

**Series:** The Letter to the Colossians

**Title:** Praying for Your Church

**Text:** Colossians 1:9-11

**Date:** May 21, 2023

### **Verse 9**

Paul continued the introduction to his letter by sharing a prayer he prayed for the Colossians: “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” (Colossians 1:9). The reference to “the day we heard” undoubtedly referred to Epaphras’ visit to Rome. When the pastor arrived to visit the imprisoned apostle, he told of the way a church had been birthed at Colossae. It seems the man was converted during Paul’s ministry in Asia (Acts 19:10). The man then subsequently returned to his hometown and shared the gospel. A church came into being via his faithful efforts.

Paul was surely overjoyed to hear of the news of the new church in Colossae. After hearing about the young congregation, he began to earnestly pray for it. He said, “...we have not ceased to pray for you....” The Greek word rendered “pray” is one that is used throughout the New Testament to speak of prayer in general. Paul employed the term earlier in his letter (Colossians 1:3). Though there are other terms that speak of prayer (“praise,” “requests,” “thanksgiving,” “confess,” and more), the word for “pray” spoke of the act of approaching God. Such is the essence of real Christian prayer — drawing near to the Lord.

In listing the content of his prayer in Colossians 1:9-11, Paul provided a model of the type of prayer he mandated elsewhere in his letters. When writing to the Thessalonians, he said, “...pray without ceasing...” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). He urged the Ephesians to be “...praying at all times in the Spirit...” (Ephesians 6:18). Persistent prayer is to be a hallmark of the true believer.

It is important to note that such prayer is to be marked by intercession — the offering of prayers on behalf of others. In writing to Timothy, Paul said, “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Timothy 2:1-2). The apostle’s words indicated that intercessory prayer is required of God’s people, but they also indicated that intercessory prayer has a powerful result in the lives of God’s people as well. When one prays persistently for others, something supernatural takes place in the heart and mind of that individual. One is transformed to live a godly life that gives glory to God. Job learned this lesson through his difficult experiences (Job 42:10).

An integral part of Paul’s prayer was “asking.” As it appears in our text, the term “asking” referred to specific requests the apostle made on behalf of the Colossians. The word referred to a petition based on a need. From the teaching of our Lord, Paul knew that real, Christian prayer involved frequent requests. Jesus said, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8). Asking of God is a fundamental and foundational element of Christian prayer. One could argue that one has never fully prayed unless one has faithfully asked of God. In his letter, James rebuked his readers for their failure in this area (James 4:3).

The word “that” in verse 9 introduced the content of Paul’s prayer for the Colossians.<sup>1</sup> In describing the nature of his prayer requests, the apostle first mentioned the way he prayed that they would “be filled with” God’s knowledge. The Greek word for “fill” appeared in the passive voice of the Greek language. Paul’s aim was to depict the Spirit of God moving upon

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<sup>1</sup> Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 460.

his readers and filling them with knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. His verbiage demonstrated that true wisdom doesn't come from the earth or from humankind. Yes, there is a form of wisdom that is "...earthly, unspiritual, demonic" (James 3:15). The Gnostics possessed such a wisdom. However, Paul wanted his readers to receive "the wisdom from above" (James 3:17-18).

Paul's use of the word "knowledge" was an unmistakable rebuke of the Gnostic heresy. The Gnostics used the Greek word *gnōsis* to speak of their supposed special knowledge. Paul used the compound word *epignōsis*. It contained a prefix of the preposition for "upon" at the front of the Gnostic's cherished term. Thus, it depicted a deeper type of knowledge. The term referred not just to "knowledge" in general; instead, it referred to "full knowledge."<sup>2</sup> One has referred to the term as "...the keynote of Paul's reply to the conceit of Gnosticism."<sup>3</sup> The apostle used the noun form of the word in Colossians 1:9, 10; 2:2; and 3:10. He used the verb form of the term previously in Colossians 1:6.

Paul knew some of his readers were being tempted to defect from a pure and true knowledge of Christ. In all generations, God's people should be on guard. There is always a smorgasbord of religious ideas that have the potential of detracting from Christ. Paul told Timothy to be on guard in this matter, saying, "Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called '*knowledge*'" (1 Timothy 6:20).

Paul highlighted the altogether different quality of the knowledge of Christ by qualifying it with several terms — "his will," "spiritual wisdom," and "understanding." The concept of God's "will" is one that seems mysterious to many. The Greek word for "will" is one that simply spoke of what God wants or what God desires. As used by Paul in Colossians 1:9, the term did not necessarily point to God's will for the lives of individual believers in the church at Colossae. Modern believers often think of the term in such a way. Instead, Paul used the term to speak of God's will in relation to His plan of redemption. N.T. Wright has commented, "The '*knowledge of God's will*' is more than simply an insight into how God wants his people to behave: it is an understanding of God's whole saving purpose in Christ, and hence...a knowledge of God himself."<sup>4</sup> Paul wanted his readers to be focused on gaining a knowledge of such things, as opposed to gaining the supposed knowledge of the heretics. The Gnostics boasted of secret insights into the angelic realm and visions of other worlds (Colossians 2:18).<sup>5</sup> Paul prayed his readers would reject such things and pursue after the knowledge of God's program of redemption in Christ.

