

The Core

What to Pray for People You Love

Mark Vroegop

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; being 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 (Col. 1:9-14).

I love the clarity of Ecclesiastes 7:2.

It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart (Eccl. 7:2).

What is Solomon saying? Let me put it this way: “It’s better to go to funerals than parties if you want to remember what life’s all about.” Through the tears and togetherness, you hear what matters most to the people in the room as they reflect on the life of the person who has died. In this way, funerals are instructive. I’ve hugged my wife a little longer, listened more intentionally to my kids, sat a little longer on their bed during the goodnight routine, and savored morning coffee conversations because of funerals.

Why is that? Because you get a sense of what’s important. You hear it. You see it. You feel it. David Brooks calls these “eulogy virtues” in contrast to “resume virtues.”

We all know that the eulogy virtues are more important than the résumé ones. But our culture and our educational systems spend more time teaching the skills and strategies you need for career success than the qualities you need to radiate that sort of inner light. Many of us are clearer on how to build an external career than on how to build inner character.¹

Funerals remind us of what really matters and what should be central. But if your life depends on reminders from funerals, you’ll not be well-served. The key is to live with the right passions in the center of your life throughout your life. To embrace a continual centering of what’s most important.

But from there, it’s also critical to learn how to see that reality play out in the lives of other people, especially the people you care about.

This is what the book of Colossians does for us as Christians: It centers us on what’s essential.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html>

Our theme in this series has been to discover what it means to live with Jesus at the center. Having Jesus as your core means that you see everything through the lens of his death, burial, and resurrection. This mentality and choice, living with Jesus at the center, radically changes everything, but especially how you pray. Or maybe this is a better way to say it: When Jesus is core, your prayers change.

In Colossians 1:9-14 we get a glimpse into the heart of the Apostle Paul as he tells the Colossian church exactly what he is praying for. He loves them dearly, and his prayer reflects the yearning desire of this spiritual father for his spiritual children.

I want you to have this text on your heart so that when you are led to pray for someone, you pray God-centered prayers. What do you pray for people you love? Pray God-centered prayers.

Colossians 1:9-14 only has one prayer, and the prayer is: **“God, I pray that they would know you so their lives would please you.”** Our aim this morning is to unpack this prayer so we can pray it with the level of depth that God intended. I want to help you pray God-centered prayers for those you love.

“That they would know you” (v. 9)

Paul tells the people that the report he heard about them caused him to continually pray for them. He had told them this before (1:3-8), but in those verses he told them why he was praying for them (i.e., faith in Christ, love for the saints, and hope in heaven). In verses 9-14 he tells them what he is actually praying for.

Now, at first it looks like there are many things for which Paul is praying. If you read the verses quickly you might think that there are four, five, or six things on Paul’s heart. Actually, there is only one prayer request, but it is so sweeping, vast, and powerful that everything else flows from it.

Paul’s singular prayer for them was “that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will.” Everything else from that prayer is about what that means. His prayer is for them to be filled with the knowledge of his will, and everything else explains what this means or looks like.

When I use the word “will,” we immediately have a bit of a problem because usually we think of God’s will as something that is future. We pray about knowing God’s will when we don’t know what to do or when we have a decision to make. Certainly, God’s will means that, but limiting it to that definition would not fit the tone of Paul’s prayer here.

The Colossians 1:9 image of God’s will is an understanding of who God is, what he desires, what he loves, and what he wants. It is used the same way in Colossians 4:12, when Paul says that Epaphras prays that they “may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.”² The word “will” can also be translated as something that is wished for or desired. In other words, the will of God can mean much more than God’s plan for the future; it means learning what God desires or wants.

² Other examples of this usage are Romans 2:18, 12:2, 1 Thess 4:3, 5:18.

Therefore, Paul's prayer for this church is that they would live in such a way that they would be filled with the kind of life that God desires—saturated with a spiritual understanding of who God is and what God wants. "God, I want them to know you."

Notice as well, in verse 9, that this knowledge of God is not just an intellectual knowledge; it is spiritual. The text says, "filled with the knowledge of his will **in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.**" Paul is praying that they would know God, and this kind of wisdom and understanding is something that (1) God does, thus the passive tense of filling in verse 9, and something that (2) happens by the Spirit of God.

I trust that you realize that not everyone who is knowledgeable about God knows God. Smart does not equal spiritual. Hell is going to be filled with very smart people. In fact, I would guess that there are some broken-hearted parents who pray this way: "Lord, our son is so smart, but he reasoned you right out of his life!"

In other words, a person cannot know God until they are converted, repenting of their sins and trusting in Christ. Nothing associated with Christ or his church makes sense to the "natural man" because he cannot understand without the Spirit.

Let me bottom-line this and make it very simple. No one knows God until they accept the most foundational and fundamental spiritual truth: God is holy; I am not; Jesus saves; Christ is my life. I need to repent and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of my sins. Knowing God starts or ends there.

What does God want? What is his will? First, he wants you to repent and trust Christ. Second, he wants his children to grow deeper and deeper in knowing and understanding him.

Now, remember that there is only one prayer here: "I want them to know you."

- It may be prayed for a son who is the smartest, most intellectual, got-it-all-together young man in rebellion against God.
- It could be prayed for a daughter who grew up in a godly home, confesses Christ, but who seems to be drifting further and further away.
- It might be prayed for a person in the midst of a really hard time who is trying to understand why this is happening and how it connects to God's purposes.
- It could be prayed for a friend with so much potential, and you just want them to use his or her gifts for God's glory.
- You could even pray it for your own heart: "God, I want to be filled with the knowledge of your will. I want to know you!"
- It should be prayed for our church during this season that we are entering together: "We want to know you!"

