

Hard Work in Joyful Prayer

Philippians 1:1-11

"The first great and primary business to which I out to attend every day is to have my soul happy in God." George Muller

Introduction: Prayer is hard. As Kevin DeYoung stated this week, "Anyone who tells you otherwise is either lying or hasn't tried praying. Prayerlessness stems from our prideful independence, our lack of focused prioritization, and rank unbelief that it can avail much. Perhaps we fear not knowing what to say, how to do it, or simply fear the uncomfortable nature of being quiet before God. We struggle not only with the **frequency** of our prayer, but in the **content**. *What* we pray for displays as much as *how much* we pray in terms of our delight, trust, and dependency on God. When our prayers simply boil down to asking God for material or medical blessings, or thanks for the food (which are both valid and good), we miss the marrow of prayer itself. We can get caught in giving token time and effort to prayer, taking matters into our own hands, not wanting to get caught in the "I'll pray for you" platitude, instead of actually helping someone in their need.

A study in the life of George Muller, a pastor and missionary in England in the 1800's is a study of prayerful dependency and joy matched with relentless and tireless work on behalf of the orphans in Bristol. Along with being a faithful pastor and preacher, this church was able to open up multiple orphan houses that fed, loved, and trained over 10,000 orphans in his lifetime. He never told anyone about the financial needs of this undertaking, nor did he take a salary, but committed to prayer each day that God would supply for the needs. In answer to these prayers, Muller received 1.5 million pounds, equivalent to 86 million pounds today (which converted into dollars is....a lot). He knew the discipline of waiting on and delighting in the Lord, making his commitment to be happy or joyful in the God each morning through the Word, and praying as he walked, sat, and lied down. This a taste of what a man of prayerful action said about prayer itself:

"No one ought to expect to see much good resulting from his labors in word, and doctrine, if he is not much given to prayer and meditation"

"I believe God has heard my prayers. He will make it manifest in his own good time that He has heard me. I have recorded my petitions that when God has answered them, His name will be glorified."¹

Prayerfulness comes out of a joyful, dependent, and trusting relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and is **vital** to our growth, maturity, and continued joy in the Lord. This introductory passage in Philippians shows us **how** Paul prayed for this group of believers in Philippi, **why** he prayed so fervently, and **what** made up the content of those prayers. Our goal this morning is not only to challenge our active discipline of prayer, but challenge our understanding and desire for it. Nothing of significance happens here without first immersing it in prayer, and we do not want it any other way.

Paul's Letter to the Church: (Phil. 1:1-2)

Paul and Timothy servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

¹ The Autobiography of George Muller. I'd highly recommend reading this or another biography of this remarkable man. It will stretch, challenge, and strengthen your own faith and pursuit of God.

This was a standard form of greeting by Paul, seen in most other letters Paul sent to churches which followed the standard protocol of the day. In this greeting, we get a glimpse of several key pieces of information:

- **Servants of Christ Jesus** - Paul does not press his apostolic credentials (like Ephesians and Colossians), but refers to himself and Timothy as *slaves*, a favorite expression of Paul to describe those IN CHRIST. He was not defending himself or pointing to his rightful authority, but simply one who was willingly enslaved to Christ
- **Written from prison** - Paul was back in prison. He was in Rome awaiting the outcome of a trial, which we know he ended up getting released. Clearly, that even these circumstances did not diminish his joy, his prayerfulness, or care/concern for the church. There was never a time Paul would have looked to himself alone, but was always looking outward, which kept his joy intact.
- **Personal and Intimate in style** - This letter was not correcting doctrine or major moral issues, but was one of thankfulness, delight, and hope. The church at Philippi was knit together with Paul, one of the few churches who continued to support him in his imprisonment. They had sent Epaphroditus to him with a gift, but now Paul was sending him back, since he got severely sick on the journey, and the church was worried about him. There was no church like Philippi. They were dear to Paul, born out of adversity, and faithful to the ministry of the gospel.
- **Church @ Philippi had matured over the years** - This letter was written over 10 years after the events of Acts 16, and in that time the church had grown. They now had **elders and deacons**, those qualified (see 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1) for the positions of *overseer and minister*, or pastors and servants. Qualified leaders were playing their roles, which led to health and participation in global ministry.

