

## **Help, Thanks, Wow!**

### **Philippians 4:4-10**

Good Morning Church Family, it's wonderful to see you all this morning. Besides being Memorial Sunday, today is also our last Sunday before Advent Season begins next week, so this morning I'll be wrapping up my sermon series on Prayer. There is a whole lot more to explore, I think, about prayer, so don't be surprised if part two of this series shows up in the new year.

To recap a bit from the start of this Prayer series: Prayer, at its center, is about relationship. Prayer is the language of intimacy, a place where we can meet and commune with God and with one another. Prayer is not about a push and pull of wills, a place to exercise power, rather it is a place to meet God and encounter his love and grace.

Most people of faith would say that we know prayer is "good for us" or "beneficial to our faith and overall well being.", but I heard a discussion on a podcast last week that got me thinking (really, a better word is convicted) about prayer as a way of staying in connection with God, inviting the refining work of the spirit in my life and helping me to live in God's ways.

Last year, Christianity Today put out the wildly popular podcast The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. Mars Hill was a mega church in Seattle, Washington which fell apart when their lead pastor, Marc Driscoll, left the church after being confronted with his abusive, controlling behavior. Sadly, it seems that every few months a new story of a Christian Leader abusing their role or the people they are supposed to help emerges. Ravi Zacharias, the systemic abuse within the

Southern Baptist denomination, and closer to our Anabaptist tradition, Bruxy Cavey at the Meeting House Church in Hamilton, Ontario.

What do these abuses of power have to do with prayer? So, on a recently released bonus episode of this podcast, the host interviewed a pastor named Timothy Keller. Keller is an Episcopalian minister in New York City, author, and founder of the Gospel Coalition. While Keller and I would certainly disagree on many things, I very much appreciated his perspective on prayer as a method of keeping us in check, of course correcting our lives into God's way. The host asks Keller, How do you account for your own longevity in ministry? Many people look up to you and see you as faithful in ministry, so What do you say to young pastors and leaders? And Keller said this, "Early on, grow in grace, not get the ego, not get inflated about your gifts. Hebrews 3:13 , you gotta have some people in your life to exhort you to fruit, authorized to talk to you, look at you, rake you over the coals. Ideally, if you happen to be married to one of them that's even better. As time goes on, you can hide, even from people like that. You can still do things, you can hide, also it's hard to make those friends again, as you get later on in life your 50 and 60s, you know, somebody dies, moves away, you can just go out at get new relationships that have that level of accountability, and then, it's prayer life. All about prayer life, i'm sorry, not just praying about things, communing with God. The purpose of prayer is to have the love of God shed on your heart, see his face, sense his love. To bask in the Father's love, the Son in Grace and the Holy Spirit in comfort, actually has to be genuine experiential prayer life, finding your deepest besetting sins, the shadow places that we are all inclined to. The puritans called that mortification, identifying your besetting sins, weakening them before they lead to behavior. That only happens with lots of communion with God. Identifying those sins and applying Jesus to them. How does Jesus weaken that? How does this reorder the loves of your heart?" His final word of caution, "You have got to have a vibrant prayer life, if you're too busy for that, and as your church grows it's harder and harder to find time, well, it's deadly."

It is this deep communion of God, through prayer, and rooted in relationship that is key to allowing us to live like Jesus, to be transfigured so that we may be more like Jesus. Allowing us to grow in those fruits of the spirit-love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, guarding us against temptation and sin, which scripture instructs us is a very real concern in the Christian life.

It's often been said that we (people) become like those that we spend time with. I think about this in my own relationship with Taylor. Taylor and I have known each other for 16 years, and have been married for 13 of those years. It will come as no surprise to all of you that Taylor is an introvert and I am an extrovert, but over the course of the last 16 years we have moved closer to one another in that regard. In college, there was no limit to the amount of time that I could happily spend with other people, but now the idea of a quiet evening at home reading a novel or watching netflix is very appealing. And for Taylor too, he needs social outings and company in a way that he once didn't. I've become more introverted and he has become more extroverted. I think this is at the core of what Timothy Keller is talking about, the more time we spend in prayer, the more time we spend in communion with God, the closer we move toward the heart of God. The more we are formed in Christian maturity and the fruit of the spirit, as Roger shared in our scripture this morning.

So let's talk about that a bit, about that formation through prayer and how different postures of prayer can realign us in our relationship with God and by extension our relationship with one another. Author Anne Lamott wrote a book in 2012 called "Help, Thanks, Wow!: The Three Essential Prayers. Now, I haven't read this book in its entirety and it's not an explicitly Christian book, but the title is so compelling. Help, Thanks, Wow! Prayer of petition, Help me Lord. Prayers of praise, Thank you God for who you are and what you do. And prayers of

wonder-How unbelievable, miraculous and astonishing is this thing that you have done O'Lord. Let's break this down a bit more and talk about each of these modes of prayer and the way those prayers can grow fruit in our lives.

