



New Hope Sermon The Power of Prayer Colossians 1

The power of prayer for believers

Paul tells the believers in Colossae “*We always thank God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you ... Since the day we've heard about you, we have not stop praying about you, and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding*” (Col 1: 3 & 9). We assume Paul is not making an unfounded claim of this remarkable commitment to pray “unceasingly” for people he even didn’t know. If you read Paul’s letters to many of the new church plants, it is clear that he and his ministry colleagues made prayer a significant priority in all they did. Epaphras is an example – Col 4:2 “*He is always wrestling in prayer for you that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.*” Unbelievers in the region said, when Paul and his colleague came to their city, “*these men who are turning the world upside-down have come here*” Acts 17:6. I am pretty sure that the committed prayer ministry was largely responsible for how the early church grew and persevered in the midst of persecution. There is enormous power in prayer beloved. I know you can say “Amen” to that. Right?! AMEN!

The Colossians’ context

Powerful intercession for others is very specific and as targeted to their needs as possible. So, before we look at the specific things Paul and his colleagues prayed for these Colossians believers, we need to understand their context. First of all, these were new babies in Christ who needed constant nurturing and teaching in doctrine and righteous living.

The problem for the newborn Colossians was erroneous teaching related to some form of Gnosticism. “Formulated in a Jewish framework, it deprived Jesus Christ of his unique status as the Son of God and Savior and reduced Him to only one, albeit in an exalted place, of a series of created divine beings emanating in a graduated scale from the Godhead...Paul feared that asceticism, magical rites and worship of heavenly bodies...would reduce Christianity to another religious philosophy, though primary but still inferior to the real ‘knowledge’ of the Gnostic philosophy.” (Harper Study Bible, RSV Zondervan, 1982, p. 1762) “The Gnostics were teaching that Christ was a good place to begin, but that there was so much more they could know and experience if only they would incorporate the Gnostic system of passwords, rites and initiations. Their superior, know-it-all air was intimidating and some of the Colossians were made to feel they were lacking. What is more, the system, by promising a special understanding, appealed to the people’s natural, elitist instinct” (Kent Hughes, Commentary on Colossians, Crossway, 1989, p. 22).

Paul’s prayer begins with the contested issues of knowledge: “*we are asking God to fill you with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding*” (Col 1: 9). It is significant that Paul prayed for the Colossians’ “knowledge” because they are under siege by people telling them they needed a “better knowledge”... The gnostic characteristic word for “knowledge” is “gnosis”. But Paul used a word for knowledge that is almost a technical term for the decisive knowledge of God which is involved in conversion to the Christian faith. Paul used the word *epignosis* as a reference to full knowledge for the Colossians. Kent Hughes says: “Knowing that they have this personal knowledge of Christ and his will, Paul prayed for an *epignosis* which would fill them in such a way that it would instill a wisdom and understanding that was singularly ‘spiritual.’.. Paul is praying for the Colossians to have a Christian mind – a mind which is trained to handle life within the framework constructed of Christian presuppositions” (Hughes, Ibid, pp22-23).

Joshua Kang in his book *Deep Rooted in Christ* says: “To understand God’s Word effectively we must be sharp and perceptive. We must become skilled thinkers... Our capacity for great thinking is increased by study, synthesis, and reflections on the information we gathered. For disciplined training of our thoughts, constant study and reading are our greatest tools. Our ultimate objective in training our minds is to give glory and honor to God (Kang, IVP 2006, p.64). Two applications from this text.

Application #1. What do you pray for others?

E.D Martin points out that Paul's asking has been regular, intense, focused and intentional. Such deliberateness stands in sharp contrast to the blend suggestion of prayer in the comment "I'll be thinking of you." ... Similarly, we are prone to pray only in emergencies – for those in need, in trouble, or in hard circumstances. Paul prayed continuously for his churches. He wrote them letters when troubles were brewing.

"Typically when we pray for ourselves and others, we pray for physical health, well-being, social relationships and spiritual growth. But part of our intercessory prayers ought to be for "*the knowledge of God's will to all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*" Have you prayed like that for others? ... Every believer should be able to filter his culture seductive gnosis to the grid of God's *epignosis* (Kent Hughes, *The Commentary of Colossians*, crossway books 1989 p 22-23) – his full knowledge in Christ.

