

*Ephesians 3:14* For this reason I kneel before the Father, <sup>15</sup>from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. <sup>16</sup>I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup>so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup>may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup>and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Dear Friends in Christ,

### **THE RIGHT PRAYER FOR A CHRISTIAN TO PRAY**

I can remember coming back from the hospital and making the phone call to my parents. On my end of the line connecting South Africa to America I said something like, “Congratulations, you are grandparents of a healthy baby boy named Jeremiah!” And I remember not feeling like a parent. Not that I didn’t want to be. It seemed I should *feel more*. I had been there in the delivery room, but other than serving as a pincushion for Lisa’s fingernails through all her terrible pain, I had been more in the way than helpful. And now, a couple hours later, getting off the phone, it seemed like I should feel more invested. But I didn’t. Not yet. What I didn’t realize is that while a birth certificate may say otherwise, you don’t become a parent in a day.

A mother has an advantage here. Months before birth, she is feeling the kicks. For her, “eating for two” is more than a cute saying. She is. And it’s not just about how much she eats. *What* she eats matters! She takes care of her body to take care of the body of that not-yet-born child. She eats healthily, watches the caffeine and abstains from alcohol. She takes prenatal vitamins. When that baby is born, she has already been caring for that child for months. Meanwhile dad has been going about life mostly like normal, except when he’s wondering what has gotten into his wife that wants him to run to the store in the middle of the night to buy ice cream and celery sticks. But dad learns. He learns to feel like a parent just like moms do, through caring for the child. In feeding, playing, even changing diapers, dad learns in pretty short order to care, to love and to get protective about that little guy. *Now he feels* like a parent.

Christian parents care in another way. Christian parents pray. We pray because we realize that no matter how many videos we watch, how many books we read, how many other parents we talk to, we will always be imperfect sinful parents, and regardless of how special our child is, we have to admit that he/she is an imperfect sinful child. And we all live in a sinful world. So, we pray. We pray for them every day. Often, it’s just a couple words. Once in a while it’s a big chunk of the night.

I think no one prays more for other people, than parents for their children.

**A.** That explains what is going on in our reading. For this reading we don't need to know much about the Ephesians or Paul. Only know this: there had been no Christian church of any sort—not Lutheran, Catholic, Baptist or Assembly of God—in Ephesus. Paul started a church there, and he stayed at Ephesus longer than any other place in all his church planting journeys. These people were his children.

And so at this point, 3:14-21, the center of his letter, at the hinge point between explaining what a Christian should know and do—BTW, both are important—at the hinge point Paul broke into this prayer.

He was always doing this. Just about all—maybe all—of his letters have these joyous spontaneous prayers for the Christians he is writing to. He couldn't just talk to them and teach them. He couldn't just give them directions and orders. He had to pray for them. This praying for other people, we call this intercessory prayer.

That's what is going on when Paul starts, *“For this reason I kneel before the Father.”* There's humility here, but it's not just bowing and worship. It is prayer, earnest prayer, for others. It's what parents do for children. It's what pastors do for parishioners. It's what Christians do for Christians. That's why we have a prayer chain. It's why we have a prayer section in our bulletin. It's about intercession, going to God for someone else, because we care for them.

**B.** But praying is so hard these days! There is always something else to do in our busy lives, and for that moment in a waiting room when there isn't something in your busy life to do, there are games and jokes and entertainment and news and weather (at what exact hour is it going to start snowing today?) and football playoffs and who knows what else. All you have to do is touch your finger to the fingerprint sensor on your phone and you are effortlessly transported into an immersive world of anything and everything that interests you.

On the other hand, prayer is hard.

First of all, prayer requires us to do something we are getting much worse at: concentrating. I won't go on a rant. But our digital habits are destroying our abilities to independently think about anything for more than 10 seconds. Me too! Prayer requires concentration.

Second, intercessory prayer requires us to think about someone other than our favorite person: ourselves. We have a selfish sinful nature. We are immersed in a consumer driven society where everything, even worship, is marketed to match personal preferences. Prayer makes us take our minds off what we want to think about, and makes us concentrate on what God wants and what people need.

Third, prayer requires us to think about things we don't want to think about. Foremost is my own sin, that barrier between me and a holy God. And even though I repent and confess my sin, every day of my life I have gone back, hammer in hand and nails pinched in my mouth and rebuilt that sin barrier between me and God. Prayer makes me confront that about myself.

These are all reasons that we neglect prayer, or don't pray like we should, even when we

know we could. If you are feeling guilty, that's good, because it means you are being realistic. Heavenly Father, forgive us!

