

Paul's Model of Intercessory Prayer

Colossians 1:9-14

Ronald Dunn's book, shares this story. He was speaking at an intercessory prayer meeting when a mother of a teenager shared a recent answer to prayer. A few days before, as she was getting a pie ready to put into the oven, the phone rang. The school nurse asked her to pick up her son who had a high fever.

The mother calculated how long it would take to drive to school and back, and how long the pie should bake, concluding there was enough time. Popping the pie into the oven, she left for school. When she arrived, her son's fever was worse. She was urged to take him to the doctor.

She drove to the clinic as fast as she dared and anxiously waited for the doctor's verdict. He said, "Get him to bed and start him on this prescription right away."

So she took her boy home & frantically headed out to get the prescription. She forgot about the pie in the oven. She got the prescription filled and rushed back to the car. Which was locked.

There were her keys, hanging in the ignition. She ran back into the mall, found a phone, and called home. She blurted out to her son, "I've locked the keys inside the car!"

Her son, in a hoarse voice whispered, "Get a wire coat hanger, Mom. You can get in with that." But most shops didn't use wire hangers anymore. She finally found one and hurried out of the mall, with a smile of relief. But, as she was about to step off the curb, she halted. She stared at the wire coat hanger. "I don't know what to do with this!"

Then she remembered the pie in the oven. The frustrations and fears of the past hour collapsed on her. She began crying & then prayed. "Dear Lord, my boy is sick, he needs this medicine, my pie is in the oven and the keys are locked in the car. Lord, I don't know what to do with this coat hanger. Dear Lord, send somebody who does know what to do with it, and I really need that person NOW, Lord. Amen."

She was wiping her eyes when a beat-up old car pulled up and stopped in front of her. A young man, in a T-shirt, ragged jeans, long, stringy hair, and a beard which hid everything south of his nose, got out. He began coming her way. When he drew near, she stepped in front of him and held out the wire coat hanger. "Young man," she said, "Do you know how to get into a locked car with one of these?"

He gaped at her, then plucked the hanger from her hand and asked, "Where's the car?"

Telling the story that night, the mother said she had never seen anything like it – it was simply amazing how easily he got into her car. A quick look at the door and window, a couple of twists of the coat hanger and bam! Just like that, the door was open. When she saw the door open she threw her arms around him. "Oh," she said, "the Lord sent you. You're such a good boy. You must be a Christian."

He stepped back and said, "No ma'am. I'm not a Christian. And I'm not a good boy. I just got out of prison yesterday."

She hugged him again – fiercely. "Bless God!" she cried. "He sent me a professional!"

Unfortunately, the story doesn't tell us what happened with the son or the pie.

Often with intercessory prayer – we pray for Jesus to rescue us from a situation. Straighten out that person. Help! This type of intercessory prayer is normal. A family member faces a deadly disease. A neighbor desperately needs Jesus, but turns away every time you try to share Christ. A nation begins to crumble as its people and leaders follow their own evil ways. What can we do? The problems seem too big for us. We are not sure how to pray or intervene. We do not know how to solve the issue on our own. It's times like these when we need to turn to the Lord in intercessory prayer.

But the Apostle Paul in our scripture gives us another model for intercessory prayer. Last week we looked at how he starts by thanking

God the Colossians have heard the gospel and recognized God's grace in it (1:3-8). The Good News has birthed fruit in their faith, love, hope and truth. But Paul moves on to pray that the Colossians church be further "filled" with additional insight, new lived practices & more fruit, that divine grace produces among them.

So Paul is being complimentary toward this church and prays they receive even more of the Creator's blessings. He starts this section of his letter with the words, "**For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you.**" Paul isn't reserving intercession for when things are going badly. The good report he had received about the church, prompts him to intercede continually, that they receive more of God's grace, and be thankful. He knows he has to address the heresy problem at some point, but here, with strangers; he lifts out their good traits and then prays their life of faith will become more fruitful, faithful and fulfilling.

What does, not ceased praying for you, or pray continually mean? It's cultivating a spirit that keeps our hearts attuned to the transcendent. It's not necessarily non stop prayer. It means we can intervene constantly in our daily lives with moments of recurring prayer. For example have you ever prayed for safety for that driver who speeds by you? Or you see someone and are reminded to pray for them? What about prayer for the people in houses as you walk by?

