



Becoming a Model Church

Sermons from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians

Spiritual Praying

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

March 1st 2020

Preacher: Roy Summers

Introduction: The prayers of Paul

A number of years ago I read a book entitled "A call to Spiritual reformation" by the Canadian teacher Don Carson. In this book Carson runs through all the prayers of the Apostle Paul, which appear in his thirteen letters, from letter to Romans through to Philemon, and shows that when Paul prays for his Christian friends, he always prays for spiritual matters. He never prays for health, or employment, or housing, or clothing, or any other material need, he only prays for their spiritual needs, like, "May your love or your faith increase," "May you be given the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you know God better," "May you have the power to grasp how great Christ's love for you is," "May you be filled with a knowledge of God's will for you," and so on.

Not once, not even once, in all of Paul's prayers does he ever ask God for the practical or material needs of his Christian friends! Look at the verses before us this morning as an example: "*May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other, and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy angels.*"

Paul's prayers are very striking, because, as a general rule, when we pray for one another, we are most likely to pray for material and practical things, not spiritual things, if we are very honest: we pray for health and employment, and housing.

What makes this difference even more surprising is that Paul lived in an age where material needs were far greater than ours are in 2020. If ever there was an age when they would be justified to pray for practical needs, it was that age. Many of the Christians in the first century were poor slaves. So you would expect Paul's prayers to be filled with material and practical requests! But they are not! And that demands an explanation!

So what we are going to do this morning, is first try to explain this conundrum, this puzzle: why Paul only prays spiritual prayers and then second, ask what that means for us when we pray for one another.

Why does Paul pray only spiritual requests?

(1) Paul knows that our spiritual needs are more important than material needs.

The first reason Paul only prays for the spiritual needs of his Christian friends is that he knows that spiritual needs are more important than material needs. In Paul's mind there is a hierarchy, an order of human needs: and at the very top, as the most important, are spiritual needs, the needs of our souls. Why is that? Because our material needs are only for this short life on earth, but our spiritual needs, the needs of our souls, go on into eternity. The body dies, but the soul lives forever. Paul was simply following his Master, the Lord Jesus who said things like these: "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his soul?" (Mark 8:36) Your soul is worth more than the whole world – should anyone be able to possess so much.

The world we live in is only concerned for material needs because the world is in spiritual darkness. But Paul knew that the most important things in life are not the things that you can see and touch but only last for a short time, but spiritual things that last forever.

William Booth started the Salvation Army to care for poor people, but he always put their spiritual needs first—I don't know if the Salvation Army today still have that emphasis or not. So though the poor might have come for clothes and food:

"We hold a rousing salvation meeting. The officer in charge.... conducts a jovial free-and-easy meeting. The girls have their banjos and tambourines, and in that couple of hours you have as lively a meeting as you will find in London. There is prayer, short and to the point; there are sermons and talks, some are delivered by the leaders of the meeting, but most of them the testimonies of those who have been saved at previous meetings, and who, rising in their seats, tell their companions their experiences... they urge all who hear them to try for themselves and see whether it is not good and happy thing to be soundly saved... In the intervals of testimony there are bursts of hearty melody."

Yes, William Booth cared for all the practical needs of the poor, but spiritual needs came first!

(2) Paul knows that if spiritual needs are met, material needs will follow

The second reason, Paul prayed for spiritual needs is this: he knew that very often when spiritual needs were met, then material needs followed. William Booth knew this: if a drunkard, a thief or a prostitute became a follower of Jesus, their whole material lives were automatically transformed: A converted drunk now spent his money on milk rather than booze; a prostitute, now began an honest living and gained respect and financial means, the converted thief began his own business and found that he who stole now even had money to give away! By putting spiritual needs first, the lives of these men and women were turned right-side up and all their material needs began to be met!

If all William Booth had done was to feed and house prostitutes and thieves and drunkards, they would have remained prostitutes, and thieves and drunks all their lives! Instead he preached the Gospel to them, their lives were transformed, and—hey, by the way—all their material needs of

housing, food, health automatically improved as well!

You know the saddest thing—many middle class Christians couldn't handle William Booth's care for the poor! They did not want rif-raff as they put it coming into their churches! That's why William Booth had to start his own churches! Because comfortable middle-class Christians didn't want to hang about with converted reformed prostitutes, thieves and alcohol addicts! What an indictment on them! How unlike their Saviour.

How did Jesus put it? "Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33) Remember when Jesus said those words? He was speaking to a crowd of people worried about money, clothes, food—material things, as we are all too.

Jesus told them, as he says to us, that if you put spiritual things first, God, God's people, living a godly life, love, faith, and so on, then God will sort the rest out for you! Get the first button of your shirt right, and all the rest will be right. Get the first one wrong and you end up with a wonky looking shirt!

That's why Paul prays only for spiritual matters! He knows that if people are walking with God, then all their material needs will fall into place! It's a promise of God: "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life."

