

In the Name of Jesus: A Sermon on Prayer
Colossians 1:9, 10
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"We . . . pray for you," says Paul to his Colossians. "We . . . pray, asking that you may be filled," etc. But notice, although Paul is telling them that he prays, he is not actually praying at the moment he is telling them that. His praying he did beforehand, now he is reporting what he prayed. His prayers he addressed to God, vertically. But this epistle is not addressed to God. It was mailed off to Colossae, horizontally. This text is not itself in the form of a prayer but is rather in the form of preaching. More exactly, this is a preached prayer. What the apostle previously prayed he now preaches.

Since I am at the moment your preacher, the same apostolic role now becomes mine. I too wish to say to you, as Paul said to his Colossians, "I ... pray for you." Not that I am praying for you this very instant. What I am doing now is what I am supposed to be doing, preaching. There will be time enough in the service later on for outright praying. And I trust that the officiant, John, when he leads us in prayer, even though he will do that out loud, will not use that as an opportunity to squeeze in some last-minute preaching. Like the proverbial dean in the campus chapel service who remembered at the last minute before the altar to insert the petition: "And O Lord, I beseech Thee, remind Thy faithful people that Professor So-and-so will not be meeting his classes today." I agree, public prayers should not be abused as a sneaky substitute for preaching.

However, prayers, once I have prayed them to God, can also be reported out to those people for whom I prayed. My prayers for them can in turn be preached to them. So I would like to preach to you right here and now that I have been praying for you. And I have. My purpose in telling you that is not, I hope, to impress you with my own prayer life. The truth is, I am ashamed to admit, for me to pray for you every day during the past

week and a half, name by name, to request for you those things which Paul requested for his Colossians, did not come easily. To be quite frank, the gift of prayer, a gift which I have prized in some of you, is not one of my own strong suits. I don't mean to sound ungrateful, as though our Lord the Spirit has not given me any gifts. He has, and one of them is the gift to recognize that my praying needs working on. I have been working on that, specifically with reference to you. I cannot claim, as Paul did, that ever since the day I first heard of you I have not ceased to pray for you. What I can say, and that at least is something, is that I have been praying for you since the day I knew I would be preaching on this text to you. The temptation was to do even that much praying merely so that I could report on it this morning without lying to you. Yet despite that base motive, I am grateful to be able to assure you, there were also other, better motives at work in those prayers in your behalf.

That is enough talk about me. Now let us talk about you. What does it do to you when you hear that someone like me has been asking God "That you may be filled with the knowledge of his will?" Doesn't that imply a deficiency in you? If I ask God to please give you better knowledge than you now have, doesn't that suggest that the way you know God is not good enough? Isn't that a reflection on you? Yes, frankly, it is. And for me to tell you I pray for your improvement—doesn't that imply my criticism of you? Yes, but not just my criticism. If it were only mine you could safely disregard the criticism. What I am telling you, really, is that it is with God that I have been interceding for your improvement. That is awesome business, for what that suggests is that the implied criticism of you originates not with me but with God.

It is God who adjudges your "knowledge of His will" insufficient. It is He who finds you still lacking in "all spiritual wisdom and understanding." It is not I but He who decides that the life you lead is not "worthy of the Lord," not "fully pleasing to Him," not "bearing fruit in every good work," not "increasing in the knowledge of God." Why else would we need to negotiate with Him to make you better? Why else but that He is the one who knows what your trouble is? Incidentally, I cannot tell you how tempting it is at this very

moment to obtrude myself into the discussion all over again and to assure you that the improvement I pray for you is improvement I very sorely need myself. (As if you didn't know.) But I am not going to succumb to that temptation. That would be changing the subject. It is to you that God has here called me to preach. There are other times when He may call you to return the favor. So for now I have to tell you that here of late I have had to review your shortcomings with God, seeing that He is the One who exposed those shortcomings in the first place.

Does my telling you that, my colleagues and students, my sisters and brothers, make you feel something like you felt years ago when your parents told you they had been to see your teacher about the areas in which you needed improvement? If after all these years you are still free enough to take that sort of experience seriously, especially when the One whom we have gone to see about you is God, then you are getting the message.

However, up until now I have reported to you only half of what I have been praying for you. The other half, really the first half, has been a prayer of thanksgiving for you. That, too, I learned from Paul. In the verses right before this text Paul had said, "We always thank God ... when we pray for you." (v. 3) That is what I too have been trying to do as I have prayed for you these past ten days, namely, to give thanks for you. My thanksgiving has not been in vague generalities, any more than Paul's was. "We always thank God," said Paul to the Colossians—why? "Because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints." (vv. 3 & 4) I have been thanking God for the same things in you, your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all the saints. I have heard about that faith of yours, and your love. In fact I have experienced it at first hand. Now I would like you to know that because of your faith and love I have been saying thanks—not just to you but up in the front office.

