

1 Cor. 1:4-9; 2 Cor. 13:7-9 “Praying for Perfection: Paul’s Prayer for the Corinthians”\*\*

Main Idea: When we examine what Paul prayed for the Corinthian believers in his letters to them, we discover that his prayers were marked by two key elements.

I. Paul’s prayers were God-centered (1 Cor. 1:4-9).

A. Paul thanked God (4-7).

1. He gave us grace in Christ (4).
2. He enriched us (5).
3. He confirmed us (6-7).

B. Paul affirmed his confidence in what God would do (8).

1. He will keep us strong to the end.
2. He will present us blameless on the day of Christ.

C. Paul emphasized the God-centeredness of our salvation (9).

1. He called us into fellowship with His Son.
2. He is faithful.

II. Paul’s prayers were gospel-oriented (2 Cor. 13:5-9).

A. Paul identified the target (5-6).

1. Make sure you’re in the faith.
2. Make sure Christ is in you.
3. Make sure you’re living like it.

B. Paul asked God to help the Corinthians hit the target (7-9).

1. God’s agenda is our perfection.
2. God’s agenda is accomplished through Christ.
3. God’s agenda should be our agenda when we pray.

Implications: In light of what we’ve seen today...

1. Am I praying in light of God’s agenda?
2. Am I living in light of God’s agenda?

In his book, *Seasons of Life*, Chuck Swindoll tells the story of what happened on an airliner bound for New York in 1968. The flight had been routine until the plane began its descent. It was then that the pilot discovered that the landing gear refused to engage. Swindoll tells what happened next:

“He [the pilot] worked the controls back and forth, trying again and again to make the gear lock down into place. No success. He then asked the control tower for instructions as he circled the landing field. Responding to the crisis, the airport personnel sprayed the runway with foam as fire trucks and other emergency vehicles moved into position. Disaster was only minutes away.

“The passengers, meanwhile, were told of each maneuver in that calm, cheery voice pilots manage to use at times like this. Flight attendants glided about the cabin with an air of cool reserve. Passengers were told to place their heads between their knees and grab their ankles just before impact. It was one of those I-can’t-believe-this-is-happening-to-me experiences. There were tears, no doubt, and a few screams of despair. The landing was now seconds away.

Suddenly the pilot announced over the intercom: *We are beginning our final descent. At this moment, in accordance with International Aviation Codes established at Geneva, it is my obligation to inform you that if you believe in God you should commence prayer.* [u](#)

As it turned out, the belly landing went without a hitch, and aside from some significant damage to the plane, no one was injured. But the incident is quite revealing, isn’t it? For many, prayer for many is what you do when you can’t think of anything else *you* can do, and so you call on God.

Prayer is a wonderful gift available to those who approach the Living God through the means He has provided, through faith in His Son Jesus Christ. If we know Christ, we can talk to the Almighty, and He listens to us, and He even responds to our requests!

Yet prayer can also be frustrating. Why is that? There are many possible reasons and most are linked to misunderstandings. If we are holding to wrong thoughts about God, it will show up in our prayer lives. If we’re thinking wrongly about ourselves, or about the nature of the Christian life and ministry, once again it will show up in our praying.

This summer, our aim is to learn how to pray more biblically. We’re inviting the apostle Paul to mentor us in the area of praying. We’re examining what he prayed for the churches and individuals to whom he wrote the God-inspired letters we find in our Bibles, taking one per week.

For the apostle Paul, prayer wasn’t an afterthought, but rather something he did, according to his own admission, *all the time* (see 1 Thes 1:2; Eph 1:16; etc). In Paul’s ministerial handbook, prayer wasn’t an appendix at the end of the book but a necessity that ran throughout the book.

This morning, we’re going to explore Paul’s prayers for the Christians living in Corinth as recorded in the two letters he wrote them. To begin, I want to take you to the end of his second letter where we find a very specific, stunning prayer request. At the end of 2 Corinthians 13:9 Paul states, “Our prayer is for your *perfection*.”

Prior to this study, I can’t recall ever praying that prayer. Have you ever prayed for the *perfection* of your children or grandchildren, your Sunday School class, your Awana kids, or anyone else? What makes that request even more shocking is to ponder the people for whom Paul was praying.

