

Praying for Others' Spiritual Progress

Colossians 1:9-14

Most of us can think of other people that we really want to see walking more closely with Christ: a friend, our children, our spouse, a coworker, a neighbor. Some of them are already strong in their walk with Christ; perhaps others of them are struggling; perhaps others of them aren't believers yet. When you look at their lives, you are convinced that they need to walk with Christ more than anything else.

When you think about it, there are numerous things we can do to help those we care about walk with Christ. For starters, we can live by example ("let your light shine before others. . ."), showing them what it looks like to walk with Christ. Many people have never seen a real, live follower of Christ walking humbly with God. Our lives can be a powerful example. We can also talk with people. We can listen to their experiences and struggles and agonize with them. We can also talk about the Scriptures and what we've experienced in our walks with God. We can also encourage them to put themselves in a position to grow. There are many resources in the body of Christ: Life Groups, weekly corporate worship, classes, books, etc.

There are plenty of things we can do to help others in their walks with Christ. Paul wrote, "I labor . . . strive according to God's power" in order to present people "complete in Christ" (Colossians 1:29). Paul exerted great effort in helping others walk with Christ.

But there's something else that Paul did. He prayed for people. He believed that his prayers had an impact on their spiritual progress. Today we are going to examine Paul's prayer for the Colossians recorded in Colossians 1:9-14. Paul's prayer gives us a fresh perspective on how to pray for the spiritual progress of other people. As we go through this prayer, keep in mind the people you want to see walking with Christ. And consider the possibility that your prayers could have an impact on their spiritual progress.

Paul's prayer for the Colossians' spiritual progress (Col. 1:9-14)

In Colossians 1 Paul has already expressed his thankfulness for the Colossians. He wasn't directly responsible for the Colossians coming to Christ, but ever since he heard of their faith, he gave thanks for them and prayed for them. Beginning in verse 9 Paul communicates **that** he'd been praying for them and **what** he had been praying for them. It had to be a striking thing to them to know that Paul continually prayed big, bold spiritual prayers for them.

9 For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

Paul had an ongoing commitment to praying for them. The main petition of the entire prayer is that they would be "filled with the knowledge of God's will." When Paul spoke about the "will of God" he generally meant the revealed will of God – the things that God had made known about Himself and therefore about how His people should live. The person "filled with the knowledge of God's will" has an intuitive understanding of who God is and how God thinks

about His people. That person isn't merely stuffed full of Bible trivia; that person really "gets" who God is and how He thinks.

This comes into focus when we notice that Paul prays that the Colossians would be filled with the knowledge of God's will "in all spiritual wisdom and understanding." Paul wanted the Spirit to give them a working knowledge of God's will; he prayed for *spiritual* wisdom and understanding. In other words, in specific situations he wanted the Spirit to give them insight and discernment about what God wanted them to think and say and do. For Paul, being "filled with the knowledge of God's will" was very strategic for the Colossians' spiritual progress.

In verse 10 Paul explains the tangible *result* of this knowledge in the Colossians' life.

10 so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

Paul's conviction was that a genuine knowledge of the will of God is a very practical thing. It leads to *walking in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects*. The Colossians' knowledge of God's will fueled their obedience. True knowledge leads to right behavior.

This was especially important for the Colossians because others had come to them with false teachings. As is often the case with false teachers, they advocated a lifestyle that was very strict and demanding. They advocated all sorts of regulations about what you could eat and drink, rules about the Sabbath and other holy days, etc. Paul's evaluation in 2:23 was:

23 These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

Such self-made religion was impressive on one level; it had the appearance of wisdom. But it was worthless in helping them walk in a manner worthy of the Lord or in pleasing Him in all respects. What they really needed was to be filled with the knowledge of God's will – an intuitive understanding of what God wanted. They really needed to understand God's mind concerning food and drink and the Sabbath.

Of course the same thing is true for the people we want to see walking with Christ. What they really need is to be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. For example, let's say that your friend is going through some difficulty – an illness, loss of a job, or a conflict with another person. Your friend's foundational need is to be filled with the knowledge of God's will concerning that situation. Even though you might not know specifically what God might want to do in that situation, you do know this from James 1:

2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

It is the will of God for your friend to be refined through his/her trial. God always wants to deepen our trust and our love for Him through the trials/difficulties we experience. People who don't have this spiritual wisdom and understanding often come out of trials bitter or fearful or less confident in God's care. But you want better for your friend, so you pray.

To clarify, it's perfectly good and right to pray that God might change your friend's difficult circumstances. If you have a friend who's suffering with some illness, it's good to pray for healing and for health. But James 1 also suggests that we should pray that they would allow this trial to produce endurance in their lives. We should allow our understanding of God's ways to inform our praying.

In verses 10 through 12 Paul describes four aspects (they're participles in Greek) of "walk[ing] in a manner worthy of the Lord" and "pleas[ing] Him in all respects." We'll go through these four items quickly, but notice how comprehensively Paul wanted the Colossians to please God.

First, Paul mentions ***Bearing fruit in every good work.*** Walking in a manner worthy of the Lord doesn't merely mean getting busy doing good works. It involves actually "bearing fruit" as we do good works. This fruit involves the personal fruit of the Spirit as well as the fruit of seeing others' lives changed by God.

