

Apostolic Prayer

2 Thessalonians 1:11–12

Prayer is a great privilege. In fact, it is an exclusive privilege for Christians, as there is no access to God the Father apart from the “one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”¹ Our Confession observes that since the fall there is *no* access to God “without a Mediator; nor in the mediation of any other but of Christ alone.”² There are not multiple ways of salvation, nor are their multiple Saviors. Truly, Christ is the Savior of the *world*, and to reject him is to reject your only hope of salvation. It is the same with prayer. There is only one way for your prayers to be heard, and that is to pray in the name of Christ.

Many people assume that God hears everybody’s prayers, but though this is a popular assumption, nowhere does God promise to hear the prayer of the wicked. Remember the impromptu testimony of the man who had been born blind, who had been miraculously healed by Jesus? The man said, “God *heareth not sinners*: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth.”³ He was right: God does not hear the prayer of sinners, but only of those who call upon him in truth through the mediation of Christ. If you are Christ’s, this privilege is yours! You ought to take advantage of it and cast your burdens on the Lord, praying according to his will. This privilege cost you nothing; though it cost Christ everything.

Our text this morning gives a window into the mind of the apostle Paul as he prays for the people he loves. What does he pray for? The answer is instructive and should encourage us all as we endeavor to live as faithful disciples of Christ. The title of this sermon is “Apostolic Prayer”—“apostolic” is because it was composed and offered by an *apostle*, chosen by Christ, the great apostle Paul. Here in these two verses is a summary of Paul’s regular prayers on behalf of the Thessalonian church. This was a church that was very dear to Paul’s heart, as it was a church that he himself had planted. He knew these people and cared about the struggles they were enduring. I have three points. They are all a single word; make a note of them: (1) character, (2) service, (3) purpose. First,

1. Character

Paul writes, “we . . . pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling.” The word “this” is in italics, indicating that it is not in the original Greek but has been supplied by the translators to complete the thought, according to English usage. “This” calling would seem to hark back to the word “church” in verse 1: “Paul . . . to the *church* of the Thessalonians.” The Greek for “church” is

¹ 1 Tim. 2:15

² Westminster Confession of Faith 21.2, https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_21

³ John 9:31

literally the “called out”—called out of the world, which is on its way to eternal perdition, into fellowship with Christ, worshiping with his gathered people. To be part of the church, in fellowship with the crucified, risen, ascended Christ, now seated in glory, is the greatest privilege a person could ever have, for it is a privilege that will never come to an end but which will continue into eternity future. At that time the church *militant*, now fighting the good fight of faith in this wicked world, will become the church *triumphant*, having won the victory over the world, the flesh and the devil, and be ushered into the physical presence of Christ eternally.

Paul continues: “that our God would count you worthy of this calling, *and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness.*” There are various translations of this phrase, but it is clear that the reference point for *goodness* is God himself. God is good—supremely good!—and he wants his people to be good. As our Father, he desires that his spiritual sons and daughters reflect the family likeness. God himself is the standard of sanctification, which will be complete when Christ returns for his people. Indeed, *God is good!* “Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is *good!*” (Ps. 118:1). “The *goodness* of God endures continually” (Ps. 52:1).

Yes, God is good, and he wants his people to be good, but Paul doesn’t merely state this truth. He waxes eloquent, piling up two similar terms for emphasis and expressing the wish that God’s people might “fulfill all the *good pleasure* of His *goodness.*” Calvin observes that “Paul goes to an amazing height in extolling the grace of God, for not contenting himself with the term *good pleasure*, he says that it flows from his goodness.”

Do you bear the family likeness? Are you a good person? Are you good to people? Or are you prickly and ill-mannered and disagreeable? Now I am not teaching that we earn our own salvation by being good. In fact, to do so is impossible. “There is *none* righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is *none* who does good, no, not one—all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”⁴ None of us has attained perfection as yet. Paul himself confessed, “Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected” (Phil. 3:12). Paul was painfully aware that he was a sinner, and that even after regeneration he still didn’t measure up to Christ’s perfection. Every true born-again person acknowledges that he hasn’t as yet attained to God’s standard of absolute perfection. But we do not despair, for we know that at the Second Coming our sanctification will be complete, and because of that, we press on. “We know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2 ESV). If you belong to Christ, it pains you to grieve the Holy Spirit of God.

⁴ Rom 3:10–12, 23

You earnestly long for victory over sin. You want your character to reflect the character of your sinless Savior.

