

**Learning to Pray:
What Do We Pray For?
Philippians 4:4-9**

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We are continuing our conversation about prayer. A conversation, not the final word, not an edict from on high, but a conversation between fellow pilgrims.

That is why this morning I have moved to Lockwood Hall for this part of our service. This is where in the past we have gathered around tables to share meals; where our Loyal Workers have served soup; where we have set up for our Yard Sale; where we have had receptions; where we have played games. In short, this is where we have gathered to build relationships with each other, where we have been friends.

It seems to me that this is a fitting place to talk about prayer, how we build our relationship with God, how we talk with God. Because in the end, that is what prayer is.

As we have talked about prayer we began with just talking about it, trying to define what it is. And the definitions are as varied as there are people. St John Damascene, 8th century Syrian monk: *"Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God."* St. Teresa of Avila said *"Mental prayer is nothing else than a close sharing between friends;"* Father James Martin says that *"Prayer is conscious conversation with God. The way you think about friendships can help you think about and deep your relationship with God."*¹

Prayer is a conversation with God. A conscious conversation. It is intentional. That means that you can't count a flippant, "God help me" when you are exasperated, though perhaps that same prayer uttered when you see the questions on your Algebra test might count! Prayer is a conversation with God, a conversation with a friend.

That is helpful for me. It is helpful when I think about the question, "What should we pray for?"

Well, what do you talk about with your friends?

The other evening Anita and I were watching something on TV when I heard my phone ring. I raced downstairs to try and find the phone before they gave up! It was my friend Macon.

We have been friends for many years. While we are in the states this summer we are going to stay with him and his wife for a few days. He was calling to check in, just to talk.

And we did! We talked and talked! (Fortunately Anita found the pause button on the remote!). We talked about the weather; we talked about his recovery from his hip replacement, his golf game, about Clemson football (Whenever you talk to a Clemson fan at some point you are going to talk football!) We talked about US politics (we always do!) We

¹ James Martin, SJ. *Learning to Pray*. (HarperCollins:New York, 2021) Kindle Edition.

discussed grandchildren (he has a bunch so that took some time;) we talked about friends, about our anticipation of being together.

It was a lot like prayer!

That is how Paul says we should pray. In many ways, Paul's letter to the church in Philippi is a love letter! He just gushes about them. They were embroiled in controversy like the church in Corinth. Unlike the church in Rome where he had never been these weren't strangers. Instead they were dear friends. He opens his letter by exclaiming, "*I thank my God every time I remember you!*"² Do you have a friend like that? What are your conversations like? What do you talk about?

Paul says that is how our prayers should be! He tells these dear friends, "*Don't worry about anything, but pray about everything. With thankful hearts offer up your prayers and requests to God.*"³

Pray about everything! I think we should have a running conversation with God. That is what Paul means when he says that we should "*pray without ceasing.*"⁴ He doesn't mean we should live our lives, knees bent, heads bowed, eyes closed. How would we ever do the good God wants us to do? Rather, we need constantly be talking with God, living in a state of prayer; knowing that we are always, always in God's presence, communicating with God.

We see that in the Psalms, which was the temple's prayer book. If we look at our Psalm for today, Psalm 20 we read a prayer as the king was about to go out to do battle, or a prayer whenever we are about to undertake an endeavor. It is a prayer for success. And haven't we done that before a big event, before an exam?

Just prior, in Psalm 19 we read, "*The heavens are telling the glory of God.*" And haven't we offered that kind of prayer? At a gorgeous sunset, the glory of the valley during apple blossom season, standing on one of our shores? Aren't we overwhelmed by the beauty of our world? Aren't there times you just want to applaud, to pray?

And if we flip over to Psalm 22 we hear that horrific prayer of despair, the one Jesus prayed on the cross. "*My god, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" And haven't there been times when we have wanted to pray just such a thing? During a time when we have felt all alone, forgotten and abandoned by everyone, including God? It is such a heart wrenching prayer.

Yet we are told "in everything, in everything make our prayers to God." We can, we should pray about everything! That's what's friends are for!

And that is where prayer gets really sticky. We are told to pray about everything, to make our requests know to God. But then....

² Philippians 1:3, *NRSV*.

³ Philippians 4:6 *CEV*.

⁴ I Thessalonians 5:17. *NRSV*

When she was a university student Savannah started calling on as she was walking between classes. Nothing major, just someone to talk to during the journey. Now she often does the same thing as she driving. She will just call on the way to pick up groceries, taking the recycling, going to the laundromat. She will just call and talk.

