

Everything for Growth: Prayer (Col. 1:9-14) | 02.23.14 | Kevin P. Larson | KarisChurch.org

Like many of you, I've caught at least some of the Winter Olympics on TV the past few weeks. We've seen the culmination of years of training from the world's best athletes. They're done everything they can to finish a race, dominate an event, take home a medal. How would you say an athlete makes it through some of these competitions? How does he or she come out of there with a gold medal? Hard work, right? Persistence. Maybe some luck?

Paul who writes Colossians here elsewhere compares the Christian life to a race. There is a finish line to be reached. There is a prize to be won. How will you get there? How will you finish it? Even win it? I recently heard of another pastor friend who walked away from the faith completely this week. There are people who walk with Christ who crash and burn all the time. How will you keep going? Through effort? Much determination? That won't be enough friends. We need more.

Last week, Aarik took us through **verses 3-8 of chapter one**. We saw Paul erupt in thanksgiving for what the Lord had done in that church. Here he turns to passionate prayer for those same believers. We're going to dissect this great prayer for that Colossian church here this morning. And we're going to find the answer to those questions.

Several weeks ago I shared a vision for Karis Church to become a family known for prayer. Part of this came about from God speaking to me through this letter of the apostle Paul. We can learn so much from his prayers in Scripture and here in Colossians. At the end of this book, we see prayers for the mission. In **chapter four, verses 2-4**, Paul asks that they would pray that he would have opportunities to share Christ and would speak with clarity when those opportunities came. That's at the end of the letter.

But here, at the beginning, we see prayers for the community. Prayers not for others to know Christ, but for us to know Him better. Right now, we have five groups praying five different mornings at 6 a.m. downtown. We spend time in our MCs all over the city praying together. We pray here on Sundays. We pray as individuals and families. We need both of these types of prayer. We should spend time in adoration, confession, and thanksgiving, but also in supplication - praying for each other. Those should include prayers for our mission and prayers on behalf of our community.

Here we see an example of community prayers. And here's our big idea for this morning: **Jesus wants us to constantly pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ in all circumstances that we together might increasingly see Jesus as our everything through Him.** Let's pray and jump in.

How Paul Prays for Them

Let's first look at how Paul the apostle prays for this church. Verse 9 again: ***"from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you."*** When he heard about this young church, he started praying and he didn't stop. Paul teaches this constant approach to prayer elsewhere. In **1 Thessalonians 5:17**, he commands that church to ***"pray without ceasing."***

In **Romans 12:12**, Paul tells that congregation to be **“constant in prayer.”** In **Ephesians 6:18** Paul speaks of **“praying at all times in the Spirit.”** In **Colossians 4**, he says, in **verse 2**, to **“continue steadfastly in prayer,”** again for his mission. Here he models that manner of prayer for the community of faith.

What does this mean for us? We should pray in this unceasing way. But doesn't constant prayer in this life seem out of reach? It's not easy, for sure. But it's something the Lord wants to work into us. What's it gonna take? **Some mental space.** Time away from Candy Crush to think about important things. **An others focus.** If we pray constantly about anything, it's our needs. We're so self-absorbed so much of the time, but God wants to transform us. **A sense of the need.** Think about the times you've had someone you love in the hospital. Their condition is serious. People are there constantly. They're praying around the clock. There is a feeling of desperation. That's our reality, too, friends. We can't afford to stop praying. Prayer is for our survival. And for those around us.

But it's also relational. God the Father wants us to talk with Him all the time. Our relationship with Him is meant to be one of constant conversation, much like I talk with my wife at home. He'll grow us until we establish and maintain set times of prayer, too. I have focused times of conversation with her, as well - at night before bed, on Fridays on dates. We need to fight for both. For other believers.

Here's something to think about: how constant are our prayers for other believers? I am so inconsistent in this. I remember this lady who came to our church who prayed for someone for 30 years until he became a believer. We've heard of grandmas and grandpas praying for their kids and grandkids, for their growth, for years and years. We should pray like an Olympic athlete trains. In a consistent, relentless way. **Jesus wants us to constantly pray.** And for each other.

