



Praying Paul's Prayers for Your People

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The purpose of this article is to explore one question: How might Christian public leaders practice the prayers of Paul for his people with and for the people they have been called to lead? We will explore a collection of prayers that Paul wrote in his undisputed epistles—namely 1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, and Philippians—to see if there is any wisdom and encouragement for today's leader for offering pastoral care, spiritual direction, and leadership for people who are experiencing great anxiety in a time of discontinuous change.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT PAUL'S PRAYERS?

There are some preliminary questions which might arise and would be good to address before diving into the prayers themselves. The first is, Why do we care about how Paul prayed? One might argue that the only model for prayer that the Christian leader needs is the

The Bible is a wonderful source of prayers, and Paul in particular offers a treasure trove for Christian public leaders to pray with and for their congregations.

model that Jesus gave us. If we focus our attention on the Lord's Prayer and Jesus's prayer for his disciples in John 17, then that is sufficient. These prayers are, to be sure, the most important standard for prayer, since they come from Jesus himself. However, it can also be helpful to observe how a person like Paul of Tarsus, flawed human like you and me, prayed for the people that he cared about in the churches that he planted.

Paul is often misunderstood and grossly, and often dangerously, misapplied to leadership, to the detriment of women and all other people who fall outside of the patriarchal power structures of the Western Church. However, it seems that much of this distortion is due to a misunderstanding of Paul and his context. The New Perspective on Paul, inaugurated by E. P. Sanders in 1977,¹ and brought to my attention through the work of James Dunn and N. T. Wright,² began to alter my understanding of Paul within his context of first century Judaism.

I am not a biblical scholar, nor is this a technical article on Pauline studies. I read the Apostle Paul, and I see a man who was attempting to follow the Holy Spirit to liberate and break open some of the oppressive systems. For Paul, there is no distinction between male or female, Greek or Jew, free or slave. The resurrection of Jesus has broken down the walls of hostility and called us into the one body of Christ. Each member of the body brings unique gifts for the common good.

THE PRAYERS³

I spent several months reading Paul's letters, finding these prayers, practicing both exegesis and *lectio Divina* with these prayers,

¹ Ed Parish Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, 40th Anniversary Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

² James D. G. Dunn, *The theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003); N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997).

³ One of the initial challenges I faced when beginning the work on this article was to choose which prayers to highlight. Not all scholars agree that Paul wrote all the letters that have traditionally been attributed to him. Therefore, I chose to limit my scope to the undisputed letters of Paul in order to encompass the largest number of readers who agree that the words we are reading are, indeed, the words of Paul. Here is the list of the prayers that will be considered for this article: 1 Thessalonians 1:2–3; 1 Thessalonians 3:6–13; 1 Thessalonians

drawing through these prayers, and seeking to find common themes.⁴ My hope for this article is two-fold. First, I hope to offer the results of my observations to note key themes I found in the prayers. Second, and more importantly, I hope to offer suggestions for how the themes and attitudes demonstrated in these prayers can serve as models for how Christian leaders might pray for their people today.

MAJOR THEMES/ATTITUDES

Relationship with God

Paul was grounded in a relationship with the Triune God. He continually refers to God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Not only does Paul refer to these three persons, but Paul also speaks as if he was in communication with the Father and was being prompted and led by the Spirit.

The fact that Paul was grounded in relationship with God is important for leaders today for two reasons. First, it reminds us that God, in God's self, is grounded in relationship. The theological term is *relationality*.⁵ God is not a being that is in a relationship with all other beings, in the way that humans are in relationship with each other and all other beings in the universe. God is the relationality of being-in-relation, from which all being-in-relation springs forth.⁶

The second reason that it is important to note that Paul is rooted in a relationship with God is to simply state that relationships are the

5:16–25; 1 Corinthians 1:4–9; 2 Corinthians 1:3–7; 2 Corinthians 13:7–10; 2 Corinthians 13:13; Romans 1:8–15; Romans 15:5–6; Romans 15:13; Romans 15:30–33; Philippians 1:3–11; Philippians 4:19–20.

⁴ See my illustrated guide to Paul's prayers, <https://www.stevethomason.net/2024/06/27/pauls-prayer-for-his-people/> (accessed August 16, 2024).

