

Main Idea: When we examine what Paul prayed for the Corinthian believers in his letters to them, we learn that our prayers should be marked by two key elements. They should be God-centered and gospel-oriented.

- I. Our prayers should be God-centered (1 Corinthians 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. Our prayers should be gospel-oriented (2 Corinthians 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.

Take Inventory: Let’s ask ourselves two questions.

1. Are my prayers God-centered?
2. Are my prayers gospel-oriented?

Happy Fathers Day! I’m so grateful for the dads in this church. To God be the glory for you brothers who take seriously your God-given calling to set the pace for your families and forever family. We’re going to learn this morning about an activity that is vital for every man (and woman and child) in this room.

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. Listen to Swindoll as he 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.

^{**}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 message preached at WBC in 2008.

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.*²

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. Far too often, prayer is what we do when we can't think of anything else to do. It's then that we call on God, sort of as a last resort.

Men, if we treat prayer that way, it's an indication that we don't understand what prayer is. Prayer is a wonderful gift that the Living God offers to those who approach Him through the means He has provided, by faith in His Son Jesus Christ. If we know Christ, we can talk to the Almighty. And He listens to us and responds to our requests.

This summer, we're learning how to pray by learning to *pray the Word*. We're inviting the apostle Paul to mentor us and examining what he prayed for the churches and individuals to whom he wrote the God-inspired letters we find in our Bibles. We're taking one per week. We've learned from 1 & 2 Thessalonians in the past two weeks to *pray missionally*, that our prayers should be shaped by the mission Christ has given us. Our mission is to preach *and* pray.

The title of today's message is "*Praying for Perfection: Learning from Paul's Prayer for the Church at Corinth.*" We'll be looking at two passages, the first is at the beginning of 1 Corinthians. The second is at the end of 2 Corinthians. To begin, let's read the second passage, so we can see where we're heading before we leave the gate.

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 13:7-9 (NIV84) "**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.⁸ For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.⁹ We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and **our prayer is for your perfection.**"

What a stunning prayer request! *And our prayer is for your perfection.* Perfection? Is that even possible? Perfection is the word used in the NIV1984 edition. For your *perfection*, says the KJV 1900. *Your perfecting*, says the 1890 Darby Bible. That you *may become perfect*, in the NRSV. In the NIV2011 edition, that you may be *fully restored*. For your *maturity*, says the LEB. Your *restoration*, says the ESV. That you may be *made complete*, says the NKJV and NASB 1995. *Become fully mature*, in the CSB. In The Message, "We pray hard that *it will all come together* in your lives."

What was Paul asking? He uses the Greek *katartisis*, from *artizo*, "to bring to an end, finish; to make someone completely adequate or sufficient for something, to furnish completely, to cause to be fully qualified."³ Paul uses the noun here which means, not so much sinlessness, as "the bringing of someone to completion (perfect and adequate in every way) and fit for some purpose."⁴

There's a spectrum here. People are sinners. What they need is *restoration*. After a period of time, restored sinners grow and experience *maturation* with a view towards perfection. They're not sinless in this life, but they do sin less. That's this word.

² Charles Swindoll, *Seasons of Life*, p. 273.

³ 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. 679). United Bible Societies.

⁴ Taken from Logos, 2 Corinthians 13:9

Men, have you ever prayed for the *perfection* of your children or grandchildren? Sunday School teachers, have you prayed this for your class? FLY workers, for the children you're working with? Paul says he did.

What makes this request even more shocking is the people for whom he was praying. The Corinthian church was not exactly a model church which is essentially why Paul wrote the two letters we call 1 & 2 Corinthians in the first place. He penned 1 Corinthians in the spring of AD 55 from Ephesus and 2 Corinthians later in the same year from Macedonia. He sent these letters because he was greatly burdened for these dear brothers and sisters, having 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).

Just scan the two letters and you'll get a taste (a sour taste frankly) of what was happening in the First Church of Corinth. For starters, there were cliques in the church (1 Cor. 1-4). There was sexual immorality in the church involving a man and his step-mother, and instead of confronting the sin, the rest of the church members prided themselves in their tolerance (1 Cor. 5). There were church members filing lawsuits against each other in the courts (1 Cor. 6). There were divisions and drunkenness in the communion services (1 Cor. 11). The corporate worship was plagued by disorderly showmanship (1 Cor. 14). In 2 Corinthians we discover that some of the church members were spreading destructive rumors about Paul (chs 1-2). Some were unequally yoked with non-Christians (ch 6). Some were 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 church of Jesus Christ. How should we pray for Christians whose lives are plagued by problems? Again, Paul prayed for their perfection. What does that even mean, and what makes it possible?