Who Paul Prays For

Let's second consider then who Paul prays for. He writes in **verse 9**, **“we have not ceased to pray for you.”** Who is the **“you”** there? Well, it's the church in Colossae, yes. He speaks of praying for them since the **“day [he] heard”** of them. Remember, Epaphras becomes a believer in Ephesus under Paul's preaching. He goes home and starts this church. Now he's with Paul in Rome in prison. Epaphras **“[makes] it known”** to Paul and his friend there just how those Colossian Christians are doing. The apostle thanks God for them. He then calls out to God for them.

Now what does this teach us? We should pray for each other, right? For other Christians. In those prayer meetings and in our MCs, around our dinner tables and in our personal worship times, we should pray for other believers. We should pray for others in our church family, here, Karis. But think about this, friends. Paul is praying for a church plant, one he likely sent Epaphras to start. He's praying for a congregation in another city. He's praying for people he has never even met.

This means we should not only start churches and send out missionaries. We must pray for them. For the Zeichiks in Jeff City. Things there aren't easy. For Eric Papp in Rio. What a tough city.

For both. Not just for them, but the people in their churches. That's what Paul models here. We should constantly pray for other churches like Redeemer in Indiana and Epiphany in Jersey.

In addition, we've spent time since the beginning in our Gatherings here praying for other gospel-proclaiming churches in our city. We need to get back to that more consistently. Not praying for other believers could be a symptom not only of self-absorption as individuals but also as a church. Karis Church wouldn't be here if it weren't for people around the nation praying for me, praying for you. People right here in Mid-Missouri did the same. We've gotta keep praying and pray even more - across the board - for other believers. People right here. People we've sent out. Others here in our city.

Prayer is relational, but not just in the vertical sense. It's also horizontal. We pray with others. We pray for others. A healthy family talks to each other. And a healthy family talks to God on behalf of each other. Write names down. Talk to your Dad about them.

Here's a question to consider: how extensive are our prayers? Do we pray for others? If we do, do we just pray for the folks here? For our own families? D.A. Carson writes, "Our prayers may be an index of how small and self-centered our world is." We need to look outside of ourselves to those around us, to other believers in our city, to Christians across the world. **Jesus wants us to constantly pray for our brothers and sisters.**

When Paul Prays for Them

Third, let's consider the when. When does Paul pray? All the time. We just saw that. I mean a different kind of when. In what situation are these Colossians Christians? Where are they in their Christian lives? Let's think of the flow of this first chapter again. In **verses 3-8**, he goes off, thanking God for His work in that church. He then says, in **verse 9, "and so."** He says, "therefore." He then jumps into praying for them. Paul says, "I thank God all the time for you." Therefore, "I pray all the time for you."

What's the connection there? Paul thanks God for everything He is doing in the Colossian Christians. He asks the Lord that more and more would be done through them. He recognizes the grace of God in this people. He asks the Lord for more of that grace.

What's the point for us? We need to pray for each other when times are good, when God's grace is evident. Of course, we need to call out to God when our friends are in need, when they are struggling. But what about when times are good? Think about gathering around that hospital bed. You're desperate. You *must* pray. But then mom gets better. We were in tune with our need. Now, not so much. But cancer could come back. Heart blockage may just return. The need is the same.

We can't afford to get complacent, friends. We're either going forward or backward in our spiritual lives. We can't take a break from prayer. Our enemy assaults God's people and the good our God is doing in us.

Thanking God and asking Him for more isn't being greedy. It's being realistic. Our brothers and sisters needed grace for yesterday. They need more for tomorrow.

But that's their circumstances. What about ours? Paul here is bursting with thanksgiving, but what if we're not? What if we're frustrated with them? What if we don't want to pray for them? Maybe we're even jealous of them? If we want to love them well, if we want to be unified with them, if we want our hearts to change, there's no better way to pursue this than through prayer.

Or what if things are too hard in our lives? What if we're struggling? Remember that Paul is here in jail. He's suffered so much for Jesus. His prayers move his focus off himself and onto God's kingdom and God's people. Through God's strength, we can get our eyes off ourselves and our circumstances and pray for others. We can even rejoice with others.

