

“Praying for Discernment: Paul’s Prayer for the Church at Philippi”^{**1} Philippians 1:3-11
Special 2026 series: *Redeemed People...Pray the Word*

Main Idea: As we examine Paul’s prayer for the church in Philippi as recorded in Philippians 1:3-11, we discover two guidelines for how to pray.

- I. Let’s pray with a perspective shaped by the gospel (3-8).
 - A. Paul prayed with thanksgiving (3).
 - B. Paul prayed with joy (4-6).
 1. He had it because of what the church had done and was still doing (5).
 2. He had it because of what God had done and would certainly do to the end (6).
 - C. Paul prayed with affection (7-8).
 1. Paul was someone who thought carefully and felt deeply.
 2. By his example Paul points us to Christ.
- II. Let’s pray with petitions shaped by the gospel (9-11).
 - A. May God give you a growing love (9).
 1. God-pleasing love requires knowledge.
 2. God-pleasing love requires insight.
 - B. May God give you greater discernment (10a).
 1. Life is full of choices between legitimate options.
 2. In every decision we should choose what is best.
 - C. May God give you a blameless reputation (10b).
 1. What’s needed isn’t our perfection.
 2. What’s needed is that we deal with every sin God’s way.
 - D. May God give you the fruit of righteousness (11).
 1. It comes through Jesus Christ.
 2. It results in glory to God.

Take Inventory: Let’s ask ourselves these questions.

1. Am I living in light of the gospel?
2. Am I praying in light of the gospel?

We are so blessed! We know the Living God personally because we have received a saving relationship with Him through the redemptive work of His Son. In Jesus Christ we now enjoy life that is abundant and eternal.

But though we are blessed, we are also needy. Many needs. How would you finish the following sentence? The greatest need of the church in America today is _____. Certainly, we could answer that question in lots of ways. Starting with *Christ*. Without the person of Jesus Christ, we cease to be the church. But there’s something that the church consistently lacks, that we personally far too often lack. And it affects everything.

Suppose I walked into the room and offered anyone a one-hundred-dollar bill right now. “It’s yours. You can spend it on whatever you want. Eat at your favorite restaurant. Do whatever. You just need to pay me back \$150 by this time next month.”

If a person heard my offer and said, “Wow, that’s great! I need a hundred bucks today. You’re an answer to my prayers. Sure, I’ll take it!”, we could rightly say that person lacks this quality.

So does the single person who is sexually active on dates. As is the person who thinks they can drink three cans of beer and get behind the wheel of a car. And the person who spends money they do not have to buy things they really don’t need.

Those are rather obvious demonstrations of the lack of this quality. There are many more subtle demonstrations.

^{**}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 For a previous look at this passage, see the messages preached at WBC in 2008 and on 10/4/15.

When Christian parents and their children stay up late on Saturday night and then sleep till eleven on Sunday, there's a lack of this quality. Or they make it to church but are too tired to engage in meaningful worship. Again, it's lacking.

It's what's needed when two nice looking young people knock on your door and say that they believe in Jesus and family values and are going to school in Utah and would like to give you some literature and discuss it with you.

Our lives are filled with decisions. Should I do *this* or *that*? The good versus bad options are relatively obvious. But the good versus best options are the tough ones. And the quality that's needed in each of these decisions is one and the same.

Several years ago I heard Pastor John MacArthur make the observation that the lack of this quality is the greatest challenge facing the church in America today. He could be overstating the case. It may not be the greatest challenge. But it has to be near the top. What's particularly noteworthy is that this is the very quality for which we see Paul praying fervently for the church we're considering in today's text.

We're learning about prayer this summer, studying the prayers of the apostle Paul, one per week. Thus far we've examined in chronological order Paul's prayers for the church in Thessalonica (which he prayed and wrote in AD 51 or 52), the church in Corinth (AD 55), the church in Rome (AD 57), and for the last two weeks his two prayers for the church in Ephesus (written from prison in AD 60). This morning we're probing Paul's prayer in another prison epistle, one of my favorites, for the church at Philippi.

