

The Prayer-Filled Life

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Preacher: Rev. George Sinclair

[0 : 00] A few years ago, a group of local Christians who were familiar with the continuing crisis in the Anglican Church of Canada asked me if I would come during the lunch hour to pray for me.

They had a prophetic word that they should pray for me. I was very pleased to go and be prayed for. So they sat me down in a chair in a room and they surrounded me.

And put their hands on me. And for the next hour, they yelled, they screamed, they waved their arms, they cried and sobbed and fell on the floor and prayed.

And I was very glad that they were on my side and not angry at me. And I was thinking that if my young daughters had been there to watch, they would have been very, very frightened and they would have been crying, but not out of ecstasy of prayer.

And I thought, well, that's an experience. I often listen to a Christian radio station in Ottawa. And sometimes when you hear the advertisements for visiting evangelists, my kids and I will turn and look at each other and think, that has to be one of the angriest sounding people I have ever heard in my life.

[1 : 22] Just the anger just flowing through their voice as they scream Jesus' name. And we both sort of wonder why anybody would go to hear somebody like that.

What does it mean to have a prayer-filled life? What does it mean to be a person who prays, who tries to live by the grace of God?

Philippians chapter 4, verse 6, do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.

What does a person look like who is coming to God in prayer, living Philippians 4, 6, and the prayer is actually drawing us to God rather than inoculating us against God?

Because, of course, part of the tragedy of our lives as human beings is that sometimes we use Christianity to inoculate ourselves against God. Sometimes we use prayer to inoculate ourselves against God.

[2 : 22] So what does a prayer-filled life look like? What does a Philippians 4, 6 person look like? Well, the scriptures give us a bit of a picture. If you turn in your Bibles, I'm using my own Bible, but if you turn to Philippians chapter 4, verses 4 to 9, there's a picture there of a prayer-filled person.

And if you notice, your neighbor Kent is sort of having a bit of problems finding the page in the pew Bibles, just to sort of share Bibles with them and help them out. The first thing that we see about a person who has a prayer-filled life is, and this is going to maybe sound like a bit of a tautology, but it has to be said, they look to the Lord and not to themselves.

They look to the Lord and not to themselves. Look at Philippians chapter 4, verse 4. This actually sort of opens the window a little bit as to how we can in fact use prayer, ironically, to inoculate ourselves against God rather than actually coming to the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's a very famous verse which has caused much mischief in Christians' lives. Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say rejoice. Now, how has that caused mischief?

It's caused mischief in two particular types of ways. I've talked to many people after they've had some type of financial crisis, or maybe they've just learned that they have cancer or a death of a loved one, and they'll say one of two types of things to me, especially Christians who are aware of this verse and maybe have churches that really sort of emphasize the joy of the Lord.

[3 : 58] The first thing is they'll say to me, George, I don't know how on earth I can think of something joyful in what's just happened to me. Like I'm thinking and I'm thinking and I'm thinking, but I just can't see anything here that I can sort of rejoice in, in what's happened to me.

Or the other type of thing that they'll say to me is, you know, I've been trying and trying and trying, but I just can't feel any joy in all of this. But you notice what both types of people are doing is they

know the text of Scripture, but they use the text of Scripture to think about themselves.

And the text of the Scripture is saying to go to Jesus. That's what the text is saying. Not do some type of psychological manipulation until you feel joyful, or not in your own power and in your own strength think of a joyful interpretation of the events on your own power.

The text says it's calling us to rejoice in the Lord. Again, I will say rejoice. It's calling us to go to Jesus. And it's calling Jesus the Lord. Not Jesus the gopher.

You know, go, G-O-F-E-R. Two words. He's not saying Jesus the gopher or Jesus the nurse. Jesus the one who can give us medication to always make us feel happy.

[5 : 19] It's calling us to go to the Lord. In other words, in the midst even of things which are very, very, as the hymn so well put it, even in the midst of things which maybe really stretch us in terms of our emotions and in terms of our resources or things that cause us great happiness, go to the one who is sovereign, Jesus.

Go to him. Go to him. And to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and to acknowledge that he is sovereign and not our gopher means that his joy will come to us in his timing and in his means.

It's not calling us to emotional manipulation or clever thought and self-talk. The text is calling us to go to the one who is the Lord of this situation and is the Lord of your life.

And he is Lord. His joy, not his happiness, his joy will come to us at his timing. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.

