
“Gospel Affections”

Philippians 1:9-11

Pastor Peter Yi

January 17, 2021

(Philippians 1:9-11)

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

I think that if we're honest with ourselves, many of us will have to admit that the content of most of our prayers focuses on ourselves. A much smaller percentage of our prayers is for other people. And when we do pray for others, it's almost always prayers about some kind of physical need or some kind of life challenge. Now, just to be clear, there's nothing wrong with praying for physical needs. Scripture instructs us that we should pray for those things. Jesus himself taught us that we should pray, "Give us today our daily bread, lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil.", but again, if we're honest, the prayers we pray for ourselves or the requests we share with others, are frequently about some immediate physical need.

Let me prove it to you. When do email prayer blitzes go out? It's almost always when someone is gravely sick and again, there's nothing wrong with that. In fact, I encourage all of us to do that even more. I appreciate receiving those prayer requests. I'm sad to hear the news, but I'm grateful for the church community that is given the opportunity to pray for this need, but to that point, when was the last time you email blitzed someone or received an email blitz with the request, "Pray that my love would abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight"? Probably, never.

All Christians, regardless of how long we've been Christians, and regardless of how mature you might be, can improve in the way we pray. How do we get better at praying? Like with other spiritual disciplines we get better by doing it. How does a baby learn to walk? She learns by walking, by doing. The same is with our prayer lives. But we can also improve by praying the way God wants us to pray. And praying for the things God wants us to pray for. That's where the Apostle Paul becomes for us, a great teacher in the school of prayer.

I did a quick overview of the major prayers of Paul that are found throughout his letters and here's a brief summary. Listen to the things that Paul prays for Christians and for the church.

- In **2 Thessalonians 1:11-12** Paul pray that God would make you worthy of his calling, bless your desire for good deeds. That Jesus would be glorified in you.
- In **1 Thessalonians 3:11-13** he prays for their love for each other to increase and overflow. That God would strengthen their hearts that they may be holy.
- In **Colossians 1:9-14** the subject of his prayer is that God's will would be revealed in order that they may live a life worthy of Jesus, bearing fruit, growing in the knowledge of God.

- In **Ephesians 1:17ff**. Paul prays, May God give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better. Then he says, “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you.”
- In **Ephesians 3:14ff** he says, May God strengthen you with power in your inner being...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. To know how wide, long high and deep is the love of Christ.
- Finally, in **Romans 15:30** Paul asks, “Join me in my struggle by praying for me. Pray that I may be kept safe. That I’ll be able to visit you.”

I think it’s important to put their situation and our situation in perspective. Let’s compare the society in which they lived and our society. In which society was there better health care, social services, life expectancy, basic human rights and freedoms, more equality for women, more stable employment, less infant mortality? The answer to all those questions is our society. If we compare our society here in Canada with life in the first century, we would look at them as if they lived in some kind of primitive culture. But look at the content of Paul’s prayers. We have far more physical advantages, yet most of our prayers are focused on the physical. They had far less physical advantages, yet most of their prayers were focused on the spiritual.

Again, I am not advocating that we stop praying altogether for our physical needs and the physical needs of others. What I am saying is, “Let’s shift the balance. Let’s change the proportions.” In today’s passage, the focus of Paul’s prayer is that we would grow in love. Let me read the passage again.

(Philippians 1:9) And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Before we get into the details, let’s look at the structure of this prayer. When we look carefully at this prayer, Paul is actually praying for just one thing. He states it in verse 9. “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.” Everything that comes after that is subordinate to this main prayer. What comes after are the reasons he prays for their love to increase, or the outcomes he wants to see happen as a result of their increasing love. Look at verse 10. “So that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ. So those are the goals that he wants to see happen as their love increases. But those aren’t the ultimate goals. The ultimate goal is the glory and praise of God. There’s an even greater goal than discerning what is best and pure and being blameless and being filled with the fruit of righteousness. The ultimate goal is the glory of God.

Let’s reverse engineer this prayer. Let’s look at it backward. The ultimate goal for this prayer is the glory and praise of God. As the Westminster shorter catechism says in its first question, “What is the chief end of man?”

Answer: “The chief of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” So, that’s the ultimate goal. Now, how do I go about glorifying God, at least according to this prayer? It’s by discerning what is best and being pure and blameless and being filled with the fruit of righteousness. How do I get those things? By abounding more and more in love. I hope that helps us understand what Paul is praying.

Now let’s look at this prayer more closely.

