

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, March 18, 2018

Sermon Title: “Is Prayer Effective?” – Zion Student Minister Glynis Faith

Philippians 4:4-9 (NIV)

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Have you ever wondered if prayer works? Ever asked yourself, is prayer effective?

We often measure effectiveness by productivity and results. We like knowing that what we put our time into is going to be worth our efforts, so it makes sense that we might want to know, is prayer effective? **Does prayer work?**

The simple answer is yes. **Yes**, prayer is effective – **Yes**, prayer works.

Listen again to the words of the Apostle Paul: “**Rejoice** in the LORD always. I will say it again: **Rejoice!** Let your gentleness be evident to all. **The LORD is near.** Do not be anxious about anything, but in **every** situation, by **prayer** and petition, with **thanksgiving**, present your requests to God.”

Sounds like Paul believes in the effectiveness of prayer. But here is the interesting thing; Paul is writing these words from prison. Not only does Paul write from prison, but he is writing to a church suffering persecution.

Does this sound like a situation to rejoice in?

Does it sound like Paul’s prayers have been effective?

Paul is sitting behind bars and the church he has founded is suffering persecution, and Paul's advice to the persecuted church is: **Rejoice**. Rejoice, Paul says, not just when things are going well, but REJOICE in **ALL** circumstances.

How do we do this? How can we rejoice while suffering persecution?

Makes me wonder how Paul managed to rejoice while sitting in prison facing possible death?

We all face tough situations in life, so it makes sense we might want to know what Paul has learned about prayer. Hopefully we don't have to face prison time or persecution, but we all face situations such as illness, loss, physical or mental suffering, stresses and anxieties at some point in life - - - maybe you are dealing with something right now. Maybe you would like to know, 'how can I rejoice?' or 'what will prayer do for me?'

Let's think on Paul's words again: "*The LORD is near . . . 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 Jesus Christ.*"

Paul reminds us that in ALL situations the answer is prayer. Paul also reminds us that the Lord is near, and because the Lord is near in prayer, we can experience Christ's peace, a peace which transcends all understanding, a peace that will guard our heart and our mind.

Now, some of you are not fully convinced. You may have unanswered prayers, which leaves you a little skeptical. Perhaps you think of prayer as those poetic lines we repeat together each Sunday, and you wonder if the words are any more effective than the group of people you are reciting them with. Perhaps you think Paul was a little bit crazy, and you doubt that anyone could rejoice under such circumstances. Perhaps you want to believe in prayer, but

what is prayer, anyway?

Prayer, my friends, is a gift? It is the gift of communication - the gift of communion. Prayer is part of discipleship. Prayer is an element of relationship - our relationship with God and our relationship with one another. Prayer is personal - its about you and God. Prayer is also universal - it is about you, God, and neighbour. Prayer is about giving and receiving, and prayer will draw us closer to God and closer to one another.

What does prayer do?

Let's look first at what prayer does not do. Prayer is not a means of receiving unlimited wishes. Prayer is not a 1-800-fix-my-problems hotline. Jesus told us, "*in this world you will have troubles.*", But, Jesus goes on to say, "*take heart, for I have overcome the world.*" John 16:33

Paul had troubles – the early church had troubles – yet they could rejoice.

Jesus makes no promise of fixing our troubles. He does, however, promise to walk with us through those dark days.

Listen again to the words from Living Faith. "Life in Christ **involves** prayer, the seeking of God's will and blessing on all of life. Prayer is **openness** to the presence of God. In words, or in absence of words, prayer is the **focusing** of our lives towards God. As we commune (which is to talk, pray, express our feelings, open ourselves to God, to yearn deeply for God's comforting presence) as we **commune** with God **through** Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit **enables** us to **express** our deepest longings, and we **experience** the **sustaining power** of God's presence.

What does prayer do? **Prayer invites God into our lives.** It is our stepping towards God's outstretched hand. Prayer is our reaching out to take hold of the hand of God. It is this awesome interaction between you and God – God reaching out to bless you and you reaching towards God to say, 'thank you'.

James 4:8 tells us: "draw near to God and He will draw near to you."

What does this mean? Well, in the context of prayer, this means that prayer is not merely a conversation, but prayer is about drawing near – coming closer to God. Prayer is about being in a relationship with God.

God's hand is always outstretched and ready to hold us close, but we are only as close to God as we chose to be. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.