Olympians wake up and have to work out and bust their tails on good days and bad, when they feel like it and when they don't. They need their coaches encouraging them and shouting at them in both circumstances. But we need more than lots of effort and lots of encouragement. We need help from above. We need prayer. We must provide it for one another. **Jesus wants us to constantly pray for our bothers and sisters in all circumstances - when things are looking down or up - for them or for us.**

What Paul Prays for Them

Let's fourth take the what. What is Paul praying for these believers? There is no way we can dive into these words fully. We could spend weeks on them. But we can say that Paul is praying that Jesus would increasingly be everything for them, that they would live like He is their everything in every way. Notice that the Apostle doesn't ask God for comfort and ease for these Christians. He doesn't ask God to give them Disney World. He asks for something better. Paul describes how He prays for these Colossians. He gives a purpose for that prayer. He tells us how all that gets worked out in their lives.

What does He ask for? He writes this in **verse 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."** What does he mean when He asks for the **"knowledge of his will?"** He's not asking that they would know God's secret will. Who do they marry? Where do they work? That's secret. God doesn't give us the map.

He's asking that they would know His will that's revealed in Scripture, that they would know what God desires, what pleases Him. That knowledge consists of **"all spiritual wisdom and understanding."** He doesn't just want the Colossians to know the truth of God. He wants them to know how to apply it in real life situations. In their minds and hearts, he wants them to know Him, what He wants, and how to live it out.

That relates to the purpose He gives for this prayer. Look at **verse 10**. Why does Paul want them to have this knowledge? **“So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him.”** He wants them to reflect this knowledge, this wisdom, in their everyday lives. What is this about living **“worthy”**? About **“pleasing”** God? Well, it doesn’t mean that we show our worth and then He approves of us. None of us is worthy. None of us can measure up. The gospel is that Christ alone is worthy. Through His worthy life, if we trust in it, in Him, we can find approval. We don’t work *for* approval. We work *from* it. We don’t please God and then He accepts us. He accepts us in Jesus. Therefore, we want to please Him.

Paul is saying, let this knowledge change your lives so that you live in a manner that fits with who you are in Jesus. Be who you are. Let your head and heart be transformed in such a way that you live in a way that makes God smile. Like an Olympian trying to get up on the platform, act in a way that makes your country feel proud and look good.

Maybe that’s hard for you to grasp. You can live in a way that makes God smile? That pleases Him? It’s true. He takes joy in the lives of His children. He likes the messy paintings. He doesn’t mind if we crash our bikes. He doesn’t care if the flour gets spilled all over the counter. He isn’t looking for us to impress Him. He loves to see His reflection in us. That’s what Paul is praying for these Colossians: a knowledge of God’s will that leads to a different, God-glorifying life.

What does this life look like? We see four characteristics. **First, it’s a life that bears spiritual fruit for God.** See the second half of **verse 10**. Paul prays that that church would be **“bearing fruit in every good work.”** God wants His children to do good works. The apostle wants the same. These aren’t works that earn salvation. They are works that demonstrate salvation. He prays for more and more of this fruit in their lives. Sacrificial service. Loving patience. Passionate evangelism. Why fill up? To spill out.

Second, this is a life that grows in knowledge of God. He wants them to keep filling up. He asks that they would be **“increasing in the knowledge of God.”** He prays for a knowledge of God that leads to a life that includes a growing knowledge of God. It’s a virtuous cycle the Lord wants us to get caught up in. And let me say: if we are going to grow in knowledge of Him and of His will, we better be in the word of God. We need to read our Bibles. That’s where we gain this knowledge.

Third, he prays for a life that’s empowered by God to persevere. Look at **verse 11**. **“May you be strengthened with all power, according to this glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.”** The Christian life is really hard. It’s so easy to give up. Or at least to go around grumbling. The apostle prays that they would have God’s strength to persevere - to keep going, trusting in Him, rejoicing in Him. He asks for the power of God in their lives. He asks for **“all power.”** He asks for the **“glorious might”** of God to be seen in them. He wants them to keep going, to hang in there, with puzzling smiles on their faces because they have **“joy.”**

Fourth, this life is one that gives thanks to the Father for the gospel. In **verse 12**, he asks that they would be people who give ***“thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.”*** The more we grow as Christians, the more we should be blown away by what has been done for us in Jesus. Look at what’s happening here. He starts off Colossians thanking God for what He has done. Now He’s praying that the Colossians would thank God, too. This Jesus-worthy, God-pleasing life is characterized by thanksgiving.

