

Dependent Prayer

Colossians 1:9-14

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Good morning. It is good to be with you this morning. We are in our new sermon series. We are looking at "Qualities of a Disciple." And if you have your Bible, go ahead and turn or tap to Colossians. We're going to be looking at the first chapter, verses 9 through 14 this morning.

Colossians 1:9-14. Hear now God's word read.

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. 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. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Lord, add to your reading of the word this morning. Encourage your people. May we have eyes and ears, both to see and to hear of your glory, to be in awe of your power, and to be moved and changed by your grace. We pray these things in Jesus's name. Amen.

I recently heard the story about Dan Rather interviewing Mother Teresa. If you're familiar, she was a Roman Catholic nun who was serving in Kolkata of West Bengal, India. She lived her life among the poor. And here is this high-profile news anchor asking her, "When you pray, what do you say to God?" I think that is a very profound question, and it has many layers to it. And just to look at some of the implications of such a simple question, yet profound, it implies that she prays. It implies that there is a particular audience to those prayers. And it implies that some form of communication is happening between the one who is doing the praying and the one who is being prayed to.

When you pray or even when you don't pray, it reveals something about your heart, the very core of who you are and the very desires of your heart. It reveals something about your posture towards the divine, towards the universe, towards the circumstances in your life, whatever it may be in your spiritual journey. But it reveals something about your assumptions of who God is, what your needs are, and what is prayer. Jesus taught His disciples how to pray. We heard earlier in the reading from Matthew 6 an example of where Jesus is interacting with His disciples. He taught them because they asked Him after watching His own habits of prayer. For Jesus, it was not a question of do you or don't you pray. Rather, a disciple that follows Jesus, it's the similar question that Dan Rather asked, "When you pray."

Now, back to the interview, what do you think Mother Teresa said to Dan Rather's question? She simply responded, "I don't say anything. I listen." So Dan Rather, being quick on his feet and the seasoned reporter that he is, rephrased his question. "When God speaks to you then, what does he say?" And she replied, "He doesn't say anything. He listens."

Now, I can't find the actual footage of that interview, and everything I've heard or read about it since learning about this interview has been secondhand accounts. And so I don't know if it happened. I hope that it did. But even if it didn't happen the way it's explained as an anecdote, I think it's still profound. It's saying something that is core to what we long for in prayer, but we also struggle with in prayer. It's this mystery that prayer is with the divine. I think her response is lovely, and it exposes

something very intimate about the nature of prayer, which at its very core, prayer is communion with God.

So when we are asked that question, "When you pray, what do you say to God," I think it is an excellent opportunity to ask yourself some questions. Do you grasp the weight of your need? Do you fully know the care of our God? And do we know that God is with us in prayer?

This brings us to this quality of a disciple in today's sermon. Dependent prayer is an important quality in the life of a disciple of Jesus. It's through the practice of prayer that we engage with God and we experience His gracious renewal in us and through us. Now, there's certainly more that can be said about this passage this morning in Colossians, but we're going to use the text to focus our attention on what we might see about dependent prayer. There's a shortened outline on the screen, and we're going to look at five aspects of dependent prayer. First, dependent prayer is formed in the disciple's life as a spiritual practice. Dependent prayer is formed in the disciple's life as a spiritual practice.

Now, as a caveat, very briefly, scripture also makes the connection often with prayer that fasting is an important aspect of dependent prayer. But that's not our topic for today. I just want you to be aware of that relationship between dependent prayer before the Lord and how we go about with fasting.

But for our purposes today, just briefly asking the question what is prayer? It seems self-explanatory, right? Generally, prayer can be thought of as an expression of an earnest hope or a wish. But more specifically, we often think of prayer as religious practice that involves requests for help, maybe expressions of thanks that are addressed to an object of worship. So whether that's the divine in a general sense or maybe God as revealed in scripture, it's communicating to our object of worship.

New Testament scholar Hans Bayer says this about prayer. He says, "Prayer is the natural form of communication with God. It means putting our declared will consciously under God's will. Prayer includes watchfulness, resistance to the subtle temptation to follow self, joyful solitude with God, and worship of God."

