

When Christians Pray

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Bible Verse: Philippians 1:3-5
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I invite you to turn to the book of Philippians as we turn to God's word now for our message this morning. Philippians 1, beginning in verses 3 through 5. This will be our text to hear from God's word here this morning. Philippians 1, beginning in verse 3.

3 I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, 4 always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, 5 in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now.

One of the famous stories in the Gospel about the disciples was how they asked the Lord to teach them to pray, and as you come to God's word and you see Christ praying, as you come to God's word and you see the Apostle Paul praying and you start to enter into the significance of what they were saying, you're left with the same impulse and the same desire, "Lord, teach me to pray because I've hardly even started down the path of what true prayer is." And it's with that sense of, "Lord, teach us to pray," that we come to this text today. The Apostle Paul is opening what he has to say to the Philippians in the body of his letter by giving them a report on the way that he prays for them. He's opening up with a series of statements about thanksgiving and prayer that is setting for them the disposition with which he is writing to them, and that's very important. Paul is writing to correct them on some important matters. He writes to thank them, of course, for gifts that they have given and for their long history of partnership in the Gospel, but he's writing to a church that was struggling with division, he was writing with a church that had made some elbow room for false teaching. We've seen that in the past, we're going to see it more as we go through the body of the letter in the months to come.

So he's writing to Christians who don't have it all together, but then I repeat myself, right? Christians who don't have it all together, we're kind of saying the same thing twice there, but I want you to note that as Paul is writing to this church that he loved, as he's writing to this church that had difficulties, that had conflict within the body, that did not have everything together in a doctrinal way, to notice the spirit with which he writes to them and with which he opens his letter, because in this we see a pattern for the way that we all can think about the body of Christ and the way that we can all think about each other as we observe our many ways of stumbling, but we also see a way, we see a pattern, we see a method of interacting with each other in the body. As Paul starts this letter, notice that he does not immediately go into rebuke of them, he does not start by listing

out their problems and starting to correct them, he starts further back and he starts from that heart of love that Jesus said would be the means by which "all men would know that you are My disciples," and as we see him interacting with them directly and as we see how he prayed for them in private, I believe that we're going to feel a sense of spiritual poverty in our own lives of realizing how far short we fall on these critical Christian virtues, and yet as we see these things, our hearts, if you are a believer in Christ, your heart will be drawn to what Paul says and says, "That's Christian living. That's a Christian man speaking there. That's what I aspire after my heart. That's what I want to become like in my inner man." So this is a passage of rich invitation to spiritual growth for us.

As you open the passage, you immediately see that Paul had a warm relationship with this church. Look at it there in verse 3 with me, and it's just striking the difference, the contrast between the perpetual conflict which we know in the world and which the world thrives on in all of its institutions, and the competition, and the rivalry, and the pride, and the boasting, and putting men down and lifting others up, you see that there is a total absence of that in what Paul has to say. He writes to these friends, he writes to these fellow believers and he says, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you." Immediately you're struck with a different disposition. Immediately you see the character of a man with deep Christian maturity.

Now we ask the question: how should Christians pray? Why do Christians pray? We could ask a different question: how do you pray? And we bring that to bear and we come with a willingness and an invitation, even, a prayer to God that he would take this passage and sift us and change us and mature us so that we would be more like this. Paul says in verse 3, look at it, we'll just go a little quick overview here to see the attitudes that are framing the way that he prays. "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you. I pray with joy in my every prayer for you all in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now." Thanksgiving and joy marking his prayer, marking his interaction with believers that needed correction. And I want to just as we go through this time together, I want to give you three elements of mature Christian prayer which is really only another way of saying this is mature Christian character, this is what a mature Christian character looks like, and to say something that I have said many many many many times from pulpits in different places when it comes to the matter of prayer, and I think this bears repeating as we go into this. So often, so often when we try to improve our prayer lives, so often when we are taught on prayer, we are left with a bit of a burden that is placed on us that you need to pray more, you need to pray and have times and get up early in the morning, and you've got to have a prayer list, and all of those kinds of things. I've tried to fight against that mindset every time I've taught on prayer because I think it is seriously misguided. It sets people up into an external framework focusing on time and focusing on, you know, trying to get specific earthly answers to the prayers that you pray without coming to grips with the attitudes that reflect true Christian praying, and if we get to the attitude of prayer, all of those other things take care of themselves. If you merely go through the motions of praying without the corresponding attitudes that God's word points you too, you're really wasting your time and so what we want to do here today is see a spirit of true prayer as it is reflected in the life of the Apostle Paul.