How do you develop Christian character? By attending to the means of grace: the Word, the sacraments, prayer. By gathering every Lord's day with God's people to seek those things which are above, where Christ sits at the right hand of God. To linger in the holy of holies, which is now opened to us by faith. To bask in God's holy presence. To hear his voice, speaking comfort to his people in his Word. To pray corporately, pouring out our hearts before him. To sing his praises, hear his holy law, confess our sins, hear his promise of forgiveness. To listen to the Holy Scriptures as they are read, to hear his Word expounded. To confess him together as his people, hear his words of institution, examine our hearts before him, inviting him to search us, and try us, and know our thoughts. By resolving to forgive as we have been forgiven, to receive the holy Supper and the Savior's benediction. To go in peace to serve him intentionally in this world as we go about our regular labors. To endeavor to be instruments of his peace, bearing witness in a world that needs, more than anything else, to hear the Gospel. To read and meditate on the Word day by day.

There are no magic techniques for achieving instant sanctification; rather, Christian character is built through the regular rhythms of worship and work, endeavoring to extend Christ's lordship in our personal lives, our immediate family, our relationships, our influence, society; not hiding the light under a bushel but making it known in our world as we wait for Christ to return and consummate his kingdom.

Some, particularly in Eastern Christianity, have taught that through the incarnation, wherein Christ became flesh, man might be deified. Athanasius of Alexandria famously said that "he was incarnate that we might be made god."⁵ But God is one. There is one God, eternally existing in three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is unique. Man will never become God in the ontological sense, being made part of the God's unique being; but through the Spirit's work of sanctification it is possible to attain victory over sin and grow in godliness. Godliness, after all, is *Godlikeness*, more and more reflecting the perfect character of the one holy God as we grow in union with our glorious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Here, then, is the believer's character: to be fully formed according to the image of Christ. Are you praying and working to develop this character?

We have considered *character*; second, consider

2. Service

⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theosis_\(Eastern_Christian_theology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theosis_(Eastern_Christian_theology))

Notice that Paul refers to “the work of faith.” In his first epistle he had made reference to the Thessalonians’ “*work of faith*, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Now he again refers to this church’s “work of faith.” The work of faith is *service*: intentionally serving God as we go about our daily work. Paul prays that God would bless his people in their “work of faith.” Good works are the fruit of a true faith. We are saved “*by grace . . . through faith . . . unto good works.*”⁶ Christ “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, *zealous of good works*” (Tit. 2:14).

God made man to work. In the beginning, when God created man, he told him, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and *subdue* it.” Scripture records that “the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it”—literally, “to *serve* it and to *keep* it.” Work is service to God. It is not a punishment but a blessing given to man before sin entered into the world. As man goes about his daily labors he is to serve God. Thus, man is to take dominion over the earth, developing Christian culture to the glory of God. This is not a uniquely Old Testament concept; in the New Testament we are told that “whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him . . . whatsoever ye do, do it *heartily*, as to the Lord, and not unto men.”⁷ Whatever we do, we are to do it to the glory of God.⁸

We are not to do good works grudgingly but *heartily*, with holy *zeal*. Obviously, man falls short of this ideal, but it is something the Christian should aspire to. Christian, as you go about your daily labors, whether in the home or in the workplace, it should be your joy to do your work in service to God. When you go to work, it is not just to please the boss; ultimately, it is to please *God*. A Christian employee is of great value to an enterprise, for he works cheerfully and heartily, intentionally endeavoring to serve his God.

The ideal of a job well done has fallen on hard times. Millions of able-bodied people have dropped out of the workforce and are no longer looking for a job but relying on checks coming in from the government. Politicians promise bigger government programs. Voters in Oregon will vote this November on a ballot measure that would give every resident, regardless of age or income, \$1,600 each year—as long as they live at least 200 days in the state. A family of four would receive \$6,400 annually, with no strings attached.⁹ This is called a universal basic income. But it is folly to think that everybody can live off other people’s money. There is certainly not an unlimited supply.

⁶ Eph. 2:8–10

⁷ Col. 3:17, 23

⁸ 1 Cor. 10:31

⁹ The Epoch Times, 8-23-24

The apostle Paul doesn't pray for bigger government programs but that God would bless his people in their "work of faith with power." The power that he refers to is the power of the Holy Spirit enabling his people to be successful as they intentionally serve the Lord with lives fully dedicated to him. We are weak, but he is strong. He is a great God. He is able to do "exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us" (Eph. 3:20).

