

J.R. Miller:

It is good to pray for one's friends. Indeed, the friendship that does not pray--is lacking in one of its most sacred elements. We have also a good index of the character of the friendship, in the things that one asks for one's friends. To seek for them only earthly blessings--is to miss friendship's highest privilege, which is to call down Heaven's blessings upon them.

It is interesting to study Paul's prayers for his friends. His prayer for the Philippian Christians may be taken as an example. "This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and every kind of discernment." Philippians 1:9. He does not ask that they may have more of this world's good things, that they may be prospered in business--but he asks for them those things that will enrich their spiritual life and character.

He asks that their love may abound yet more and more. Without love--there is no Christian life. To live truly at all--is to love. Love is 'perfect tense' of live--at least spiritually, if not grammatically. No one can be a Christian, and not have love. Christian character, wherever found, in whatever country, has in it the red cord of love. Not to have love--is not to be a Christian. All Christian duty is summed up, in loving loving God and our neighbor.

The prayer of Paul is that this love may abound yet more and more. It is not enough to have a little love in the heart, a feeble, trickling spring, bubbling up, and sending out tiny rills and streamlets of affection. Love in us should be like a river. Our life should be rich in its gentleness, its patience, its charity, its long-suffering, its forgiveness, its serving. We need a love that does not count its forgivings seven times--but forgives seventy times seven times. We need a love that is kind, not merely to those who show us kindness--but also to those who are unkind to us. We need a love that loves on--when grieved and hurt; that does good in return for evil and hatred; that teaches us to 'pray for those who persecute us'. We need a love that is unaffected by men's cruel treatment; that pours out its gentleness and goodness upon evil and good; that in the enduring of personal injury-- is like the lake which, when ploughed by the cleaving keel, instantly heals its own hurt, and is calm and smooth again. We need a love that abounds in service, forgetting itself; giving, sacrificing unto the uttermost, to bless others. We need a love which bears all things and never fails.

We may never say, even after the highest achievements of loving, "I have now reached my ideal of unselfishness, of patience, of gentleness, of serving. I have now done my share for other people. I will take no more burdens on me. I will wear myself out no more in serving." Our love is to abound yet more and more.

Paul prayed that the love of his friends might abound yet more and more in knowledge. Love without knowledge--is mere emotion, which soon dies out. We must know God--to love Him truly. The reason why people do not love God--is because they do not know Him. How can we get this knowledge of God? How do we get to know a human friend better? Is it not by meeting him often; by talking with him to learn his thoughts and feelings; by watching his acts to learn the mode of his life; by observing his disposition and attitudes, to discover his spirit? How else can we get to know God better? If we never meet with Him, if we never talk with Him, if we never study His Word, if we never observe His ways--how can we ever know Him?

The Bible reveals God. It unfolds His character and tells us what are His thoughts toward us, what is His will for us. Study the Book if you would know God. Jesus was called "the Word". A word reveals thought. A thought lies in the depths of your soul, and no one can read it. Then you speak, and the thought is made known.

Just so, in the depths of God's being--lay the mystery of His love, grace, and truth. Men could not know it. No one by searching, could find out God. Then Jesus came, the Word, revealing the thoughts that were in the mind of the Father. God laid bare His heart--in Christ. Know Jesus--and you will know God. Then knowing God better, your love for Him will abound more and more.

We stand on the mere edge of a great ocean of knowledge, as we seek to learn of God. We can get, at the best, only little fragments of knowledge of Him.

Spain used to stamp on her coins, the rock at Gibraltar, casting over the figure a scroll bearing the words, "No more beyond." She fancied that there were no lands beyond those rocks. But one day a bold spirit sailed far away beyond these rocks, and discovered a new world. Then Spain wisely changed her coins, striking off the word "No", leaving "More beyond." Some of us may have been fancying that we know all of God that there is to be known in this world. But out beyond our little "No more beyond" there lies a vast continent of knowledge of Him. We may study theology, the science of God, for ages--and still we shall only begin to know Him.

Then, the more we know of God and love Him--the more shall we love our fellow-men. For true human love, is only the lesson of God's love learned. We only try to think our God's love thoughts. Jesus commands us to love each other--as He loves us. It is only as we learn how Christ loves us--that we know how to love one another. All our lessons in loving--we must get from Him. We must know Christ's patience--before we can be patient. We must know Christ's gentleness--before we can be gentle. We must know Christ's way of forgiving--before we can truly forgive.

Paul prayed that his friends, "may be able to discern what is BEST." Philippians 1:9-10. We must be always making choices in this world. We cannot take up everything that lies in our path--and we ought to choose the best things. Even among 'right things' there is room for choice, for some right things are better than others.

There are a great many Christians, however, who do not habitually choose the best things--but second-rate things. They labor for the food that perishes--when they might labor for the food that endures unto everlasting life. Even in their prayers, they ask for temporal blessings, when they might ask for spiritual gifts and treasures! They are like John Bunyan's "man with the muck-rake", who only looks 'down' and drags his rake among the weeds and worthless rubbish--while over his head are crowns that he might take into his hands!

They are like Esau, who sold his valuable birthright, for some bread and lentil stew. They toil for this world's things--when they might have been laying up treasures in heaven!

We only have one life to live--and we ought therefore to do the best we possibly can with it. We pass through this world only once--and we ought to gather up and take with us the things that will truly enrich us--things we can keep forever!

It is not worth our while, to toil and moil and strive and struggle--to do things that will leave no lasting results when life is done--while there are things we can do which have eternal significance!

What, then, are the things that are excellent? All Christian kindness is excellent. It leaves results in other lives--results which will outlast time. The words which you speak in love and truth into other hearts, will never perish.

