

Main Idea: As we examine Paul’s prayer in Colossians 1:9-14 we discover the apostle praying two very specific requests for Christians he did not know personally. We ought to be praying these same requests for one another.

I. Pray for God-centered thinking (9).

A. May God enable you to know His will.

1. Prior to knowing Christ, we did our own thing.
2. Now that we know Christ, what matters most is God’s will.

B. May God grant you spiritual wisdom and understanding.

1. If you want to know God’s will, be careful where you seek your counsel.
2. In order to know God’s will, make sure you are thinking spiritually.

II. Pray for God-pleasing living (10-14).

A. We need to be bearing good fruit (10a).

1. God has a high standard.
2. Through Christ God raises us to that standard.

B. We need to be growing to know God better (10b).

C. We need to be strengthened with His power (11).

1. The kind of life that pleases God requires what God alone can give.
2. That’s why we need to live in dependence upon God every day.

D. We need to be giving thanks to our Heavenly Father (12-14).

1. He has qualified us to share His inheritance (12).
2. He has rescued us from the domain of darkness (13a).
3. He has transferred us into the kingdom of His Son (13b).
4. He has redeemed us (14a).
5. He has forgiven us (14b).

Take Inventory: Ask yourself these questions...

1. Is doing the will of God what matters most to you?
2. Is there evidence that you are pleasing God with your life?
3. Are you grateful for what God did to make this possible?

Recently I received a letter telling the story of Changjiu, a Chinese student who not long ago came to Christ and was baptized at Kossuth Street Baptist Church in West Lafayette, Indiana. Here is part of the testimony he gave at his baptism:

“Thanks God for his grace in the name of Jesus Christ, I have accepted the belief of Christian and seen the hope of life. With my heart rejoicing greatly, I am glad to give glory to God my Lord. Lord you are so powerful. I am such a sinner who deserves no salvation. But you gave great grace to me to know you, accept you, and praise you. This once again demonstrates that your love is broader than the sea.

“It is unbelievable that someone like me, who used to be a stubborn unbeliever, can accept God as the center of life. It is not because I worked hard to seek God and gained understanding of God, for ‘there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.’ (*The Bible*, Romans 3:11)

“I was born in China. My education from primary school to college repeatedly emphasizes one point that there is no God and our successes depend on ourselves...I laughed at God-believers and thought they spent their energy and passion in vain on worshipping something that does not exist and does not help.

“Things changed for me after I left my homeland and came to USA for my graduate study. In a foreign country, I had to adapt to a very different environment for study and living. The different life experience was also an opportunity for me to think about things from different perspectives. In April 2003, it was the first time I went to a Christian church by the invitation of my friends. I did not intend to go to the church to worship God but to eat a free dinner. The people I met there were very nice and talked about God with me...I started to learn Bible with Paul Briggs from January 2007. I really thank God who arranged such a patient and faithful teacher for me. Paul said he is just like an audience who was given the privilege to sit in the front row to see how God was working on my life...”^[1]

I love to hear stories like that! To hear how God used a brother in Christ to introduce someone I’ve never seen to the life-changing person of Jesus Christ, now that’s thrilling!

That's also a fitting backdrop for the prayer we're about to investigate this morning in Colossians 1. Paul wrote this letter to and prayed this prayer for Christians he had not personally led to Christ. He'd merely heard about them from a man named Epaphras who himself had come to know Christ under Paul's ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:10; Col. 1:7-8; 4:12). Epaphras consequently took the gospel message to Colosse^[2], apparently his hometown, and saw the Holy Spirit grant saving faith to many. Some time later, Epaphras traveled to see Paul, who was in prison in Rome, and told him what God had done in Colosse. In response Paul wrote this letter, the epistle to the Colossians, and the first thing he tells them is what he's been praying for them, his spiritual grandchildren.

Notice Colossians 1:9, "For this reason, since the day we *heard about you*, we have not stopped praying for you." That's interesting. Paul cared and prayed for people he'd never met. Paul was in Rome, hundreds of miles west of the young believers in Colosse, but just hearing about them moved him to pray continually for them. Why did he pray for them? He mentions several reasons in the previous verses—because they're *brothers* (verse 1), because they believe in the same person he believed in, namely Christ (verse 4), because they were exhibiting *love in the Spirit* (verse 8), all of which means Paul knew he'd be spending eternity with these folks!