Scripture Reading: Philippians 1:3-11 (ESV)

"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And it is my prayer that **your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment,** ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."

It was around AD 61 when Paul penned this prayer. He was imprisoned awaiting trial before Caesar (check out Acts 28 for further details). But Paul's relationship with these dear people in Philippi goes back at least a dozen years.

Background: It was during his second missionary journey (recorded in Acts 16) that the apostle, responding to a vision in which he saw a man from Macedonia pleading for him to come, sailed for the European continent and ended up at Philippi. Philippi was a Roman colony named after King Philip II, father of Alexander the Great. As a Roman colony, its citizens were also citizens of Rome itself, for which the Philippians took pride.

Since there wasn't a synagogue in Philippi, Paul went to the river to find a place of prayer. There he met a businesswoman named Lydia, and "the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message" (as Acts 16:14 states). Lydia opened her home to Paul and his team and in time a church was established.

One day Paul exorcised a demon from a slave girl, but his actions prompted the slave's owner to have Paul and Silas arrested, beaten, thrown in prison, and shackled in stocks. That night the two missionaries were singing praises to God when God sent an earthquake that broke their chains and opened the prison door. Thinking they had escaped, the jailor was about to kill himself when Paul stopped him. Moments later that man and his family put their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation and were baptized that

same night. On the next day Paul left Philippi, then later returned during his third missionary journey (according to Acts 20:6; AD 53-57).

So yes, the church at Philippi was special to Paul. The people were special to him. Lydia. The slave girl. The jailor and his family. And others. He loved this church. And not only because of its God-exalting beginning. This church had entered into a special partnership with Paul, which we'll discuss in a moment.

Yet special churches are still *needy* churches. What do they need most? They need a specific quality or trait. And if they lose this trait, they're in trouble. And this is why Paul is praying so fervently for it in his prayer for the church at Philippi.

Allow me to be transparent. I believe that WBC is a special church. The people of WBC are special. The partnership we've enjoyed together is precious. Yet this special church remains a needy church, and acknowledging this need is a good thing. What is it we need *most*? I'm convinced that we need this special trait tucked away in the heart of Paul's prayer. And we need to pray for it, for ourselves, our children, our church family.

Yet this trait doesn't function in isolation. To experience this trait, we must see it in the flow of the entire prayer. Paul doesn't mention the trait until verse 9, yet what he prays prior to the trait is necessary for it, and what he mentions after the trait is the fruit of it.

This is a very gospel-shaped prayer. That ought not surprise us. It was the gospel that took Paul to Philippi in the first place. Prayer is a vital part of gospel ministry. Many have heard of William Carey, the father of modern missions. Few have heard of his sister who, although bedridden for years, spent hours each day calling on God in behalf of her brother and other preachers of the gospel.²

As a prisoner Paul couldn't preach in Philippi, but he could pray. And he did. In this gospel-shaped prayer, he models two guidelines for us. One, pray with a **perspective** shaped by the gospel (3-8). Two, pray with **petitions** shaped by the gospel (9-11).

I. Let's pray with a perspective shaped by the gospel (3-8).

Three words characterized Paul's perspective as he prayed for the Philippians.

A. Paul prayed with thanksgiving (3). "I thank my God every time I remember you." It wasn't because they'd arrived and were problem-free, and he will challenge them with some needed changes later in the letter, for instance, urging a couple of ladies to put a disagreement behind them (4:2). Nonetheless Paul continually expressed gratitude to God for this church, indeed *every time* he prayed.

B. Paul prayed with joy (4-6). He says in verse 4, "Always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy."³ That's a word we don't expect to hear from the lips of a man in prison. *Joy*. And we hear it a lot in this letter (the words "joy" and "rejoice" appear in every chapter, some thirteen times).

What caused Paul to pray for the Philippian church with such joy? He tells us. In fact, he puts the record of his prayer on hold until verse 9 and begins to share the reasons for his joy. In other words, he wants the Philippians to know not only *what* he prayed for them, but also his heart's *perspective* as he prayed.

