

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 28, 2010**

A HEART FOR PRAYER

Colossians 4:2-6

You probably know about the man who was running late for an important business appointment and he couldn't find a parking space. As he frantically drove around the block, he became so desperate that he decided to pray. He looked up toward the heavens and said: "Lord, take pity on me. If you find me a parking space, I'll go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life, and not only that, I'll give up drinking."

At just that moment, miraculously, a parking space appeared. The man looked up again and said: "Never mind. I found one."

This is a message about prayer. Not the kind of game with God this businessman played, but genuine, God-honoring prayer that comes from the heart. It is about developing a heart for prayer.

We've been talking about matters of the heart off and on since the beginning of the year. We talked about the importance of *guarding* our hearts, since the heart is the well spring out of which all of life flows (Proverbs 4:23). We talked about *giving* our hearts by loving God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and by loving others in the same way that Jesus loved (and loves) us. And we have talked about the importance of having a heart for God's Word. We said that the Bible, unlike any other book ever written, is the Book that understands us. It is a mirror in which we see a true and accurate reflection of ourselves and our nature. It is the handbook of salvation, showing us the way to be saved through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. And the Bible is, as James Boice said, "the living voice of God." The Bible is God's Book, God-breathed from beginning to end. It is fully inspired by God, unerring in all it teaches, authoritative in our lives, "the final and only infallible rule of faith and life" (Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1).

In order to be healthy, vibrant, faithful and effective followers of Christ in our 21st century world, we need to develop and exercise a heart devoted to God's Word.

But that is not all. In addition to a heart for God's Word, we need to develop a heart for prayer, and make prayer an integral part of our lives. Prayer is central to a healthy, growing relationship with God. If you neglect prayer, if you are haphazard or sporadic in your prayer life, it will hinder your spiritual growth.

Prayer is not some kind of afterthought in the Christian life. It is not an optional add-on that is just for spiritual giants or people who are fanatical about their faith. And it is way more than just a religious obligation we are supposed to fulfill. A heart for prayer is at the heart of the Christian life.

In Colossians 4:2, Paul makes three points about prayer that we need to take to heart today.

1. DEVOTE YOURSELVES TO PRAYER

First, he says, “devote yourselves to prayer.” The word “devote” gives us an indication that he is not talking about some kind of casual or sporadic activity. He is calling the 1st century believers in Colosse – and the 21st century believers here in northern Virginia – to take prayer seriously and to give it high priority in our lives.

The Winter Olympics in Vancouver, British Columbia, will come to an end later today (but not before the U. S. Men’s Hockey Team goes for the gold medal). If you have watched any of the Olympics over the last sixteen days, you have seen some remarkable performances by some extraordinary athletes. These Olympic athletes, whether skiers or figure skaters, speed skaters or snowboarders or hockey players, have to be devoted to their sports in order to excel. They must devote themselves to rigorous training and self-discipline. They have to make sacrifices in their personal lives in order to be able to compete at the highest level, to be the best they can be in their sports, just to make it to the Olympics. Some of them, like Apolo Ohno and Lindsey Vonn, have devoted years, if not their whole lives, to have a chance to win Olympic gold.

Paul wants us to be like that in our praying. He wants us, if you will, to be Olympic pray-ers. He wants us to devote ourselves to the blessed discipline of prayer.

What does it mean to devote ourselves to prayer? It means to make prayer a high priority in our daily lives. It means to make a daily appointment with God, and then keep it. It means to build time for prayer into our daily routine. For some of us, the best time of the day for a planned period of prayer may be at the beginning of the day, before the demands of the day press in. For others, the best time may be at the end of the day, when you can quietly reflect on the events of the day and bring your cares and concerns to the Father. For still others, the best time may be some other time, perhaps in the middle of the day, if your schedule allows, or before supper.

When you do it, of course, is not nearly as important as doing it. Consistently. With diligence. And without giving up either on prayer or on God Himself, if answers to your prayers seem slow in coming. This is the reason Jesus told His disciples the parable of the persistent widow, the woman who kept bugging the unjust and uncaring judge until she got justice (Luke 18:1-8). The point of the parable was to teach the disciples to keep on praying and not give up (18:1). Sometimes prayer may feel like nothing more than a duty to fulfill. At other times it will be an almost unimaginable pleasure. Whichever it may be on any particular occasion, God wants us to keep at it. He wants us to devote ourselves to prayer.