Beloved, we who know Christ are a part of something big, a big, world-wide family that God is growing daily. It behooves us to see beyond ourselves, and to pray beyond ourselves. Yes, pray for the people you know, but also for your brothers and sisters you may never meet.

"Pray what?" you ask. As we examine Paul's prayer in Colossians 1:9-14 we discover the apostle praying two very specific requests for Christians he did not know personally, and we ought to be praying these same requests for one another, and others.

Last time in our study of Paul's prayer for the church in Philippi, we saw a dual emphasis in Paul's prayer, observing first that he brought a gospel-centered *perspective* to prayer, and secondly that he offered gospel-centered *petitions*. We see the same dual emphases here in Colossians, as Paul shares his gospel-centered *perspective* in verses 3-8, and then expresses his gospel-centered *petitions* in verses 9-14. Our focus today will be on the two petitions. Here's the first.

I. Pray for God-centered thinking (9).

Verse 9—"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding."

It's interesting to note that Paul's prayers for the various churches, while similar in some ways, were expressed differently. For the church at Philippi, he asked God to give them an abounding love and growing discernment. For the church in Ephesus he asked God to help them know Him better. His prayer for the Romans was that God would grant him an opportunity to come and impart to them some spiritual gift for their strengthening. In his prayer for the Thessalonians he asked God to grant an open door for the advancement of the gospel. For the Corinthians he prayed for perfection. And what was it he asked God in behalf of the Colossians? Right here we see the essence of his prayer.

A. May God enable you to know His will. Paul was fervent in asking God to grant this request. From the day he first heard about the Colossians' faith until the present day he and Timothy had not stopped praying for them, and specifically, had not stopped asking God to fill them with the knowledge of His will.

Why did he pray that particular request? It's because...

1. *Prior to knowing Christ, we did our own thing.* That's what sin is, in its essence, going *our own way* (Isa. 53:6). From birth life is all about *us*.

Sherry babysat little Regan last week, our youth pastor's six month old daughter. What a cute child! As I watched her I was reminded again how we don't have to teach our children to think about themselves. If they're hungry, they let you know. If they're uncomfortable, they let you know. If they're bored, they let you know. "Hey, I've got needs down here! You better do something about it, and soon!"

Figuring out what *we* want is no problem for us. That's part of the sin-nature package we've inherited from Adam. But figuring out what *God* wants, now that's a different story. We don't enter the world thinking, "I wonder what God wants me to do right now." For instance, when I'm a two-year-old toddler and I see one toy in the church nursery and two children, me and that other little person over there, my instinctive thought is not, "What would please God most right now?" No way. Prior to knowing Christ, life was all about *us*, and consequently we did our own thing. However...

2. *Now that we know Christ, what matters most is God's will.* That's part of the fundamental change that Christ makes when He saves us and comes to live in us. If anyone is in Christ he is a *new creation*; old things pass away and all things become new (2 Cor. 5:17). And that includes our life-orientation. Life's no longer about doing

our own thing. If we're in Christ now we live to please God, and to do that we must know what pleases God, which means we must know *His will*.

"To do the will of God in this passage is virtually synonymous with obeying what God has mandated," writes D. A. Carson. "What God has mandated is his will; our responsibility is to do it."^[3]

And that's what Paul prayed for his friends in Colosse: *May God enable you to know His will*. It's worth noting that Epaphras, who himself was known for his wrestling in prayer, prayed a similar request according to Colossians 4:12, "Epaphras...is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured."

Which leads to the question, "Since knowing God's will is so important, how do we discern it?" Paul tells us in his prayer request. Notice the end of verse 9, "Asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will *through*" something. Through what? "Through all spiritual wisdom and understanding." D. A. Carson observes that the Greek preposition translated "through" carries the sense "which consists of," and concludes, "The knowledge or perception of God's will consists of spiritual wisdom and understanding."^[4] Hence, like Paul we should offer this related request...

B. May God grant you spiritual wisdom and understanding. How do you discern God's will? You don't discern it by listening to Dr. Phil or reading Wall Street Journal. Paul says that God's will is attained *through* spiritual wisdom and understanding. In other words, make sure you are thinking according to the mind of the Holy Spirit.