The word for "wisdom" is the Greek word *sophía*. For the Greeks, the term referred to "...mental excellency in its high-test and fullest sense."<sup>6</sup> In the Hebrew mind, wisdom was the ability to apply knowledge to life's situations.<sup>7</sup> The word for "understanding" (*súnesis*) is one that could perhaps best be translated as "prudence."<sup>8</sup> According to the Greek poet Homer, the

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<sup>2</sup> Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume IV, The Epistles of Paul*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931), 475.

<sup>3</sup> Robertson, 475.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, N.T. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 57.

<sup>5</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 460.

<sup>6</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 460.

<sup>7</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 460.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 142.

word spoke of “a running or flowing together.” It seems the idea of the word was the ability to meld principles of wisdom to the daily experiences of real life. Used together, terms like “will,” “wisdom,” and “understanding” highlighted the superiority of Christian knowledge to supposed Gnostic knowledge. Paul heaped term upon term to show that the wisdom from above is vastly superior to the wisdom that is from below.

The adjective “spiritual” in verse 9 is used as an adjective for both “wisdom” and “understanding.”<sup>9</sup> In the previous verse (Colossians 1:8), Paul indicated that the the virtue of love is produced in the lives of believers by the Holy Spirit. His intent in verse 9 was similar. He wanted to convey the idea that true knowledge, and the ability to apply that knowledge to life, comes from the Holy Spirit of God. No believer assimilates any Christian virtue into his or her life apart from the indwelling power of God’s Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

Concerning the need for Christian knowledge and wisdom, one modern author has said, “Instead of being filled with the knowledge of the world, we are to be filled with all spiritual wisdom and understanding.”<sup>10</sup> Paul knew his readers needed to reorient themselves with their need for the knowledge of Christ. The doctrinal error and falsehood in their midst was resulting in spiritual confusion and insecurity. God’s people cannot be spiritually strong without a strong stance in Christian truth. They need to constantly fix their attention on Christ and the wisdom that is found in Him.

### Verse 10

In verse 10, Paul shared a second prayer he prayed for the Colossians. He prayed they would “...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” (Colossians 1:10). Take note of Paul’s reference to the “walk” of his readers. The concept of walking was used in Hebrew Scriptures to speak of the way one conducted his or her life (Proverbs 2:20; 4:23-27).

As used in verse 10, the verb rendered “to walk” (*peripatéō*) appeared as an aorist active infinitive verb in the original language of the text. As such, it denoted purpose or result.<sup>11</sup> Paul’s words revealed that Christians do not accumulate spiritual knowledge for the sake of knowledge alone. The purpose of pursuing Christian knowledge is to experience a transformation in how one lives. Without obedience to God’s wisdom, one makes no progress in godliness, no matter what boasts or claims one makes concerning what they know.

The Gnostics were famous for the way they gave license to sin. John seemed to deal with such things in his first letter (1 John 1:7-2:2; 2:6, 15; 3:4-8; 5:2-3). Paul wanted the genuine believers at Colossae to know that the Gnostics were misguided. They bragged about what they knew, but their lives were marked by many of the sins that plagued unregenerate humanity. Paul wanted the Colossians to know that a true knowledge of Christ always results in a true change in how one lives (Ephesians 2:10). Knowledge of God and holiness before God are like twin pillars in the Christian life. You cannot truly have one without the other.

The word translated “worthy” referred to something that was suitable or proper.<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul used the same term to urge believers to live in a way that was worthy of their salvation. In Ephesians 4:1, he said, “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” He instructed the Philippians, saying, “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel”

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<sup>9</sup> Calvin, 143.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, Mark. *Knowing Christ*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 188.

<sup>11</sup> Robertson, 475.

<sup>12</sup> Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), 200.

(Philippians 1:27). To the Thessalonians, he said, "...we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory" (1 Thessalonians 2:12). God the Father and God the Son are the standard for what is deemed suitable or proper for Christian living. The lies and lifestyles of the Gnostics were an inferior standard.

In talking about the way his readers were to walk, Paul urged them to be "fully pleasing" to the Lord. In doing so, he used a term that was often used of an unhealthy type of people pleasing. It sometimes described one who tried to gain the favor of another through a "cringing, subservient attitude."<sup>13</sup> There are always individuals who live by an unhealthy fear of others. Driven by an ardent desire to please others, they seem willing to do anything to get others to like them. Maybe the Colossians were tempted to kowtow to the demands of the heretics. The Bible repeatedly warns God's people to reject such man-centered living. Instead of living to please others in an unhealthy sense, Christians are to live primarily for the pleasure of God. Solomon instructed his son, "The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe" (Proverbs 29:25). This is the true driving motivator of genuine Christian living — a desire to please the Lord. It is for this reason that the New Testament authors often exhorted their readers in this regard (Romans 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 5:9; Ephesians 5:10; 1 John 3:22).

