Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Praying for the Right Things, Part 1
Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 1:11
Code: 53-5

As we open the Word of God together it should be obvious to all of us that we are about to hear the Lord speak to us these words that come to us from the pages of Scripture are the pure Word of God from His own heart and His own voice to us. And thus do they command our attention.

The text for this morning is 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 verses 11 and 12...2 Thessalonians chapter 1 verses 11 and 12. "To this end also we pray for you always that our God may count you worthy of your calling and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power in order that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ."

That is what I would call a prayer report from Paul. It is not a prayer, though his letters have many prayers in them, but it is a report of how he prays. He is telling the Thessalonians the nature of his prayer for them. And as you look at that prayer and consider it, you come to the conclusion that he is praying for the right stuff.

Sadly the prayers of most Christians are directed toward the wrong stuff. Most of the time Christians pray in regard to themselves and those they love for somewhat shallow things. The prayers are often misdirected and very short-sighted, and, in fact, selfish. Christians typically pray for health and happiness and success. They pray for personal benefit. They pray for comfort. They pray for solutions to fix all of the little problems of life. They pray for a healed body or a home or food or a job or a car, a husband, a wife, a promotion, more money. Those things while they certainly make up part of life are very low on Paul's priority list. They're also very low on the priority list of Jesus who said basically take no thought for what you eat or drink or wear, knowing full well that God supplies all of those things. Get on with seeking matters that relate to the Kingdom of God.

Often we ask, says James, and receive not because we ask amiss for the sole purpose of consuming it on our own lusts. So very often we not only pray for the wrong stuff but we pray for the wrong reason.

As we look at this insight into the prayer of Paul we see a man who prayed for the right stuff for the right reason. The right stuff is in verse 11, the right reason is in verse 12, and we'll unfold those to you. It's a brief text but one that is so full of truth that we could spend months in it and you are living with a grave illusion if you think we will get by those two verses today.

I suppose at this particular point I could ask the question of you, what do you pray for? When it comes down to you in your life and your family and the people in your world, the people you love, your church, for what do you pray? What do you desire for yourself? What do you desire for your spouse? What do you desire for your children? What do you desire for the people that you love? What do you desire for the people in your church? What do you really want?

If God showed up and said I want to give you three wishes, whatever you ask I will do...what would they be? What would you ask God for? Do you have the right values? Do you have the right priority list?

We live in a world, of course, that is skewed, a world that is deviated, a world that knows little of true value. We live in a world where people pursue all the wrong stuff. And that massive overpowering pursuit that is all around us encroaches on our lives and gets us caught up in the very pursuit of things which mean nothing or should mean nothing to us.

The attitude of most worldly people in terms of their pursuit is exposed ably by Anton Chekhov's(??) classic short story called "The Bet." Chekhov was a Russian writer who wrote in the 1800's. This story gives us insight into the value system of most people.

The plot involves a wager, a bet between two educated men. And it was a bet over the issue of solitary confinement. A wealthy middle-aged banker believed that the death penalty was a more humane punishment than solitary confinement because an executioner kills at once, solitary confinement kills gradually.

One of his guests at a party, a young lawyer of 25, disagreed saying, "To live under any conditions is better than not to live at all." Angered the banker impulsively responded with a bet of two million rubles, a fortune. He bet that the younger man could not last five years in solitary confinement. The lawyer was so convinced of his endurance and so eager for the two million that he announced that he would stay fifteen years instead of five to make his point.

The arrangements were made and the young man moved into a separate building on the grounds of the banker's large estate. He was allowed no visitors and no newspapers. He could write letters but receive none. There were guards watching to make sure he never violated the agreement but they were placed so that he could never see another human being. He received his food in silence through a small opening where he couldn't see those who served him. Everything else he wanted, books, certain foods, musical instruments, was granted by his own special written request.

The story develops with a description of the things the lawyer asked for through the years and the occasional glances of the observant guardians who delivered some of them while he slept. During the

first year the piano could be heard at almost any hour and he asked for many books, mostly novels and light reading. The next year the music ceased the works of various classical authors were requested. In the sixth year of his isolation he began to study languages and soon wrote that he had mastered six languages. After the tenth year of his confinement the prisoner sat motionless at the table and read the New Testament. After more than a year's saturation of the Bible he began to study theology.