Paul prays that God would bless his people in their "work of faith." We, too, should pray for the Spirit's enabling to serve God with power and effectiveness in our daily lives. We are small, but the Spirit can enable the committed Christian to accomplish great things for God.

Think of Gideon. When Israel sank into idolatry, God judged his people by allowing the Midianites, Amalekites, and other people of the east, to invade the land. They came up against Israel each year for seven successive years for the purpose of plundering and desolating the land. The book of Judges records that "so it was, whenever Israel had sown, Midianites would come up; also Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. Then they would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep nor ox nor donkey. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, coming in as numerous as locusts; both they and their camels were without number; and they would enter the land to destroy it. So Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites, and the children of Israel cried out to the LORD."¹⁰

Here was an almost innumerable horde of foreign invaders coming in to plunder the land, and Israel was powerless to repel them. But there was a simple farmer named Gideon, threshing wheat in a winepress in an attempt to hide it from the Midianites. "The Angel of the LORD appeared to him, and said to him, 'The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor!'" Mighty man of valor! Gideon could hardly believe what he was hearing! He responded, "O my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us?"

Then the LORD told him, "Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?" Gideon protested: "O my LORD, how can *I* save Israel? Indeed my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." The LORD answered: "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man."

Here was a simple farmer with no political experience who, in obedience to the Lord, destroyed a powerful invading army and delivered his people. And with the Lord's help, we, too, can be successful.

¹⁰ Judg. 6:3-6

We have considered the *character* God wants us to develop and the *service* he wants us to perform; thirdly, let us consider the underlying

3. Purpose

Paul continues, praying “that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him.”

Calvin writes, “He calls us back to the chief end of our whole life—that we may promote the Lord’s glory. What he adds, however, is more especially worthy of notice, that those who have advanced the glory of Christ will also in their turn be glorified in him.”

What a magnificent promise! If we seek the glory of God in this life, we in turn will be glorified in the next. As we are taught in Romans 8, “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also *glorified*.” This is expressed in the past tense because, though future, in the mind of God it is positively certain.

The believer’s purpose is the glory of God. We serve, not to make a name for ourselves but to lift up the name of Christ. *He* must increase, and we must *decrease*! He made us for the express purpose of serving him and glorifying him in this world. It’s not about us but about him. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

It is entirely fitting that the apostle would so pray for the saints.

Here is our purpose: to please God. As Paul writes in another place, “So whether we are at home or away, *we make it our aim to please him*” (2 Cor. 5:9).

How is Paul’s prayer to be answered? “According to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” God’s grace is abundant and knows no limits.

Notice Paul’s reference to “*our* God”—twice! This is the God who has joined us to himself by covenant. He says, “You shall be *my people*, and I will be *your God*.” We saw this also in our Old Testament text: “Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised on the city of *our God*, in His holy mountain . . . this is God, *our God* forever and ever; He will be our guide even to death.”

Prayer is the gift of God to his covenant people.

Here, then, is the apostle’s prayer. It is a prayer that the saints might be enabled to develop Christian character, that they might serve him in all that they think, say and do, all for the purpose of glorifying God.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Paul testifies that he prays “always” (πάντοτε) for the Thessalonians. That is a remarkable claim, as we know that concentrated, focused prayer takes effort. There are many factors that war against us as we begin to pray—weariness, distractions, wandering minds and hearts, limited attention spans, Satan’s darts and arrows. True shepherds pray for their

sheep. They realize that the saints will not profit from the Word without the Spirit's work. A preacher can deliver a perfect sermon, but it will have no effect unless the Spirit plant the seed of the gospel deep within the regenerated heart, where it will take root, grow and flourish. God can accomplish this through the power of his sovereign Spirit.

So the apostle testifies, "therefore we also pray *always* for you." This reminds us of his exhortation at the close of his first epistle: "Pray without ceasing" (ἀδιαλείπτως). As we noted at the beginning of this message, access to our heavenly Father is the exclusive privilege of those who belong to Christ.

Dear saints of God, let us pray for one another, and not just for healing and strength and the supplying of our physical needs—though these are legitimate things to pray for. Let us pray also that the Father would develop within us godly *character*, that he would enable us to *serve* him with distinction in a needy world, always focusing on *his glory* both now and forever.

Lord, be with this congregation. Accomplish your purpose in us. Amen!