

## **Grow Together #5: Praying to Grow Together (Colossians 1:3-14)**

### **PRAY**

If I were to guess one area of your spiritual life where you feel like a failure in, I'd guess prayer  
Like, we know in our heads that we ought to pray, yet we regularly struggle to do so  
Even some of the most seasoned saints I know have expressed frustration here  
I don't want to add to that sense of failure or guilt today  
Rather, I want to excite you, or stir you up, with the privilege and the joy and the glory  
of praying for one another... Specifically of praying for each other's growth, together

I know you want to grow... We've established that in our series on Growing Together  
So: Have you been asking God to empower you to grow?  
But also: Do you realize how much everyone around you wants or needs this as well?  
If we love them, we will want to participate in their sanctification through prayer

Let's **TURN** together in our Bibles to Colossians chapter 1... Colossians 1 [page #983]  
Where we will read one of the apostle Paul's many prayers recorded in Scripture  
If you study these prayers, you will notice that one consistent theme is growth  
He wants God's people to be sanctified—made holy and godly and Christlike  
In his words, I think we can glimpse a model for us to follow, and motivation for us to do so  
I hope and, yes, pray that they will inspire us happily down the pathway of prayer

For if God is the ultimate source of our growth, as we've seen, then we must look to him  
And if the gospel provides the main motivation to grow, we should seek the God of the gospel  
And if Christlikeness is the goal of our sanctification, then we need to gaze on Christ's face  
And if the Word of God is *one* key means by which we grow, the Word often drives us to pray  
One author called prayer "*acknowledged helplessness*"<sup>1</sup>... acknowledged helplessness  
In it, we draw near to God and acknowledge we are helpless, powerless, on our own  
And we admit that we need him and his help, and ask for it, by his grace

Remember we introduced the idea of the 'means of grace' last week... Which are:  
Ways God puts grace to work in our lives through habits, practices, or disciplines  
They are ways we put ourselves in position to receive from him  
Like a light switch or water faucet opens up to the flow of electricity or water  
Hearing Scripture was one such means... Prayer is another *major* means of grace  
You might be familiar with the old Sunday School song:  
*Read your Bible, pray every day, and you'll grow, grow, grow*  
And then the kids act out growing up, maybe like a sunflower  
The song is cheesy, the truth is basic, but it is actually true  
These are two of the chief methods God uses to spiritually grow us, long-term

Do these core means of grace seem too basic or boring? Well, have you actually mastered them?  
Darryl Dash explains: "*The core habits... may be mundane, ordinary, and at times lack excitement, but they are also wondrous, miraculous, and beautiful ways in which we*

*grow into conformity with Christ and who we were meant to be. We ignore them at our peril. The moment we begin ignoring core habits is the moment we begin to stagnate."*

Boring? The most mature believers will tell you otherwise as well, as they've found the means of grace to be life-giving and soul-rejuvenating, time and time again And they too usually feel they're just getting started on the basics

Before we dive into Colossians 1, let's quickly define what prayer is

At its simplest, prayer is communicating with God:

Talking with God, pouring out our hearts, or sharing our lives with the Lord

Prayer really is a two-way conversation with God, which he started through his Word

It's also the way we access God's supernatural power that he wants to work on our behalf

And a beauty is, as a form of grace, we don't need to earn the right or the ability to pray

Everyone can come spiritually before him, just as we are, with our hearts and mouths

We can bring all our anxieties, doubts, dreams, emotions, joys, pains, or struggles to him,

(Even our struggle to pray or to *want* to pray)

Knowing that he already cares for us... Jesus proved that by dying for us

When you love someone, you naturally want to talk and share everything with them

When I was first falling in love with my wife, we'd talk for hours, deep into the night

Funny things, hard things, mundane things, joyous things, painful things, spiritual things

And nearly twenty years later, I still want to share everything with my wife

Even if our texts now often consist of funny memes or shopping lists

Even if you haven't been in love before, you can probably relate

When you think of who you talk to the most—your mom, a good friend, a roommate...

We build relationships through communicating and sharing our lives with one another

So do we love the Lord? Do we want to love and know him more? We need to talk to him!

