

We are working our way through Paul's letter to the Colossians. In the first half of the letter the focus is largely on different aspects of what it means to be a believer in Jesus and in the second half of the letter the focus is largely on how we are to live as followers of Jesus. The distinction is not absolute, but in general terms the first part of the letter is more doctrinal and the second part of the letter is more about practical Christian living. This corresponds with the fundamental biblical truth that Christian living is based on the things that are true of us as followers of Jesus. We are saved from sin. We are united to Christ. We are alive in Christ. Therefore we are to live the kind of life that follows from those truths. The practical Christian living that the Bible calls us to is always something that we do on the basis of what God has done for us and to us in saving us from our sins.

So far Paul has spoke to us about putting sins to death and putting on the character traits that reflect God's character. He has talked about how to live together in the home. He has addressed slaves and masters. And in the verses we are going to look at this evening he turns his attention to how Christians are to be involved in the mission of the church to bring the gospel to the world. This is not all that the Bible says about that subject, but it is how Paul addresses to Colossian church on this matter.

The first part of this section is a general exhortation to pray. Verse 2 "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving." If we look at the instructions concerning prayer in the Bible and the examples of prayer in the Bible, it is clear that the focus of our prayers is to be on the spiritual growth of the church and the coming of God's kingdom. So the call to prayer here is a call to be praying for the kinds of things that Paul models for us in this epistle and in other places.

Paul's description of his prayer for the Colossians is a very helpful example of what he is thinking about when he calls his readers to continue steadfastly in prayer. Colossians 1:9-12, ⁹"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, ¹⁰so 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; ¹¹being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light."

Jesus' model prayer, which we call the Lord's prayer, is another biblical model to guide us in what God is calling us to pray about. In Matthew 9:9-13, Jesus said to his disciples, ⁹"Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread, ¹²and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

You will notice that in these examples, at least, there is not a lot of emphasis given to our physical wellbeing on this earth. That is not to say that there is no place for praying for our this-worldly cares and concerns. In the Psalms there are examples of saints praying for healing from sickness and other this-worldly matters.

Philippians 4:6 tells us “[D]o not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Presumably Paul here is telling the Philippians and us to pray to the Lord about the things that we are tempted to be anxious about. 1 Peter 1:7 tells us to cast all our anxieties on him, because he cares for us. There is no question that there is a place in our prayers for the cares and concerns that we face in this life.

But when Paul in our text tells us to “Continue steadfastly in prayer” we can assume that he is thinking about prayers that reflect the emphasis of his prayers that he describes in this letter and many of his other letters. Certainly we should pray for our this-worldly cares and concerns. But if Jesus tells us to seek first the kingdom of God in all of our lives, as he does in Matthew 6:33, that priority ought to be reflected in our prayers as well.

And the prayers of the Bible are a great resource for us to help us to reflect God’s priorities for our prayers.

Now the fact that there is such a big emphasis on prayer in the Bible is a great encouragement. It means that prayer matters to God. The Bible is the word of God. Paul’s letters that we have in our Bibles are inspired by God. God is telling us to “continue steadfastly in prayer.” Clearly God thinks that our prayers are important. They are important for lots of reasons. One of the most important is that God wants us to talk to him. God wants to hear our voice. God wants us to share our thoughts with him. Prayer is a huge part of fellowship with God. A relationship is about being together and speaking together. And prayer is the part of our relationship with God where we speak to God. That’s important to God and that is an amazing truth. God is your Father. You are his beloved child. And God wants you to open your heart to him and let him know what’s on your mind.

But if we think about how seeking first the kingdom of God should be reflected in our prayers, the fact that God puts such an emphasis on our prayers indicates that our prayers have something to do with the coming of God’s kingdom. This is a fundamental part of the significance that God has given us as his people. God does not need us. He can accomplish whatever he wants without any involvement from us at all. But he has chosen to include us in significant ways in the accomplishment of his purposes – so the coming of his kingdom, the growth and flourishing of his church, the salvation of the lost, overcoming evil with good in the world.

This is an amazing thing! For our prayers, it means that they are part of the way that God saves people from their sins. They are part of the way that God is winning the victory over Satan’s kingdom. They are part of the way that the church grows in holiness and zeal and fruitfulness. They are part of the way that God is spreading the knowledge of his glory over the whole earth. So Paul here is telling us to continue steadfastly in prayer because the people of God continuing steadfastly in prayer is a very significant part of the way that God is bringing his kingdom and building his church. We are very weak creatures as human beings and as believers. We really can’t accomplish much of anything – actually nothing - apart from the Lord’s keeping us in life. And yet through prayer we can have a role in changing people’s hearts and building the church and overcoming evil in the world. Through prayer we have a role to play in unleashing God’s almighty power to save sinners

and defeat evil. We do not in any way control God, but God has arranged things so that our prayers are important in him bringing his kingdom. And that is pretty awesome.

And Paul here is telling us to pray a lot. “Continue steadfastly in prayer.” We are to continue praying. We are to persevere in prayer. Paul gives similar exhortations in other places. In Romans 12:12 he writes, “Be constant in prayer.” In 1 Thessalonians 5:17 he says, “[P]ray without ceasing.”

