

PRAYING WITH MATURITY

Ephesians 1:15–23

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We're beginning a series of messages in Ephesians. Today's Scripture is in 1:15–23: "Praying With Maturity."

Someone related to me recently that they had monitored prayer requests announced in their church over a period of months and had come to the conclusion that over 80 percent of the prayer requests announced from the pulpit were for healings or ministry to people's physical bodies. I got to thinking about that statement and thought, "That probably holds true for the prayer requests announced here in public worship as well." A great majority of our prayer requests are for healings of the body.

There's nothing wrong with this. The Scripture gives us the opportunity to come to the Lord in prayer. But when we pray, we're to pray for more than the healing of the body. We're to be praying for the welfare of our inward being, as well as the welfare of our outward being. We learn how to pray for the inward being when we watch a great saint like the apostle Paul pray. We learn from his prayer how to pray with greater maturity.

There are basically two things that Paul shows us in this prayer this morning that help us pray with greater maturity.

I. One is that mature praying begins with thanksgiving.

Verses 15–16 say, "For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers" (NIV).

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In my home church in Springfield, Missouri, the pastor called on Reverend C. M. Ward to lead in prayer. He, at that time, was speaker for “Revival Time.” What was unusual for the call for him to pray was that Ward was not on the platform. Normally, when someone leads in prayer, they’re on the platform, because the auditorium is so big you practically had to have a mic to be heard. As soon as Ward began to lead, he began in a voice loud enough that it could be heard through the rafters. He said something like this, “O God, we are here this morning to complain.” I’d never before in my life heard anyone begin a pray that way. And, of course, what he was complaining about was the prayer requests. I thought it was a rather unique way to say “prayer requests.”

As I reflected upon that, I wondered if—perhaps more subtly—our prayers aren’t couched in a form of complaint to God. It’s striking when we turn to Paul’s praying, that we should find, instead of complaints, thanksgiving. Out of the thirteen letters that Paul writes, six of them have, in their first chapter, a prayer of thanks. And not just a general thanksgiving for God and salvation, but a specific thanksgiving for the people that have been associated with Paul. Maybe a way to pray maturely—in respect to thanksgiving—is to single out, for thanksgiving to God, the people in our life that have touched us the deepest: our spouses, if we have them; our children; our parents; our brothers and our sisters; our church family; our deepest friends.

Am I praying to the Lord for the people in my life? And do I let them know that I thank God for them?

Paul gave specific reasons for thankfulness.

A. Their faith in the Lord and their love for all the saints. When you look at Paul’s situation at the time of the writing, perhaps you could find an excuse for his not being thankful. He was, after all, in prison. He was awaiting trial. A church like at Philippi had sent him an offering to

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help him at this time. But the Ephesian church hadn't sent him an offering. Maybe that could have been the basis for a complaint.

B. And two, when you read Ephesians 4 and 5 and see the practical pastoral instructions that Paul gives the church, you can immediately detect that not everybody in this church was perfect. There was a lot of room for improvement of their spiritual walk. There were also problems in relationships: husband/wife problems; parent/child problems; employer/employee problems. Yet before dealing with any one of those, Paul lets us know that the way to relay prayer effectively is to begin with thanksgiving in your heart. Otherwise, if you try to correct people without thanksgiving, you will correct them with the wrong kind of spirit and it will not produce any change at all.

Why do we neglect thanksgiving in our life? Sometimes, it's just a matter of plain carelessness or complacency. We're perhaps like the wife who complained that her husband never said, "I love you." His response was, "I don't need to. I bring the paycheck home every time, don't I?" That was his way of saying, "I love you." She wanted to hear it. Some of your wives would like to hear it from your husbands as well.

We neglect to say things like "I love you" or "Thanks" because we become complacent.

Sometimes, we don't express thanksgiving to God because there is sin in our life and nothing will keep us from prayer like sin. But, rather than letting sin keep us from prayer, it should be what drives us to prayer, because we recognize that God has His arms extended wide to receive us, and that we can be healed, only by coming to Him in prayer.

Often broken fellowship keeps us from being thankful to the Lord. I realize that, from time to time, there are married couples that come to a Sunday morning service and have hardly been on speaking terms with one another. Yet, out of a sense of duty and habit, they come to worship the

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Lord. The Lord wants you, at this time, as you hear this message, even today, to reflect upon your relationship with your spouse and, in the quiet of your heart, to give thanks to God for them, no matter how broken you might feel your relationship to the one you have loved is. By thanksgiving, a door is created through which God can begin the healing process.