The second half of the story focuses on the night before the noon deadline when the lawyer will win the bet. The banker is now at the end of his career. His risky speculations and impetuosity had gradually undermined his business. The once self-confident millionaire was now a second-rate banker and to pay off the wager would destroy him. Angry at his foolishness and jealous of the soon to be wealthy man who was now only forty, the old banker determined to kill his opponent and frame the guard with the murder.

Slipping into the man's room, he found him asleep at the table. Before he could kill him he noticed a letter the lawyer had written to him. He picked it up, this is what he read. "Tomorrow at twelve o'clock I shall be free. But before leaving this room I find it necessary to say a few words to you. With a clear conscience and before God who sees me I declare to you that I despise freedom and life and health and all that your books call the joys of this world. I know I am wiser than you all and I despise all your books. I despise all earthly blessings and wisdom, all is worthless and false, hallow and deceiving like the mirage. You may be proud, wise and beautiful, but death will wipe you away from the face of the earth as it does the mice that live beneath your floor. And your heirs, your history, your immortal geniuses will burn with the destruction of the earth. You have gone mad and are not following the right path. You take falsehood for truth, and deformity for beauty. To prove to you how I despise all that you value, I renounce the two million on which I looked at one time as the opening of paradise for me and which I now scorn. And to deprive myself of the right to receive the two million, I will leave my prison five hours before the appointed time and by so doing break the terms of our compact." And he signed his name.

The banker read the lines, replaced the paper on the table, kissed the strange sleeping man. And with tears in his eyes, quietly left the house. Chekhov writes, "Never before, not even after sustaining serious losses had he despised himself as he did at that moment." His tears kept him awake the rest of the night and at seven the next morning he was informed by the watchmen that they had seen the man crawl through a window and go to the gate and disappear.

Some people have to learn the hard way what is the right stuff. And some people never learn.

Paul knew. Look at verse 11, "We pray for you and here's what we pray for, that our God would count you worthy of your calling and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power." Three requests, we pray for your worthiness, we pray for your fulfillment and we pray for your work or

your service. There is so much in those three things to captivate our minds. There is such depth in those three requests, we trust that we will be able by the Spirit's help to unfold them.

The world is full of fools, fools who the hard way learn what is the right stuff and fools who never learn what is the right stuff. We who know the Lord Jesus Christ and who have the Word of God need not be so foolish. We need not waste our time endeavoring to get what is ultimately after all not even valuable. We need to spend our time gaining what is priceless. Three wishes Paul had for them...worthiness, fulfillment and powerful service.

Before we look at those requests and their implications, I want us to consider the text from the perspective of prayer. Paul begins in verse 11 by saying, "To this end also we pray for you..." And he introduces us to his resource. Whatever it was that he wanted for the Thessalonians he knew he could obtain only by prayer. He did not turn to human ingenuity. He did not turn to some program. He turned to God.

As we think about this great text and before we look at the requests and the reasons for the requests in verse 12, we need to look at this matter of the resource which is prayer. "To this end also we pray for you always." Several things flow out of that. First of all, obviously, that he prayed for them. Secondly, that he prayed for them all the time, unceasingly, which of course was typical of Paul. And thirdly, that in praying for them all the time he had a goal in mind, to this end or for this reason or for this purpose. His prayers were very pointed. They were very direct. They were not generic. They were not general. They were specific. And the three things that were the goal or the end of the purpose or the direction of his prayer were worthiness, fulfillment and effective service. That's what he prayed for. He sought for them the right stuff. He here is showing himself a faithful pastor. In the sixth chapter of Acts and verse 4 it says that those who shepherd the flock of God, those who are the leaders should give themselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Now the way you accomplish your part in the sanctification of God's people when you're the leader is to pray for them that God will sanctify them and to teach them so you give them the truth that sanctifies. The pattern of prayer for the shepherd is a prayer for the sanctification of his people, for the maturity of his people, for the growth of his people, for the development of his people spiritually. And that is that for which Paul prays. Not only, of course, did he pray for them but he also taught them the Word of God, that's the two-fold responsibility.