Second, Paul also mentions ***increasing in the knowledge of God.*** The knowledge of God isn't static and fixed; our knowledge of God grows and matures as we walk with Him. And like the knowledge of God's will, the knowledge of God isn't merely a matter of piling up facts about God; it is relational knowledge. This is what Paul wanted for himself in Philippians 3 when he wrote that he counted all thing loss so that he might "know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings."

Third, in verse 11 Paul mentions being ***strengthened with all power:***

11 strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.

The only person who lives a life pleasing to God is the person "strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might." We don't just "need a little help" from God. We need His power coursing through our lives. Pleasing God in all respects isn't something that can be done by willpower or in the power of the flesh. We're way too weak and way too fickle. We need the power of God's glorious might (which leads to steadfastness and patience).

Fourth, Paul mentions in verses 11 and 12, ***joyously giving thanks to the Father.*** Something is missing if a person doesn't notice and acknowledge what God is doing in his/her life and world. Maturity involves a life of giving thanks to God the Father. Paul mentions in verse 12 a core reason why thanksgiving is so appropriate: God has "qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light." Paul fills out this idea in verses 13 and 14:

13 For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Sometimes we as believers need to take our eyes off of our immediate circumstances and remember that God has rescued us from the domain of darkness (and all of its bondage) and has transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son. We now live in a kingdom ruled by the One who loved us so much that He laid down His life for us. Instead of bondage and oppression, this kingdom is characterized by freedom, redemption, and forgiveness. No matter what our immediate circumstances, that's reason to "joyously give thanks to the Father."

And remember that this description of "walking in a manner worthy of the Lord" is the fruit of being filled with the knowledge of God's will. And so one of the most strategic things we can do for the people we love is pray for this filling. If this prayer has captured your imagination, you might even consider memorizing it (or part of it) so that you can easily bring it to mind and pray it for others throughout the day.

In our time remaining I'd like to share a couple of perspectives that should help fuel our praying for others' spiritual progress.

First, ***we should want for ourselves what we are praying for others.*** If you and I aren't praying for and pursuing the knowledge of God's will in our own lives, we won't be passionate about praying for others to be filled with the knowledge of God's will. Our hearts just won't be in it. If you read Paul's letters to the churches, you will see that Paul was personally committed to being filled the knowledge of God's will. He prayed and studied and sought God as long as he lived (see 2 Timothy 4:13). When he wrote to individuals and churches, he was only challenging them to pursue the things he pursued. And he prayed for them the things he wanted for himself.

God has been impressing this upon me recently. I've been praying for several marriages lately. As I pray for others, I can't help but evaluate my own marriage. Brian and I do a lot of weddings, and these wedding meditations come back to mind (and "haunt" me – in a good way – at times). As I pray for others' marriages, I find myself wondering, "Do I really believe that that the best thing I can do for *my* marriage is to walk with Christ?" Do I remember that Brenda is "the wife of my youth" and my "wife by covenant" and my "companion" (Malachi 2:14)?

As I pray for others I find myself challenged to want the same for myself. And that makes me more fervent in my prayers for others. As you pray for others to be filled with the knowledge of God's will in some way, allow God to impress upon you the need for the same.

Second, ***we should be convinced that our praying is vital for others' spiritual progress.*** Paul believed that praying for the Colossians was strategic and effective in their lives. He didn't devote himself to praying these big, bold, spiritual prayers for the Colossians to make himself feel good or because he was "supposed to." Rather, he believed that his praying could change their lives

Praying wasn't the only way Paul tried to influence the Colossians to be filled with the knowledge of God's will. He also wrote them this letter before us, explaining to them various

aspects of the will of God. He also exhorted them to “let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” (3:16). And so Paul tried to influence the Colossians through more than his praying. But ***his praying was essential***. He believed that his prayers would have an impact in the Colossians’ lives.

This is a rather foundational conviction for our praying also. If we don’t believe that our prayers can have an impact in others’ lives, we won’t pray very much and we won’t pray very well. This is where we need to allow the Scriptures to shape our thinking on prayer (as opposed to our limited experience or our emotions or our logic or whatever). Scripture couldn’t be more emphatic about the efficacy of prayer. Jesus said this, for example, in John 15:7:

7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

Prayer is one of the foundational things that God uses to bring about His will on the earth. When we want what God, and we pray the same, God is pleased to act. God doesn’t ***have*** to act in response to our prayers, but He often does. It doesn’t seem like a terribly efficient way to run things, but God has established something of a partnership in which He leads us to want and ask for things, and then He acts. Understanding and believing this is vital.

When you think about the person you’d like to see walking more closely with Christ, consider the possibility that your prayers are the very thing that will move God to work in his/her life. At the very least, you don’t want your lack of praying to be the reason God hasn’t done something in that person’s life. We can’t pray specifically for everybody. But we can invest spiritual energy in praying for those people whom God has put on our hearts. And who knows? Perhaps our prayers are the very thing that will move the hand of God on their behalf! Prayer is an expression of helplessness; when we pray we are asking God to do what we cannot – change the heart and mind of another person.