

**“Garden Prayer”**

Philippians 1:3-11

July 16, 2017

Last week we looked at praying by the Spirit, especially when we wait, at times feeling stuck in the waiting room of life. The call to wait teaches us to look more to the One who promises than to the promise. Because while we wait, God is at work. The Spirit is with us in the waiting room of life.

Today we turn to begin to examine God’s shaping of us as a missionary people through prayer. In the book of Philippians, we have one of the Apostle Paul’s last letters. It was written from prison most likely in Rome in 60-62 A.D. He was running out of time, fast. He was facing trial and a death sentence he seems to believe and he hints in 1:20. This was the end for Paul.

What would you pray for if you knew you were on your last days? For us as a church, for your family, for your small group?

<sup>9</sup> And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, <sup>10</sup> so that you may approve what is excellent, and so 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.

As you know, the Smiths are in process of moving into our new home in Olivette. God has given us a wonderful home, including wonderful gardens. The previous family included a level 3 master gardener and a garden to match. There are things growing everywhere...in part because they were so well tended as they grew. Beautiful gardens reveal the presence of an attentive gardener. Paul’s prayer for us is that God would tend the garden of his people to make us beautiful.

So much of this prayer draws on agricultural language: growing, abounding, more and more, fruit. It points to the great day of *Harvest, the Day of his return* in v. 10. Paul seems to intimate that our lives are like gardens in which God is the Gardner. It starts with seed in v. 9 and ends with a great harvest, v. 11. The Lord must tend our garden that we grow and finally make it to the Day of Harvest. Therefore we pray; we ask God to tend us, his garden.

What do Garden Prayers look like for Central?

1. **Informed Love.**

V. 9, *And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment so that you may approve what is excellent.* What Paul prays for love to grow, to abound more and more, from seed to harvest. Did you notice, however, Paul gives no object? Love toward whom? He doesn’t define it, but instead, has a more comprehensive view of love in mind. From the remainder of the letter, we begin to see that Paul has in mind a love that abounds, or overflows, as one commentator put it, up to God and out to one another.<sup>1</sup> A love toward God that overflows into love for others. What do I mean?

The prayer for love to grow is not that we grow in mushy sentimentality. Paul is not here praying for an ill-defined love, but a love that is according to knowledge and discernment so that we approve what is excellent. What Paul prays for is a shoot of love that is staked by knowledge and discernment.

Knowledge is grasping what is true, spiritual things to be known of God and his work. But again this is not information for information’s sake. Paul isn’t praying that we master deep theology simply as an academic subject. It is a personal and responsive knowledge.

He adds to it discernment. This is the only time in the New Testament this particular word is used, but seeing how it is used at the time of Paul’s writing we understand it to refer to a practical grasp of circumstances. Perhaps we could translate it as tact, or skill to apply some truth.

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<sup>1</sup> Kent Hughes, *Philippians* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), p. 40.

This is beautiful for us to grasp because it gives us a window into how Paul sees spiritual maturity. It is not simply knowing more stuff, but it also includes knowing how to apply it to life! And, knowing how it affects and is driven by love for one another. Spiritual maturity, and growth in holiness as Paul sees it, is relational.

Let me say it another way. Paul prays that we not only pursue knowing more about unconditional election and extent of the atonement—deep theological truths—but also that we know how they apply in love toward one another. I'll be so bold as to say *until* we know how theology drives love up to God and out toward one another we have not yet understood the truth. If revival in our city were to break out, it won't simply be because people say those folks over at Central know the Bible better than anyone else. It might, however be said that those folks at Central know God so well and it drives them into relationships of love all over our city.

But he goes one step further, and here is where this idea of love informed by knowledge and discernment really presses in on prayer. Verse 10, says to have love in knowledge and discernment **so that we may approve what is excellent**. Paul prays that our active and discerning love has a direction to it, toward approving, or we could translate test/choose, what is excellent, or things that excel, or things that are vital. He asks that we have an understanding and active love for each other so that we choose and act upon those things most vital, most important, most excellent, to choose the necessary over the good. Or more colloquially, Lord, help these Christians know to grow in love so they pursue what really matters.

One application is to pursue a closer harmony and unity within their body. Apparently this church, not unlike our own, had members bickering and engaged in dissension. In chapter 4, Paul calls out by name for all time a couple of folks who simply could not get along. What a great prayer for us all. That we would in love choose to pursue what really matters. Sometimes being right and some tiny little thing is REALLY important to us, but in love, is that what matters most? That I am proved right and another person nit-picked and proven wrong? Probably not. Not in God's church. Not in our marriages. Not with our friends. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, even if we know all kinds of theological truth, even if we are jam-packed with all sorts of knowledge, and have not love, then it is all for nothing! Worthless. I hope you pray for me, as I will for you, that we truly love, that is, give our lives and energy and passion, to what really matters, and leave the other straining gnat's eyelashes alone.

Another place this challenges us is when we realize that biblical love involves giving self away, willingness to disadvantage self for the benefit of someone else. The love of God toward us cost Jesus his life, that we might live. Biblical love follows the road to the cross, where we are willing to be burdened to bless another. Love up to God and out to others.