So it stands to reason, and we see this from Matthew 6, that we know we're to pray. And so it's very natural to ask how are we to pray? Well, we see that in Matthew 6 and Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. We learn two key things about prayer. Prayer is not to be a performance that garners esteem in front of others, nor is prayer reduced to just words to be used as magical incantations that seek to manipulate God. Here are a couple suggestions on how you might pray. We pray using scripture. We can be familiar with the actual prayers of God's people, the actual prayers of the men and the women that are found in all of scripture. Another example of having our prayers shaped by the Psalms themselves, the Psalms being the hymn book of God's people, poetry, and prayerful posture towards the Lord.

We're to study and pray the prayers of Jesus, study and pray the prayers of the other apostles that we can find in the book of Acts, as we can find in their various letters, Colossians being just one example here of Paul's prayer. We use scripture to praise God for His attributes. We confess our sins, and we intercede on behalf of others. And we pray for God's mission. So we pray using scripture.

We can likewise pray by using formal written prayers. For example, Jesus teaches us what is called the Lord's prayer. "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name." Perhaps if you're like me, you probably first memorized that on a baseball team where you just pray it and put your hands in, say the Lord's prayer, and then you go play baseball. I don't know if that was your experience. That was my experience of the Lord's prayer in South Carolina. You say it quick. It's just routine. And you get on the field. I don't even know why my coach asked us to do it, but it was something that shaped my imagination even at a young age then. But Christians have prayed that prayer in corporate worship and in private devotions for thousands of years. It's a great prayer to say, using the words themselves.

We can also use historical prayers. For example, to take advantage of the many prayer books that various Christian traditions have written throughout time, or other devotional materials. It's engaging with the prayers of believers that have gone before us. And may the prayers of their heart be an

encouragement to us. May they be equipping us to pray in the same mind and in the same heart.

Not only formal and written prayers, of course. We can pray informal and unwritten, just extemporaneous prayers. And these prayers are more personal. They're addressing and engaging God in a more natural conversational way in our own private personal worship as well as praying with other people. It's both talking to the Lord, and it's also listening. We might engage in prayer journaling, we may engage in prayer cards, or whatever your system may be in how you best organize a way that facilitates your personal prayer life.

This brings me to another suggestion that we can pray with a plan or we can pray without a plan. It really comes down to temperament a lot on that. Everybody wants to be that person that can have a very fully fleshed out notecard system, and you're going to pray on this day for this, and next Tuesday you'll pray for that. How many people have started and stopped those things? But having a plan can provide a rhythm and a structure that helps us facilitate our prayers. We can pray at all times of day. Having a regular time can provide a rhythm to our day and a structure to our devotional life. We can pray to acknowledge and enjoy the fellowship of God.

We can pray alone. We can pray with people. And we certainly pray together when we're assembled in corporate worship. We can and we should embody the practice of prayer without ceasing as our natural posture before God. We're engaging with the communion, with the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And all of this brings us to an important question. The what and the how is nice. Give me some steps. Give me some tips. We need those, right? Some people are more drawn to them than others. But what actually is important to compel change is answering the question why? Why do we pray? And this gets closer to the heart of the matter.

Now, there might be any number of reasons why you might pray. Just for example, an experience of fear and anxiety. Needing your circumstances to change. Needing provision of some kind. Seeking forgiveness. Seeking guidance. Now, they say there are no atheists in fox holes. So it's interesting why we pray as a revealer of our heart for when we pray and why we might not be praying.

But as a spiritual practice in the life of a disciple, it's about tuning your heart to God's heart. It's about inviting and welcoming God's presence into your life and having your character formed by the very heart of God that's informed and revealed by the word, empowered by the Holy Spirit. And in prayer, we are agreeing with David in Psalm 139:23-24 where he says, "Search me. Search me, O God. Know my heart. Try me. Know my thoughts. See if there is any grievous way in me. Lead me in the way of everlasting."

My own journey of prayer went from trying to just kind of throw out thoughts, good vibes, out there into the ether to trying to wrestle with how does God hear me? And coming to a place in my life being confronted with even just beginning to have the first prayer of belief. Lord, make me a new creation. I believe. And more of my grow as a younger Christian being shaped by the prayers of being mentored by an older more mature believer, being walked with and invited into regular times of prayer. With prayer, as with many things in the Christian life, there is an aspect of being taught, but it is being shown. It is being modeled. It is something that is caught much more prevalently than taught.