The first thing that we can say is that true prayer is grateful. True prayer is grateful. Literally, the first words off the pen of the Apostle Paul, so to speak, look at it there in verse 3, the first words that he says as he opens the body of the letter is, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you." Gratitude. Thanksgiving to God is the first words out of his mouth. As soon his mouth opens, he is expressing thanksgiving to God and Jesus said that – and this is so, this is so convicting – that the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart, and I would say that the way that we speak in prayer in some ways is the truest reflection of our heart. If we're dead in prayer, it's because we've got coldness in our hearts. If our prayers are selfishly oriented, it's because our prayers are selfish. If our prayers are distant toward God, it's a reflection of a heart that is distant toward God. Your mouth is speaking what fills your heart and when you are praying, your mouth is speaking what is in your heart toward God. So Paul here lays out for us and by his example shows us, that true prayer is marked by gratitude. It is marked by thanksgiving.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 it says "in everything give thanks," and so I would just step back for a moment and ask you to consider as you pray, as you reflect back on your prayers over the past week, whether there has been an element of gratitude in your praying to God or if there has been something else, a complaining spirit, "God, fix this.. God, do that. God, change him, change her. Send this." You see, we need to step back and remember who it is that we're praying to and why is that we're praying to him and why we can even pray to him in the first place. We never need let our thoughts drift far from the cross of Christ, never drift far from the mercy that saved us, drift far from the love that was exemplified on the cross as he poured out his lifeblood for our sins; to remember that it was in love that he did that and we are praying in response to love like that so that we always have at the center of our thoughts, "God, I am approaching You because You have shown grace and mercy and patience to me, and I pray in response to that and, Lord, I maintain a consistent attitude of gratitude toward You for the goodness that You have shown to me and shown to these brothers and sisters in Christ."

I realize, beloved, that prayer is often urgent for you, that life is urgent and difficult and the sequence of events is sometimes overwhelming. I realize that but it is precisely at that point that you have to gather yourself up and remember the mercy of God in Christ and let that inform the way that you pray. It will warm your prayers toward God in praise and adoration and devotion. It will warm your sense of confidence as you pray. Rather than shooting arrows in the dark and hoping they land someplace, you say, "No, I'm praying to my heavenly Father. I'm praying the One Who loved my soul, Who chose me before the foundation of the world, Who has adopted me in Christ and brought me into His family"; the power of those doctrines and the power of that truth informing and shaping the way that you pray to him, and giving you a perspective of gratitude even in the midst of the conflict and the hardship that you find yourself calling out to God in the midst of.

Paul adds that dimension. Look at verse 3 with me when he says, "I thank my God." My God. My God, the first person pronoun, "my," showing that Paul was thinking of God in personal terms. He knew the God to whom he was praying. He was not praying in the dark, he was not praying to some unknown God, you know, "If You're up there some place," or praying to "the Big Man upstairs," so to speak. No, this was an earnest prayer

that it was reflecting his confidence that he knew God in Christ and, therefore, he was praying to one that he knew personally and the prayer was, therefore, a matter of intimacy to him. There was a personal communion going on between him and God as he prayed that whatever else was happening in the world around him, God knew him and he knew God and that shaped the way that he prayed for the Philippians and he prayed with confidence on their behalf.

Look at it there in verse 3 with me. He gets specific about exactly what he's thankful for. Philippians 1:3, he says, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you." I thank my God in all my remembrance of you. Look at the word "all" there, saying, "This is my consistent pattern. This is what I do consistently as I pray for you, I am praying for you with gratitude."

