

What Should We Pray?

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Lessons from Paul on Prayer

Tonight, before our time of prayer, I want to take a few moments to look to God's Word and ask the question: **"What should we pray?"** I'm not directing the question yet to our prayer sheet or personal requests—we will do that in a few moments—but to God's Word.

We are commanded in Scripture:

1 Thess. 5:16–18 Rejoice always, **pray without ceasing**, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Coming before God in prayer should be a regular practice. Whether we are at home or at work or here in the gathered worship of God's people, whether we are alone or with family and friends, prayer should be a continual part of our day. Prayers should be lifted **spontaneously**—throughout the day and night as we have reason to cry out to God for help, or as we simply remember His kindness and nearness. And prayers should be offered **at set times**—specific times that we set aside in our schedules, individually and corporately for that purpose.

We are encouraged to live a life filled with prayer—It is our very breath as God's people. We are to continually be engaged in seeking God, worshiping God, rejoicing in Him and giving thanks.

But what should fill our prayers? What should we ask of God? How can we best pray for one another and for ourselves? Tonight I want to address these questions by looking briefly at some of Paul's prayers in his letters to the churches.

There are times when we are facing difficulties or in the midst of trials when we have needs that are pressing and obvious. We see our situation and it is easy to realize: We need to pray about this. And there are times of blessing and provision that call us to pause and give thanks. But apart from those providential occasions for prayer, we have an abiding need and continual reason to pray.

The gospel is an ever-present reality and God is continually on His throne. We have open access to the Father through the Lord Jesus by the shedding of His blood on the cross. **There is always reason to pray and always reason to praise and rejoice.** Paul models this for us in the letters he wrote in Scripture. You can't read a passage written by Paul for very long, without encountering words of prayer and praise.

In our time tonight we will look briefly at five of Paul's prayers: two from Ephesians, and one each from Philippians, Colossians and 1 Thessalonians. The prayers are similar and you will notice some common themes running through Paul's thoughts as he remembers the churches and lifts praise and petitions in their behalf.

So you can hear these themes tie together, I want to begin by reading through the five prayers. Then I will draw out some lessons that help teach us what to pray.

Ephesians 1:15–23 For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Ephesians 3:14–21 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Philippians 1:3–11 I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And 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 praise of God.

Colossians 1:9–14 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. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

1 Thess. 1:2–10 We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

So what are some of the common threads here in Paul’s prayers for the church? My list is not exhaustive, but I want to show you 7 themes that regularly surface when Paul is praying—themes that can teach us how to shape our prayers before God.

1) We are to pray for our love for Christ and for His people.

When Paul prays, he often begins by expressing his love for the Lord Jesus and the church.

- Ephesians 1:15–16 For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and **your love toward all the saints**, I do not cease to give thanks for you, **remembering you** in my prayers,
- Ephesians 3:17–19 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being **rooted and grounded in love**, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and **to know the love of Christ** that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.
- Philippians 1:3–4 I thank my God in **all my remembrance of you**, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.
- Philippians 1:7–9 It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because **I hold you in my heart**, for you are all partakers with me of grace... For God is my witness, how **I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus**. And it is my prayer that **your love may abound more and more...**
- 1 Thess. 1:2–3 We give thanks to God always for all of you, **constantly mentioning you** in our prayers, **remembering** before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our prayers should be shaped by a love for God and for His people. We should pray that God would increase our love for Christ and for one another in the body of Christ. As we think of one another and remember one another throughout the week, we should be “constantly mentioning” one another in our prayers. As we remember Christ’s love for us—its “breadth and length and height and depth”—a love “that surpasses knowledge”—it should be cause for us to pray and praise.

2) We are to pray for our spiritual growth and maturity.

Specifically, Paul prays that we would increase in knowledge, wisdom, discernment and understanding. These appear frequently in his prayers for the church. For the church at Ephesus he asks that God would grant them “a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him” (1:17)—that the eyes of their hearts would be enlightened (1:18). He prays that they would know the hope to which he has called them, “the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints” and “the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe” (1:19). In chapter 3 he prays that they—

Ephesians 3:18–19 may have **strength to comprehend** with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

That word for “comprehend” is the same word that John uses in—

John 1:5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not **overcome** it.

It is a word that can be translated both *comprehend* and *overcome or overtake*. The darkness cannot overcome the light and the darkness cannot comprehend the light. Those two concepts are connected. When you overtake something physically, you lay hold of it and conquer it. When you overtake something in your mind, you grasp it and conquer it in your thinking—you comprehend it. Paul’s prayer is that we might have strength from God to comprehend the vast love of Christ that has rescued us from sin and death and brought us near to the Father.

Paul’s prayer for spiritual growth and maturity is echoed in Philippians and Colossians.

Philippians 1:9 And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with **knowledge** and all **discernment** . . .

Colossians 1:9 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**,

We all need these gifts from God:

Knowledge	Being aware of or possessing Truth—what we know
Understanding	Receiving and comprehending truth (making sense of what we know)
Wisdom	Knowing when and where and how to apply truth
Discernment	Recognizing and distinguishing truth (both from other truths and from error)
	—so we can approve what is excellent . . . (Phil. 1:10)

We should pray and ask God to give these in abundance.

