Message for Trevor for Sept 21

Why and How Should we Pray

Scripture: Philippians 4:6-7

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, 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 your minds in Christ Jesus.

I want to start out today sharing the results of some research studies that looked at prayer and prayer habits in the United States. A 2024 study done by Pew Research found that only 44% of Americans say they pray each day, which is down from 58% in 2007. 23% said they pray weekly or a few times a month, and almost a third of adults said they seldom or never pray. There are two really two main factors that explain this decline. First, the share of Americans who state that they are either agnostic, atheist, or not religiously affiliated has increased by 6 percent. Secondly, the self-reported frequency of prayers has declined in some of the largest religious groups, including Catholics, Evangelical Protestants, and Mainline Protestants. This Pew study also found that only 33% of U.S. adults say prayers before meals and only 19% participate in prayer groups.

Pray is talked about quite a bit, but it isn't really practiced by a majority of people. And yet, for the believer, it remains one of the greatest gifts our Lord has given us outside of salvation. Because of Jesus's sacrifice on the cross, we are given the privilege of being able to communicate directly with our Heavenly Father and bring our requests to him, with Jesus as our mediator and the Holy Spirit as our intercessor or translator when we're not sure how to pray. Romans 8:26-27 tells **26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.**

I heard a story the other day about a man who encountered a bit of trouble while flying his little airplane. He called the control tower and said, "Pilot to tower. I'm 300 miles out from the airport, 600 feet above the ground and I'm out of fuel. I'm descending rapidly,

Please advise. Over". The response came quickly. "Tower to pilot, the dispatcher began, repeat after me. Our Father who art in heaven…" Instead of something we do every day like breathing , eating, walking, and talking, it seems to have become like that little glass covered fire box on the wall that says break in case of emergency

You have all heard it said that there are no atheists in foxholes.

So why don't Christians pray more often?

First of all, some Christians struggle with the need for prayer because they acknowledge that God is omniscient. **If God knows everything, why do we have to pray?** He already knows what we need. They may also think that since God has a good and providential plan for everyone, why bother praying for what we want to happen? God knows our circumstances before we even pray. He is omniscient.

Psalm 115:3 says "But Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases". So sometimes, we don't pray because we don't think it matters.

Secondly, **we may not have a true relationship with God**. Praying is all about communicating with God. Imagine any earthly relationship in which we don't communicate. If we see God as distant or detached and don't have a relationship with Him, we may not speak with Him. But if we recognize God as loving, near, and sovereign, we will desire to talk with Him throughout the day, just as we would with any of our human relationships.

Third, **we may think more highly of ourselves than we should.** We may think we have enough knowledge, energy, and strength to face any challenges with our own power. We often hear messages in our culture saying you can do anything you put your mind to. Now, I'm not saying we shouldn't have strong drive and motivation to succeed, but there are simply things out of our control. It really becomes a source of pride. Before I became a Christian, I often thought that the good things that happened in my life were the outcomes of my own efforts. I followed a HIGHLY unlikely career path going from an accountant to a marketing leader to a general manager to an HR manager to Operational manager to a sales leader to running a leadership consulting business. As I look back at this path now, it is crystal clear that God had a plan for my life and He was equipping me for what He was calling me to do. I am now living out that

plan by serving in His church. But Ministry NEVER entered my mind in MY plan for my life. John 15:5 reminds us that **"Apart from God, we can do nothing**"

Next, **we may think that our prayer requests are inconsequential** when compared to the many problems that others are facing around the world. I remember feeling guilty praying about a job I wanted or a date I wanted to work out or a house I wanted to buy because I thought that there were people around the world with **REAL** problems, like homelessness or hunger or financial distress. Then, one day in prayer, God revealed to me my problem. He said that "you don't understand that I am all powerful and there is no limit to what I can do". So He can hear my prayer about things that seem inconsequential compared to other's problems and **STILL** answer prayers on more significant issues. I was falling into the worldly perspective that resources, specifically time and money, are limited and we have to make tough choices on where we use them. Not so with God! And in addition to knowing that God's power is limitless, I also started to understand that He loves us unconditionally, is both all powerful AND all good, and wants the best for his children.

