

## ***Priorities in Prayer***

Series: *Paul's School of Prayer*

Jan. 4, 2015

Col. 1:9-14

Happy New Year, everyone! Happy new *decade*.

How many of you ate your way through the holidays? My hand is up.

How many of you are now trying to turn over a new leaf when it comes to your eating habits?

Did you know that two big tests of people's dietary resolutions are coming up quite soon on the calendar? Two big tests of your resolve to eat right. What are they?

The first won't apply to everyone here, but it will for many of you. I'm talking about Chinese New Year. It officially falls on January 25<sup>th</sup>, but the celebration lasts for days.

If you want to control your eating this Chinese New Year, I made up a little motto you might find useful:

*I will not put on fat in the Year of the Rat!*

The next big test of people's dietary resolve will take place on Sunday, February 2<sup>nd</sup>. Who can tell me what's happening on that day?

The Super Bowl!

You know, many people mistakenly think that Super Bowl Sunday is about football. But it's really about all the food that gets served up at Super Bowl parties. I mean, just Google *Super Bowl snacks*, and you'll find that the search results are pretty much endless.

Speaking of the Super Bowl, here's a fun little anecdote I came across:

One year at the Super Bowl, there was this diehard football fan sitting in the stands, and he was surprised to notice an empty seat nearby. He asked another fan who was sitting next to the seat if he knew why it was empty.

"It was my wife's," the guy explained, "But she died."

"Oh! I'm very sorry to hear that," said the man. "But I'm really surprised that none of your relatives or friends would take her seat."

“Yeah, I know,” the guy answered. “But they all insisted on going to the funeral.”

It seems like this fellow had his priorities out of whack, wouldn't you say?

Priorities. Many of us are thinking about our priorities now, because the New Year is a time to reassess, reset, and make sure you're putting first things first.

Like attending your spouse's funeral ahead of being at a football game. Or putting the health of your body ahead of your appetite.

Those of us who are Christians are called to make God and his kingdom our very first priority. After all, what did Jesus tell us?

Seek the Kingdom of God above all else...<sup>1</sup>

At Cornerstone, we want to do just that by coming right out of the gate in 2020 with a series on prayer. Because if you truly want to seek the kingdom of God above all else, prayer must be among your very highest priorities.

The series is called *Paul's School of Prayer*, and I'll tell you more about it shortly.

But first I'd like to note that five years ago, in January 2015, we began the year with this same series. Does anyone who's been around Cornerstone long enough remember the significance of the year 2015 for this church?

It was the year construction was completed on Cornerstone Centre, and then we moved in. After 17 years of meeting in rented spaces, we finally had a facility to call our own by the grace and provision of God.

This was a tremendous blessing, but it also was a time of tremendous change and transition. Moving into a new building and learning how to function in it would be a huge learning curve for us.

As we faced this transition into a whole new era of ministry, we sensed very keenly that our first priority had to be prayer—asking God, and depending on God, to do for us what we could never do without him.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:33 (NLT)

2020 marks the outset of what promises to be a new era for Cornerstone.

As most of you know, last year, after an extended season of prayer and collaboration, we sensed that God is calling this congregation to plant a new Cornerstone campus in another community sometime over the next few years. On the way to that goal, we also believe God is calling us to launch a third Sunday worship service, and also to develop a Leadership Institute to train Christian leaders to be kingdom influencers both in the church as well as in various sectors of society.

If you're new and would like to learn more about this vision, you can read all about it at [cornerstonechurch.ca/vision2020](https://cornerstonechurch.ca/vision2020).

In 2020, we're going to start planning, and strategizing, recruiting, and working toward these goals in earnest.

The demands of transitioning into this new era of expanded kingdom influence are certainly beyond our own strength and smarts. The learning curve will be steep. I mean, we've never planted a new campus before, nor have we developed a leadership institute.

But it's never been about what *we* can do, has it? It's always been, and always will be about what God can do in us, through us, and for us.

Prayer is the way that we draw near to God, and acknowledge our dependence on him alone. And so, just like Cornerstone began a new era of ministry 5 years ago with an emphasis on prayer, we begin a new era of ministry in 2020 with an emphasis on prayer. With the same sermon series, in fact—*Paul's School of Prayer*.

Over the next 8 weeks, we'll be exploring several of the Apostle Paul's prayers that are recorded in the New Testament. Who is Paul?

Known as the greatest missionary in Christian history, Paul spread the message of Jesus first to Jews, and then especially to non-Jews, known as Gentiles. He planted multiple churches during his missionary journeys, and the letters he wrote to various churches and individuals now make up about half the New Testament.

Paul would endure sickness, beatings, years of imprisonment and repeated attempts on his life, but never wavered in his resolution to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to as many people as he could. Ultimately, it would cost him his life, but not before the good news of Jesus had taken root throughout much of the vast Roman Empire.

