

John 17:1-26

Prayer is Love

To pray is to love

Christians talk a lot about prayer. Hopefully we do a lot of praying too. We certainly try to infuse our worship services with prayer...opening prayer, prayer of confession, prayer for illumination, prayer of dedication, prayers of the people, The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, The Lord's Prayer. Hopefully we have figured out that prayer is an integral part of being Christian.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 The apostle Paul writes ,¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (ESV). This does not mean that we have to be down on our knees in prayer at all times, but it does mean being prayerful as you go through the circumstances and experiences of your life.

Jesus' own life was one of prayer. He prayed before nearly everything he did from eating a meal, to healing, to walking on water. Many times, his prayers were prayers of thanksgiving to God. Many other prayers asked for God to help others understand, to have their eyes and hearts opened to God's word, not only the spoken word, but the word that was before them in the flesh through Jesus.

Many of you likely grew up saying prayers at bedtime or before a meal and those patterns may still be ingrained in you. For many more people, prayer only happens in times of crisis, when it feels like they have no control over a situation. As long as we feel we have some control we may not resort to prayer as it means that we can influence the outcome without divine intervention. But when that moment comes that you know there is nothing you personally can do to change a situation, that is when one starts praying.

And this is not a bad thing. It is reassuring to know that God is always present and available in our greatest times of need. But in our self-reliance, it can be hard to pray when we think we have things under control, or we get angry at God when our prayers are not answered as we think they should be.

When prayer is not part of our regular life of faith we sometimes treat it as a magic wand, hoping that whatever we touch will be changed by the prayer. Thing is, what is changed by prayer is our hearts. Even if one starts out angry when praying, over time, whether it be that moment or months later we discover anger is no longer part of the equation. Our circumstances may not have changed, but we are changed through prayer.

The scripture passage from John 17 is Jesus' longest recorded prayer and it is a beautiful model of prayer. The first five verses are directed at the personal relationship between Jesus and God. The next section of the prayer, verses 6-19 are Jesus' prayer for his disciples, and the last verses are a prayer for unity and love.

Now you may not recall, but Jesus is saying this prayer the night before he is to face crucifixion. He also says it when and where his disciples can hear him praying. Jesus knows what he is about to face, and his prayer is one of love and concern, not for himself, but for those he loves most dearly. Those he knows will be most rocked by the events that will take place in the coming days, and those he has entrusted with his words, words that are meant to be shared, taught, and lived out.

This is a prayer born out of love. For all that we have been taught or understood about prayer, prayer is ultimately about love. You cannot pray and hate. You may start out that way, but true prayer is about caring for another. If you are praying for someone you dislike or has hurt you, someone who has made you angry or frustrated, you will find that your heart softens toward them. Even if your intention was to prayer the worst for them, over time your heart will soften because to even bother with them in prayer means to love yourself enough to want the circumstance to change.

Having said that, prayer does not always change a circumstance, it may not even change another person, but it will always change you. To pray is to love. When Jesus prayed it was because of his great love for people and not just his disciples, but for all people, those both living and those who were not yet born. This is one of the most wonderful things about this particular prayer in John 17, that Jesus prayed for us, because Jesus loved us before we even came to be followers of Christ.

In case you missed it, hear these loving words again,

²⁰"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (NRSV)

I ask on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word. That line is about us, as is the whole section that follows it. Jesus prayed for us.

My grandmother died in Holland back in 1989. She was in her eighties, but like so many in the Netherlands was still an avid cyclist. In fact, it was her only means of transportation and had been all her life. One day as she was walking her bike across a street she was struck by a small pickup and died a few hours later. When her children gathered together in their family home and went through her belongings, tucked inside her Bible they found a prayer. All of them were deeply moved when they realized that

she had prayed for them throughout their lives, but not only that, she had been praying for the generations that would come after her, those both living and yet to be born.

Up until that point they had not realized how deep their mother's pray life had been and just how much she hoped for the generations to come. It also spoke to her great love. Think of what it means to a granddaughter or grandson to know that there were prayed for from before they were born, and not only that, their grandmother had prayed for their children. One might wonder if she took for her example of how to pray from this very passage in John where Jesus prays, not only for those who he knows now, but for those yet to know the Good News of forgiveness, hope, faith, joy, grace, and profound love.

Now on this Mother's Day, not all of us get to look back on wonderful memories of family. Some people had some pretty miserable upbringings and know that prayer was not one of their mother or father's practices. Many, for one reason or another, do not and will not have generations of family that will come after them. No worries, you are in good company, Jesus didn't have generations of children that came after him either, but that didn't stop him for praying for the generations that would come after him.

What all of us can take from both the prayer of Jesus and the prayer of my grandmother is that prayer matters. Prayers of love matter and that to pray is to love. Professor and minister Rev. Dr. David Lose writes there are a couple of things about prayer,

Prayer is a chance to remind ourselves of blessing and give thanks.

and...

Prayer is a chance to share our deep-seated concerns, worries, and

fears and ask for help.¹

These things wouldn't matter if we did not love. Giving thanks doesn't matter when you think the world revolves around you. It matters when you care about others.

Understanding blessing as a gift that comes out of love, doesn't matter if you think you are who you are only because of what you have done to get there on your own.

Blessing matters when you see it as a gift.

And one does not pray about deep concerns, worries and fears, asking for help if we did not think that there was a greater love than our own. We pray to God because we trust that God cares. And the prayer of Jesus for his disciples and for those of us yet to come assures us of that love and care.

God loves. Jesus prayed out of love. We pray because of love and through it discover that God is love. In the coming days, think of the love behind your prayers, where is the love directed, where does it come from. If you have someone that you are angry with, rather than prayer vengeance, pray that God will give them the best in their lives. If you

¹ David Lose. <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/05/easter-7-b-pray-is-love/>. Accessed May 12, 2018

rarely or never pray, say one pray this week, and do it out of love for someone or as a prayer of thanksgiving. Begin to recognize the love in your prayers, love for God, love for others, and love for yourself and God's love for people.

To pray is to love. It is that simple and that complex. It is beautiful, profound, and filled with irony. Know that you were prayed for over two thousand years ago when Jesus spoke this prayer in love for his disciples and for those who would believe through the words of the disciples. You are loved.

In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.

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