Paul spoke of the transformation that accompanies Christian truth through the imagery of "fruit." The concept of God's people being fruitful was drawn from Jewish prophecy (Isaiah 5). Jesus famously used the same imagery in John 15:1-8. Paul had previously used the imagery to speak of the way the gospel resulted in life transformation "in the whole world" (Colossians 1:6). The imagery of spiritual fruit bearing reveals that Christian virtue mysteriously grows from an unseen source of life. Just as there is a level of mystery in the way luscious grapes appear on a vine, the Spirit of God works in ways unperceived to the human eye to make the virtue of Christ grow in the lives of God's people. In the Greek of the text, the word "bearing" appeared as a present active participle. The verbiage denoted fruit-bearing as a continual action. Throughout their lives, God's people are to habitually produce the fruit of Christian character by the power of the Spirit of God within them.

Notice at the end of verse 10 that Paul once again mentioned the need for his readers to be "...increasing in the knowledge of God." Within the span of just a few lines of writing, Paul used either the verb form (Colossians 1:6) or noun form (Colossians 1:9, 10) of the word for "knowledge" on three occasions. He undoubtedly wanted to impress upon his reader's minds the need for them to grow in true knowledge. He wanted to debunk the false, so-called knowledge of the Gnostics.

In the context of verse 10, his intent was to reveal that the fruit of genuine Christian character grows through the seed of the knowledge of Christ. One has said that Paul's language in verse 10 presents the knowledge of God as being like rain that nourishes the growth of the fruit of Christian virtue.<sup>14</sup> None can exhibit the life of Christ apart from a soul-transforming knowledge of the truth of Christ. One can have a form of zeal for God that is devoid of the true knowledge of God (Romans 10:2). However, maturity and advancement in Christian character requires an acquaintance with and acceptance of the true truth of Christ (Ephesians 4:13). Paul knew well that one is only transformed into the image of Christ when one's mind is first transformed by Christ's wisdom (Romans 12:1-2). Jesus affirmed such realities in His high-priestly prayer on behalf of the church (John 17:17).

### **Verse 11**

Paul next told of the way he prayed for his readers to have strength from God. He said he prayed that his readers would be "...strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy" (Colossians 1:11). In the original language of

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<sup>13</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 460.

<sup>14</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 460.

the text, the Greek word for “strengthened” (dunamōō) was the verb form of the noun translated “power” (dúnamis). As used by Paul, the term referred to supernaturally-produced power that imparted capabilities or abilities for godly living.

The word “strengthened” appeared in the passive voice of the original Greek language. Paul employed what Bible scholars call the “theological passive.” His verbiage depicted the Colossians as being passive subjects as the recipients of God’s power. His point was that human flesh cannot muster or produce the power of God. The Lord does the giving and God’s children do the receiving. God’s empowerment of His people occurs via the presence of the Holy Spirit in the human soul. Before ascending to heaven, Jesus told His disciples, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Paul used the same language of Colossians 1:11 in his letter to the Ephesians, saying, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might” (Ephesians 6:10). The word for “might” in Colossians 1:11 and Ephesians 6:10 is one that referred to “perfect strength.” The term is only applied to the Lord in the New Testament.<sup>15</sup> Paul paired the word with his other terms for God’s power in order to emphasize the superior nature of God’s power. Though the Gnostics boasted of spiritual power they supposedly received from interacting with spirit beings in other worlds, they knew nothing of real power. They were devoid of the strength and might that comes to God’s people through Christ. Otherworldly, supernatural power is only available through the instruments of His Spirit (Acts 1:8), the Spirit-imparting Gospel of Christ (Romans 1:16), and the Spirit-breathed Scriptures (Hebrews 4:12).

Paul indicated that the strength of God served a definite purpose in the lives of God’s people. He said that the “power” and “glorious might” of the Lord produced “endurance and patience.” Paul used two different terms to refer to the end result of God’s power. The first (“endurance” [hupomoné]) spoke of one who held one’s ground. Of one who persevered in the face of difficulties.<sup>16</sup> The second (“patience” [makrothumía]) referred to “...the self-restraint which does not hastily revenge a wrong.”<sup>17</sup> It was a compound word that literally meant “large desires.” One could think of the term as depicting one who has a “long fuse,” as opposed to a “short fuse.”

Considering the error of the Gnostic heretics, the faithful believers in Colossae undoubtedly needed special measures of endurance and patience. It was undoubtedly tough to put up with the resistance, contradictions, and flagrant falsehood of such individuals. Paul’s prayer for strength revealed the reason God’s people need God’s strength. Many suppose that strength from God is only necessary for glorious and grandiose feats. However, Paul’s words reveal that the strength of God is need for what might sometimes seem to be the mundane matters of life — putting up with difficult people and persisting through life’s storms. As you pray for yourself and for your church, make it your aim to mirror the content of Paul’s prayer in Colossians 1:9-11.

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<sup>15</sup> Robertson, 476.

<sup>16</sup> Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 392.

<sup>17</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 460.