As we said, the main prayer is for love to abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight. The love for which Paul prays is most likely love that’s directed toward one another. We said before that love for one another can never be divorced from our love for God. Just remember the two great commands that Jesus taught. Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. Now Thessalonianse Philippian Christians were pretty amazing at loving one another. From what we can tell, they were a spiritually mature congregation. They were selfless in their expressions of love toward Paul. When no other church helped, it was the Philippians who came to Paul’s aid. And still, Paul prays that their love will grow even more. It makes you wonder, is there a limit to love? Could you ever fulfill love’s quota? Can a Christian ever say that they’ve loved too much? And the answer is no. As Paul says in Romans 13:8, “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another.”

That’s why Paul prays that their love may abound more and more. The word ‘abound’ means to exceed over and above a certain number or measure. Think of similar words like overflow and abundance. But on top of an already generous word, he adds ‘more and more.’ The image that came to my mind is Niagara Falls. I want your love to be like the water that falls over the edge of what we know as Niagara Falls, and I want your love to keep flowing over and over, more and more. That’s the picture of love that Paul has.

Next, notice how Paul qualifies this increase in love. He wants love to abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight. Or as the NASB says it, “real knowledge and all discernment.” The obvious question here is, “What does that mean? What does it mean for love to abound in knowledge and depth of insight?” The reason the NASB applies the word real before knowledge is because there’s a word for knowledge and there’s the word that used here. The word used here has a prefix attached to the word for knowledge. The prefix implies precision and correctness. It’s often used of knowledge of God. It means full knowledge, complete knowledge.

In addition to our love increasing in complete knowledge, Paul also adds that it would increase in depth of insight, which implies the use of the intellect. It implies using our discernment in our expressions of love.

Here’s what we must take away from this. We usually think of love as a feeling only, almost like an instinct and we say things like, well if I don’t feel love when I do something for someone, then it’s not sincere. There might be some truth to that, but what Paul teaches us here is that there’s a lot of mental activity associated with our love. The more knowledge you have, the more mental discernment you have, the better your expressions of love will be.

Here’s one way this all works. As I look at the gospel, I see the love of God. I see the reality of John 3:16, that God loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.

That love continues to mature when I realize that I was an object of wrath; that all I deserved was God's just judgment. That love continues to grow in knowledge when I learn that Jesus, who knew no sin, became sin for me, when he hung on the cross. That love continues to grow when I understand that in love God chose me before the beginning of time, he forgave my sins, he adopted me into his family, I avoid the hell I deserve, and enter the heaven I don't deserve. From that knowledge and experience, my Saviour tells me, "A new command I give to you, that you are to love one another, just as I have loved you." You see how deeper knowledge of God's love and the love of Jesus initiates and informs my love for others?

Here's a story that will also show the connection between love and knowledge.

Several years ago we had a mission team that went to the southern part of KG. Our objective for that trip was to assess the nutritional health of the children and equip parents to improve their children's diet through local, affordable ingredients. So, we had our resident nutritionist from our church lead us in this project. One of the things we did was we visited the local market to see what foods were available for purchase, and what the nutritional content of each of the items were. We assessed the cost of the items. And then finally we purchased the items, but then, the real challenge was to cook a dish that was equally nutritious and tasty. We all know how finicky children can be. It doesn't matter how nutritious the food is. If the food looks weird or tastes bad, children will not eat it. So, we decided to make this thick porridge containing all the local, nutritious ingredients. As some of the team members were cooking the dish over the stove, I went into the kitchen and gave it a taste and to my surprise, it was really good.

We put the porridge into bowls and then the mothers and children assembled together. Each mother took a spoonful and lifted it to their child's mouth. Some of the children shut their mouths tight, and turned their heads away in disgust. Other children opened their mouths and took in that spoonful of porridge. I was watching intently the facial reactions of all the children. After that first bite, the moms mumbled something to their kids. They were probably asking, "How does it taste?" And you could see the children nodding their heads. But the real proof was in all the empty bowls. Even the children who at first shut their mouths, eventually gobbled up their bowls too.

You see, there was no doubt that each mother loved their child. They wanted what was best for them. They wanted their children to be healthy, but now, what was added to their love was knowledge and insight. They had new information about the nutritional value of each ingredient sold at the market. They learned a new recipe. That's how we can understand what it means for our love to grow in real knowledge and depth of insight. Our knowledge and insight into the love of God increases. That impacts the way we love each other. But at the same time, when we learn more about what God wants for his children and when we learn about the specific needs of the people in our church, and how we can meet those needs, then our expressions of love can grow.

Let's go next to the result or the goal of this abounding love. Verse 10 shows us the purpose, "So that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ."

The first phrase speaks of discerning or distinguishing or approving what is best, especially as it relates to moral actions. Not all morality is black and white. Some moral things are obviously black and white. Murder, adultery, lying and so on. But the Christian ethic that Jesus teaches us, is not just doing the right things and not doing the wrong things. Rather, it's doing what is best. Remember how the ending to the second great command goes? Love your neighbor...as you would love yourself. Why is that ending so important? That ending tells us the quality of the love we should be showing one another. We take care of ourselves, we feed ourselves, clothe ourselves, we buy the best things for ourselves. So, Jesus tells us, "That's how I want you to love your neighbor." It's loving in the best way, the most excellent way.