We were unqualified for salvation; there was nothing we could do to earn it. No, we were disqualified for salvation; we had turned the other direction through our sin. But He qualified us to receive this amazing inheritance! Yes, that’s the new heavens and the new earth. But it’s Jesus Himself. That should make us constantly thankful.

He then goes on to describe this truth further in **verse 13**. Paul gets caught up in thanksgiving again himself. ***“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin.”*** We were under Satan’s dark kingdom. The Lord rescued us. He brought us into His Son’s kingdom, one of light. This transfer comes by God’s power. We’re redeemed. We’re forgiven.

Catch the language here? I’ve committed to not talk much about Exodus for awhile, but we can’t help but do it here. This is Exodus language. This is Israel in slavery under the wicked rule of Pharaoh being rescued through the Red Sea into a new land of freedom. Paul here prays that the Colossians will experience joyful thanksgiving for these realities. We have been forgiven and redeemed through Jesus.

Just a few years ago, the whole family showed up to the Tiger to supposedly Skype with our missionary friend in Brazil. When we got there, people shouted, “Surprise!” They played a video of appreciation for us. We had a big party. And they then gave us this gift - an all-expenses-paid vacation to Disney World. In that gathering and the whole time on the trip, we felt amazingly loved by the people of Karis. Friends, we get something so much better than Disney World. And we are so incredibly blessed and loved in Jesus.

Back in the day, I took a trip to Michigan. I flew there, too, but this was my first time ever in a plane. I got back and was raving to a friend about it. I was blown away that I could be up in the air in that big bus, going across the country, at such a high rate of speed, getting there in such a short amount of time. He looked at me and said, “Man, what will they think of next?” Everyone had a good laugh. But I was astonished.

The Lord wants that in us. Gospel astonishment. Deep gratitude. ***“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin.”*** Does this move us? Those next to you? If not, that’s the first thing we should pray for. That it would.

So here's the point of the prayer. Paul is praying that Jesus would be everything to these Colossian Christians, and that they would live a distinctive life that fits with it. Their fruit would show it. Their knowledge would reinforce it. Their perseverance would display it. Their thanksgiving would shout it. This is what Paul wants for this church plant. Remember, that church is getting tossed to and fro by bad doctrine. He doesn't want them going to lesser pictures of Jesus and conceptions of Christianity. He wants them to fight idolatry. He also doesn't want them going toward legalism or asceticism. He prays that they would resist these futile, foolish attempts at self-salvation. He wants them going deeper in Jesus.

We need to be praying the same things for each other. We should want these things for ourselves and those around us. Think about this for a second. Do these look like our prayers? Do we share the priorities of Paul? Do we find ourselves praying for health concerns all the time? Do we pray for God to get our brothers and sisters out of suffering? Do we focus mainly on earthly, temporal concerns? Jobs? Money? Clothing? Health?

There is nothing wrong with praying for those things. However, if it's the only way we pray, it might display that in our lives, Jesus isn't our everything. Our prayers for others are mirrors into the priorities of our lives, also. We might be in love with the things of this world. That might be why we don't pray. It might be why we pray for what we do, also. **If Jesus is our everything, we'll pray for growth in Him, for a life that displays Him - in them. In us.**

Why Paul Prays for Them

Let me wrap up here with the why. Why does Paul pray for them? He doesn't just want them to grow to see Jesus as everything. He understands that Jesus is also everything they need for that growth. What do I mean? This may seem obvious, but to whom is Paul praying, asking? It's to the Lord, right? He understands that if this growth is going to come about it's going to be the Lord Jesus in them.

This life we've seen here in these verses requires effort. We have to pursue this knowledge of God. We must discipline ourselves for this life that pleases Him. But that's not enough. And if we accomplished it, we could take credit for it. This life we see here also requires the encouragement of those around us. We need others' words and hugs, for sure. That's even what Paul does here in this letter!