The Corinthian church was not exactly a model church. That’s why Paul wrote the two letters we call 1 & 2 Corinthians in the first place. He penned 1 Corinthians in the spring of A.D. 55 from Ephesus, and 2 Corinthians later in the same year from Macedonia. He wrote the letters because, although miles away from Corinth, he was greatly burdened for these dear brothers and sisters. He’d received a visit from some members of the household of Chloe who informed him of some problems in the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 1:11). He’d also received a letter from Corinth requesting counsel concerning various subjects (see 1 Cor. 7:1; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1).

Scan the two letters and you’ll get a taste of what was happening in the First Church of Corinth. For starters, there were man-centered cliques in the church (1 Cor. 1-4). What’s more, a church member was sexually involved with his step-mother, and instead of practicing church discipline, the rest of the church family prided themselves in their tolerance (1 Cor. 5). Other church members were filing lawsuits against each other in the civil courts (1 Cor. 6). There were church-splitting divisions in the communion service (1 Cor. 11). The church worship services were

plagued by disorderly showmanship (1 Cor. 14). In 2 Corinthians we discover that some of the church members were spreading false and destructive rumors about Paul (chs 1-2). Some were unequally yoked with non-Christians (ch 6). Some were apparently stingy in their giving (chs 8-9).

Yet Paul says he was praying for their *perfection*? Either Paul was quite an optimist, or he knew something we tend to forget about the Christians in Corinth! How should we pray for Christians we know whose lives are plagued by problems? Paul prayed for their perfection. Should we? And if so, what does that mean, and what makes it possible?

When we examine Paul's prayers for the Corinthians in both of his letters to them, we discover that his prayers were marked by two key elements. Let's go back to the beginning of Paul's first letter and notice the first element...

### I. Paul's prayers were God-centered (1 Cor. 1:4-9).

Notice the first words that flow from Paul's pen, immediately following his introduction. Verse 4—"I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus."

This is key. Paul is going to deal with some heavy issues in this letter. But before he does, he puts the spotlight on God. He tells the Corinthians what he was praying to God regarding them (and it wasn't, "Lord, help those Corinthians to get their act together!"). He may have prayed that, but here's where he started... *I thank God for you.*

Why was he thankful? Was it because they were such a good church? Is that why He thanked God for them? No, it was *because of His grace*, God's grace, that Paul thanked God for this church. And what was true of this grace? Paul says it was *given you in Christ Jesus*.

Beloved, if you've got Christ, then you've got grace, and if you've got grace, then you've got what it takes to deal with whatever problems you're facing. And if you've got whatever it takes to deal with your problems, then that's cause for thanksgiving from those who are praying for you!

Now let's take a closer look at three God-centered features in this prayer.

**A. Paul thanked God (4-7).** For what? What was it that caused Paul to express his appreciation to God for the Corinthian church, problems and all? It was because of three divine activities in their behalf. If you know Christ as Savior, these are three divine activities in your behalf, too.

*1. He gave us grace in Christ (4).* Grace, God's unmerited, undeserved favor and help. For by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8).

Paul saw that happen firsthand in Corinth, as Acts 18 records. The apostle came to Corinth from Athens on his second missionary journey. As was his custom he went to the synagogue each Sabbath, opened the Scriptures, and announced that Messiah Jesus had come. Opponents forced him to leave the synagogue, so he went to the house of Titius Justus and kept preaching Jesus. As a result, many Corinthians believed, including Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue. One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision and said: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city (Acts 18:9-10)."

*I have many people in this city.* That's what kept Paul preaching in Corinth, for eighteen months until a church was born and established.. That's also what kept Paul praying years later for the Corinthians. He knew that God in His amazing grace had chosen a people for His glory in Corinth. He also knew that God had manifested His grace to those people in the city of Corinth, for he'd seen it firsthand. And no matter how many problems these folks had in their lives (and they had plenty), he knew these were God's chosen people, people to whom God had given His grace, and that was cause for thanksgiving. But God has done something else for His people...

2. *He enriched us (5)*. “For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge.” As sinners, we are spiritually bankrupt. But as sinners in Christ, we are made rich, spiritual billionaires, if you will! Don’t miss the prepositional phrase, “In Him.” All that we enjoy is ours because of our identification with *with Christ*. Throughout his epistles Paul emphasizes the union of believers with Christ. Right here he states we are *in Christ* (verses 2, 4, 5), *with Christ* (verse 9), and the fact that we receive grace and peace *from Christ* (verse 3).