*What a friend we have in Jesus... What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer*

[tr] After introducing his letter to the believers in the Colossian church,

Paul gets affectionate, excited, and worshipful

He was thrilled that these believers were part of God's family with him

And he was passionate about praying for them... Just listen: **READ v.3-5a, 9-12<sup>2</sup>**

Are you thankful that you have been placed in the same family of faith with other believers?

And are you excited to pray for them? If not, pray that God would stoke your desire

We could do a whole, long series on the topic of prayer... But that's not today

For now, I want to focus on praying for *one another* and how that helps us grow together

Through what Paul says and prays in this passage, I think we will learn three key truths... First:

**Our prayers for one another should be shaped by thanksgiving (v.3-8, 12-14)**

[r] Our prayers for one another should be shaped by gratitude and thanksgiving

Thanksgiving for what? Primarily for what the gospel has done in each other's lives

Did you see as much here? **READ v.3-5a<sup>3</sup>**... Notice: faith, hope, and love

Faith in Christ as Saviour, love like Christ loved them, hope of eternal life

All that they were thankful for was sparked by the gospel

And Paul *thanks God* for these good fruits that had grown in the Colossian Christians

He doesn't give *them* all the credit for it: 'Great job on the faith, hope, and love, guys!'

And he isn't just relieved or happy: 'Oh, I'm so glad you're all doing the right things...'  
No, he is thankful, and to the Lord... Not to them  
And he directs their attention to the source of all their growth: 'We always thank God'

v.5-6 make it clear that God had used the gospel to bring about this work in them:

**READ v.5b-6<sup>4</sup>**... The gospel bears fruit... The gospel grows the church... The gospel grows us  
This is the season that some of you might go apple picking... Or pumpkin picking  
When you do, you reap fruit that has already grown on a tree or a vine, planted by others  
It takes months (or even years) for plants, and then fruit, to develop and grow  
But when the fruit ripens, we can then enjoy the harvest  
Paul was like, 'Look around! It's harvest time! The gospel is bearing fruit all over the place!'  
The good news of Jesus had been spreading around the world, saving and sanctifying people  
And this harvest was (and is) ongoing: '*it is bearing fruit and increasing*'  
Go ahead, look around today... The gospel has borne fruit, saving so many folks around you  
And it continues to bear fruit, as you and I keep slowly changing into Christ's likeness  
This should fill our hearts with joyous gratitude

By the way, if you haven't yet put your faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour,  
This, today, can be the day you '*hear it and understand the grace of God in truth*'  
I pray it is! I ask God right now that your ears would be opened to hear of Jesus,  
That you would understand what he did for you by dying in your place and rising again  
And that you would receive God's grace today, in truth, and be forever changed

And for all of us, let's remember that it is only because of the gospel of Christ  
That any of us can pray the way we do, at all... Jesus tore the veil between us and God,  
Making peace between us, and welcoming us into his presence without fear  
As **Ephesians 2:18** says: "*For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.*"  
So, from the most mundane, take-it-for-granted prayers, before meals or bedtimes,  
to the most powerful, life-changing times of intense intercession,  
The reason we can pray is because Jesus paved the way... Are you thankful yet?  
**David Mathis** says: "*Prayer is a reflex to the grace he gives to the sinners he saves. It is soliciting his provision in view of the power he has shown.*"

This is why, every single time they prayed for the Colossians, Paul and his friends *thanked God*  
But they weren't just thankful *to God*, they were thankful *for people*

They mention the name of one guy in particular, who was well known to the Colossians  
**READ v.7-8<sup>5</sup>**... We don't know much about Epaphras, besides what's written here  
He seems to have been the first one to bring the gospel to Colossae... Their church planter  
He was a beloved early Christian... A faithful servant of Christ  
And he'd brought the exciting news to Paul about how the Colossians were doing  
But notice: Even though God is the one to be thanked for bringing about salvation and growth,  
He uses his people to actively help do this work in each other  
And check out something cool... Flip over to chapter 4, and look at v.12:

**READ 4:12<sup>6</sup>**... So, interesting... Epaphras' ministry to them wasn't in person at this time  
And yet he continued serving them, from afar, and how? Through prayer!  
He was 'always struggling' on their behalf in prayer, praying for their maturity

I want you to pause right here and think:

Who was the person, or the people, who first taught you the gospel?

