

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 3, 2019**

**WHAT TO PRAY WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO PRAY (2)**

**Colossians 1:9-14**

Last Sunday was an eventful day. Two dozen of our men were away on the Men's Retreat. My good friend Jim Byrne was our guest preacher here. If you were here, I'm sure you were blessed by his message from 1 Corinthians 13 on the value, virtues, and victory of love in our lives as followers of Jesus. (I can't invite Jim to preach too often, or you may want him to come and preach *every* Sunday!) ☺ And then, there was the rain. Did it ever rain! Some of you probably stayed home because of the rain. Some of us, unfortunately, had to dodge raindrops here in the Sanctuary! I'm sorry about that. We're going to get that situation resolved. We're determined to get the roof fixed, so no one has to be concerned about sitting under or near a leak.

Two Sundays ago, I told you about my friend Al (Chef Alfredo) who told me years ago that when he didn't know what to pray or how to pray for someone, he would pray the prayer Paul prayed for the Colossians here in Colossians 1. This prayer, as we saw two weeks ago, has two main requests, two primary petitions:

1. That the Colossian Christians (and we) may know the will of God for their (and our) lives, for the church, and for the world God loved so much that He gave His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1:9); and
2. That they (and we) may each live a life worthy of the Lord, a life that pleases God in every way (1:10).

It is a good prayer to pray. It is a good prayer to pray for the person seated next to you, or in front of you, or behind you. It is a good prayer to pray for members of our church family who aren't here today. It is a good prayer to pray for fellow Christians with whom you work. It is a good prayer to pray for Christians who are in the public eye, who may need an extra measure of grace and wisdom to stay true to the Lord Jesus Christ. It can even be a good prayer to pray for people who are not yet believers, praying that they will come to faith in Christ, and both experience and exhibit the kind of life in Christ for which Paul prays. When you don't know what to pray for someone, this is a good place to start.

**THE BENEFITS OF GOD'S GRACE**

There is more from last time I want to bring to your attention, in case you missed it or have forgotten. In verses 12-14, Paul names three benefits of God's grace (or four, or five, depending on how you count them), three things God has done for us (or four, or five) that we could never, ever deserve. Let's go with the number five today:

1. *He qualified us* to share in the inheritance of His people in the Kingdom of His Son Jesus Christ. We were *not qualified*. We were *unqualified*. We were *disqualified* by

virtue of our sins. (How is that for an oxymoronic phrase – “by virtue of our sins,” as if there were some virtue, some goodness, in our badness! But I trust you understand what I mean.) None of us could ever qualify for heaven on the basis of our own goodness. But *God* qualified us. God did what was necessary to make us qualified to receive an inheritance in heaven. It was (and is) all God’s doing.

2. *He rescued us* from the dominion of Satan, where we were stuck in the darkness of sin and unbelief and guilt. He delivered us from the enemy of our souls and adopted us as His children.
3. *He brought us* into the Kingdom of His Son and gave us a new home in His family.
4. *He redeemed us* – that is, He purchased our freedom from sin and guilt. With His blood, Jesus paid the ransom to set us free. There really is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because He has set us free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:1-2).
5. *He forgave* our sins. Every last one of them – past, present, and future. He forgave them all. Whatever sins you have committed, whatever secret (or not-so-secret) things you have done that you carry around in the recesses of your memory – in Jesus Christ you are forgiven. Do you hear that? Do you believe that?

Sin cripples. The weight of guilt can paralyze. The forgiveness of Jesus sets us free.

A little boy was diagnosed with cancer at the age of three. He had multiple relapses over a five-year period and was close to death more than once. But his parents never lost hope, and loved him through it all.

The boy’s mother, however, told the oncologist that early in their marriage, she had an affair and left her husband for another man. She became pregnant by him. When she told him she was pregnant, he (the man with whom she was having the affair) gave her something to swallow in the hope of inducing an abortion. It did not work, and he subsequently left her. She went back to her husband, pregnant with this little boy. She asked for and received his forgiveness. He knew the truth but always loved and treated this boy as his own son.

The boy’s mother asked the oncologist: “Do you think the [cocktail of drugs] I drank to abort the pregnancy caused my son’s cancer?”

The doctor replied that we will never know what caused the cancer. Doctors, you know, can do many things, but they cannot heal guilt, and this mother suffered for years with this terrible burden. Deep in her soul she felt that her sin had caused her son’s suffering.

The mother had grown up in a church that preached the gospel. She had heard the message of forgiveness that comes through faith in Jesus and His sacrifice on the cross for us. Yet she had never been able to forgive herself and could not bring herself to accept the forgiveness God offers to us in Jesus. Sadly, there was no one in her church with whom she felt she could share her terrible burden. When, with God’s help, she was finally able to forgive herself, she went through her Bible, underlining every verse or passage that spoke about God’s forgiveness. Her heart was finally set free. The healing of memories and guilt, the doctor came to realize, can sometimes be more difficult than healing cancer.

The little boy survived the cancer. Years later, the oncologist was invited to his wedding. (Adapted from Diane Komp, “Hearts Untroubled,” *TToday* 45, 278; cited in David Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Colossians/Philemon*, 79-80.)

