

# Learning to Pray

## Part 3 - "How prayer changes us"

Scripture: Philippians 1:9-11

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on July 14, 2019, by Pastor Steven Edelman

**(SLIDE 1)** Good morning. We want to welcome you to Central this morning. Last week, we kicked off a series "**Learning to Pray.**" It's our aim in this series to help us to learn to pray and mature in prayer. This fall is also the time when we are seeking God for what he would have us do for the next three years.

Today, I want to try to answer two questions: **1. Why pray at all? 2. What should we pray for?** As you are going to see we need to pray to be changed by God.

**STORY: I want to start with a question. Are you desperate enough? How desperate do you need to be before you ask for help to change?**

I remember feeling desperate to impress a girl in high school. One particular girl had my attention. I started working out with weights. I found myself wearing dock martin boots, and acid washed jeans trying, to impress her. At one point, I even tried out for the football team. That was a disaster. Two weeks in, I realized I liked football better without the weight of the toxic smelling equipment and the part where people are tackling you. In the end, I guess I wasn't desperate enough to put in the effort to change so that I could win over this girl. In the end... I got a better girl anyway!

**In the rainy season, many of us are desperate for the sun as it has this life-giving property about it. Maybe we book a sunny vacation to give us a break from the clouds and the rain.** I lived in the rainy city of Abbotsford and when the rains came so did a wave of sadness and difficulty. **As science has proven, there is a direct connection between our mood and the lack of certain frequencies of light.** Without getting too technical, there is blue light, which causes the blues and white light, which tells us that it's okay. When we don't get the sunlight or the white light that we need, we can experience a loss of energy, difficulty concentrating, excessive tiredness, and more unpleasant side effects. In the rainy season, people have purchased light lamps that emulate the sun rays to give them the light they need which transforms their mood.

For example, when using a lamp that gives off the right frequencies of light, "reviewers say this is an excellent therapy lamp for **treating SAD**, writing that they experienced a noticeable change in mood after using it."<sup>1</sup>

Prayer is like a light therapy lamp that helps us change and get over the barriers so that we can become more like Christ. Spiritually speaking, there is a direct connection between our prayer life and the way we see God and others. Prayer is like the rays of light that we need for energy, focus, joy, and a healthy transformation so we can see God at work in our life. Prayer is like turning on this little light that connects us with God. At times, our prayer life might just be small little moments of flickering signals of truth in the darkness. **Prayer is like the rays of white light that help our spiritual synopsis fire so we can see God clearly in the darkness.** Have you turned on the lightbox of prayer? Are you desperate enough?

What we mean by prayer is simply this - it's our personal conversation with God. If we are being honest, many of us struggle with our prayer life. It can become

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mhanational.org/blog/how-blue-light-affects-mental-health>

monotonous or a routine add on. It can turn into a repetitive formula that we say before we eat. We may even convince ourselves that it's pointless, awkward, or a waste of time. We may even ask... if God is in control, why bother to pray at all?

**(SLIDE 2)** To leave you with another image, at home, we will often find our cat sleeping and basking in the spotlight of the sun beaming through a window in a dark room. My cat is his most awkward best self when he is taking in the light in all kinds of weird positions. The sun has a life-giving aspect about it.

So, one reason to pray is to connect with God, and to transform our lives to become more like His Son Jesus. Prayer has this life-giving and life-changing aspect to it. Prayer helps us overcome the hurdles of spiritual darkness and changes us in the process.

**As we learn to talk with God for our own inner transformation we need to:**

**1. PRAY FOR INCREASING LOVE (SLIDE 3)**

Look with me at Philippians 1:9 which says, *“And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more...”*

This is one of the prayers that Paul wrote in prison from Rome. And each of these prayers gives a remarkable insight into the heart of the apostle Paul. The second part of the letter gives us insight into his mind. **And we discover that his heart is full of love for others and the churches he writes to.**

The word for love in this passage means to have admiration, affection, and harmony for others. As Paul prays for the Philippians, his love for them just comes through loud and clear. And he tells them that they are always on his mind. “I cannot get you out of my mind. And you are in my heart.” He feels very deeply for them, that he longs for them, and that he has warm affections for them, the very affections of Jesus Christ. Think about the affection you have for a best friend who you have wonderful memories with. The inside jokes. The closeness. If you did ministry together... the bond of seeing God at work.

