

Today we get back to our series on prayer – we’ve jumped around a bit because of other things that were happening, so here’s a reminder of what we’ve done so far.

What we're doing is we're looking at 4 specific prayers that the Apostle Paul prayed. In the first week we saw that we need to stop praying safe, small, general prayers as passionate followers of Jesus. We're going to pray big, God-honoring, faith-filled, and specific prayers, just like Paul prayed. There is a very common rhythm in Paul's prayers: he prays for something specific and then adds the words "so that" and he then shows the desired result. For example, in the first week, we saw him say, "*I pray that you would be filled with power so that Christ may dwell in your inner being.*" That little phrase, 'so that', is so significant.

In week two his prayer was: '*I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.*' So we need to pray for God's help in sharing our faith, so that we can begin to understand everything that is ours as children of God.

Today we're going (pic of man thinking!) to think about how we know what the best thing to do in a particular situation is. It could be something quite simple – should I post this on facebook? Or something deeply significant – should I take this job?

That is what is at the essence of this prayer that Paul delivers to the Philippian church. It's found in the book of Philippians, chapter one, verses nine and ten. Paul is writing from prison in Rome. He does not know if he's going to be executed next. This could be his last days on earth. He doesn't know. He's in prison in Rome, and he's writing to the Philippian church, whom he loves dearly. In fact, in verse three just before this, he says, "*I thank my God every time I remember you.*" Imagine a relationship in your life where every time that you think of this person, you thank God. You love them deeply. This is the context. This is a letter you're going to write to them, and you may not get to communicate with them again.

Whatever prayer that you pray for them is going to be of the greatest importance, is it not? And it is within this context that we read, "*And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight*". What a great prayer! That you would learn to love God more, other people more and yourself more: that you begin to understand the power of love and the effect it can have in the world. It is not enough simply to love; we must also love wisely. Remember thought that Paul is going to add a 'so that' – there is a point to the learning and insight.

*"so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God."*

Why do we need knowledge and depth of insight? So that we know what is best. Before we can do what is best, we need to know what is best. Only then can our lives be pure and blameless.

God has appointed us to bear fruit – there are two kinds of fruit: firstly, new disciples who come to faith in Christ through our witness; secondly, and what Paul is focussed on here, is the fruit of righteousness which comes through Christ. Our own righteousness, all of the good things we do in our own strength we are told are like filthy rags in God's sight - Isaiah 64:6 *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.*

The fruit of righteousness is the same as the fruit of the Holy Spirit: Galatians 5: <sup>22</sup> *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,* <sup>23</sup> *gentleness and self-control.* This fruit is made known in our good attitude, good decisions and the loving help we give to others.

Paul talks about love abounding more and more. But what kind of love is he talking about? We use the word love in lots of different ways: we love where we live, we love our parents, we love our spouse, and we love Krispy Kreme donuts. Paul's talking about an agape type of love. A love that is unconditional, it's from the heart of God. It is unconditional. It's a love that doesn't just give us what we think we want, but rather it would give us what we need.

The point is that this love, once we experience it, is going to transform us. It is something so significant that it begins to change the way we act, and the way we think. The more we experience this love the more insight we have and we begin to see things differently.

Love is not about taking the easy road and trying to be nice to everyone. Sometimes it involves having a hard discussion because it is important to say what is needed rather than what a person wants to hear.

The process is a bit like the logos earlier – once you see the fedex arrow you can never go back. It's a silly illustration but Paul is saying that we're not going to see things the same. You're not going to see it the same anymore. All of a sudden, you see God's word differently. You experience it in such a way that it begins to transform the way you act, the way you see things. Where other people look on a situation, and they see desperation, they see no sense of hope, you see God at work. You see God doing something different. Why? Because the love of God has just grown up more and more inside of you, both in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you will be able to discern what is best.

What we have to do is begin to let the love of God transform us from the inside out, and it will change the way that we see things. But how does that help me to know what to do, because that was the initial question?

**The key to knowing what is best is knowing God.** It's just that simple, and that complicated. How do we get to know God at all? Well, there are all sort of ideas about that but I want to share some things.

Firstly, you can't do it on your own. Even if you really wanted to you can't – unless you allow God to help you. God wants to be in a relationship with people and that relationship comes about through faith. If we choose to believe, then God will respond – and I know that someone will be saying but it's God who takes the initiative, and that's right. God draws people to himself, even before they come to faith, but the step of faith we take allows God to pour his Spirit into our lives.