Next, **we don't PLAN to pray**. We may use the excuse that we don't have the time to spend in prayer on any kind of regular cadence because our lives are too busy. I've often told people that I only need two pieces of evidence to know what's important to you: your checkbook and your calendar. People spend their time and money on what is important to them. So I've always believed that "I don't have time" is really a excuse for "it's just not that important to me". An article in the Wall Street Journal noted that the average internet user spends 68 hours on the internet per month or about 2 hours and 6 minutes per day. So if prayer is important to us, it seems hard to believe that we couldn't find **some** time each day to talk to our Heavenly Father.

Finally, we may not pray because **we are facing very difficult circumstances** or are going through a period of trials that we can't understand. So we are going through a time of spiritual dryness or maybe even spiritual attack. Jan and I have hosted a connection group at our house for 7 years now and during that time, people have faced tough challenges in life, including losing a loved one, having a tough time at work, financial difficulties, relationship issues, etc. So people might just say that really didn't

feel like coming to the meeting or to church on Sunday when facing tough times. But this is when we need prayer and fellowship the most. When we need GOD the most!

So WHY should we pray? (Build slide)

First of all, Because God commands us to.

Our scripture today says *Do not be anxious about anything, but in **every** situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* In the ESV version of the Bible, there are 322 instances of the word "prayer" and its variations. There are 650 recorded prayers in the Bible and Jesus Himself is attributed with 25 distinct prayers in the Bible. And Paul emphasizes the power of prayer, mentioning it 41 times in his writings. Praying is not a recommendation, but a command. James 4:2-3 says **" You do not have, because you do not ask.** You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."

Secondly, Prayer is simply communicating with God.

Again, how can you have a strong relationship with God if you do not communicate with Him? God knows our circumstances before we even pray. He is omniscient. But it helps us to verbalize them in the silence and sanctity of our prayer closet. And God wants us to talk with Him on a regular basis.

Prayer is a conversation with God, not a **display** or a **ritual**.

In Matthew 6:5-8, Jesus says "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. [6] But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. [7] And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. [8] Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Jesus isn't condemning the fact that people prayed aloud, but that they were putting on a public display for their own benefit.

Next, Prayer changes us for the better.

You see, God is unchangeable. Numbers 23:19 says,

God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does He speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?

It's not God who changes when we pray--- the big transformation actually comes about in us. We become more dependent on God and less on our own ability to solve our problems. And we learn to trust God more because He is omniscient and all powerful. God has a plan for us but He wants us to learn to ask of Him so that we learn to depend on the kindness and love of our heavenly Father. **Always ask God first for what you need and trust Him to provide in His way and His time**

Prayer transforms us into people who depend on our Lord for all that we need in life.

Finally, Praying to God is an act of worship.

When we talk about **HOW** to pray, we are going to talk about the fact that prayer is much more than simply submitting our requests to Him. It is a demonstration of our trust in Him and His perfect will

So let's talk about **(Slide 4) How we should pray**

I want to address this question from two different perspectives. The first is a method and approach to prayer and the second is our state of mind and behavior when we pray.

Let's start with the approach to prayer

Jesus Himself emphasized the importance of prayer and provided a model for us on how to pray with the Lord's Prayer. In Matthew 6:5-15. Jesus said: **And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. 9 Pray then like this:**

"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.[a]
10 Your kingdom come,
your will be done,[b]
on earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us this day our daily bread,[c]
12 and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
13 And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.[d]

How many of you are familiar with the ACTS approach to praying? It's simply an acronym for four elements of prayer that can keep you focused on God and what you are praying about. And it helps you organize your thoughts and requests. As I said earlier, prayer is much more than just submitting requests to God. The letters in ACTS stand for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. As we unpack this, you will see these elements in the Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught to His disciples.