There is a place in the Christian life for structured, scheduled times of prayer. There is also a place for spontaneous times of prayer, as we lift our hearts to the Lord in any given moment, whether in silent prayer or prayers spoken aloud. There is never a time when it is not time to pray in one way or another. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 says: “Pray continually.” Unceasingly. And there is no God-free zone or prayer-free zone anywhere under heaven. You can pray anywhere and everywhere. Maybe not out loud, but I promise you, there *is* prayer in schools and in the workplace, there *is* prayer in the White House and on Capitol Hill. Just as there is

never a time when it is not time to pray, there is no place where it is not the right place to pray.

Devote yourself to prayer. Make it an integral part of your life as a follower of Christ. And keep at it. Don't lose heart. That is Paul's first point.

2. BE WATCHFUL

Second, he says, when you pray, be watchful. Most of us pray with our eyes closed. But Paul is saying, in a figurative sense, that we must keep our eyes open when we pray. Keep your eyes open to what is happening in the world, to what is happening in the lives of people God has placed in your life. Keep your eyes open to what God is doing in the world. Stay alert for signs of where God is moving. Stay spiritually alert so you can be on guard against temptations which may sneak up on you or try to entice you and entrap you.

When we pray, God wants us to be like the men of Issachar in 1 Chronicles 12:32, who understood the times in which they lived. He wants us to be aware of the problems and challenges people face. He wants us to be alert to the opportunities He gives for witness and service. And He wants us to seek and follow the leading of His Spirit in all our praying.

Be watchful, and pray with the eyes of your heart wide open. That is Paul's second point.

3. BE THANKFUL

Third, Paul says, be thankful in your praying. Pray with an attitude of gratitude, with a spirit of thankfulness. Be intentional about giving thanks to God for all that He has done – in creation, in history, in salvation, in your life and the lives of people you love. Give thanks to God for what He is doing in the world and in your life right now. Give thanks to God for the manifold manifestations of His marvelous grace. Give thanks to God for the blessing of prayers answered and needs met.

Every day, think of something in your life for which to give thanks to God. No matter what you're going through, no matter what you're dealing with, everybody has something for which to be thankful.

Here is a good practice for all of us: Before you go to sleep each night, think of five blessings in your life that day, five things for which you are thankful. Then give thanks to God for those blessings. They might include big things, like the saving love of Jesus or healing from a serious illness. And they might include smaller things, like a warm house on a wintry night or an uplifting conversation with a friend or a beautiful sunset. If it seems too hard at first to come up with five things, start with just three.

There is never a time when it is not time to be thankful. So make thankfulness a never-neglected part of your prayer life.

The point of all this is to make prayer an integral part of your daily life. Not haphazard or sporadic or shallow. But real and rich and rooted in a radical reliance on God.

The truth is that prayer is a simple yet powerful way to exercise your faith. It is a way for you and me to put our faith into action, because the act of praying itself is an expression of faith. It is a way of expressing our trust in God. When we pray, we are bearing witness to our conviction that God is real. That God is there. That God cares about us and this world. That God hears us when we pray to Him. And that God answers prayer.

Our old friend John Calvin said that we do not pray in order to inform God about things He doesn't know, or to rally Him to do His duty, or to urge Him as though He were reluctant to come to our aid. On the contrary, we pray in order to arouse ourselves to seek Him, to exercise our faith in meditating on His promises, and to relieve ourselves of our anxieties by giving them over to Him. We pray, he said, in order to declare that from God alone we hope and expect to receive, both for ourselves and for others, all good things. Prayer is not a means of manipulating God to do what we want. It is an expression of our faith and trust in God.

It is true that God does not always give us the answer we want when we pray. Nor does He always answer our prayers when we want. He does not operate on our timetable. We seem to live so much of our lives in a hurry, rushing from one place to another, from one activity to another, from one meeting or deadline or responsibility to another. Because we are so often in a hurry, we want God to be in a hurry, too. We want God to hurry up about answering our prayers. We want Him to hurry up and do what we want Him to do. Am I right? But have you noticed that Jesus was never in a hurry? Never. God the Father is never in a hurry. And, though we don't always understand His ways, He is always right on time. I really believe that.