What's the second characteristic of a person who's trying to live that verse? Through a life of daily prayer. The second characteristic can be seen in verse 5. My version of the Bible says, Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.

[6 : 51] The Lord is at hand. And there's a variety of words that are trying to translate there the Greek. But here's, remember my opening analogy of these anger-driven evangelists.

You know, the anger and the arrogance. Just, it's hard for me to even hear Jesus in them just because I hear so much anger and so much arrogance flowing through them.

But we see that a person who is living Philippians 4.6 becomes fair-minded, becomes gentle, becomes merciful. One of the things which I think we can really see in the primate statement that just was released on Thursday night, I think it was, was that in fact the primates really revealed in this document their fair-mindedness and their gentleness.

They've taken a very, very small step on one level, but a very important, significant step, by asking the Canadians and the Americans to withdraw from the Anglican Consultative Council, one of the key instruments of unity in the Anglican Communion.

It's a very, very small step, but an important step. And it opens, it keeps the door wide, wide open. It is obvious from the text of the primates' letter that the primates don't want to embarrass Canada, they don't want to humiliate Canada, that what they desire is that Canada will repent.

[8 : 13] That's what they desire. It's a very, very, it's in fact a Philippians 4.5 statement. They are showing their reasonableness and their gentleness in the face of sin.

One of the reasons I think that Buddhism is so popular, at least celebrity Buddhism, is so popular in the West, is that it promises that we can live in a bubble of bliss, untouched and unstained by the world.

We just are filled with our little blissedness and sort of our inward-lookingness, and we can sort of just sort of float through the world untouched by good and evil and tragedy and success and just sort of live in a little bit of a bubble of bliss.

But the image here, this characteristic of a prayer-filled life, this reasonableness, fair-mindedness, gentleness, mercifulness, graciousness, which is being talked about, is a characteristic of life, a habit of life, that emerges out of our confrontation, our personal confrontation with anxiety and with sin.

It is to come face-to-face with the reality of the many sources of anxiety in our life, often called by sin. And in the midst of coming to God in daily prayer, discovering God's mercy time and time and time again, and discovering not only God's mercy, but God's larger purposes, the salvation of others.

[9 : 52] I mean, one of the things that we are to do in the face of this continuing crisis is always keep before us the words of the Scripture, that God takes no delight in the death of a sinner, but rather that they would turn from their wickedness and live.

And the Scriptures constantly enjoin us, that it is worthy of us to suffer if our suffering is such, our turning the other's cheek is such, our going the second mile is such, that it provides space for the other to come to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Because that is the desire of God's heart for every person that we will see today. That is His enduring hope for all.

And so this, we, as we come to God daily in prayer, do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. As we come to God in prayer daily, God's Holy Spirit will renew us, and God's Holy Word will reform us. And a gentleness, a fair-mindedness, a graciousness, a merciful characteristic is what God will start to build, build in our personality and in our character.

[11 : 13] Thirdly, another characteristic of one who is trying to live, Philippians 4, 6, We see that as we try to live this verse, that we receive God's balance.

That we receive God's balance. Look at verse 7. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Secretly, almost all Canadians are druggies. I don't know, do they use that term here in Vancouver? Secretly, most of us are druggies. Most of us are really people who desire a type of faith akin to Prozac, or something more powerful that will allow us to live our lives, always sort of in a particular type of emotional state.

And we tend to see biblical words in self-massaging, self-therapeutic and emotional terms. And so when we see this verse, and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, because secretly we are all druggies, we hear that verse as a powerful drug that will come from God.

But if we hear the verse in that way, we do not receive God's drugs, we receive God's balance, here described with the word peace. Many of you, you all probably know what a mobile is.

[12 : 50] I don't mean the cell phone, what the British and the Australians call a cell phone, but mobiles, you often see them in kids' children's bedrooms, maybe of sailing ships or something like that, wood and string and objects.

In a sense, every single one of us who is sitting here today have the makings of a mobile within us. But unfortunately, most of our mobiles have been thrown first in the washing machine and then in the dryer, which means that the wood, the objects, the cord or the nylon or whatever, the fishing line, has all become unbelievably tangled.

And what happens as we learn to go to God in prayer, not being anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, letting your requests be made known to God, is this becomes part of the daily habit of our lives, seeking truly the Lord, not ourselves, seeking truly to come to God in prayer.

