

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 18, 2020**

**WHATEVER YOU DO (13):
PRAYER AND MORE**

Colossians 4:2-6

Whatever you do, devote yourselves – devote *yourself* – to prayer. Even though the words “whatever you do” don’t appear in this particular verse we just read (Colossians 4:2), I think it is fair to say it is assumed by the apostle Paul. In the English Standard Version (ESV), this verse reads: “Continue steadfastly in prayer” In *The Message*, it says simply: “Pray diligently” Whatever you do, make prayer a non-negotiable priority in your life.

If we’re honest about it, we have to admit – many of us – that we have a hard time with prayer. It is not the non-negotiable priority we know it should be in our lives. Sometimes, maybe often, we find it a struggle to pray. We know prayer is important. From Genesis to Revelation, the call to prayer, the necessity and privilege of prayer, and real-life examples of prayer pervade the Bible. When the disciples of Jesus came to Him in Luke 11 and said: “Lord, teach us to pray,” Jesus did not say: “*If* you pray, pray like this.” No. He said: “*When* you pray ...” (Luke 11:1-2), just as He said in Matthew 6 to the crowd that had gathered to hear the Sermon on the Mount (6:5-13). For Jesus, prayer was not an *if*; it was a *when*.

Many of us, though, pay more lip-service to prayer and its importance than we spend time actually praying. It is true for me more often than I wish.

I suppose there are a number of reasons why we have trouble devoting ourselves to prayer. For one, sometimes prayer is hard work. It is hard work because we sometimes feel like our words are totally inadequate, and we lack the wisdom to know just how to pray for a particular person or a particular situation. If you ever feel this way, as I sometimes do, perhaps these words from Max Lucado will speak to your heart: “Our prayers may be awkward. Our attempts may be feeble. But since the power of prayer is in the One who hears it and not in the one who says it, our prayers do make a difference” (crosswalk.com).

Prayer can be hard work because we are so easily distracted. You may find it hard to concentrate when you try to pray. If so, it may be helpful to use a prayer notebook or journal, and write down the people and situations for which you want to pray. You may even find it helpful to write out your prayers.

Noise may be a distraction for you. You may be distracted by the wants or needs of another person, whether child, spouse, or parent. You may be distracted by social media, by your attachment to technology. You may be in a season of life in which it is difficult or even impossible to set aside a block of time for uninterrupted personal prayer. If that is true for you, you can still seize moments in your day here and there to communicate with God in prayer. But you – *we* – must be intentional about it. Or those sizeable moments will disappear.

Prayer can be hard work, too, because the devil, the archenemy of our souls, does not want us to pray. He does not want us to enjoy communion with God. The devil knows there is power in prayer. He knows that God wants us to devote ourselves to prayer, because prayer is one of the tools God uses to form the character of Christ in us, and prayer is one of the means God uses to carry out His purposes in the world. So the devil will do whatever he can to distract you or to try to delude you into thinking that prayer is simply a waste of your time. Or that you have far more important things to do.

Peter Kreeft, in his book *Prayer for Beginners*, observes that “some say that prayer ... is an unaffordable luxury today, or an irresponsible withdrawal from the pressing public problems of our poor, hurting world. I say just the opposite; that *nothing*, nothing is more relevant and responsible; that nothing else can ever cure our sick world except saints, and saints are never made except through prayer.” (By *saints* I think Kreeft means fully committed followers of Jesus who model the life and teachings and values of Jesus in our lives.)

He continues: “Nothing but saints” (or the Holy Spirit working in and through God’s people) “can save our world because the deepest root of all the world’s diseases is sin, and saints are the antibodies that fight sin.” Like someone who has had COVID-19 and recovered from it now has antibodies to fight against the virus, all of us who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus shed on the cross for us – all of us whose sins have been fully forgiven by God, who have been saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone – now have spiritual antibodies to fight against sin in all its forms.

Kreeft goes on: “Nothing but prayer can make saints because (no one) but God can make saints, and we meet God in prayer. Prayer,” he says, “is the hospital for souls where we meet Doctor God” (Kreeft, *Prayer for Beginners*, 14).