Now, beloved, remembering the division, the conflict, the false doctrine that was percolating in the midst of the church in Philippi there, that might sound somewhat surprising. How can he be grateful for these people who have so many problems? How could you possibly begin to pray with gratitude for your difficult spouse, your difficult children, the other difficult people in your life? How can you pray with gratitude especially if they're claiming to be Christians and their imperfections are pounding you, their sins even, are pounding you day after day with concern and heartache along the way? How can that possibly be? How could you be grateful in the midst of that? Well, Paul is praying with gratitude because – mark this – because – this is important – he was looking beyond the human faults, he was looking beyond the human sins that needed correction, he was looking beyond that and looking to the God who was the source of their spiritual life, to the God who was sovereign over those for whom he prayed and the God in whom he trusted. His prayer was God-centered from the start and God being who he is and Christ being who he is, allows prayer with gratitude rather than starting from the defective earthly starting point that would be the case with anybody for whom you prayed. True prayer is grateful, then, in light of the fact that there is a work of God that is taking place in the midst of the people that he's writing to.

Look at verse 6 with me. We'll get to this next week. How could he pray with thanksgiving? Look at verse 6, he says, "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." God started a work in you, I know he's continuing it, and even though it is imperfect and it is not yet finished, I'm confident that it will come to perfection and, therefore, I look to the God of your salvation and I look to the God who is at work and I look at the God who will certainly complete the goal that he has in mind for you and, therefore, I can pray with gratitude and confidence even in the midst of your weakness. That's how Paul prays for them. His prayer is grateful because it is a God-centered prayer.

Now right on the heels of that, we could go to point 2, recognizing that prayer is dependent, prayer is dependent. Paul is looking to the God who is at work in them even though the work is not complete, and look at what he says in verse 4. He says, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you. Father, I thank You for these friends in Christ. I thank You for these brothers and sisters in Christ." And in verse 4 he says, "I'm always,"

remember he's speaking to the Philippians here, he's telling them how he prays for them, he says, "I always offer prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all." Look at the consistency with which he says this. Now he's not saying, "I pray for you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. I never sleep. I never eat. I never do anything. I only pray for you." That's not what he's saying, rather he's saying, "Every time I think of you, I'm grateful. Every time I pray for you, I'm joyful, and this is the unbroken pattern and attitude that I have toward you. I pray for you with joy." So as Paul is saying these things, what he's reflecting on and what you see as you read the rest of the letter is, is that every time he remembers them and prays for them, it brings his heart joy. It brings gladness to him and it brings him gladness because when they came to mind he remembered the whole context of the history of their relationship together. Paul reflects on them. They had shared ministry together over the years.

Why would Paul be grateful and joyful? Well, let's go through it rather quickly here. Look at Philippians 1:5. He says, "I pray with joy in my every prayer for you all," verse 5, "in view of," I remember, "your participation in the gospel from the first day until now." He says, "We have years together of being partners together for Christ in the Gospel. How could I be anything other than grateful for you in response to that? That informs the way that I pray. Yes, there are these temporary matters that we're going to have to get to and address, but I haven't forgotten the context of all of the goodness and all of the love and mercy that God has displayed in your lives and through your lives." And that's helpful as we go through life together, praying for each other as a church body and difficulties come. Very helpful for a husband and wife, parent, children praying for their parents. You remember, you get into the conflict, you get into the difficulties and it seems as though it will drown you in the difficulty and the consequences of what lies ahead, perhaps even tempting you toward bitterness and resentment at the problems that you are going through at the hands of this person that you're supposedly praying for. I get that. Paul here doesn't so focus on what's happening today as he remembers the whole context and that allows him to pray for joy, pray with joy, I should say, despite the issues that he needed to correct.

He remembers, look at this in verse 19, chapter 1. He remembers that they had prayed for him. Chapter 1, verse 19, he says, "I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ." Of course I'm praying joyfully, I remember the fact that you pray for me. How could I not be joyful? How could I not be thankful as you're praying for me? He's mindful that these Christians had suffered for Christ just like he had.

