

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 1, 2019**

TEACH US TO PRAY (3)

Ephesians 6:18-20

In our reflection on prayer the last two Sundays, we have talked about Charlie Stoltzfus and the sometimes miraculous ways God works when His people pray. We have talked about Anne of Green Gables and Sandra Bullock and their need – *our* need to pray. Last Sunday I shared with you a prayer prayed by a 1st-century Christian named Clement of Rome.

This morning I want to begin with an analogy on prayer that comes from a Norwegian theologian named Ole Hallesby, who compared prayer to demolition mining. Demolition to create mine shafts requires two basic kinds of action. There are long periods of time, he said, “when the deep holes are bored with great effort into the hard rock.” To bore the holes deeply enough into the strategic spots for removing the main body of rock is work that requires patience, steadiness, and a great deal of skill. Once the holes are finished, the “shot” is inserted and connected to a fuse. “To light the fuse and fire the shot,” he said, “is not only easy but also very interesting.... One sees results. Shots resound, and pieces fly in every direction.” He points out that while the more painstaking work takes both skill and patient strength of character, “anyone can light a fuse.”

What in the world does this have to do with prayer? Pastor and author Tim Keller says: “This helpful illustration warns us against praying only “fuse-lighting” prayers, the kind we soon drop if we don’t get immediate results. If we believe in both the power of prayer and in the wisdom of God,” he writes, “we will have a patient prayer life of ‘hole boring.’ Mature believers,” he says, “know that handling the tedium is part of what makes for effective prayers. We must avoid the extremes – of either not asking God for things or thinking we can bend God’s will to ours. We must combine tenacious importunity, a ‘striving with God,’ with deep acceptance of God’s wise will, whatever it is.” (Tim Keller, *Prayer*, 137)

You may not get a kick out of blowing things up. Or maybe you do. But there is something to be said for this view of prayer that includes both hole-boring and fuse-lighting prayers, a perspective on prayer that encompasses both the big picture of God’s purposes and immediate needs, as well as a pervading and prevailing trust in the goodness, wisdom, sovereignty, and sufficiency of God, no matter what we encounter in life.

Last Sunday I mentioned “4 Alls for All Y’All” concerning prayer that we find here in Ephesians 6:18. Let’s look at them together.

1. ON ALL OCCASIONS

First, Paul says, we are to “pray in the Spirit *on all occasions*. To pray “in the Spirit,” as we said last week, is to pray Spirit-directed prayers, to pray under the influence or guidance of the Holy Spirit, so that our prayers reflect and align with the heart and purposes of God.

When are we to pray? “On all occasions.” There is never a time when it is not time to pray. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 urges us to “pray continually” or “without ceasing.” Colossians 4:2 instructs us to “devote (ourselves) to prayer.” There is never a time, never a place, never an occasion in which prayer is not needed.

True, we are more inclined to pray at certain times than others. Most of all (all of us, I hope) pause to pray before every meal. We tend to pray when we find ourselves in “sticky situations,” when we don’t know what to do or we feel helpless. People who don’t pray regularly are more likely to pray when they are facing difficulties, when there is an emergency, when tragedy strikes, when they or someone they love are dealing with a health crisis or some other personal crisis. We may be more likely to pray when we feel confused and need guidance, or when we have a need that is bigger than our resources, or when we feel anxious or afraid.

All of these are good times to pray. All of these are the right time to pray. But they are not the only times to pray. The Bible urges us to pray on all occasions, no matter what is going on in our lives, because there is never a time when we are not standing in the need of prayer. There is never a time when we don’t need God and His grace. Prayer connects us with God. Prayer connects us with our Heavenly Father who loves us, and who invites and welcomes us into His presence on all occasions. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that because of Jesus and what He has done for us, the door to God’s loving presence, to “the throne of grace,” is always open to us. It says: “Since we have such a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin. *Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need*” (Hebrews 4:14-16, *emphasis added*). There is never a time when we are not in need of God’s mercy, grace, wisdom, and help.

