

Sermon 3, What Should I Pray For?, Philemon 4-6

Proposition: Paul's prayer for Philemon instructs us how to pray when we need a fellow believer to grow up and do the right thing.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, one of the major themes in this letter is the communal aspect of the faith. This is a letter from Paul to Philemon telling Philemon to do a particular good deed that is going to be hard for him to do. Now, most of us have the instinct that says it is manipulative to make such a request in front of others. If I think that sister Judy here needs to be reconciled with Millie, I pull Judy aside and tell her privately. I don't bring it up with five other people standing around, and I certainly don't pray about it publicly.

Brothers and sisters, I just want to introduce this sermon by pointing out the massive gap between our own cultural expectations on this point and Paul's practice here in Philemon. Paul names six people who are with him in writing this letter. He addresses it to two people who are with Philemon, and to the whole church. In our cultural lexicon, that kind of pressure is utterly reprehensible. A pastor who did this to you would be regarded as something of a monster. Now, obviously none of us is going to call Paul a monster. But in addition to saying it in front of 8 people and the whole church that Philemon needs to welcome Onesimus, Paul has the temerity to say it in front of the Almighty in public prayer.

Yes, that's right: This prayer in Philemon 4-6 tells us not only what to pray, but how to pray, when a fellow believer needs to grow up and do the right thing. I want you to realize that Paul did not think of this as manipulation, that is, illegitimate communal pressure. He thought of it as an important strategy to help Philemon say no to sin and yes to God. You and I have run into this before. Occasions come when we need a fellow believer to grow up and do the right thing. When they happen, we should pray like this.

I. Paul's Prayer Is a Model for Our Prayers

That, of course, is my first point: Paul's prayer is a model for our prayers. It teaches us how to pray. Why do I say this? From the absurdity of the contrary. If someone were to suggest that no,

this prayer is here not to teach us how to pray but simply as a historical record of how Paul once prayed, the overwhelming consensus of the church would reply that such a contention is absurd. All Scripture is profitable to train, and the apostolic example of how to pray is just as valuable as the Psalms or the Lord's Prayer in instructing us how to pray.

Does this mean that I'm going to start calling out particular members of this church in prayer each Sunday? Only if I have to. Paul's example shows us that it can be right. But in a culture like ours, where we have this concept of a "right to privacy" that Paul and the rest of the ancients would have found ludicrous, it would be extremely imprudent to call out particular church members in my prayers. So this sermon is going to focus primarily on praying privately for those who, like Philemon, are good Christians but nonetheless have a glaring weakness that needs divine intervention and help. In other words, of course, this prayer is appropriate for every one of us. We all have a genuine desire to serve God, which is why we are here in church. And we all fall short in small ways and in a few big ways too. This prayer is for those who fall short in a big way — like Philemon, who was a slave master bad enough that at least one of his slaves ran away.

II. The Components of Paul's Prayer, vv. 4-5

Well, the first two verses of the prayer focus on the positive. These statements are impressive. Philemon is a slaveholder, and we should not expect that pre-conversion he had been the best of the best among slaveholders. If he was a typical Roman slaveowner, he probably beat his slaves and used them sexually. He certainly made them work for him whether they wanted to or not. And, of course, there is some doubt about whether he would receive Onesimus back as if he were receiving Paul. If he just obviously would have done the right thing, there would have been no need for this letter. But like all of us, Philemon was a mixed bag.

A. Gratitude to God, v. 4

Still, the good predominated, at least in Paul's recollections. Every time he remembered Philemon, he thanked God for him.

Is gratitude a defining theme in your prayers? When you think of your parents and the love they've poured on you, do you thank God? When you think of the person in the pew next to you, do you thank God? When you remember me as your pastor, or the children of your old church in another state, does your heart fill with gratitude that expresses itself audibly in a "thank you, God, for so-and-so"? Paul's heart overflowed with gratitude.

So often I hear Christians praying, and their prayers sound like a Christmas list. They ask God for many things, but from their prayers you wouldn't know that He had ever given them anything. Don't be like that. Lead with gratitude. Before you ask for anything else, spend some time thanking God for what He has already given you.

B. Remembering our Fellow Christians' Good, v. 5

Paul didn't just thank God in general for Philemon, either. He thanked God for specific things in the man's life. He heard about these things, all the way in Rome or Ephesus. He was geographically far from Philemon, but the goodness of Philemon, his love and faith, were known even so far away.

So — when you express gratitude for fellow believers, do you have specific things you're grateful for? Paul did. Also, we should pray for faith and love among ourselves. More than that, we should let faith and love drive us to grateful prayer.

III. The Goal of Paul's Prayer, v. 6

But though Paul began with gratitude, he certainly didn't stop there. Oh no. Paul had big things that he wanted to pray for, and he did pray for them. It is universally agreed that that is the most complicated, dense verse in Philemon, and it is translated in some different ways. We are going to try to get behind the translation and talk about the substance of what Paul is requesting here, because this is spiritual dynamite. These petitions are an extremely powerful way to pray for anyone you know who needs to grow up and do the right thing in a difficult situation. When Paul needed Philemon to step up, he prayed for these things. When you need yourself or a fellow believer to step up, you pray for them too.