Such prayers are common to the letters of Paul. We don't need to beg the issue by chasing our way through all of his epistles tracking all his prayers down, it would be enough to remind you that you can't read an epistle of Paul without either getting a direct prayer or a report of how he prays. Were you to go back and take the time to read 1 Thessalonians again you would find that in chapter 1 he opens up the chapter by telling them that he prays for them and gives them a prayer report. You would find that as he moves into chapter 3 verses 11 to 13 he stops and actually prays for them. And when he gets into chapter 5 verse 23 he stops and prays for them again. So we're not surprised that

here in the first chapter of this little epistle, the second one to his beloved at Thessalonica, he stops before he closes this first chapter and puts a prayer in, or a report really of how he's been praying for them. We could easily conclude, of course, that the epistle itself is just three chapters long and therefore would only take a matter of a few moments to read and perhaps not very long to write since he was writing under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He may well have written this all in a very brief time. And so the measure of time would be brief in regard to the teaching part and perhaps much, much longer in regard to the praying part because he doesn't say we write you always, but he does say we...what?...we pray for you always.

There are brief times that we're able to teach. There are unlimited times that we're able to pray. And the prayer life of the shepherd is a constant thing. He may not always be on his knees. He may not always have his hands folded or his eyes closed, but there is seldom a waking moment when the shepherd doesn't have the sheep on his heart and being on his heart they are thus carried to the heart of God and the prayer for sanctification is a way of life. And so we're not surprised when Paul in writing his epistles stops at points to pray or to inject a prayer report about how he's been praying and will continue to pray for them.

So here he says, "I know this, I want you to be sanctified. I want you to be worthy. I want you to be fulfilled. And I want you to serve with power. And the resource that I tap for that is God. I go to God." And here we're introduced to a wonderful balance. We know we must teach the people because they must obey the Word to be sanctified. But we also know that it is God alone who can prompt that obedience. That's why when anything good happens in our life, who gets the credit? God, because in our flesh we can do no good thing. So there's a wonderful tension there that must be maintained in our hearts and minds that basically says if I'm going to be a sanctified Christian moving along the path to Christ's likeness, if I'm going to be growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord, if I'm going to be more and more holy, moving from level of glory to the next level of glory, changed by the Holy Spirit to be more and more conformed to Christ, if that process is going on in my life it demands my obedience. I must obey the Word and the Spirit.

But I also know that the only way that that can happen is when God empowers it to happen. And so I'm caught, as it were, on the vortex of that same tension that exists so many, many places in the Word of God and the truth of the Christian faith.

But I want to speak to that, if I might, this morning because I think it's important. There is a growing response among Christian people to the truth of God's sovereignty and I thank God for that. The church is finally awakening to the fact that God is an absolutely and utterly sovereign God, that God controls all things by the Word of His power, that God will do what He will do when He will do it the way He will do it because He has so ordained and because He is absolutely in charge and because He has the power to do it. God has set in motion His perfect purpose from before the world began. It is all set and established by His infinite mind and will operate according to His infinite power and

purpose. I'm glad the church has affirmed that.

But I also am concerned that in the affirmation of the absolute sovereignty of God there come not a depreciating sense of responsibility on the part of the believer, either on the one hand to pray or to obey. I have recently been involved in a conversation that runs something like this, "After all, God controls everything so if He lets me sin it's really not my problem." Or another conversation that might run something like this, "God's going to do what He's going to do anyway so why pray?" And what they want to do is take all the tension out of spiritual reality and reduce the whole issue to human comprehension and say, "If I can't understand how this relates, I'll make up my own theology."

Prayer is an essential reality and a strong and confident and biblical belief in the sovereignty of God does not preclude prayer. Just as obedience is an element in which God works His sovereign purposes of salvation and sanctification, so prayer is a human element by which that purpose is effected. That is a mystery which is not understood but is believed.