Maybe it was a parent or grandparent, a sibling, a pastor, a teacher, an evangelist, a friend

Get them in your mind: Are you thankful to God for how he used them in your life?

No matter how impressive or faithful we are or not, he uses us in each other's lives

Epaphras had made an eternal impact in so many people... And God was getting the glory

Our prayers really should be so shaped and surrounded by thanksgiving

And Paul exemplifies this by not just starting with thanksgiving, but ending with it

Skip ahead to v.12, where he prays that the church would be continually: **READ v.12<sup>7</sup>**

You may feel like you don't know how to pray, or that prayer is too hard for you

Or even that you don't deserve to pray, because you've messed up your life too badly

We may think that prayer is especially for the super saints out there... Prayer warriors

Like, 'I'm not qualified to do this...' Except that you are! Wake up to this glory:

By exchanging places with you, and giving you his own holiness,

Jesus *qualified* you to come before the throne of God above... Thank the Lord!

As if we needed any more reason to praise, Paul adds this gospel summary: **READ v.13-14<sup>8</sup>**

So look at your neighbours... Assuming that they are believers, are you grateful:

That they are a saint now—made holy by the blood of the Lamb?

That they are qualified to share in the inheritance of heaven with you?

That they are no longer of the domain of darkness, but belong to Jesus' kingdom?

That they are fully redeemed? That they are forgiven and free?

No matter how dark our pasts are, we've been changed and transformed, praise God!

And believer, don't just be thankful that this is true of you...

Be thankful that we're in this glorious new reality together

[tr] And one implication of all this? He has drawn us together, in order to *pray*

We do struggle to grasp how critical prayer is in our lives

Perhaps because the spiritual realm is so invisible and intangible

So many physical realities, like eating or working or sleeping seem more important

But Paul begs to differ, demonstrating that prayer is of utmost importance... So much so, that:

**Our prayers for one another should be constant in zeal (v.9)**

[r] Our prayers for one another should be constant in fervour or zeal

**READ v.9a<sup>9</sup>...** 'And so...' Why had they not ceased to pray for them?

Well, look back: because of their salvation, their good fruit, and the good report of their love

Which means: It was actually *good* things that caused them to pray all the harder

Is that surprising? Today, we often pray hardest for people when things are hard:

When someone has a health challenge, financial trouble, or a fall into sin

(And we absolutely *should* pray for those kinds of things!)

But we need to pray in the good times too, and when things are going well spiritually

For one, because what we've been given is so precious, that we want to go deeper

For two, because we have an enemy who would love to destroy God's work in us

And three, because even when God has graced us abundantly,

There is so much more we can receive... So much farther that we can go

Clearly, praying for other believers was of utmost priority...

It was Paul's *first* impulse: *'From the day we heard...'* they started praying  
And clearly, this is something we desperately need, even if we don't grasp prayer entirely  
I struggle with the desire to pray, which means I terribly underestimate the privilege  
I also can struggle to believe that prayer does much of anything, so I don't see the point  
But beneath that is a lack of faith in the God who hears prayers...  
So Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!

**READ v.9a<sup>10</sup>** ... Did they literally not cease praying? It depends what you mean by not ceasing  
Did they pray for this singular Colossian church, 24/7/365, non-stop, every second? No  
But if they kept praying regularly for them, hourly, daily, or even weekly,

They could still honestly say, 'We haven't stopped praying for you.'  
For example, I could tell you today, 'Since the day I was born, I haven't ceased eating' ...  
Or, 'I haven't stopped sleeping' ... Or even, 'I haven't stopped using the facilities'  
And you know what I mean... I don't do these things all the time, but I do continually do them

Now at the same time, there is also a sense of frequency or constancy in Paul's unceasing prayers  
I suspect he did think to pray for these people often, probably multiple times a day  
He wasn't saying he *only* prayed for them, but that he constantly kept returning to prayer  
So you're not failing if you're not praying every waking moment of every day  
Yet we should still aim for more and more and more prayer, all we can

Many Scriptures make this point about the urgency of frequent prayer

In Luke 18, Jesus told a parable to say we *"ought always to pray and not lose heart."*  
And, multiple times, he told his disciples to keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking

1 Thessalonians 5:17 says: *"Pray without ceasing"*

Romans 12:12: *"Be constant in prayer"*

Colossians 4:2: *"Continue steadfastly in prayer"*

Ephesians 6:18 says: *"[Pray] at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints..."*

So not as much for ourselves, as for each other... But do you get the idea?