What produced this joy in prayer? Two things did, says Paul.

1. He had it because of what the church had done and was still doing (5). Verse 4 says in the NIV, "I always pray with joy." Why? According to verse 5, "Because of your partnership [Greek *koinonia*] in the gospel from the first day until now." These

² Observation by D. A. Carson, p. 123.

³ NIV "In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy."

individuals were *partners* with Paul in the gospel ministry and had been so for nearly a dozen years, from the *first* day until *now*.

Why were they partners? Because of the *gospel*, the message of the person and work of Jesus Christ. They knew the difference the gospel had made in their lives, and they wanted the same to happen in the lives of others. So they got involved.

How? Paul mentions two ways in this letter. One, they sent him **money** for ministry and personal needs. And two, they sent him **personnel**, as he explains at the end of the letter in Philippians 4:14-19 (NIV).

“Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”

The epistle to the Philippians is essentially a thank-you letter. Paul is writing to express his thanks to the church for their gifts of money and for their sending Epaphroditus who not only delivered the latest gift of money, but also (according to 2:25) cared for Paul’s personal needs while imprisoned.

But there was a second reason Paul prayed with joy. The first again, he had joy because of what the Philippians had done and were still doing.

2. *He had it because of what God had done and would certainly do to the end (6).* He says in verse 6 (NIV), “Being confident of this.” In the ESV, “And I am sure of this.” Of what? The NIV says, “That he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” The ESV says, “At the day of Christ Jesus.”

When Paul prayed for the Philippian church, he did so with confidence, and his confidence was rooted in God. God had begun a good work in them, and Paul saw it firsthand. He saw God open Lydia’s heart to the gospel message (Acts 16:15 is very specific, stating, “The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message”). And God did the same with the jailor and the rest of his household. *God* began a good work in Philippi. And what God begins, God finishes. The God who began a good work in you *will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus*.

Beloved, this is good to know. Salvation begins with God and it ends with God too.

When I was eleven years old God began a good work in me (actually He began that work before creation, according to Ephesians 1:4, but I recognized it at age eleven). He convicted me of my sin and opened my heart to the wonderful, liberating news that Jesus Christ His Son had died in my place and for my sin, that Christ had conquered death, and that through Christ I could be made right with God and live with God forever.

And what God begins, God finishes. Has God begun a good work in your life? If He has, you can be sure He will bring it to completion.

This knowledge produces fortitude when life gets hard. It did for William Booth. During the early days of the Salvation Army, Booth and his associates were bitterly attacked in the press by religious leaders and government leaders alike. Whenever his son, Bramwell, showed Booth a newspaper attack, the General would reply, “Bramwell, fifty years hence it will matter very little indeed how these people treated us; it will matter a great deal how we dealt with the work of God.”⁴

⁴ W. Wiersbe, *The Wycliffe Handbook of Preaching & Preachers*, p. 185.

As Paul wrote this letter, he probably had ugly scars on his back from the beating he received in Philippi. But that's not what came to mind when he thought of that city. He thought of a group of people that God used him to reach with the gospel, people who reciprocated his love by meeting his needs. And that caused him to pray as he did, first with thanksgiving, as well as with joy.

C. Paul prayed with affection (7-8). Listen to the NIV, "It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus."

Sometimes we think of Paul as being a great *thinker*, and indeed he was that. But he was also a great *feeler*. Notice his language here. "It is right for me *to feel this way about you*. I have you *in my heart*. I *long for* you with the *affection* of Christ Jesus."

Paul was someone who thought carefully and felt deeply. And oh, how we need both qualities in their proper balance. He *thought carefully*, meaning he filled his mind with the Scriptures and used his mind to wrestle with the implications of the truths contained therein. But he also *felt deeply* with affections that were firmly anchored in the truths of God's Word.

By his example Paul points us to Christ. "I long for you with the affection of Christ Jesus," Paul says in verse 8. That's the greatest display affection! Christ so loved us that He left heaven, let soldiers nail Him to a cross, and endured hell for us.