Sometimes, bitterness keeps us from being thankful to the Lord. Situations have happened in our lives about which we are not content. We feel like Asaph, in Psalm 73, who said, “When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant. I was like a brute beast before You.” Bitterness can make us behave like animals at times. But the Lord wants to wash that away with thanksgiving. So if you want to begin to pray maturely, begin with thanksgiving.

II. The second major thing that Paul says about mature praying—in giving us his own example of prayer—is that mature praying is more concerned with petitioning God for inward personal change than petitioning God for simply the outward change of circumstances.

Probably, if a poll was taken of each one of us here this morning, we could all think of things in our life that we would like to change. It might be our health. It might be our job. It might be some of the breaks we wanted to go our way. It might be somebody we’re linked up with. It might be the classes we’re attending. Something we’d like to change in our circumstances.

Often, our prayers are simply coming to God, asking Him to change our circumstances. But mature praying, as it’s reflected in the Lord’s prayer and in Paul’s prayers, are prayers that have to do with changing us inside—that God has a freer hand in working on the inside of us. Many times, He wants us to live with a circumstance in order for something on the inside of us to change. When we look at the Lord’s Prayer, five out of the six petitions don’t have anything to do with outward change. They have to do with inward change. Paul prays for some things that

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have to do with that Ephesians, that have to do with inward change and reflect great maturity and prayer.

A. The first thing he prays for, by way of inward change, is so that we all might know God better. Verse 17 says, “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, might give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better” (NIV). Paul is not praying that we would know more *about* God. That can be important, and there is room to grow theologically and doctrinally. But more important than knowing *about* God is knowing God himself.

An older minister friend of mine made a statement in a personal conversation not many weeks ago. He was alarmed about the amount of people that were in pulpit and music ministry today who were turning up with moral sin in their lives. He made this comment, “I have seen it to be true that a man can preach great sermons and still have sin in his life. I’ve also found it to be true that a person can have a great ministry in music and still have sin in their life. But I have yet to find someone who really consistently prays, who has that kind of sin in their life.”

That, I think, is what Paul means when he says he’s praying that we’ll know God better.

Because, when we know the character and nature of God better, our own lives are purified and made whole. Paul prays for the kind of knowledge that is not a partial knowledge but a full knowledge. In the Greek language, in which Paul writes, the common word for knowledge is *gnosis*. He prayed that they would have *epignosis*, which is “full knowledge.” It means the kind of knowledge that involves, on our part, a greater participation in what is known. Because we have a greater participation in what is known, it has a greater effect upon our conduct.

So when we really come to know God in the fullest sense, we become more active in His ways and we become more influenced by Him. We need the Spirit of wisdom and the Spirit of

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revelation. “Wisdom” is the mind of Christ which comes to us in a particular situation and helps us know how God would respond to that situation. “Revelation” is some secret disclosure of God’s mind, that we may not have previous access to, but when we’re needing it, the Spirit of revelation is there to show us how God would face what we’re facing. Saint Paul fears the congregation knows God too little, and therefore does not know how Jesus would respond in life situations.

It’s interesting to look at how Paul deals with this concept and knowledge, because he admits, in Romans 7, that there are times when we do not know ourselves. He admits, in Romans 8, that there are times when we do not know our circumstances. But, he says, there really is never a time when we do not know God. We may not know ourselves. We may not understand our circumstances, but we may always know God.

There is no time in our life when we can be absent from the phrase “We have the mind of Christ.” Friends, when we’re praying and knowing God, we have the mind of Christ.

B. The second petition that Paul makes is that we know the hope to which we are called. Verse 18 says, “I pray also that the eyes of your heart [isn’t that a beautiful phrase—poetic—‘the eyes of your heart’] may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints” (NIV). I know that there are different hopes represented in this congregation. Some of you are hoping that you’ll survive school this year. Some of you are hoping to get a college degree or a high school degree. Some of you are hoping that someday you’ll be able to buy your own home instead of renting. Others of you are hoping that you’ll be able to get a better home than the one you now own. Others are hoping that you’ll find a job that is more meaningful than the one that you occupy now.

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These hopes are all important. But there's a hope that is more important. That is deeper. That is eternal. And it is the hope of our glorious inheritance in Christ Jesus. It surpasses any hope that we have. From time to time, we need to realize that this world is not our home, we're just passing through. We have a hope laid up for us, which is fixed and sure.