So, the first thing we need is to have a personal relationship with God. In fact, it is that and that alone that makes us Christian. I know people who can tell me all about God and the bible, but they don't actually know God.

Once we have a relationship with God we often don't know what to do or where to start.

Romans 8: 26 *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.* <sup>27</sup> *And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.*

The Spirit helps us. He takes our words and thoughts and presents them to the Father. The Spirit acts in accordance with the will of God. When we're struggling with prayer and feeling our relationship with God is not what it should be, Holy Spirit is there to help us and he knows what God's will is. Therefore, as we grow in our love for God – as our relationship deepens – we begin to hear from God through Holy Spirit and know what God's will is.

We think of prayer as talking to God. We talk to God, we even praise Him, thank Him for who He is and all this, and we pray, but we're not so good at listening, because prayer is a conversation. It is talking to God, but it's also listening for God. It's amazing in our relationships that we have around us, we understand this quite naturally. I wish that God would actually speak to me sometimes because that would clear up any ambiguity in a situation. More often than not what I experience is an internal prompting or a feeling that I should act in a particular way – but it's not always clear.

There's a story in Numbers 11: <sup>4</sup> *The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat!"* <sup>5</sup> *We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.* <sup>6</sup> *But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!"*

No cost!? They were slaves! I wonder how often I do the same though? Not satisfied with the blessing of God in the moment and wanting something else.

Moses is completely fed up with them and begins to argue with God about what to do with them. What's the best thing to do? He decides that the best thing is for God to kill him right there, but God has another plan..... he's going to give them so much meat they can't take it any more.

Moses gets an answer to his prayer but he's not satisfied - he complains that there simply isn't enough meat for that, even if they kill all their livestock. He's still on the, what's the best thing, question. God's answer? "Is the Lord's arm too short?" In other words, trust me.

Moses was being real with God. He had had enough. There was nothing fancy in what he said. His pain was obvious. Some of you may not like prayer because you're not real in your prayer. You've just got to be real with God, and tell God like it really is. Why? Because God's way big enough for what you're thinking and what you're feeling.

The second thing is to begin to seek Godly counsel from people around you, and see if God doesn't begin to speak through the wisdom of the leaders and people that God has placed within your sphere of influence, Godly leaders and people whom you trust.

The last thing is to spend time reading the bible. God left the bible for our benefit and we need to read it. Hebrews 5: <sup>11</sup> *We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand.* <sup>12</sup> *In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!* <sup>13</sup> *Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.* <sup>14</sup> *But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*

These are harsh words, but harsh words spoken in love.

I have a new nephew, Ben, who was born last Thursday and he is drinking lots of milk. There would be something wrong though if he was still only drinking milk when he was 20! There is an expectation that a child will move on to solids and then begin to develop a taste for different food. I have been a Christian for as long as I remember but there would be something really wrong if all I ever wanted to do was read the children's bible I got when I was an infant. I suspect that there are some folk here who simply haven't grown in their relationship with God, or are not growing. I'm really glad you're here today but being in church once a week is not enough. Being a Christ-follower is pretty much an all or nothing commitment, and that takes more than an hour a week.

Today is Pentecost Sunday and normally I would have talked about Holy Spirit coming in power, spiritual gifts or the work of Holy Spirit in bringing transformation. We need all of those things. We need a fresh filling of Holy Spirit; we need to learn to use all of the gifts God gives his people; we need to be transformed ourselves, so that we can point others to Jesus. However, I felt that it was important to say that following Jesus is a process in which the more we put in, the more we get out. Think of your best relationships and ask what makes them so good. I'm sure there are lots of possible answers: a common interest, shared values, fun, someone you can be yourself with etc. I would suggest that the most important thing is time. We know we're important to someone when they make time for us. It's the same with God. There is no substitute for making time to be with God. If you want to know how to live well and to make good decisions you need to know God, and you need to make time in your life for him.

His promise is this: Isaiah 42:16 *I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them.*

Holy Spirit will lead and guide; he will give us good gifts from God to be used in his service; he will increase our desire for God; he will bring knowledge and discernment; he will help us see things differently. **BUT**, we need to ask. He will not force himself on us. If your relationship with God is a bit flat, or somehow lacking something - you might not even know what it is – it's not because God wants that for you. It's because you haven't asked.

So let's ask....