And permeating this Apostle's remarkable career, was prayer. Paul was a man of prayer. Indeed, prayer was Paul's first priority. In his New Testament letters, Paul often describes what he prays, and how he prays.

Now if you were a basketball player, and you had the chance to get tips from Kawhi Leonard; if you were a cellist and had the chance to take lessons from Yo-Yo Ma; if you were a foodie and had the chance to get restaurant recommendations from Pastor Jeremy— wouldn't you jump at such chances?

If prayer actually matters to you—if you agree that prayer is vital for any disciple of Jesus— why wouldn't you want to hear everything Paul has to say about it, and make every endeavour to put it into practice?

To get ready for today's session in Paul's school of prayer, I'd like you to ask yourself this question:

*When I pray, what do I typically pray about?*

If you could be given a printout of every prayer you prayed in 2019, what requests would show up most frequently?

Some of us may have to admit that our list wouldn't have much on it at all.

Those of you who have prayed more often may well find that your most frequent requests have been for good health, safe travel, financial or material provision, the well-being of family and friends, success in exams, and help with situations at work.

It's perfectly appropriate, even necessary, to pray about such things, by the way.

But how often and how earnestly do you pray for God to open doors for us to share the gospel in our community, or for believers to become more and more like Jesus, or for God's love to so permeate our hearts that our day-to-day lives become marked by profound gratitude, joyful obedience, and Christ-like love for others?

It often doesn't occur to many Christians to pray such things. And yet the Bible shows us that the Apostle Paul constantly prayed these and other petitions for the churches and Christians he associated with. Why did Paul pray these things?

Because they reflect God's heart. They reflect God's *priorities*.

How might God change the way you relate to him, and how might God change your priorities in prayer and in life, as you study and apply Paul's prayers over the weeks of this series?

For our first session in Paul's school of prayer, let's take a closer look at his prayer for the Colossians, in chapter 1 of that letter, verses 9-14. Please follow along in your Bible or Bible app—or on the screen—as I read this passage:

<sup>9</sup>For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, <sup>10</sup>so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, <sup>11</sup>being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, <sup>12</sup>and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. <sup>13</sup>For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, <sup>14</sup>in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

In these verses, we find rich lessons in terms of:

- How to pray
- What to pray for
- Why

First, in terms of HOW TO PRAY, we learn this lesson from Paul:

### **1. Don't stop praying.**

Paul tells the Colossians Christians, starting in verse 9:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will...

The first three words of our passage say what? *For this reason...*

Here's a tip when you're reading the Bible. When you see a phrase like that, you need to go back to the preceding verses, and see what "this reason" is. In this case, the preceding verses find Paul thanking God for the Colossian Christians who are growing in faith, hope, and love. "For this reason," Paul says in verse 9, "we have not stopped praying for you..."

This is very interesting when you think about it, because it's unexpected. The reason Paul gives as to why he doesn't stop praying for the Colossians is *because they've been doing so well in their walk with God*. They've been growing in faith, hope, and love.

You would think it would be because they were in some sort of crisis. After all, aren't times of crisis the times when we find ourselves so much more inclined to pray.

And let's be very clear—we must pray at such times. But in his prayer for the Colossians, and his other recorded prayers, we find that when Paul hears of good news in the life of a church or an individual believer, he doesn't stop praying for them and move on to pray for others who have more pressing concerns. On the contrary, he doubles down. He gives thanks for the blessings, and continues praying fervently for more of the same.

Are the Ephesians growing in love? Yes. *Oh, God, thank you! Now let their love abound more and more!*

Are the Philippians finding joy because of the eternal hope they have in Christ? Yes. *Thank you, Lord! Keep filling them with your joy until it overflows and gloriously infects everyone they come into contact with!*

Do you see the pattern here? Even when there is already blessing, Paul doesn't stop praying— and neither should we.

Let me give you an example in the life of this church.

In 2019, our theme for the year was *Engaging for Growth*.

Attendance at Cornerstone continues keeps going up, and that's great! But effectiveness in reaching our community and making disciples for Jesus depends not on how many people *attend* church services and events. Rather, it depends on how *engaged* they become in the life and mission of the church.

So last year, we focused on four main areas of engagement: *Gather, Invite, Serve, and Give*.

Through prayer, and by God's grace, engagement in all these areas has increased significantly! If you haven't done so already, you can read all about it in our 2019 Annual Report, which you'll find online, as well as on the literature racks in the lobby and hallway.

But as much as we've grown in engagement, we sense that it's not time to just thank God and move on to something else. It's time to *keep on praying* that we might grow in engagement *all the more*.

That's why, our annual theme for 2020 will remain the same as what it was last year: *Engaging for Growth*.

In fact, next week, we're going to do our next engagement assessment— an interactive exercise where you get to put coloured ping pong balls into the cool machine in the lobby. We last did this in the fall, and next week we'll do it again, as a fun way of tracking our growth in engagement.

So please, don't stop praying for this aspect of our ministry. Growing in engagement in the life and mission of the church can't be one of those things we pray about just once every so often.

The question we need to ask at this point is this:

*How can we make sure, practically speaking, that we don't stop praying for the things that matter most to God?*

In telling the Colossians, "We have not stopped praying for you," Paul is simply saying that he's made it a matter of discipline to pray for them during his regular times of prayer. Similarly, Paul told the church in Rome:

God knows how often I pray for you. Day and night I bring you and your needs in prayer to God, whom I serve with all my heart by spreading the Good News about his Son. <sup>2</sup>

So Paul undoubtedly set aside regular times for prayer during the course of his daily activities. We too should set aside a time or times for prayer each day, and keep a prayer list to remind us who to be praying for.

Use your phone, use your tablet, use post-it-notes if that's how you roll. But however you do it, do it. That's the practical challenge I put before you at the beginning of this New Year: **Keep a prayer list, and pray through it regularly.**

It's really not rocket science. It's a simple matter of intentionality.

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 1:9-10 (NLT)

Bible scholar D.A. Carson hits the nail on the head when he says:

Much praying is not done because we do not plan to pray.

Speaking of prayer plans, we are working on a special prayer guide based on the prayers of Paul. We will have that ready for you to use throughout the season of Lent, because we want to help equip and resource you to put your faith in practice.

Whatever you do, don't stop praying. Yesterday's prayers aren't enough for today's need. It's in this spirit that an anonymous poet once wrote the following words:

I got up early one morning and rushed right into the day!  
I had so much to accomplish that I didn't take time to pray.  
Problems just tumbled about me, and heavier came each task.  
"Why doesn't God help me?" I wondered, He answered, "You didn't ask!"

I tried to come into God's presence; I used all my keys at the lock.  
God gently and lovingly chided, "Why, child, you didn't knock!"  
I wanted to see joy and beauty, but the day toiled on, gray and bleak.  
I wondered why God didn't show me. He answered, "But you didn't seek."

I woke up early this morning, and paused before entering the day.  
I had so much to accomplish, that I *had* to take time to pray.<sup>3</sup>

Next, we learn an important lesson from Paul in our Colossians passage about *what to pray for*. Specifically, we are to pray for ourselves and for others:

## **2. To be filled with the knowledge of God's will.**

That's the very heart and soul of Paul's prayer, as you can see in verse 9:

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives.

When we hear the phrase "God's will", many of us tend to think about the decisions we face in life: where to go to university; the search for the right job; the decision to get married; which church to attend; which home to buy; whether or not to move; how to invest our money; when or whether to have kids, and so on.

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<sup>3</sup> Author unknown.



Without a doubt, we need to seek God's guidance and direction in such decisions.

When Paul prays for the Colossians to be filled with the knowledge of God's will, he has something much bigger and broader and deeper in mind. His prayer is that the Colossians would understand what matters most to God. What is God's agenda in this world? What are God's priorities for us as his people?

If we were to continually pray that God would fill us with the knowledge of his will, how do you think God will respond to our request?

Surely, he will compel us to read, study and mediate on scripture. As the Apostle Paul wrote elsewhere:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.<sup>4</sup>

Having an ever-growing handle on the Bible is essential if you want to know God's will—what really matters to him—what his priorities and purposes are. What are you doing these days to grow in your knowledge of the Bible?

In his book on prayer, Pastor Tim Keller says this:

We only know who we are praying to if we first learn it in the Bible. And we know how we should be praying only by getting our prayer vocabulary from the Bible...Without immersion in God's words... we may not be responding to the real God but to what we wish God and life to be like.<sup>5</sup>

The very thrust of this series is to anchor our praying in the Bible, so our prayers can be driven by God's heart and priorities. It all comes back to *priorities*, right? How can we pray in line with *God's* priorities?

Well, it's a lot bigger deal to God, for example, that I'm growing in love for people than that I get into this or that academic program, because scripture says in 1 Peter:

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV)

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, p. 54-55.

Above all else, love each other deeply... <sup>6</sup>

But do my prayers reflect this priority?

It's a lot bigger deal to God that I develop a joyful, thankful heart than if I make this amount of money or have that level of material lifestyle, because the Bible says in 1 Thessalonians:

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

But do my prayers reflect this priority?

