

WHAT ARE THE LOGISTICS OF PRAYER?

Philippians 4:4-7

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Sometimes talking about prayer is so general and vague it's not helpful. I'd like this sermon to be practical. Imagine that you and I are sitting down for a cup of coffee and you've asked me some simple questions about prayer. The first thing we would do is talk about what is not in Phil. 4:6. There are no magic words. Nothing about location, clothing, using thee's and thou's. Nothing about having to qualify as a "spiritual" person. And nothing about the required posture for praying. This Far Side cartoon reminds that walruses should not bow their heads to pray! In the Bible, we see various postures assumed during prayer—standing, lying face down, kneeling and walking. Here's the bottom line: If we put off praying until we are good at it, most of us never will do it [Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, p. 265].

It's helpful for us to burrow into the middle of v. 6 and go in each direction. Thanksgiving moves our prayers out of selfish wishing. This also takes us beyond prayer as a transaction (giving something in order to get something). It moves it to the mystery of relationship. In short, thanksgiving opens us to God, to others and to our deepest selves.

This relational approach to prayer will free us from guilt, as if we fail unless we have long, deep, set times of prayer. You are hereby absolved of all guilt! But don't neglect prayer. Learn to pray as you go. Mothers of small babies don't have an hour each day to pray. But you can experience God in a child's smile. As you lie in bed, eaten up with those worries, turn those into prayers offered up.

Before this sermon series began, I posted on social media your thoughts, questions and practices regarding prayer. One person wrote she practices what she calls prayer bubbles, short but important moments during the day, sharing honestly with God what is on her heart.

Sometimes someone will say to me, "I feel really silly, bothering God with my small stuff." Here is a good rule of thumb: If it is big enough to mess with you, it's big enough to take to God in prayer. To be anxious (worried) is to be pulled apart. Consider this. Our reluctance to pray may be about our unwillingness to admit vulnerability and need. Prayer is admitting we can't do this by ourselves. Remember. Paul is writing from prison. And his heart is heavy for people who are struggling. He was a really strong man. But he knew he needed prayer.

Verse six commands us to not worry, but instead offer prayer (more general, all-encompassing) and supplication (specific requests). The Greco-Romans of the first century believed their gods attended to big things, not small ones. Aren't you glad our God cares about both? When we know God through the lens of Jesus, we see God as caring about the small stuff as well as the big stuff.

At this point in our coffee conversation, you would probably ask me what to do if your prayer life gets stuck. Sometimes when my prayer life is stuck, I practice *lectio divina* (sacred reading). It is the practice of reading short Bible passages in a contemplative way. Reading the same passage over and over, four times, pausing between each reading, allowing the text to wash over us, focusing on a word, an image, a thought. It is ruminating, meditating, reflecting.

There are other things we can do when we feel stuck. Pray the psalms. They are, after all, the Hebrew prayer book. Or we can sing, color, draw or sculpt. We can listen to music and pray.

The point is, pray! The field of neuroscience has made amazing discoveries about the positive impact prayer and meditation have on the brain. Brain scans show regions of the brain positively affected by meditation, chanting, whispering, singing and praying [*Learning to Speak God from Scratch*, p. 102].

Perhaps that's why Paul offers this assurance that God's peace will mount a garrison (Paul uses a military term) around our hearts (v. 7). What an image. God's peace, always there, but brought to a conscious level through prayer. Peace, circling around us and those we love. Come to think of it, v. 7 is a great one to practice *lectio divina*. Listen to it prayerfully. "The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."