Look at verse 29 of chapter 1. He says, "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me." He says, "I have sympathy for you because I know you're suffering for the sake of Christ. I'm grateful for you. I know you pray for me. I'm mindful of the fact that you have shared ministry with me." And their testimony reflected well on Paul's ministry.

Look at verse 15, and he has this as a goal in mind as well as a recognition. He anticipates that their testimony will be a vindication of his ministry. In verse 16 he says, "hold fast the word of life so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain." He says, "You hold fast to the Gospel. You remain faithful to Christ." He says, "I'm looking forward to the day when Christ evaluates me for my apostolic ministry and I will be able to rejoice over you because you will be proof and vindication that I did not labor in vain, that God was at work in me and through me to accomplish work in you," Paul says, "and then when that takes place, I know that Christ is going to be pleased and that will be a vindication of my ministry and, therefore, I pray for you with joy as well and gratitude."

What else had this church done? They had sent one of their own to be an emissary to Paul, to be a minister to Paul in his time of need and imprisonment. Look at chapter 2, verse 25. Paul says, "I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need." They had sent Epaphroditus to care for Paul and to bring the gift that they had for him as a congregation, and Epaphroditus was a personal representative, a personal manifestation, an outward display of the love that the Philippians had so much that they sent one of their own in order to be with Paul personally during his imprisonment. And along with that they had provided regular financial support to him. Look at chapter 4, verse 15. Chapter 4, verse 15. He says, "You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs."

So Paul here is praying and he's reflective. I'm mixing the points up, the order of my points, and that's all right. Paul here is reflective as he's praying for them and what I want you to see is this, is that Paul wasn't so caught up in the moment in his prayers that he forgot the whole context of the relationship of the people for whom he was praying, and despite their difficulties – I'm repeating myself but this is just so important – despite their struggles and despite the things that he had to address, he remembered that they were genuine Christians, that the Spirit of God was at work in them, and that over time they had consistently proven to be faithful friends to him, and that remembrance shaped the way that he prayed. He prayed now with joy and thanksgiving rather than focused exclusively on the problems that he knew that needed to be addressed, and that's why he could pray for them with joy; he reflected back and it brought back memories of these friends who had shared in the Gospel with him. His heart was glad. Each time he thought of them, it brought him joy.

And yet there's more as you look at this prayer. Go back to chapter 1 with me. His prayer is grateful, it is dependent, and it is reflective, and what I want you to see here is this, we've pointed this out in the past but it comes up in the text now, he says, "always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all." My every prayer for you all. His prayer embraced the entirety of the congregation. He was praying for all of them and this love and this joy and this intercession that he was making on their behalf was for all of

them which is something that transcended the petty conflict and divisions that they were experiencing with each other.

Look at chapter 4. Let me remind you of this. Chapter 4, verse 2, he had to single out two women in the church who were being a bit of a pain in the neck and in conflict with one another, and he says to them in verse 2 of chapter 4, he says, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord." Now why am I mentioning that here? You know how conflict works, right? People are on different sides of an issue and they start to recruit people, wanting people to join in their side against the other. Paul's prayer has transcended all of that and he said, "I pray with joy for all of you on both sides of the conflict, on both sides of this division. I'm praying for all of you." There is a breadth and a love that encompassed everyone in the church and that becomes the pattern that we are to consider. He prayed for everyone in the church. Beloved, here's the thing, there was a unity to his praying even though on a human level there was disunity in the church.

Now, how is that possible? How can you even think that way? How can you not help but take sides when there is division there? Well, Paul saw God's people in a unified light because he saw them in Christ. He saw them individually in Christ. He saw collectively that they were all in Christ and he knew that Christ was not divided. Christ was not divided in his love, in his care for his people, and therefore Paul would not be sucked into the division and let it affect the way that he prayed. He can say, "I pray for joy with thanksgiving for you all," and in Christ there was a unifying principle to be found, and in a derivative sense in the unifying nature in which Paul prayed, there was unity to be found in there. Christ is not divided and, therefore, the way that his people pray for one another should not be divided as well.