Paul's prayer for the Colossians to understand the knowledge of God's will is about their ability to discern between God's truth and God's teaching. "The opening paragraph of Colossians speaks to our contemporary need to understand uphold and proclaim the Christian version of the truth. Those who are able to detect counterfeit bills learn everything they can about a genuine bill. The same principle applies to distinguishing truth from falsehood. We must know what is true before we can recognize what is false. Our pragmatic relativism has blurred the distinction between the two (Garland, ibid p. 59).

Application #2. How to develop a Christian mind

So I want to think together today about how to develop a Christian mind. Paul's emphasis, through his prayer, is that the Colossians "*grow in their knowledge of God's will to all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*" To develop a Christian mind is to learn to think God's thoughts. How does that happen?

- **Knowing God**

J.I. Packer says it starts with knowing God:

"Knowing God is a matter of personal dealing – it is more than knowing about Him. It is a matter of dealing with Him as he opens up to you and being dealt with by Him as he takes knowledge of you...Second, knowing God is a matter of personal involvement in mind, will and feeling. Third, knowing God is a matter of grace. It is a relationship in which the initiative throughout is with God...We do not make friends with God. God makes friends with us, bringing us to know Him by making His love known to us...God has given His Son to die for me in order to realize this purpose..."

Knowing God means becoming a disciple of Jesus...It involves faith – assent, consent and commitment expressed through prayer and obedience...a person who knows God will be more than a conqueror, living in the reality of Romans 8." (J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, pp. 34-37, 253).

- **Soaking ourselves in God's Word**

"Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity (Packer, Ibid, p. 14). Quoting Paul's advice to Timothy, Packer adds that the way to become wise is "by soaking ourselves in the scriptures which are *able to make men wise and perfect the man of God for all good works.*" 2 tim.3:15. In other words, once a person knows God, the next step to developing a Christian mind is to be immersed in God's thoughts so we can be living Bibles to those around us, doing God's good works.

But knowledge alone does not enable obedience. "Paul's petition of God is to give his reader not only spiritual discernment of God's will but also the divine power to do it. That power has been revealed in the resurrection. That same power gives Paul's strength to toil for the gospel and empowers other Christians to live life pleasing to God" (Garland, ibid, p. 75).

This is important because in the Hebrew's mind, knowledge and conduct were bound together. In the gnostic culture, which was threatening the Colossians' faith, teaching was highly speculative and theoretical, not related to life...So Paul prays that the Colossians will walk their

talk, that their knowledge of God will grow and then that this in turn would produce a conduct that is worthy of the Lord, pleasing Him in all respect. That is how we should pray (Kent Hughes, *ibid*, p.24-25).

- **Meditating on God's Truth**

Packer says we develop a Christian mind by “turning each Truth that we learn about God into matter for meditation before God, leading to prayer and praise to God.” This is what is needed to “shield ourselves from false teaching. The great danger of those who are not solidly grounded in their faith is that they will unknowingly allow the practices and values of our culture to dilute their faith beyond recognition. Then we wind up with mushy sentimentality or worse, bizarre belief reinforced by a herd mentality” (David Garland, *NIV application commentary Colossians* p. 70).

I believe having a Christian mind is very relevant for us at New Hope because all of us are educated. Thus we each highly value knowledge and the work it takes to master a subject and let that subject penetrate our life and priorities. Knowing our subject means applying it in everyday life. And so it is with the knowledge of God.

- **God lights our passion**

But God has to light our passion. Christian thinker R.C. Sproul says:

To tell the truth, I hated school from the first grade all the way through high school. The last thing I wanted to do was go to college. Because it was a church-related college I had to take a course in the introduction to the Old Testament, first semester, and second semester an introduction to the New Testament. I'll tell you, I absolutely devoured the scripture. I read it all day. At the end of the first semester I had an A in gym because I was on an athletic scholarship, an A in Bible, and all the rest Ds.

At the beginning of my sophomore year I almost had a second conversion. It was a strange thing. I took a required course in Introduction to Philosophy. The first assignment was on David Hume. I thought this was nonsense, and I was bored. I sat in the back of the class, and read Billy Graham sermons. While the professor was droning on about this stuff, I was being edified by the Reverend Billy Graham.

Then one day the professor started to lecture on Augustine's view of creation. He got my attention. I sat there and had an experience that was almost as powerful as my conversion, where all of a sudden my understanding of the nature of God just exploded. I went downstairs and changed my major to philosophy just so that I could have a more in-depth understanding of God.