God wants you and me to be people of prayer who “pray in the Spirit on all occasions.” Does this mean we do nothing but pray? Of course not. What it means is that prayer is to permeate our lives. Is it wise and helpful to have a daily appointment with God for prayer and Bible reading? Absolutely. But your prayer life is not to be limited to a daily appointment. It is to be an ongoing communion and conversation with God in the midst of the ordinary or not-so-ordinary events of life.

Brother Lawrence, the 17th-century French monk who worked daily in the kitchen of his monastery, wrote about the secret of an ongoing, personal conversation with God in his classic *The Practice of the Presence of God*. You can have a conversation with God, he discovered, while washing dishes or peeling potatoes or scrubbing floors. If he were alive today, Brother Lawrence would probably include such things as mowing the lawn, sitting at your computer, working out at the gym, sitting in traffic, even changing a diaper.

Does this mean that you are to constantly be talking to God? No, because there is more to prayer than just talking. Prayer involves listening, too. I have never heard the voice of God speaking audibly to me. Can it happen? Yes. It happened on a few occasions in the Bible.

And it can still happen today. But whether you hear the voice of God audibly or not, God still speaks. He continues to speak in and through the Bible. He speaks to me – and can speak to you – by bringing to mind what He has said in His Word. He speaks to us not only by reminding us of what He has said but by showing us how to apply His Word in our lives. He speaks to us by impressions He puts in our hearts. He speaks to us by bringing to mind certain people or situations He wants us to pray for, or circumstances in which He wants us to intervene. God still speaks. And we must listen to hear His voice. For listening to God is part of a rich and healthy prayer life.

It has become fashionable in some parts of our culture to criticize or even mock those who express their “thoughts and prayers” for victims of some terrible event, such as a mass shooting or a hurricane. “Thoughts and prayers,” it is said, are of no value. They are just a waste of time and sentiment. What is needed is action – usually political action that corresponds to the political views of those who devalue thoughts of compassion and prayers for God’s comfort and provision in times of loss and grief. It is true that in some cases political action is needed, though it seems to require the wisdom of Solomon (or One greater than Solomon) to know what actions will actually solve the problems created by our sinful bent and the fallenness of the whole creation.

The point I want to make is that “thoughts and prayers” for those who are suffering or in need are always appropriate. We should never fail to pray for others. Sometimes it may be the only thing in our power to do. But when it is possible to do something in addition to offering our thoughts and prayers, it is our Christian duty to do what we can to care for others and to work for a more just, loving, free, and God-honoring society.

Pray in the Spirit “on all occasions.” That is the first “All for All Y’All.”

2. WITH ALL KINDS OF PRAYERS AND REQUESTS

There are different kinds of prayers. As Hallesby said, there are “hole-boring” prayers and there are “fuse-lighting” prayers. Paul identifies several kinds of prayers in 1 Timothy 2:1-2: “I urge, then, first of all” – which is to say, “of first importance” – “that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – (including) kings and those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”

Different kinds of prayers are appropriate at different times in different situations. There is no “one-size-fits-all” prayer. Even the model prayer Jesus taught His disciples – the Lord’s Prayer – is not the only prayer we should ever pray. The Lord’s Prayer shows us the kinds of things for which we should pray. But Jesus did not mean for us to limit our prayers to the words of the Lord’s Prayer.

Peter urges us in 1 Peter 5:7 to “cast all (our) cares” – all our anxiety – “on Him because He cares for (us).” You can bring all your cares to Him. You can lay all your worries and anxieties, all your fears and doubts, at His feet, because He cares for you. Your Heavenly Father cares about you. He is especially fond of you. He loves you with an everlasting love. He will never leave you nor forsake you. You don’t ever need to worry about that. If you

belong to Jesus by faith, if you have received God's saving grace in your life, you are safe and secure in God's arms. He cares for you. And He is at work for your good and His glory in every detail of your life.

In Philippians 4, Paul writes: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (4:6-7).

Here is how it reads in *The Message*: "Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises turn your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life."