By probing the prayers that Paul included in these two inspired letters he wrote to the Corinthians, we'll discover two key elements that are linked to praying for perfection. Our prayers should be **God-centered** (that's 1 Corinthians) and **gospel-driven/oriented** (that's 2 Corinthians).

I. Our prayers should be God-centered (1 Corinthians 1:4-9).

Notice the first words that flow from Paul's pen, immediately following his introduction. Notice verses 4-9, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

For the apostle Paul, prayer wasn't an afterthought, but rather something he did, according to his own admission in verse 4, *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 reality that ran throughout the book.

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, he says it was “because of the grace of God.” Don’t miss that. It was *because of divine 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 have Christ, then you have grace, and if you have grace, then you have what it takes to deal with whatever problems you’re facing. And if you have whatever it takes to deal with your problems, then that is 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 we know Christ as Savior, these are three divine activities in our behalf, too.

1. *He gave us grace in Christ (4).* Grace is 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 this 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).”

Let those words sink in. The Lord said, *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. It’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, for he’d seen it firsthand. And no matter how many problems these believers had in their lives (and they had plenty), Paul knew they were God’s chosen people, people to whom God had given His grace.

And that was cause for thanksgiving. Continual thanksgiving. But there’s more. There’s a second divine activity that God has accomplished 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 (NIV).” As sinners, we enter the world spiritually bankrupt. But the recipients of this letter are no longer bankrupt. Now they are rich, spiritual billionaires! What made the change? The answer is seen in the prepositional phrase, “in Him.” All that we now enjoy is ours because of our identification with *Christ*. Throughout his epistles Paul emphasizes this wonderful reality of the union of believers with Christ. 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 speech (lit. “in all word”; the Greek word is *logos*) and our knowledge. This is important to know. 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!*” My friends, if we are in Christ, yes we can. God has enriched us with everything we need to do everything He desires.

3. *He confirmed us (6-7)*. That's the word Paul uses in verse 6, "Even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed in you (ESV)." Paul reminds them of what happened. He did the preaching, and God did the confirming. He opened the Scriptures and gave a clear presentation of Christ to them, and God opened their hearts and granted them saving faith and repentance. God *confirmed* that testimony.

And the result? Verse 7 says, "So that you are not lacking in any gift [NIV 'spiritual gift'; he'll have much more to say about spiritual gifts in chapters 1-14], as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁵ Keep in mind he's talking to the whole church here, not merely to individual Christian. No Christian possesses every spiritual gift. But the church possesses all it needs. And that's cause for thanksgiving, isn't it?

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. We don't lack any spiritual gift. And that's why Paul is going to keep working with the Corinthians because he knows they have what it takes! And that's also why, as we'll see shortly, he prayed for their perfection.

Yet God-centered praying is not just past tense. Note a second feature in this prayer.

B. Paul affirmed his confidence in what God would do (8). In the ESV, "Who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁶ What will God do with His children? Paul mentions two outcomes.

First, *He will keep us strong to the end*. He will not let us go.

And second, *He will present us guiltless/blameless on the day of Christ*. Think of a courtroom scene. There are two words that the defendant longs to hear from the jury. "Your honor, we find the defendant *not guilty*." And this is what we will hear when we stand before the Judge. Not guilty. Guiltless.

Let's remind ourselves again who Paul has in mind as he says this. This isn't his prayer for the church in Ephesus or Philippi. We might expect such confident praying for those churches. This is Paul's confidence for the church *in Corinth*.

Corinth was a significant city in ancient Greece, 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 soon deal with those problems, and firmly.

But even Christians with problems are secure, and they need to know they're secure. Their security is not found in themselves, but in God and in 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, it's as if Paul can hear the objections. "Blameless, Paul? We're going to be *blameless*? 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 have problems here in Corinth, Paul! We need help, not wishful thinking!"

⁵ NIV "Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed."

⁶ In the NIV, "He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."

But this is not wishful thinking. This is *reality*, gospel reality. This is what God is going to do for His people, and in verse 9 we find out why. This brings us to the third feature of Paul's God-centered prayer.

