

Book: *Philippians*
Series: *Rejoice in the Lord!*
Lesson 3: *Prayer for Perfection*
Text: Philippians 1:9-11
Date: September 8, 2013 (SF)
September 22, 2013 (ABF)

Colonial Hills
ABF
Baptist Church

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

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Next Lesson: Philippians 1:12-18a



TEACHING TIP

Consider closing 3-5 minutes early so that your class can model in groups of 2-4 this kind of prayer for perfection. Encourage them to use this prayer or any of the prayers listed in the introduction below as a model as they pray spiritually for one another.

INTRODUCTION¹

Paul is rejoicing! He is so grateful for these dear Christian brothers and sisters at Philippi, and he even has “the affection of Christ Jesus” for them (vv. 3-8). Such brotherly love is demonstrated by and is also the fuel for his regular (vv. 3-4) prayer for God’s perfecting work within their lives (vv. 9-11). Paul wants nothing less than for God to “bring...to completion” the “good work” He began in them (v. 6). He wants to see these believers become spiritually mature in the faith, filled with the joy of such Christlikeness (1:25).

Scripture records for us many Pauline prayers. II Corinthians 12:7-10; Ephesians 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Philippians 1:9-11; 4:6-7; I Thessalonians 3:11-13; 5:16-18, 23-24; II Thessalonians 1:3-12; 3:1-5, 16; I Timothy 2:1-8; and Colossians 1:9-14 are all reflections of Paul’s prayer life. What is incredibly striking about these prayers is that while Paul was always praying for people, he was praying for them spiritually, not physically. I’m sure that he prayed for their financial concerns, their family issues, their health needs, etc., but his inscripturated prayers are only those in which *he prayed God’s will for them*. These were the requests for which he had the divine guarantee that they would be answered. When he asked God to give them spiritual wisdom (Ephesians 1:17), he

knew God would answer that (cf. Colossians 1:3; James 1:5); when he prayed for them to know God’s love and be filled with His fullness (Ephesians 3:17-19), he was confident that God would do that (cf. Colossians 2:9-10; 2 Peter 1:4); when he requested that they have discernment so they could be blameless (Philippians 1:10), he was guaranteed that God would respond (cf. Jude 24)! This is because believers have the promise of God recorded in 1 John 5:14-15—

*And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.*²

See, we don’t always know God’s will for someone’s physical well-being, but God’s Word clearly tells us what His will is for our spiritual well-being—He Himself is working to “complete/perfect/finish” what He started in us. Let us then arrest the attention of God by offering prayers that are in agreement with His perfecting will.³

In Philippians 1:9-11, Paul models such a prayer. He petitions God for three requests that together would cause God’s work to be perfected within them. Let’s learn from Paul what *praying for perfection* looks like.

PRAY THAT RICH LOVE WOULD MULTIPLY WITHIN THEM (vv. 9-10a).

Paul begins by praying “that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent.” Paul prays, first, for love. The very fact that he is praying for it demonstrates that it is divine in its nature and origin, even as the Apostle John writes in 1 John 4:7-12, 19 (cf. Romans 5:5; Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10).

John tells us in that passage that God’s love is manifested in two ways—first in the sacrifice of His Son (v. 9), and secondly through the lives of His people (v. 12). Therefore, while such love was

already within the Philippian believers, Paul prays that it would overflow, like the leftovers from the little boy’s lunch at the feeding of the 5,000 (Luke 9:17; cf. Matthew 5:20). And this rich love is not a mere feeling or expression—as we would expect from our God who “is love” and models love, it has tangibility and depth (cf. Romans 5:15). Paul is thus praying for a very specific kind of love (i.e., *agape*), which he describes in his prayer.