A. Effective Fellowship

The first thing Paul asks God for regarding Philemon is “effective fellowship.” This is an absolutely key concept in this letter, and in the church more generally. But what does it mean? First off, I want to posit that we all have a pretty good idea what ineffective fellowship is. We know that fellowship means social contact within the church. Ineffective fellowship is the kind of hanging out together that does nothing for our faith, hope, and love, that does not further our walk with Christ or make us look more like Him, long for heaven more, etc. I will go farther: Ineffective fellowship is all too common in our churches. Now, I'm not saying that *totally* ineffective fellowship is the norm. I've been helped against sin a lot by the fellowship of the church.

But effective fellowship is a different matter. When Paul says “effective fellowship,” he means the kind of fellowship that results in greater faith, hope, and love, greater Christlikeness. That's what he wants for Philemon's life.

Let's back up. Fellowship is the condition of being a fellow—that is, of having something in common. Here, of course, Paul specifies that the thing held in common is faith. Philemon, he says, you and I have a common faith. That faith puts us in fellowship; that is, it makes us fellow believers. I want that condition of being fellow believers to become effective. I want the mutuality of believing in Jesus together to make you more like Him than you would be on your own.

Now, I think we just sort of assume that this will happen. When we spend time with fellow Christians, we get more Christian. To a certain extent, that's true. But Philemon is going to church regularly; in fact, he's hosting the church in his own house, so he can hardly skip a Sunday here and there. Paul is saying that the fellowship in faith that Philemon already has is not enough. It needs to grow into something more powerful and effective. How? Well, together with Paul and the rest of the church, Philemon needs to get more involved with the good.

B. Knowing Mutual Good

That's where Paul takes this effective fellowship idea. It is effective fellowship in faith that manifests itself in "the knowledge of every mutual good that is in us." That is, I want you, Philemon, to be more attuned to the good things that are in me and you.

Now, put like that, this sounds a little like New Age nonsense. That's not how Paul meant it. When he says that he wants Philemon to know every good thing that's in us, he means a full-orbed knowledge of the good.

1. Possessing It

The first aspect of this knowledge is to possess it. Quite simply, you need to know what's right. In terms of the society in which he was brought up, the "right thing to do" was obvious to Philemon: Beat the tar out of Onesimus and never trust him again, lest he give the other slaves the idea that running away was somehow worth it.

Paul is saying "I want you to know the good as Jesus sees it." That's a tall order, because the good as Jesus sees it is not the same thing as the good as the world sees it. There's a big difference there, in fact. But Paul, in praying for effective fellowship for Philemon, is praying that life in the body of Christ will help him see that welcoming Onesimus back as if he were Paul is the right thing to do.

2. Doing It

But in praying for the knowledge of every good thing, Paul is also talking about doing the good. This knowledge is the intimate knowledge of practice — the knowledge that moves from knowing what's right to doing what's right. It's a knowing how, not just a knowing that. Paul wants Philemon to know how to love his runaway slave as though his runaway slave were Christ — because inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, you've done it to Jesus.

Paul wants Philemon to know and do the truth. And he prays that that would happen through effective fellowship. The faith that Philemon and Paul have in common needs to manifest itself through a knowledge of the good that results in doing the good.

C. Directing Fellowship, Faith, and Knowledge toward Christ

Paul winds up this prayer with a reference to Jesus — an "unto Christ." It's an incredibly compressed account of a prayer that must have occupied him, sleeping and waking, for some time as he labored through how to pray for the Onesimus-Philemon situation.

But this final phrase, this "unto Christ," explains to us how the whole thing is possible. Philemon is not a letter based on the law, which says "Do better, be better." Paul is not writing to Philemon just to say "Philemon, do better, be better." That is part of the message, no doubt. Philemon does indeed need to shape up. But he can do so only when he learns to do it for Jesus Christ, the one who died so he could live and who took Philemon's own guilt on himself. Fellowship, faith, knowledge of the good — all of these only work when they are directed to a certain purpose, or better, toward a certain person. When you're doing it for Jesus, it makes sense. It works. If you're not doing it for Jesus, it doesn't work. Faith in faith, fellowship based strictly on our common humanity rather than our common faith, knowledge of the good that is circumscribed by the immanent horizon — these things all wither. They don't last because they

are cut off from their purpose. Just as a steering wheel detached from a steering column is rather pointless, so faith, fellowship, and knowledge of the good are rather pointless when they are cut off from the Christ whose life and death and resurrection gives them meaning.

So Paul prays that Philemon would have all of these things, and he prays for Philemon to recognize their purpose: They are for Christ! Why bother to believe? Because Christ is trustworthy and deserves to be believed in. Why acknowledge the good things in other Christians? Because Jesus put them there. Why be in fellowship with other believers? Because they live for the same thing you do — for the glory of Christ.

So do all these things, and do them unto Christ. Pray for these things for your fellow Christians who need to grow past their blind spots and mature in the faith, unto Christ.

How should you pray for that Christian who just has a major issue that doesn't seem to be changing? Pray for effective fellowship, for knowledge and the practice of every good thing, and for the specific good thing you need that fellow Christian to do. And be motivated, not by disgust with your fellow saint's shortcomings, but by the conviction that the Lamb is worthy. When you are fired by love for Jesus, when you are motivated by His worthiness, then you will see your prayers have a major effect. Until then, keep praying! Amen.