C. Paul emphasized the God-centeredness of our salvation (9). "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." When Paul prayed, he always tried to look at situations from God's perspective, and so should we. In this case, Paul stresses something that God *did* and something that God *is*.

1. *He called us into fellowship with His Son.* "You were called into the fellowship of his Son." This is a reference to the effectual call of God (as in Romans 8:28ff), and if you're a Christian, my friend, this is 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 (e.g. Paul on the road to Damascus).

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.⁷

That is precisely what God *did*. He did it for the Corinthian believers. He did it for every one of us who have professed faith in Christ. He called us. That's what He *did*. But Paul takes it a step further. Here's what God *is*.

2. *He is faithful.* "God is faithful, by whom you were called." 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," says Paul in verse 10 and then begins to address the problem of cliques in the Corinthian church. He will then confront the man living in sexual sin in chapter 5, and the brothers who were suing each other in chapter 6, and so on. But he doesn't start with the confrontation. He begins by putting the focus on God.

⁷ Packer, J. I., *Concise Theology*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1993.

There's an important lesson here for us. When dealing with problems in the lives of people, whether in our families or our church family or at camp or wherever, 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 should affirm it when we *pray* for them. And then do the same again when we get down to business and *counsel* them from God's Word.

Paul's prayers were, first of all, *God-centered*. God is perfect and requires perfection (see Matthew 5:48). And through Christ He makes the perfection of sinners a certain outcome. And with this in mind, we pray.

The next time we see Paul talking about what he prayed for the Corinthians occurs at the end of his second letter. Let's turn to 2 Corinthians 13 and observe a second element. Our prayers should be God-centered and *gospel-driven/oriented*.

II. Our prayers should be gospel-oriented (2 Cor. 13:5-9).

While we don't see the word "gospel" in this text, be assured that Paul has the gospel in mind as he writes. He always does. 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 Paul 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. Notice 12:20, "For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder."

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 to be what I want you to be, which 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 sin, *he would*. He would initiate church discipline and, as he put it in verse 2, "not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others."

That seems harsh, even unloving, some would say. Why would Paul speak this way? He says the answer is because of the *gospel*. Notice verse 4, "For he [Christ] was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God."

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 *guiltless*. Remember that word? It's the word we saw in 1 Corinthians 1:8. "Who will sustain you to the end, *guiltless* in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."

This is the goal of the gospel, the targeted outcome. God intends to produce a blameless, guiltless, *perfect* people for the honor of His name. This is why He sent Christ into the world. This is why He pours out His grace on undeserving sinners and calls those sinners into fellowship with His Son.

This is His target. This is Paul's target. This needs to be the Corinthians' target. And of course, our target. This is precisely what Paul makes clear at the end of his letter.

A. Paul identified the target (5-6). It's with the target in mind that Paul gives this strong exhortation in verses 5-6 (ESV), "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! ⁶ I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test."

The target matters, says Paul. So much so that he offers three charges. *First, make sure you're in the faith.* Not everybody who says he has faith truly has faith. Test yourselves, says Paul.

Second, 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, third, *make sure you're living like it.*

Many years ago, I was talking with our youngest daughter, Katie, who was three and a half at the time. We were in our house and Katie was looking into the air and said to me, "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 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.

My friend, if sin isn't a big deal to you, you need to get into the presence of the Son. Look at God's Son, Jesus Christ. Gaze at Him as He's revealed in the pages of the four gospels, and the rest of His Word too. He truly is blameless, and His life reveals that we need to be blameless as well. And we can be, by putting our faith in Him. And if God has declared us blameless because His Son is in us, then we should want to live like it.

And this is where prayer can help. Notice the very next things Paul says he did.

B. Paul asked God to help the Corinthians hit the target (7-9). In the NIV, "*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.*"

What did Paul say he was praying for the Corinthians? That you will *not do anything wrong*, and that you will *do what is right*. That's pretty comprehensive, isn't it? *Anything wrong* must go. Only *what is right* should remain.

Then Paul sums it up in verse 9, "Our prayer is for your *perfection.*"⁸ The Greek again is *katartisin*. Paul uses it again in another form just two verses later in verse 11, "Be perfect (AV)." The NIV84, "Aim for perfection." The ESV, "Aim for restoration." In Greek literature this word is used of setting a broken bone or repairing a torn fishing net, in both cases so the bone and net can be useful again for their intended purpose.