How do we know the Spirit's mind? Through the Book He has given us, as Peter explained in 2 Peter 1:20-21, "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were *carried along by the Holy Spirit*."

So in the Bible the Spirit of God has revealed the mind and will of God to us. This is basic, yet critical and ever so practical.

1. *If you want to know God's will, be careful where you seek your counsel.* What matters most is not what other people think, but what God thinks. We need to discern His assessment, His will. That being the case...

2. *In order to know God's will, make sure you are thinking spiritually.*

I like how Carson put it when he wrote, "People cannot live by bread and Jacuzzis alone."^[5] We desperately need God's Word because apart from God's Word we will not know God's will. And doesn't that bring us to a core problem? Bible illiteracy is growing and growing in our country. Granted, a person who does know the Bible may choose to disobey it and thus disobey God's will. But what if a person doesn't know the Bible? That person will base his understanding of what God's will is on church tradition, or family opinion, or gut feeling, or some other man-derived source.

But why did Paul pray this particular request for this particular church? Why is he asking God to help them know His will in the first place? It's because of something that was taking place *inside* the church, namely false teaching.^[6] Remember, this was a young church, and consequently, these were young, very enthusiastic believers, perhaps somewhat gullible to fall for any teacher who called himself "Christian." R. C. Lucas observes, "The danger for the enthusiastic young convert comes from error *within* the churches, teaching that is largely, even emphatically, Christian, but *which has been influenced more than it knows by the spirit of the age*."^[7]

When we're thinking according to the spirit of the age, we'll not think according to the mind of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, and therefore, we will not discern God's will.

So here's an important question. Are you thinking spiritually? One way to tell is to examine your prayer list. What kinds of things did you pray for in the past seven days? Your list may include safety on the roads, the improved health of your child or relative, a better job, help in dealing with a problem person, money to pay your bills, and a good night's sleep. Now compare your prayer list with Paul's. Do they resemble each other? If not, to what should we attribute the difference? To borrow from Lucas again, *we have been influenced far more than we know by the spirit of the age*. Who says that health, job, money, peace with people, the good life, is what matters most? The world does, not God's Word. God's Word says that what matters most is knowing His will and, of course, doing it. And that's why Paul prayed this request for the Colossians, and we should pray it for ourselves and each other. The first petition—Pray for God-centered thinking. Paul's second petition grows right out of the first.

II. Pray for God-pleasing living (10-14).

Verse 10—"And we pray this *in order that* [so here's the intended result of a prayer for God-centered thinking] you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way." It's not enough merely to *know* God's will. We must *do* it. Much damage is done to the cause of Christ by folks who claim to know Him but don't live to please Him. Paul prayed that God would grant the Colossians not only God-centered *thinking* but also God-pleasing

living.

Which raises an important question. What does God-pleasing living look like? Paul uses four participles to give us the answer: *bearing fruit* (10a), *growing* (10b), *being strengthened* (11), and *giving thanks* (12). These four participles modify the purpose clause in verse 10 and show us in living color four traits of a God-pleasing life.

A. We need to be bearing good fruit (10a). “Bearing fruit in every good work...” Do our good works save us? No. In order to be saved from our sins we must believe in the person that God sent to take care of our sin problem, His Son, Jesus Christ. We are saved by Christ’s work, not ours. But once saved we do work. If we are living a God-pleasing life we will bear fruit in every good work. Notice that...

1. *God has a high standard.* In every good work. The God-pleasing life is not a best out of seven series. It’s not, “Well, I did three good works last week, so I’m allowed to do my own thing a couple of times today.” No, every good work.

You say, “Wow! God’s standard is high!” Indeed, it is. But the solution isn’t to lower God’s standard. That doesn’t please God, but this does. The good news is that...

2. *Through Christ God raises us to that standard.* Later in the letter Paul elaborates on this, explaining in Colossians 2:6-7, “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”

Paul made this a matter of prayer. A God-pleasing life is one that bears good fruit. That’s the first trait. Here’s a second.

B. We need to be growing to know God better (10b). “Growing in the knowledge of God...” If you have received the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ, you know God, for Jesus said in John 17:3, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” Yet when it comes to knowing God, we never arrive. There’s always more to know for He is infinite. And Paul prayed to that end for the believers in Colosse.