So Paul knows that only God can produce the right stuff, but he also exhorts the Thessalonians over and over again about the right stuff. In the first letter, you'll remember, he started out in chapter 1 by saying, "I know about your work of faith, I know about your labor of love." And he said, "I know about your endurance of hope." He said, "I know that you are the elect. I know that you heard the Word as it is the Word of the Lord and you believed. I know that you have become an example to the other churches. I know that from you the Word has sounded out. I know you have repented and turned to God from idols. I know you are waiting for the Second Coming. I know you love one another and nobody even needs to teach you to do that." And then in chapter 4 he says to them in verse 1, "I know all of that is true but I'm asking you to excel even more," and he's putting on them the responsibility.

Then at the end of the first letter to them in chapter 5 he gives them a staccato rapid-fire series of commands that tell them to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks, don't quench the Spirit, don't look down on revelation from God, examine everything carefully, hang on to what is good and stay as far as you can away from what is evil. And he's giving them command after command after command.

He understands that the will of man is involved in the instrumentality of God accomplishing His sanctifying purpose. And so does he understand as well that on the front end of sanctification in the prayer part that our prayers are a part of the plan by which God effects His eternal purposes. And so we want to remember here the very important word that though we believe whole-heartedly in the sovereignty of God, if that leads us to diminish the place of prayer that is bad theology as well as disobedient Christianity. God is sovereign. There is absolutely no question about the sovereignty of God.

In Job 42:2 it says, "I know that Thou canst do all things and that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted." In Proverbs 16:33 the writer says, "Men cast lots but every decision is from the Lord."

In Daniel, you remember the king who finally came to his senses, Nebuchadnezzar, after living in the field and eating grass for seven years finally got it straight. And he said of God, "He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, What hast Thou done?" God acts totally independently of man.

And Isaiah the prophet certainly said it as wonderfully as it could be said in chapter 46 and verse 9, "I am God and there is no other, I am God and there's no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying My purpose will be established and I will accomplish all My good pleasure." And then at the end of verse 11, "I have planned it and I will do it."

Yes God is sovereign, yes He is sovereign but that does not preclude prayer. Paul here knows God has a sovereign plan but he continually prays for them. He pours out his heart to God that they might be worthy and fulfilled and effective in their service that God might be glorified.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

And again I say, yes we exhort, yes we believe in the sovereignty of God but we also understand the place of prayer and know that all the good things that come from God's power.

To illustrate that to you let me show you just a few scriptural illustrations. Back in 1 Samuel chapter 12, quite a fascinating illustration. The people had sinned numerous ways and then sinned of late in asking for a king like everybody else had. Verse 19 of 1 Samuel 12, "Then all the people said to Samuel, pray for your servants to the Lord your God." They said, Samuel, will you please intercede for us, please pray for us, "So that we may not die for we have added to all our sins this evil by asking for ourselves a king, so would you please pray that we don't get killed, that God doesn't kill us?"

Samuel said to the people, "Don't fear, you have nothing to be afraid of." Now why would he say that? Because he knew the plan. He knew God's sovereign plan. "You have committed all this evil yet do not turn aside from following the Lord but serve the Lord with all your heart." He says...Look, yes you've sinned, yes you deserve to die but start getting obedient right now, start obeying. "You must not turn aside then you would go after futile things which cannot profit or deliver but they are futile." So he says...Look, don't be afraid, just start doing the right thing.

Then verse 22, he goes back to the plan of God. "For the Lord will not abandon His people on account of His great name because the Lord has been pleased to make you a people for Himself." He says, "Look, God's not going to kill you, God will not kill you because God has a plan. The plan is already set in motion. The plan has been revealed. The plan is, you're going to be His people. He's not about to kill you."

So what's he saying? They come to him and they say...pray for us, pray for us...and he says...don't be afraid, you're not going to die, I know the plan...the plan is, you live...the plan is, you're the people, God will keep you alive because He's chosen you. His name is at stake, that is His reputation is at stake. His plan is at stake. So don't be afraid, you're not going to die.

But then in verse 23 look what he said, "Moreover, as for me far be it for me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to...what?...to pray for you, and I will instruct you in the good and right way." I'll do two things for you...I'll teach you the good and right way and I'll pray for you because I know how the plan is going to work out.