Paul says, “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more.” **The word “abound” means “to overflow with abundance.”** It means **“to increase beyond boundaries.”** The idea here is that love would come flowing out of their hearts and lives in even greater capacity and measure. Think of soda that been opened after it's been shaken. It just gushes out and fills the space around it. This word “abound” is a verb in the present tense. It calls for them to be currently and actively abounding, and always growing in their love for others. This is what Paul was praying *“May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another and for all people.”* The idea of increasing in love is not just for other Christians, but even for those who do not know Christ, for all people.

**Paul is saying that love is so important that we need to pray for an increased love.** As we spend time in the light, pray that our love increases for others. How does this work? Prayer is like this organic process where you spend time with God, you increase in love. As another pastor said, “It is produced by the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

But this is a God-like love that can only come from God Himself. It is a love that turns away from putting yourself first to turning to others. It is a love that gives until it hurts for the sake of others. In contrast, lust and selfishness take from others. Love

gives to others. It serves others. It ministers to others. It lifts up others. It prays for others. It encourages others. **Paul is praying for an increase of love because it's the fulfillment of all the Christian life.** Writing to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of love and knowledge as opposites: **"knowledge puffs up; love builds up"** (1 Cor 8:1). He also speaks of the vainness of knowledge without love: "If I have all knowledge, but do not have love, I am nothing" (1 Cor 13:2).<sup>2</sup>

Christians must be characterized by love. Paul is praying that the Philippian church would increase in their love for one another. And this is how we should be praying for one another, and how we should be praying for our own lives, that **"God, give me a greater love for You, and that You would give me greater love for others."**

#### **ILLUSTRATION:**

A couple weeks ago John Stonestreet writes, "TV host Ellen DeGeneres found herself in the middle of a Tweet-storm because she sat next to former President George W. Bush at a Dallas Cowboys game. Many of her fans weren't happy. So naturally DeGeneres (who is a liberal) apologized, like the CEO of Twitter did when he was caught at Chick-fil-A. Right?

Wrong. Instead, DeGeneres, responded with wit, humor, and common sense. "I'm friends with George Bush," she told her TV audience. "I'm friends with a lot of people who don't share the same beliefs that I have." **"When I say, 'Be kind to one another,'" she continued, "I don't mean only the people that think the same way that you do. I mean be kind to everyone."**

Good for her. I wish these good words were not so revolutionary, but in our contentious times, they are. In fact, living the Christian ethic today will seem crazy to many. **"Of course, Christians are called to love our enemies. That's even more than kindness, but it's certainly not less."**

#### **APPLICATION:**

The question we need to be asking ourselves is: **Do others know that we are followers of Christ by the way we love others?** We want to get-out this question because we want to focus on everyone else and not our own ability to love. **What happens when someone disagrees with you? What do you do when someone hurts you? What is your reaction when you don't get your way? Far too often, it's not a loving response that flows out of us.**

Yet the love of Christ should be the distinguishing mark of his followers. So, Christians are meant to be the most love-focused, love-pursuing, love-flowing people on the face of the earth. If our love abounds and increases than it shapes our decisions and actions.

How do we test if we are increasing in love or loving at all? Do you want what is best for others in this congregation? What consumes your thinking and actions? Do you love others well?

**This is why we need to learn to pray.** So, we increase and build bridges of love. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to illumine our levels of love. The highest priority in our life is loving God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, as well as loving our

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<sup>2</sup> Hansen, G. W. (2009). *The Letter to the Philippians* (p. 58). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

neighbor as we love ourselves (Luke 10:27). We should not waste one more day allowing anything to impede our pursuit of those two loves. When we read the great commandments notice the love God **with “all” your heart** and love your neighbor “as” yourself. This alone should cause us to drop to our knees and make us desperate for God.

This is what should make us utterly helpless and desperate for prayer. It’s going into the light and pressing into the love of God with our entire beings, until we see clearly our profound lack of His love.

**(SLIDE 4)** Jon Bloom says, **“We will likely keep comparing ourselves against the low-bar of one another, and often feeling like we’re doing relatively okay, until we invite the Spirit of Jesus to examine us. His questions always penetrate deeper. “Do you love others as I have loved you?” “Do unbelievers know you are my disciple by the way you love the Christians I have given you to love?””**

For each and every one of us here today, when we pray, we should be asking God, “Give me a greater, deeper, purer, fuller, Christ-like love that would come flowing out of my heart.” It’s in prayer that our inner person is transformed by and we learn to love. It’s in prayer that we learn to overcome all the reasons why we shouldn’t love. Love is the first step in our growth. By exposing our life to the light of the Holy Spirit, so we can grow into our best self. As we spend time in the light our love increases.