After I graduated from college, I went to seminary for three years, and then I went and did my doctoral studies at the University of Amsterdam. *"The Dick Staub Interview: R. C. Sproul's Testimony," ChristianityToday.com (12-30-02)*.

John Stott advises: “Don't neglect your critical faculties. Remember that God is a rational God, who has made us in his own image. God invites and expects us to explore his double revelation, in nature and Scripture, with the minds he has given us, and to go on in the development of a Christian mind to apply his marvelous revealed truth to every aspect of the modern and the postmodern world. Author John Stott, "CT Classic: Basic Stott," interview by Roy McCaughey *Christianity Today* (1-8-96). In other words, exercise your brain!

Now let's make this more practical. Back in the 60's Harry Blamires wrote a prophetic book called *The Christian Mind* in which he said “There is no longer a Christian mind... As a *thinking* being, the modern Christian has succumbed to secularization... He rejects the religious view of life ... which sets all earthly issues within the context of the eternal, the view which relates all human problems – social, political, cultural – to the doctrinal foundations of our Christian Faith, the view which sees all things here below in terms of Christ's supremacy and earth transitoriness in terms of Heaven and Hell (Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, Seabury, 1963, p.3-4).

Six Aspects of a Christian Mind

He describes a Christian mind in 6 areas:

- 1. Its supernatural orientation- “the Christian mind cultivates the eternal perspective... i.e., the Christian view of the human situation... It sees human life and human history held in the hands of God... It sees the universe sustained by his power and his love... time as contained within eternity.” One of my friends in battling cancer; sometimes her body rejects the chemo. She only has inner peace because she knows the God, who is sustaining the universe, is sustaining her in His love. “Secularism, rooted in this world, accounts it the only sure basis of this knowledge, the only reliable source of meaning and value. Secularism puts its trust in this life and makes earthly happiness and well-being its primary concern... Its most basic presupposition... is that this which we experience directly with the senses constitutes the heart and totality of things” (p.63-64). How tragic.
- 2. Its awareness of the power and spread of evil. It involves seeing the universe as a battlefield between the forces of good and evil... The Christian mind must be “sharp enough as an instrument of discrimination to cut cleanly through the befuddling mental jungle which constitutes the practical ethics of our secular society.” (pp. 84 & 99).
- 3. “The concept of truth proper to the Christian mind is determined by the supernatural orientation of the Christian mind ... Secularism asserts the opinionated self as the only judge of truth. Christianity imposes the given divine revelation as the final touch down of truth... which is supernaturally grounded objective, based on revelation, discovered by inquiry and authoritative” (pp.100-101).

“The Christian mind is inescapably and unbrokenly conscious of the hard factual quality of the Christian faith. The Christian mind is alert to the solid God-given authoritative factuality of the Christian faith and the Christian church” (pp. 104-106). The works of God through out history provide a solid foundation for our faith. As the Bible says, we often “call to mind” the works of God and rejoice (Ps. 105)

- 4. Its acceptance of authority. Secularism is permeated by “the doctrines of individualism and self-sufficiency” (p.124). “In secularism, authority is something whose grip you grow out off, something you break away from, something you view with suspicion, something you combine against in order to limit its operation” (p. 131). But the Christian Mind accepts God’s authority and says, as Jesus says, “Not my will but Thine, Lord” (Mat. 26: 39).
- 5. The concern for the person. “Christian thinking is incarnational ... The Christian conception of the human person is a high one, the sense of the sacredness of human personality being deeply grounded in revealed theological truth [human’s made in the image of God]” (p. 147). Those who think Christianly value all people and treat humans with the honor and dignity God originally invested in them.
- 6. Its sacramental cast. “The Christian mind thinks sacramentally of life’s positive richnesses as derivative from the supernatural. It teaches us that to create beauty or to experience beauty, to recognize truth or to discover truth, to receive love or to give love, is the coming into contact with realities that express the Divine Nature” (p.163). As James says, “every good and perfect gift comes from above” (James 1:17). This creates an attitude of thanksgiving to God.

Are you developing a Christian mind that rehearses the works of God, this confident in God’s truth, sovereignty, and authority, that sees people as God originally created them to be and celebrates His grace and goodness and daily life? That’s *epignosis* – the fullness of knowledge and understanding. We need to pray for one another. Amen.