The poet found his song, long, long after it had been sung, from beginning to end--in the heart of his friend. So will it be with every word spoken and every song sung for Christ; some day we shall find them all in some heart. Christian service is among the excellent things which we should choose. Idleness is cursed. It produces death in the idler. Work blesses the world--and blesses him who works.

Noble character is excellent. Someone says, "The only thing that walks back from the tomb with the mourners, and refuses to be buried--is character." This is true. What a man IS--survives him. It never can be buried. It stays about his home, when his footsteps are no longer heard there. It lives in the community where he was known. And this same thing, 'character' --a man carries with him into the next life. Hence we should take care to build into our character only beautiful things, things that will be admitted into the heavenly kingdom. Paul teaches this when he says, "Whatever things are true, whatever things are honorable, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report--think on these things," and "these things do." It is worth while to gather into our character these beautiful things, these eternal things, for we can keep them forever.

Another excellent thing is true friendship. We must choose the best. There are friendships which only hurt the life, which only poison the fountain of being, which only mar the beauty of the soul. We can find no perfect friends; all have their faults--ways that will annoy and vex us, peculiarities that will fret us. Still there are friends who, with all their imperfections, are God's holy gifts to us. To have a friend who is true, worthy, noble, pure, is a blessed privilege. Godly friendship brings blessings into our life.

Friendship brings blessings into our life. It makes us stronger, for it shares life's loads with us. It is an inspiration to us. It writes its lines of beauty on our soul. The things that are true, which holy friendship brings into our life, we shall have always. Even death cannot rob us of them.

These are suggestions of the "things that are excellent," which a Christian should choose to live for. Thousands of lives are almost or entirely wasted--because they are spent in striving after things that are not worth while. We are immortal beings, and it is folly for us to live for this life only--and neglect the things that are eternal.

Another of Paul's prayers for his friends is that they may be sincere and void of offence. Sincere means 'without wax'. In Rome's palmy days, many people lived in fine marble palaces. Sometimes a dishonest workman, when there was a piece chipped off a stone, would fill in the chink with a kind of cement called wax, an imitation of marble. For a time the deception would not be discovered; but after a while, the wax would be discolored, and thus the fraud, the untruth, would be exposed. It became necessary, therefore, to put in contracts with builders, a clause providing that the work should be 'sine-cera' without wax. This is the story of our word "sincere." It means that the life described is true through and through, without deception, without fraud, or any mere seeming. Its professions are real. It makes no pretensions, but is simply itself.

We should mark well this feature of life for which Paul prays. Insincerity in any form, mars the beauty of a character. What a farce people play--who pose before the world, for what they are not! We all remember how, in what scathing words, Jesus denounced hypocrisy. This was the only sin of which He did not speak with pity and compassion. There may be hypocrisy in other things besides religion. One may be a hypocrite in dress, in mode of living, in professions of friendship, in business, in work. There is a great deal that flashes for diamond--which is not diamond. There is much show of wealth--which is only poverty in purple robes. There is plenty of marble in appearance--which is only wax.

Paul's prayer is that his friends may be sincere in all things. It is a good prayer for all of us to make for ourselves. We should be true through and through. We should live so that we shall never be afraid of exposure. What a farce it is to live falsely! What a farce it is to live insincerely before the world, a mere empty life of outside appearance, while the divine eye is looking down into the heart and seeing the poor miserable reality!

Paul prays also that his friends may be without offence. We use the word "offend" of hurt feelings. We offend a man when we make him angry. The Bible takes small note of mere hurt feelings, but it regards as of infinite importance, a hurt done to a life. We offend another in the Bible sense when, by our example, our influence, our words, any act of ours--we cause him to stumble or fall. Paul's prayer is that his friends should never do anything that would cause others to stumble. It is very important that we learn to live, so that we shall never harm other souls.

Jesus spoke very earnestly of the sin of causing a little one to stumble. It is a grievous thing to sin; it is a yet more grievous thing to be the cause of another's sinning. We must guard our habits--lest we set the feet of others in paths which will lead them to ruin. We must watch our words--lest in unguarded moments we say that which will poison another's mind. We must look to our example--lest its influence become the bane and curse of an innocent life. We should be without offence in all our life.

Another of Paul's prayers for his friends, was that they should be filled with the fruits of righteousness. It is good to be without offence, that is, not to do any harm in the world. Yet that is not the best thing. Some people are so afraid of doing harm--that they never do any good. But that is not the kind of goodness that the Bible urges us to have. We are to be active, always abounding in the work of the Lord. We are to bring forth fruit, much fruit, and so prove to be Christ's disciples.

We are to be filled with the fruits of righteousness. This suggests a life that is holy, bearing the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, meekness, faith, self-control. It means also a life full of good works. We must be useful people, helpful people. The world is a great sea, in whose dark waters souls are perishing, and we must be fishers of men! All about us are human need and sorrow--and we must be comforters and helpers. We must be Christ to the world, ever carrying in us, the healing of Christ.

It is on its branches, that the vine bears its fruits, and we are the branches. Christ must live in this world in us and through us, or not at all. The fruits with which we would feed the world's hunger--must grow in our lives. "Give them something to eat," is Christ's answer, when we tell Him of the people all about us who are perishing.

It is fruits of righteousness, with which we are to be filled. The revival that the world waits for today in the church, is a revival of righteousness. "You are not as good as your Book!" said a Brahmin to the missionaries in India. "If you were as good as your Book, India would soon be Christ's." If all Christians were as good as their Book, this whole world would be Christ's in a little while. We must keep the commandments. We must be holy. We must live righteously and godly in this present evil world. We must bring the kingdom of heaven down to earth in our living.