1. *Rich love is characterized by spiritual recognition (v. 9).*

Paul prays that their love would abound “with [lit. in] knowledge.” Paul uses the Greek word *epignosis* here instead of the typical *gnosis*. It conveys more than just a grasp of information or a memory of facts. It is used to express a real, experiential, relational recognition of something, as its regular usage in the phrase “knowledge of the truth” demonstrates (cf. Romans 1:28; 3:20; 10:2; Ephesians 1:17; 4:13; Colossians 1:9-10; 2:2; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Timothy 2:25; 3:7; Titus 1:1; Philemon 6; Hebrews 10:26; 2 Peter 1:8; 2:20). It refers to a spiritual recognition that understands the significance, meaning, and reality behind what we see in Scripture or in life. It is the intersect of thinking and faith, for it brings the unseen God and His invisible spiritual realities to bear upon the way we interpret life.

Illustration: Many of us have been baffled by Stereograms⁴ until we finally rejoiced to see the hidden 3D image emerge. That illustrates this term—it’s the ability to look at facts and recognize the spiritual significance of what we’re seeing.

To parallel it with our Ecclesiastes study, it’s the Spirit’s aid in helping us 3D creatures live with understanding and success in a 4D world. This spiritual cognition allows us to see “the picture within a picture” and recognize what might really be going on in that situation from a spiritual perspective. In essence, it’s simply believing the biblical

worldview and using it to view and interpret all we learn. This perfected love, therefore, cannot exist apart from a habitual exposure to God's Word (cf. John 14:15, 21, 23; 15:10; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). And such habitual exposure (i.e., a growing in knowledge) is commanded of all of Jesus' disciples (2 Peter 3:18).

Rich love, then, is not blind. Rather, it enables the lover to love God and others on a higher, spiritual dimension by taking into consideration all the factors that mere "earthly" thinking would overlook (cf. 1 Peter 1:22). Paul wants these Philippian believers to love in that way, and so he prays to that end.

What were some situations that Paul was facing that from a mere "earthly" perspective would make it difficult for him or them to love?

2. ***Rich love is characterized by moral perception (v. 9).***

Paul prays for their love to abound secondly "with [lit. in] all discernment." BDAG defines this word as the ability "to perceive clearly and hence to understand the real nature of something" (cf. Luke 9:45). It very clearly, then, parallels the term, "knowledge," but it seems to add the sense of a moral perception, the ability to judge between right and wrong. The Septuagint uses it this way in Proverbs 17:10, and Hebrews 5:14 emphasizes this dynamic.

Before we make application, we'll consider the final characteristic of this rich love that Paul describes.

3. ***Rich love is characterized by excellent decision (v. 10a).***

Paul prays that this love would abound in this way, "so that you may approve what is excellent." The word "approve" means "to make critical examination of something to determine genuineness: put to the test, examine" (cf. Luke 12:56; 14:19; 1 Timothy 3:10). This is evident in such passages where we are told to "examine

ourselves" (1 Corinthians 11:28; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 6:4). Paul wants us to examine, discover, and do only those things that are "excellent." This word means to "be worth more, be superior to." Jesus used it often to describe the worth and value of believers (Matthew 6:26; 10:31; 12:12). Therefore, believers who richly love God and others are those who examine all their choices and follow only those things that have true value as God would ascribe it (Ephesians 5:8-10; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 John 4:1-2)—that is, those things that are virtuous, healthy, beneficial, worthy, and in keeping with their spiritual standing (cf. Colossians 3:12-14).

Can you think of a passage in Philippians that teaches us what God considers to be excellent things?
Philippians 4:8

In his commentary on Philippians, John MacArthur actually takes it a step further and challenges our desire to do this. Seeing as the next main point in Paul's prayer is the actual doing of what we discern and decide, focusing our application here on our desire and preparation is appropriate. Consider MacArthur's comments:

The idea here is rather the desire and ability to rightly discover the things that are excellent, so that believers can live their lives at the highest level of spiritual devotion and obedience. That ability separates the fully committed believer from the less committed, the mature from the immature, the strong in faith from the weak, and the effective servant of the Lord from the ineffective. Christians who live at the noblest level of devotion to God and His will are single-minded. They are highly focused and do not become preoccupied by the countless distractions that inevitably come their way.⁵



Application: In what ways are the following virtues necessary to enable our discernment?