William Penn said this of George Fox, “But above all he excelled in prayer. The inwardness and weight of his spirit, the reverence and solemnity of his address and behavior, and the fewness and fullness of his words have often struck even strangers with admiration as they used to reach others with consolation. The most awful, living, reverend frame I ever felt or beheld, I must say, was his prayer. And truly it was a testimony. He knew and lived nearer to the Lord than other men, for they that know Him most will see most reason to approach Him with reverence and fear.”^[8]

Those final words bear repeating—for *they that know Him most will see most reason to approach Him with reverence and fear*. There’s a direct connection between your knowledge of God and your prayer life. Those who know Him *most* see most reason to *approach Him*. We need to know Him better, beloved. Do you know the Lord better today than you did a year ago? What steps are you taking to grow to know Him better?

C. We need to be strengthened with His power (11). “Being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience...” Think about it this way...

1. *The kind of life that pleases God requires what God alone can give.* And...

2. *That’s why we need to live in dependence upon God every day.* “Being strengthened,” that’s passive. The word indicates something that needs to be done to us from the outside. We need to receive God’s strength, God’s might.

Why do we need this God-given strength? “*So that you may have great endurance and patience.*” It’s not easy to live a God-pleasing life. In fact, it’s *hard*, rewarding but *hard*. Yet God graciously gives us the strength that enables us to endure and persevere. Which leads to the fourth trait.

D. We need to be giving thanks to our Heavenly Father (12-14). “And joyfully giving thanks to the Father.” People who live God-pleasing lives are people who give credit where credit is due. They know that the only reason that they are now pleasing God, when once they lived to please themselves, is because of what God has done and is doing in their lives. And so they thank Him. Over and over they thank Him. Joyfully they thank their Heavenly Father for His deeds in their behalf.

What deeds? What has God the Father done for us that deserves our never-ending thanks? Paul reminds the Colossians (and us) of the Father’s grace-based deeds in verses 12-14, “Who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

What’s the Father does for us that deserves our thanks? Five amazing activities...

1. *He has qualified us to share His inheritance (12).* We entered His family as bankrupt debtors. In fact, Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, said the acknowledging of our spiritual bankruptcy is the first prerequisite to entering His kingdom. He said in Matthew 5:3, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

That's what we were—*poor*. We had nothing to offer Him.

But in His grace He did something for us. He *qualified us*. For what? To *share in the inheritance*. Don't miss that. Not everyone is going to share in God's inheritance in the life to come. Only those whom the Father has qualified will do so. Paul identifies this as "the inheritance *of the saints* [lit. 'holy ones,' for to receive God's inheritance one must become *holy*] in *the kingdom of light*."

There are two kingdoms in the universe, my friend, and you are in one of them today. One is what Paul here refers to as "the kingdom of light," and in verse 13 as "the kingdom of the Son." Only those who are in this kingdom will share in God's inheritance.

We weren't always in this kingdom, Paul reminds us. You see, there's another kingdom. It's the one to which we who know Christ *used* to belong. Until the Father intervened. What did He do?

2. *He has rescued us from the domain of darkness (13a)*. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned against God and plummeted the human race under God's curse, every man, woman, and child has entered this world as a citizen of the kingdom of darkness (see Eph. 2:1-3). That's where we were, brothers and sisters. We were without hope in the dominion of darkness, and we would still be there had not God taken the initiative. God in His mercy went on a rescue mission. His intent? To rescue helpless sinners. "He has *rescued us*," says Paul, "from the dominion of darkness." But that's not all!

3. *He has transferred us into the kingdom of His Son (13b)*. Transferred—that's the term used in the ESV. The KJV says He 'translated' us. We started in the kingdom of darkness, but we're no longer there. We belong to a different kingdom, the One God the Father brought us into. And I love Paul's descriptive phrase at the end of verse 13 where he tells us that the Father brought us into the kingdom *of the Son He loves*. The Father loves His Son. That's why the Father qualified us, rescued us, and brought us into this kingdom in the first place, because He loves His Son. We are His love gift to His Son. We exist for His Son. That's true now and forever.

