

Spiritual Prayer List
April 25, 2021

My wife and I got our vegetable garden in the ground this past week. We planted tomato, pepper, and broccoli plants in the ground. We also planted seeds for snow peas, cucumbers, and squash. Every year we hope for a good crop, enough for us, for freezing, and some to give to neighbors. Every gardener wants to see their garden grow.

Life is built on growth. Parents want their children to grow. Businesses want their profits to grow. Athletes want their abilities to grow. Teachers want their students to grow in knowledge.

Jesus also wants growth. Jesus wants his followers to grow. He has equipped us to grow. He expects us to grow. And it saddens him when we do not grow.

There are several places in the New Testament where Jesus reveals his displeasure at the lack of growth of some Christians. In 1 Corinthians, through the apostle Paul, Jesus calls them immature baby Christians. He did not mean they were new Christians. He meant they were behaving immaturely. In the book of Hebrews, the writer rebuked his readers because they were not growing. They were stuck in the beginner stages of the Christian faith. They were stuck at an elementary understanding of the Gospel. These were not new believers.

One evidence of such immaturity in Christians today are those who think, "I was baptized. I get to go to heaven. That's all I want. Don't bother me with other stuff to know or do." They don't want to grow.

My wife and I both attended seminary. When she was preparing to leave South Carolina for the seminary a friend told her she did not want to hear of stuff she learned there. This young woman was comfortable with where she was as a Christian and did not want to hear anything to challenge what she already believed.

I wonder about such people. Sure, they talk a good talk about being thankful Jesus died for sins, but you don't see any growth. They go to church year after year, but they aren't growing in knowledge of Christian truth. They are in a state of arrested spiritual development.

That is never God's will for his people. He wants us to mature in our faith. He wants us to grow in our knowledge of God, grow in knowing God, and grow in love for God.

A mature faith is evident in different ways. One way is in our prayers.

A maturing understanding of the Christian faith will be reflected in our prayers.

We see this principle in Pauls' prayers for the Christians in the city of Ephesus. In recent sermons, we learned of some of our spiritual blessings recorded in the first chapter of

Ephesians. I want to pick up today at the end of that passage and read what Paul was praying for those Christians. I am reading from the New Living Translation today.

Ephesians 1:15-19 (NLT2) Ever since I first heard of your strong faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for God's people everywhere, I have not stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly, asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God. I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called—his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance. I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him.

Today's title is Spiritual Prayer List. It is about prayer. So, let's draw a prayer application here. I encourage you to... **Be praying for other Christians.**

Since we are all so busy one of the best ways to fulfill Jesus' command to love each other is to take the time to pray for each other. Give each other a gift of prayer time. Give each other a gift of intercessory prayer. This is what Paul did.

Ephesians 1:16 (NLT2) I have not stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly...

You may know some of the needs of a brother or sister in Christ. Some in our church are not doing well in their health. Others are facing financial challenges. Others have problem relationships with relatives. Others face problems at work. You learn of these needs in your Bible study group or on the church prayer list.

But, beyond these kinds of requests you might not know what to pray for others. Let me suggest several things to pray, based on Paul's example.

Thank God for their salvation and partnership in our church.

Ephesians 1:15-16 (NLT2) Ever since I first heard of your strong faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for God's people everywhere, I have not stopped thanking God for you.

It has always been God's plan that you, and they, be a part of this church. God worked to bring us together as a church. You may not like everyone here. You may not get along with everyone here. But it was God's plan that we become a church family. God loves each person in our church, your church, just as much as he loves you. If you don't love them, you are opposing God. You are failing to cooperate with what God is doing.

Everyone here is a part of God's plan to mature you in Christ. God has great purpose in who he chose to be a part of this church family. Recognize that. Acknowledge that in prayer. Thank him for his wisdom. And thank him for every member of our church family.

Think of their good qualities and thank God for those in them.

Too often we think of what we don't like in people and ignore the good in them. God put the good there. He put skills, abilities, interests, good character. He is forming in each person the image of Christ. Celebrate God's work in them. Look for the good in others and give God praise for what you see.

Ask God to give each of us a fuller understanding of the Gospel so that our hearts would be drawn to Him.

This is what Paul asks for in the text.

Ephesians 1:17 (NLT2) "... asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God.

Knowing God is what the Christian life is about. First and foremost it is about a personal relationship with God. This was Paul's goal for them.

I usually preach from the 1984 New International Version. I purposely changed translations today because I do not agree with how the NIV translated this passage, specifically verse 17. This verse is easy to translate, but not easy to interpret. An adequate translation is as follows:

"...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you (a) spirit of wisdom and revelation in a fuller knowledge of him..."

It is difficult to know what Paul means by this. I had puzzled and praying over the meaning of this verse for several years. Comparing English translations wasn't much help. There are a lot of differences between them. Some of them add the direct object, "the", before the word spirit and capitalize it to Spirit. They interpret Paul to mean that he is praying for God to give his readers the Holy Spirit. But that makes no sense because they were already Christians. They already had the Holy Spirit.

Instead, I believe Paul is asking God to give them to understand fully the truths of the Christian faith.

It does not take much understanding of the Gospel to get saved. But to draw close to the God with all your heart requires a great understanding of the Gospel. It requires an understanding of that only the Holy Spirit can give us. It requires us to respond to God with love. This is what Paul prayed for. This is what we can ask, should ask, for ourselves and each other.

I was saved when I was twelve years old. I did not know very much Christian truth at that age. I finished high school at 18. I did not know much more Christian truth at that age. I finished college at age 23 and seminary at 29. Even then there was much I needed to learn. In my years as your pastor God has continued to inform my faith and draw me closer to himself. This is what Paul prayed for.

Let me show you an example of this. All through the Gospels, the disciples of Jesus had a traditional view of what would happen when the Messiah came. They believed the Messiah would gather the Jews together, take the throne of Israel, and in the power of God rebel against the Romans. They kept expecting Jesus to do that, right up to the last day he was on earth, as we see in Acts 1.

Acts 1:6 (NIV) So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

They still did not understand about the purpose of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus answered that it was not for them to know when that would occur. He told them to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come to them. After this brief conversation Jesus rose up into the clouds and they saw him no more. They did what he said and waited in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Ten days later the Holy Spirit was poured into them. And a few minutes later, Peter, suddenly full of understanding of the Gospel preached to a crowd and 3,000 people got saved.

When the Spirit came upon them, He filled them with knowledge of the gospel. They immediately understood what the death and resurrection of Jesus meant and began to preach that truth. The Holy Spirit gave them the knowledge they lacked about Jesus and the Gospel.

This is what I pray for me and you to experience. This is needed for us to mature in our faith. Just going to church won't do it.

Paul gives us some help in understanding his request with verses 18 and 19. In the original Greek, verses 15-19 are all one long sentence. By breaking it up into smaller sentences, many translations make them sound like two additional requests. Instead, they are an extension of the same request. They are the outcome of God fulfilling the request in verse 17.

We should translate them as follows:

Ephesians 1:18-19 (RSP) ... (so that) your eyes having been enlightened, you will know the hope of his calling, the wealth of His inheritance in the Saints (Christians), and His great power to work in us...

So pray for each other. Give thanks for each other. Ask God to give each of us a fuller understanding of the Gospel so that our hearts would be drawn to Him.

Let us fulfill Christ's command to love each other by praying for each other. A gift of prayer time, of compassion, and of kindness is all part of loving each other.