You see, God's will is revealed in God's word, so in order to know and live God's will, you need to grow in the knowledge of scripture. What's your plan for Bible study and reflection in 2020? Here are some opportunities for you to consider:

- For starters, take good notes on this series. Apply at least one learning from each message.
- And use the Lent Prayer Guide when it comes out in late February, because it's based on scripture.
- In terms of other recommend resources, the [Read Scripture app](#) by The Bible Project is one of the best tools out there for reading through the Bible with understanding, with the help of excellent animated videos.<sup>8</sup>
- [The Bible App by YouVersion](#) has tons of scripture reading & devotional plans to choose from.<sup>9</sup>
- And one of my all-time favourites is a book called [Meet the Bible](#) by Philip Yancey and Brenda Quinn. It gives you a panorama of the entire Bible in 366 selected readings, along with helpful, well-written reflections by the authors. If you order the Kindle version, you can start reading it today!

So far, in Paul's prayer for the Colossians, we've seen a lesson on how to pray, as well as a lesson on what to pray for. The next lesson has to do with **why**. Why do we pray for ourselves and others to be filled with the knowledge of God's will? We do so:

### **3. To live lives that please Jesus in every way.**

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Peter 4:8 (NIV)

<sup>7</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.readscripture.org/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youversion.com/the-bible-app/>

In verses 9-10 Paul says:

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will... so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord, and please him in every way.

The whole point of *knowing* God's will is so that we can *do* his will. The whole point of *understanding* God's priorities and purposes is so that we can *put them into practice*, thereby pleasing and honouring Christ in every aspect of our daily lives.

What does it look like to live lives that please Jesus in every way? Well, we don't need to guess, because Paul tells us in the verses that follow. It looks like, first of all:

**Bearing fruit in every good work.** The imagery of fruit-bearing in the Bible refers to God making our service to him and others impactful and productive. God put us here, and he's given each Christ-follower different gifts, abilities, strengths, passions, and callings, so that we can partner with him in making a difference in this world for the sake of his kingdom.

Second, Paul shows us that a life that pleases Jesus in every way involves:

**Growing in the knowledge of God.** He's not referring to intellectual knowledge. He's talking about personal, experiential knowledge. He's talking about relationship.

Many of us see prayer as a means of getting *things* from God to make us happy. But Paul would have us pray that *God himself would become our happiness*. Prayer is not merely as a way to get *things* from God, but a way to *get more of God himself*.

Third, Paul shows us that a life that pleases Jesus in every way involves being strengthened with God's power to have:

**Great endurance and patience.** Because guess what? Sometimes life as a disciple of Jesus gets hard. Paul himself suffered tremendous hardship for Christ's sake—far more than most of us will ever see in our lifetime— but do you know what he was able to say?

Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory [God] will reveal to us later.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Romans 8:18 (NLT)

Do we, like Paul, have a vision of our glorious eternal future with Christ that fills us with tremendous hope, and along with it, patient endurance?

As we move toward the vision that God has given us to plant a new campus, to start a third worship service, and to develop a leadership institute, the year and the years ahead will surely hold a number of demanding challenges for us, as exciting as the vision is.

So would you cover Cornerstone in prayer, starting now—and then *don't stop praying*— so that together we may be strengthened with God's power to patiently endure any trials or challenges that may come our way as we transition into a new era of ministry?

Finally— and with this we'll move into the Lord's Supper—a life that pleases Jesus in every way involves:

**Giving joyful thanks to God.** Being thankful is a choice, regardless of life's circumstances. There are always reasons to give thanks to God, no matter what your situation in life. Surely, we can be thankful for our family and friends, the air we breathe, the jobs we have, the food on our tables, the homes we live in. If you begin to count your blessings, it can transform your outlook and attitude, and this pleases Jesus.

We should thank God for all of the things I just listed, because all good gifts come from God.

But those things—as wonderful as they are—pale in comparison to what Paul says is our ultimate reason to give joyful thanks to God. Look at verses 12-13, which say:

and giving joyful thanks to God the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Our reason to give joyful thanks to God, infinitely above all else, is that God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness, bringing us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, and qualifying us to be his holy people, now and forever.

Oh God, may the exceeding wonder of what you've done for us in Jesus not be lost on us! May it fill us afresh today with joyful thanksgiving unto you, and may that joyful thanksgiving mark our lives from day to day.

Some churches refer to the Lord's Supper, or communion, as the Eucharist, which comes from a Greek word meaning to give thanks. The Lord's Supper is a celebration of joyful thanksgiving. In it, we celebrate what the Lord has done for us thorough the death and resurrection of Christ.

We celebrate the fact that through the bread and wine, Jesus himself invites us into his presence, right here, right now. He feeds us with his very self. And we celebrate the fact that this supper anticipates the marriage supper of the Lamb, which we will enjoy with Jesus face to face when he returns, in the new heavens and the new earth.

As we partake of the Lord's Supper this morning, may we do so in the spirit of Eucharist—a joyful celebration of thanksgiving to God for the unspeakable gift of his Son, Jesus Christ.

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