Isn't that kind of interesting? God's not going to kill you, it's all settled. Well then you say to Samuel, "Well why in the world are you praying for them then? What's the point?" The point is it's the cry of my heart, it's the longing of my heart, it's the pleading of my heart to line my heart up with the purposes of God. And my prayers are part of the instrumentality by which God effects His plan and so is my teaching so I will pray for you on the front end and I will instruct you and God will not kill you.

You see, obedience, prayer, sovereignty all blend in. It's like Romans 9, isn't it? In Romans 9 Paul says, "Not all Israel is Israel," not all Jews are going to get saved. "Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." In other words, God's saying I'll save whoever I want to save. And he goes on like that all through chapter 9. Paul writes that down. Who are you to question? What right does the pot have to say to the potter..why did you do this? Is there injustice with God? No, God can do anything He wants to do and He will do whatever He wants to do, and that's how it is. And that means that not all Israel will be saved, Israel will be set aside and Gentiles, a people who were no people, will be saved. Paul lays that out absolutely in unequivocal terms, chapter 9, Romans.

You know how he starts chapter 10? "My prayer is that Israel will be saved." What? I know the sovereign plan, that doesn't eliminate my prayer life. I plead with God for Israel, for their salvation. I leave God's part to God, my part to me. And the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Somehow God works that in.

I love Luke 22 because it's such an apt illustration of this same principle. In Luke 22, this is fascinating, Jesus says to Peter, "Simon, Simon," and He called him by his old name when he was

acting like his old self, "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat. Satan wants to come after you." And the implication is, and I'm giving him permission. But you could also fill in the white spaces, "I know you're going to survive." Right, He knew that. He knew Peter wouldn't totally lose his salvation and be plunged into Satanic power and end up in hell, He knew that. Satan wants to have you and he's going to put you through a very sifting test and I'm going to let him do it. And He knew exactly how it would turn out. But look at verse 32, "But I have...what?...prayed for you." Do you know that the prayers of Jesus were even a part of the sovereign plan of God? Jesus didn't say, "Well, there's no sense in me praying, I know how this whole deals going to come out." Jesus didn't say, "Well not only do I know how it's going to come out, I'm controlling the whole deal so why should I pray?" Jesus in His humanity gives us an example of one though knowing perfectly the plan of God who yet prayed for that plan to be fulfilled. He knew Peter would pass the test, survive, ultimately give his life in the cause of Christ as a faithful servant, die a martyr without renouncing his faith. Jesus knew all of that, He planned all that, He made that all happen, He effected that in Peter's life and yet He prayed for Peter right here. If the Son joins in prayer along with the sovereign plan of the Father, then should we do less? Prayer and sovereign power go together with pleading and human responsibility.

And another one that's one of my favorites is at the end of the book of Revelation illustrating the same principle. It shows you that the heart cries out to line up with the plan of God. That's really what prayer is. We're crying out to line up with God's plans. At the end of verse 20, just before he says "the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all, amen," his second to the last statement, John says, "Amen, come, Lord Jesus," that's his prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus." Now somebody might say to John, "John, have you been listening? You have just written twenty-two chapters to say Jesus is coming. Now if you've just spent twenty-two chapters saying He's coming, why are you praying, `Come, Lord Jesus?' You just said He's coming, in fact in the same verse, `I am coming quickly.' Response, `Come, Lord Jesus.'"

You see, prayer just lines up with the plan. Paul knows, now back to 2 Thessalonians, that God desires to sanctify His people and he lines up his prayer with the desire of God. God, I know You want to sanctify Your people, I know You want to count them worthy, I know You want to fulfill every desire they have for goodness. I know You want to see their work of faith produced with power. I know that's Your desire. I'm lining up with that. That's the right stuff and I'm praying for the right stuff and I'm teaching them to activate their will in regard to the right stuff.

If you want to pray for one another, this is how you pray. These are the things you pray for because these are the things that concern God. God doesn't really care about the little nuances of life as much as He cares about the big spiritual issues of life. You see, the purpose of God by the Holy Spirit is to conform you more and more to the image of Jesus Christ. The little things in life that come and go are incidental to that process. They work with that process maybe one way or another. And so, God has a sovereign plan which He will sovereignly fulfill but within that sovereign plan there is a place for

prayer as we line up ourselves up with that plan and as we even become the means to activate that plan for the effectual prayer of a righteous man does avail much...it does avail much.

