

The Letter to the Philippians

Lesson 5: Essentials for Growth in Godliness Philippians 1:9-11

“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.”

This lesson will focus on this prayer of Paul for the Philippian believers. It will benefit us greatly to examine in detail the various parts of this prayer, which will aid us in our Christian lives. Paul’s prayers, just like his teachings, are very theological in nature, and are therefore instructive to us, as well as an example of prayer.

If you’ve been paying attention to the flow of chapter one so far (which may be reflective of my explanation so far), a question might at this time arise in your mind as to why Paul is praying here, or why Paul prays *at all* for that matter. Just three verses prior, Paul is “sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” So, if Paul was just sure that God will finish what He has started in the believers, than why is he now praying that they will abound in love, and knowledge, and discernment? *“You just said that they would Paul, and now you’re praying that they will? Which one is it Paul? Did you contradict yourself? Can God’s purpose and promise fail? And if God’s sustaining power can’t fail, then what’s the letter all about? Why don’t we just kick back, relax, and watch the story unfold!”*

I may have just created a controversy in your mind where there wasn’t one a minute ago, that wasn’t my intention. There does seem to be a controversy here, look at verse 10 again. Paul says that he prays that they grow so that ‘you may approve what is excellent’, placing the emphasis on the individual effort, growth, and approval. And then in the next verse, he prays that these efforts would culminate in them being ‘filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.’ Paul says ‘produce it’, and then he says, ‘and you get it from Jesus.’ So, which one is it Paul?

This isn’t the first time that this seeming contradiction is found in scripture, in fact, it happens again in Philippians in the next chapter. Look at 2:12-13. Paul says in verse 12, ‘work out your own salvation’ implying human effort and intention. And the very next verse he says, ‘for it is God who works in you’, implying God’s effort.

There are other passages that are like this throughout the NT, and it has led many to become synergistic in their salvation. ‘Synergistic’ being a technical term to describe the co-operation of man and God, both working towards the common goal of salvation. The major problem with synergistic thinking is that it’s not biblical, especially when we step back and examine salvation from a macro view across the expanse of scripture. When we take verses out of context and present them as islands of truth all by themselves, cases can be argued for synergism, but those arguments dissolve within the context of scripture. Salvation is biblically Monergistic, a technical term meaning One (mono) person involved in the salvation of souls, God.

So, how do we settle this conundrum (that I’ve so kindly brought up) in our minds before we proceed to examine God’s purpose for inspiring this prayer here in the letter? To begin to settle the controversy, I’ll simply tell you that there isn’t one. We work, and God works, but not synergistically. We don’t work

alongside of God, we don't work to awaken His work, rather, we work because He has breathed life into us.

That shouldn't be too difficult for us to comprehend. If a computer programmer designed a program to operate a specific way, he would have expectations from the program to run as designed. The program cannot run without a programmer (nor can we live apart from God breathing new life into us). The program cannot create itself, nor can the program work alongside the programmer to create itself. The programmer creates the program (faith, repentance, justification, salvation), and the result of his work is a program that runs according to his input (good works).

I hope that last analogy provided some clarity as to the relationship between our work and God's work. On the surface, the two seem to contradict, but in light of the programmer analogy, maybe we can understand how we work because God already has. But the truth of the matter is that the programmer analogy falls short. In fact, every analogy falls short when we try to understand the relationship between God's sovereign work and man's responsibility. Lloyd-Jones has this to say about it,

“This is a great mystery which we cannot understand, and nothing, it seems to me, is more foolish and fallacious than to attempt to go beyond the work of God and to cross the borderline which separates what is clearly revealed, from our own original presuppositions and deductions. These are the things of which we can be certain: it is God who has initiated this good work in us—salvation is entirely of grace—but once we have received it, then he calls upon us as responsible new men in Christ Jesus to do certain things ourselves.”²⁴

So, how are we to finally understand this? Lloyd-Jones says we can't. There are some things that are revealed to us in scripture, and there are things that are not. And there are things like this, to which God in His infinite wisdom has revealed just enough truth. I can define the Trinity as I see the Godhead revealed in scripture, but I cannot give a comprehensive explanation. I can define a literal six-day creation, but I cannot give a comprehensive explanation is how God did it. In the same way, I have defined the relationship between God's saving work, and our required good works, but I cannot give the comprehensive explanation for it. But both sides are in scripture, and in God's mind they are both necessary, and true, and in perfect harmony with one another. So we will press forward at this point, trusting in God's wisdom, and seeking to understand this doctrine from scripture as we move along.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

In our text, Paul prays for the growth of saints in Philippi, knowing that God has promised that He would perfect those whom He has begun a good work in. So, if Paul knew that God would complete their sanctification, and so Paul knew that the saints would grow, than why did he pray for the growth? In comparison to Paul's relationship with other churches (Ephesus, Colossi, Corinth, Thessalonica), his relationship with the Philippians was actually pretty good. Their church life was healthy and strong compared to the Corinthians. Why would Paul pray for the Philippians growth? Why didn't he just thank God for what He had already done with the Philippians, and pray that the other churches grow to become like them?