- Maturity
- Courage
- Persistence
- Endurance

“Paul’s appeal is for believers to study, investigate, and determine the best possible ways to obey and please the Lord, and then to live accordingly.”⁶ This is truly abounding love towards God and others.

With that in mind, are you seeing God perfect His rich love in your life? Ask yourself the following questions:

- Spiritual recognition—am I habitually developing a biblical worldview through personal Bible reading?
- Moral perception—am I training myself to discern good from evil, and do I understand the real nature of good and evil?
- Excellent decision—am I renewing my mind to chose the excellent way (cf. Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 2:16)?

Illustration: So, how’s your love? Do you really love God?

When John Wesley went away to Oxford, his godly mother, Susanna, wisely wrote in one of her many letters to him: “Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes off the delight for spiritual things, whatever increases the authority of your body over your mind, that thing is sin.”⁷

What Paul is praying for, then (and what we should be praying for one another), is that the crucial foundation of raw and real love for God be laid within the hearts of the Philippian believers (Romans 5:5; Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10).⁸ Without this starting point, there will be no spiritual perfection.

Transition: If we would pray for the perfection of our brothers and sisters in Christ, we must first pray that rich love would be multiplied within them. Secondly, we must petition God that righteous living would be mastered by them.

PRAY THAT RIGHTEOUS LIVING WOULD BE MASTERED BY THEM (vv. 10b-11a).

The first prayer request naturally leads into this one.

Having a genuine, deep love for God—and, even more so, knowing and experiencing His love for them—raises believers’ motive for obeying Him far above that of merely fulfilling a duty. Obedience motivated by love for God not only becomes believers’ supreme objective but also their supreme pleasure and satisfaction.⁹

This is exactly how Paul prays—He asks God to cause their rich love to overflow into righteous living. This is Paul’s next prayer request, and he describes what such righteous living looks like in verses 10b-11.

1. Righteous living is evidenced by genuineness (v. 10b).

The word “pure” is a compound word combining the Greek word for “sun” with the word “to judge,” thus meaning in its basic form “to test by the light of the sun.” The adjectival form, then, would indicate something that was “unmixed, without alloy, absolutely pure.”

Illustration: “In ancient Rome fine pottery was relatively thin and fragile and often developed cracks while being fired. Unscrupulous shops would fill the cracks with a hard, dark wax, which would be concealed when the object was painted or glazed but would melt when the pottery was filled with something hot. In ordinary light, the deception was usually undetectable, but when held up to the sunlight it was clearly exposed, because the wax appeared darker. Reputable dealers would often stamp their products *sine cera* (“without wax”) as a guarantee of high quality.”¹⁰

Throughout the New Testament this word takes on an entirely moral sense, referring to a pure lifestyle (1 Corinthians 5:8; 2 Peter 3:1) or motives (2 Corinthians 1:12; 2:17). BDAG defines it as “without hidden motives or pretenses.” In rich love for God and others, believers test themselves by the light of God’s Word to determine where their Christian character is cracked and their likeness to Christ is flawed (Hebrews 4:12). The opposite of this is hypocrisy, a sin that Jesus regularly and vehemently denounced (Matthew 7:5; 15:7; Luke 12:56; 13:15). Paul himself admonished in favor of sincerity against hypocrisy this way—“Let love be genuine [lit. without hypocrisy—this point]. Abhor what is evil [our next point]; hold fast to what is good [our third point].”¹¹

Application: MacArthur starts the application here.

*Many people try to cover their faults in various ways in order to appear less spiritually flawed than they really are. They use such things as regular church attendance, generous giving, activity in church functions, and spiritual talk to give the appearance of spiritual integrity. But when they are severely tempted or persecuted for their faith, the cracks show.*¹²



How can we be “testing” ourselves to determine our genuineness? Cf. Hebrews 4:12 (God’s Word); 3:13 (other believers)

How can we fix any cracks/imperfections we discover? Pray for genuineness like Paul does here, after all, it comes from God (2 Corinthians 1:12). Obediently respond to what you learn from “testing” yourself by God’s Word (James 1:19-25).