I love the calls! I love knowing what is going on with her, staying caught up. But there are times when she calls, like this past week, when I am working on my sermon. I have things going on! It is not that she isn't important, but what she is talking about is not really that important to me. In those times I have learned to just ask, "Is this important or is this a driving conversation?"

And to her credit, Savannah will say, this is just a driving conversation!

That means I can listen, but not really. An occasional "uh huh," "yeah," "oh my" will suffice.

Can I suggest that perhaps that is the way with our prayers too. It is not that you are not important, but that in the broad expanse of life, the outcome of the game is not that high on the priority list of the Almighty?

There are some prayers that WE need to offer in order to be honest with God, but that God really doesn't take seriously. Even in the Bible. I know it is there, but do you really think that the God whose face we see in Jesus really took seriously the prayer that happy be the ones that take their enemies children and dash their head against the stones?

Oh I pray God doesn't take those prayers seriously, anymore than Anita takes seriously the notes that Alison would throw down the stairs after as a young girl she would stomp up the stairs made that Anita had said no. We have kept the notes. *"You are the meanest mom in the world!"*

We need to express our feelings to God. The good the bad and the ugly and pray to God that God will sort them out!

We need to pray. We need to pour out the deepest and the most shallow desires of our lives, because that is what friends do, right?

But we need to understand that God is not our celestial Santa. Just because we ask doesn't mean we get, no matter how urgently, so devoutly, so intensely we ask. That is where we find ourselves in a theological dilemma. What then?

This past week I arrived at the office and was standing in the parking lot talking to someone who was driving through. While we were talking a young man walked up, neither of us knew him, but he asked, *"Do you have a toonie that I could use for the bus?"* I just happened to have picked one up as I was leaving the house and said, "Sure!" and gave it to him. We chatted a bit about the direction the bus might go when he said, *"You don't happen to have a granola bar, or something I might eat, do you?"* I had my backpack and said, "This might just be your lucky day!" Because I happened to have 2 in there! With that he went off to wait for the bus, and I came into the office.

About an hour later I heard a pounding on the outside door. I went to check it out and there was this young man. He had discovered that apparently the bus wasn't running

that day. "Could you give me a ride to Wolfville?" he asked. I was in the middle of something, and said no. I couldn't.

That wasn't completely honest. I could have taken him. I just wouldn't.

Where is God when we pray, and nothing happens? Where is God when we pray for a healing that doesn't come? Where is God? What good is God?

That is the issue, isn't it? That is what troubles us when we pray so intently.

My theology professor, Frank Tupper, helped me so much with this. His wife died of breast cancer just a year before I took his class. His book *A Scandalous Providence* is one of the best books on the problem of evil. Frank said over and over again that *God is always doing all that God can do.*⁵ God is always seeking to bring about good in every situation, some redemption, some healing.

But there are times when that is not possible. There are some things that God cannot do, not in this world. I know that is hard to hear. It flies in the face of the omnipotence of God, but may I suggest that I prefer it to the alternative. I prefer a God who can't, to a God who won't.

Frank went on to say that we need to widen our view of God's grace. There are times when God's healing grace is not possible. There are times when a person, a relationship, a situation, is so sick, so damaged, so injured that healing is not possible. **There are times when God's healing grace is not possible, but in those times, God's sustain grace is always available.**

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for you are with me." God is always with you.

Perhaps that is the answer to our question, what should we pray about?

Everything.

Everything, because God is with us, in the times in which we celebrate the best of life, in the times when we are in the valley of deepest shadows. We pray, we talk to God as an act of faith.

In writing about prayer Frederick Buechner says, *"Whatever else it may of may not be, prayer is at least talking to yourself, and that's in itself not always a bad idea. Talk to yourself about your own life, about what you've done and what you've failed to do and about who you are who you wish you were and the people you love are and the people you don't love too. Talk to yourself about what matters most to you, because if you don't, you may forget what matters most to you.*

Even if you don't believe anybody's listening, at least you'll be listening.

*Believe Somebody is listening."*⁶

Thanks be to God.

⁵ E. Frank Tupper. *A Scandalous Providence*. (Mercer University Press:Macon, GA, 1995) 325.

⁶ Frederick Büchner. *Wishful Thinking*. (Harper and Row:New York, 1973) 71.