Last month, I got sick, and after all the rest of my symptoms were gone, I had a cough  
A continual hacking cough that I couldn't seem to shake  
Now was I coughing every second of every day? Of course not; I'd probably be dead now  
But I was coughing frequently and impulsively... Every few minutes, it shot out of me  
Likewise, we are to pray frequently and impulsively... All the time  
It doesn't mean you're actually praying every single second

But it means we recognize the value and power of prayer so much,  
That whenever anything or anyone pops into our minds, or comes across our path,  
or worries or frightens us, or excites us or thrills us, we can't help it:  
Our first impulse is to pray... To shoot something out from our hearts  
'Thank you!' 'Help me' 'Help them, Lord' 'Your will be done'

As Don Carson wisely advises us to: *"Never ignore an impulse to pray."*

So if we need to pray to best grow together, and our prayers should be constant in zeal,  
Then we ought to make sure, as a church, that all our activities are saturated in prayer

As our church has grown, I know it's become more challenging to get to know people  
Thus, it's harder to truly love all those around you  
And if you don't love someone, why would you bother to pray for them?  
This just goes to show the priority of intentionally getting into each others' lives  
So you care enough about people to pray continually for them  
And so you know enough about people to pray intelligently for them  
Small groups are a vital way to facilitate these closer relationships and intercessory prayer  
But I'd encourage you to take every opportunity you can to work prayer into our community:  
You have a meeting or meal with someone? Pray for each other then  
You're on a service team together? Pray before, during, and after serving  
You have a conversation after church? Offer to pray for each other before you disperse

[tr] But you might think, "What should we be praying for?" ...I'm so glad you asked!  
The Lord's Prayer, which we recited earlier, can be a model or guide for us  
in the many things we can and should be praying about  
But again, today, we're focusing on praying for each other  
And I think Paul's prayer in Colossians 1 exemplifies where our focus should be:

**Our prayers for one another should be focused on spiritual growth (v.9-11)**

[r] Our prayers for one another should focus on sanctification—our spiritual growth

Look again at what Paul prays for: **READ v.9<sup>11</sup>**

In other words, that we would have the knowledge and know-how  
to live according to God's will—the way he wants us to live  
And that leads to: **READ v.10a<sup>12</sup>**... So not just the know-how, but the follow-through  
We are called live in such a way that is 'worthy of the Lord' and 'fully pleasing to him'  
Now, question: Is that possible to do on our own power? Absolutely not  
Every time I sin and fall short, I live unworthily of the Lord  
And there's no way I do enough good to be 'fully pleasing' to him, all the time  
However, Paul prays for this as though it's totally realistic... Because it is!  
Because we have been united to Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit,  
It is now possible for us to, imperfectly yet truly, please the Lord  
But we're going to need God's supernatural help to live up to these incredible standards  
Hence why we must pray, and pray for one another  
By the way, you can pray these exact words this week as you think about your fellow believers

What would walking worthy and pleasing look like? Paul answers: **READ v.10b<sup>13</sup>**

So our faith will be lived out in good works... That is part of bearing fruit  
We will love, we will give, we will serve, we will witness, we will disciple, and so on  
Jesus said, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."* (John 15:5)

One key way we abide in him, daily, is through constant prayer... Which bears much fruit  
All the while, as it says here, we keep increasing in the knowledge of God—knowing God  
So knowledge of God's will, in v.9, in turn leads to knowledge of God  
So there's this cycle of never-ending growth

And don't underestimate how incredible this growth can be: **READ v.11<sup>14</sup>**

Do you need strength today, to keep standing up for Christ in a world gone mad?  
I know I do... Can I interest you in “all power” strengthening you?  
That’s what’s held out to us in prayer, because of God’s ‘glorious might’  
Do you need endurance today, to keep holding on to hope?  
I know I do... Let’s pray for one another, that we keep on keeping on  
Do you need patience today, to wait for the Lord’s return—or to put up with his people?  
Do you need joy today, in the midst of a lot of real sorrows?  
Brothers and sisters, I hope you see how much we need to pray  
And even more so, I hope you see how much is available to us in prayer... Do we believe it?