In what way? Love and life to flow up and out toward others often looks like a radical hospitality, having and open home and open life before others. The question is not *whether* I share my life with others, but exactly *how*! Is my home open to my neighbors to share in love, the love of Christ through us? In our world loving hospitality, having an open home, even an open dinner table is a primary path of evangelism. But that kind of open life forces us to discern what is worth pursuing...in love. Is it more loving and worth pursuing that my home is spotless and perfect before my neighbors can enter and share a meal? OR in love, might it be a better pursuit to spend time with my neighbor instead of making sure all the clutter is gone *before* they can come in? What in love (love up to God and out toward others) REALLY matters? I hope you pray for me as I pray for you, knowing open homes and open lives are one of the best ways for friends and neighbors not only to hear about but experience the love of Christ *through you*!

## 2. Holiness that doesn't hide.

The second "so that" of Paul's **Garden prayer** comes in the back half of v. 10, **so that we be pure and blameless**. The word **pure** also means "unmixed or sincere." He's praying that our love drives us to exhibit holiness, yet holiness that doesn't hide in hypocrisy but rather lays hold of the truth that our purity on the last day comes by the blood of Christ. We are not holy because we hide our flaws; rather, we are made holy by the blood of Jesus. How?

In his comment on this verse, Boice reminds us in Paul's world, pottery was big business. And like in most businesses, some who dealt in pottery were looking for a quick buck. Cheap pottery was thick, but the more precious was thin and fragile. As it was being made, being fired in the oven at times caused the pottery to crack. The delicate pottery that cracked when being oven fired and tested should have been thrown away. But unscrupulous vendors would fill the cracks with little bits of wax and then paint over it.

You couldn't see the cracks, until you held the pottery up to the light, especially the brilliant light of the sun. Sunlight revealed the cracks. So dealers began to mark their sun tested pottery *sine cera*, without wax, from which we get sincere, pointing to the concept of pure as Paul says here.

Paul models to pray for one another, that we are holy/pure/blameless not by hiding the flaws of our lives but instead by laying hold of Jesus who makes us pure. He prays that as love drives us to share open homes and open lives, we do not hide the brokenness so we appear to be what we aren't. So often we try to hide, to cover up our flaws with coats of hypocrisy so no one sees inside. But we are instead called to confess our need so that Jesus does the work of healing. Jesus fills the cracks of our lives! Our need drives us to admit that He makes us pure by His work on the cross to cleanse us and by his resurrection power alive in us now, not by our trying to look good. Trying to look good before others is a recipe for hypocrisy!

As we as a church pray for God's best in our mission in St Louis, it is going to come about through His strength being seen in our weakness, His grace driving us to holiness. It's not going to come about if we pretend strength, or act as if God is our assistant instead of our Lord. The world around us needs to see that we acknowledge that we are sinners saved by grace through faith in Jesus's work, and we don't hide it. Our family needs to see that. Our children and friends need to see us own that: sinner saved by grace. We are not Christians because we are better than; we are Christians because Jesus loves us as we are and by his blood cleanses us. Let's pray for THAT to drive growth.

### 3. Fruit of Jesus's life in us.

The final aspect of Paul's prayer is that we have fruitful lives. How are we to understand [v. 11, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ](#)? As Paul prays here, there is an organic relationship. The fruit is what righteousness produces in us. But that righteousness that produces fruit is the righteousness that comes from Jesus Christ. We don't gin it up. Rather like Jesus says in John 15, he is the vine and we are the branches. Our lives bear fruit if we remain connected to the vine, and ONLY if we are connected to the vine.

So what Paul is praying here is for the life of Jesus to shine from us. His character shaped in ours, his values in ours, his loves in ours. As the old hymn Breathe on Me Breath of God says, that I may love what Thou dost love, and do what Thou wouldst do. That is what Paul prays. The life and righteousness that comes from Jesus be expressed in and through us. His love and his life coming out.

This is truly a missionary prayer: that people experience the righteousness of Jesus through us. That the fruit of our lives offers a taste of Jesus to the world. But it will only happen if we remain connected to Jesus, the vine of life.

The family from whom we bought our house left us their amazing water nozzle they used to deliver water to these magnificent gardens. It's complicated with all sorts of settings I could use: spray, jet, rain, etc. But we all know the most elaborate nozzle in the world is useless to the garden unless it is HOOKED UP to the hose, and the WATER TURNED on! The plants are not going to be fruitful if I hold a disconnected nozzle above them. You need the source!

Our lives are parched until we are connected to the pipeline of his love, his forgiveness, his grace, his cleansing AND indwelling power. The thirst of the world will begin to be satisfied as they experience the life of Jesus in us. Open homes and open lives.

So friends, as those planted in God's garden, pray for His work to tend and grow us. A fruitful tree reveals the care of the Gardener. So also when our lives bear fruit. It is His life within us. His work through us. That is what will fuel revival in our own hearts and in this city. Let's pray for it.