Do you know what matters most in the kingdom of God? It's what should matter most in our lives right now if we claim to belong to that kingdom. The Son He loves. It's the kingdom of *the Son* that the Father loves.

And here's what's mind-boggling. In order for the Father to make much of the Son He loves, He asked His Son to something in our behalf. Notice verse 14, "In whom [that's referring to the Son He loves mentioned at the end of verse 13] we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." That indicates that the final two activities the Father accomplished in our behalf He accomplished through the work of His Son. Here they are...

4. *He has redeemed us (14a)*. That means He paid a price to set us free. The price? The Father handed over His own beloved Son to die, so that by means of His Son's death on the cross He might *redeem* a people for the glory of His Son. And not only has He redeemed us, but through His Son's work...

5. *He has forgiven us (14b)*. He no longer holds our sins against us because His Son paid the full and just penalty for those sins. And to prove that His Son's death was sufficient for our redemption and forgiveness, on the third day after grieving hands lay the Son's lifeless body in the tomb, the Father raised His Son from the dead. And forty days later He welcomed Him home to His heavenly throne. And one day soon, perhaps today, the Father will send His Son back to earth to finish His Father's plan by rewarding those who have trusted in Him and punishing those who have rejected Him.

"If God had perceived that our greatest need was economic," writes D. A. Caron, "he would have sent an economist. If he had perceived that our greatest need was entertainment, he would have sent us a comedian or an artist. If God had perceived that our greatest need was political stability, he would have sent us a politician. If he had perceived that our greatest need was health, he would have sent us a doctor. But he perceived that our greatest need involved our sin, our alienation from him, our profound rebellion, our death; and he sent us a Savior."^[9]

Beloved, these are past tense accomplishments. They are facts. They're realities that are true of us if we know Christ. The Father had qualified us to share in the inheritance. He has rescued us from the domain of darkness. He has transferred us into the kingdom of His Son. Through His Son He has redeemed us, and He has forgiven us. All past tense, and all true!

Yet the tragic, all too common reality is that Christians fail to affirm these realities and consequently live pessimistic, defeated lives. It's vital that we grasp our God-given position, and thank God for it!

Most of us fail to give God the Father thanks enough for His deeds. Our problem is we don't stop long enough to ponder exactly what He's done for us. We take Him for granted. May I encourage you, as I do so to my own heart, to rehearse God's works often. Take time daily to think of what He's done for you, and especially what He did at the cross. Sing of His accomplishments in your behalf.

*There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their filthy stains.*

If there's one thing that studying Paul's prayers this summer has impressed upon me, it's this. Paul's prayers were not superficial. When he prayed he asked God to take His people deeper and deeper into the knowledge of Himself, a knowledge that He knew would transform their lives.

So how do you pray for Christians you've never met? Here's a great place to start. Pray that they would exhibit God-centered thinking. And pray that they would exhibit God-pleasing living.

Take Inventory: Ask yourself these questions...

1. *Is doing the will of God what matters most to you?* Be honest with yourself. Nothing is more important than knowing and doing the will of God, *nothing*.

2. *Is there evidence that you are pleasing God with your life?* If there is, thank God the Father for it, to the praise of His Son, for He accomplished it. If the evidence is lacking, look to Him today. Confess your sin to Him. Cast yourself upon His mercy. Affirm that what Christ has done is sufficient to transform your life into a God-pleaser!

3. *Are you grateful for what God did to make this possible?* Then thank Him continually. And today let's thank Him by coming to the Lord's Table...

******Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Taken from monthly EBM letter from W. Paul Jackson, May 2008.

[2] Colosse, also the hometown of Philemon, was situated twelve miles from Laodicea. Many Jews lived there.

[3] D. A. Carson, p. 101.

[4] D. A. Carson, pp. 102-3.

[5] Carson, p. 103.

[6] The false teaching came from a mixture of three sources: 1) A dangerous Jewish heresy 2) A pre-gnostic notion that there exists advanced teaching for the spiritually elite (see 2:18-19), and 3) Asceticism, the view that the body is evil, so true redemption applies only to the spiritual (see 2:20-23); taken from R. C. Lucas?

[7] R. C. Lucas, *The Message of Colossians and Philemon*, p. 21 (emphasis his).

[8] Source unknown (perhaps O. Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*)

[9] D. A. Carson, p. 109.