Joyful Prayer Overflows with Thanksgiving (3-6)

"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.**"

Thankful for partnership in the gospel

Paul typically started a letter with thanksgiving to God and commendation to the people of the church. This showed two key principles of life: 1) Life bathed in thankfulness positions our mind and heart to have proper perspective and attitude toward circumstances and others. Before requesting things *from God*, we should spend time thanking Him for what He already has 2) Commending and encouraging *before* exhorting or correcting helps properly motivate others. We should take time with our kids or employees encouraging them for what they are doing well *before* we rightly help correct.

Here, Paul is effusive in his thanksgiving. Every time he remembered them, which was continually, he thanked God for them joyfully, which was an addition to his typical thanks. His thanksgiving overflowed because of the **partnership in the gospel** that they displayed from the very beginning. This partnership showed itself in multiple ways, since the implications of the gospel touch every part of our life. They had continued on in evangelism and discipleship, the way Paul had demonstrated in his time with them, but there was another aspect that they shared. In Phil. 4:15-16, they entered into **partnership of giving and receiving**. After Paul left Philippi and went to Thessalonica, they sent him resources for his needs, and while he was imprisoned in Rome they did the same. They saw **giving** as a means of gospel centered ministry, and caring for Paul as a way to advance the gospel. This encapsulates the breadth of the gospel: its evangelism, discipleship, care, giving, and missions which causes us to return thanksgiving to God when others partner with us.

Thankful for the promised work of God

Any good father or mother knows how hard it is to be disconnected by distance from your kids. The hope is that all that you taught and trained them will be played out consistently. This can cause sleepless nights, concern, anxiety, and fear when we are not actively present to guide and direct. However, Paul's absence and disconnect from the church was not a reason for worry but enhanced his thankfulness. **How was this possible?** It was based on his conviction that what God had started among the people of Philippi, God would complete. This is where a paradox does not produce negative tension but glorious hope and thankfulness, knowing that salvation is an act and work of God from the beginning to the end.

Are we saved by faith? Yes. Are we sanctified by our putting off of sin and putting on holiness? Yes. Are these acts that can be done on our own, by our on strength and power? By no means! It is **because** God is at work by His Spirit that we can work and act (Gal. 3:3). We will see in Phil. 2 that we are to **work out our own salvation**, but it is **God who at work** in and through us. The assurance we possess, and every believer possesses, is that God will see to completion what He began by gifting us faith, never leaving us alone, and preparing us for Christ's return. This frees us to work hard at the process, and assures us there will be growth of maturity in the process. Paul had seen the maturation of the church, and though he gave thanks for them, the reason for thankfulness was that God was at work and would continue until the day of Jesus Christ. We can rest in the fact that God is the one who grows, matures, and brings to completion, and we simply direct people to Him.

Joyful Prayer Outflows from Affection for others (7-8)

"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.**"

Out of a new way of thinking about others

We pray for those that we love the most, and who we pray for the most will inevitably lead to loving affection. Why was Paul committed to pray for this church while away from them in prison. How did Paul solve the "**out of sight, out of mind**" problem which plagues us? It is the fact that he had a **new mindset toward people**. The word "feel" here means to think or adopt a certain mindset or attitude. The people were dear to him because they partakers of the same grace that he had experienced. For Paul, friendship and family were born out of the Spirit bringing salvation, not cultural factors. In others words, those who were written on his heart were those brothers and sisters in Christ, not the buddies from college. Or to say it another way, our those dearest to us are chosen by God through salvation more than chosen by us by some other affinity. Paul prayed for Lydia and her family, a formerly demon possessed slave, and a jailer and his family, among the others that would have come to know Christ, NOT BECAUSE THEY LIKED THE SAME TEAM, MUSIC, OR HUMOR, but because they were saved by the same Lord, same gospel, by the same grace. How was this cultivated?

