

“Learning to Pray: Part 2”

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on October 13, 2019

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** We are doing a series on “learning to pray.” What we’ve been saying is that learning to pray is the easiest thing in the world. We should never over complicate it. Praying to God is no different than when a child begins to speak to their parents. Good parents love to hear their kid talk with them even if it is expressed poorly, is simplistic, and even wrong. In the same way, God delights just to hear us speak with him in prayer.
 - But we have also been saying that just as children need to mature in their relationship with their parents so we must learn to mature in prayer. One of the most obvious areas children need to mature is in thinking of others and not just themselves.
 - At our house WW3 breaks out among our kids over whose turn it is to sleep with the cats or whose turn it is to sit in a certain seat in the van. But then we also see signs that they are maturing: one kid will do another kid’s chores. There will be compassion when someone is going through a hard time.
- Here’s the point: one of the greatest signs that we are maturing in prayer is that we don’t just pray for ourselves and our needs but that we also pray for others and their needs.
 - In this series we are looking at the prayers of the apostle Paul. When you read his prayers you cannot help but notice how he models a deep love and concern for others.
 - In the passage we are looking at today Paul is writing to some Christians in the city of Thessalonica. He only spent a short time with them but he loves them dearly. Since he can’t be with them he wants them to know that he is praying for them.
- What we pray about is one of the greatest indicators of what we really care about. How about you? What do your requests reveal about what you value? How much do other people come into your prayers? Surely this is an area we all need to mature in.
 - Paul’s prayer is a marvelous guide for this. From it we will see four ways to grow in our prayers for others.

THANKING GOD FOR OTHER BELIEVERS

- **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** First then, **to grow in our prayers for other people we must thank God for them while also expressing this thankfulness to them.**
 - Look at verse 9. **READ 9 – *9 For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God?***
 - Expressing thanks is a chief mark of Paul’s prayers.
- In this letter Paul has already thanked God for these Thessalonian Christians. He’s done it not once but twice. Why do it again? Because when you see those whom you love following Jesus and living for him, you cannot help but overflow with thanksgiving to God.
 - Paul loves Jesus. Paul loves people. And when he sees people living for Jesus and serving him it fills him with joy. Look at verse 9. **READ 9 - *9 For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God?***
 - In other words, what makes Paul smile, what gives Paul great joy is seeing others doing well in the faith. What a heart for people Paul has!
- You know you are maturing in Christ when you are constantly thanking God for what he is doing in the lives of other people.

- Some Christians I meet seem only to want to talk about what's wrong: what's wrong in the church, wrong in other people's lives, and wrong in society. But you don't hear them rejoicing and talking about all the good things that are going on.
 - So what makes you excited? Are your prayers filled with thanksgiving for others? Growing in prayer means rejoicing and thanking God for what he is doing in other people's lives.
- But let's go a little deeper. Notice that Paul does not just tell God what he is thankful for. He also tells the Thessalonians what he is thanking God for in their lives. He's doing this to encourage them.
 - Many Christians say you should not thank other people because it could go to their heads. But notice that Paul sees no problem with giving the glory to God and encouragement to the Christians.
 - He gives God the glory by thanking him for what is going on but he then tells them what he is so thankful for. So in the end they feel encouraged and God gets the praise.
- Even secular writers understand the power of encouragement. Ken Blanchard, the consultant and writer about business and leadership method wrote a famous book entitled, *The One Minute Manager*. He made popular the idea that leaders and managers should do a better job of communicating, encouraging, those under them. He particularly told people write down words of encouragement because written words have more power.
 - Paul was doing this 2000 years ago. When you are praying and thanking God for others, tell them what you are thankful for. Send them a text. Write an email. Write a letter. Make a phone call. Tell them in person.
- Let us be a church that pours out thanksgiving to God and encouragement to each other.
 - So that is the first point. To grow in our prayers for other people we must thank God for them while expressing this thankfulness to them.