Paul uses the word in Ephesians 4:13, "Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to *mature* manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Mature, complete, perfect. The full measure of Christlikeness.

Paul sums up his approach to ministry in Colossians 1:28 (which I first memorized in the AV), "Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may *present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.*"

⁸ The ESV uses the term "restoration," the KJV "perfection," and the NKJV "that you may be complete."

What was Paul's goal with people? To present them *perfect in Christ*. We tend to water that down. Perfection? Seriously? Nobody's perfect. Why such a goal then? Because of three biblical realities.

Reality #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 and I 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?

Reality #2: God's agenda is accomplished through Christ. Christ lived a perfect life and gave His perfect life as a ransom payment for sinners like you and me. Therefore, if we put our faith in Christ, God cleanses us of our sins and credits the merit of His Son's perfect life to our account.

Paul explains this further in Ephesians 5:26–27. "That he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, *without spot or wrinkle* or any such thing, that she might be *holy* and *without blemish*."

This reminds me of the charge we saw recently in Hebrews 6:1. "Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity ['perfection' KJV]."

Matthew Henry comments on our text in 2 Corinthians, "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."⁹

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

Reality #3: God's agenda should be our agenda when we pray. We find a good example of this in the life of Epaphras. We're told this about him in Colossians 4:12, "Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, *that you may stand mature* and fully assured in all the will of God." Maturity mattered to Epaphras. It was the goal when he prayed.

Are you praying in line with God's agenda for your children? Are you asking God to work in their hearts so that they will trust in Christ and then live in light of His righteous merit? And are you asking God for opportunities to help them mature in Christ, confronting sin as needed, but always with a huge dose of encouragement, interacting with them 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, do you think, "Well, none of us is perfect, so it's none of my business." Friends, it is our business, not to gossip, not to throw stones, but certainly to pray for their *perfection*, which is assured in the future yet needs some work in the present. And then be an instrument in that perfecting work in their lives.

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:

⁹Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (2 Co 13:7). Peabody: Hendrickson.

‘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.’¹⁰

Even lost people know that the perfecting of the saints matters. When God’s people lose sight of God’s agenda, then the beautiful gospel message is not beautiful in the eyes of the lost. And this is why we pray for perfection.

Take Inventory: Let’s ask ourselves two questions.

Men, let’s lead the way. We’re called to be the spiritual pacesetters in our homes. Let’s be brutally honest with ourselves. Our wives and children probably know the answers better than we do.

1. *Are my prayers God-centered?* Am I thanking Him for what He’s been doing? Am I expressing my total dependence upon Him for what He alone can do?

2. *Are my prayers gospel-oriented?* Am I praying for things that matter in the light of Christ’s death and resurrection and the atonement He accomplished?

Listen to ABWE president Paul Davis in the recent edition of *The Message* magazine:

There are mornings when I sit before the Lord, praying for those who have never heard the name of Christ.

As I pray, my mind does not drift toward the easy places. It is drawn again and again to the hard ones.

Deserts where the wind scrapes across endless sand. Mountain valleys where brutal winters keep villages hidden for months. Dense urban neighborhoods where the wrong conversation overheard can bring imprisonment or worse. Regions where following Christ means losing family, work, safety, or even life itself.

As those places rise before me, I find myself asking: Where are the committed men?

Where are the sturdy men (and strong women, too) God has forged with unusual endurance, who do not flinch at hardship, who will not retreat when opposition comes, and who can endure loneliness, danger, and long seasons without visible fruit?

I see glimpses of them everywhere. They are running ultramarathons and pushing their bodies through Ironman competitions and Spartan races. They train to endure pain and difficulty. They welcome the challenge.

Every time I see them, I pray: “Lord, draw them to the nations. Draw the climbers to the mountains where Christ is still unknown. Draw the runners to the long roads between unreached villages. Draw the disciplined and resilient to places where persecution is real and faith must be lived with courage.”¹¹

Song of Response: #372 “*Living for Jesus*” (all four verses)

This evening: “*We Are the Body of Christ*” Ephesians 4 (at Fairview BC)

¹⁰ Taken from Warren Wiersbe, *First Peter* (commentary)

¹¹ <https://abwe.org/blog/issues/volume-74-issue-1-2026>