When some people think of prayer, they often skip the Adoration,Confession, and Thanksgiving and jump right to the supplications or prayer requests. Notice that Jesus taught his followers to start their prayers with adoration when He prayed, Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed (or Holy) be Your name. The ACTS approach tells us to start our prayers by recounting God's many characteristics in the form of praise. It is an acknowledgement that God is worthy of all of our praise.

The C in ACTS is admitting and confessing our sin to God so that our prayers will not be hindered. Although it's true that God already knows our sins, by confessing them, we are admitting to and acknowledging that our sin is offensive to God and agreeing with Him that we need His Son, Jesus, to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. John 1:9 tells us that "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous, so that HE will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus tells us that we should pray, **and forgive us our debts,**
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

The T stands for Thanksgiving. **1 Thessalonians 5:18 tells us " in everything, give thanks: for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus".** Notice that the verse doesn't say to give thanks only for the good things or blessings, but to be thankful in EVERYTHING. We express thanksgiving to God by thanking Him for difficulties we face, things He has withheld for our own good, for the trials that are molding us into the image of Christ, as well as the blessings and good things that we experience. Remember that Romans 8:28 tells us that **All** things work together for the good of those who love God… who are called according to His purpose. Not just the good things, but ALL things. So even when we face difficult situations, we Trust Him that He is using good and bad experiences for our overall good and for His glory.

Finally the S stands for supplication, which is just a fancy word for requests. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray, Give us this day our daily bread, and Lead us Not into Temptation, which means we are asking for God's provision and His protection.

So the Lord's Prayer starts with praise and adoration. And thanks to the text that was added by a scribe in an early manuscript, ends in praise and adoration, with the words, "for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, now and forever, Amen.

Now we need to talk about a very important command from the Lords' prayer. After opening with adoration for our Heavenly Father, Jesus teaches us to pray, "**Thy** Kingdom Come, **Thy** Will be Done, on Earth as it is in Heaven"

When we pray, we often ask God to answer in the way that we think is best. But Jesus commands us to pray for God's will to be done, not ours. Let's look at Luke 22:41-42 from the night Jesus was betrayed

And He was withdrawn from them about a stone's throw, and He knelt down and prayed, 42 saying, "Father, **if it is Your will,** take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, **but Yours**, be done. Even in the most dire of circumstances, Jesus modeled for us the command to yield to God's will and not insist on our own desires.

1 John 5:14 tells us. 14 And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

In the flesh, we want what we want when we want it! When God's answer is yes, we are happy. When it's no or wait, we struggle. We live in a culture of instant gratification and struggle to wait on God. We attended Chip Ingram's church when we lived in California and when he talked about prayer, he used to say that some Christians think of God as a cosmic vending machine. You put in your request and out pops the solution you requested. So it can be difficult when we walk in the flesh to submit to God's will.

But as Christians, we believe that God is omniscient, loving, all powerful and all good. So it should be easy to submit to His will. We often have opinions about things that we are not necessarily experts in. But in our earthly relationships, if we are talking with someone who clearly knows more about a topic than we do, we usually submit to them. God is omniscient and knows everything. Why would we not submit to Him instead of thinking we know better. We pray for the answer to our prayers that would be a **good** solution based on our limited knowledge. God answers our prayers with the **BEST** solution because His knowledge is unlimited! He knows our past, present, and future and how the answer to that prayer works for the good of us and for His Glory. So whether God's answer is yes, no, or wait, we trust that He has answered our prayers with the **BEST** answer.

Now let's go back to our scripture for today, Phil 4:6-7. It tells us to pray about everything. **And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.** This scripture does not say that God

will answer our prayers in the way that we ask, but that His peace will guard our hearts and minds. So what happens when we put our dollar in the vending machine and push the button for a snickers bar, but it spits out a granola bar. We may want the snickers, but need the granola bar.