You will be pleased to learn that my thanks for you has not been rejected. So far as I can tell, I have not been laughed out of the front office for being grateful about you. I hope

that pleases you. It is intended to. That is, I hope you don't insist instead on being skeptical. I hope you won't resort to false humility and argue back, "O poor naive Bertram, what is there in us poor sinners for you to give thanks for?" I hope you won't play down the faith and love I've found so gratifying in you, and say to me instead: "Faith?—well, maybe, but not much; love for all the saints?—you've got to be kidding." You might well be tempted to talk like that. You might want to throw back at me my own words of a moment ago about your deficiencies and shortcomings. You might want to say, But what about our need, our aforementioned need to be "filled with the knowledge of [God's] will"; what about our failing "to lead a life worthy of the Lord," our failing "to please Him fully," our failing "to bear fruit in every good work," our failing "to increase in the knowledge of God?" I say, you may prefer so to emphasize these admitted failings of yours that you veto all the thanks I have been praying for you—even though God Himself has not vetoed my thanks.

Lest you do that, lest you invalidate the whole point of my prayers in your behalf, I had better explain one thing. To whom have I been making these prayers? To God? Well, yes, I suppose so. But there are many front offices which carry that title on the door. I have been frequenting that one office where I could be sure Someone was in, and—what is at least as important—where I have an "in." It is the only front office where I can get a hearing. It is the one place where even folks like you and me have connections. That is the God who, as Paul here calls Him, is "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." (v. 3) That is where I have been taking my prayers about you.

And that makes all the difference, this Christly connection we have. No wonder my thanks for you were not laughed to scorn. When in my prayers I mentioned your "faith in Christ Jesus," I got no put-down answer like "Christ who?" The answer I did get was, This is indeed my "beloved Son, in whom [you] have redemption the forgiveness of sins." (v. 14) When in my prayers I gave thanks for "the love which you have for all the saints," there was no incredulous laughter over my referring to myself and the other seedy people you love as "saints." My use of that word "saints" did not strike my Benefactor as silly.

On the contrary, I was even one-upped. I was informed that, what's more, those off-beats whom you love have been qualified by the Father "to share in the inheritance of the saints in light" (v. 12)

What I mean is, just by going to the Source I did, to the one place I could get in, I got the distinct impression that precisely because of this extraordinary connection which you and I enjoy up front, you and I and all the rest of us are in for big things. I might as well put it to you flat out, incredible though it may sound: we are in for the same big thing that "the beloved Son" Himself, Jesus, has going for him. All right, so He and He alone is, as Paul says, the only One in whom "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." (v. 19) And granted, it is by painful contrast with His "fullness" that your deficient knowledge of the divine will needs to be "filled" up and your displeasing life needs to be made more "fully pleasing to Him." But He, this Jesus our Lord, is likewise the sort of "fullness" who fills in for you in the meantime. He makes up the difference by reconciling it, "by the blood of His cross." (v. 20)

That is why, He is why, He alone is why I dare to be so confident about the prayers I have been praying for you. About those prayers I was sure you'd want to know. In fact, for all I know, you may already have been experiencing during the past week and a half those very Pauline improvements which I have been requesting for you: fuller knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (have you?); lives more worthy of the Lord and more pleasing to Him; (have you?) increase in your knowledge of Him. Or maybe the way those prayers take effect in you is precisely by my telling you about them here and now. Either way, now you know. That is, you now know more fully than you did before. Right before our eyes the very prayers I prayed for you are getting answered.

By the way, you don't imagine for a moment, do you, that I was the only one praying for you? I had lots of company. In fact, didn't I see you there?

Oh, and one thing more. The prayers I have just been preaching to you, I have been preaching not only to you but also simultaneously to another audience as well. An ugly audience that is, a scary, menacing, hovering crowd of eavesdroppers. Paul calls them "thrones," "dominions," "principalities," "authorities," "the dominion of darkness." They begrudge the way I prayed for you. Mostly they resented the way I went over their heads and, most of all, my audacious Name-dropping. But don't you take a certain private delight (I do) in preaching these revolutionary prayers of ours also within their hearing right under their resentful noses? Have you noticed how that sets their office-doors to rattling?

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

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