Prayer without ceasing is like when we fall in love. That experience helps us understand the command to pray continually. Being in love, shows it's possible to love without ceasing. The loved one is always on our minds. Corrie ten Boom wrote, "Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?" When Paul tells us to pray continuously, its loving, unceasingly.

So Paul prays first, that the believers **be filled with the knowledge of God's will, in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.** It's good to know the will of God. We do this by making ourselves listen to the Almighty, more than try to get God to listen to us. We listen to each other. We try to find out what God wants

us to be and do, more than persuading God to do what we want. But too often our prayers really are "May thy will God be changed," instead of "God, thy will be done."

Often we want to know what choices to make. But here Paul models a prayer that asks for, spiritual wisdom and understanding. This is different from asking should I take that job or follow this career path or something specific.

It's praying for others that they learn to understand the great truths of Christian faith. Some call this, knowledge of first principles. Some one can be a theologian, but a failure in living. A person may be able to write & speak about eternal truths, but helpless and unable to apply them to the situations in daily life. We can faithfully attend church activities, but there is no effect on our values system in relation-ships. A counselor may be popular but their personal lives are charitably described as chaotic.

In contrast, Paul wants us to be filled, engulfed, and overwhelmed with knowledge of God. We must know what faith in Jesus means, not just with pure knowledge, but in the daily business of living. This is about much more than right behavior. To be filled as Paul prays for us, it's catching the flow of God's will and fully living each day accordingly. A way to think about this is like stepping into the extensiveness of the ocean and how the tide can lift us off our feet. It's being completely in tune with God. It's being automatically like Jesus in our guts; in our attitudes; our actions; and in our hearts.

This spiritual wisdom & understanding, if it's of God, leads to **lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him.**" There has been lots of print on how the church is changing and how we are being affected by psychology and social trends. There has been lot's of moaning at the church's loss of influence and desertion of our children. But surveys tell us there is not a vast difference between many believers and the world. So let's ask ourselves – how do we show our distinctness from the world in the daily decisions of life?

How can we be better at more fully leading lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him? So we should be interceding like Paul that our Bible knowledge turns into what Paul prays for here. Even one example of Christian witness not matching up to God's knowledge of spiritual wisdom and understanding, that leads to hearts turned in Christ's direction, with eternal values, hurts our world wide reputations as believers. So Paul is setting up the believers at Colossae for his message about false beliefs and actions.

Just to remind us, Paul's intercessory prayer is packed with all kinds of themes. You could take just a word or one phrase and do a full sermon on it. It's easy to get overwhelmed or lost in this text. This prayer in verses 9-14, is one long, rambling run-on sentence. It's 109 Greek words, a wagon train of participles, clauses and phrases. Its one sentence packed with a whole volume of theology.

And we need to remind ourselves, Paul recognizes the true Christian life of these believers. They have already shown the unmistakable marks of newborn babes in Christ. They have learned that Jesus himself is available to them personally to help in the struggles of life. Paul compliments them, but he wants more for them.

He wants, as this intercessory prayer asserts, to mature and grow up. This is also the emphasis of much of the New Testament. The weakness of the church often is, Christians remain babies all their lives. They settle down and never grow up. They adapt some good habits and then stop. The church, as a result, flounders in weakness and fears and turns many people off. It is growing up, maturing that is important, as Paul emphasizes in these words. He is simply saying – your progress in faith is wonderful and worthy of thanksgiving, but I want you to grasp that there is more for you. Live a life in a manner fully worthy of the Lord, so you may please God

Then we are told, "**Bear fruit in every good work as we grow in the knowledge of God.**" In the Bible the metaphor of bearing fruit is a rich term. Paul uses this word twice in verses 6 and 10. And he adds in the concept of growth twice.

It's assumed that obedience to Biblical law assures prosperity in all our undertakings.

Paul a Jew, deeply embedded in the symbolism of the Hebrew Scriptures, uses a metaphor like "fruit" which offers a whole wealth of allusion that we don't have time to unpack. In biblical imagination fruitfulness is always connected to faithfulness, while disobedience and idolatry invariably results in fruitlessness. Plus this term evokes memories of God's first instruction at Creation of be fruitful and multiply. We usually take this to mean agriculturally, as families and in good works, but here, Paul is focused on our inner habits, hearts, and souls.