The Bible emphatically declares that in His grace, God does not treat us as our sins deserve (Psalm 103:10). With Him there is forgiveness and full redemption (Psalm 130:4, 7). This guilt-ridden mother experienced what David wrote about in Psalm 32:

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven,  
 whose sins are covered.  
 Blessed are those whose sin  
 the Lord does not count against them,  
 and in whose spirit is no deceit.  
 When I kept silent about my sin,  
 my bones wasted away  
 through my groaning all day long.  
 Day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;  
 my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.  
 Then I acknowledged my sin to You  
 and did not cover up my iniquity.  
 I said: “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord” –  
 and you forgave the guilt of my sin.  
 (Psalm 32:1-5)

If there is some unconfessed or unrepented sin in your life, take it to the Lord. His grace covers it all. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all our transgressions. Though you may feel great guilt over something in your past (or present), Jesus is a great Savior. No sin is too big, or too small, for Him to forgive. This is the beauty – and the truth – of the gospel.

### **WORTHY**

Now, because God in His grace has qualified us for heaven, because He has rescued us from Satan’s domain and brought us into the Kingdom of His Son, because He has purchased our freedom from sin and guilt, because our sins are forgiven – all of them – we are called to “live lives worthy of the Lord and (to) please Him in every way” (1:10).

Let’s think for a moment about the word *worthy*. It means not simply to have worth or value. More than that, as James Boice says, it means to have a worth equal to your position (Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary*, 121). Stephen Strasburg, we may say, is not only a valuable and valued member of the World Champion Washington Nationals baseball team, he is *worthy* of the honor of being named the World Series MVP because of his phenomenal performances on the mound in games 2 and 7 of the World Series.

In addition to Colossians 1:10, Paul urges believers in several other places to live lives worthy of the Savior who gave His life for us.

Ephesians 4:1: “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received (from God).”

Philippians 1:27: “Whatever happens” in your life – whatever hardships you may face, whatever opposition you may encounter, whatever pain or loss you may experience – “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

1 Thessalonians 2:11-12: “You know how we (Paul, Silas, and Timothy) dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into His kingdom and glory.”

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), Jesus tells the story of a young man who demands his inheritance from his father and then goes out and wastes it in a self-indulgent lifestyle. When all his resources are gone and he has nothing to eat, he finally comes to his senses and decides to return home to his father’s estate, to confess his foolishness, and to say: “Father, I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But his father is overjoyed to have him back and throws a big party to celebrate his return.

We are all like the prodigal son. We have all turned away from God and gone our own way. We have all lived for ourselves. We are not worthy to be called His sons and daughters. But God loves us anyway. He waits patiently for us to come home to Him. He welcomes us home with open arms. He showers us with good gifts.. He forgives our sins. He imparts to us the gift of the Holy Spirit. We who are not worthy are given the grace and power of the Holy Spirit to live lives worthy of His name, lives that reflect the truth and beauty of the gospel.

This is God’s will for you and me: To live a life worthy of the Lord and to please Him in every way. Brother Lawrence, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century French monk who wrote *The Practice of the Presence of God*, said we should “think often that our only business in this life is to please God.”

Is that how you view the business – the purpose – of your life? How would your life be different if pleasing God were the primary aim and object of your life from the moment you wake up in the morning until the moment you fall asleep at night? How can you seek to please God in the activities and responsibilities of your daily life?

### **HOW TO PLEASE GOD**

In verses 10-12, Paul gives us a picture of what a life worthy of the Lord looks like, a life that is pleasing to Him – the kind of life God desires us to live as the recipients of His grace. He names four traits of a God-centered, God-pleasing life:

- The life that is pleasing to God bears kingdom fruit in every good work.
- The life that is pleasing to God continues to grow in the knowledge of God. Not just knowledge *about* God; not just head knowledge; but knowledge of both head and

heart: Relational, experiential knowledge combined with head knowledge of the Bible and Christian doctrine.

- The life that is pleasing to God is continually being strengthened with the strength that comes from communion with God, producing patience to endure both hard times and difficult people. It is a life characterized by staying power, a life that exhibits the qualities of love Paul describes for us in 1 Corinthians 13.
- The life that is pleasing to God is epitomized by thanksgiving. *Joyful* thanksgiving. *Exuberant* thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is not just a holiday that comes around once a year. It is a way of life. Listen to what Martin Luther said: “It is clear that a sacrifice must consist of praise and thanks, or must at least not be without praise and thanks, if it is to please God. We cannot give God anything; for everything is already His, and all we have comes from Him. We can only give Him praise, thanks, and honor” (Martin Luther, “What Luther Says,” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 34, No. 17).

These are qualities of a life that is pleasing to God, a life worthy of the Lord who has done everything for us and for our salvation. In response to all the gifts of His grace, what kind of lives are we to live?

The prophet Micah says:

He has shown you, O man, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly, to love mercy,  
and to walk humbly with your God.  
(Micah 6:8)

Do this and you will please God.

When you don't know how to pray for someone, pray these things. Pray what Paul prayed for the Colossians. Pray that we may all know the fullness of God's revealed will for our lives. Pray that we may all live lives worthy of His name. Pray that we may all please Him in every way. Because He is forever worthy.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.