⁵ For an excellent overview of the late twentieth century conversation around the Triune God and relationality, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

⁶ Thomas Groome names the individual as *agent-subjects-in-relationship*. Edward Farley names it as *being-together* in the reciprocity sphere. Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers), 9; Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 68.

priority for Christian public leaders. One of the pitfalls of modernity and the secularization of our society is the rise of radical individualism. Our culture trains us from an early age that we are responsible for ourselves. Our future rests on our ability to succeed and advance up the socio-economic scale.

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Paul's prayers remind us that we are dependent upon God for all things, and interconnected with each other as the body of Christ. Being in relationship is not an option for humans. We are all interconnected whether we like it or not. Paul's prayers remind us that we are invited to cultivate healthy relationships that are grounded in the love and grace of God, demonstrated through Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Relationship with people

Not only was Paul rooted in a relationship with the triune God, but he was also deeply, emotionally, and relationally connected to the people to whom he writes. Paul's connection to his people is evident in the way he repeatedly tells them how much he longs to be with them, how he misses them, how it pains him to be apart, and how he prays for their well-being.

We cannot underestimate how important it is for leaders to be in caring relationships with the people they lead. Some leadership models have told leaders that they need to be the super-hero for their people. The leader has all the answers, works harder than anyone, and can stand strong and alone through any adversity.

The aloof Lone Ranger, do-it-myself model of leadership is bankrupt. It creates an unhealthy chasm between the leader and the people, and it creates an unsustainable loneliness for the leader.

A Christian community is not a for-profit, bottom-line-is-God machine full of people-as-interchangeable-parts. A Christian community is an organic body. Jesus calls it a vine with many branches and a family in which we are all siblings. Paul calls it the body of Christ in which each of us belongs as we express the uniqueness of our part. All these organic, relational metaphors stand in stark contrast to the modern mechanistic model. An organic body is interconnected and interdependent. The head of a body cannot survive without the body, and the body cannot survive without the head.

When leaders pray for their people, like Paul prayed for his, we remember that we are in relationship with them. We can only know how to pray for people when we spend time with them and listen deeply to their longings and losses. When leaders intentionally step down from the platform and pulpit, both physically and metaphorically, and get involved in the normal patterns of people's lives, only then can a leader know how to pray deeply and fervently for their people.

An Attitude of Gratitude

Paul begins his prayers by giving thanks to God for his people. The Greek word translated "I give thanks" is εὐχαριστέω. It is the word used in the Gospels to describe Jesus's blessing of the bread and wine during the last supper. Originally meaning "to do a favor for," in the Greek of Paul's time, it came to mean "to be grateful" or "to give thanks."

Gratitude is an attitude of the heart and mind that acknowledges dependence upon someone else. We are grateful when we receive a gift. It is something that has been given to us that we needed and could not provide for ourselves.

Think about the people that you have been called to serve. What is your attitude toward them? Do you see them as objects of your work and service for which you are paid? Do you see them as people who clamor for your attention, wanting the goods and services that your office can provide them? Are they merely obligations that eat up time in your already busy schedule?

Or, do you see them as gifts to you? Do you see them as broken and beautiful humans, who, in their uniqueness, offer opportunities for you to learn, grow, and serve? Are they siblings in Christ who are

part of your spiritual community and make you better for being in relationship with them, no matter how difficult the circumstances may be?

How might these different attitudes impact your heart and the way that you approach your work? More importantly for the purposes of this article, how might these different attitudes impact the way you pray for your people?

To put it simply, when we open ourselves up to an attitude of gratitude toward the people that we serve and for whom we are praying it will transform the way we pray for them. Gratitude humbles us. God has given these people into our care. They are a gift. Gratitude opens us to empathy. If we see our people in terms of a burden, then resentment has an opportunity to creep in and create barriers between us and our people. Gratitude breaks down the walls of resentment and resistance and keeps our hearts open to empathize with the needs of our people. Thus, we are more able to pray for their needs.

Abundance

Paul prayed that his people would abound in love and hope. The word he uses in the Greek is *περισσεύω*. It means, “to have such an abundance as to be more than sufficient—‘to have (much) more than enough, to have an overabundance.’”

He uses it three times in the prayers that we are studying:

1 Thessalonians 3:12: “may the Lord make you increase and abound (*περισσεύω*) in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.”

Romans 15:13: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound (*περισσεύω*) in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Philippians 1:9: “This is my prayer, that your love may overflow (*περισσεύω*) more and more with knowledge and full insight.”