Clearly the Bible is calling us to pray often and to pray much. But what does that actually look like? It cannot mean every second of every day because there are lots of other things that God calls us to do that we cannot do if we are praying. Paul has just told us “work heartily, as for the Lord” and doing that requires concentrating on your work. But clearly continuing steadfastly in prayer means praying often and praying much.

For many of us, I think it is fair to say, this means praying more than we do. It may mean setting aside more time to pray. It may mean setting aside different shorter times during the day when we pause for prayer. It may mean attending prayer meetings. It may mean being more organized about our prayer time. There are, for instance, many requests for prayer in the updates that we get from the ministries that we support. There are the weekly emails that we can get from VOM that give a number of specific cases of persecution to pray about. There is a book like Operation World that is a prayer guide for the spiritual needs of the nations of the world. There are books of written prayers that are helpful for some of our prayer time. One of the best is called Valley of Vision which is a collection of Puritan prayers. Another is called A Method for Prayer by Mathew Henry. There are versions of this book with updated language available online and in print. There are many good books on prayer that give ideas about how to structure prayer time. One of the better books on prayer is Tim Keller book simply called *Prayer*.

So there are a lot of resources to help us to continue steadfastly in prayer. It takes some effort on our part. It takes hearing the word of God to us in this verse and considering our own practice of prayer in the light of it. It takes feeling the weight of the fact that God is strongly emphasizing how important prayer is to him.

Now besides telling us to continue steadfastly in our prayers Paul tells us to be watchful in our prayers. The idea here is that we are to be alert and engaged in our prayers. Clearly Paul understood that it is challenging to stay alert when we are praying. I’m sure we are all familiar with our mind drifting during prayer or dozing off. Perhaps the call to watchfulness is part of the broader call to watchfulness that the NT urges so often – in the sense of being spiritually alert and awake and engaged as opposed to being complacent and sluggish in our Christian life.

Certainly it will help to be watchful in prayer if we are awake to the significance of our lives in the light of the biblical teaching – that we are involved in spiritual warfare – that how we live is a matter of life and death – that unsaved people will end up in hell – that we are to seek first the kingdom of God. It is easy for the

concerns of daily life to dominate our minds and the spiritual issues of life fade into the background. The call for us to be watchful in prayer is a call to pray with the awareness of what is at stake and with the passion that the things we are praying about merit.

And then there is the call to thanksgiving in our prayers. Paul does this many times in his letters. He gives some kind of exhortation and then adds that we are to do it with thanksgiving. Again and again he calls us to thanksgiving. And that is an indication of how important thanksgiving is to God.

Thanksgiving is important because there is so much for us to be thankful for. Our very life comes from God. Everything that is good in life comes from God. Our salvation comes from God. Our salvation was very costly to God. He gave his own Son to suffer the penalty for our sin. Jesus was willing to become a man and suffer and die so that we might be forgiven and reconciled to God. Just as our physical life is upheld moment by moment by God so our spiritual life is upheld moment by moment by the Holy Spirit. We are worthy of death and we live as people loved by God. God has promised to work everything in our lives for our good so that nothing can ultimately harm us. We live with the certain hope of eternal life in the presence of God.

Our thankfulness is an acknowledgement of our dependance upon God. It is a confession that we have nothing that we have not received. It is worship because it acknowledges God's goodness and generosity – it acknowledges God as the one from whom all blessings flow.

And so we are to "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving." Just as prayer is important because the heart of true life is a relationship with God, so thanksgiving is important because the heart of life is a relationship with God. It is a response to God's love and grace and generosity towards us. In all the blessings that God gives us he is expressing his love – his desire to bless us - and thanksgiving is a response to God's expressions of his love for us. To be unthankful is to despise the relationship. It is not to value God's expressions of love towards us. It is to take God for granted. It is to value God's gifts without valuing him as the giver of the gifts. It is actually to neglect the most precious thing about God's gifts which is his love to us in them.

So thanksgiving is to be a constant part of our prayer life. What that does is force us to think about and to be explicit about what is good about our life in relationship with God. It means that we are not to focus exclusively on the things that we would like God to change. It means that we are not to focus only on the hard things and the painful things and the things that we wish were different. It means that no matter what difficulties that we are going through, if we are in Christ, the overall perspective of our life is positive. It means that if God loves us and we love God, we are blessed, even if we are suffering, even if we are dying. This is part of the reason that God calls us to rejoice in the Lord always. It is part of being content in all circumstances. There is always reason for thanksgiving if we belong to our faithful saviour Jesus Christ – if our sins are forgiven – if God is at work in us to make us holy. And that should be reflected in our prayers.