As we have seen we need to pray for increasing love so we can be changed by His love. Secondly, for our transformation we need to learn to talk with God and pray for increasing knowledge.

## **2. PRAY FOR INCREASING KNOWLEDGE (SLIDE 5)**

Look with me at Philippians 1:9 which says, *“And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment...”*

So, what does the word knowledge mean in this verse? It means “full knowledge.” It speaks of a **knowledge that gives you “recognition of the will of God that is effective in the conduct of one who knows God.”**<sup>3</sup> In other words, there is a connection between the knowledge of knowing the things of God and how you act. A growing love, fed by proper knowledge and moral insight, enables one to see the best way to live in light of the day of Christ.<sup>4</sup> The word “in,” I-N, is important because it’s saying that the abounding love that we want and need will take place within the sphere and connection of real knowledge and all discernment.

A commentator says, “And it refers to **not just head knowledge**. Really we would say, **“heart knowledge,” a deep experiential knowledge**. This heart knowledge is not just facts that you know, but something that you express in your heart. It is a close knowledge, an intimate acquaintance with someone or something. That is another word for “authentic,” or “genuine.” It is just one word. And so as not to take more words to define this, it is just translated, “real knowledge.” But it speaks of an intimate, personal

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<sup>3</sup> Hansen, G. W. (2009). *The Letter to the Philippians* (pp. 58–59). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

<sup>4</sup> Melick, R. R. (1991). *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Vol. 32, p. 66). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

knowledge, an experiential knowledge, it's a deeper knowledge; a knowledge that has affected your life."

For example, with a close friend or family member, you can easily discern what gift to get them. Right? Many of you just know because there is a close knowledge and friendship with the other person.

When God changes us, he starts with how we think about God and others. That is, he typically draws the will into action by displaying truth to the mind. When our thinking is off, so are our actions! It's so interconnected. When someone becomes a Christian, they are changed by the Spirit of God, who helps them see and understand real knowledge of God. The more time we spend in the Word and in prayer the more we start to understand the things of God. In a way we started to think more like God. This is how we begin to understand the will of God.

**What is God's will?** God's will in the big picture of everything is to magnify the worth of his Son and the power of his Spirit and the glory of his own name. In order to discern His will, we need to be aware of these things: that we know them, that we think on them, and that they become conscious incentives in the way we make choices and the way we get stirred up to pray.

In order to please my wife, I have to understand what it is that she wills or needs. This is marriage 101. Marriage 102 is you can't get what you want. Marriage 103 is with that knowledge work it out!

**As we pray, God wants our minds to be filled with this kind of God-exalting truth as the incentive to our praying and our living. We are not to act on mere impulse or whim.** We are to act on the knowledge of God-centered incentives. This is why we read the Bible. This is why we preach. This is why we have Sunday school and Community Groups. This is why we learn to pray! We want to stir up the truth in us, so it flows into active love.

#### **ILLUSTRATION:**

Unfortunately, when we pray with just requests, we miss the knowledge and depth of insight that we need for discernment and change in our own life.

When I start with praise and praying through scripture, it changes me. If I am truly seeking God's will for my life, my asks change and stop being so self-focus and start to become more love focused.

As we learn to pray, here are some guiding signposts or patterns for prayer? It's a template taken from the Lord's Prayer.

#### **One such pattern forms an acrostic from the word "PRAY":**

**Praise.** Start with praising God for His attributes and actions. Praise Him for who He is and what He has done. **(SLIDE 6)**

**Repent.** Search your heart. Review your recent actions. Identify any sins you have committed. Confess them, express your sorrow for them and intention to turn from them, and claim God's forgiveness. **(SLIDE 7)**



**Ask.** Present your requests to God, “In every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6). **(SLIDE 8)**

**Yield.** Submit and surrender yourself and to God. Recognize that He is in control. Bask in God’s presence. **(SLIDE 9)**

#### **APPLICATION:**

We can often find ourselves in difficult and tiresome circumstances, we pray to God for deliverance. Sometimes God delivers us right away. Other times, our situations don’t change, and we are left to face hardship. As a result, many of us become discouraged. We may even become angry at God for not “answering” our prayer. How often do we pray, “God be glorified in my trials. God help me to be more loving. God give me a greater knowledge of yourself.”