It was a joy to play a part of Tony's Thanksgiving service this last Wednesday. One sentence that delighted me in the eulogy, was this: "Tony had great joy in the fact that his six grandchildren were all Christians." When you think of your kids or your grandkids, what matters most to you? What gives you most joy? How rich they will be? How successful? How famous? How educated? Or spiritual matters?

(3) Reason 3: Paul is there to set a high spiritual example in everything

The third reason, Paul only prays spiritual prayers for his Christians friends, is because he wants to set for them and for us the very highest standards of example.

It is my own personal belief that the apostle Paul was the greatest Christian who has ever lived. You are not obliged to believe that, but what you must believe is that he was one of the greatest Christians who has ever lived. On a number of occasions, Paul tells people to follow his example, "follow me as I follow Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1) "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice." (Philippians 4:9) If you want to be a great Christian, you can't find a better example than the apostle Paul. I know that Jesus is our great example, our great example. He is the supreme one we are called to follow, but if we only had the example of Christ—do not misunderstand what I am about to say—it may be possible for us to say, "Well I could never love like that, I could never pray like that, because I am a fallen human being but Jesus was the perfect son of God."

But in the apostle Paul we have an ordinary sinner like you and I; he is not divine, he is not a super-

hero, he is just an ordinary man, like you and I, who, by God's grace sought to live as close to God as he possibly could. And so as we read about him he sets the kind of standard that you and I can attain to, can aspire to. God has put Paul in the NT to show us how godly, how spiritual, how selfless, how zealous, how sold-out a Christian can really be.

The great Christian evangelist DL Moody from the 1800s once said: "The world has yet to see what God can do with a man fully consecrated to him. By God's help, I aim to be that man." He was right in the second part: it is a noble desire to be the best Christian, the most consecrated follower of Jesus Christ the world has ever seen! What a target! But he was wrong in the first part: for the world has seen what God can do with a man fully consecrated to him! The world has seen an apostle Paul!

How should we pray for one another?

Where does that leave us today? How should we respond to Paul's spiritual praying? I believe we should pause and reflect, when we consider our own prayer lives, that we are not the spiritually minded people we should be or could be. Paul's prayers should be a spiritual wake-up call, that we are not as spiritually mature as we think we are, and to mourn, lament, and repent of our worldliness.

"Lord forgive us that our prayers are so often about stuff that is here today and gone tomorrow, rather than about spiritual graces and heavenly priorities that last forever."

I believe that is one thing we should take away from Paul's prayers. Is it not?

But that aside, there are three brief lessons, we can take away this morning.

(1) Let us show our love for one another by praying for one another.

Paul prayed for his Christians friends because he loved them, and if we want to show our love for one another, than one way we can do that is to pray for one another.

We had a very interesting and lively chat in our home group this week about how difficult some people find it to chat to strangers in the coffee hall after morning worship! Some people find going up to a stranger and welcoming them very difficult—we thank God for those who just find it natural—keep up your good work.

But, if we find going up top strangers difficult, here is another way to show love for people, that you can do in your home, when you're on a walk, even perhaps at work: pray for one another.

(2) It is not wrong to pray for material blessings!

How do we know that? Because Jesus, in his great model prayer, encouraged to pray like this: "Give us this day our daily bread." (Matthew 6) Bread stands for the basic necessities of life. It's OK to ask God to bless people with food and clothing and homes and so on. Look how the apostle John prays this for his friend Gaius, it's a rare New Testament prayer, but it's there: "*Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health, and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.*" (3

But notice John is also concerned for Gaius's soul! There's nothing wrong with praying for material needs!

(3) ...but we should aim more and more to pray spiritual prayers

But the prayers of Paul teach us that we should aim, more and more, to pray spiritual prayers. As we grow in grace, as the years pass by, we should learn—more and more— to pray for spiritual matters. Material prayers are O level prayers and spiritual prayers are A level prayers! Let's close with the two spiritual prayers Paul prayed for his friends—which we can pray this very week.

(i) May your love increase “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.” What a beautiful spiritual prayer to pray for one another! That our love may increase and overflow, into your family, into your workplace, into your neighbourhood. What a wonderful spiritual prayer we can start praying right away, this week. “Lord, may John's love increase, Lord, may Jane's love increase.”

(ii) May God strengthen your heart, “May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy angels.” (13)

The Christians in Thessalonica were being persecuted, harassed, and Paul prays that instead of weak hearts that will easily fall away, turning back to the world, their hearts would be strengthened so that they would live such holy lives, that when Jesus returns, they will be strong and blameless. Isn't that another spiritual prayer we can pray right away! “Lord strengthen John's heart, Lord, strengthen Alice's heart.”

Summary

Let us pray for one another more and more, it's not wrong to pray for practical needs, material needs, but if we are to advance in the school of prayer, we need to pray spiritual prayers for one another, and we can start with Paul's two prayers; increased love and strong hearts.