Out of a newfound affection for others

"I yearn for you all with affection of Jesus Christ" is the reason. When Paul left Philippi 10 years earlier, he immediately went to Thessalonica where he only was able to stay between 3 weeks and a few months (see Acts 17:2). However, in this short amount of time, the gospel took root and many followed Jesus. You would think that upon leaving Paul would have only a general care for them, but instead he said, "**So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.**" (1 Thess. 2:8). The gospel is not simply a transactional event, but knits us together in intimate relationships. Part of the reason we do not pray for each other is that we do not truly love each other with this kind of affection, the kind

that can only come out of a unity in the gospel. We pray for those that we love the most, and those that we pray for become very dear to us. The way that we cultivate prayer for each other is to cultivate a true love for each other. We did not join this church to be with our friends, but we view those who God has brought here through the gospel as our friends, as our family, as those we are willing to live and die for. Prayerlessness for others reveals something deeper than a lack of time or priority, it signals that we have a lack of true supernatural love for each other. This is why Paul's requests in prayer center around this concept of **abounding love**.

Joyful Prayer Seeks Increasing Maturity in others (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 with is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.**"

Paul's prayer overflowed with thanksgiving out of a strong affection for the people in Philippi, and that led to the **content of his prayer**. Have you ever been stumped in *what* to pray for? When you pray for others, does it read like a medical report or a "general" prayer request: bless them, be with them, we "pray for them"? Knowing what to pray can be a challenge, and we certainly do not want to pray in a way that becomes formulaic or by rote memorization. If you would ask Paul what he prayed when he prayed for fellow believers, it was not complicated: he prayed for their **growth in grace, maturity, and continuance in their life in Christ**. We will look at how he specifically prayed for the church at Philippi, which was distinct from what he prayed for the church at Colossae and Thessalonica. In other words, the content was specific to the group, but the purpose and goal was the same: *increasing maturity*.

Growing in the intertwining of love and knowledge

What was needed for this faithful church to continue on, to take the next step, and continue in unity and effectiveness? Love. Paul prayed this increasing love for the church at Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:12-13) as Peter encouraged as well (1 Pet. 1:22-23). What was he praying for, exactly?

Supernatural - The love he was praying for was something that can only come as a result of God's work in us, not in ourselves alone. It's why Paul reminded the Thessalonians that they were "God-taught" to love (1Thess. 4:9) and something the Lord causes to increase (3:12). This kind of love is produced by the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22) and though it expresses emotion and affection, it is NOT borne out of the these. This love has at its core **sacrifice, selflessness, and service**. This is the love that does not seek its own good but that of another, breeds kindness, and is quick to forgive. This love is relentless in its pursuit of God and others and produces hard work in that pursuit (1 Thess. 1:3). Supernatural love is the only thing that can explain our willingness to submit to each other (Eph. 5:21), to humble ourselves before each other, and forgive the deepest of sinful wounds, fighting for faith to be restored and reconciled. Supernatural love is what motivates and empowers us to do all of this with people who are **unlike us**, having nothing to offer us, and have no seeming upside. That is what growth in love looks like.

Room to Grow - Paul prays that this love would ABOUND, that it would be evident and seen. This means **none of us has arrived in the area of love**. We all have **room to grow**. We all need to grow in our love for God and others, since self-love continually seeks to sabotage love for others.

With Knowledge - A mature Christian does not love without thinking, or think without loving. We are called to speak truth to one another in love, intertwining the two vital concepts (Eph. 4:15). "*Love without discernment will melt into feeble sentimentality. Discernment without love will harden us into ruthless suspicion*" (Gunner Gunderson). Since love is MORE than a feeling, to put love into action takes

knowledge: knowledge of who God is, what He desires, of the person we seek to love, and what is needed for the moment. Paul's prayer, then, was not for something vague but intensely practical and tangible. That their love would grow in a practical nature with each other.