What starts to happen is that God starts, in the mystery of his grace, starts to untangle those things within us. I mean, his plan, in a sense, is to take our lives and make each of them into mobiles.

Some of us have huge, big brains and maybe tiny little hearts. Some of us have big hearts and tiny brains. And some of us have sort of well-balanced bits and pieces.

[14 : 16] And you throw in some wounds and you throw in some talents and you throw in some gifts. And we're all different. And if you want to have that whole big sucker get balanced, it means the pieces of wood have to be different lengths and the cord has to be different lengths and it all has to be very, very cleverly balanced.

And so each of our mobiles would look very, very different. But the word peace here is primarily trying to communicate to us God's balance, God's harmony.

And in fact, the word opens up to us something which takes us beyond the self, beyond sort of our worship of ourself, our finding ourself infinitely fascinating, in fact, far more fascinating than God. The verse opens the door to the fact that we are going beyond ourself because not only is the peace of God understood really as God's balance or God's harmony in those things within us which could be immobile, that not only as we come to God in prayer and renewed by the Holy Spirit and reformed by God's Holy Word, and so the makings of that mobile start to be made within us, but the mobile is not only balanced internally within us, it's balanced with our larger environment.

I mean, we walk in the midst of unseen presences. Our culture teaches us to be atheists when we are in the public square.

[15 : 36] And while our culture attempts to teach us that or legislate that, the fact of the matter is that we walk in a world with angels and with demons, a road that is people are on the path to

heaven or on the path to hell, that we walk in the midst of unseen presences.

Scriptures tell us that the very trees cry out and bring praise to God, the angels offer unceasing glory to God, and the balance that is to come into our life, the harmony that is to come into our life, which is a gift of God, not something created by ourselves, is a balance that is in harmony with the angels' praises and with the praises of all creation.

So to live, to come to live by daily prayer, to not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God, is to learn to look to the Lord and not to ourselves, is to become fair-minded and gentle, not brittle and anger-driven.

It is to receive God's balance. And finally, we will develop new aspirations. Aspirations. We were meant to aspire higher than ourselves.

Look at verse 8. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

[17:09] Now, this verse has caused lots of mischief in Anglican churches. First of all, many of us interpret these words as when we think of lovely, we think in Hollywood terms, like, you know, who could be more handsome than, I don't know, Tom Cruise or Robert Redford, I don't know the range of, you know, the people who go on People magazine and all that type of stuff.

We tend to interpret it within either the, an understanding, it's if the Bible's giving us permission to aspire to a Hollywood lifestyle. That might not be as much trouble in the average Anglican church, but the next two things are, we often interpret this in class terms.

That in fact, what the Bible here is encouraging us to, it's in a sense giving us permission to aspire to be more like the upper class. I hope this isn't a bit of a shock today that I think he's been here long enough to know, but the average Canadian does not aspire to have an Australian accent.

A Sydney accent, it's just not there. Maybe it's different here, they all now want to speak Sydney Australian, but, you know, the average Anglican congregation, you have somebody with a good Oxford accent in the congregation, and the congregation just swoons.

I mean, that's just, like, you know, Australians just doesn't cut it, David. My, I'm first generation Canadian.

[18:40] I'm, my parents are both from Belfast, and working class Irish wouldn't work either if people were to hear it since my parents were working class. But the average Anglican, when they hear this text, they think that it gives them, in a sense, permission to aspire after the upper class.

All of the apparent loveliness and graciousness of the upper class, and that's not what this text is talking to us about at all. In fact, the scriptures constantly call into judgment the fact that we, the fact that we make big deals out of class differences.

This isn't saying, speak with an upper class accent. Don't try to speak like a CBC announcer voice. I mean, that's the persistent sin of Anglican clergy, to try to sound like a cross between a CBC announcer and somebody who went to Oxford, as if somehow we have a more holy voice.

And it's not calling us to that at all. And the third mistake that we make when we hear Philippians 4.8 is to think that it's talking about aesthetic categories, as if what it means that we should read the King James Version of the Bible and read Shakespeare and listen to Handel.

And it's really just a call to us to not use guitars or anything like that, but to aspire to these higher aesthetic things. And the text of scripture is talking about none of those things at all.

[20:01] Last Saturday, a week ago Saturday, I did the funeral of a man named Tom Ralph. He was in his 80s. He and his wife had been married for many years. His wife had died about 12 years earlier.