First, Help! Prayers of asking, and petitioning. To be honest, this is the form of prayer that fills much of my prayer life, and I think that's normal for a lot of people. Because it reminds us of our finitude, it reminds us that deep down, we're really not in control of much. Some of my times of most desperate, fervent prayer were when I needed God's help- a health scare, a time of feeling profoundly unsafe. Help, God, I need help. These prayers of petition reorient us to be reminded that God is the master of all things, God, whose throne is the Heavens and whose footstool is the earth.

This week, I heard a very interesting perspective on the book of Job. In the story, Job, a righteous man experiences tragedy beyond belief. He loses nearly everything- his possessions, his home, his family, his health. And throughout the book, Job asks God, where are you? Help me! Why are you so far away? Why didn't you show up? At the end of the book, God shows up and delivers the longest unbroken speech by God in the entirety of the Bible. God asks some hard questions of Job- where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? God lays out the intricate magnificence of the world that God set in motion and keeps in motion. At the end of this speech Job says, you're right. You are God and I am not. Yet Job is also reassured, because God DID show up, and Job is part of this cosmos. Prayers of petition remind us of our place, so to speak, and also of the infinite God who loves us and remembers us.

Secondly, there are the Thanks prayers. The prayers of praise and adoration towards God for who God is and what God does. The book of Psalms are filled with these prayers. And I think the purpose of these prayers for the building up of the Christian life is that It reminds us that the

goodness of God is a constant, we can praise God for the past, the present and indeed, the future. Despite the ups and downs of life, the darkness and challenges of life on this terrestrial ball, God is the one from whom Goodness flows from. James reminds us that even though temptation and sin are a real threat, God's Goodness is greater, "When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." That's James 1:13-18.

Praising and thanking God in prayer reminds us to be honest in presenting our both/and experiences to God. Father James Martin, a Jesuit Priest Whom I mentioned early in this series shares a story that reminds us that praise and petition are meant to exist side by side in our prayer lives, "I was talking to my spiritual director and I said I was so angry at God last night, but I said, how about some bleeping help? And my director said, that's a good prayer because it's honest. And I said, well, OK. And he said, but I thought this was so helpful. He said, but are you being totally honest with God? And I said, What do you mean? " I was, you know, just spouting off at God and telling God how angry I was. And of course, I was being honest. And he said, well, OK, that's one part of your life, are you sharing with God the other part of the other parts of your life? I said, what do you mean? And he said, Well, you're going to present your life to God and you present it in its totality, not just the stuff you're annoyed by. If that's the only focus of your prayer, in a sense, it's actually not being honest with God. So, you're saying the breadcrumbs and the stuff on your whiteboard that if you were to ignore that and say, oh God, my life is only about this, you're kind of being, in a sense, you're only showing God part of the

picture. So that was really helpful for me, you know, to be honest. But also in the totality of your life.”

Finally, there are the prayers of Wow!- Prayers of wonder and astonishment. The prayers we pray when the goodness, majesty and miraculousness of God surprises us. Two weeks ago, I attended a panel discussion in the city called Eyes of See: Naming our Divine encounters. The event was put on by MCSask and New Leaf Network-a church resourcing network based in Saskatoon. Four panelists shared about the spaces and places where they encounter God, the places where they meet Jesus. One of the panelists was Sylvia Keesmaat. Sylvia is a biblical scholar and taught the CMU course on Paul and Romans that was hosted in Saskatoon a couple of weeks ago.

One of the places that Sylvia said that she meets Jesus is in her yard and garden, and she proceeded to show us a slideshow of photos she had taken of insects in her yard. And honestly, it was incredible. She shared a bit about each one -what plants they visit, what purpose they serve, their rarity to the area. Wasps eating flower petals. Bumblebees SLEEPING on dandelions. No creature homeless or without purpose. God provides for them all. After each photo, I kept thinking Wow! What a wonder these miniscule creatures are, what a gift to the ecosystem around them. Sylvia said, “Sometimes, I have a hard time seeing God, when I’m outside, it’s so easy to believe in God. Impossible to believe in God when I read the news” Her words encouraged me to consider how I make more capacity for wonder in my prayer life, indeed in my whole life. The (too much) time I spend on social media definitely makes me say Wow, but not the way that aims me toward Jesus and wonder in him.

How can these three prayers, Help, Thanks and Wow reorder the loves of our hearts? How do these three prayers create in us a desire for more of Jesus? How can we begin, in some small way, to commune more deeply with Jesus through prayer as we step into the Advent Season? These are the questions that I'm going to be pondering this week, and I hope you'll join me in this.

Let's Pray.