My friends, we ought to *feel deeply* the staggering implications of those words. Why then often do we not? Here's a prime reason. In order to *feel deeply* we must first and continually *think carefully*. Not superficially but think *carefully*. Thinking carefully and feeling deeply work hand in hand.

It's true. We were heading for eternal torment, that's what we deserved, but Christ took our place. On the cross God's own Son took the judgment we deserved, so that on the basis of His Son's substitutionary work God might pardon and adopt us as His sons and daughters. *Think carefully* about that and then in response *feel deeply*.

Paul prayed with a gospel-shaped perspective. It's why he prayed *what* he prayed, and *how* he prayed. Let's heed his example. Have you thought carefully about the gospel and have you repented and placed your faith in Christ alone? Furthermore, are you right now thinking carefully about the gospel? Are you pondering the cross on a daily basis so that you're regularly feeling deeply its implications? If we're going to pray as Paul did (praying for the much needed trait that follows), we must pray with a gospel-shaped perspective.

II. Let's pray with petitions shaped by the gospel (9-11).

In verses 9-11 Paul reveals precisely what he was praying for his friends in Philippi. He mentions four petitions that function like stair-steps, each one leading to the next.

A. May God give you a growing love (9). In verse 9 Paul says, "And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment."⁵

When we see the word "love", we must not think that Paul has in mind merely some feeling. He uses the Greek word *agape*. Agape is a virtue that originates in a person's will which produces action. Agape is choosing to do good towards another.

It's significant that Paul doesn't pray that they would *begin* to love, but that their love would *abound*. He is not suggesting that the Philippians had a glaring problem. They are a loving church. But even loving churches have not arrived.

⁵ NIV "This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight."

The term 'abound' means "to be over and above." Picture an empty cup. Suppose you take a pitcher of water and start pouring. The level rises from one-quarter to one-half to three-quarters, and finally the cup is full. What happens if you keep pouring? The cup *overflows*, for it can't contain the contents. That's the kind of love Paul prayed to see in his friends' lives. An *abounding* love. An *overflowing* love.

Love is like a muscle. Use it and its capacity for greater use grows and expands. Stop using it and it shrivels up. In order for love to grow, there are two requirements.

First, *God-pleasing love requires knowledge*. "May your love abound more and more in knowledge (NIV)." Husbands, have you learned by now that it takes knowledge to love your wife? It certainly does. Peter explains it this way in 1 Peter 3:7 (KJV), "Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with *them* according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife..." Men, we can do what we *think* is an expression of love and fail to show true love, right? Just because the gift you buy her is something *you* like doesn't mean it'll be something *she* likes. So Peter says, "Study her. Dwell with her according to *knowledge*."

Later in this letter Paul is going to use a related word when he says in Philippians 3:10, "I want to *know Christ*." You can't love someone you don't know. That was Paul's consuming desire, to know and be like Christ. And he saw this pursuit as an ongoing process, as he clarifies in the following verses (Phil 3:12-14), "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

So love requires knowledge. We cannot love well without knowing well. But that's not all. Second, *God-pleasing love requires insight*. That's the word used in the NIV. "In knowledge and depth of insight," prays Paul. "In knowledge and in all judgment," says the KJV. "With knowledge and all discernment," says the ESV.

Before we can show love, we must first *see* the opportunity. But since we're sinners and therefore self-focused by nature, we don't naturally see the needs of others and the opportunities to love. Hence Paul prayed, "Lord, give them eyes to see. Give them *insight* and *discernment* so their love will abound."

This is key. Love, if it's to be biblical, must be based upon *knowledge* and *insight*. Those are the boundaries in which God-pleasing love is exercised. If we go beyond the boundaries, it's no longer true love. Indeed, when love is not based upon knowledge and insight, we end up doing more harm than good.

Suppose I'm watching television and hear a plea to help the starving children in the Congo. I'm moved, and so I should be. I see the 800 number on the screen. I get out my visa card, and wire them \$100. Did I demonstrate biblical love? It depends. Was my action governed by *knowledge* and *insight*? Did I taken time to check out the organization that's handling the money? Does it operate by integrity? Or did I act based on emotion?