And do we need to be reminded of that most fascinating illustration about Isaiah? Isaiah went to Hezekiah, this is what the Lord says, Isaiah told him, "Put your house in order because you're going to die. You're not going to recover," Isaiah 38:1. He told him you're not going to recover, you're going to die. After that the king wept bitterly, you remember, and he prayed about his impending doom. Well it was Isaiah then who hadn't even gotten out of the king's house after delivering the first message who was told by God, "Go back and tell Hezekiah this, this is what the Lord the God of your father David says, I've heard your prayer, seen your tears, I will heal you, I'll add fifteen years to your life." Amazing. The prophet's own account makes it very plain that had the king not prayed, if he hadn't prayed he would have died. So somehow the instrumentality of prayer fits into the plan as does obedience, for if you don't obey you won't be sanctified, if you don't obey the gospel you won't be saved.

We cannot then believe in the sovereignty of God, we cannot just believe in the teaching of the Word of God if it somehow strips us of the passion to pray. Prayer then is the heart longing to unite with the holy purposes of God for their accomplishment. God works in us, says T.C. Hammond years ago in a "HIS" magazine article, "There is and there must be a human response to the divine overture." Prayer is an act by which I line up with the purposes of God and through which He works those purposes to fulfillment. Prayer moves God. God moves His people who move in response.

So that's the resource. And whatever you may believe about the sovereignty of God, no matter how firm your confidence that He is in charge of everything, it cannot...it cannot diminish your prayer life. Paul then prays and to this end, that God may count you worthy of your calling, fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power...those three things. They are magnificent things. Worthiness...that has to do with spiritual character, that the Lord would make you the kind of person you ought to be. Fulfillment...that God would then fulfill in your life circumstances every holy longing. And then finally, that whatever service you do would be done with power. That's what God's after...a worthy life, a fulfilled life, a powerful life. That's the right stuff to pray for. When you pray for your spouse or you pray for your children or you pray for your friends or you pray for your church or you pray in behalf of your own spiritual life, you pray for those things...worthiness, fulfillment, power in service.

Now as a note, this is an easy transition really from verses 5 to 10, just sort of sticking it in the chapter where it goes. We normally find these kinds of notes about his prayer life earlier in the first chapter. They usually show up in the first five or six verses, but here he waits till after he has discussed the Second Coming. And I think it's...it's an excellent way to do it because any discussion of the Second Coming, any discussion of the future hope of the Christian has immediate present implications, does it not? Now you know from verse 5 to 10 we went into detail on the Lord's return.

Verse 7 being the key there in the middle of the verse when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels and flaming fire and we said He comes for two purposes, retribution and relief. The anticipation then of the coming of Christ is not only the something that effects how we view the future, but it effects how we view the present because it has such stringent present implications.

In 2 Peter chapter 3, the perhaps most familiar and easy to grasp text with regard to this, Peter is writing about the return of Christ, talks about the promise of His coming in verse 4, talks about His judgment. And then in verse 8 he says that this is going to come and it's going to come inevitably, you cannot withstand it, you cannot put it off. If it seems like a long time, just remember that days and millennia are the same to God. And then in verse 9 he says, "The Lord is not slow if He promises it, He's going to do it." Verse 10, he describes it as a day coming like a thief, the heavens are going to pass away. He goes in to all of that. Then in verse 11 comes a real key. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be? In holy conduct and godliness. Then in verse 14 he says you ought to be found in peace, spotless, blameless. Verse 18, growing in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So when you know there is the future coming of Christ, the present response is to get your act together. First John 3:3 says if you have that hope in you, it purifies you.

So Paul knew God's plan for the future glory of His people was set. That's Christian hope. But he also knew it had immense practical implications for how they lived and so he moves easily into praying that the practical aspects of that hope might find their way into the lives of the people. He knew, for example, in verse 12 that they would be glorified some day but he wanted Christ to be glorified in them now...now. The reality of what will be should make a difference in what is.