Often times, when we come before God to pray, it is to ask God to remove the circumstances from our life that we don’t like. I imagine a disappearing device that I can point at the trouble and have it removed. And when God doesn’t, we get upset, frustrated, or worse. We may begin to think that God doesn’t care about what is happening. The truth is, God does care, and He hears our prayers. Yet the purpose of prayer is not to expect that God will make our circumstances disappear, but a change in perspective. Prayer is less about changing things and more about changing us. When we spend time in His presence, we are changed by the light of His Spirit. As we commune with Jesus, our faith increases, our spiritual understanding increases and often the “problems” just don’t

As we have seen we need to pray for increasing knowledge because it’s connected to how we discern the will of God and love others. Lastly, as we learn to talk with God for our own inner transformation, we need to pray for increasing fruit.

#### **3. PRAY FOR THE LIGHT OF INCREASING FRUIT (SLIDE 10)**

Look with me at Philippians 1:10 - 11 which says, *“so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”*

Here Paul uses a metaphor that includes the word “fruit” which implied harvest. His prayer was for them to live in such a way that Christ could work in them the harvest of righteousness which would be acceptable at the day of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

“To be filled with “the fruit of righteousness” means that he takes our sin and gives us His fruit of righteousness. When we are changed by Christ, our life is marked by the behavior of Christ. Again, think of the fruit of the Spirit! As Galatians 5 says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” It means that our actions, words, and thoughts are being changed as we spend time with God. Paul never tells us to produce fruit by trying harder or by our own efforts.

**(SLIDE 11)** Tim Keller says, **“God’s salvation does not come in response to a changed life. A changed life comes in response to the salvation offered as a free gift.”**

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<sup>5</sup> Melick, R. R. (1991). *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Vol. 32, p. 67). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Look with me at verse 10 which says, “*and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ...*”

What does Paul mean by the “the day of Christ”? “Paul is telling them that they must live in a such a way that they show they are remembering that Christ is returning for His bride. Rise above the fleshly desires. Rise above the pettiness. Live with the higher view that Christ is returning to make all things right. **In other words, live out who you are already in Christ! Live in such a way that you are constantly reminded that Christ made you holy so you would be pure and blameless before God.**

**What** keeps you from turning on the light of prayer so that you can be fruitful and see excellent things in your life? **Maybe you haven’t learned to pray? Maybe you have become cynical over the years? Doubt? Sadness? Circumstance?** Ask God to shed light on what is going on in your heart that is keeping you from connecting with Him.

**A worship pastor and author named Bob Kauflin says,** “But the tests couldn’t measure what was taking place in my heart. I was battling God for his glory—and losing. About a year after these symptoms appeared, Julie and I attended a leadership conference and shared a meal with our good friends Gary and Betsy Ricucci. **I knew Gary was a wise and gracious pastor. I also knew I needed help. Desperately. Early in our conversation I confessed, “Gary, I don’t know what to do. I feel hopeless all the time. Completely hopeless.” I expected Gary to say something like, “You’ll be okay, Bob. God is faithful. He’s working all things for your good.” Instead he looked at me with compassion and stated, “I don’t think you’re hopeless enough.”** I’m not sure what the look on my face said at that moment, but inside I was picking myself up off the floor. Gary smiled. “If you were really hopeless, you’d stop trusting in yourself and what you can do and start trusting in what Jesus accomplished for you at the cross.” The words drifted into my head like morning fog over a field—there was a discernible shape, but I couldn’t quite get my arms around it.

As I considered Gary’s response in the coming weeks, the fog began to lift. I started seeing a reality that dominated my life—the reality of my sinful cravings. My problems—emotional, physical, and otherwise—stemmed from battles within my heart of which I’d been largely unaware. Yes, I wanted God to be exalted through my life, but another agenda was ruling my heart. I wanted people to approve of me, admire me, applaud me.”

#### **QUESTION:**

Why pray? If God is control... why pray at all? Does prayer really change anything? **The answer is yes. Because prayer changes you! Prayer helps you increase in the love, knowledge, and fruit of Christ.**

**Prayer is the very answer to the heavy burden we carry. And it’s the very answer to the burdens our friends carry as well.**

**Prayer reminds me who He is – All-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present  
Prayer reminds us of who we are. His workmanship, His treasure, wholly loved**

- We pray because much is accomplished by prayer.

**The question is: Are we desperate enough to turn to God and bask in the light of prayer? Let's turn on the white light!**

**CLOSING PRAYER:**

**Praise.** Start with praising God for His attributes and actions. Praise Him for who He is and what He has done.

**Repent.** Search your heart. Review your recent actions. Identify any sins you have committed. Confess them, express your sorrow for them and intention to turn from them, and claim God's forgiveness.

**Ask.** Present your requests to God, "In every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6).

**Yield.** Submit and surrender yourself to God. Recognize that He is in control. Bask in God's presence.