Isn’t it revealing what Paul *doesn’t* pray for here? This doesn’t sound like most of our prayers:  
‘Help Aunt Sally be healed from her bronchitis...’ ‘Give Freddie a job, please...’  
‘Make the bully stop bullying my kid...’ ‘Bring the Johnsons’ suffering to an end...’  
Again, nothing wrong with praying for those things  
But looking at the prayers in the Bible, it appears it’s *better* to pray for spiritual growth  
So ‘Help Aunt Sally heal, but help her to learn to trust you more daily’  
‘Give Freddie a job, but teach him patience and contentment in the meantime’  
‘Make the bully stop, but strengthen my kid to endure hardship, even now’  
‘End the Johnsons’ suffering, but fill them with a love and joy in knowing you’

When our prayers are answered, we can then go right back to thanksgiving...  
As Paul does in 2 Thessalonians 1:3, right while acknowledging afflictions people were facing,  
He says: *“We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers... because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.”*  
That was most important of all  
So let’s be honest with ourselves today: How much of our prayers are aimed at spiritual growth?  
How might we adjust or re-focus them on what is most valuable to our souls?

I could list off various practical ways to grow in prayer today  
Like praying out loud, praying Scripture, or utilizing tech or apps to keep you praying  
And prayer in private is extremely vital... Jesus made that very clear in Matthew 6  
However, communal prayer tends to be so overlooked and underestimated  
Remember that it is to *our* Father we pray, not just *my* Father  
Jesus often took his disciples with him to pray  
Acts 1:14 says of the early church: *“All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer”*... Actually, the whole book of Acts is chock-full of the church praying

So let’s focus on a few ways we can grow together as a church family at praying together

- 1) Stop telling people you will pray for them, unless you really mean it  
Instead, stop, drop, and pray, right there, with them, in the moment
- 2) Pray through sections of the church directory at certain times of the day or week
- 3) When you think of someone and shoot up a prayer for them,  
Shoot them a message to let them know you prayed for them  
Not to brag about your prayer habits, but to encourage them in their faith
- 4) Commit to times of corporate prayer as of prime importance  
So, as a small group, always leave enough time to pray in depth for one another

Don't rush it or just tack it on at the end  
 Make it meaningful so it becomes maybe even the biggest reason to come  
 Or commit to coming out once a month to our evening gathering, (like tonight)  
 Which is primarily a church-wide prayer meeting  
 We started these when we recognized a lack of opportunities to pray, all  
 together, for the big things going on in our church, our city, and our world  
 The preaching and potluck times are bonuses... Prayer is the priority  
 One final key piece of advice, from Darryl Dash: *"Focus on God more than you focus on prayer. Remember, prayer is a means to an end. You're pursuing God, not the act of prayer itself."*

## CONCLUSION

So let us pray... And remember, we don't just pray for this by ourselves, even as a community  
*Jesus* prayed for our growth, too, remember? *"Sanctify them in the truth..."* (John 17:17)  
 And he hasn't ceased praying for us, to this day  
*Hebrews 7:25* says *"He always lives to make intercession for [us]..."*  
 And get this: the Holy Spirit joins in, even now, praying with us  
*"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words... the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."* (Romans 8:26-27)  
 So may our community join in the community of the Godhead,  
 In praying that his kingdom would come and his will would be done *among us* [ ]  
 I thought we'd close by immediately putting this into practice by praying for one another  
 So why don't you turn to your neighbour or neighbours...  
 (Make sure everyone's included, but groups no larger than 3)  
 And use the words of Colossians 1 here to pray for them right now... Then I'll close

## PRAY

### Benediction: prayer, 5min, Eph. 3:20-21

<sup>1</sup> Jared Wilson

<sup>2</sup> We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven... And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

<sup>3</sup> We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

<sup>4</sup> Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth

<sup>5</sup> just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

<sup>6</sup> Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

<sup>7</sup> giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

<sup>8</sup> He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

<sup>9</sup> And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you

<sup>10</sup> And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you

<sup>11</sup> And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding

<sup>12</sup> so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him

<sup>13</sup> bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God

<sup>14</sup> being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy...