

Series: “*How to Pray for People You Love: Learning about Prayer from Ephesians*”

Main Idea: As we examine Paul’s first prayer for the Ephesians recorded in Ephesians 1:15-23, we discover two vital prayer requests that we ought to be praying for those we love (and of course ourselves).

- I. We should ask God to help us know Him better (15-17).
  - A. Paul’s prayer was for people who knew Christ (15).
  - B. Paul’s prayer was ongoing (16-17a).
    1. In order to know God better, you must first know Him.
    2. If you do know God, you need to know Him better.
  - C. Paul’s prayer recognized the triune nature of God (17b).
    1. We address the Father.
    2. We plead the merit of the Son.
    3. We request the help of the Spirit.
- II. We should ask God to help us know His gifts better (18-23).
  - A. If you are in Christ, you have hope (18a).
  - B. If you are in Christ, you are an inheritance (18b).
  - C. If you are in Christ, you have power (19-23).
    1. It’s the same power that raised Christ from the dead (20a).
    2. It’s the same power that seated Christ on His throne in heaven (20b-21).
    3. It’s the same power that made Christ head over everything (22-23).

Application: Let’s take this to heart...

1. Make sure our prayers are God-centered.
2. Make sure our lives are God-centered.

This morning we’re beginning a new three part series, “*How to Pray for People You Love: Learning about Prayer from Ephesians*”. I love Ephesians and have turned to it consistently in my life. We’re going to turn to it again to learn about this vital subject, *prayer*, and specifically, *how to pray for people we love*.

There are three important prayer texts in Ephesians, one in chapter one, the second in chapter three, and the third in chapter six. Those will be our prayer tutors for three messages.

Our text today is Paul’s first prayer for the Ephesians recorded in Ephesians 1. If there’s one thing this prayer teaches us, it’s that prayer that pleases God is *God-focused* praying. What does that mean? We’ll find out.

Ephesians is called a “prison” epistle. It’s called that because Paul wrote it while incarcerated in Rome. As we saw last time in his prayer recorded in the book of Romans, Paul prayed for God to open a door so he could go to Rome and minister. And God did open the door, but not as Paul envisioned.

He got arrested in Jerusalem. His crime? He’d been telling the world about Jesus, and that crime infuriated the zealous Jews and irritated the powerful Romans. Consequently, Paul spent the next four years of his life in chains.

The hymnwriter, William Cowper, said it well:

*God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform.*

*He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.*

It’s true, isn’t it? The infinite God’s ways are often mysterious to finite creatures, and even His answers to our prayers can come in the strangest of packages. Aleksandr

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<sup>\*\*</sup>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> For an earlier development of this text, see the series on the Prayers of Paul at WBC in 2008.

Solzhenitsyn offered this personal testimony, “It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually, it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes, not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts. So, bless you, prison, for having been in my life.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul wrote Ephesians in A.D. 60. That’s three years after he expressed in Romans his prayer request for an open door of ministry to Rome and then to Spain. But as just stated, the text we’ll be investigating this morning was penned in prison. The apostle Paul, whose calling and great delight in life was to make Christ known to the peoples who had never heard of Him, was incarcerated. He couldn’t travel to cities to preach the gospel. He couldn’t even leave the dwelling where he lived under house arrest, chained to a soldier. Yet still he could participate in the ministry of gospel advancement by using his *pen* and his *prayers*.

This morning, as we examine Paul’s first prayer for the Ephesians recorded in Ephesians 1:15-23, we’re going to discover two vital prayer requests that we ought to be praying for those we love and for ourselves.

#### I. We should ask God to help us know Him better (15-17).

Listen to verses 15-17, “For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, *so that you may know him better.*”

In that final phrase we see the heart of this first request. Paul prayed that his friends in Ephesus would know God better. Why did Paul bring that particular request to God in behalf of the Ephesians? To answer that question we must go back and ponder the first words in verse 15, “For this reason.” What reason does Paul say motivated him to pray for the Ephesians? Is he referring merely to the fact that he had heard about the Ephesians’ faith and love? It is likely that Paul had in mind that and much more, namely what he just wrote about in the entire preceding section of verses 3-14. Look back and you’ll see the reason Paul prayed as he did.