Growing in discerning what matters most

Pursue what is excellent, not necessarily excellence - This knowledge fueled love would allow them to **discern the things that matter most**. Notice that excellence is not the goal, but pursuing **what was excellent was**. Love of people is messy and inefficient, meaning the results can take time and do not give us the feels like something external. Discernment is needed to narrow love, not just between what is good and bad, but what is better and best. This type of approval or proving comes from the leading of the Spirit and searching of Scripture, as well as seeking wisdom from God's people. Paul had a goal and hope for the church, that they would walk in a manner worthy of the gospel, and to do it together. That meant they had to have wisdom in how to love each other, how to reconcile, knowing when to back down, when to pursue, when to quit squabbling (4:1). Discernment must be large if love will be abounding.

Walking with sincerity - Purity or sincerity was also needed to love well. This was a word that meant something tested by sunlight, as they would do with pottery to check for imperfections. Insincerity not only kills our relationship with God, but with each other. When we put off the vibe that we do not struggle, or that we never recognize our own wrong, we leave people in our wake with either discouragement or broken fellowship. Love is willing to seek purity but is also will to acknowledge failure, weakness, and sin.

Growing in holiness → for Christ → through Christ → to the Glory of God

Finally, the prayer was for holiness, blamelessness in the church. When we are the most pure as a church, when we deal aggressively with our sin to kill it, confess it, repent of it, we are not only the most joyful, but we are also the most effective. We are being prepared **for Christ's return**, like a bride getting ready for a wedding day. We continue to have fruit produced out of us because we have been given a foreign righteousness, Christ's righteousness given to us, to empower us to grow. In other words, we have been resourced to grow, and failure to grow means a lack of faith and obedience on our part. What is at stake is the glory and praise of God. Failing to grow in love, in discernment, in holiness, and fruitfulness falls short of God's glory, which gives reason for us to repent.

What does this mean? Paul prayed that we would think about our lives in a radically new way, centered around Christ and His gospel. We want to think and discern the difference between spiritual fruit and human "religious activity", since one brings God glory and the other brings us glory. Every aspect of our life is to be ruled by Christ, in action, thought, desire, and attitude. This is why Paul prayed so fervently for these things.

So, is this how you pray? Is this how you pray for your kids, for those in your shepherding group, the church at Rancho, the people sitting next to you that you don't know that well? We pray as an overflow of thanksgiving to God, out of an outflow of our affection for others, as we seek to see others grow to maturity in Christ.

Questions for Discussion:

- What are some of the reasons for our/your prayerlessness?
- When you do pray, what do you typically pray for? How does this compare to what Paul prayed for? Look up Ephesians 1:15-23 and 3:14-21; Colossians 1:9-10; 1 Thess. 3:9-13. What do you notice about Paul's prayer? How would we apply this to our prayer life?
- Who do you typically pray for? How would this change if we began to love in an abounding, knowledgeable, and discerning way?
- What are ways that you have found that help you pray?
- What needs to change in our thinking, schedule, and priorities to be able to pray the way Scripture instructs? What is at stake in our discipline of prayer? What happens to us if we neglect prayer?

Counseling Thought:

Prayerlessness reveals our heart. Prayerlessness is a declaration of independence from God and gives us a clear temperature gauge of our belief in God's goodness and sovereignty. In doing spiritual inventory, our prayer life can help us understand our maturity, whether we are growing or not. This creates a pathway of repentance, turning, and change, proactively trusting God by seeking Him in prayer.

"The greater the difficulty to be overcome, the more will be seen in the glory of God how much can be done by prayer and faith."

"I saw more clearly than ever, that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not how much I might serve the Lord, how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man may be nourished...I saw that the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to the reading of the Word of God and to meditation on it."

George Muller, *The Autobiography of George Muller*