The answer to this prayer is satisfaction. Paul wasn't satisfied that he had a good relationship with the Philippians. Paul wasn't satisfied in where they had grown spiritually. The goal in sanctification is not to lead the pack spiritually. The goal wasn't to become just like Paul, the goal was, and is, to become just

²⁴ Lloyd-Jones, Martyn, *The Life of Joy* Baker, 1989 (p. 47)

like Jesus Christ. Paul was never satisfied in his own growth, he always pressed forward for Jesus Christ! (cf. Phil. 3:13-14) Paul was never satisfied in himself, and always coveted more Christlikeness, and this is precisely what he coveted for the church.

Maybe you're uncomfortable with my using words like coveting, and not being satisfied, with positive connotations. Isn't it a sin to covet? Isn't it a sin to not be content? Those are sins. It is wrong to covet anything, unless what you covet is Christ. I believe it becomes a sin when we stop coveting Christ. We should be content with most things in our lives, it is a sin if we aren't, but I believe it becomes a sin when we are content with our present knowledge and growth in Christ.

Paul was anxious that these Philippians would advance and grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, as he was. We shouldn't lose sight that the book of Philippians is a prison epistle. Though Paul was presently in every circumstance that we would expect to find depression, he wasn't. Paul says, **“for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”** (Phil. 4:11-13) So, we need to hold in balance the fact that Paul wants the Philippians to grow and find their all in Christ, and yet he is not speaking of finding the rose in every thorn bush, because Paul himself knew all too well the reality of the thorns that life brings. Paul isn't encouraging them to keep their chin up because all was well, because all wasn't well, and that was reality. But what Paul intends with this prayer is that they meet reality head on, prepared to overcome the challenges before them, because of their love and knowledge of Christ.

The Prayer

“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.” (9-11)

Let's take note of the words 'love' and 'knowledge, so that we don't focus on just one, and diminish the other. Paul doesn't *just* pray that the love of the Philippians abound more and more, but he prays that their love abound with knowledge and all discernment. The world around us is unceasingly looking for love in all the wrong places. People have erroneous interpretations of what love is, and how we should love. But God's Word meets us where we are as sinners, and teaches us the way that God would have us love Him, and one another. Aside from this God-given knowledge and wisdom to discern, you cannot love. Of course, the same is futile in reverse, all the knowledge in the world is nothing without love. First Corinthians 13:2 says, **“And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”** Lloyd-Jones said, “You [can] display a purely intellectual interest in the Bible and in Christian truth—it is all in the head and it never affects the heart. You can quarrel with men about it, but you may be denying the gospel you are discussing.”²⁵

So Paul is praying that the Philippian believer grow more and more in love, through the knowledge and application of the gospel truths. It is important to we not overlook the intensity of the spiritual disciplines involved in intentionally learning and applying the scriptures to our lives, since this prayer of true of each of us also. And the prayer is important because of the practicality of it. So many times we see Christian

²⁵ Lloyd-Jones, Martyn, *The Life of Joy Baker*, 1989 (p. 51)

people who are suffering from so many things. They are depressed about their current circumstances, and they are angry about the state of the world, and the direction things seem to be headed. And the prayer of Paul is directed to the growth of their thinking, to align scripturally, which would bring them such clarity and peace, and result in love rather than anger and frustration. These people need to love, but in order to love, they need to grow in knowledge.

The Philippians were going through some rough waters, and Paul prays that as they do, that they would find their balance in the God who made them, and keeps them, and will perfect them. It brings a wonderful peace to the heart of the sinner to know that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (1:6) That is a truth that is unshakable. Regardless of the darkness of the day you're in, that truth is still as beautiful as the sunrise. But that truth cannot be trusted in apart from the knowledge of it.

But even more than growing in love through knowledge, Paul also prays that they grow in all discernment, or wisdom, or judgment, or sense. We all know people who have a good amount of knowledge, but no wisdom, some of those people are my boss. All kidding aside, there are many Christians who possess a right, and intense theology, but who are practically tripped up all over in their lives. Paul so prays that these believers not only grow to become expert theologians, but that they also grow in their ability to discriminate between good and godly things, and evil things in their lives.

There is much wisdom in praying for this wisdom. We should always be alert to the opposition that comes against Jesus Christ and His church. But we need to be aware, not just of the outside opposition, but the internal opposition too. It's not just that Paul wants these believers to grow in wisdom so that their not being tangled in the affairs of a dying world. Even more, Paul wants these believers to be able to see with great clarity, the evil and unscriptural doctrines that were unceasingly being brought into the churches. Without a proper knowledge of the scriptures, and the wisdom to discern it, the onslaught of false doctrines would surely bring much damage to the congregation. I can hardly think of a more unloving thing than to allow the destroyer in the door to harm your brothers and sisters.

Application of the prayer

I want to draw your attention to the beginning of verse 10. For the first time in this epistle we read "so that", which tells us that Paul is giving the reason for his prayer. Paul prays that the believers grow in knowledge, because good theology matters, and he prays that they have the wisdom to discern, but he prays so that (1) they might discern what is excellent, (2) be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, and (3) that they might be filled with the fruit of righteousness. So let's look at each purpose in order.