In verses 3-14 Paul praised God for His sovereign and gracious work in providing salvation for sinners—he praises the God the Father for designing redemption (verses 3-6), then praises God the Son for His work to accomplish redemption (verses 7-12), and then praises God the Holy Spirit for His work in applying redemption (verses 13-14). It’s with *this* in mind that Paul prayed.<sup>3</sup> It’s with the knowledge that the Almighty God has chosen from eternity past to save sinners, that He sent His Son into the world to provide that salvation by means of His perfect life, His death as a substitute, and His victorious resurrection, and that the Holy Spirit is working through the proclamation of this gospel message to save and seal sinners. It’s what God has done, is doing, and will do that moved Paul to pray as he did for the Ephesians.

Notice three specifics concerning Paul’s first prayer request.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Gulag Archipelago*, taken from Charles Swindoll, *Leadership*.

<sup>3</sup> I’m indebted to D. A. Carson’s helpful observations concerning this; p. 169.

**A. Paul's prayer was for people who knew Christ (15).** He says in verse 15, "For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints..."

We first learn about Paul's relationship with the people of Ephesus in Acts 18, for Paul made an initial stop there during his second missionary journey. But it during his third missionary journey that he invested at least two years of his life there, first preaching in the synagogues and then later beginning a daily Bible study in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. The result? A church was established and from that church the gospel began to have a regional impact, as Acts 19:10 indicates, "This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord."

Several years passed, during which time Paul was arrested and eventually shipped to Rome. But as he begins this letter he says he's "heard" things about the folks in Ephesus. He's heard about their *faith* and *love*. Those are two marks of a true Christian—*faith* in the Lord Jesus, and *love* for the saints.<sup>4</sup> Faith in the Lord—that speaks of a proper vertical relationship. And love for all the saints—that speaks of proper horizontal relationships. Those are the two necessary evidences of a genuine Christian. Such a person gives fruit of a proper relationship with God and with people.

This is key. The prayer request we're considering was offered for people who knew Christ.

**B. Paul's prayer was ongoing (16-17a).** Verse 16—"I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers." And verse 17 begins, "I keep asking." Notice Paul's persistence in praying, his consistency.

Paul did a lot of ministerial tasks. He preached. He did personal evangelism. He wrote letters to encourage, instruct, and address problems. He organized ministry trips, and much more. But here's something he did day and night. He *prayed*. In this case, he says he prayed continually for the believers in Ephesus, asking God again and again for the same thing. And what was that request? *I keep asking God to help you know Him better.*

We learn two vital realities from this...

1. *In order to know God better, you must first know Him.* If I said, "This year I'd like to get to know President Bush better," that word "*better*" suggests there's a relationship in place but I'd like to see it go beyond what it is. The reason that Paul asked God to help the Ephesians to know Him *better* was because they did know Him.

This is basic, but essential. If you want to know God *better*, you must first come to know Him. You say, "Well, doesn't everybody know God?" No, in fact, at birth *no one* knows God. We all enter the world cut off from Him, in darkness, ignorant of Him, because of sin. In order to know God we must accept the One He sent into the world to reconcile us to Himself. We must accept His Son, Jesus Christ, as our Savior. It's true. In order to know God *better*, you must first know Him. This also is true...

2. *If you do know God, you need to know Him better.* That's why Paul kept bringing this request to God again and again.

As we continue to examine this request we discover something else.

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<sup>4</sup> Apparently, the church has grown for he says he *heard* about their faith and love. He *saw* firsthand the initial believers faith and love, but has now *heard* about the more recent converts.

**C. Paul's prayer recognized the triune nature of God (17b).** God is one eternal being yet He exists, has existed, and will always exist as three persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Each of the three persons is equal in terms of essence and worth, yet each possesses a distinct role and function. It's called the doctrine of the Trinity, but for Paul this was no abstract, ivory tower concept. Indeed, the triune nature of God affected the way he prayed, as it should us.

Paul says, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better." How will recognizing the triune nature of God affect our prayers? If we follow Paul's example here, we'll learn that in prayer...

1. *We address the Father.*
2. *We plead the merit of the Son.*
3. *We request the help of the Spirit.*

Paul says he addressed his prayer to *God, the glorious Father*. But since Paul knew that this God is holy and cannot allow sinners to enter His presence, Paul pleaded the merit of God's Son as the basis for approaching Him, affirming that he was asking the *God of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Only those who are trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ can call on God, and those who do know Christ can call on God boldly. And so, on the merit of the Son, Paul addressed the Father and requested the help of the Spirit, of God the Holy Spirit, that He would help the Ephesian Christians know the Living God better.

My friends, Jesus said that eternal life is *knowing God* (John 17:3). But God is not merely some "higher power" or some "fill in the blank" or some "use whatever name you want to call him, it doesn't matter." No. God is who He is, and the God who is has revealed Himself in His Word. When we pray, we must line up our thoughts and words with the reality of His self-disclosure.

Again, that's what Paul is doing here. This Trinitarian structure of Paul's prayer grows right out of the truths he just taught in verses 3-14. It's because of who God the Father is and what He has done that we address our prayer to Him (the Father chose us, verse 4; the Father predestined us and adopted us, verse 5). Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father in heaven." And it's because of who God the Son is and what He has done for us that we plead His merit when we pray (the Son provided us with redemption and forgiveness through His shed blood, verse 7). And it's because of who God the Holy Spirit is and what He does that we request His help in prayer (He is the One whom the Son sent to convict sinners, says John 16:8, and seal believers, says Ephesians 1:13).

Now do you see why we need to be asking God to help us know Him better? He is the infinite Creator, and we will never plumb the depths of His greatness and grace. When it comes to God, there's always more to learn! And if we truly know God, this should be our desire, and this should be our continual prayer request, both for ourselves and each other. *Help us to know You better!*

John Stott said it well, "There is no higher knowledge than the knowledge of God Himself."<sup>5</sup> How important is knowing God better for you? Is it important enough to set aside time every day to study the Book He has given us for the very purpose that we might know Him? Is it important enough to carve out daily quiet-time to meditate on what He is like and what He has done for us, specifically to ponder the cross-work His Son accomplished for us? Is knowing Him important enough that you'll make every

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<sup>5</sup> John Stott, p. 54.

effort possible to be present when His people gather to worship Him? Is knowing Him so significant to you that you will give sacrificially so that others might come to know Him?

And may I mention that one of the ways God answers that request is through the use of trials? Billy Sunday once said, "I've thanked God a thousand times for the roses but never for the thorns, but now I have learned to thank Him for the thorns."<sup>6</sup> How can a person thank God for thorns? It's not the thorns per se, but the understanding that God's intent is to use the thorns and everything else in our lives to *help us know Him better*.

There's a second request that Paul brought to God, and so should we. Listen to verses 18-19, "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe." Here's the request...

## II. We should ask God to help us know His gifts better (18-23).

If you are in Christ, then God has given you three valuable possessions. You have them. It's a fact. But you may not know that you have them, or you may know it yet not be living like it. Paul prayed that God would do something for the Ephesian believers so that they would know better what they possessed.

Before we look at the gifts, notice what Paul said needed to happen in order to appreciate the gifts. "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know..." Something needs to happen in your *heart*, and Paul prayed that it would. In the Bible the "heart" refers to the part of you that no one can see. It's the place where we think, process information, make value judgments, and then make decisions. In our day we associate the term "heart" with emotion, and while the biblical term encompasses emotion, it refers primarily to our *mind*.

Notice that Paul says he's asking God to "enlighten" the heart, and specifically "the eyes of your heart." In other words, he wants God to help the Ephesians see something (that's what eyes are for), to see something more clearly (that's what light is for), and to see it not merely in some external sense that won't affect their lives, but to see it in the place where they process information, make value judgments, and make decisions, that is, in their *hearts*.

Now let's look at these three possessions. They're yours if you are in Christ.

**A. If you are in Christ, you have hope (18a).** "That you may know the hope to which he has called you." Consider those words carefully. They indicate that we who are in Christ have hope. Again, we may not grasp fully what that hope is (which is why it's Paul's prayer request), but we have it. And what we have in Christ is not a generic hope, but a very specific hope. Paul refers to it as the hope *to which God has called us*. Our hope, then, is linked to our God-initiated calling.

Just what is our calling? Paul tells us clearly in verses 4-5, "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will." That's our calling. In eternity past, God the Father chose us in Christ. His intent? He purposed to form a people that would be holy and blameless, a people that would resemble His dear Son.

And God always finishes what He starts. That's what gives us hope. We may not yet resemble Christ as we ought, but we will. God won't stop until we do. D. A. Carson

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<sup>6</sup> Taken from his sermon on "Heaven," Dorsett, p. 175.

explains, “If you are a Christian, the hope of your calling is the component of your salvation that you look forward to in the future.”<sup>7</sup>

So often what grabs our attention is the *unfinished* business. We’re plagued by the glaring reality that we do *not* resemble Christ in so many ways. I’m very aware of my impatience when standing in lines—that’s not like Christ. And my fear of man—that’s not like Christ. And sometimes I see your shortcomings, too. But know this. The day is coming when we will not only *see* Christ, but we will be *like* Him. That is our calling, and that calling gives us hope in the present, and a very powerful incentive, too. We *can* change, and we *will* change. So Paul prayed that God’s people would know better the hope of their calling.