It is through regular communion with God – through the reading of God’s Word and prayer – that we grow to know God, love Him, and become more like Him.

To this end, Paul says to the Colossians (and to us): “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful” (4:2). The word Paul uses here, *proskarterein*, means “continue steadfast” or “to persevere.” It is the same word Paul uses in Romans 12:12, where he says: “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful” – devoted, steadfast – “in prayer.”

Proskarterein is used several times in the Book of Acts to highlight the primacy of prayer in the life of the New Testament church. In Acts 1, the first thing the followers of Jesus did after His ascension into heaven was to hold a prayer meeting. As Luke describes it in Acts 1:14, “(The disciples) all joined together constantly in prayer.” Constantly. Steadfastly. Devotedly.

Likewise, when the Holy Spirit came in power upon the followers of Jesus on the Day of Pentecost and 3,000 new believers were added to the church, Luke says in Acts 2:42 that “they” – all the believers – “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Verse 46 says: “Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts” for worship and prayer. A little later, when complaints arose over discrimination in the way food was being distributed to widows in the fellowship, the

leaders of the church in Jerusalem responded by creating the first Board of Deacons to oversee the ministry of caring, so the apostles could continue their devotion to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:1-4).

In devoting ourselves to prayer, Paul says we are to keep watch (*gregorountes*) and to do it with thanksgiving (*eucharistia*). What he means is that we are to stay alert, to keep our eyes open to *what* God is doing, *where* He is at work in the church and the world, and *how* He is at work in our own lives and in the lives of people around us, so that we may join the Lord in what He is doing. And we are to give thanks to God for all the ways, big and small, that we see Him at work. God does not always broadcast what He is up to. If you're not paying attention, you can miss the ways God is at work, the things He is doing, to bring about change and healing and hope.

Watchfulness and thankfulness are two hallmarks in the life of someone who is steadfast in prayer. How is it in your life? Are you paying attention to what God is doing? Are the eyes of your heart open to see where and how God is at work? Is thanksgiving a central part of your prayer life? Listen to what the Bible says about the importance of thankfulness:

Colossians 2:6-7: "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and" – what? – "overflowing with thankfulness (*eucharistia*)."

Ephesians 5:4: "(Among you) there should be no obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place (in God's family), but rather thanksgiving (*eucharistia*)." As it says in *The Message*, "That kind of talk doesn't fit our style. Thanksgiving is our dialect." Let's make sure we speak our dialect. Especially now. But always.

Philippians 4:6: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving (*eucharistia*), present your requests to God." Even as we bring our prayers of petitions for ourselves and our intercessions for others to the Lord in prayer, we are to have an attitude of gratitude, to give thanks to God for prayers answered, and for answers yet to come.

1 Timothy 2:1-3: "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving (*eucharistia*) be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior...."

And then there is this, as we have already seen in Colossians 3:17: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks (the verb *eucharisteo*) to God the Father through Him." "Whatever you do," of course, includes prayer.

I love the writings of Charles Spurgeon, especially his *Morning and Evening* devotional I have used for many years. Spurgeon, a Reformed Baptist who died in 1892, was the most acclaimed preacher of his day, and his church, the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, was the largest independent congregation in the world. He was a megachurch pastor before

“megachurch” was even a thing, preaching every Sunday to a congregation of more than 5,000. His sermons were published every week in the London *Times* and – get this! – the New York *Times*, and were translated into more than 20 languages.

I want to share with you one entry from *Morning and Evening* on the subject of prayer. I read this to the elders at the Session meeting on Thursday evening, and I want you to hear it, too. The Bible text is Lamentations 3:41, which says: “Let us lift our hearts and hands to God in heaven.” Here is what Spurgeon says:

“The act of prayer teaches us our unworthiness, which is a very beneficial lesson for such proud beings as we are. If God gave us favors without requiring us to pray for them, we would never know how poor we are. But true prayer is an inventory of wants, a catalog of necessities, a revelation of hidden poverty. While it is an application to divine wealth, it is a confession of human emptiness.

“The most healthy state of a Christian is to always be empty of self and constantly depending on the Lord for supply; to always be poor in self and rich in Jesus; to be weak as a butterfly personally, but mighty through God to do great things. That is the value of prayer: while it adores God, it lays His creatures where we should be – in the very dust.