3) We are to pray for strength in the power of the Spirit.

In Ephesians 1:19 Paul speaks of—

Ephesians 1:19 ... the immeasurable **greatness of his power** toward us who believe, according to the **working of his great might**

Ephesians 3:16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be **strengthened with power through his Spirit** in your inner being,

And this, he says is “according to the riches of His glory.” We cannot ask too much of God!

Paul prays for the church at Colossae:

Colossians 1:11 May you be **strengthened with all power**, according to his **glorious might**, for all endurance and patience with joy,

Truth is not something we can know, understand, learn to recognize and apply on our own. For God’s Word to do us good, we need God’s Spirit. We need the indwelling presence and work of the Spirit, if we are to grasp truth and walk in its light. So pray, as we read the Word and hear the Word and preach the Word, that God would accompany His Word with the power of His Spirit and give us the strength we need.

4) We are to pray for fruits of righteousness.

We are to pray that there would be evidence of spiritual growth in our lives—that we would more and more be conformed to the image of Christ—that we would live and walk in ways that are pleasing to God—that we would persevere in faith and hope to the end.

For the Thessalonians, Paul remembers in his prayers their—

1 Thess. 1:3 ... **work of faith** and **labor of love** and **steadfastness of hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For the Colossians he prays that they—

Colossians 1:10 ... **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.

He desires that the church in Philippi—

Philippians 1:10–11 ... **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 praise of God.

Paul returns to this theme near the end of Philippians, where he again encourages the church to “approve what is excellent.”

Philippians 4:8–9 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

As you pray for God’s people, pray for the cultivation of this fruit in their lives. Pray that our walk will give evidence of the hope within us and that we would immerse our lives in these excellent things of which Paul speaks—God’s Word, His church, His people, His work and His grace.

And as we see fruits of righteousness manifest in us and in others:

5) We are to pray with thanksgiving for evidences of grace.

Ephesians 1:15–16 For this reason, because **I have heard of your faith** in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers,

Paul rejoiced when he heard of the faith of the believers at Ephesus and their love for all the saints. Faith and love are both fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). As Paul saw evidence of fruit in the lives of these Gentile believers, he gave thanks and encouraged them in his prayers.

He testified of the church in Thessalonica that they—

1 Thess. 1:4–9 ... **received the word in much affliction**, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that **you became an example** to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has **the word of the Lord sounded forth from you** in Macedonia and Achaia, but **your faith in God has gone forth everywhere**, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how **you turned to God from idols** to serve the living and true God.

Near the beginning of Colossians, before praying, Paul writes of the church in Colossae:

Colossians 1:3–5 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since **we heard of your faith** in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

When you see spiritual fruit and evidence of God’s grace in the lives of brothers and sisters in Christ, give thanks to God! Pray that we would be known for our faith and love for Christ—that we would be an encouragement to all who see us or hear of us to look to Christ and follow Him.

6) We are to pray for our fellowship and unity in Christ.

Paul reminds us that we are fellow partakers of grace. We share together in Christ our joys and sorrows. He says of the church at Philippi:

Philippians 1:5 because of your **partnership** in the gospel from the first day until now. ... [7] It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all **partakers with me** of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

He goes on to explain—

Philippians 1:12–14 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Paul saw God at work in his own life, even in difficult circumstances. And he wanted the church at Philippi, brothers and sisters who prayed for him and supported him, to see it as well. He encouraged the saints not to be discouraged by his imprisonment. God was using his chains to further the cause of the gospel.

Pray that God will unify us as a church—that He will strengthen our fellowship together—that we will regularly and faithfully remember one another in prayer—and that through prayer we would enter into one another's triumphs and trials.

And as we do so, finally—

7) We are to pray with joy and confidence in Christ.

Our greatest need is Christ. Aim to keep Him at the center of all your prayers. Fill the content of your prayers with Him. This is how Paul concludes most of his prayers. His aim and end is the praise of Christ Jesus. Listen to the direction of Paul's prayer in—

Ephesians 1:19–23 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power ... that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 ends with a doxology—

Ephesians 3:20–21 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

God is the One who can do exceedingly abundantly above all we can ask or think! God is the One to whom all glory is due! Paul's confidence is in Him.

Philippians 1:6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 1:11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes, to the glory and praise of God.

Colossians 1:13–14 He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

1 Thess. 1:10

and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Paul prays with the gospel foremost in his mind. He thinks much of Christ and speaks much of Christ.

Let me encourage you to shape your prayers in this way as well:

Pray with a love for God and for His people.

Pray that God will give us knowledge, wisdom, understanding and discernment by the power and strength of His Spirit—that we can grasp the marvelous truths of His Word and the riches we have in Christ.

Pray that our lives will more and more be conformed to the image of Christ—that we will produce fruits of righteousness and give evidence of God’s work in us.

Give thanks for every place and for every person where you see God at work.

Pray that God will unite us together as fellow partakers of His grace.

And fill your prayers with joy and confidence in Christ. Remember the gospel. The height and breadth and depth of all we have in Christ should continually fuel and speed our prayers.

Let’s spend the remainder of our time now in prayer.

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