In the home, how is such genuineness so important, not only in the perfection of the parent, but also in the watching children? See footnote 13.¹³

How might we word this kind of a prayer for genuineness in the hearts of fellow-believers? *open discussion*

2. ***Righteous living is evidenced by blamelessness (v. 10b).***

The word-family underlying “blameless” carries the idea of not tripping or falling. Applied morally, as it usually is throughout the New Testament, it means “without stumbling or offense” and carries both the idea of not falling into sinful conduct oneself and of not causing others to fall into sin. This is evident in Acts 24:16, in which Paul says that he always strove to have a “clear [lit. blameless] conscience toward both God and man.” The phrase “for [lit. until] the day of Christ” (a appropriate motivation for both genuineness and blamelessness—cf. 1 Corinthians 3:13; 4:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10) in our passages indicates that Paul is probably emphasizing the personal integrity aspect of this word.

If the previous point, “genuineness,” addresses a man’s motives or heart, then this characteristic begins to deal with a person’s behavior. The blameless person simply lives out the sincerity of his heart; he is blameless in his conduct, because he is genuine in his core. He cooperates with God (v. 6) by participating in gospel-living (v. 5), which necessitates the avoidance of wickedness (1:27; 2:14-16).

Blamelessness must be pursued, for sin is all around us and is a more natural choice for us (Romans 7:18). The writer of Hebrews wrote with divine inspiration and personal experience when he spoke of the “deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:13). Thus, the spiritual recognition, moral perception, and excellent decision of Paul’s first prayer request is integral to the fulfillment of this one.

Illustration: In *An Essay on Man*, Alexander Pope writes:

*Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As to be hated needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.*¹⁴

Application: Friends, let us “abhor what is evil” and turn aside from it, even fleeing from it if we must (cf. Genesis 39:1-12). The deceitfulness of sin was forever unmasked at the cross, where we saw the final destination of every sin. Therefore, let us heed the counsel of the old Puritan, Richard Baxter, “Use sin as it will use you; spare it not, for it will not spare you; it is your murderer, and the murderer of the world: use it, therefore, as a murderer should be used. Kill it before it kills you; and though it bring you to the grave, as it did your Head, it shall not be able to keep you there.”¹⁵ Don’t play with sin; put it to death, and maintain your blamelessness. Immerse yourself in the washing of God’s Word whereby you may be presented to Christ “in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing...[but] holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:27).

And, let us help each other maintain blamelessness by heeding the admonition of Galatians 6:1-2 and by faithfully praying this prayer for one another.

3. ***Righteous living is evidenced by fruitfulness (v. 11a).***

Paul prays that these genuine and blameless believers would be “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.” This word continues the emphasis on one’s conduct that our previous point began, but whereas “blameless” refers to avoiding sin, “fruit” refers to doing right.

Too often, we gauge our spiritual effectiveness on our blamelessness, our avoidance of bad things. Scripture, however, indicates that sin is not only doing bad things,

but also not doing certain good things (cf. James 4:17); likewise, righteousness is not only avoiding bad things, but also doing certain good things. So, obedience, righteous, fruitful people are those who engage in positive righteousness.

Application: Are you? Or are you merely content to avoid doing wrong? If so, you’re missing the point, you’re not really living righteously, and you’re falling short of Paul’s prayer request for the church.

Two observations about the way Paul words this prayer request offer us encouragement to really pursue righteousness (cf. 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:22). First, Paul indicates that believers can be “filled” (i.e., “to make full; to complete”) with righteous fruits. In a Christian community filled with apathy, lethargy, and inconsistency, how wonderful would it be to be “filled” with righteous fruit. Second, Paul writes that such fruit “comes through Jesus Christ.” We’ve already seen Paul’s confidence in God’s ability to finish what He started, and now we learn that the Son and Father are working together for our perfection, cultivating the righteous and fruitful image of Christ within us (cf. 2:13; John 15:4-5; Romans 8:28-30; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 2:10).

