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Phil 09 Prayer that Leads to Wise Choices

“More things are wrought in prayer than this world dreams of.” Those are the words of the great English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson. I believe them. I believe my life is what it is today, largely because of prayer, the prayers of others and my own. I believe the same is true for you and because this is true, we should be men and women of prayer. Who knows what God will do in our lifetime and in the generations to come because we prayed.

Do you remember the story in the Old Testament when the Assyrian army attacked Jerusalem? The arrogant Assyrians thought Jerusalem would fall like other cities they had conquered. But they did not count on someone praying to the living God. The king of Judah, Hezekiah, tore his royal robes, put on sackcloth and cried out to God for mercy.

I love God’s response to him, “Hezekiah, because you have prayed I will deliver you.” *Because you have prayed*, God said. *Because we pray*, God acts. We don’t have to remain as we are. Things can change!

We continue our study in the book of Philippians, *Ancient Faith for Modern Times*, and we probe more deeply into Paul’s prayer for the church in that city. Let’s look at the prayer again:

⁹ I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. ¹⁰ For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ’s return. ¹¹ May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ—for this will bring much glory and praise to God.

Prayer is like a staircase – 5 steps, one building upon the other taking us to the great climax - the glory and praise of God. We also focused on the first step of the prayer – that our love would overflow more and more.

Today we look at steps 2 and 3. The second step in this 5-step prayer is we would keep growing in knowledge and understanding. It’s not enough for love to increase, but love must increase with something. Love must increase with knowledge and understanding.

The Greek word for knowledge is *gnosis*, but sometimes Paul uses the word *epignosis* which means a higher form of knowledge – knowledge that is of the heart and knowledge that is

gained by experience and not just information. Paul prays for their love to overflow in *epignosis*.

Paul knew this first hand. He had experienced it on the receiving end of his relationship with the Lord many times. Remember our first study in this series, “God’s No Leads To A Greater Yes”? Paul wanted to go into Asia Minor with the gospel and the Spirit said “no.” Paul wanted to take the gospel into Bithynia and the Spirit said “no.” This was because the Spirit knew things Paul didn’t know. The Spirit had much higher knowledge than Paul had and told him no to these places so that he could tell him yes to better places.

On another occasion, Paul prayed that his physical infirmity, which he called a thorn in the flesh, would go away and Christ in love said, “no.” Paul prayed again and Christ in love said “no.” Paul prayed a third time and Christ in love said, “Paul, my grace is sufficient for you for power is perfected in weakness.” Christ could look down the road and see the temptations of pride that Paul would not be able to withstand, and so he sent him this infirmity to make Paul weak so that he would be humble and put his trust completely in Christ. This was the abounding love of God toward Paul with all knowledge.

Having received this kind of wise, full-knowledge love from Christ, Paul learned how to apply it towards others and he learned how to pray this for others. He didn’t just want the Philippians to overflow with love. He wanted them to overflow with wise love, or, as the verse tells us in knowledge and all understanding.

Sometimes, with some people, the issue is not love, but wise love. People have big hearts and they want to do so much but they end up doing the wrong thing. Years ago, when I was pastoring, our entire staff read through a book called “When Helping Hurts”. It is a book by two very fine Christian men who have had ministry where poverty abounds, and they have learned this: just giving money and gifts to poor people will not help them in the long run.

The intentions are good, the love is there, and the people are needy, but these men have learned more strategic ways of showing love to those in need that brings development to areas and doesn’t put people into a never-ending cycle of dependency upon the welfare of others. I heartily recommend this book, “When Helping Hurts” by Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett and it is a modern and vivid illustration of Paul’s prayer that our love would overflow more and more in knowledge and understanding.

But why did Paul pray this? Was this the end or the goal of his prayer? No, this is only Step 2 in his 5-step staircase for the Philippians, and the reason he prayed that they would have this kind of wise love is so that they would understand what really matters – Step 3. You see, if we have love, and not wise love, we will be prone to making bad choices with good hearts and we will miss what matters the most.

Have you ever known anyone like that? Someone who is full of love and goodness and kindness, but they keep making bad decisions? I'm sure you do. So do I and I have to admit that I've had my share of bad decisions because I didn't have wise love.

But Paul wants us to move beyond this and to learn how to make wise choices. The Greek text is interesting. Paul uses one of his favorite words – dokimazo – and it has the idea of distinguishing between what is pure and real and what is not. An alternate translation of this verse is to distinguish between the things that differ.

Paul used this word in Romans 12:2 where he told us not to conform ourselves to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we may prove (dokimazo) what the will of God is – that which is good, acceptable, and perfect. In Ephesians 5:10 he said, “try to learn (dokimazo) what is pleasing to the Lord. This word has the idea of assaying metals to determine their true value.

Just the other day my wife and I were watching the evening news and one of the reports was about a new invention that could determine the purity of precious metals. Put your piece of gold or silver in the machine, the machine would analyze it, and give back a report with 99.99% accuracy. No more guesswork and no more having to melt it down first.

In the ancient world, there was a problem with coinage. Sometimes, the makers of currency would add extra alloy to the silver or gold pieces so that they were less pure and therefore less valuable than they were said to be. And the word used to determine the true value of those coins was dokimazo, the word Paul used here as he prayed. He wanted these Christians to overflow in love (step 1) with real knowledge and understanding (step 2) so that they would have the ability to discern what was most valuable in life (step 3 of the prayer).

Discerning what is most valuable in life. I remember my father saying, “too soon old, too late smart.” I also remember someone saying that “80% of wisdom, is being right in time.” All of us have great wisdom, after the fact, after the event. But to be wise in time, to be wise ahead of the choice, that is the trick.

And so Paul prays that they would **see** ahead of time and be able to distinguish between what is real and not real, what is valuable and not valuable.

What a challenge for our day! What a challenge for Christians, especially in the affluent West who are faced with a thousand choices on everything. And this is crucial for our growth and fruitfulness.

Jesus told a parable about a farmer sowing seed. “A farmer went out to sow in his field. As he went, some seed fell onto road, some onto rocky soil, some onto soil with thorny plants, and some onto rich, cultivated soil. He who has ears, let him hear.”

I've always been challenged by the soil with thorny plants. Listen to these words from Mark 4:18-19:

¹⁸ The seed that fell among the thorns represents others who hear God's word,¹⁹ but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things, so no fruit is produced.

Jesus identifies three things that are damaging to the soil, three things that are alloy among precious metals, three things that will choke us and make us unfruitful. The first is the worries of the world – and we know there are a 1000 things to worry about. But later, Paul will tell us, “Be anxious for nothing. Don't choose the path of worry and anxiety.”

The second is the lure of riches – not riches themselves but the deception that accompanies them, the deception that we are secure if we are rich and the greater allurements to forbidden pleasure that comes with riches. Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 6:17 not to fix our hope on the uncertainty of riches.

The third warning is the phrase, the desires for other things. That could be a million things. And the desires for other things is in contrast to Paul's statement in Philippians 3:13 where he said, “this one thing I do – I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

And so Paul prays for the Philippians that they would overflow in wise love so that they would have the ability to make the right choices in life, so that they would choose the pure, unalloyed precious metal of following Jesus and know that they were living for what mattered most.

When you and I get to the end of our lives, we will want to look back and know that we have made good choices, we have chosen the excellent things of God from a heart of love for him and others. To that person comes great satisfaction and joy.

May God give you grace and peace as you take these words and pray them for yourself and those you love. May your growing love be accompanied with real knowledge and understanding so that you will make right choices and experience what matters most.