I don't know if you're a worrier. I don't know if you tend to be an anxious person, fretting about this or that or what the future may hold. I encourage you to turn your worries and your anxious thoughts into prayers. Whenever you start to worry about something, whenever you feel a wave of anxiety coming over you, stop and pray. Do you know the advice the Fire Department gives in case of a fire? "Stop, drop, and roll." When the heat of the destructive fire of worry or anxiety begins to get to you, stop, drop, and pray. Give your worries and anxieties to God. Let Him handle them for you.

One method of praying "with all kinds of prayers and requests" that you may be familiar with is the ACTS acrostic. Each letter of ACTS stands for a different kind of prayer:

- A is for Adoration. We express our love and adoration for God, and praise God for the qualities and attributes of His character. We acknowledge His worth-ship and give Him the glory due His name.
- C is for Confession. Knowing that God is a merciful and forgiving God, we confess our sins to Him – our sins of commission and our sins of omission; the wrong things we have done and the good things we have failed to do.
- T is for Thanksgiving. We thank God for His mercies and grace to us. We thank Him for His blessings – spiritual, material, and temporal. We give thanks for prayers answered, for needs met, for doors opened, for His blessings in the lives of others.
- S is for supplication. We bring our petitions and requests to Him. We ask Him to supply our needs. We pray for His blessing and provision in the lives of others. No petition is too small. No request is too big. You can take it to the Lord in prayer. As John Newton once wrote:

You are coming to a King;
Large petitions with you bring.
For His grace and power are such.
None can ever ask too much.

3. BE ALERT AND ALWAYS KEEP ON PRAYING

“Always” here means “with all perseverance.” We are always to be on the alert to what God is doing. We are always to be on the alert against the attacks and tricks of Satan. We are always to be clothed in the armor of God. As Jesus told His disciples in Luke 18:1, we should “always pray and not give up.” Which is to say, we are not to get discouraged and lose heart in our praying or in our life as followers of Jesus. Paul describes this persistence or perseverance in prayer in Romans 12:12 as being “faithful in prayer.”

4. FOR ALL THE SAINTS

The fourth “All” is “for all the saints.” The word “saints,” as I’ve pointed out before, simply means “Christians.” Every follower of Jesus is a saint. The “Saints” are not just a football team in New Orleans. Nor is the word “saint” reserved for a special class of Christians. As the New Testament uses the word, all of us who believe in Jesus and have been saved by His grace are “saints.”

We can’t pray for all the saints – for all of God’s people – by name, because we don’t know them all by name. But we can pray for the saints – for Christians – we do know. We can pray for one another. You can take your church directory and pray for every person listed in it or pictured in it by name. You can pray for specific needs or challenges or hardships or opportunities you know about in the lives of your sisters and brothers in Christ.

We can also pray generally for saints we don’t know personally – for Christians and the church in America, and for Christians and churches in other parts of the world. We can pray for Christians in places where believers and the Christian faith are under attack. In places like China. In Iraq and Iran and other Muslim-majority countries. In Europe, where Christianity seems to be dying out in many places. In Africa. In Central and South America. On every continent. And for all the saints who serve as missionaries – ambassadors of Jesus Christ – in all those places. We can pray for the number of saints – the number of Christian disciples – to increase in every place and every nation, including our own nation and our own community.

There you have it: The “4 Alls of Prayer for All Y’all.”

1. On all occasions.
2. With all kinds of prayers and requests.
3. With all perseverance.
4. For all the saints.

A person can live without food for about 40 days. You can go about 3 days without water. But you can go only a matter of seconds, or minutes, without air. If you can’t breathe, you will die.

Prayer, says James Emery White, is “the breath of spiritual life.” To pray, said Evelyn Underhill, is to “breathe the air of eternity.”

Isn't it amazing that God permits us to breathe the air of eternity and to commune with Him at His throne of grace while we are here on earth? This is a gift, a blessing, we should never reject or neglect.

Make prayer a priority in your life. Make prayer for others a priority in your ministry. In the natural desire for "fuse-lighting" prayers, let us not neglect the important work of "hole-boring" prayers.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.