

Philippians 1:9-11

Additional Bible reading: Colossians 1:1-13

Introduction

Several times Paul commences his letters by telling his readers what he prayed about them. Here is helpful instruction to us on what to pray for and how to pray. It is worth examining our prayer life, which is often so limited and impoverished. When we only pray for ourselves, and fail to pray for others, we are sinning against the Lord (1 Samuel 12:23). We can also get into the limited habit of only praying for the souls of the unconverted, and the bodily needs of the converted, forgetting to pray for the spiritual needs of our fellow Christians. Paul constantly prayed for the spiritual needs of the fellow believers (See Ephesians 1 & 3; Colossians 1; 1 Thessalonians 3, and here in Philippians 1).

We also have a tendency in our prayers to overwork that word “bless”. What exactly do we mean by that when we repeatedly say “bless this person, bless that person..”? It may be a good idea, if we feel it difficult to pray for fellow Christians and missionaries, to name the people, then read these words of Paul. He basically prayed that they might know love, light and life, and we are going to look at these three in turn.

Note also Paul’s approach to prayer and his attitude to these people. **I have you in my heart** (Philippians 1:7). If we do not have this attitude for the people we pray for, if we lack love and concern, our prayers will lack life and become a miserable duty. We need God’s love poured out in our hearts if we are going to pray aright.

Must also stress the importance of praying for others if we are in leadership in the church. Spurgeon said the preacher must above all be a man of prayer. He must pray as much as the ordinary Christian, else he is a hypocrite, and he must pray more than others, else he is disqualified from office.

Love

That your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight (Philippians 1:9). This takes us to the seashore – picture wave after wave of love. Or to a fountain – full and bubbling over. **May your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else** (1 Thessalonians 3:12).

The word “love”, in the English language, covers so many things. The same word is used for “I love that book”, as is used to describe the “love” of the man who died saving a drowning child. We also use the same overworked word for God’s mercy to us in giving His Son to bear our sins and die in our place.

The Greeks had four words for love – one for sexual love, another for friendship, another for family affection, and fourthly “agape” love. The latter is not an emotion, but an act of will, deliberately choosing to recognise, consider and save. This is the love God has for us, and this is to be our model. This is the kind of love Paul wanted

the Philippians to abound in. The kind of love that says, “I respect and value you because you are a fellow believer. There may be many things I do not like or admire about you, but I value and prize you for Christ’s sake. I will show practical compassion to you in your need.” This love is concerned to give, and not to get.

In knowledge and depth of insight. Here we have the banks of the river of love – determining where it goes and keeping it in boundaries. Our agape love is not misty thought and foolish behaviour, throwing money around without thinking, not encouraging people to sin by failing to rebuke, not soft and indulgent. But rather, sensible and wise expressions of love. “Love is blind”, they say – but Christian love should not be.

Give consideration to what is the best way to express your love. What a difference it would make in churches if this wise thoughtful love was expressed. There would be a greater bond of fellowship, practical help, and widening missionary interest, words that would not be said, and letters that would not be written, different words that would be said, and different letters written!

Light

So that you may be able to discern what is best (Philippians 1:10), i.e. that you may test things that differ and decide for the best. δοκιμαζειν is the word for testing metals. The picture here is of testing a coin to see if the metal is pure and genuine. Paul is concerned with distinguishing between true and false, and discriminating between good and evil.

The early church had many problems – errors, heresies and false teachers. There was need for discrimination, discernment and wisdom. No less today, when we are surrounded by cults, fallacies and errors. People have plausible ways, use the right language, and can catch out the undiscerning. They might actually mean something different though they use the same terminology. C.f. some may speak of accepting Christ as saviour, but they only mean him as saviour by his example – he taught us how to live unselfish lives. They may teach salvation, not through personal faith, but by partaking of sacraments. Need to be very careful whether they say Jesus *is* God, or whether they stop short by saying Jesus was *like* God. Even need to be aware of the differences in the use of the word “evangelical”. Hence the need to pray for discernment, and to put things to the test.

Discernment is also needed because the Christian life is full of difficult choices. Things are not always black and white, e.g. the rights and wrongs of going to the pictures, of owning a TV, of being a conscientious objector, of paying taxes. And in our Christian service there is so much choice in what we could be doing, in what organisations and causes we could be supporting. What should we concentrate on? What should we leave out? What should we put to one side? There are difficult choices and decisions to be made every day.

The whole art of living is concerned here. It would be easy to fritter away our energies on this and that, wasting time on second rate issues. We need to grasp what is vital. Concentrate on the really important things. Keep steadily to the one thing that is needful. So easy to be like Martha, busy with so many things, instead of concentrating

on the one important thing, as Mary did. The good is often the enemy of the best. We need to discern what is best. Test everything and distinguish true and false.

Life

That you may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God (Philippians 1:10,11). “Pure”, i.e. transparent, ελικρινεις, tested by the sunlight. When our lives are held up to the light, are they without flaw? Are we transparent, sincere and genuine, without trickery or deceit? Christian character should be able to stand the searchlight on it. Someone once asked if he could write Spurgeon’s biography, and he was able to reply, “You may write my life in the clouds, I have nothing to hide.”

“Blameless”, i.e. not causing others to stumble. C.f. the warnings of Christ against causing the little ones to stumble. Leading others astray by our example. Remember you may be being observed by other younger, weaker Christians, who will follow your lead and example. Make sure you are blameless.

And we have to keep this up, not for a week, or until this time next year, but until the Lord’s return when we shall have to give an account of our lives. Our lives should be laden with the fruit of godly living and righteousness. This comes from faith in Christ. And it gives God the glory. **Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven** (Matthew 5:16). It is not just Christian business and church activities which are important, but spiritual fruit coming from fellowship with Christ. Paul longs that they may live a full Christian life overflowing with fruit.

Conclusion

Prayer for love which is wise and discerning; for light, which is able to test all things and discern true from false in doctrine, conduct and service; for Christian life that is genuine and does not cause others to stumble, overflowing with fruits of godliness and righteousness.

This should be our prayer for others, and also for ourselves. How will God answer it? He will grant us these things as we meditate on His Word and pray, as we meditate on our soul and our life, as we live in Christ, centred on Him, as we seek out His will and live to His glory and honour.