

Text: Phil. 1:9-11

Title: "How to pray for God's people"

Time: 1/24/2020 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: I am reminded this morning of a conversation I had in Greer SC with one of the neighborhood boys who had befriended my son Kent, whose name was Dee. Dee happened by one morning as I was enjoying a cup of coffee on our front patio, spending a little time with my Bible and in prayer. In conversation I got caught up with how Dee was doing, and because it was my time for prayer, I happened to ask him if he had any prayer requests that he wanted me to pray for. Hearing that question, this six- or seven-year-old looked puzzled and then explained, "I don't know what that is." Dee did not have any prayer requests that morning because he did not know what a prayer request was.

Some of us have been taught from an early age what a prayer request is. I think I could have come up with one when I was Dee's age. But I am sure that what I would have come up with would not have looked very much like the prayer request of the apostle Paul for the Philippian church in this passage.

Paul begins vv. 9-11, "And this I pray," and then he tells us what was one of his prayer requests for God's people. There are a number of these Pauline prayers in the New Testament, and each one teaches us important truth about how best to pray for fellow church members. So our topic this morning concerns one important way we ought to pray for each other. Paul tells us what his request is, what the desired results of that request are, and then the reason why it is important for us to pray this request for one another.

I. The request of Paul's prayer (v. 9).

Illustration: *Egalitarianism* is the philosophy that believes equality to be the greatest of virtues. Webster's explains that it is "a social philosophy advocating the removal of inequalities among men."

A couple of Tuesday mornings ago, one of the brothers at men's prayer meeting told us about his dad's experience teaching physics in the public school system of Pennsylvania. Because too many students were failing, this teacher was told that he needed to make his tests easier. That is evidence of egalitarianism as a guiding principle in public education.

Application: Believers need to guard against having this same attitude when it comes to our Bible education. I have heard it said that "people do not care what you know until they know that you care." Well, that may be true, but Paul seems to be turning this idea around in his prayer request. He is glad that these believers care, but he is also very concerned about what they know. He wants their love to abound in knowledge and all judgment.

Our world believes that in order for love to abound in society, we have to dispense with more knowledge and judgment. C. S. Lewis wrote about how this antipathy for knowledge and judgment, viewed as antithetical to love, actually causes iniquity to abound and love to grow cold:

"In a word, we may reasonably hope for the virtual abolition of education when I'm as good as you has fully had its way. All incentives to learn and all penalties for not learning will vanish. The few who might want to learn will be prevented; who are they to overtop their fellows? And any-

way the teachers – or should I say, nurses? – will be far too busy reassuring the dunces and patting them on the back to waste any time on real teaching. We shall no longer have to plan and toil to spread imperturbable conceit and incurable ignorance among men. The little vermin themselves will do it for us” [*Screwtape Proposes a Toast*, 179-181].

Paul prays for the opposite of this outcome in the local church of Philippi. He prays that the love they have would abound in knowledge and all judgment. We must begin with love. Love is foundational, and Paul taught elsewhere that without it our ability to solve all theological mysteries with our knowledge and judgment profits us nothing (1 Cor. 13:2). But love needs knowledge and judgment added to it. Even unbelieving Jews have a zeal for God, but it is still unbelief because it is not according to knowledge (Rom. 10:2). Notice with me three things about biblical knowledge:

1. Before it can be anything else, biblical knowledge is first the personal and relational knowledge of God and His Son, Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:17 – “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him”; Eph. 4:13 – “until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ”; Col. 1:10 – “bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God”). Biblical knowledge begins as knowing God personally. Religious love without knowing God personally is idolatry, not true love.

2. This biblical knowledge is also the propositional knowledge of the content of God’s self-revelation, so it is called knowing His truth, His mystery, His will, His good

things, and His grace in the Scriptures (1 Tim. 2:4, Col. 1:6, Col. 1:9, 2:22, Philem. 6). Our love must abound more and more in the knowledge of this glorious revelation of God.

3. Finally, this biblical knowledge goes hand in hand with judgment, or the ability to apply specifically our relationship to God and our knowledge of the Scriptures to the decisions of everyday life.

The verbal form of this word *judgment* is used in Heb. 5:14: "But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to *discern* good and evil." We need biblically-trained spiritual sensibility, which can tell the difference between right and wrong in practical ways.

Illustration: Compare the person who tunes a piano. He has a standard with which to work, and he has an ear that is so familiar with the standard that he can tell whether the note he is hearing is in or out of tune.

Application: Our standard is the solid food of the word of God, and as we listen to it over time we develop sensibilities about the differences between right and wrong, good and evil, truth and error, beauty and ugliness, which are not as immediately apparent to the natural man. We not only know when things are right and wrong, but we know why and we know by how much. This helps us make necessary corrections.

