

Sermon 6th Sunday after Pentecost, July 12, 2020 Intro to Prayer Part 3: Content

This is Part 3 of a 5-Part series, *An Introduction to Prayer*. You can get Part 1 and 2 on our website or ask the ladies in the church office for a copy. Part 1 was Having confidence in Prayer and Part 2 was on the Power of Prayer. Today, in Part 3, I hope to properly cover the subject of the content of our prayers. What should we pray for? What should be included? Excluded? What does God command us to pray for? What does he forbid? In this sermon I hope to cover some of those things.

An illustration that helps show what good prayer is like is a meal. Not a snack. Not a quick bite. Not a light lunch – but a real, full, complete, Thanksgiving or Christmas type meal. You know what’s on a typical menu for such an occasion: Meat (turkey, ham, roast beef); Something starchy (baked potatoes, twice-baked, mashed, scalloped, or maybe some pasta), A Vegetable or two (green bean casserole, candied carrots, corn); Salad; Rolls; Butter; Water; Wine; Desert (pie, cheesecake, cookies); Coffee. We want our prayers to be like that kind of meal – including everything and lacking nothing. Imagine going to the family get-together and there was no meat. It would seem strange to us and seem incomplete, unless your host is vegetarian, in which case I’m sure you’ve brought your own bucket of KFC or something. So, too with our prayers. We do not want to be missing a main part of the normal content that is to be included in our set of prayers.

Now once we know what content we want to be sure is in our prayers, we can take a DIY approach and put those prayers together and word them as we wish. This is like using your own recipes. Or we can use complete prayers that have been developed over the thousands of years of history of the church. This is like getting Chinese take-out or Pizza where you just have to open it up and enjoy. Hopefully, we’ll take a look at some of these next week as we consider different forms of prayer.

The first thing that is good to included in our prayers is Scripture. In Part 2 I talked about the power of God that prayer draws upon and the power that prayer summons. We know what kinds of power prayer lays hold of because the Scriptures tell us what kinds of power there are for us. Therefore, when we include Scripture in our prayers, we are citing the very source of the truth upon which we base our prayers. When I was blessing those rocks in Maui, I cited Psalm 24, “The earth is the Lords, and everything in it.” Since it says the rocks belong to God and no one else, they surely can receive his blessing. If we need healing, we can cite one of the many accounts where Jesus healed the sick, lame, the leper, and even the dead. Are we traveling? We can say, “Lord, as you accompanied Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem and kept them in safety, so now please go with us on this trip.” You get the idea. The Psalms are a veritable treasure trove of Scriptural passages that can both ignite and fuel all our prayers. For this reason, I hope to do a complete series on how to use the Psalms in daily prayer this fall.

Next, we want to pray for the Spirit. Here’s that passage again about God giving us the Holy Spirit,

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” Luke 11:11-13

Prayer has the power of bringing the Holy Spirit into our lives and Jesus even promises that he will give the Holy Spirit to all who ask him for it. Well...I think he was implying there that we should ask for the Holy Spirit! So, the request for the Holy Spirit is a good part of the content of our prayers. It can make a big difference in our prayer life, as Paul here says,

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. Romans 8:26

When we just don't know what to pray for or how to put our desires into words, the Holy Spirit steps in and helps us out.

Another good part of prayer is asking God to grant us forgiveness. When we are judged by our sins, we are not entitled to anything. So, we need to deal with those sins right off the mark. We want to pray with a clear conscience. That doesn't mean we have done nothing wrong. It means we have been forgiven by God. The psalmist puts it this way,

***The Lord lifts up the humble;
he casts the wicked to the ground. Psalm 147:6***

It is good to come before God in humility, confessing and asking to be forgiven. This is crucial for a vibrant prayer life.

Next, a good prayer session includes praise and thanksgiving. God owes us nothing, yet he showers us with forgiveness and every blessing and salvation. Therefore, we respond in the praise of his name. We look for and give thanks for every good thing he bestows upon us. Well, we can count *everything* - there is too much - so we count what we can and give God thanks for it with a grateful heart. As it says here in Colossians,

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. Colossians 4:2

There are two kinds of people in the world - thankful people and unthankful people - and boy what a difference there is between the two! We don't like to be around unthankful people. They just don't get it. How right it is then for us to be thankful when we go to the Lord in prayer.