Discerning excellent things: There are always a million things that we can do with our lives. Maybe a zillion. There are high priority responsibilities that we have, there is always work to do, places to go, people to see. There are at any time a dozen things fighting for our attention. And this is where a mature Christian who is knowledgeable and wise can discern properly. Sure, there are many causes, many clubs, many teams, many jobs, many friends, many books, many movies to take part in, but are they all spiritually excellent for us?

There are many amoral things that we can do, things that fill our life, and enrich it, but if those things fill detract from our ability to see and savour Jesus Christ, if those things choke out Christ, or tire us so much that at the end of the day we have nothing left for Him, are they still amoral? There comes a point when the amoral club becomes the god in Exodus 20:3, "**You shall have no other gods before me.**" I fear

that many who claim the name Christian these days are so wrapped up in things that are clean, that they've convinced themselves that their doing Christian things, when in sum total they're doing clean worldly things.

But we are not specifically talking about the act of doing certain things, and abstaining from doing others. People are always looking for the list of do's and don'ts in Christianity. We're not talking about works righteousness, we're talking about single-mindedness. What Paul is praying for, is for a spiritually mature Christian, whose life is lived in total devotion to Christ, who strive for holiness in everything that they do. Who look to make much of Christ even in their most private times. Paul wants to see spiritually mature Christians live their lives openly, for others to see what a mature devotion to Christ looks like, not for their praise, but **“to the glory and praise of God.”**

This type of living doesn't happen overnight, and it doesn't happen by itself. There must be a concentrated effort, a single-minded devotion. Paul ends off his letter to the Philippians with this advice, **“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.”** (4:8-9) Much of what we see that is wrong with Christians today is that their minds are divided and devoted to two or three of twenty different and competing things. Paul's prayer is that we approve the things into our lives that are excellent.

Secondly, Paul prays that **“they be pure and blameless for the day of Christ”**. Paul is reminding them, and us, that we are not living for today. This world is not our home. And our life is not supposed to be spent in entertaining, and pursuing the American dream. Our lives are supposed to grow and mature and reflect Jesus Christ. Our lives are supposed to point other towards Him. Our lives are to be pure, so pure that even though the watching world may hurl insults our way, they still can find no blame in our conduct. But there is a purpose still in our purity, in our 'pursuit of holiness' as Jerry Bridges calls it. It's because we're preparing ourselves for eternity with Christ. We're not living for to-day, we're living for that day. There will come a day when sin will be dealt with severely and finally. There will be a day of judgment. God is angry about sin, and He is not now, nor will He on that day treat sin lightly. And so neither should we. We should be seriously concerned with purity in our lives, by concentrating on our lives, living with a single-minded devotion to pleasing and honouring Him, and looking forward to that day when we will hear, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

Thirdly, and finally, Paul prays that they be **“filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”** It doesn't take a theologian to recognize what the fruit of righteousness is. Everyone, believer and unbeliever alike, know right from wrong, righteousness from unrighteousness. So I won't spend the time to talk about specific fruit, but I want to make a few remarks about it in general. First, Paul prays that we be filled with this fruit. If a Christian were a tree, Paul prays that the tree would be overrun with fruit, so that the branches would bend because of the weight of the good fruit. Our produce is the only thing the observing unbeliever sees, unbelievers can't see our thoughts, that is why our faith, apart from our works is dead. Our lives are intended to be spent on other, to be impactful on others. When they see how we live, they should recognize a radical difference between Christians and all others. Our lives should scream of a change that has come upon us from another, and that other is Jesus Christ. Matthew 5:16 Jesus says, **“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”** We are the trees, who are filled with the fruit of righteousness, but He is the sap that runs through us. Without Christ, and His work in us, we are nothing, therefore He gets all the glory. We are

to be a people who live solely to point to, and magnify, and praise Jesus Christ for all that He is and has done for us and through us.

John 15:8, Jesus says, **“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”** God makes fruitful believers for His glory. Paul said, **“All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor...So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”** (1 Cor. 10:23-24, 31)

Godly living is not optional. It is the supreme objective and result of the life devoted to Him. Lloyd-Jones will close this lesson with these words,

“And the way to live that full, abounding life with its fruits of righteousness is to make certain that our love shall abound more and more in knowledge and in all judgment. How is it done? By reading the Bible, studying it, meditating upon it, by prayer, by meditating about the soul and life and God and all these things; by grasping this doctrine, reading it upon our knees, not in a theoretical manner, but that we may produce the fruits of righteousness to the glory of God and ascribe all praise to our Lord Jesus Christ. That is Paul’s recipe, that is his method of preparing the people for the problems and the difficulties of life, and any man whose love abounds thus more and more in knowledge and in all judgment, will know on what to concentrate; he will know what is vital, and as he concentrates on it he will not stumble as he goes along, but he will bear these glorious fruits, these magnificent fruits of righteousness to the glory of God.”²⁶

²⁶ Lloyd-Jones, Martyn, *The Life of Joy Baker*, 1989 (p. 57)