So Paul says, "Look, I'm praying to God on your behalf for these three things. This is the right stuff." It really is the right stuff. It's the stuff that you should be committed to praying for. We've got somehow to strip our life down to focusing on the right stuff. These are the things that we should be preoccupied with in our own Christian obedience, seeking to be more worthy of the name of Christ, seeking to be pursuing what is good and seeing it fulfilled, seeking to serve with power. And if that's what we look for, if that's the goal, if that's the end of our prayers and our patterns of obedience, God's going to be honored. I recognize that it's sacrificial. I recognize that you've got, in a sense, to sort of blur out everything around you, you've got to blind yourself to the culture and the trash that's being inevitably dumped on you. And you've got to pursue something that takes a straight-forward gaze and a straight-forward look and a tremendous sense of commitment and sacrifice to stay focused.

Lance was showing me a interesting illustration in a book about the Pony Express that talks about the sacrifice and the dedication that it takes to live for the right stuff. The Pony Express was a private express company that carried mail by an organized relay, you remember, of horseback riders. The

eastern end was St. Joseph, Missouri, the western end was Sacramento, California. The cost of sending a letter by Pony Express was $2.50 an ounce, and that's over a hundred years ago, so that was a lot of money. If the weather and the horses held out and the Indians held off, the letter would complete the entire 2,000 mile journey in ten days, top speed. That's how long it took Lincoln's inaugural address to get to Sacramento from St. Joseph.

It may surprise you the Pony Express was only in operation from April 3, 1860 to November 18, 1861. Then the telegraph came and when the telegraph line came and the line was completed between the two cities, Pony Express was no longer necessary. Being a rider for the Pony Express was tough, talk about focus. Riding constantly at top speed, stopping only to bounce off one horse on to another, you were expected to ride up to 100 miles a day, changing horses 15 to 25 miles. Other than the mail, the only baggage they were allowed to carry contained a few provisions, a little tiny bit of flour, cornmeal and bacon. In case of danger you had a medical pack of turpentine, borax and cream of tartar. In order to travel light and to increase your mobility to dodge Indians during the Indian attacks, the men always rode only in shirt sleeves, even during the fierce winter weather coming across the Rockies.

You say, "How in the world would they get any people to live like that? How do they ever recruit anybody?" Well here is an ad from an 1860's San Francisco newspaper, this was an ad run by the Pony Express, this is what it said: "Wanted: Young skinny wiry fellows," you don't want to kill the horse, you understand. "Not over 18," got to have the stamina. "Must be expert riders willing to risk daily." And the final note, "Orphans preferred."

Do you know they never had a lack? They always had a waiting list of riders. Some people were drawn by the attractiveness of such sacrifice.

I suppose in the spiritual dimension this matter of staying focused and following the right stuff demands the same kind of rigor and virility and dedication and sacrifice and spirit of adventure and the same kind of indifference to all the stuff and all the people around us that it took in the physical world to make a good Pony Express recruit. Can you stay focused? Can you stay at the speed God wants you to stay at, moving toward the goal He wants you to move at with all the stuff going on around you and be undistracted? Can you stay with the right stuff? That's the challenge.

You can't on your own and that's why Paul prays that you be able to by the power of God.

Father, thank You for the reminder again of the centrality of prayer in the matter of sanctification and spiritual growth. Thank You, Father, for reminding us that yes You are sovereign, yes You know all things from the end to the beginning because You've ordained them. Yes You have set Your purposes and they will come to pass. Yes You are the Lord and You change not. And we affirm all of that. But at the same time, Lord, somehow mysteriously wonderfully, paradoxically You have somehow figured in to the whole sovereign equation the role of prayer and obedience. And so we

pray with Paul for our church, God, that You would count them worthy of their calling, that You would fill up all their desires for goodness and that You would cause their service rising out of faith to be powerful. And, Lord, that You would also give them the power and the strength and the will to stay on track, to keep moving against all the adversaries and enemies and odds and difficulties, lean unencumbered moving fast on the path, making the necessary sacrifice to reach the goal, the prize which is Christ's likeness. We thank You, Lord, that You can do this in our lives which we long for You to do and for which we give You praise in Christ's name. Amen.

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