In Christ God has enriched us in every way. This spiritual endowment affects our speaking (lit. “in all word”—Greek word *logos*). It also affects our knowledge.

It won’t be long in this letter before Paul begins to lay down some hard counsel about changes that needed to happen in Corinth. He’s already anticipating the objection we so love to use, “I could never do *that!*” If you are in Christ, oh yes you can! God has enriched you with everything you need to do everything He desires.

3. *He confirmed us (6-7)*. Verse 6—“...because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you.” Paul reminds them of what happened. He did the preaching, and God did the confirming. He opened the Scriptures and gave a clear testimony about Christ to them, and God opened their hearts and granted them saving faith and repentance. God *confirmed* that testimony. The result?

Verse 7—“Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.” Keep in mind he’s talking to the whole church here, not to the individual Christian. No one Christian possesses every spiritual gift. But the church possesses all it needs. And that’s cause for thanksgiving, isn’t it?

We don’t lack any spiritual gift. If we sin, if we stumble and fall, if we fail to experience God’s intent for us, it’s *not* because we don’t have what it takes. And that’s why Paul is going to keep working with the Corinthians because he knew they had what it takes! And that’s also why, as we’ll see shortly, he prayed for their perfection.

Notice a second God-centered feature in Paul’s prayer.

**B. Paul affirmed his confidence in what God would do (8)**. “He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” What will God do with His children? Two things...

1. *He will keep us strong to the end*. And...

2. *He will present us blameless on the day of Christ*. Remember who Paul has in mind. This isn’t his prayer for the church in Ephesus or Philippi—we might expect such confident praying for those model churches. This is Paul’s confidence for the church *in Corinth*.

Corinth, one of the key cities in ancient Greece, was a metropolis of 250,000 free persons and 400,000 slaves. And like any large commercial city, Corinth was a center for open immorality. At one time, the temple of Aphrodite had one thousand sacred prostitutes. I read one commentator that referred to Corinth as the New York City, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world, all wrapped up in one. The immorality of Corinth was so widely known that the Greek verb “to Corinthianize” came to mean “to practice sexual immorality.” Is it any wonder that the Corinthian church had problems?

And Paul will deal with those problems shortly, and forcefully. But even Christians with problems are secure, not because of themselves, but because of God and what God is going to do. He will keep you strong to the end, says Paul, and He will present you blameless, faultless, *perfect*, on the day of Christ.

At this point Paul can almost hear the objections of the Corinthians. “We’re going to be *blameless*, Paul? Not to burst your bubble, but didn’t you read the letter we sent you, or talk to the brothers from Chloe’s household? We’ve got problems here, Paul, and the church is about ready to split! We need help, Paul, not wishful thinking!”

But this is not simply wishful thinking. This is *reality*. This is what God is going to do for His people. And in verse 9 we find out why: “God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.” Here’s the third feature of Paul’s prayer...

**C. Paul emphasized the God-centeredness of our salvation (9).** When Paul prayed he looked at situations from God's perspective, and so ought we. Here Paul reminds us of something that God *did* and something that God *is*.

1. *He called us into fellowship with His Son.* That's a reference to the effectual call of God (as in Rom 8:28ff), and if you're a Christian that's what happened to you on the day you were saved. God *called* you into fellowship with His Son, and because He did, you *called* on Him.

We see this dual usage of the word "call" back in verse 2: "To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and **called** to be holy, together with all those everywhere who **call** on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Christians are people who have been *called* by God, and then consequently *call* on Christ to save them.

J. I. Packer offers this helpful explanation of what theologians refer to as the "effectual calling of God":

"What is being spoken of here is the many-sided reality of Christian conversion, involving illumination, regeneration, faith, and repentance. It is being analyzed as a sovereign work of God, "effectually" (i.e., effectively) performed by the power of the Holy Spirit. The concept corresponds to Paul's use of the verb *call* (meaning "bring to faith") and *called* (meaning "converted") in Romans 1:6; 8:28, 30; 9:24; 1 Corinthians 1:24, 26; 7:18, 21; Galatians 1:15; Ephesians 4:1, 4; and 2 Thessalonians 2:14, and contrasts with the idea of a merely external and ineffective invitation, as found in Matthew 22:14.

"Original sin renders all human beings naturally dead (unresponsive) to God, but in effectual calling God quickens the dead. As the outward call of God to faith in Christ is communicated through the reading, preaching, and explaining of the contents of the Bible, the Holy Spirit enlightens and renews the heart of elect sinners so that they understand the gospel and embrace it as truth from God, and God in Christ becomes to them an object of desire and affection. Being now regenerate and able by the use of their freed will to choose God and the good, they turn away from their former pattern of living to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and to start a new life with him."<sup>[2]</sup>

That's what God *did*. He called us. Here's what God *is*, says Paul...

2. *He is faithful.* "God, who has called you..., is faithful." He's dependable and trustworthy. He finishes what He starts. Those whom He has called are His eternally.

Notice the very next verse. "I appeal to you brothers," Paul says in verse 10, and then begins to address the problem of cliques in the Corinthian church. Next he'll confront the man living in sexual sin in chapter 5, and then the brothers who were suing each other in chapter 6, and so on.

There's an important lesson here for us. When ministering to people with problems, we would do well to follow Paul's example. We ought to begin by recognizing what our faithful God has done, is doing, and has promised to do in the lives of His people. That's not to say there isn't yet more to be done, for until we see Christ there always will be more to be done. But we must begin by affirming what God has already accomplished. We ought to affirm it when we *pray* for them, and then when we get down to business and *counsel* them from God's Word.

So Paul's prayers were, first of all, *God-centered*. The next time we see Paul talking about his prayers for the Corinthians occurs at the end of his second letter. Let's turn there and observe a second element.

## II. Paul's prayers were gospel-oriented (2 Cor. 13:5-9).

No, you won't see the word "gospel" in this text, but be assured Paul had the gospel in mind. In 1 Corinthians 15:3 he said the gospel was of *first importance*. The good news of Jesus Christ, His death, and resurrection affected everything Paul did and said, and I mean *everything*.

At the beginning of 2 Corinthians 13 he says he's planning to make his third visit to Corinth. He's not looking

forward to it either. Why not? He told them why at the end of chapter 12, specifically in verse 20, “For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder.”

Do you like to confront sin-problems? Paul says he was afraid of coming to Corinth . It wasn't the fear of man that gripped his soul. It was the fear that when he came he would discover unrepentant sin in the Corinthian church. If that's the case, he says, if I don't find you Corinthians to be what I want you to be, that is, walking in obedience to Christ, then you won't find me to be what you want me to be either.

In the first five verses of chapter 13 Paul makes it clear that if the Corinthians didn't deal with their unrepentant sin, when he got to town *he would*. He would initiate church discipline and, as he put it, “not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others (2).”

That seems harsh, even unloving, some would say. Why would Paul respond that way? The answer is, because of the *gospel*. Verse 4—“For to be sure, he [Christ] was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you.”

The gospel demands that we take sin seriously. Christ didn't die for our sins so that we could continue to live in them. He died to set us free from our sins so that we might be blameless. Remember 1 Corinthians 1:8? “So that you will be *blameless* on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” That's the goal of the gospel, the target, if you will. God is interested in producing a blameless people for the honor of His name. That's why He sent Christ into the world. That's why He pours out His grace on undeserving sinners, and calls those sinners into fellowship with His Son.

That's God's target. That was Paul's target. That needed to be the Corinthians' target. And ours. And that brings us to Paul's closing exhortation in verses 5-6, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.” What did Paul do?

**A. Paul identified the target (5-6).** And in light of the target he offers three appropriate charges...

1. *Make sure you're in the faith.* Not everybody who says he has faith truly has faith. Test yourselves, says Paul.

2. *Make sure Christ is in you.* Don't assume that just because you've been baptized or joined a church that you're okay with God. The question is, *is Christ in you?* And if He is...

3. *Make sure you're living like it.*

Many years ago I was talking with my daughter, Katie, who was three and a half at the time. While we were in our house, she was looking into the air and said, “What's *that?*” I couldn't tell what she saw at first, but then realized it was the speckles of dust hanging in the air, illuminated by the sun's rays.

“Dust,” I told her.

“I've never seen that before,” she replied.

“Oh, the dust is always there,” I told her, “but it takes the sun to make it visible.”

So it is, dear friends, with the dust spots of sin in our lives. They go unnoticed...until we're in the presence of the Son whose radiance reveals our blemishes.

Listen carefully. If sin isn't a big deal to you, then get in the presence of the Son. Look at God's Son, Jesus Christ, as He's revealed in the pages of God's Word. He truly is blameless, and through Him you can become blameless, and if He's in your life you'll want to live like it.

And here's where prayer can help. In the very next verses we discover that...

**B. Paul asked God to help the Corinthians hit the target (7-9).** “Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong. Not that people will see that we have stood the test but that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is for your perfection.”

Notice what Paul said he praying for the Corinthians. Verse 7—“We pray that you will *not do anything wrong...* but that you will *do what is right.*” That's pretty comprehensive, isn't it? *Anything wrong* must go, only *what is right* must remain. And verse 9 sums it up, “Our prayer is for your *perfection.*”<sup>[3]</sup>

The Greek word for “perfection” is *katartisin*. It appears in the verb form just two verses later in verse 11, “Aim for perfection.” In Greek literature this same word is used of setting a broken bone or repairing a torn fishing net, in both cases so the bone and net can be used for their intended purpose.

Now ponder these three implications.

1. *God's agenda is our perfection.* “Be perfect,” Jesus said in Matthew 5:48, “even as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

“But how can a sinner like me ever be perfect?” you ask. A vital question. The fact is, you can't be perfect, not in our strength. Even if we lived sinlessly from now on, since our lives are already stained with past sins we lack perfection. The solution?

2. *God's agenda is accomplished through Christ.* Paul explains this in Colossians 1:28, “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone *perfect in Christ.*” Christ lived a perfect life and gave His perfect life as a ransom payment for sinners like you and me. Therefore, if you put your faith in Christ God cleanses you of your sins and credits the merit of His Son's perfect life to your account.

Remember Hebrews 6:1? The writer challenged his readers, “Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity [‘perfection’ KJV]...”

Ponder this commentary by Matthew Henry on our text, “He [Paul] desired their [the Corinthians'] perfection ... He not only desired that they might be kept from sin, but also that they might grow in grace, and increase in holiness, and that all that was amiss among them might be rectified and reformed. This was the great end of his writing this epistle.”<sup>[4]</sup>

And this was the great end of Paul's prayers, too. Our prayer is *for your perfection*. Let's personalize this thought...

3. *God's agenda should be our agenda when we pray.* Are you praying in line with God's agenda for your children? Are you asking God to work in their hearts and lives so that they will trust in Christ and then live in light of His righteous merit? And then are you asking God to give you opportunities to help mature in Christ, confronting sin as needed, with a huge dose of encouragement, as Paul did with the Corinthians?

Is God's agenda what consumes you when you think of and pray for your church family? When you see a brother sinning, is your response, “Well, none of us is perfect, so it's none of my business.” It is our business, not to gossip, and not to throw stones, but certainly to pray for their perfection, that is, to pray that their blamelessness which is assured in the future would become more and more realized in the present, all to Christ's honor.

Warren Wiersbe shares the following, “In the summer of 1805, a number of Indian chiefs and warriors met in council at Buffalo Creek, New York to hear a presentation of the Christian message by a Mr. Cram from the Boston Missionary Society. After the sermon, a response was given by Red Jacket, one of the leading chiefs. Among other things, the chief said:

‘Brother, you say that there is but one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit. If there is but one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it? Why not all agree, as you can all read the Book?’

‘Brother, we are told that you have been preaching to the white people in this place. These people are our neighbors. We are acquainted with them. We will wait a little while and see what effect your preaching has upon them. If we find it does them good, makes them honest and less disposed to cheat Indians, we will then consider again of what you have said.’<sup>[5]</sup>

When God’s people lose sight of God’s agenda, then the precious gospel message loses its beautiful, eternal-life-giving luster in the eyes of the lost. May our prayers be God-centered and gospel-centered.

Implications: In light of what we’ve seen today...ask yourself two questions.

1. *Am I praying in light of God’s agenda?*

2. *Am I living in light of God’s agenda?*

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**\*\*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.

<sup>[1]</sup> Charles Swindoll, *Seasons of Life*, p. 273.

<sup>[2]</sup> Packer, J. I., *Concise Theology*, ( Wheaton , Illinois : Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1993.

<sup>[3]</sup> The ESV uses the term “restoration,” the KJV “perfection,” and the NKJV “that you may be complete.”

<sup>[4]</sup> Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (2 Co 13:7). Peabody : Hendrickson.

<sup>[5]</sup> Taken from Warren Wiersbe, *First Peter* (commentary)