God answers prayers with what we need, not necessarily what we want. If God's answer is not yes, we may think that He didn't hear our prayer. Or that our prayer went unanswered. Have you ever prayed for something that God answered in a way that you did not expect, and you were able to look back at it and finally understand that God's answer was better than what you asked for? When Jan and I lived in California, we were looking to buy a house. She found a nice house that was affordable and after praying about it, felt like this is what God had for us. Well, I wasn't convinced and found a more expensive house that I liked much better. So I prayed and convinced myself that God wanted us to have the house I found, totally disregarding the fact that Jan did not feel at peace. So I forged ahead and we made an offer on my house. As we went through the mortgage approval process, we got word back that the appraisal came in a whopping $100,000 under the price we agreed to pay, making it literally impossible for us to buy that house. So guess what happened! We ended up buying the house Jan felt God had for us. As I look back at that, we would not have been able to afford my house even if we could have gotten the mortgage. I kept pushing for my will, ignoring Jan's or even really listening to God's answer. So it seems like God said okay, you keep pushing Your will instead of mine. So I guess I just have to slap you on the side of the head to get your attention.

Did you ever hear a song by Garth Brooks called Unanswered Prayers. The lyrics talk about a guy running into his old high school flame and remembering how he had prayed to God that he would make her his and that if He would do that, he would never ask for anything again. The lyrics continue that as they talked, he realized that she was not who he thought she was and he turns to his wife and thanked God, acknowledging that "I guess the Lord knows what He's doing after all. And the refrain says

That just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean he don't care. 'Cause some of God's greatest gifts Are unanswered prayers.

Look back at your life and see how sometimes it may have taken years, but you can look back and say, God knows what He's doing after all.

Luke 11:13 says If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?

Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 that So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations,[a] a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. **8** Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. **9** But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

His prayers were answered but not in the way he expected. The grace and mercy he received was NOT in the form of the problem being removed, but in the form of strength to endure it.

So we have talked about the approach and method for prayer, let's talk now about our state of mind and our behavior when we pray.

Planned and spontaneous prayer

There are two ways to pray; planned prayer and spontaneous prayer. Having a regular rhythm of prayer, whether it's first thing in the morning, in the evening, during your commute, or before meals can help build a regular habit of communion with God. But Ephesians 6:18 tells us *"And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people."* So a strong prayer life means that in addition to planned prayer, we communicate with God on an impromptu basis whenever the Spirit moves us. In Psalm 62:8, God tells us "Trust in Him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to Him, for God is our refuge.

Innocence and Honesty

We are to pray to our Father with the innocence of a child.

In Luke 18:15-16, we read about how people were bringing infants to Jesus that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. **16** Jesus called

them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. 17 Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

And Matthew 18:4 tells us that Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Children have a way of being honest and candid in the way that they pray. They are not influenced by any kind of cultural pressure or peer pressure. Their prayers are simple and uncomplicated. They speak from their hearts

As I prepared for this message, I came across some prayers offered to God by children and wanted to share some of them with you today.

Dear God, when my mom makes leftovers, do I have to pray for the food again?

Dear God, instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don’t You just keep the ones you have?

Dear God, please take care of my daddy, mommy, sister, brother, my doggy, and me. Oh,and please take care of yourself, God. If anything happens to you, we’re gonna be in a big mess.

Dear God, if You can’t make me a better boy, don’t worry about it. I’m having a real good time like I am

Dear God, maybe Cain and Able would not kill each other so much if they each had their own rooms. It works out Ok with me and my brother.

Dear God, thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy.

And finally, Dear God, it must be super hard to love all of the people in the world, especially my brother. I don’t know how you do it.

Like children, we need to pray to our Heavenly Father with honesty and a sense of innocence that reflects that trust we have in Him and an acknowledgement of His unconditional love and mercy and grace.

Undistracted and quiet

The first step in uncomplicating prayers is to find a quiet time and a place in which you can talk with God without a sense of hurry. Psalm 46:10 tells us to Be still, and know that I am God. We talked earlier about finding the best time of the day for regular pray time. But it is equally important to remove all distractions so you can not only pray to God, but listen for His response. When I pray, I need to be in a different room from Jan and the dog, somewhere where I can’t hear the tv or radio in the background. I would even suggest turning your phone off when you pray so you can truly have quality uninterrupted time with our Heavenly Father.