You see, Christianity can never be minimalist. It can never fly by asking, "What's the least I can do?" "What's the very least I can do for God; and what's the very least I can do for others?" Why? It's because at the very foundation of Christianity is a God who gave us everything, who gave us the very best of what he could give, his only Son, Jesus Christ. If you have a minimalist view of Christian life, it just may mean that you don't understand Christianity at all. The love we've received, along with this prayer for our love to abound more and more demands that we do what's best.

The next phrase says, "And may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. I think the NIV gets it wrong here. The word 'and' is not in the Greek text. The word that's there is the phrase, "in order that." So, if we read it again, it would go like this: "so that you may be able to discern what is best, in order that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ." The goal of our discerning what is best is for our personal holiness. D.A. Carson, in writing about this phrase, focuses on the end game, the long-term goal. Paul says that he wants us to be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, which is a reference to the second coming of Christ. *The image I have in mind is that of a bride getting ready for her wedding day. I have observed, I'm not mentioning any names, but I have observed many brides-to-be, going on a diet to shed some weight to prepare for their wedding day. Maybe it's to fit into the dress, maybe it's to look beautiful in front of all the guests, maybe it's to be as beautiful as she can be for her groom. But she has a goal in mind. And many months before her wedding day, she starts to make adjustments to her diet, she begins an exercise plan, all for the big day.*

The same is true for all Christians. Yes, in one sense we are already married to Christ. We are his bride, but perhaps a better way to understand the Bible's use of this wedding imagery is that we are engaged to be married. We are betrothed to Christ. And we are waiting for the bridegroom to arrive, for our wedding day, which is the second coming of Christ. So, what do we while we wait for the big day? We get ready. We grow in love for Jesus. We long for his coming. As well, we grow in our expressions of love toward each other. We begin to discern what is best in the eyes of God. We become holier and holier, purer and more blameless, in preparation for the coming of Jesus.

Let's look to the next phrase which says, "Filled with the fruit of righteousness." This merely explains what occurs when we become pure and blameless. We begin to bear the fruit of righteousness. We begin to display the good and holy deeds, that are the expressions of our love for each other. Now notice what it says about how this fruit comes about? The fruit come about through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one that works in us to bear this beautiful fruit.

It should remind us of the passage in Ephesians 5, the famous husband-wife passage. In that passage we learn that it's not just us, as the bride who prepares ourselves for the groom, for Jesus. Jesus himself, as the groom is preparing us. He's making his bride holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless." That's what Paul is saying here. The fruit of righteousness. All those things that constitute a holy life before God comes through Jesus. In fact, if they don't come through him, they're not real fruit. Isn't that amazing?

So, let's summarize. What's the goal of praying for our love to abound more and more, like Niagara Falls? So that we can live out greater and purer expressions of that love within our Christian community, preparing ourselves like a bride getting ready for her groom.

Finally, let's not forget the last phrase. To the glory and praise of God. The ultimate goal of Paul's prayer is not love, it's not caring for each other, it's not being fruitful Christians; it's the glory and praise of God. Paul's like an architect. He has a grand design in mind. He wants to build the most amazing and glorious structure. And to get there, he has to go through various steps. He doesn't just start drawing. He already has in his mind what the grand structure will look like. His ultimate goal is that God would receive praise and glory from us. And in order for that to happen, we need to increase in love. There's this YouTube cooking channel that Linda and I watch. I forget what it's called, but it's a young Korean couple living in Seoul and he shows the viewers all Thessalonianse creative yet very simple cooking dishes, like ten ways to cook Shin Ramen. Well, one of the tag lines that he repeats in nearly every episode is this. "More green onion, more delicious." That's one of his cooking philosophies. The more green onions you add, the more delicious the dish will be. What Paul is saying is like that. The more love you have to more glory God gets. The less love you have the less glory God gets. This is why Paul prays what he prays, because what he cares about the most is the glory of God, that God alone would be praised.

Just consider, if all of your prayers ended with the phrase, "So that you alone would receive glory and praise." Now, we're so sinful we could twist that to achieve our selfish desires. "Lord, I need a new Lamborghini, so you alone would receive glory and praise." But seriously, just imagine with me how our prayers would change if we always prayed with that end in mind, that God would be glorified. How would you pray for your children? How about for your job? How about for where you will live? How about for the health of your loved one? What about when we pray for the salvation of our loved one? How about when we pray for the growth of our church? We need to ask, "For whose glory are we praying to God for Thessalonianse things?" Friends, when we pray for love to abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that we may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, then and only then, is it for that ultimate purpose, to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Let's pray.