Another thing we do not want our conversations with God to be without is coverage of our daily life. This one may be the easiest and most common subject of our prayers, but it is not to be forgotten.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. Philippians 4:6

Here we are taught this way of prayer. "In everything" covers all of life. What we need, what we'd like, what we fear, our struggles, difficulties, pains, and heartbreaks - everything. God is our Father and he wants to hear about it all and help us with it. Besides, when you give

everything to God, there is nothing else to worry about. Everything is in his hands now. There's no better place for them to be.

When we include everything, it may just be natural to especially include all the bad things in our lives. But again, sometimes when we really get thrown off center, it's not so hard to forget to ask God to get us through. Here, Psalm 50 encourages us in this regard,

And call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me. Psalm 50:15

Anybody ever have any trouble in their life? Of course there is trouble! There is always trouble, everywhere. It may be so common we don't even think to include it in our prayers, so let's be sure we do that.

Missions is another subject to include in our prayers. We would all like to see more people in this church and we can pray God bless our evangelism work. It would also be good to add to the number of those in other churches and for new churches to come into being. Jesus says it like this,

Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Matthew 9:38

Again, good ol' St. Paul told the nice folks at the church in Colossae to pray God to prosper the mission effort he was doing at that time. Paul wrote,

At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison. Colossians 4:3

Paul was one of those laborers working out in the harvest. Here he prays his work would indeed produce the harvest intended.

Praying for other people is almost universally understood to be important, and it is important. Perhaps the best thing of any we can do for someone else is pray for them. Who can do more for someone else than the Lord? No one. There was one time when St. Paul and his team faced such difficulties in their missionary work they even despaired of life. Paul wrote,

You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many. 2 Corinthians 1:11

Paul didn't write something like, "Things are a little rough here – it would be nice if you could send a few prayers our way." No! He was quite firm in his insistence that the church in Corinth MUST pray for him and his team. And it is important for us to pray for others. Jesus cares about us and loves us and he makes intercession to the Father on our behalf. There are people we care about and love. It's important to ask God's help for them, too.

I only have two more items on my list that will help us to have all the bases covered. Like the last item, these are also prayers for people. However, these are people you may not

love, like, or even care about. The first group we are to pray for are people in government, and here's the charge:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 1 Timothy 2:1-4

This was written when emperors were worshiped as gods and pagan practices were a natural part of government life and pretty much no one in government was a Christian yet. Still, the command remained – pray for these people. No matter how you feel about a particular president, governor, member of congress, court, or agency, we are given the charge to pray for them. Why? So they do their jobs extremely well and help provide for a peaceful and prosperous society. Because when society is peaceful and prosperous, it's much easier to spread the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, just like it says at the end of this passage. This is really important!

Last but not least on our list of subjects to keep in our prayers is something quite unusual and particularly Christian in nature – prayer for our enemies. We hear it twice from the Lord's own lips:

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Matthew 5:44

Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Luke 6:28

Why pray for these people? Because God loved the world so that he sent his only Son. God's love is for everyone, not just the nice people. The idea here is not that our enemies would be able to continue in their evil, but would be changed/ converted - that they would be rescued from the error that is causing their behavior and be brought into the truth of God's light and have a change of heart and a change of life. Understood this way, I think we all can be nudged a little closer to placing prayers for our enemies on our prayer menus.

Well, there are 8 or 9 areas of content for our prayers. We may well not be at the point where we will have all of them in every prayer we offer. That would be a very good thing. However, it would seem good to cover all these areas at least once a week. I should probably make sure I have all these areas in our main prayer here at church just to be sure we get them all covered. If I do, I hope I don't hear complaints through the elders that the prayers are too long!

Next week I hope to take all these subject areas and show how they can be put together and arranged in ways that give good, useful, and memorable structure and form to prayer.

Until then, the peace of God guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.