumes that the transformation of character and conduct that's brought about by the renewal of the Christian's mind is exactly what equips them to test and approve God's will; that is, to discover for yourself by your own experience that His will and His ways are best.

The thrust of **Eph 5:15-17** is that Christians are to make the most of every opportunity, to avoid foolishness, and thus to show that they understand what the Lord's will is. The following verses contrast drunkenness with the joy of being filled with the Spirit, which is also the way understanding the Lord's will is worked out in our lives. In **I Thess 4:3a**, Paul writes, "For this is the will of God: your sanctification." Again, in **5:16-18**, he writes, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." These verses teach us that it's foolish to pretend to seek God's will for your life, in terms of a spouse or career, when there is no deep desire to pursue God's will as He has already kindly revealed it! It's like a 2nd grader refusing to learn basic arithmetic and just wanting to skip to algebra and calculus. It can't happen! You must first be submitted to the Lord's general will, as revealed in Scripture, before you can honestly seek his will for other areas of your life.

Paul doesn't just pray for them to just know God's will but that they will be filled with the knowledge of it. In the NT, to be filled with something is to be controlled by it. When we're filled with anger, we're controlled by anger. When we're filled with the Spirit, we're controlled by the Spirit. Paul's prayer is that they'll be controlled by the knowledge of God's will. How does this happen? In all wisdom and spiritual understanding. Biblical wisdom looks for ways to serve God in the material world of work, family, even politics. Such

wisdom and understanding is spiritual both because it seeks to put into practice the will of God and most of all because it does so through the guidance of God's Holy Spirit.

10a- After articulating his prayer, Paul reveals the reason for his prayer: that the Colossian believers might be utterly pleasing to the Lord Jesus. The false teachers of Colosse attracted people with their offer of spiritual knowledge but they failed to relate that knowledge to life. In the Christian life, knowledge and obedience go together. There's no separation between learning and living. The wisdom Paul prayed for wasn't just a head knowledge of deep spiritual truths. True spiritual wisdom must affect the daily life. Wisdom and practical intelligence must go together. All Biblical truths are practical, not just theoretical. If we're growing in knowledge, we should also be growing in grace.

In **II Thess 1:5**, Paul assures the Christians there that they will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God for which they are suffering. But here the language is stronger because it's more personal. Living a life worthy of Jesus is an incredibly higher standard and a bit more demanding than suffering for the kingdom. But Paul spells out what it means to live a life worthy of Jesus: fully pleasing Him in every way! We would comprehend this better if we lived in a shame culture, as found in many Asian countries. In a shame culture, one of the worst things you can do is bring shame on your family, clan or tribe.

Western culture rarely thinks in such terms. We applaud rugged individualism and our heroes often display a stubborn independence from societal norms. But in Paul's world, to be a Christian, to confess Jesus as Lord, meant to adopt a worldview in which you are bound to please Him in every way. Not to do so would bring shame on Him whom you have confessed as Lord. Now, a shame culture can manipulate people with terrible cruelty but most of our churches in the West are plagued by a different sort of problem. Too many of us think that we can sin with impunity. The outreach and impact of our ministries have been debilitated by the virus of indifferentism.

So, if we're to join Paul in his prayer, we must first align ourselves with his motives: to please our Lord in every way - in thought, word and deed; in action and reaction. In every area of life: work, rest, relationships, free time,

ministry – we must consider what would please Jesus the most. These considerations, rightly pursued, will transform how we work, what we do without leisure time, how we speak to our spouses, what responsibilities we take on at church, what we read, watch on TV, how we treat our neighbors and what we do with our money. The truth is, we can't begin to be utterly pleasing to Jesus unless God fills us with the knowledge of His will. At the same time, the knowledge of His will is not an end in itself. The goal of this knowledge is to facilitate such Christian maturity within us that our deepest desire in life is nothing less than to please our Lord Jesus.

10b- Paul doesn't allow these spiritual truths to remain at a theoretical or abstract level. Walking worthy of the Lord and fully pleasing Him are not just wonderful subjects to discuss in a group Bible study or over morning coffee. Paul goes on to describe what it means to be utterly pleasing to the Lord. In fact, he lays out 4 characteristics of what this looks like in the believers life. We'll only deal with 2 of them today.