So what do we find as we come to this? You know, look, and I'm saying this sympathetically, I'm saying this as one in need of grace myself in more ways than I care to count, saying this knowing that this is common to our experience, that we are to one degree or another, we're all prone to earthly-mindedness, prone to anger, prone to bitterness, prone to resentment. "Life isn't going the way I want. He doesn't treat me the way I want. I need something better. I deserve better than this. I'm fed up with some of the people in this church." That's not me talking. I'm not fed up with anybody. I'm just illustrating attitudes. "My spouse is like this." My spouse is not like this, okay? My spouse is not like that. Yours may be. I'm just trying to be clear here and not have a silent ride on the way home, not that Nancy would ever say anything like that to me. But this is life, right, and our praying has a way of reflecting that kind of narrow-minded resentment, focused on issues, focused on what's in front of us right now, losing sight of the big picture, and what we find as we read Paul here, Paul writing from prison, Paul in the midst of his own difficult circumstances, Paul writing with gratitude, expressing prayer with joy for all of them there, mindful of all of the good things that they had shared together in the past as they did ministry on behalf of Christ together, joy and thanksgiving marking the way that he prayed, and now, beloved, what I want you to see is that when we see this, this is a pattern for the way that our heart attitude should be in prayer as well and I ask you whether it is for you. I ask whether those kinds of spiritual attitudes are forming and growing in your own heart because this is what Christian

growth and Christian maturity looks like. Not trying to have God take your side against somebody else, not trying to have God simply to fix up your earthly circumstances, but to be satisfied in Christ now so much so, so satisfied in Christ that even with unfinished business all around, you find in Christ a perfect completion of everything that your heart desires so that you pray with joy, you pray with contentment, you pray with gratitude because it's just a reflection of that which animates everything about your heart, and so dominate your affection that you can't imagine life in any other way.

It's a lot different, isn't it? That's a lot different, isn't it, than the way I was introduced to prayer as a young Christian and people just taught me to just have an ever-expanding prayer list of people that had earthly needs and you just pray and you just slog your way through that day after day after day praying for those things. Well, after a while that gets kind of old, doesn't it, those of you that have been there? To just focus on earthly needs and, "God, fix this earthly need and that earthly need, and A through Z earthly needs." I got tired of it. I threw the thing out, and this can be what prayer is supposed to be like. I recognized that even as a young Christian. It's amazing that you have to say these things again and again and again. No, no, if God is who he is and Christ is who he is and he's done what he's done for us, and he's unfolded this magnificent eternal plan for your redemption that has swept you up in grace despite your many sins, and that he is at work in you to carry that out until the day of glory, that he loves you with an everlasting love, he is your rock, your refuge, your fortress, as the Psalms say over and over again, he is your shepherd, he is your champion, he is your warrior, Christ called us, "You're My friends if you do what I command you." Well then, beloved, don't you see that that starts to overturn, that starts to revolutionize the spirit in which you think about God and, therefore, the spirit with which you pray to God, and you no longer want to treat God as simply some cosmic genie who can fix things on earth. You relate to him from a depth of profound love, of profound worship, of profound gratitude, that says, "God, I am grateful to be in Your presence. I am mindful of who You are and everything about my disposition toward You is oriented toward joy and thanksgiving because of all that You are and all that You've done for me." Sooner or later, beloved, that has to enter into and start to dominate your perspective on praying. None of us would like it if somebody only related to us on the sense that they wanted us to fix things for them without any expression of gratitude, without any expression of love. "You're just using me," you would say. Well, multiply that by infinity and realize the love and devotion and affection that is deserved by your God from your heart.