Conversation, not a script

Remember, prayer is simply a conversation with our Father in Heaven. It does not require a script or format. When it comes to the Lords Prayer or the Apostle’s Creed,

we run the risk of simply reciting words instead of truly thinking about what these words mean and what we are trying to convey to God. I remember when Pastor Kerry preached on the Apostle's creed and the Lord's Prayer line by line and I will never pray those prayers again the same way. I now think about what each and every word really means. I remember growing up Catholic and saying the rosary at least once a day if not more. And as I look back at that, I realize I had no idea of what I was praying when I said the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be to the Father over and over again as I navigated through the rosary beads. Our prayers to God should be authentic and heartfelt, not from a script

Slide 5 (Build Slide) Passionate and Persistent

Prayer is not an obligation, but a privilege. We are blessed to be able to go to our Heavenly Father on a personal basis and share our deepest darkest confessions and requests with no fear of condemnation and the promise of forgiveness. This is not about checking a box, but passionately entering into a conversation with our Heavenly Father.

Jesus teaches us to pray with persistence with the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. 2 He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. 3 And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

4 "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'"

6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.

If we understand God's character, we will pray more persistently and with total confidence that HE will answer the prayer with he BEST answer.. not necessarily our request. He is all powerful, so He can answer even what we consider to be insignificant as well as prayers that have much weightier issues.

Every day, I like to pray the serenity prayer. You know it. God give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change those I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. But I have amended that pray by adding… And the faith and

trust in You that all things are possible through You. So even if there are things I cannot control, I pray with persistence because I know there is NOTHING out of Your control. Like praying for my friend Laura for her sense of taste and smell to return after a brain aneurism and a prognosis by the doctor that she will NEVER get it back.

Pray for others, not just our own needs

Finally, in addition to sharing our requests during our prayer time, we need to pray for others, for our country, for our world, for our church, and for other current needs in the world we live in. We have a strong prayer team at River Ridge with over 100 people participating. Terri Williams does a great job of leading that team and each week, she receives many requests from people inside and outside the church to pray for them. She shares these prayers with this team and once a week, a smaller group of prayer warriors get on a zoom call and present these requests collectively to the Lord. I want to encourage you to join the prayer warrior team and if possible, join the zoom call on Wednesdays. And you'll also note that at every service at our church, we spend time in corporate intercessory prayer.

So let me bring this to a close with some final thoughts.

I read an article from Moody Radio called Why Do We Pray if God is Sovereign? and I want to use some of their final thoughts as I close today. But first, I want to remind you that It is a blessing and a privilege that we are able to go directly to God with our prayers, with Jesus as our mediator and the Holy Spirit as our intercessor or interpreter.

And our scripture for today tells that we should not worry about anything but pray constantly with Thanksgiving. And God's peace, which we cannot totally understand will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Not that God will give us everything we pray for in the way and time that we ask. But He will ALWAYS answer our prayers with the perfect answer, showing us His unconditional love, His unlimited power and goodness, and His omniscience.

So talking some thoughts from that Moody article, prayer is not about trying to figure out how it works, but instead trusting that God hears us and wants the best for us. We should spend less time wondering what outcome God has ordained, or wondering why we should pray if God already knows everything and simply trust and believe in God's providence and the fact that HE is sovereign over life and death. This article states that God doesn't want us to engage in philosophical inquiry, speculating about what He has already ordained or asking why we should even bother praying since God already knows the outcomes. He just expects us to bring our prayers to Him, no matter how significant, knowing that He is in control and with the assurance that He will work

everything for good and for His glory. Isaiah 55:8-9 tells us For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. **9** For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

We'll never truly understand the dynamic of prayer, but we do know that God asks us to cry out to Him. And we can rest assured that He always accomplishes His purposes .