This is Paul's prayer request for God's people: love abounding more and more in knowledge and all judgment. Is that our prayer request for one another?

II. The desired results of Paul's prayer (v. 10).

Application: Paul's goal as he prays is that the lives of church members would be sincere (or pure) and without offence (or stumbling) until the day of Christ. He practiced what he prayed for others. He could say to the Corinthian church, "In holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world" (2 Cor. 1:12). This should be the goal of our prayers for one another as well. Satan wants us to be constantly tripped up by our impurities and the unholy defilements of the world. We pray to be a church of love abounding in knowledge and all judgment that is victorious in purity without getting tripped up in our battle with sin.

And the way knowledgeable and discerning love gets us there is "prov[ing] the things that are excellent." A walk of purity that is free from stumbling depends on this responsibility. *Prove* is a word that Jesus used when He spoke about the comparative worth of His disciples over birds and sheep (Matt. 10:31 - "So do not fear; you are *more valuable* than many sparrows").

So the ability to prove what is excellent is an ability to make choices based on what is most valuable in life. These correct valuations make us sincere and without offence in our progress in the faith.

Although sparrows are nice, disciples of Christ are more valuable. In the same way, some of the choices we can make might be nice, but others are better. Many of the decisions we make as believers are choices between what is good and what is best, rather than between what is evil and what is good. And because it is more so the good that competes with the best, we often have to draw a line in our decisions that eliminates some things that are not really that bad. And the places we draw those lines cannot always be defended with perfect specificity.

Illustration: It is like the parent who tells a child that ten o'clock is where the line is drawn for bedtime because he knows the child needs a good night's sleep. The child may inquire, "Why is 10:00 pm any better than 10:01 pm? What will that extra minute of sleep really accomplish? It makes no sense to draw the line at 10:00 pm when 10:01 pm is pretty much the same thing." Now every parent knows that if they accept that line of reasoning, no bedtime can be justified, and the child will never get a good night's sleep.

Application: The standards of holiness, purity, and avoiding stumbling can be like that example. On the spectrum of our choices from dark evil to bright good, there is a lot of gray in between. When we draw a line on that spectrum of choices - we will go here and no farther - we can have a hard time noticing a difference in the shading of each side of the line. But if we do not draw a line, we are really just tricked into saying that black is another shade of white, when really they are opposites. The enemy throws in the gray to keep us from drawing the lines of godly standards we need.

When our love abounds in knowledge and judgment, we will draw lines that reflect the way we value what is best even over what is good, so that we can live lives in holiness and godly sincerity without stumbling into the unholiness and ungodly impurities of our sinful flesh and the dark world around us. This ought to be the result we seek in our prayer for one another.

III. The important reason for Paul's prayer (vv. 11).

Illustration: When we were kids, our teachers encouraged us to learn how to show and tell. The assignment was to bring something in to school that fellow students could see,

and then you were to tell why that object was unique and important.

Application: There is a sense in which God's work of saving sinners like you and me can be described as a divine show-and-tell of the matchless glories of his grace. Eph. 3:10 puts it this way: "[The dispensation of God's grace was] to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God"; and that this showing and telling of God's saving wisdom shall last for eternity is indicated in Eph. 2:7-9, "That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast."

Why bother praying this way for one another? What will praying this way for one another really accomplish? What good will the results be? Very simply, we will fulfill the reason we exist - God's purpose for saving us. The show and tell will be powerfully displayed not only in heaven some day, but in the darkness of our needy world as well.

When God answers this prayer for love abounding in knowledge and all judgment with the result that we are able to prioritize what is most valuable in life, we will be filled with the fruits of righteousness unto the glory and praise of our God, and He will be able to show and tell the glories of His grace. The answer to this prayer and the fruits produced by it are all by Jesus Christ. They are the result of our Savior's work of salvation in us.

God used Job to display His glory to Satan. When we pray this Pauline prayer for one another, the reason is not so that

you and I can be happier, healthier, and have more stuff in this life. Job had less of all of those things. No, the reason we pray for one another is so that God can do with us what He did with Job, for He is worthy. "Hast thou considered my servants at New Boston Baptist Church, Satan? Do you see how they pray for one another? Do you see how they are filled with the fruits of righteousness? Do you see what my work of salvation is doing in their once sin-cursed lives?"

Conclusion: So that is how we must pray for one another. Do we pray for one another this way? If not, we must begin. Samuel told Saul, "Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you." Failure to pray for one another is to sin against the Lord. Perhaps the Lord will give us repentance, forgiveness, and correction for our lack of prayer for one another this morning.

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching