

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *“Pray as You Can”*

SERIES: *The Wonder and Mystery of Prayer*

SCRIPTURES: *Philippians 4:6-7*

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**Credit to the Tyler Staton, author of “Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools*"*

Good morning everyone, as we begin I'd like to open up with a brief word of prayer.

*Pray *Slight pause after prayer concludes**

Did you all realize what we just did? It was incredible. It doesn't feel like it should be possible... yet it is. We just talked to our Creator. The Lord Almighty.

Let that resonate in your mind. Because that is CRAZY! We called out, and He listened. Wow... it's just amazing.

But you know, we are not the only ones who took time to pray today. All around the world there are other Christians gathered together praying, perhaps reciting the Lord's Prayer.

There are Catholics who have recited their poetic prayers of the historic saints. There are Jews visiting Jerusalem's Wailing Wall, writing down their pleas to God on pieces of paper and shoving them into the cracks.



And somewhere, there's a convinced atheist stuck in a hospital waiting room with his head in his hands...Muttering words of desperation to a God he doesn't even believe is there to listen.

The fact of the matter is that Prayer is a major part of our lives. So much so that according to the reliable Gallup Research, they discovered more Americans will pray in a given week than they will exercise, drive a car, or even go to work.

That may seem a bit shocking to you as there's been a steady decline in the amount of people who attend Church regularly throughout America, but prayer is still a key part of our lives...It's almost as if prayer is this instinctive part of who we are as humans, as if it's part of our nature.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel actually explained it like this, **"Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living."**

It's like we can't help ourselves, we HAVE to pray. And why?

Because it's prayer that allows you to ask questions like a young child even in your old age.

It's prayer that allows to you shout your questions and frustrations in an angry tirade.

It's prayer that allows you to be at your most vulnerable confessing your past mistakes.

It's prayer that allows you to feel the loved, completely and fully loved, regardless of past mistakes.

And yet despite all of that... a lot of people, even Christians who are the most cemented in their faith, find little in prayer. Prayer is viewed as boring, some obligatory tradition we have to keep up, or even just confusing.

That's why our goal for the next 3 weeks is to dive into... **The Wonder and Mystery of Prayer.**

I think we can all agree that there are a lot of questions when it comes to prayer! Questions such as...

“Why does God sometimes answer my prayers but only after a LONG, LONG time of asking? If the answer was yes, why wait?”

“If God is all-powerful, that means He can accomplish anything He wants whenever He wants! So why does He need me to ask?”

“How am I even supposed to pray? I see and hear other people making beautiful poetry on the spot, but I can’t do that, so how can I pray?”

Like I said, we have A LOT of questions about prayer. So let’s start trying to answer some of them. Before I go any further, I do want to give credit to Tyler Staton and his book, *Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools*, for the inspiration behind this sermon series. It’s a great read that I’d highly recommend!

Alright, so where should we begin as we dive into this beautiful, wonderful, and mysterious world of prayer?

There’s certainly no shortage of Scripture passages throughout the Old and New Testament that teach us about prayer, but I’d personally like to begin with a passage found in Philippians 4:6-7,

6 Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. 7 Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

That’s beautiful.

Now, to give some context, Paul is writing these words from a Roman prison to members of the Philippian Church who are terrified for their lives. Emperor Nero of the Roman Empire is on a mission to exterminate all Christians, and the Philippians don’t know what’s about to happen next.

In their constant state of anxiety, Paul simply says... **“Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything.”**

Just as these words applied to those Philippian Christians nearly 2,000 years ago, I think it's safe to say we need to be hearing these same words right now in 2024. Whether young or old, I am constantly hearing from folks about their battles with anxiety, stress, and worry.

And here in the heart of Philippians, we are given an answer to combat that! In a world of crippling anxiety, we are given instructions to help achieve true peace. A peace that according to Paul, "exceeds anything we can understand." And one of the key parts to achieve that kind of peace... is prayer.

But the question is... do we actually obey these words? Do we even *believe* these words? Like can it really be that easy?

It's like when my wife, Lexie, told me she had some house project ideas for us to work on... When I heard that, it was like a wave of fear just came over me... "OH NO. WHAT IS IT THIS TIME? Is it gonna be putting in new flooring? Redoing the bathroom? Oh no....."

And then she proceeded to say... "Yeah, I was thinking of changing the kitchen curtains. Wait, Really? Is that it? Is it really that easy? I couldn't believe it, but it was true!

Now, if part of the answer to exchange anxiety for peace is by praying, then that raises the question...

I. What Stops Us from Praying?

What is stopping us from achieving that peace? Because we all crave peace, we want to experience that "peace that exceeds our understanding"... so what is stopping us from doing so? I think many people would have a similar answer to this...

We are too busy. There's work, family activities, kids' sporting events to go to, house projects to complete (more complex than just hanging up curtains!), and even volunteering at church!

It's actually somewhat comical to think about this because back in 1967 a subcommittee of the US Senate was looking at how technology was helping to save so much time in people's lives. As a result, they determined that by 1985 the average American would only have to work 22-hours a week for just 27 weeks out of the year. I don't think they quite got that one right...

However, despite our lives still being occupied with so many things, I don't think that's the reason as to why we don't pray. We still manage to find time to scroll endlessly on social media. We find time to watch sports, read fun books, play games, binge watch TV shows on Netflix...

Yes, the reason we don't pray isn't simply because we are too busy... Rather, I think it's that prayer comes with plenty of reasons to feel anxious and unsure. As Tyler Staton put it,

“Prayer itself makes us anxious because it uncovers fears we can ignore as long as we don't engage deeply, thoughtfully, and vulnerably with God.”

So, let's talk about the “Fears” that are associated with prayer. The first being...

A. The Fear of Feeling Naïve

Being perceived as naïve seems to be one of the greatest “social sins” a person can commit. We like people to think that we know it all. That's why when I go to Lowe's I will pretend that I know exactly where to find what I'm looking for, even if I'm totally clueless. It reminds me of a hilarious video I saw awhile back...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEQt6fJ7NRU>

The fear in his eyes of being perceived as naïve... It's hilarious in this video, but it's so true! And when it comes to prayer, there is often fear of being perceived as naïve. And why?

Because prayer is not something that can simply be “mastered”... No, because to pray is to act in submission to God. To pray is letting down your guard to let God in. To pray is to embrace humility, our theme for this year.

To pray is to risk being naïve, risk believing, to risk trusting someone who you feel might let you down. And in our world, we've been taught to avoid all of that. We've been taught to pretend like we have it all and know it all... so what happens? We avoid prayer.

But we also avoid prayer due to...

B. The Fear of Silence

If you're anything like me, you love background noise. Anytime I'm working in my office, I typically have music playing. When I sleep I have a white noise machine. While driving I will play music or listen to a podcast... I love noise.

But the thing about prayer is that sometimes it means you need to risk the possibility of silence...

Dallas Willard said it like this, **“Silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life... and in that quiet, what if there turns out to be very little to ‘just us and God’?”**

Our Sunday morning worship gatherings are full of noise. There's music, sermons, and announcements. Afterwards there's conversations, cookies, and coffee...

But what if you removed all of that, you striped away all the noise... and now all of sudden you're left with just “me and God”? Where now you are facing the God you've just spent all that time singing and learning about and you're left to wonder, “Is there really anything here? What if I discover there's actually not much to ‘me and God’?”

To avoid that reality we stay in our normal habits of noise. Avoiding true times of prayer due to the fear of what we could discover.

We fear the silence... And so we avoid prayer. However, there's one other thing that holds us back from praying, and that is...

C. The Fear of “Doing it Wrong”

I love the way Staton explain it because it cracked me up,
“Some of us are kept from praying because we listen to everyone else’s prayers and it makes us feel like we’re next up after Winston Churchill in high school speech class.”

A few month ago during our Student Ministries Weekend Retreat I was staying as one of the leaders in the Middle School Boys cabin. We had just turned off the lights to get to sleep for the night, but they were still amped up. They were sharing jokes and funny stories, and it was good fun. Until the clock is 12:30 AM and I was ready to sleep!!

After giving a few warnings telling them to quiet down and start sleeping I finally threatened them with the scariest punishment imaginable... **“THE NEXT PERSON WHO SPEAKS WILL HAVE TO SAY THE PRAYER IN FRONT OF THE WHOLE GROUP TOMORROW MORNING DURING BREAKFAST.”**

Immediate silence. 😊 ...But why is that? Why was that such a “scary punishment”? I think it’s because sometimes we are scared of not sounding eloquent enough. We’re not confident in how we pray, or we’re not comfortable with how we pray.

Even the disciples of Jesus felt this way. They would have been praying their whole lives and yet they still felt the need to say to Jesus,

“Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” (Luke 11:1)

Simply put, we don’t want to make a fool of ourselves. We don’t want others to judge how we pray and as a result, we just skip praying all together.

So yes, we’re scared of feeling naïve, we’re scared of silence, we’re scared of praying incorrectly... With all of these different fears, that now presents the question of...

II. Why Pray?

Why should we pray? Why should we even *want* to pray if it’s going to cause all of these different fears?

I have 3 points to tell you why. First, pray...

A. Because We're Overwhelmed

As we talked about earlier, one of the “social sins” of society is being naïve, and **in our Post-Enlightenment world we have embraced skepticism and thrown belief to the side in order to avoid naivety.**

As a result of this, we are growing up in a world that is pushing us to not have belief in God or even have trust in one another. We are told that you are the only one who can guide yourself, you can only trust yourself. That as long as you can be enough for yourself, that's all that matters...

And what has that mindset produced? It's caused us all to feel overwhelmed.

In the midst of his great Sermon on the Mount Jesus said these incredibly wise words found in Matthew 7,

16 You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 20 Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions. (Matthew 7:16, 20)

So what has the “fruit” of our world shown about us? It shows that we are drastically, constantly, and emphatically overwhelmed.

I'm not sure about you, but I feel that I constantly hear people talk about how overwhelming their lives are. Even the good and positive things are described as overwhelming,

“I love my job, but it can be so overwhelming sometimes.”

“I love having my kids play sports, but the schedule is so overwhelming.”

“I love volunteering at the animal shelter, but it can be so overwhelming.”

In this determination to avoid becoming naïve we are simply overwhelming ourselves to show that we can handle it on our own. But we don't have to face it alone!!

The fact of the matter is that these overwhelmed feelings should be pushing us into prayer. But not with these “safe” sounding and calculated prayers, no. We should be coming to God in the most raw and purest form of prayer. Letting down our walls and expressing how we truly feel.

It is when we put aside that fear of naivety that we will start to, “[experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand.](#)” That’s why we pray. But we also pray...

B. Because Trust Comes Before Faith

As we discussed earlier, we fear silence, so we constantly surround ourselves with noise. And what will calm that fear isn’t necessarily faith, but it’s trust.

Now that may sound a little odd, so allow me to explain. The author of Hebrews explains faith like this,

[1 Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see.](#)

In other words, **Faith is the assurance in what we hope for.**

On the other hand, **Trust is confidence in the character of God.**

You see, before we have faith that God will answer a prayer request, we first need to trust the character of who God is. Because it is trust that allows us to say, “I’m not totally sure what God has in store, but I trust that He is good.”

If we pray without trust, we will hide behind shallow prayers, trying to guard ourselves from the potential silence that God will not answer them.

But when you pray with full trust, you can go to our great God in brutal honesty, knowing that His silence doesn’t match his character. You can face the hard questions,

“God, why didn’t you heal them of that hideous cancer?”

“God, why can’t my husband and I get pregnant?”

“God, why didn’t I get the job?”

“God where were you? How could you? What were you thinking?”

Jesus himself did this before he was arrested and crucified. Knowing what was about to take place he prayed,

42 “Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.” (Luke 22:42)

Even in times of agony, Jesus reveals that you can perfectly trust in God, trust is the certainty that the listening God hears and cares.

Because of this, you can trust the God who although may not make that suffering immediately go away, you can know that he is bearing that suffering right alongside us. Although the silence may be real at times, we know it’s not forever.

That’s why we pray. But lastly, we also want to pray...