And he does. As you heard this morning after your own confession of sin, he forgives us fully and freely. Jesus died a death so that my daily and numerous sins be wiped off the books. God's desire is that when I hear that pronouncement of forgiveness, that the anxiety in my mind over the prayers for others I have not offered up, that that worry dissolves in the forgiveness that Jesus has won. Then, my desire to pray is not motivated by guilt, but joy and thankfulness to God. And even as I fumble about at what to say, and my prayer words spill out feeble and scatter-brained, Jesus reminds me that he lived a life of perfect prayer so that my child-like prayers will come before heaven as God-pleasing, for His sake.

C. Encouraged to pray for others, what should we pray for? There are so many things: health in times of sickness, comfort in time of sorrow, help and recovery in disaster, a godly spouse, a good job, safe travel, recovery from depression, freedom from addiction—I have only begun! (Now remember, these are prayers for other people, intercessory prayers.) Our heavenly Father is so pleased to see his children actually care enough about other people to pray for them. He is pleased that we trust him to hear and act.

But my list left out the most important thing to pray for. God would have us pray for something we too often forget. Paul's prayer reminds us. Paul's prayer is not about health, wealth or family. His fervent on his knees prayer for these Christians is ***“that the Father may strengthen you... in your inner being.”*** This must be my number one prayer for you; even more than I pray for your health. This should be your number one prayer for anyone, especially those for whom you are somehow responsible, ***“[Pray] that the Father may strengthen [their] inner being.”*** This is not a blessing the world will care two figs about. The world can appreciate the good health and high paying job you might pray for for your kids, and the world will call you a good parent when God gives those. But a strong inner being, the faith of a Christ-believing person living out God's will? The world will yawn at your parental concern. The gift you seek will be counted a detriment, a weakness. You will be told that you have raised a prejudiced and simple child. But this pleases God, so let them be gone!

If you really care about people, what you are going to pray about is about their relationship to the Lord. Anything else you pray for is window dressing. Now we certainly pray that more people know their Lord and Savior. That would be Paul's prayer later in this letter, in chapter 6. But here, this prayer is for the spiritual health of those entrusted to him. We do well to concentrate on just this point: to pray for the spiritual well-being of the Christians we know.

Paul prays that these people would be firmly ***“rooted”*** in Christ's love. ***“Firmly rooted.”*** Outside our church, where the asphalt of the parking lot butts up against the concrete curb, all along it there is a crack. (Earl is very familiar with this.) Every fall and winter, seeds get in there, and with the spring rains and warm sunshine, grass and weeds sprout. They grow slowly so you don't notice. Then in early summer you notice. The grass in that crack is happily growing along, starting to peek over the 6” curb. By that time it is too late. For most of the weeds, you can just wait for a rain storm and then easily pull

them out, root and all. But there is one kind of grass, that if you have let it grow that long into the summer, when you pull it out, you will only pull off the green blades of the grass. The roots will stay firmly embedded beneath that crack. In another week new leaves will be sprouting again.

This firmly rooted faith is the sort of faith Paul prays for: the faith of Job who had all the good shaved off the top of his life and who could still say, *“The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.”* (1:21). A well-rooted faith is like the faith of those commended in Hebrews, chapter 10, *“You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions”* (34).

That’s what I pray for for you: a deeply rooted faith. I pray that you have a faith that endures through the tough times. But to get that firmly rooted faith, I pray that things happen in your life to make your faith strong. You need daily contact with God’s Word, because that is where the Holy Spirit speaks into your heart. I pray that twice a month you come to receive the body and blood of our Lord in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, for here your Lord bids you to receive that which was given for your forgiveness. And as these truths of God’s grace become more firmly embedded, as the Holy Spirit strengthens, as Jesus dwells in your heart through faith (these are all ways Paul explains what is going on inside), the God-created inner self will take rule your life, so that you not only believe what God would have you believe, but also that you would then do what God would have you do!

Paul’s prayer for these Christians is mine for you. When your *“inner being”* is strengthened, then all that comes in the second half of the book of Ephesians will joyfully spring from your life. We have not time to run through all those, but let me mention a few: *“Be patient, bearing with one another in love... Put off falsehood and speak truthfully... [Speak] only what is helpful for building others up... forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”* These things simply must follow when your inner being has been strengthened.

Make that your intercessory prayer, your prayer for others. It will result, not in a life of joyless obedience, but in joyful fulfillment, confidence and hope. That’s what you want for others, right?

**THAT’S THE RIGHT PRAYER FOR A CHRISTIAN TO PRAY. Amen.**