But that's not enough. And if it was, we could again be proud of it. We need His grace at work in us. Again, as **John 15:5** says, **"Apart from me"** - from Jesus - **"you can do nothing."** Prayer is the real work. We need Him to work these things in us. We need His grace. We ask. He answers. He works. He gives. And, as Piper likes to say, "the giver gets the glory." That's why we pray.

But so often we don't, right? Why? I think it springs from two different things: a low view of God or a high view of ourselves. What do I mean by a low view of God? Right after I met my wife, she began walking toward this life-long dream of being a flight nurse in the Air Force. She made it almost all the way through basic training, until she got called into a superior's office.

Her eyesight wasn't good enough for military service. It was good enough to get in. It wasn't good enough to stay in. Basically, a recruiter fudged the test to pad his numbers. Someone stepped in and put a stop to it.

Often, we can think God is like this. He invites us into this relationship, but we'll no doubt end up disappointed at the end. We don't believe He wants to answer or really can answer. We're cynical. Therefore, we don't pray. Sometimes we don't pray to protect our hearts from disappointment. If He won't do anything, it feels easier. But He can answer. He will answer. He is powerful enough. He cares for us. So we must have faith and pray.

Sometimes, though, He doesn't give us what we want. And that's a good thing. I can't imagine if some of the things I wanted for me or you came true. It wouldn't be good. And if Amy would have had her prayer answered, she wouldn't be here, and neither would Hadley, Melia, and Kylen. Karis Church wouldn't likely be here either.

A lack of prayer also flows from a high view of ourselves. Why don't we pray? We live like we don't need God. We're fine on our own. Our friends are, too. Even if we wouldn't say this, we live like it. We can help those brothers or sisters ourselves. We can say just the right things to them. We can give them sound advice on our own. We think we're Fix-It Felix. Really we're Wreck-It Ralph. We're fooling ourselves. None of these things can come apart from Him.

What does this mean for us? Jesus in us is everything we need for growth. That's why we must call out to Him. That must be our main strategy. That's why we need to be in the Imago Center seven days a week crying out to God. For our city, yes. But also for ourselves, for our brothers and sisters in Christ. How are we going to finish the race? Win the prize? Through Him. How has He purposed that this happens? Through our prayers.

Prayers for each other in community. In the past month, a Christian hipster author wrote some blog posts saying he didn't go to church much anymore. He didn't care for the music much. The teaching didn't fit his learning style. I think I understand him. Bobby and I often have different tastes in music. I think my sermons stink half the time, too. But he's missing the point. This isn't Jesus-Mart where we put what we want in the cart and leave the rest on the shelf. This is a family. Period. Not a bunch of products we pick and choose from. A family.

And we need that family to know our name. And that takes being together. It takes worshipping together like this. And we need that family to pray for us. Otherwise we're sunk. We need a family that will pray, recognizing that He is everything we need.

We need a family that will call out to Him, pleading that we might see Him as everything we need.

We've seen the Lord work in us, answering our prayers, Karis. We asked you to commit to pray 40 hours straight over a weekend that God would guide us. He provided the Imago Gallery & Cultural Center that we're excited to launch in the coming months. We need that same dedication as we nail down our new Sunday Gathering space.

But more than anything, it's my prayer that we would engage in constant prayer for our family here. Join us each morning at 6 a.m. to pray for each other and to pray for our mission together. Do it in your homes, your MCs, in your times alone with God. We had this amazing prayer time as MC leaders recently. God's at work among us. Let's pray that He'll make us people who pray.

You might be too young to have heard of Scottish runner Eric Liddell. His story was told in the 80s film *Chariots of Fire*. He trained and crossed the finish line and won the prize in the 1924 Olympics in Paris. But he was a believer who kept serving Jesus until His death. He served as a missionary in China. When things got hard, he refused to leave. He ended up dying in a prison camp there. He had an opportunity to leave at one point but gave his slot to a pregnant woman. He hung on. By God's power. He finished the race.

How will we hang on? It won't be our efforts alone. It won't be our persistence. It'll come from God. Through answered prayer. From our family. **Jesus wants us to constantly pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ in all circumstances that we together might increasingly see Jesus as our everything through Him.**