C. Because The Only Way to Get it “Wrong”, Is Trying to Get it “Right”

Yes, one of the fears we have of praying is that we don’t want to do it “incorrectly”. As I mentioned earlier, I think even the disciples of Jesus had this same fear, which is why they asked Jesus the “proper” way to pray.

As Jesus taught his disciples, right the middle of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:11, he says to pray these words...

Give us this day our daily bread.

It’s such a simple request! Go to the Lord in prayer and ask Him to provide for your needs that day. But there’s something more important to what Jesus is saying here. At the root of it, Jesus is encouraging the disciples, and us, to simply TALK to God about the mundane, every day, little things.

My wife, Lexie, is currently visiting her family in Germany, and during this time a part have been messaging or calling each other throughout the day, just sharing the small details.

“Yeah, the light stayed red for at least 15 seconds longer than normal!”

“The cat kept meowing at this bird outside, it was hilarious!”

“Does the garbage disposal always make this noise?”

We simply talk and communicate, sharing anything and everything... That’s what prayer to God should look like!

We fear of not praying the right way because “we don’t talk no good!”

But prayer isn’t about sounding noble and poetic all the time. Prayer is about talking to a friend, a Father, a God who loves us and wants to hear every small detail and request about your day.

And in the words of Roberta Bondi,

“If you are praying, you are already doing it right!”

So yes, I understand that prayer can be scary. Facing the feelings of naivete, of silence, and doing something incorrectly, it’s hard... But the peace we find in Jesus through prayer makes all of those fears seem so insignificant. That’s why we pray.

III. Practice Rather Than Theory

Now, for the last few minutes of this morning’s message I want to present you all with a challenge. As we go on this journey to dive into the wonder and mystery of prayer, I think it’s pretty important that we take time to PRACTICE praying!

When the disciples asked Jesus how to pray, what did Jesus do? Start praying!

“By praying we learn to pray.” – Richard Foster

“If you want a life of prayer, the way to get it is by praying.” – Thomas Merton

So you may be sitting here now wondering, “Okay, well, how am I supposed to pray then?” To answer that, I’d like to quote the late John Chapman,

“Pray as you can, and don’t try to pray as you can’t.”

If you’re someone who constantly zones out and loses focus when trying to pray in your home, then maybe that means going on a walk to pray. Maybe it’s praying while you’re on your commute to work or out running errands. If you can’t concentrate praying in silence, maybe you talk out loud as you pray. Maybe you even write down and journal your prayers.

Pray as you can.

It’s also important to note that sometimes you’ll feel that you can’t pray with full faith, and that’s okay. God isn’t bothered, He wants to hear your doubts. If you are in a period of suffering and phrases of praises and adoration just feels fake and forced, that’s okay, don’t fake it. Pray your complaints, your anger, your confusion.

“May burning coals fall on them, may they be thrown into the fire, into miry pits, never to rise.” (Psalm 140:10)

“I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God.” (Psalm 69:3)

“I pour out before him my complaint; before him I tell my trouble.” (Psalm 142:2)

You may read those and think, “Man, that guy needs help!!” And that guy... was David. The one who defeated Goliath and is even described as “A Man after God’s own heart”... these are just a few examples of his prayers found in the Psalms.

When you read these, let it be an example to you that God is looking for a true, honest relationship with you, it’s not always about having these “well-prepared” speeches. God listens to the rage and despair because when you pray He is listening to his dear child.

C.S. Lewis once said,

“We must lay before Him what is in us, not what ought be in us.”

Pray as you can.

If sitting down and trying to pray for an hour sounds overwhelming, then that's not for you! If you're looking to start a new habit of prayer, maybe just set a timer for 2 minutes. Knowing that the clock will go off in 2 minutes, you can focus solely on that time connecting with God. Then after a week, bump that up to 4 minutes, then 6, then 8, and so on.

Pray as you can.

I can promise you that somewhere along the journey of prayer you will begin to discover the deep love that God has for you. You will begin to discover the wonder and mystery of Prayer.

Trust me, God will take care of the discovery part. That's His job! You just have to show up honestly. And keep showing up, and showing up.

Now, let's show up right now by partaking in this beautiful wonder and mystery by closing in a word of prayer to our Great God.

PRAY