

"Please, God"

13 March 2005

Bible passages:

1 Thessalonians 5:17 (*The Message*)

"Pray all the time."

Philippians 4:6-7a (*The Message*)

"Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape 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."

I'm sure you're heard **ASAP** more than once. Typically, it means "as soon as possible," and when we see or hear that, our stress levels soar and our anxiety increases. In our hurry-up world, it's just one more way to move us faster and propel into the next minute or hour or day. Often reading or hearing **ASAP** can make an already difficult day even more difficult.

I received an email from a former Gardener who has moved away a while ago, and she suggested that we give the letter **ASAP** an entirely new meaning. Her idea was that, instead of "as soon as possible," we might exchange those words with "always say a prayer." I kind of like the idea... "always say a prayer." Actually, "Always say a prayer" is really the heart of one very short Bible passage that we have for today. Our version says "Pray all the time."

Now I don't believe that that little verse is encouraging us to stop and drop to our knees all day long. After all, we can pray at any time and in any place, and there's no rule for what position our bodies are to be in when we pray. I know folks who do their praying while they're driving, and others who pray while walking or exercising. There are some who pray while breathing, and some pray through music..

I really think that every thought, every idea, even every emotion we experience may be a form of prayer. In fact, Victor Hugo once said, "Certain thoughts are prayers. There are moments when, whatever be the attitude of the body, the soul is on its knees." I like that, and I think it's very true. There are lots of moments when we are doing other things that our soul is on its knees.

Well, if we're to pray all the time, what is it we're to be praying for? In his book, *Powerful Prayers*, talk show host Larry King tells about a phone conversation with Rabbi Katsof who asked him if he understood prayer better as a result of all the people he had talked to for the book. King responded by saying that sometimes it's a conversation, and at times a request while at other times it's saying thanks or asking for strength. It could also be putting voice to the desire to be connected with God, with others. He concluded by saying: "But it has to be the heart speaking, not just the mouth." He added that there are times when a prayer is a way

of.

That's a good way to put it, I think, and it really covers virtually all the bases. Dr. Larry Dossey who has written a book on the effects of prayer on our health has named the six top topics that people say they pray for: family, well-being, thanks, forgiveness, emotional strength and personal peace.

There are others who talk about the nature of our prayer life. For instance, Ivan Turgenev said, "Every prayer reduces itself to this: 'Great God, grant that twice two be not four.'" There are plenty of times, I think, when we ask God for the impossible—that 2x2 is not 4. We want things to be different than they appear to be.

Angela Thirkell said this about someone and prayer: "He didn't know exactly what he wanted to pray for, in which he was like most other people. For our real prayer, if we had the wits or the courage to formulate it, would be a general plea for everything to be all right for ever." I think that's the underlying reason that many of us pray—we want everything to be OK forever. Unfortunately, life just doesn't work that way, and some of the things we'd like to avoid really do come our way. What then?

I think that's where the second Bible passage for today can help us. It reads this way: "Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape 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."

If I understand this correctly, and I think it's pretty straightforward, it's saying that we need to state our worries as prayer. Although I believe that God already knows, it helps us to whisper or name our concerns, hurts and needs. It's good to put into words the things we're worried about, things that are anxiety-producing in our lives.

Video with Ross

Remember the words of the Bible passage about "a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down?" When we share with God our concerns, God has a way of working within us to settle us down. That's the promise of prayer. The "answer" may not be exactly what we expect or look for, but I think what the writer of our passage Paul wants us to know is that prayer works. It doesn't magically erase a tragedy that occurs in our lives, but God can work to bring something good out of the tragedy. It doesn't mean that all our problems go away, but we may discover an insight or new idea that helps us tackle our problems. It doesn't necessarily weaken the challenges we meet, but prayer can give us the strength to face whatever challenges or pitfalls we come upon. Prayer can fill us with strength, courage, peace, hope, comfort and so much more.

Can we pray for absolutely anything? I don't see why not, although I don't usually bother God with things I can handle on my own—like finding a parking space. I'm not sure that it's necessary to pray for an A on a test, or for our team to win the game. In fact, you know what Knute Rockne said, don't you? "I've found that prayer works best when you have big

players."

So, then, perhaps the better prayer is "Help me do my best on this test." "Help our team to play well and do its best." We can't forget to do our part and prepare. After all, we're partners with God, and have a role to play in how we live our lives.

What do I pray for? I begin each day with a prayer that begins usually in the same way, thanking God for the day and for the opportunities it brings. I ask God to help me be faithful in the course of the day, faithful as God is always faithful to us. I often lay out people or projects that are on my mind, and ask for guidance and wisdom in dealing with them. One thing I find important to seek is an openness of mind and spirit, because I very often limit possibilities with my limited vision and thinking. Then I pray for specific people—family members, colleagues, friends, Gardeners, picturing them in my mind, trying to send positive energy and thoughts their way. I close my prayer typically the way Rob French does here at The Garden, with "Thank you, God."

I know I've shared with you before something Rachel Remen talks about in her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*. She said that prayer is not a way to get what we want to happen, like the remote control that comes with the TV. She believes that prayer is less about asking for things than it is about letting go of our attachments in some way. That's an interesting way to think about it.

In light of her thoughts, Remen told about something that I've shared with you before. It happened to her one day when she was the patient, lying on an operating table, waiting for anesthesia. She said that one of her surgeons took her hand and asked if she would join him and his operating team in a prayer. She said that she was startled by the request, but she agreed. The doctor gathered the team around the table for a moment of silence, after which he quietly spoke the words to a traditional Native American prayer. The words to that prayer have stayed with me since I first read them, and I think they're good words to think about including in our own prayers. Here's what the doctor said, "May we be helped to do here whatever is most right."

Remen shared that as a result of that prayer, she felt her fears about outcome slipping away. She said that she went under the anesthesia holding on to those few words with a deep sense of peace. She said that, for her, that simple little prayer had a powerful way of embracing life and finding home in any outcome.

Prayer, like faith, is a very personal thing, and we're all different when it comes to our prayer life. It was actually a bit difficult to come up with even a title that worked for today. That's the reason we changed the title three times. The original one was, "God, give me strength." Strength is one of the things we pray for, but not the only one, so I thought we needed to expand it a little. The second title was "God, help!"

Then I read something that Len Sweet wrote in his book *Soul Salsa* that prompted me to suggest changing to our current title "Please, God." He was sharing some of his inner struggles and told how his personal prayer life was dedicated to one thing: getting rid of that one little comma. He said that he wants to get rid of the comma in what he called his and our "Mayday prayer," the kind of prayer we utter when all else fails. He wants to change that prayer for himself into "Please God" without the comma. He says that the removal of that one little comma changes the prayer from a 'What can you do for me?' prayer to a 'How can your purposes be fulfilled in my life?' prayer.

While I suspect we'll all include a lot of what we need and our concerns and fears in our prayers, maybe we will also be able to ask how God can be at work in our lives, how we can live a life pleasing to God.

Would you pray with me, please? God, thank you for this day, and for everyone here. Be at work in our lives, helping us do whatever is most right. And God, help us to live our lives in such a way that your love is clear. Amen.

Video:

Song:

Closing:

James Pike said, "Prayer is a principal means for opening oneself to the power and love of God that is already *there*—in the depths of reality."

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we open ourselves to God's love to work in our hearts and in our world.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.