It is clear that for Paul, when the gospel is proclaimed it brings life, not death. When people grow in gospel wisdom and understanding, they lead lives worthy of Jesus, lives that bear fruit in every good work. Believers in Jesus become fruit of the new humanity, who in turn bear fruit. They produce the fruit of good work in every dimension of life, every nook and cranny of the culture, and in every part of their lives. In turn fruit produces more fruit.

Paul seems to be saying, "Your faith is wonderful, but there is more." We can do more good works. We can keep changing in our personal lives. Our identity in Christ can always become stronger and deeper. Don't rest on our laurels and successes. The Almighty Creator always has more holiness for us to take in, more trust we can learn and more faith we need to develop.

For example, it's difficult to win a championship. But it's tougher to do so a second time. It's wonderful to conquer a bad habit. But when will we take on the next one? It's normal at times for a congregation and for us personally to think we have "arrived." We have a good facility, the right pastor, a great organization, and everything is going well. But Paul is interceding by encouraging us to answer the question: how have you matured lately? Are we growing in the comprehensive divine values of our Savior Lord Jesus? Is the Creator fully pleased with you?

To offer another example, some congregations and even some conferences always see the financial and opportunity glass as half empty. Others see it as half full. This difference makes a huge divergence when it comes to decision making, life together & how a church operates. I've worked in both types of congregations and in both kinds of conferences. I can tell you, it's simply more fun to be with a group that doesn't limit what God can do and calls us to.

The fruit metaphor takes us deeper. Deuteronomy 30:14 tells us. "The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your hearts for you to observe and obey." Paul affirms the fruitfulness of the believers in Colossae, as well as calling them to become more fruitful, more faithful, to grow in their heart knowledge of God and to have more good works in their souls.

Then in verses 11 and 12 Paul offers a blessing and more intercession that is dependent on what has been prayed for previously. **"May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power."** The grammar indicates that the act of empowerment is carried out upon us, rather than by us. It's a gift from God to receive knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding as we lead lives fully pleasing to God and bear fruit.

So we will be strengthened "according to His glorious might." This stresses the fact that our empowerment comes from God & is consistent with God's power. The purpose for this power is "so that **we may have great endurance and patience.**" We receive & develop fortitude and conquering patience. Paul expects the church to persevere in faith, not falling prey either to the heresy that threatens the church or any possible persecution associated with their faithfulness to Christ. Don't become lazy in growing traits of the faith. It's long suffering patience and belief.

Not only are they and we to endure, but we are to do so **"with joy."** This is a distinctive mark of Christian strength, fortitude and patience with people, that only comes from knowing God. It contrasts with happiness which is temporary.

Then verse 12 intercedes that we lead worthy lives by **"giving thanks to the Father."** This offers us, three reasons to give thanks. First, we are qualified and enabled to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. Paul uses the word inheritance that is a reference in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, to the Promised Land. This may be a reference to the new creation, the believers' "promised land."

Second, God has "rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son He loves" (vs. 13). The transfer of citizenship given to believers from Satan's dark kingdom to the Kingdom of the Son of Light, is a reason for our thanksgiving. Usually when one kingdom conquers another, every part of the whole country was taken over. So the recipients of this letter understood the language and implication of the citizenship transfer from darkness to light, in every corner of our lives.

A third reason we give thanks is, "In Him, the Son, we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (vs. 14). "Forgiveness of sins" is tied to "redemption." To be redeemed means to have our sins forgiven. It is this forgiveness that causes the believer's thanksgiving.

Paul's type of intercessory prayer is a description of the reality of the life that is enabled by the gospel. This prayer mirrors the purpose of this letter to the Colossians. During Lent we lifted up going deeper, in hope, relationship, wisdom, commitment, healing, growth, & living. Sinking our roots deeper and more fully into Jesus.

Good works are a sign, but even more so is the fruit of our souls. That's more fully pleasing & worthy fruit of the Lord. It's about expanding God's kingdom in the world, in our fellowship and in our own souls. It's living out the divine values of the Creator. Paul offers compliments for who we are now. He also intercedes that we be open to what more the Almighty has for each of us. Are we open and eager to receive? Can we name a spiritual trait or attitude or skill or value or gift we need or want more of? And lastly, will we offer prayers of intercession like Paul does here?