Transition: The prayer for perfection—for ourselves and others—asks God first for His rich love to multiply within them, then for righteous living to be mastered by them, and finally for the reputation of God to be magnified through them.

**PRAY THAT THE REPUTATION OF GOD WOULD
BE MAGNIFIED THROUGH THEM (v. 11b).**

Paul’s prayer climaxes at the end of verse 11. The goal of his prayer for love and righteousness is “the glory and praise of God” (cf. John 15:8) In other words, the purpose of this prayer for perfection is that God’s reputation would be magnified. By

considering those two words—glory and praise—we discover how we can magnify God’s reputation.

1. We magnify God by putting Him on display (glory).

“Glory” speaks of God’s splendor, brightness, and radiance, as was so clearly seen in the Old Testament Shekinah Glory. When we “glorify” God, we put Him on display, so that His person and works, His value and worth, are radiated for all to see.

2. We magnify God by paying tribute to Him (praise).

To “praise” refers to “the act of expressing admiration or approval.”¹⁶ This is more verbal than visual, as we use words to honor Him. It is choosing to obey Psalm 113:1a, 9b and actively speak well of Him. And the reasons to do so are countless.

Application: Are you as concerned with God’s reputation as you are your own? Are you putting God on display in your reasoning and choices (first main point) and in your motives, attitudes, pursuits, and conduct (second main point)? This is the purpose of perfection and ought to be the point of our prayers, as well.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let’s review this prayer for perfection by using Peterson’s paraphrase:

*So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover’s life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.*¹⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ This introduction is adapted from the introduction to Lesson 2 of our Colossians study.

² To summarize this I John 5:14-15 idea of praying—(1) As we interceded for believer’s physical needs, we should pray “if the Lord wills” and ask for what we know that God does will in that situation, i.e., their growth in Christlikeness, etc.; (2) We should regularly pray for believers’ spiritual development, since this is what Paul consistently modeled, and we have biblical assurance that this is God’s will.

³ John MacArthur writes about the incredible reality of prayer: “Even without the benefit of sophisticated scientific equipment or technology, every Christian can minister directly to the spiritual well-being of other believers without seeing or speaking to them. We can play a role in their spiritual growth, and even secure God’s blessings for them. The amazing means is prayer... It may seem unnecessary to pray for those who are doing well. Much of our prayer time focuses on those who are struggling, facing difficulties, or fallen into sin or physical distress. Paul, however, knew that the knowledge that others are progressing in the faith should never lead us to stop praying for them. Rather, it should encourage prayer for their greater progress. The enemy may reserve his strongest opposition for those who have the most potential for expanding God’s cause in the world” (*Colossians*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1996, pp. 23, 25). Cf. II Corinthians 1:11; Colossians 1:9; Ephesians 6:18

⁴ <http://bit.ly/15HvrFu>

⁵ MacArthur, John, *Philippians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001), 48.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁸ Again, we see the balance between asking God to grant such love, and “cultivating the conditions” (to borrow a phrase from Dr. Jim Berg) ourselves (by growing in knowledge, practicing discernment, choosing virtue) from which love will spring.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

¹² MacArthur, *Philippians*, 50.

¹³ “Because children are fallen sinners (Ps. 51:5), their parents are not wholly responsible for their behavior, even when they are small. But parents’ spiritual and moral integrity, or lack of it, always has a profound influence on their children. Sometimes children in the most godly homes rebel against the Lord. More often than not, however, an errant child rebels because of the hypocrisy of his parents, knowing that the faith they profess—regardless of how genuine and sincere it may appear to others in the church and community—is not manifested in their private lives. Although that does not excuse the sins of such children, it does make their parents share in the guilt” (*Ibid.*).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵ MacArthur, *Colossians*, 135.

¹⁶ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 357.

¹⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005).