Years ago I met a man who said he was raising funds to help needy children. I gave some money, and then later found out he was part of a cult. Sincerity is not enough. Love operates within the boundaries of knowledge and insight.

This is Paul's first petition for the Philippians. May God give you a growing love.

Now notice the next two words in the text. Verse 10 begins, "So that." Those words indicate that a growing love is not an end, but a means to something. To what? The ESV says, "So that you may approve what is excellent." In the NIV, "So that you may be able to discern what is best..." This is the second stair-step and the heart of the matter.

B. May God give you greater discernment (10a). Let's talk about this word *discernment*. For starters, you probably noticed a difference in the translations. In the ESV the word "discernment" appears as a noun at the end of verse 9. In the NIV, it appears as the verb "to discern" at the beginning of verse 10. Why the differences? It's because Paul actually uses two different Greek words.

The word he uses in verse 9 is the noun *aesthesis* which means "to have the capacity to perceive clearly and hence to understand the real nature of something."⁶ It's the only time this word appears in this form in the NT. It carries the idea of *insight, perception, judgment, discernment*.

In verse 10 Paul uses a present, active, infinitive, from the verb *dokimazo*, meaning "to examine, test, approve"; "to regard something as genuine or worthy on the basis of testing."⁷ It has the idea of putting something to the test and judging it to be good and worthwhile.

Both are needed. We need the noun, the quality of discernment. We need the verb, the activity of testing and being discerning. Why are both needed? Because life is *full of choices* and the choices are often *between legitimate options*.

My grandmother was married sixty-two years when the Lord took my grandfather home to heaven. After being a widow for three years, she remarried a widower. Both were in their eighties, and they enjoyed fifteen years together. I still chuckle when I think of a statement they made. "We don't buy any green bananas." In other words, when you realize you could be leaving this world today, what's the sense of buying a banana you have to wait two days to eat?

The reality is, every day we make decisions, hundreds of them. What time should I get up? What should I wear? Should I eat breakfast, and if so, what? Should I open my mouth at breakfast or keep quiet? If I open it, what should I say? Should I read Facebook? If so, should I comment on that post I just read? If so, how?

Should I take this job? Should I date this girl? Should I marry her? Should I buy this car? Should I read my Bible today? Should I spend time with this person?

Decisions. Decisions. Decisions. Every day. What should I do? Which option should I choose? Here's where prayer is vital. Notice what Paul prayed his friends for his friends. In the NIV, "That you may be able to discern *what is best*", the "things that are excellent" says the KJV, "that you may approve what is excellent" says the ESV.

The term translated "excellent" essentially means "to make a difference." I am praying for you, says Paul, that in all your decisions you will discern and then choose the option that makes a difference.

Take it from someone who's been down the road a few years. It's so easy in life to get distracted, even sidetracked by things that *don't make a difference*. We're prone to set our sights on things which may not be bad, but are just simply not the best option.

Paul is not praying that his friends will choose the good over the bad. That's a given. We don't even need to pray about whether to sin. Should I lie on my income tax? Should I deceive my parents? Should I look at a little pornography? The answer to those matters is always *no* because God's Word clearly prohibits such actions.

This prayer is about choosing between legitimate options. Paul is burdened that the Philippians *not* do what we're all so prone to do, and that is, to settle for the *good* when we could experience the *best*, the option that will make a difference in eternity.

⁶ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). In [*Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 383). United Bible Societies.

⁷ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). In [*Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 363). United Bible Societies.

Here's an example. Men, fall is coming. That means football season is near. We need Paul's reminder, don't we? Is there anything wrong with football and watching a game? No. But does it really matter in the light of eternity whether the Buckeyes beat the Wolverines? Seriously now, is it the best use of our time to spend hours in front of ESPN when we can't seem to find fifteen minutes to read our Bibles?

In his book, *The Whitehouse Years*, Henry Kissinger tells about a Harvard professor who gave an assignment, collected the papers, and then handed them back the next day. At the bottom of one he wrote the words, "Is this the best you can do?" The student thought, "no," and redid the paper. It was handed in again, and received the same comment. This went on ten times, till finally the student said, "Yes, this is the best I can do." The professor replied, "Fine, now I'll read it."⁸

Back in 1995 Neil Postman wrote a book with a title that says it all. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Nothing wrong with recreation except when it's gone too far. How will we know? Discernment.

As D. A. Carson observes, "Paul's prayer spells the death of entrenched mediocrity, of smug self-satisfaction, of contentment with our own excuses. Paul prays for what is excellent."⁹

In every decision we need to choose what is best. But to choose what is best, we need to *discern* what is best. Hence, we need to pray that we'll discern what is best.

Should I take the overtime or go to the Wednesday evening prayer meeting? Should we go to the ball game on Sunday or head to the church house? Should we buy the new car or will the payments strap our ability to be generous with our kingdom giving? Should I watch this movie? Read that blog post? Listen to that podcast? And on and on?

Carson asks an important question, "What have you read in the past six months? If you have found time for newspapers or news magazines, a couple of whodunits, a novel or two or perhaps a trade journal, have you also found time for reading a commentary or some other Christian literature that will help you better understand the Bible or improve your spiritual discipline or broaden your horizons? Are you committed, in your reading habits, to what is best?"¹⁰

Think about what this prayer reveals to us about Paul the man. Paul wasn't interested in coasting through life. Because he knew where he was heading (heaven) and who He would see when he arrived (Jesus), he resolved to make the most of the present.

As Carson reminds us, "The more fruitful and the more holy he becomes, the more he perceives how much farther he has to go."¹¹

Notice the relationship between these first two petitions. May God give you a growing love, *so that* you may have a greater discernment. Note the connection. If our love isn't growing, then we will not be able to choose what is best. If we're living in the vacuum of self-focused-ness, we will lack the ability to discern the *best* from the good.

I know of a woman who used to be in this church who chose to vote for a presidential candidate because she thought he was handsome. That's not very discerning, is it?

I know of other Christians who vote for a particular party because that's what their parents did, regardless of the candidate's position on matters the Scriptures clearly address. Again, that's not very discerning.

On what basis do you vote for candidates? Appearances? Family opinion? What should our basis be for making choices? Choosing that which is *best*, that's the goal.

⁸ From Henry Kissinger's *The Whitehouse Years*.

⁹ D. A. Carson, p. 125.

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, pp. 128-9.

¹¹ Carson, p. 131.

Which raises this question, “How can I know what *the best* is?” That’s a good question, and Paul gives us a helpful suggestion in his third request.

C. May God give you a blameless reputation (10b). Notice the next phrase in verse 10. In the NIV, “So that you may be able to discern what is best *and may be pure and blameless* for the day of Christ.” Paul’s second and third requests are bound together by the word “and.” I’m praying that, as the ESV puts it, “you may approve what is excellent, *and so be pure and blameless.*”

The term “pure” [KJV “sincere”] means “to be clear when examined in the sunlight.” How do you check to see if your sunglasses are clean? You hold them up to the light. The light reveals the spots. Paul prays that the reputation of the Philippians will be clear and clean when held up to *the Light*.

Pure and blameless. There’s no place for sin spots in the Christian’s life. And what Paul prays for the Philippians is the standard he holds for himself. As he says when standing before Governor Felix in Acts 24:16, “And in this do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense toward God and men.”

What’s needed isn’t our perfection. What’s needed is that we deal with every sin God’s way. “For the day of Christ,” says Paul. That is, for the day Christ returns. The word “for” in this phrase carries the sense of “with a view towards.”¹² People who live with a view towards the day when Christ will return are the people who will make wise decisions in the present. We need to live, as Carson puts it, with a “forward-looking dimension.”