God calls out to us through the splendor of creation, through the words of Scripture, through the Gospel of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and through the gentle whisper of the Holy Spirit calling out to us, but God will not force us to respond. Prayer is a choice! You can choose to respond to God through prayer, or you can remain quiet, but it is a choice.

In prayer we draw near. In prayer we cry out ABBA – Father – my Lord and my God. In prayer we reach out our hand to touch the hand of God. In prayer the Holy Spirit enables us to see the goodness of God’s creation. In prayer we are better able understand the words of Scripture. In prayer we enter into the Gospel story and we begin to walk that journey with Christ – our journey of faith. In prayer we see and hear God’s will for our lives. In prayer we choose to say to God – not my will, but Your will be done!

Through prayer we invite or welcome the Holy Spirit to accompany us through the good times and the bad ones. Through prayer we grow closer to God and to one another.

Prayer is a gift – Prayer is relationship – Prayer is a journey

So how do we get this gift? How do we have this relationship? How do we enter into this journey?

How do we pray?

Well, there are many types of gifts, many kinds of relationships, and many types of journeys. Prayer too has variety. There is no single way to pray any more than there is a single way if communicating with the people around you. God relates to us in different ways, and He has given us a range of ways to be in relationship with Him.

You may find it helpful to write your prayers in a book (like a diary or journal). The written words can help you remember and focus on the people or situations you are praying for.

Keep a pen or pencil in hand and listen as you pray – write what you are thinking or what you feel God is saying in that situation.

It may be helpful for you to find a quiet time and place to pray. Sitting quietly in prayer is no easy task at first. Think of prayer like a muscle – the more you do it the stronger your prayer life becomes.

Try going for a walk (find the place that works for you) – walk with God and let Him open your eyes to the world around you. Walk with God and tell Him how you are feeling (**how you are really feeling**) – walk with God and tell Him about your neighbours (pray for them as you walk past their houses). Walk with God and

just enjoy His company (feel the peace His presence brings - - enjoy your time with God)

Kneel beside your bed, unless you have bad knees like me, then curl up in a comfortable chair or sprawl out on the couch (remember, this is you spending time with God – find the place that works for you)

Bring God’s Word with you. Read – pray – let God speak to you – let God walk with you through the story of creation, grace and salvation.

If you are a writer – write out your prayer. If you love to talk – then talk it out with God. If you are a singer – sing your prayer. If you have a household full of kids and no quiet time in your life – invite God to join you in the chaos of your day (you just may be surprised at the goodness God brings out of chaos).

There are no set ways to pray, any more than there are set rules to a relationship. It is about you being in relationship with God.

What do we pray?

We pray what is in our hearts. We question – we praise – we give thanks – we ask – we cry – we confess – and of equal importance, we listen. (this is often the part of prayer we find the most difficult – but keep trying)

If you are task oriented and you want a guideline for prayer, try to remember the word ACTS.

A- Adoration or Acknowledgement. Acknowledge God the Creator and His all-powerful, all-knowing unconditional loving nature and goodness. Voice your admiration to God.

C- Confession, admitting our sins and confessing our need for God’s grace.

T- Thanksgiving. Can we ever give God enough thanks??? (just for the record, the answer is no)

S - Supplication, which is taking all our cares to the Lord, praying for ourselves, for others, and for situations where we see a need for God’s intercession.

Prayer – spending time with God, shapes our Christian life and strengthens our faith. Prayer does not necessarily change our circumstances (think of Jesus’

prayer in the garden, “*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.*”) Prayer does not necessarily change our circumstances; but rather, **prayer changes us.**

Prayer helps us understand God’s love for us, which changes how we feel about ourselves.

Exploring God’s will through prayer can change the way you view what is happening around you and can be the guiding light that keeps you on track and keeps you rejoicing.

Does prayer work?

Absolutely!

If what you seek is a closer relationship with your Creator.

If you invite the Holy Spirit to lead you.

If you will follow Christ’s examples in prayer and life.

If you will join with Christians throughout the world in praising and adoring the wonderful ways of God.

If you choose to give thanks in ALL circumstances – the good times and the bad.

If you will confess your sins and acknowledge your need to be in communion with the Author of salvation – **then yes, YES** prayer works – YES prayer is effective.

My friends, prayer **IS** effective, and when you live in prayer, you will know with certainty that God **IS** near.

To God be all the glory. AMEN