They had not been blessed with any children. And Tom Ralph loved children. He loved children. I can remember that, you know, one of my services, you know, as younger people started to come to St. Albans and people with children started to come to St. Albans.

And there was a Sunday where a couple of kids were making some noise and some ruckus after they came back from Sunday school. And I had person after person at the door just tell me off for these unruly children.

And so I'm leaving the back of the church to, you know, where I've been shaking hands and my shoulders are sagging. And Tom was a man, I mean, he's in his 80s, and sort of, I think one eye was higher or lower than the other than the face.

And he walked with a very funny shuffle and he had lots of age spots on his face and he had this huge grin on his face and he said, isn't it so wonderful to have children in church?

[21 : 08] His relatives asked him if he felt lonely living in the house by himself and he said, I have Jesus with me. I'm not lonely in my house. And so Tom, I mean, you wouldn't get him on the cover of People magazine and he'd worked a simple lower middle class type of job all of his life.

But there was a childlikeness about him, an accepting of life, a graciousness, a prayerfulness about him. And Philippians 4.8 is talking about Tom Ralph.

It's talking about people who become wise in scripture. People who lives are formed not by playing with words but by co-inhering in the truth.

It's talking about people who faces have become lovely through holiness. It's not talking about the face. When it says lovely, it's not talking about the face of somebody on People magazine.

It is talking about the face of Pope John Paul II or Billy Graham or the Tom Ralph of your congregation. And what happens as we live Philippians 4.6 do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God is that within us there starts to be aspirations.

[22 : 33] I wish I could have a face like Tom Ralph we say. I wish I could know the Bible like this other person. I wish I could be a more prayerful person like somebody else. And the wonderful thing about aspiration is it isn't competitive.

There can only be one CEO of a corporation so if you want to be the CEO you have to hope that the other person goes to another corporation retires or dies. But you know there can be a thousand prayerful people in a church.

If there's right now only five prayerful people in a church and one more becomes prayerful the five won't become upset. They'll rejoice that there's now six. People who learn to live persevering lives. These moral qualities in our lives is what is being talked about and what the scripture is saying is as we live Philippians 4-6 that there starts to develop within us aspirations of godliness which were not there before.

Do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. I guess I'm just going to invite today there's no better time than today to begin the habit of daily prayer.

[23 : 44] It's not going to be better next week. It's not going to be better when you retire. It's not going to be better when you finish graduate school. It won't be better when the kids have left home. There's no better time than tomorrow to begin the habit of daily prayer and daily prayer is part of the normal Christian life.

It's not for spiritual superstars. It's for ordinary folks like you and me and so I just want to challenge you if you do nothing else before you leave here but to say a simple prayer and say God I would

Some of us might have to say God I desire to return to a regular habit of prayer. Some of us might say God I've never really had a habit of daily prayer. Father I ask for that habit and pray that prayer today before you leave and my experience is the earlier in your day that you can possibly do it to read your Bible and to pray the most likely you are to continue in that habit and if you're serious about trying to enter into a life of Philippians 4-6 ask somebody that you think is prayerful to pray for you daily that you will develop that habit of daily prayer and just come before God read some of God's word asking first for him to speak to you through his word and then take a few moments to say your story to God for things that you've done that are wrong take a few moments to pray thank you to God just for the things that God has blessed us with that we can be thankful for take a few moments to ask God request for yourselves and for others but it is worth it to have a prayer filled life it is God's desire for you and there is no time better to begin it than tomorrow let's pray

Father you know that some of us are using prayer to inoculate ourselves against you and Father in your mercy may your Holy Spirit bring conviction to our lives and turn us from the path of using prayer to keep us distant from you and turn us from that Father in your mercy and bring into new birth within our lives are coming before you in prayer and Father you know that there are some of us here who have no habits of regular prayer of daily prayer and so Father for those who are those of us who are here in that situation we ask that your Holy Spirit would fall upon us afresh to fan into flame within us a desire for daily prayer and we ask Father that you would help us to begin that new life of daily prayer tomorrow that Father you grant us the discipline as well as the desire

Father for those of us who are here who have that habit of daily prayer Father we acknowledge that it is not due to our own efforts or our own strength but purely a result of your Holy Spirit moving within us and Father in your mercy may you deepen us in our lives of prayer may you Father extend the reach of our prayers and our time of prayer may you continue to teach us and help us to pray all of this Father we ask in the name of Jesus your Son and our Savior Amen