

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 25, 2020

**WHATEVER YOU DO (14):
PRAYER AND MORE**

Colossians 4:2-6

Look at the two verses that bookend this passage in the context of Paul's theme phrase "Whatever you do." Verse 2: Whatever you do, "devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful." And verse 6: Whatever you do, "let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Has there ever been a time when there was a greater, more urgent need for prayer than today? Or when there was a greater need for grace in our discourse, both public and private?

You may point to other moments in history when prayer was more urgently needed. I recall two dear former members of our church family, Bill and Aline Dennis, both in heaven now, who were married on June 3, 1944, just three days before the D-Day invasion of Normandy during World War 2, telling me how fervently they prayed on their honeymoon for the success of the invasion. Throughout history there have been other moments when the urgency of prayer was off the charts.

Is there ever really a time when we do not need to pray? Is there ever really a time when it is not time to pray? As someone has said: "If you only pray when you're in trouble, you're in trouble" (Anonymous). Do you know people who only pray when they're in trouble? Some of their troubles may be due to the fact that they only pray when they think they're in trouble.

Charles Spurgeon, in *Morning and Evening*, reminds us that "in every case, in any plight, prayer is the never-failing resort of the Christian.... (It) is an open door that no one can shut. (Enemies) might surround you on every side, but the way up is always open.... Prayer," he continues, "is never out of season; its goods are precious in summer and in wintertime. Prayer gains heaven's audience in the dead of night, in the heat of the day, in the cool of the evening. In every condition – whether poverty, sickness, obscurity, slander, or doubt – your covenant God will welcome your prayer and answer it from His holy place. And prayer is never futile. True prayer is always true power. You may not always get what you ask, but you will always have your real needs supplied. When God does not answer His children according to the letter, He does answer according to the spirit. If you ask for (a piece of bread), will you be angry if He gives you (a gourmet meal)? If you seek bodily health, should you complain if He instead uses your sickness to heal your spiritual maladies? Isn't it better to have the cross sanctified than removed?" (*Morning and Evening*, November 3 Evening).

Never out of season. Never futile. Never. Whether our problems seem impossibly overwhelming or insignificantly small. Nothing is too small, and nothing is too big for God. Not COVID-19. Not the 2020 elections or the political and social unrest that plagues our nation. Not the problems we or our families are dealing with.

Prayer may not be the only thing God wants us to do in these or any circumstances. But it is the first thing to do. As Paul says: “Whatever you do ... devote yourselves to prayer” (Colossians 3:17; 4:2). Whatever you do.

Prayer, of course, takes different forms in different situations. Anne Lamott wrote a book you may have heard of called *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. She is right: These are “three essential prayers,” three ways any of us can and should cry out to God. We are always in need of God’s help. Always. Usually we are in greater need of God’s grace and help than we realize. In addition, there is always something for which we can and should say thanks to God, for “every good and perfect gift” comes to us from our Heavenly Father (James 1:17). And we should constantly be wow-ed by God. We should be continually amazed by His grace, mercy, and love, by His awesome power and magnificent beauty seen in creation. But there is more to prayer than *Help, Thanks, (and) Wow*.

Some of you have probably read Catherine Marshall’s classic called *Adventures in Prayer*, in which she identifies eight different types of prayer. Among them are:

- Prayer Is Asking (The Asking Prayer)
- The Prayer of Helplessness
- The Waiting Prayer
- The Prayer of Relinquishment
- Prayer in Secret
- The Prayer of Joyous Blessing

If you’re looking for a book to jump-start or enrich your prayer life, *Adventures in Prayer* may be a good place to start. Marshall acknowledges that there is more to prayer than the specific categories she has written about. Prayers of adoration and praise, prayers of repentance and confession, prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of commitment, even, as she says, “simply the lifting of the human heart in silent communion with the Lover of our souls” (*Adventures in Prayer*, 2) – all of these are types of prayer our Heavenly Father invites us to pray.

Your sincere, heartfelt prayers are not a bother to God. God is not annoyed by your prayers. Prayer connects us with a God who loves us. Prayer connects us in relationship with the true and living God. The Bible reminds us that through Jesus, we may come with boldness, confidence, and humility to the throne of grace – the throne of *God* – in prayer, there to receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

Whatever you do, dear church, do not neglect the gift and privilege of prayer. Whatever you do, do not give up on prayer. Whatever you do, don’t stop praying. Don’t give up praying for the world. Don’t give up praying for America. Don’t stop praying for our church, for its health and its witness in this community. Don’t stop praying for revival in the church and in our culture. Don’t stop praying for a new great awakening in which millions of unbelievers come to faith in the Lord Jesus. Don’t give up praying for the prodigal(s) in your family to come to their senses and to come back home to Jesus. Don’t give up praying for the President. And for whomever the next President will be. Don’t give up praying for the sick, the hurting,

the poor, the brokenhearted, the bereaved, the discouraged, the depressed, the lonely, the elderly. Don't give up on prayer. Whatever you do, devote yourselves to prayer, keeping your eyes open to what God is doing and, as it says in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, giving thanks to Him in all circumstances.