My favorite translation of this word is *overflow*, used in Philipians 1:9 by the NRSV. Think about those two words for a moment: *abundance*, *overflow*. What images come to your mind when you dwell in those words?

There are two images that spring forth for me. The first is an image of an overflowing pot. Imagine one of those chocolate fountains you might see at a fancy reception. The chocolate bubbles up into the top basin and fills it so full that it spills over the rim and overflows into the wider basin below it. That basin fills to overflowing and now a tower of basins is flowing with cascading waterfall of luscious chocolate for everyone to enjoy.

The second image is a fruit-bearing tree, bursting with delicious fruit that are ripe for the harvest. The fruit glistens in the sun as the branches hang low with the weight of an abundant harvest.

God's love and hope are the chocolate and the fruit. Paul's prayer is that love and hope would not just be present in his people's lives, but that it would be so present that it gushes out of them so that anyone around them can't help but want to reach out and taste to see how delicious it is.

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Hope and love don't exist alone in these prayers. Love, in Philipians 1, overflows from a deep knowledge and insight. Hope, in Romans 15, springs from the fullness of joy and peace.

Spiritual growth moves in two directions, in the same way that the fruit bearing tree grows. First, it grows down, sending roots deep into the soil for nourishment. Second, it grows out, spreading its branches high and wide to provide food and shelter for everything around it.

As leaders in the twenty-first century, it is easy to be seduced into a theology of scarcity. We love to bemoan the rise of secularization and the decline of church attendance. We can become panicked that our resources are going to run out, and we will have to close the church.

Paul's prayers remind us of an important truth. God is infinite and the resources of God's love will never run dry. When we are rooted in the mysterious depth of God, filling up with the unconditional love that God has for us, grounded in the knowledge that we have been set free by the grace of God through Jesus and have been reconciled to God, then we will find ourselves bursting with hope and love.

Comfort

What about the people who are truly suffering in the world? What about hunger, violence, oppression?

Good point.

It is important for us to remember the context of the letters in which these prayers are written. Paul is a man who has given up everything that he had to follow Jesus. He was even beaten and left for dead on many occasions.

His people were suffering as well. In Paul's day, it was difficult to follow Jesus.

Paul asked that God bring them comfort.

Let us bring this back into conversation with the notion of abundance. Paul prays that his people would abound in love and hope amid suffering.

Think about the people for whom you are praying. What is the source of their pain? In what ways might you be able to come alongside them and help them to discover the depths of God's love, joy, and peace that they might, once again, overflow with hope in a world that so desperately needs it?

Holiness

In the letters to the Thessalonians, Corinthians, and the Philip-
pians, Paul prays that his people would be strengthened in holiness,

sanctified, kept sound, do what is right, become perfect, be pure, and be blameless. Look at that list again:

Holy,
Sanctified,
Sound,
Right,
Perfect,
Pure, and
Blameless.

Some Lutherans may ask, “How can Paul expect his people be holy, pure, and blameless? These are impossible ideals that can lure us into a works-based form of righteousness that feeds our pride or sense of self-loathing for never measuring up.”

What should we, as Christian leaders in the twenty-first century do with these prayers for holiness, and how should we pray them for our people? Should we be holding our people to an unrealistic standard and shaming them into spiritual practices?

Paul's prayer is that his people see themselves as called by God (set apart, holy), contribute something good for the world, that does not needlessly scandalize people, or provoke them to violence, but offers them an alternative way of life that leads to wholeness.

Paul wants his people to remember that our calling as disciples of Jesus is to be the light of the world and salt of the earth. We are called to love our neighbor, no matter who they are, for the good of the neighbor and the neighborhood.

We can pray Paul's words of holiness and blamelessness for our people. This is not a shaming call to “get your act together” and “be superior.” It is a prayer that your people might be a whole people who are full of integrity, grounded in the genuine love of God for all things.

Unity

The list of attributes explored in the previous section came from the letters to the Thessalonians, Corinthians, and the Philippians. None of these words appear in the prayers for the Romans. Instead, Paul prays something for the Romans that he does not articulate for the other communities.

He prays for unity.

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15:5–6, NRSV)

Paul prays that God may “grant you to live in harmony with one another.” Literally translated, this phrase is “grant you the self-thinking/mind in one another.” The NIV translates it “a spirit of unity.” The KJV translates it “to be likeminded.”