SET ASIDE TIME TO EARNESTLY PRAY FOR OTHERS

- **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** Second, **to grow in our prayers for other people we must set aside time to earnestly pray for them.**
 - Look at verse 10. **READ 10 – ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face**
- One of the great benefits of this series is that we are beginning to see themes in Paul. Here again, we see that Paul has regular set times of prayer. When he says **"night and day we pray"** don't go thinking that he is a monk praying 24 hours a day. He is not saying that he never works or eats or drinks. Don't over spiritualize this. Surely he does pray throughout the day while he is working or walking or talking. But he has set times of pray in the day and night. It is during these times that he remembers other people.
 - Do you want to learn how to pray? The most basic thing you need to do is set aside a time each day to do it. Even better, set aside a place.
- When the good news of Jesus first came to Africa, the believers were very disciplined about their private prayer lives. Each one reportedly had a separate spot in the thicket where he or she would pour out his heart to God.
 - Over time the paths to these places became well worn. As a result, if one of the believers began to neglect their time of prayer, it was soon apparent to the others. They would kindly remind them saying, **"Brother, the grass grows on your path."**
 - Brothers and sisters, if you want to mature in prayer there is really only one way to do it and that is to pray. Books and sermons will help but we learn to pray by praying.

- Over the past few weeks I have been suggesting that if you have no regular prayer life that you begin with 15 minutes. But can you really pray like Paul in 15 minutes? No. But it is a start. One of the worst things you can do is say, ***“Unless I pray for one hour I am a failure.”*** No one calls a child a failure because they can only talk about one subject for 2 minutes. Start with 15 minutes and as you grow you will want to add time.
 - And note also that Paul says he is earnest in his prayers. This is evidence of his deep love for them. In Romans 15:30 Paul says, ***“I appeal to you, brothers...to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.”*** Strive in prayer. Does this reflect your prayers for others? Do you struggle together with others in prayer? Do you cry out to God for other people? Is earnestness a mark of your prayer life?
 - Right now I’m striving for a friend who is going through chemo treatments: ***“Father, give her the strength she needs. Grant her healing. Keep her spirits up.”*** I’m striving in prayer with people who are facing serious temptation: ***“Father, deliver my brother from the evil one.”*** I’m striving with others who are working through past trauma: ***“Father, grant inner healing.”***
 - To grow in our prayers for other people we must set aside time to earnestly pray for others.

ASKING TO PLAY A PART IN STRENGTHENING THE FAITH OF OTHERS

- (SHOW SLIDE 4) Third, to grow in our prayers for other people we must ask that we might play a part in strengthening their faith.
 - Look at verse 10-11. ***READ 10-11 – ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? ¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you,***
- This lack in their faith is not because they are living in sin. They are lacking because they don’t know certain truths. Paul was only there a short time. We know from this letter that they did not rightly understand the second coming of Jesus. They thought that if a person died they would miss his coming. And so, Paul is praying that God would open a way for him to come back to them so that he can help strengthen their faith by teaching them basic Christian truth.
 - Again, we see Paul’s heart for people. All he cares about is serving others. He is not doing this for his own ego or to make himself feel good. No, he sees an area in their Christian lives that is lacking, he knows he can help, and so he desperately wants to serve them.
 - So as you’re praying for others you pray also that you might be able to play a part in helping them.
- It is no mistake that you know the people that you do. God did not place me there. He placed you. The people you know have areas of lack.
 - Like the Thessalonians, they may need some basic teaching. They don’t know certain truths and so their life is going astray. If you can see those areas then you are wise enough to help them.
 - They may lack in certain areas of their character. You may see them going astray. You may see their anger. Again, if you can see it then you love them by earnestly devoting yourself to prayer on their behalf. But more than praying you ask that God would enable you to play a part in helping them.
 - Again, this prayer makes us ask ourselves how much we truly love other people. How much are we thinking about them? How much are we praying about their areas of lack rather than talking to others about it? And then are we crying out to God that he would enable us to play a part in strengthening them?