**B. If you are in Christ, you are an inheritance (18b).** “That you may know...the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.”

It’s true that we are joint-heirs with Christ and as such have a tremendous inheritance coming. But that’s not what Paul has in mind here. Notice his terms: “His glorious inheritance in the saints.” He’s referring to God’s inheritance. God has an inheritance? Yes, it’s *in the saints*. We who are *saints* are *God’s* inheritance.

How can that be? In what sense are *we* (the ‘saints’) God’s inheritance? Once again, Paul has in mind the Trinitarian mystery we pondered moments ago. To put it precisely, we (the saints) are the inheritance of God the Son, a gift given to Him by the God the Father and for His eternal praise and pleasure. Paul just praised God for this in Ephesians 1:11, “In him [the Son] we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.”

Jesus talked about this in John 6:39, “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of *all that he has given me*, but raise them up at the last day.” Jesus here affirmed that God the Father had given Him a love gift, a people for whom He would die and then raise up at the last day. Later Jesus prayed about this love gift in John 17:24, “Father, I want *those you have given me* to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.”

Did you catch that? Jesus, on the night before He was crucified, indicated something He *wanted*. He wanted the people the Father had given Him to see His glory. Has that happened? In part. The first disciples saw His glory after His resurrection, but then He returned to heaven. Are we seeing His glory now? No, not fully, for our glorious Savior is unseen in the present (see 1 Pet. 1:8). But that will soon change. He wants His people, His inheritance, to see His glory. And not only *see* it, but *share* it. And what the Sovereign Son wants, the Sovereign Son will receive!

Beloved, we are Christ’s inheritance. We belong to Him. We are the trophies of His grace. He has great things in store for us and through us. And He wants us to know it!

**C. If you are in Christ, you have power (19-23).** “That you may know...his incomparably great power for us who believe.”

I don’t think most of us have even scratched the surface in understanding the power available to us for living the Christian life. One of the great excuses we often use to justify our ongoing, ungodly habits is, “I just can’t change. It’s the way I am!” But we *can* change, not by our strength for sure, but by *His*. Paul prayed that the Ephesians would grasp the incomparable power available to them for living God’s kind of life. How great is this power? Paul compares it to three previous divine accomplishments.

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<sup>7</sup> D. A. Carson, p. 176.

1. *It's the same power that raised Christ from the dead (19b-20a).* "That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead."

On Friday, they nailed Him to a Roman cross, and six hours later He died. But on Sunday morning, that lifeless body lived again. God did a work in that tomb. God demonstrated His mighty strength and raised up His Son from the dead.

And He's still doing that! And I don't mean simply that in the future He will raise up His sons and daughters to eternal life, as wonderful as that is to ponder. Paul says that this resurrection power is available *now*. Paul prayed that the Ephesians would know God's resurrection power *now*.

Why would they need such power now? For the same reasons you and I need it. To break stubborn sin habits, to overcome impossible challenges, to work through relational frustrations, to accomplish ministry assignments. Every day we need *power*, and every day it's available. The very same power by which God raised Christ from the dead is ours for the asking. Here's a second illustration...

2. *It's the same power that seated Christ on His throne in heaven (20b-21).* "That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead *and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms*, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come."

The devil thought he had triumphed that Friday, but he was wrong. Three days later God raised His Son from the dead, and forty days after that He took His Son home to heaven and gave Him a seat on the highest throne in and over the universe. Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, they and a hoard of others have shaken their tiny fists at God, but they're not on the throne now. God's Son is. And under His Son God placed all potential rivals, demonic, human, and every other potential rival, not just in this age but in the future age as well.

Beloved, we need power, not just for challenges we can *see*, but also for the *unseen*. We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers. There is a demonic world that hates Christ and Christ's people. Can we stand? Yes, because we have access to Christ's ascension power.

3. *It's the same power that made Christ head over everything (22-23).* "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

"I need power," you say. "Where can I experience this power, this power to overcome sin and live for God?" The answer is, if you are in Christ, you *have* it. In Christ we have all we need. In Christ we have hope. In Christ we are God's inheritance. In Christ we have power. What's needed is not something else. What's needed is to grasp what you have.

And that requires prayer. Specific prayer. Targeted prayer. Prayer in which we, first of all, ask God to help us know Him better, and then, to know His gifts better.

Application: Let's take this to heart...

1. *Make sure our prayers are God-centered.*
2. *Make sure our lives are God-centered.*