Now that's why Paul can pray with thanksgiving, he can pray with joy. He's grateful, he's reflective but he's also dependent as he's praying for them. Look at verse 4 with me again. He says, "I'm always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all." The word that is used here of prayer is used of a request to God for meeting a need, and so Paul is praying that God would meet their needs, that is a legitimate important part of the way that we pray, it's just that it's not only about that, and the word here consists of a sense of urgency. He's not simply saying, "God, bless Joe. God, bless Pam. God, bless So-and-so. Amen." No, there's an urgency and there's even a specificity to it, and as Paul is praying for his friends, here's what I want you to see that we'll get to in about three or four weeks down the road sometime, later on he tells them how he is praying for them and what

specifically he asks. Chapter 1, verse 9. Chapter 1, verse 9, not praying for their medical condition, not praying for their financial condition, praying for their spiritual condition. In verse 9, he gives them the content of what he is praying and he says in verse 9, "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." Now we're about to get in what's just ahead in the next few minutes, we're about to get rebuked by God's word again, corrected again, most likely for many of us, if not most of us. Paul's prayers for these people were not earthbound prayers, they were not related to circumstance. He is praying for their spiritual lives. He is praying in light of the eternal purposes of God.

Look at it there in verse 9, he says, "I pray that your love would abound. I pray that you would grow in knowledge. I pray that you would grow in discernment." You know, if somebody is growing in love and knowledge and discernment, then all of a sudden all of the earthly circumstances are secondary for them, and if they're not growing in love, knowledge and discernment, then the best of earthly circumstances cannot compensate for their spiritual poverty.

So a God who is spirit, who saved us and caused us to be born again, has in mind for us to pray in spiritual ways, and I say what I'm about to say with sympathy and remembering some conversations that people have said in the past, saying, "Man, I never saw prayer in this way before." Well, that's right. The way that so many Christians pray, you would think that being a Christian was all about this life, about getting through the next health issue, and just being consumed with shaving the sharp edges off of life here on earth. Well, how could that possibly be the case? How could that possibly be the right way and the right goal and the right motivation for us to pray for one another? How could that possibly be correct that earthly matters would be the focus? You realize, right, that sooner or later those prayers are not going to be answered? You realize, right, that sooner or later we're all going to be returned to dust? There has to be more than to the way that we pray than the physical circumstances and conditions of the people for whom we pray. I'm not saying don't pray for that at all, I'm just saying that it's a secondary consideration to the spiritual growth of one who God has saved to bring into his family and that God is doing something to conform them to the image of Christ; the purpose of God in the lives of the Christians for whom we pray is ultimately to conform them to the image of Christ, that they would be a pure reflection of the glory of the one who saved them. That is what we pray. That is the end to which we pray.

So if I can follow Paul's example and you say, "Well, how do you pray for me in the midst of my physical affliction?" Sure, I pray for God to comfort you, to heal you. Sure, but even more, the predominant prayer that I have for those of you that are in physical affliction is this, is that God would sanctify your physical distress to the good of your soul; that God would take your physical troubles and somehow use those to help you see better his surpassing glory and find his surpassing comfort regardless of what happens in your flesh. It's because the things of your soul are more important and that prayer was never meant to be simply a matter of dealing with the Christian's body. He says, Paul

says, "I pray that your love would abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment." And that can happen even if your body is not healed.

So we just find this sifting that goes on in the way that we think about prayer. It's grateful and yet Paul is praying for them in these matters, he's praying urgently to God for them because there are real needs that are beyond his power to meet. Paul could not personally apart from the work of the Spirit of God cause them to grow in love, cause them to grow in discernment, cause them to grow in knowledge. He's asking God to do something that only God himself can do which is to shape his children into closer conformity to the image of Christ.

And so let's not lose sight of the primary aspect that we want to see as we go through the rest of this passage. Whenever you pray for another Christian, you're praying for somebody who is not yet perfected. When we pray for each other, we're praying for those that are tossed from time to time, if not more often, by sin and conflict and difficulty, and that if we were only to judge people on a human level, we would find them to be disappointments because they fall short of the lofty standard that God has called them to. Glorification comes later, not right now. We're all in the process of being sanctified. But what I want you to see here, what I hope will shape your thinking as you pray for your brothers and sisters in Christ in the future, maybe even if you think of me from time to time to pray for me in a similar way as well, when Paul is praying for them as he starts out his letter, he is not impatiently starting at the point of, "God, fix them." That's not his starting point. He knew men's heart. He knew that Christians fall short of the glory of God. He knew that they often walked in the flesh, not in the Spirit. But as he's praying for them, it is filled with gratitude and joy and what that teaches us is this, is that as Paul is praying for this friendly church, he was starting at the point of God's grace in their lives. God had graciously saved them in Christ, God was graciously sanctifying them over time, God would graciously bring them to perfection at the day of Christ, Christ would graciously return for them from heaven, Paul did not forget their long history of partnership together, and so rather than praying with an edge of impatience and dissatisfaction, Paul was praying for those close to him with a spirit of trusting dependence that says, "God, they have spiritual needs. They need to grow. Yes, they do but, Father, I thank You for them. I thank You for the spouse that's fallen short of my expectations because, God, I see You at work in him or her. I thank You for this difficult child, Father, because I know in wisdom You gave that to me for my own flesh and blood, or adopted them into my family. You brought that child to me, Father, in Your wisdom and grace and I thank You for that, and I thank You for the evidence of the work that I see in their lives even though it is not yet perfected." And on it goes.