The phrase continues by qualifying the harmony/unity/like-mindedness as “in accordance with Christ Jesus” (Romans 15:5). It is not just that they agree with each other. It is, more importantly, that they collectively align with the ways of Jesus, in unity.

The second phrase is how Paul concludes by giving the reason for his prayer for unity. He prays, “so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 15:6).

The entire argument of the letter to the Romans is Paul’s plea that the Jewish and Gentile disciples of Jesus would understand that they are all siblings in the family of God and members of the body of Christ. For the Thessalonians, Corinthians, and Philippians, he prayed that they be pure and blameless. Perhaps the purity and blamelessness that Paul prayed for the Romans was more specific. It was to be unified. In their unity, they demonstrate the glory of the body of Christ and God’s dream for the world.

Urgency

The final theme that I observe in the prayers of Paul’s undisputed letters is one of urgency. Paul lived under the assumption that Jesus was going to return very soon. The imminent return of Christ colored his theology and shaped his priorities. Time was short and what mattered most for him and his people was to live for the kingdom and to be ready for what Paul called “the Day of Christ.” Marriage, church structure, and long-term planning seemed irrelevant in light of the imminent cosmic renewal.

It has been two thousand years since Paul wrote these prayers. He was incorrect in his assumption of Jesus's hasty return. How should we interpret Paul's prayers considering Jesus's delay?

Jesus taught us to pray to Abba that "your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in the heavens." This is not necessarily a prayer for a literal, one-time-only, coming of the Kingdom of God to replace the kingdoms of the world. What if we thought of it as a daily prayer of alignment. Each day, the disciples of Jesus are urged to remember that we live in accordance with the way of Jesus and not according to the selfish, self-destructive ways of systemic evil that rules the world. The urgency for today is that we not become weary in doing good as we follow the ways of Jesus—rather, that we live as if each day is the Day of Christ.

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Ultimately, every person reaches the end of their physical time on earth and comes to their own Day of Christ. The human lifespan is a blip in the cosmic timetable. The Day of Christ asks all of us: How have we lived our lives? Have we squandered it in the pursuit of things that are fleeting, or have we lived our lives in the fullness of God's love, drawing people into the beloved community?

The Day of Christ is a perpetually urgent calling. Paul may have been motivated by the urgency of a theological conviction that Jesus was returning within his lifetime. However, the urgency goes deeper than that, even for Paul. Perhaps the urgency of the Day of Christ in its fullest meaning should align our priorities just as much as a belief that Jesus might show up tomorrow. Because, in fact, he will show up tomorrow. And the day after that. And the day after that.

THE BONUS PRAYER

This article has intentionally focused on the undisputed letters of Paul because they are unified in their theology, particularly around Paul's belief in the imminent return of Christ. However, considering the previous section on urgency, it is appropriate to look at one prayer from a disputed letter of Paul: Ephesians.

One of the primary distinctions between Paul's disputed and undisputed letters is that the latter display a perspective in which the church needs to plan for the future and think about things like civil order and church structures. We discussed in the previous section that Paul's conviction of the imminent return of Christ left him unconcerned with these matters. However, when Jesus did not return and the founding leaders of Jesus's church died, the next generation was left with a new set of questions. They wondered, "How should we be in community if Jesus doesn't come back right away?" Many scholars argue that the disputed letters were written in Paul's name by church leaders who followed his teachings, in the churches that he planted, but in a subsequent generation that was asking this question.

If that is true, then it seems appropriate that we can learn from these letters as well, since we in the twenty-first century are more like the authors of the disputed letters than we are like the Apostle Paul himself. Jesus has not returned in the last two thousand years. We live within a complex, global society. We ask, much like the second generation, "How are we to be the community of Jesus's disciples in our present moment?"

Therefore, I leave you with what is, in my opinion, the most beautiful prayer of all the letters that bear Paul's name:

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:16–19)

This prayer reflects the heart of the man who wrote the undisputed letters of Paul. Perhaps it was a prayer that Paul wrote to his students that kept them going through their difficulties. Perhaps it was so important to them that they felt it necessary to include it in the letter that they wrote to the churches surrounding Ephesus on the verge of the second century.

May you, dear leader of God's people in the twenty-first century, know that you are rooted and grounded in the love of God. May that love overflow from you into the people that God has brought into the care of your leadership. May we all be filled with all the fullness of God.

Amen. ⊕

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