The other bookend is verse 6, though maybe it is better to include verse 5 as well: Whatever you do, Paul says, "be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

If ever there was a need for Christians to be wise in the way we act toward outsiders (unbelievers, skeptics, and all who are opposed to the way of Jesus), it is now. If ever there was a need for us to exercise and demonstrate grace in the way we speak and how we treat both outsiders and insiders, it is now. If ever there was a need for wisdom and grace in the church, our nation, and the world, it is now.

Anger is one of the defining characteristics of our time. Rage is all the rage of our age. The world of Twitter, FaceBook, and other social media make it easy to be mean and demeaning toward others. It is easy, in the social media age, to distort the truth, to believe the worst about someone, and to pronounce judgment on this candidate or that, or, more broadly, on anyone and everyone who disagrees with our particular viewpoint on the election or some other issue.

May I gently urge you all to be careful what you post and how you speak about political candidates and their supporters? May I urge you to remember that our first allegiance is to Jesus Christ, not to a particular candidate or party? May I urge you not to let your political point of view take precedence over your identity as a follower of Jesus? May I urge you not to malign others, including sisters and brothers in Christ, who disagree with you? May I urge you to consider how your social media posts reflect on your witness to the Lord Jesus and may influence how others think of Him? May I urge you not to fall into the trap of believing that the salvation of America depends on who wins the election? Neither Donald Trump nor Joe Biden is our Savior. There is only one who can save. His name is Jesus.

What we need today is less anger, less vituperativeness, less bitterness, less divisiveness, less confrontation, less judgmentalism, and more grace. Listen to the wisdom of Proverbs 15:1: "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." In *The Message* it says: "A gentle response defuses anger, but a sharp tongue kindles a temper-fire."

James warns of the danger of the tongue. It is like "a fire," he says, "a world of evil among the parts of the body ... corrupt(ing) the whole body" and "set(ting) the whole course of (your) life on fire" (James 3:6). *The Message* says: "By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony into chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell." Do you hear that? By your speech, you can ruin someone's reputation. If you aren't careful, your speech can turn people away from Jesus. If James were writing today, I think he would warn us of the dangers of social media and how often it is used to tear people down, not build them up in faith and life.

What the world needs, and what Jesus asks of us, is more grace and less anger. As God is gracious in His dealings with us, so we are to exhibit grace in both our conversation and our conduct, our speech and actions. As recipients of God's grace, which, I hope you know, comes free of charge to people like us who don't deserve it and never will, we are to be conduits of God's grace to others. Jesus embodied grace in His life. He was "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). You and I are to be like Him. In 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul says: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich." You and I are to be like Him in our relationships with others. You and I are to look out for the best interests of others (Philippians 2:4). That is what grace is about.

Being gracious means you never seek to embarrass or humiliate another person. Being gracious means you appreciate and affirm the contributions of others. You don't take credit for what others do. Nor do you take their efforts for granted. Being gracious means you use words to bless, not to curse or condemn. Being gracious means that you sprinkle your conversation with "salt." We use salt mainly as a seasoning for food, but in the 1st century its primary use was as a preservative to prevent meat from spoiling so quickly. Like salt, followers of Jesus are to preserve and spread the message of the gospel and the transforming power of God's grace (Matthew 5:13). Being gracious means you don't hold grudges against those who have hurt you. Being gracious means you are quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, as it says in James 1:19. Being gracious means you enter into the sufferings and joys of others. You rejoice with those who rejoice and you mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:15). It means you live in harmony with one another (NIV) and you make friends with nobodies (*MSG*) (Romans 12:16). Being gracious means you don't say everything on your mind. Some thoughts are best left unexpressed. Being gracious means you don't let any unwholesome, ungodly, untrue, or unloving talk come out of your mouth, from your phone or other device. It means you don't put others down. It means you don't grieve the Holy Spirit by the things you say or post. It means saying no to all forms of bitterness, rage, anger, slander, and hate. It means being kind, compassionate, and forgiving toward others, both insiders (brothers and sisters in the faith) and outsiders who don't yet know Jesus in His saving power and love (Ephesians 4:29-32).

Maybe you and I can't fix all the things we think are wrong with social media and the way some people express themselves and their viewpoints on it. But we can, with God's help, make sure that what we communicate is gracious and loving and true.

Whatever you do, dearly beloved, pray. Whatever you do, devote yourself to prayer. Whatever you do, don't give up on prayer.

Whatever you do, be gracious. Whatever you do, let your conversation be always – *always and in all ways* – full of grace, seasoned with the preservative power of the gospel, so that you may know how to speak to everyone and so that the grace and glory of God will be exhibited in your life.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.