- Before we move to the last point I cannot bypass this verse without pointing out to you the profound way that it speaks of Jesus. Who is Paul praying to? Our God and Father. But notice He is also praying to our Lord Jesus Christ.
 - As a good Jewish man Paul knows that the only person we offer prayers and worship to is God alone and yet notice carefully that He is praying directly to Jesus: ***11 Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you.*** He is asking that the Father and Jesus clear a way. They are united in his prayer as the one God.
- This teaches us two things here. First, this means that from the earliest days Christians were worshipping Jesus as God. Books like *The Da Vinci Code* and others have made popular the idea that the early church only thought of Jesus as a great man and this idea of his divinity was a gradual development that was not fully accepted until the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.
 - This is historically inaccurate for many reasons, one of which is this letter. This letter is the first letter to be written in the New Testament. Paul wrote it around 50AD. And here, in the very earliest days of the New Testament church we see Paul praying to Jesus as God.
- Second, it teaches us that we can pray directly to Jesus. Normally we pray to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit but here we do see precedence for praying to Jesus. In Acts 1 the early church prayed directly to Jesus when they were seeking to find a successor to Judas. As he was dying Stephen prayed directly to Jesus – ***“Lord Jesus receive my spirit.”*** And Paul later writes to the Corinthians and ***“all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”***
 - So although prayer is normally to be to our Father in heaven, as Jesus taught us, it is also perfectly right and good when we pray directly to Jesus.
 - Alright that is the end of the third point. The third point again was, growing in our prayers for other people means asking that we might play a part in strengthening their faith.

ASKING THAT OTHERS OVERFLOW WITH LOVE

- (SHOW SLIDE 5) Finally now, **to grow in our prayers for other people we must ask that their lives would overflow with love.**
 - Look again at verse 12. ***READ 12 – 12 and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you.***
 - How can you pray for your church? How can you pray for other Christians? This is one of the greatest ways. Paul is greatly concerned that they would grow in love. Love for each other. This of course echoes many other verses throughout the New Testament.
- In John 13 Jesus says this is to be the mark of the Christian community. ***“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”*** Throughout history Christians have displayed many different symbols to show that they are Christians. Some people wear crosses around their necks. Still others tattoo pictures or Bible verses on their bodies. One of the more popular marks is the fish symbol on a person’s car.
 - Generally speaking all of these things from necklaces to tattoos to fish are meant to mark a person as a Christian. But here in John 13 Jesus makes clear that, however you may want to mark yourself as a Christian, there is to be one mark that supersedes all others. There is to be one defining mark that identifies Christians in all places at all times. Love.
 - It is like Jesus is saying, ***“Do not forget it. Never forget it. We must love one another. This is to be our defining mark.”***
- One of the early church fathers, a man named Jerome, says that when John was in his old age at the church in Ephesus, he used to be carried in on a chair.

- As he passed through the congregation, he would say to the congregation, **“Love one another. Love one another.”** And when they would ask him why he said this, he would say, **“Because it’s the Lord’s commandment and if you do this, it is everything.”**
- But Paul is also praying that our love would overflow not just to Christians but notice the phrase, **“and for everyone else.”**
 - Gal 6:9-10 puts it well: **“Let us not become weary in doing good...therefore as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people [regardless if they are believers are not but] especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”**
 - He is praying this so that as he says in verse 13, **“May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.”**
- But how do become others-centred instead of self-centred? Like kids we are so often self-centred. It is our natural bent. How can that change?
 - Look to Jesus. As the eternal Son of God he had every right to focus just on himself and not on us. After all, what have we ever done for him? All we have done is ignore him and disobey him.
 - Oh but look at the love of Jesus for us. He intentionally and purposefully, put us ahead of himself. He gave up all the rights he had as God and humbled himself by becoming a man. His whole life was putting others ahead of himself. He healed the sick. He taught people truth. Even when he was tired he served others. And then his greatest act was going to the cross. There his love is on display. He dies in our place.
- Friends, there is nothing difficult to understand here. But this is as practical as it gets.
 - Do we love one another? Are we actually living this out? Do we pray for each other that love would overflow to each other? Do we pray for each other that our love would overflow to believers and to unbelievers? And then again look at the last phrase in verse 12. **READ 12 - “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.”** Are you seeing Paul’s passion for people? It is everywhere. Do we have that passion?
 - C.S. Lewis wrote, (SHOW SLIDE 6) **“Do not waste your time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.”¹**
- Brothers and sisters, we need to thank God for the love that we do enjoy. I am so grateful for the tangible acts and verbal expressions of love that I see going on in this church. But just as the Thessalonians were a healthy church that still needed to grow in this, so also we need to keep praying this for each other.
 - This week let’s grow in our prayers for others.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book III, Chapter 9.