This has a special relevance for us at the present time. This is an anxious time. The situation that we are in with the pandemic has a way of getting to us. Most of us are not in too much danger because of it, but it is certain affecting our lives and as that drags on, it can get us down or anxiety can seep into our hearts or we can be frustrated with the restrictions. One helpful discipline for us during this time is to make sure that we are thanking the Lord for all his benefits – that we are thanking God for the wonderful things that are true of us as believers in Jesus. We still have a great deal of this worldly comfort and pleasure, but even more importantly we have the love of Christ that nothing can separate us from, God is our heavenly Father who loves us and is taking care of us, God is using the difficulties in our lives for our spiritual growth, and he tells us to rejoice in the Lord always. We are to live lives of thanksgiving. That does not mean that it is always easy to do that. But it is what we are being called to do and so it is part of what we are to be growing towards. The call to pray with thanksgiving is a call to think about all the things that we have to be thankful for and to express that to God and in the process we can make progress in the struggle to live with joy and contentment in the midst of the challenges of life.

Now in verse 3 and 4 Paul asks the Colossians especially to pray for God's blessing on the mission work of Paul and his team. "At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison – that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak."

In his book, *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission*: John Dickson has written, "Of all the things Paul urges his churches to pray for, prayer for the work of the gospel is the most common. More than that: of all the things the New Testament mentions as gospel promoting activities (giving money, speaking of Jesus, and so on) prayer is the one most frequently urged." He says that that does not mean that Christians should "be silent about their faith" but he goes on to say that prayer "is the primary evangelistic task of every believer."

The words of Paul that I have just quoted are part of that emphasis. Paul here is urging the Colossian Christians to pray for his work of preaching the gospel to the world. First he asks for prayer that "God may open to us a door for the word." He wants the Colossians to pray that the Lord will provide opportunities for him to preach the gospel. At the moment he is in prison. He is not able to move about freely around the Roman world. But he knows that God is able to provide opportunities for him to declare the good news of salvation in Jesus. In 2 Timothy 2:9 Paul mentions the fact that he is "suffering bound with chains as a criminal." But, then he says, "But the word of God is not bound!"

And indeed God did provide opportunities for Paul to preach the gospel when he was in prison. The end of the book of Acts describes Paul as being "allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him." And in Acts 28:30-31 we read, "He lived there two whole years as his own experience, and welcomed all who came to him proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance." This shows how the word of God was not bound by Paul's imprisonment.

And Paul request that the Colossians pray that God would open a door for the word teaches us that should be an important part of our prayers for the success of the gospel. For the gospel to be declared there needs to be people who will listen. People generally are not interested in the gospel. And God is the only one who can work in people's hearts so that they will even be willing to listen. And so the work of prayer for open doors for missionaries and evangelists and regular Christians to bring the gospel is a necessary part of the way that way that God brings people from darkness to light. We need to be praying that God will be working ahead of those whom he sends out to bring the gospel to provide open doors for the word – the bring people who are willing to listen.

Paul here refers to the gospel message that he declares as “the mystery of Christ.” This is one Paul's way of referring to the gospel message. The idea is not that the gospel is mysterious, but that it has been hidden and then revealed. Paul gives more of an explanation of the idea of mystery in Ephesians 3:8-9 where he says that God had given him the grace “to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God....” This is what Paul means by the term the “mystery of Christ.” It has to do with God's plan to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ to the Gentiles – a plan that had been hidden, but now had been brought to light.

And finally Paul asks the Colossians to pray “that [he] may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.” Paul is aware of his need as a preacher of the gospel for God's enablement that he might be able to speak clearly. To bring the gospel clearly is no easy task. That is true when preachers preach to settled congregations, but Paul is asking for prayer here for evangelistic preaching and teaching. He was the leading missionary to the Gentiles. He was bringing them a message for which they had little framework for understanding it. It was a message that could be told simply in its basic outline, but was very profound once he got beyond the basics. And Paul felt the need for God's enabling grace to make it clear.

The main point here is the importance of prayer for the success of the gospel. Paul here is appealing to the Colossians to pray for him as a missionary sent out by the church to bring the gospel to the lost. But Paul is very aware of the fact that he is just one part of the picture of how the gospel is spread. There are missionaries like him who are called to be on the front lines. And there are the people in the churches who are called to the ministry of prayer that God might open doors, that God would enable the missionaries to do declare the gospel clearly and that God would open the hearts of the hearers to receive the message.

The verses that we have looked at this evening, are about the importance of the prayers of the church for the success of God's mission in the world. There are all kinds of things that must be done by God's people to further God's mission in the world, but at the end of the day nothing happens apart from God's blessing. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 3:7 “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.” And God has ordained to give that growth through the prayers of his people.

The great significance of prayer for the success of God's mission in the world is a tremendous encouragement. We are all gifted in different ways. Not all of us are gifted to be missionaries and evangelists. But we can all be involved in one of the most important parts of the churches calling to bring the gospel to the world through taking seriously the ministry of prayer.

John Dickson ends his chapter on prayer in the mission of the church with the following words, "As we look around our workplace, home, friends, school, university or suburb, what do we believe to be the "solution" to the problem of so many people not yet appreciating the truth of Christ? The most basic part of the answer must be "prayer"—compassionate petitions to the Lord of the harvest to send out more workers, to give success to such workers and to grant salvation to our friends, family and the world."

(Dickson, John. *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission: Promoting the Gospel with More Than Our Lips* (Kindle Locations 1061-1064). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.)