“Apart from the answers it brings, prayer in itself is a great benefit to believers. As daily exercise gives a runner strength for the race, we acquire energy for the great race of life by the sacred labor of prayer. Prayer grooms the wings of God’s young eagles, so they might soar above the clouds. Prayer prepares God’s warriors, sending them out to spiritual combat with their nerves steadied and their muscles firm.

“... Prayer surrounds human weakness with divine strength, turns human folly into heavenly wisdom, and gives troubled mortals the peace of God. We don’t know what prayer can’t do!

“Great God, we thank You for prayer, a powerful proof of Your marvelous lovingkindness. Help us to use it properly today!”

(Charles Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, Morning of October 11)

And every day.

The truth is that, to one degree or another, we don’t know what prayer can’t do, because we have not fully developed our prayer muscle. We have not fully devoted ourselves to prayer. We have left many prayers un-prayed.

Along with Charles Spurgeon, another of my spiritual heroes is Jonathan Edwards, the 18th-century pastor-theologian of the First Great Awakening. Edwards once said: “There is no way that Christians, in a private capacity, can do so much to promote the work of God and advance the kingdom of Christ as by prayer” (Quoted by Adam Stadtmiller, “The Prayer-Centered Church,” www.christianitytoday.com). Edwards did not mean that prayer is the *only* strategy or weapon at our disposal in carrying out our mission as God’s people in this world. Not at

all. It is not the only thing God wants us to do. But Edwards did mean that we must not underestimate the practical importance of prayer, and that we should demonstrate its priority by doing it as a matter of first importance.

As we have already noted, after the ascension of Jesus, when His first followers returned to Jerusalem to regroup, their first act was to – what? -- to pray (Acts 1:14). “Having come to the end of themselves,” says Adam Stadtmiller, “they prayed.” As should we. Individually. Personally. And together. In our small groups and Sunday School classes and ministry teams. As a church. As the body of Christ.

Prayer was not the only thing the first Christians did, as the rest of the Book of Acts and the whole of the New Testament make clear. But prayer was where they started. And prayer would remain a central, integral, essential part of their relationship with God, and their mission to spread the gospel and advance the kingdom of God in the world.

I gave this message the title “Whatever You Do: Prayer and More.” We will talk about the “more” in this passage next Sunday.

I don’t want to leave you today with a load of guilt or a feeling of failure because your prayer life is not what you think – or know – it should be. That’s not the point of this message. I do want to urge you, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to start where you are right now in your prayer life and intentionally seek to “devote yourself to prayer, being watchful and thankful.”

If you don’t have a regular time of prayer each day, start now. Set aside 5 minutes a day. Come prepared with a prayer list, if that will help you. If you forget or miss out on your prayer time, don’t go to bed at night until you have taken time to pray. Over time, as you grow in your relationship with God in prayer, I think you will discover that maybe you need more than 5 minutes each day.

If your prayer life is in a rut of some sort, take whatever steps are necessary to get out of the rut. Change up your prayer routine. Go for prayer walks. Pray with your Bible open. Use hymns or worship songs as expressions of prayer.

If you’re struggling with consistency in your prayers, ask one of your brothers or sisters in Christ in our church family to pray for you, or maybe to pray with you. To help you be accountable in your praying.

One more thing: As of today it is 16 days until Election Day. Voting in the 2020 elections is already underway. But Election Day itself is just 16 days from now, on November 3. Will you join me, starting today, to pray for our country and the elections each day for the next 16 days, at least until Election Day, and maybe beyond, because it is very possible that the outcome of the Presidential election and other elections of local, state, and national interest may not be settled by the night of November 3? Will you pray as the Lord leads you for our country to come through this election without chaos or violence or attempts to fraudulently affect the outcome? Will you devote yourself to pray for the election of leaders who will seek and serve

God's good purposes for our nation? Will you make this a priority to pray for the next 16 days?

Whatever you do, dear church, devote yourselves to prayer. Pray diligently. Pray faithfully. Pray with your eyes open to what God is doing. Pray with thanksgiving.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.