God wants us to pray this way. Do you know why? Because he wants us to know him too! Isn't that beautiful?

“So they would please you” (vv. 10-14)

The effect of this knowledge of God’s will is incredible, and it takes Paul five verses to identify all the amazing ramifications. You could boil down the longing of Paul’s heart to this simple statement: I want them to know you so that they will please you.

Verse 10 is very important. Their knowledge of God’s will (what God wants) will have a direct effect on how they live. Their lives will please him in two ways. First, their lives will **fit** who God is, and second, their lives will **function** in accordance with what God loves. Knowing God leads to lives that fit and function.

Paul would have nothing to do with a separation between what someone believes and how they live. These are inseparable, and this is the main message of chapter 3. In verse 10, we see that knowledge of God leads to a walk that is “in a manner worthy of the Lord.” This means that you understand who Jesus is and the actions of your life match what you know about Christ. So, you can see the problem if you don’t know or understand who Jesus is! If you don’t know him, you won’t know what doesn’t fit.

It is obvious! As an individual comes to know God, they realize what doesn’t fit with the worthiness of Christ. There are few things more painful than watching someone live a life that doesn’t fit with Christ.

Four Marks of a God-pleasing Life

Everything that follows in verses 10b-14 is an explanation of what a life that pleases him looks like. Again, we see Paul’s emphasis on an intimate knowledge of God that does something—it works! So real spiritual maturity or really knowing God is directly linked to how we live. What happens at 96th and Towne every Sunday is not even close to the sum total of functional Christianity. What happens here is just a catalyst for everything in your life.

Now, what does this look like?

1) Fruit-filled Growth (v. 10)

The text says, “bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” This means there is a direct relationship between knowing God, bearing fruit, and knowing God more. I think it works like this: I come to know who God is in a deep way, such that my life looks more and more like Christ. And as I do what he calls me to do, I see fruit. **And I know that it was God who did it, which increases my knowledge of God.** In other words, bearing fruit helps me learn about God.

So, pray that God would make a loved one spiritually fruitful so that they or others could learn more and more about God. Pray that he would make you spiritually fruitful.

2) Endurance in Suffering (v. 11)

The second manifestation of a life that is pleasing to God and for which we pray for others is for spiritual strength in suffering such that a person will endure and be joyfully patient. This strength comes from God “with all power according to his glorious might.” The idea is that their strength is being supplied to

them, and it is directly tied to God's power. Don't you love that? The spiritual strength prayed for here is tied to learning to bear up under something with great and joyful patience. So, the heartfelt prayer is for a loved one's ability to be spiritually strong while the pressure of hardship or pain grows.

How many of you know someone who is going through a really tough time right now? Do you ever wonder what to pray? Pray this: "God, give them power directly from you to help them be strong."

3) Gratitude to God (v. 12)

The third mark for which Paul prays is an overarching thankfulness. But what is he thankful for?

. . . 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 (Col. 1:12-14).

I hope you realize that if you really understand grace and if you really understand who God is, then you will be a person who sees life through a continual lens of gratitude. The battle line for gratitude is not just whether or not you'll be thankful. The battle line is whether or not you understand God. And do you know when this is tested? When God does something that is hard or confusing, can you still thank him because you really know him?

4) Gospel-centeredness (vv. 13-14)

The gospel is all over verses 13-14! Redemption, forgiveness, deliverance from the domain of darkness, a qualification to share in the inheritance—these are all words tied to the work of Christ in the good news. And it was the Father, through the Son, who accomplished this work.

Maybe you know someone today who has had some hard stuff in their life, and you long for them to learn how to root their gratitude to God in the gospel. This is why we have to help people connect the gospel to their lives and learn to celebrate the gospel. Because, when hard stuff happens, it is all you've got! And so we pray, "God, help them to please you by giving thanks to you for all that you've done."

A life that functions in the gospel should yield fruit leading to more knowledge, strength in suffering, and gratitude to God. I know that some of you just ache for a family member, friend, or counselee to be like that. God invites us to pray for them. This prayer invites us to pray God-saturated prayers that lead to fruit that really pleases God.

In light of this text, there are three kinds of people I want you to consider with me:

First, is there someone in your world whose godliness and growth thrills you? Is there someone who is starting to turn the corner and whose life you just want to see ascend for the glory of God? Pray God-centered, "Help them to know you, Lord!" prayers. Then, let them know that you are praying for them. Inspire them. Encourage them.

Second, is there someone for whom your heart aches? Is there someone whose present path just brings tears to your eyes? Who is it that God is calling you to renew your prayer efforts for today? For whom

would you cry out, “God, help them to know who you are!” Whose life today is heading down all the wrong paths and you would say, “God, I want them to have a life that fits and functions in a way that pleases you.” In a moment, I’m going to invite you to come up to one side of the auditorium to seek God’s face for them or to pray with one of our elders or deacons.

But there is a third person who is on my heart today. And I want to speak directly to you. You are the person who will be prayed for over here. There are people who love you, they want God’s best for you, and they might be seated right next to you. And I want you to hear this message as if it were God speaking directly to you: It is time to stop breaking your loved one’s heart. Let me invite you to say today: “Enough! I want to know God!”

Making Jesus the core means praying God-centered prayers that sound like “God, I pray that they would know you so that they could please you.” That’s what you pray for people you love.

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