When we come to cross the chasm that separates this world from His, there's someone that's going to meet us on the bridge. And He's bringing His own light. You have this hope in you and Paul's prayer is that, in the midst of all of our temporal day-to-day problems, we will be focusing on the hope of our glorious riches in Christ. The Christian knows which is better. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

C. The third thing that Paul directs us to pray for, regarding maturity, is that we might know the incomparable power of God toward us (verses 19–23). That we might know “His incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Ephesians 1:19–23, NIV).

As a young person, I remember seeing at a fair a game in which you had a big mallet and you hit something that was a scale, and it would shoot something up in the air that measured how strong you were. If you rung the bell at the top, it indicated you were a strong man and you would get a prize.

When you think of a unit of strength, when you look at the Old Testament, the thing that rings the bell of God's power in the Old Testament, that there's never anything equal to it, is the

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exodus of God’s children from Egypt. All throughout the Old Testament, the exodus is the unit of measurement of God’s strength.

But in the New Testament, there is a whole different thing brought into focus. The unit of measurement in the New Testament, the mallet of God’s power, is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Nothing comes even close to measuring God’s power, not even the splitting of the atom. Nothing comes close. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the indication of how great God is. Paul says that this same power that is at work in Christ is also at work in us. It’s like saying that the water in the ocean, that supports the greatest ocean tanker, is the same water that keeps our canoe afloat. The same power that raised God’s Son from the dead is the power that also is at work in us, for the glorification of our bodies.

What Saint Paul is saying is, “We realize that, while scientists are trying to create life in test tubes, Christ already—through His resurrection—got a hold of humanity. He is Lord over all. He is head of the church.” Yet Paul says this one strange thing about Christ and His power: “The church...is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Ephesians 1:22-23, NIV). Here is an eloquent phrase which describes our relationship with Christ. We are His fullness. In other words, Christ is not full without us. Although He fills everything in every way, He is not full without us.

What does this mean? It simply can be compared to the fact that, although a physician may be a great physician, he cannot practice being a physician unless he has patients to work with. And although Christ is Redeemer and Savior, He yet cannot practice that redemption and that saving unless there are people whom He redeems and whom He saves. And, in the eternal counsel of God, it has pleased God that Christ should remain incomplete without us. We are His body. And we also become a reflection of the measure of His power.

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So, Saint Paul directs our attention to these things, that in our praying, we might be changed on the inside. That we might pray with thanksgiving, and that we might pray that our inward attitudes expand, so that we have no small view of Christ, no small view of ourselves. But rather, that we know God. That we have a glorious home. That we have the greatness of God's power.

Closing Prayer

Father, we thank You for this Sunday in which we have come to worship You. I pray now, Lord, as we apply this message to our lives, to the various needs that are represented—some of which Your Spirit has indicated in my own heart and some of which are known alone to the hearts of people who are here. There are persons here this morning, Lord, who really need an experience to withdraw from the bitterness and the isolation and the sins of their lives, and begin to thank You for redeeming them and for the family and the friends You've put them with. God, let thanksgiving rise in our hearts, as a fountain bursting out of the desert floor. Let the spirit of thanksgiving come upon us. Lord, there are others here who have spent a great deal of time praying for the changing of circumstances, and it may very well be Your will that those circumstances change. Yet Lord, more important than the change of circumstances are the changed people You want us to be in them. We pray, Lord, to grow in the knowledge of You. We pray, Lord, that we would again know in our hearts the greatness of our home. That, in the times when life brings us the worst, when we are wounded and harried and our tears flow, that we'll remember this world is not our final home. And that our hope in You is not some pie in the sky. But it's reality, grounded in who You are. That for You not to deliver on your promise is totally unthinkable. And that every moment we have spent here in agony and suffering and sorrow will be replaced by an eternal eon of joy in Your presence. Help us, Lord, to understand that not everything is measured here; but that the weight of glory is so much greater than the

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weight of agony and suffering. Let us have hope and not let the world steal it from us. Teach us, Lord, to trust in Your power again. To realize, Lord, that there is not a thing in life that You don't have power over. That You have power in heaven and on earth and under the earth and all things are Yours. We rejoice that we are the body of Christ, sons and daughters of God, joint heirs with Christ. We praise Your name for who we are. Bless Your people today, we pray. In the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.