Carson offers this helpful word picture. “The church is to see itself as an outpost of heaven. It is a microcosm of the new heaven and the new earth, brought back, as it were, into our temporal sphere. We are still contaminated by failures, sin, relapses, rebellion, self-centeredness; we are not yet what we ought to be. But by the grace of God, we are not what we were. For as long as we are left here, we are to struggle against sin, and anticipate, so far as we are able, what it will be like to live in the untarnished bliss of perfect righteousness. We are to live with a view to the day of Christ.”¹³

There’s what we are. An outpost of heaven. Citizens of another kingdom. Living in foreign and at times hostile territory. We won’t be here forever, but while we are here, we are to represent the agenda of our Master and Savior. And now we come to the top of the staircase.

D. May God give you the fruit of righteousness (11). The ESV says, “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” Fruit, as you know, is the visible produce of the tree. The fruit of righteousness is the visible produce that ought to be seen in our lives, the right kind of living. And what’s true of this fruit of righteousness? Two characteristics. One, *it comes through Jesus Christ*. And when present, two, *it results in glory to God*.

Here’s the difference between religious activity and fruit. Religious activity is something we do in our own strength. Genuine fruit must be produced in us by Christ. Religious activity impresses people. Genuine fruit results in praise to God.

Now take a look back at Paul’s petitions. *Growing love, greater discernment, blameless reputation, fruit of righteousness.* The four requests work together. He prays that God will grant the Philippian Christians a *growing love*, which will make possible *greater discernment* as well as a *blameless reputation* and the *fruit of righteousness*. These are gospel-centered requests because nothing other than the gospel of Jesus Christ can make them possible.

¹² Observation by Carson, p. 135.

¹³ Carson, pp. 135-6.

Here's where the rubber meets the road. Are these the kind of requests that we have been asking God to grant, for ourselves, and for others we care about?

"How much have we prayed for what is best," asks D. A. Carson, "for a spiritual harvest, for conversions, for demonstrations of the fruit of the Spirit? Could it be that we have experienced little because we have asked for little? Is our unfruitfulness proportionate to our prayerlessness? Paul's prayer knifes through so many of our excuses."¹⁴

David Livingstone was one of the great missionaries of all time. He was also a great man of prayer. It was his habit every birthday to write a prayer. On his next to last birthday, this was his prayer: 'O Divine One, I have not loved Thee earnestly, deeply, sincerely enough. Grant, I pray Thee, that before this year is ended I may have finished my task.' One day the following year, Dr. Livingstone's faithful men checked in on him. As they looked in his African hut at Ilala, while the rain dripped from the eaves, they saw their master on his knees beside his bed. He had died on his knees in prayer.¹⁵

Henry Martyn, missionary to India in the early 1800s, said, "Let me burn out for God. After all, whatever God may appoint, prayer is the great thing. Oh, that I may be a man of prayer."¹⁶

Psalms 119:125 (NIV) "I am your servant; give me discernment, that I may understand your statutes."

Take Inventory: Let's ask ourselves these two important questions.

1. *Am I living in light of the gospel?*
2. *Am I praying in light of the gospel?*

In 1898 Johnson Oatman penned the following. May it be our resolve.

*I'm pressing on the upward way,
New heights I'm gaining every day;
Still praying as I'm onward bound,
"Lord, plant my feet on higher ground."*

*My heart has no desire to stay
Where doubts arise and fears dismay;
Though some may dwell where those abound,
My prayer, my aim, is higher ground.*

*I want to live above the world,
Though Satan's darts at me are hurled;
For faith has caught the joyful sound,
The song of saints on higher ground.*

*I want to scale the utmost height
And catch a gleam of glory bright;
But still I'll pray till Heav'n I've found,
"Lord, plant my feet on higher ground."*

*Lord, lift me up and let me stand,
By faith, on Heaven's table land,
A higher plane than I have found;
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.*

Song of Response: #399 "Higher Ground" (all four verses)

This evening: Scioto Hills Family Camp chapel at 7:15, Rex Howe preaching

¹⁴ Carson, p. 132.

¹⁵ Bounds, *Purpose in Prayer*, p. 35.

¹⁶ Taken from E. M. Bounds, *Purpose in Prayer*, p. 38.