Dependent prayer opens up to our vulnerabilities before God. It shows us the way the Lord is transforming us. Dependent prayer is the practice of surrender and trust, the two things we talked about last week. Prayer is going to be woven through many of these qualities in this sermon series. And through Jesus Christ, we have access to God, to know His glory and to receive His care.

So as we think about the general sense of prayer, let's move a little bit more specifically into this passage in Colossians to see how we might observe what it has to say about dependent prayer. So look at verses 13-14. Dependent prayer is shaped by the story of redemption. The text says, "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." This great summary statement of salvation, scripture is full of these

pithy summaries that try to put words to the totality of what God is doing in His salvation. But this story of God's redemption is what is shaping our sense of dependent prayer.

Even earlier in verse 3, Paul begins with thanking God for the testimony of their faith, and he continues with thanks in verse 12. And we see in verses 13-14 why he's giving thanks. Paul is praising God for the work of redemption in the lives of those in Colossae. And what is this redemption? That God the Father has delivered us out of sin and bondage, out of being at enmity and out of being out of accord and enemies of God and bringing us into a relationship where our very standing before God changes. We're no longer enemies, but we are sons and daughters. We are no longer slaves to sin but now free in Christ. We are no longer burdened by the weight of the fallen world that we're impacted by and is within us, and to experience the freedom that comes with redemption in Christ.

This praising of God in the shaping of the story, his imaginations are overwhelmed with God's promises, the inheritance that is in God, the transfer that is nothing less than the redemption that is bought by the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This salvation by grace through faith forgives your sins. It justifies sinners. It adopts orphans and the estranged. It welcomes the enemy, and it renews the whole person from the inside out.

Dependent prayer is immersed in God's story. It is a simple story, but a story that touches every aspect of the universe and the human condition. God made all things, and He made all things good for His purposes. And for His image bearers, He intended for all to be in perfect communion with Him, and yet mankind fell in rebellion and sin. And despite what was lost, and all was lost, God provides a way to reclaim and to restore all. Everything that the curse of the fall touches is reclaimed and renewed in Christ. God's redemptive purposes culminate in Him, and we have restored fellowship and experience reconciling peace with Him. And this story of redemption is being worked out throughout the world as the Lord calls all peoples to find restored communion with Him. Dependent prayer is shaped by the hope of the gospel and the praise of His name.

Another aspect of dependent prayer is it being marked by a pattern of persistence. Look at verse 9. "And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you." Paul shares a similar sentiment in Ephesians 1:16, and we get a sense of Paul's posture also from 1 Thessalonians 5:17 where he says, "Pray without ceasing." This gets into the question of when do you pray? Now, praying without ceasing is aspirational. Of course it doesn't mean that you are never not praying, as if you don't eat or sleep, as if you're not engaged in other things. But what Paul is getting at is the continual nature of a prayerfulness, a mindfulness of God's presence, and an engagement with God's activity in our lives in the world.

And we're reminded of this custom in the early church. Randy looked at Acts 2:42 last week where it says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship to the breaking of the bread and prayers." Earlier in the book of Acts 1:14, this is after Jesus ascends into heaven and leaves the disciples. The disciples return to Jerusalem, and they're in the upper room, and they're praying with one accord, devoting themselves to prayer together with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and His brothers. Although a different word, the sense is the same later in Colossians 4:2 where Paul says, "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving."

Now, exploring when we pray might also invite us to consider what hindrances keep us from praying. These are great questions for your own personal reflection. There might be all kinds of reasons why we don't engage in prayer. Perhaps we don't know what to say. Perhaps we are uncomfortable with the silence. Perhaps we're waiting for someone to speak first. Perhaps we're easily distracted. And if you have experienced this, what I often experience is I fall asleep. But there might be other hindrances. There might be the perceived closeness to God. Maybe we are burdened with sin, and we feel distant from God, and it keeps us from praying. Maybe we're consumed with ourselves, and we are kept from praying for others. Maybe we are so clouded with our circumstances in the here and the now that we haven't lifted up our heads to even be mindful of the eternal weight of God's glory and what He is doing across time. So it's a moment to reflect upon what you pray, when you pray, and reflecting upon what is

going on that might be keeping you from praying. But dependent prayer is marked by a pattern of persistence.

Now, when you are a newer Christian, everything's exciting. Everything is new. That's new information. That's amazing. That's awesome. I need to do that. That'll be fun. Oh, I got to try that. And your head is on a swivel, and you're just absorbing everything like a sponge. Maybe you trip up on some rocks down the path, stub your toe, sprain an ankle. Maybe a person who's walking with you gets ill and needs to get out of the journey, if you will, metaphorically speaking of course. But life hits us. Life has pain. Life has struggles. And it's not always exciting.

So what is going to motivate us to pray along that path? And dependent prayer is that being marked by the pattern. There's going to be seasons where we are praying where we feel very close to the Lord, and there are seasons when we do not. But a motto that I didn't come up with myself but took it from someone, and I give it to you free of charge, is to never stop starting. When you look at the pattern of your life, and if you're down on yourself and you say, "I haven't been praying," "I don't feel close to the Lord," zoom back and look at the pattern. You will see God's faithfulness in your life, and you will see the pattern that has been marked by persistent prayer to give you the encouragement and the resolve to never stop starting, to start again, and to start afresh. Dependent prayer is marked by that pattern.

Number four, dependent prayer is defined by a posture of need. Looking at verses 10-12, this gets into the content of Paul's prayer of course. It's so that they would walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, having a posture that is pleasing to Him. This is the very thing that is behind His prayer. And in order to walk, what does he say in just the previous sentence? It's that they "might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding."

It is important that we are recognizing the interplay between knowledge and life. Christianity and the gospel are always to be taken together in tandem, what we believe and how we live. To grow in the knowledge of His will, to grow in spiritual wisdom and understanding are not just propositional truths that we hold to, though it includes that. But having a posture of need is recognizing where we are lacking, where we are deficient in those two things held together. What am I lacking in knowledge that I need to understand more about? What am I lacking in that I know, but I'm not living it out faithfully? This is a moment for dependent prayer. It's marked by a posture recognizing that this is where our sanctification works out. This is the means of God's grace that grows us from the inside out. It is recognizing that our need for salvation never stops after we convert to Christ. It's recognizing that we're always in a position of need for His grace and for His mercy. And we have needs for our daily bread, of course.

And that's why the Lord's prayer is such a powerful prayer, not only to pray the words, but to use it as a template for your own prayers. To even think about them being five aspects to talk about while you're praying, to be praising God, to glory in His name, to praise Him for His honor, His glory, His righteousness, His holiness as you give praise to His attributes. It's likewise the placing yourself in a position where you are being transformed by God's will, and not your will, that you're wanting to tune yourself to the concerns and the very heart of God. Of course there's also ways that we are needing our daily bread, our actual tangible physical needs day to day, moment by moment, asking our Father to provide what we need.

Both in the Lord's prayer and in this passage as a reference of just recognizing how, of course, our need is for forgiveness of our sins, but it's also that the dependent prayer that seeks forgiveness is also being shaped by how we are forgiven changes us as people that extends that forgiveness to other people because we recognize how great and how much we have been forgiven. So, too, as a disciple, we are to forgive greatly. And of course, it's to be shaped, to be molded, to be enamored by God's power and God's glory, these things being a beautiful template to how we pray.

Lastly, dependent prayer is the motivation for a life of spiritual formation. Now, we've covered a little bit of this from the previous point, but it blends into it. The point is to walk. Now, Paul loves to—I guess it doesn't really translate in the Greek necessarily. But let's just say he likes to write in a lot of run-

on sentences. He just keeps going. He doesn't use periods often. He just keeps going. I guess it's a text message today if you're 25 or under. You just keep going. You have to figure it out. You got to decipher what's being said here. Is this a question? I don't know. But you're working with what Paul is saying. And he often does it to build on itself. He gets on a roll, and he starts stacking things. And they're not always comprehensive, but they're related. And he's giving shape to what he's talking about.

And so just as a motivation for a life of spiritual formation, the reason why he's praying is something that we can take to focus our attention on. Here's just four brief things. First, bearing fruit. This is the inner life of the believer. This is the goal of the Christian life, to bear fruit. The seed of the gospel bringing new life and bearing fruit is the goal of the Christian life.

Another characteristic for the content of this prayer is increasing in the knowledge of God. I kind of jumped ahead and kind of stole my own thunder here from already saying it, but it is incredibly important and worth saying again. The Bible and the way of discipleship is always concerned with putting the truth into practice. It is to increase in the knowledge to believe and to live according to the manner of the gospel.

Number three, it's being strengthened. Now, this refers to being enabled to live accordingly. It's being empowered, being equipped, being enabled, which takes on the need for endurance and patience because, again, the road is rocky. There are hills. There are low points. There are pains and struggles along the way that dependent prayer grows our character, grows our endurance, grows our patience. But taken with that, the bumps along the way, it's also important to recognize how joy plays into this in the life of the believer. Without the joy, the pains and the struggles may deaden, may dull, may become cynical, and may be hardened. But the power of the gospel also compels us to have great joy as we journey on.

And then lastly as a fourth characteristic here as we walk in a manner worthy of the Lord is giving thanks. Here, as often with Paul, he begins and he ends with giving thanks. Our motivation and our joy comes from the reality of God's promises. They're given through Jesus Christ, and we share and enjoy God's inheritance. There is much to give thanks about. Often, people—I think rightfully so, and is very trendy now, but I think it's a good practice. Even ending your night by just expressing what are you thankful for? Giving that thanks to the Lord and receiving it, just receiving and embracing gratitude and thankfulness. That dependent prayer is transformational.

Taken all together, we might summarize dependent prayer this way. Prayer is telling God the desires of our hearts in the name of Christ by the help of the Holy Spirit, whereby we confess our sins, we petition our needs, we give thanks for God for His grace and His mercy. And as a spiritual practice in the life of disciple, prayer is the language of communication, of communicating and listening to God through His word and in community.

So when you pray, what do you say? Think about that this afternoon. When you pray, what do you say? Are you growing in dependent prayer for yourself? Are you engaging in dependent prayer with others? And another important aspect of discipleship is even to consider are you helping another brother or sister grow in their posture of dependent prayer? Discipleship is one hand up following the Lord, and it's one hand back pulling someone along with you. It's following Jesus in community. And so even our own personal life of prayer is for ourselves, it is on behalf of others, and it is to be done for the benefit of helping another grow as well.

George Washington Carver was a professor at what is now Tuskegee University. He taught classes in science, agriculture, and art. He's maybe most famously known for his research on the peanut. In 1921, Carver addressed the U.S. House of Representatives, and upon finishing his presentation on the many uses of the peanut, the chairman of the committee asked, "Dr. Carver, how did you learn all these things?" Carver answered, "From an old book." "What book?" Carver replied, "The Bible." The chairman asked inquisitively, "Does the Bible tell us about peanuts?" And Carver answered, "Well, no, sir. But it tells about the God who made the peanut. I asked him to show me what to do with the peanut, and he

did."

Not only in his own research, his own teaching, Carver was a believer. He led prayer meetings and Bible studies at the school. One day he was asked by a student how to find the will of God. And he said this, "Pray in silence. Ask God for guidance. Keep your thoughts pure. Forget yourself. Know that you are an instrument through which your creator wishes to pour out some blessing for others. Be not over anxious. Keep your mind on God after you have prayed. If you find yourself in a situation in which your mind strays from the fact that God is good and is in all things, wrestle with yourself and get back on track. It behooves us to stay in contact with him because we know not the minute, the hour, the day, or the year when he is ready to reveal to us the wonders of his universe."

Carver was formed and shaped by dependent prayer. This spiritual practice is shaped by the story of God's redemption. It's marked by a pattern of persistence, and it is defined by our posture of need before the Father. Our driving motivation that propels us as an aspect of the Christian spiritual life is it's bearing fruit, it's increasing in the knowledge of God, and it's strengthened with all power. May we have our hearts attuned with God.

May our will be aligned with the will of God, and may we be disciples who embody dependent prayer. Let us pray.

Our Father in heaven, we ask of you to pour out your grace. We ask of you for your Spirit to lead us into all understanding. We pray that your Spirit would grow us towards maturity and faith. And Lord, we pray that you would grow us to be men and women and children who are trusting you and dependent upon you. And when we are with you, we are changed. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.