So my beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, I can only wonder how many points of correction and improvement we find for our own hearts to aspire after in light of this prayer that the Apostle Paul has made. Your prayer life, beloved, even in the midst of really serious life-threatening issues, your prayer life should be more than a long string of requests, "God, fix this. God, fix that. Give me this. Give me that." And that's that. So much more worship and joy and thanksgiving and gratitude and dependence and reflection informed primarily by a grateful response that never loses sight of the fact that

Christ was gracious to you at the cross, that Christ was gracious to save you in the midst of your sin, that Christ is graciously keeping you, and that Christ will graciously bring you to glory.

You can pray with joy, with gratitude, with thanksgiving, you can pray this way even in the midst of dark circumstances. You can and you should. Paul was in prison when he was praying this way and maybe we need to just step back and ask a different question, even. Maybe for some of you, maybe your prayers are just primarily about you. "God, help me in my job. Help me with my spouse. Help me with my family and my finances. In Jesus' name. Amen." Are you kidding me? What about the people of God? What about the work of God throughout the world? What about pastors throughout the world preaching the word of God in the midst of hostility? What about your fellow believers within the walls of this room? Really? Christ gave himself for us in the ultimate way and the outcome would be for us to pray in response in a selfish self-centered way that never got beyond the little circumference of our personal circle? Could that possibly be why God saved us was to produce people who prayed like that? God forbid. God forbid. And the fact that we're like that simply shows how much we need the sanctifying work and influence of the Holy Spirit to be upon us.

Are your prayers weighed down by temporal matters or do they rise with joy upon the remembrance of Christ and his grace? Are your prayers merely for material matters of physical and financial well-being, or do you pray for the people of God to grow in grace, to grow in joy, to become more of what he made them to be? It's no wonder, is it, that the disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray. We need help. We need grace just to learn to pray in an appropriate way." And that's what we'll see because we pray now.

Bow with me, if you will.

Father, how weak and convicted we all feel as we see the prayer of a great apostle, an apostle of love, an apostle whose heart was set free from the circumstances of this world, who sought Christ above all else, who sought the well-being of his Christian friends above his own. Father, we confess that we fall short of this when we pray to You, and yet we ask You to teach us to pray evermore like this, Father, because we see the lofty worthy nature of this manner of responding to You. We see that You're worthy of all thanks, of all joy, of all gratitude. We see and embrace the responsibility to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ, for their growth in the grace and knowledge of God, the grace and knowledge of Christ. We see the need to pray that they would be sanctified in the truth. We see the need to pray that You would perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish each one in Christ and against the adversary of their souls. We long for that. We pray that the Spirit would produce that in us, and at the end of the day, we're tossed back on the cross, tossed back on Christ. Our prayers are not sufficient, Lord, we confess that, but the prayers of our Redeemer were perfect. The life, the ministry, the words of our blessed Lord Jesus were all perfect and it's in His righteousness that we rest, it's His righteousness that will keep us, it is His righteousness, Father, in which we trust, not our own. But having been born again, Father, we long to be conformed to Him, to be made more like Him, and today we especially pray that You would teach us to pray in a

manner that reflects the glory of the One who loved us and gave Himself up for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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