Now, these 4 characteristics aren't provided as the only marks of a believer, they're simply typical traits and they flesh out what living a life worthy of the Lord really means. The first is characteristic of a life that is pleasing to the Lord is that a Christian will bear fruit in every good work. True, we know that we're saved by grace and through faith, which means our salvation is not accomplished by works, at least not by any works of our own doing. But, here's the rub – God's free grace in our lives has an inescapable purpose (**Eph 2:10**).

The kind of good works demonstrated and the degree of fruitfulness will vary a great deal from believer to believer. But Paul can't imagine anyone being pleasing to Jesus without producing some kind of fruitfulness in good works. Or, to state it another way, Paul prays that they might be filled with the knowledge of God's will, so that they may live a life pleasing to the Lord Jesus and utterly pleasing to Him and this primarily means abounding in good works. This echoes the Lord's own thought in **Jn 15:7-8**. Bearing fruit in every good work not only pleases our Lord but it glorifies the Father as well.

the 2nd characteristic of fully pleasing Jesus is growing in the knowledge of God. Paul is never satisfied with just the status quo: Christians are organisms that grow, not machines that simply perform a designated function for which they were designed. In stating this, Paul has come full

circle. He began by praying that these believers would be filled with the knowledge of God's will, to the end that they might live lives worthy of Jesus. Part of what that looks like is growth in the knowledge of God. This isn't a vicious circle but a wonderful cycle. The knowledge of God's will is accompanied by the need to obey that will, to conform to it. We must learn something of that will in order to obey it and discovery of more of that will is contingent on our obedience of what we already know.

To put it another way: there's a moral basis to the knowledge of God. To learn something of God's will and then use that knowledge to live a life fully pleasing to the Lord is to engage in the business of obedience. But, as you get busy in the business of obedience, you get to know God better. That, in turn, compels you to more obedience, which then opens up deeper levels in the knowledge of God and His will. It follows then that as your knowledge of God and His will improves, you are driven to greater obedience; which leads to access of greater knowledge of God; etc. If a believer is living a life that's fully pleasing to the Lord, they will be growing in the knowledge of God.

2 words summarize the practicality of the Christian life: walk and work. But the sequence is important: first wisdom; then walk; then work. Clearly, I cannot work for the Lord unless I am walking with Him, but I can't truly walk with Him if I am ignorant of His will. The believer who spends time daily in the Word and in prayer will know God's will and be able to walk with Him faithfully and work for Him effectively. After all, our purpose in life is not to please ourselves, but to please the Lord. We should *walk worthy of our calling* (Eph 4:1) and *worthy of the gospel* (Phil 1:27), which means we will *walk worthy of God* (I Thess 2:12). In short, we should *walk to please God* (I Thess 4:1).

Ultimately, it's not we who work for God; it's God who works in us and through us to produce the fruit of His grace. Christian service is the result of Christian devotion and the one will only be as effective as the other. The work that we do is the outflow of the life we live. God must make the worker before He does the work; He must work in us before He can work through us. God spent 13 years preparing Joseph for his ministry in Egypt and 80 years preparing Moses to lead Israel. Jesus spent 3 years teaching His disciples and even the learned Paul needed a "postgraduate course" in Arabia before he could serve God with effectiveness. A newborn baby can cry and make its presence known, but it can't work. A new Christian can

witness for Christ and even win others but they must be taught to walk and learn God's wisdom before placed in a responsible ministry.

The result of true spiritual wisdom and knowledge is a life lived in a way that is worthy of Jesus Christ. This neatly sums up the distinct nature of Christian ethics. We seek to live a good life because we serve a Lord who has given us salvation as a free gift. Our loving response is to seek to be worthy of such a gift. Part of the promise of salvation is a call to look forward to, and to live in the light of, the coming kingdom of God. Our Christian life here aims to put into practice the way of life that's natural to that kingdom, to prepare ourselves for it and model it before the world. 😊