God wants us to devote ourselves to prayer. He wants us to be watchful and thankful. He wants us to keep on praying and not give up. Though He may not give you the specific answer you desire to your prayers, He will give you something even better. He will give you Himself. And He will give you His grace – grace that is sufficient in every situation.

THE CORNERSTONE OF ALL WE DO

Just this week I received the latest E-gram update from our missionaries Phil and Diane Thrash, who are part of a church-planting team in Berlin, Germany. I was particularly struck by one thing they said. "Prayer," they said, "is a team value and the cornerstone of all we do." *The cornerstone of all we do.* They have made a commitment to devote themselves to the ministry of prayer as a primary means of carrying out their mission to make disciples and build Christ's church in the part of Berlin that was formerly under Communist rule.

Isn't that a worthy goal for us, too – for our church family and for each of us in our personal lives and ministries – to make prayer the cornerstone of all we do?

I realize that some of you, perhaps many of you, are men and women of prayer. There is no doubt in my mind that some of you are way beyond me in your devotion to prayer. Like Phil

and Diane Thrash, you understand the value of prayer and you have made it the cornerstone of all you do. That is a beautiful thing. I praise God for you. I thank you for your faithfulness in prayer. And I urge you, in the name of Jesus, to keep on praying, to keep on asking and seeking and knocking at heaven's door (Matthew 7:7-11).

But I also realize that some of you may feel overwhelmed by what you've heard today. You may feel like you're not spiritual enough or eloquent enough to pray prayers that make any difference. Or, you may feel like you don't even know how to begin to pray in a meaningful way.

Sometimes, I think, we make prayer more difficult or more complicated than it really is. Sometimes, we try to impress God – or, if we're praying publicly, we try to impress other people with our prayers. Pastors have to be especially careful about that.

Prayer is really not all that complicated. It is simply communication with God. It is simply a way for us to share our heart with our heavenly Father who loves us.

THREE KINDS OF PRAYER

Steve Brown is a retired pastor and seminary professor, the author of several books and host of a radio program called *Key Life*. He is one of the most interesting Christians I know. In one of his books (*What Was I Thinking? Things I've Learned Since I Knew It All*), he talks about interviewing Anne Lamott on his radio show. Anne Lamott is a famous author who has published non-fiction works as well as several novels. She is a former atheist who has come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and she has written about her faith in her books *Traveling Mercies* (1999), *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (2005), and *Grace (Eventually)* (2007). Referring to her politics and her views on certain social issues, Brown says he doesn't agree with her about much of anything except Jesus, but that's enough. That is probably a good reminder to us when we encounter people who agree with us about Jesus but practically nothing else. Yes, the gospel has implications for all of life, and some of us are less consistent in living out those implications than others, but we must not allow our disagreements about politics or social issues to fracture the fundamental unity we have through faith in Christ.

But I digress. The point I wanted to get to is that Anne Lamott says there are three kinds of prayer:

First: "Help!"
Second: "Wow!"
Third: "Thank You!"

This is not all there is to prayer. There are other kinds of prayer as well. But if the practice of prayer is new to you, if you feel intimidated by the notion of a structured daily time of prayer, or if you feel like you just don't know how to pray, this is a great place to start.

When you're in trouble of some kind or you have a need, cry out to God for help. You will find that He is an ever-present help in times of trouble (Psalm 46:1). He invites us to cast all our cares and burdens on Him because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7).

When you catch a glimpse of God's greatness or glory, when you see His power or loving kindness displayed in some way, you can say: "Wow! What an amazing God You are!"

And when you become aware of having received God's gifts in your life, be sure to stop and say: "Thank You, God!"

CONCLUSION

In your life, I urge you to make prayer the cornerstone of all you do. I urge you to devote yourself to prayer, keeping the eyes of your heart open and always praying with a spirit of gratitude to God.

And do not neglect opportunities to pray with others. I believe God wants each of us to develop a heart for prayer which is expressed in our personal devotion to prayer. But I also believe God wants us to come together in the name of Jesus to pray. We do it in worship every Sunday morning. Prayer is an integral part of our worship. Some of you, I know, are part of smaller groups in which you take time to pray for each other and other concerns as well.

Another opportunity for prayer is what I'm calling "Sunday Evening Prayers," which will be held just one Sunday a month, usually the first Sunday of the month, starting next Sunday, March 7, at 6:30 P. M. I hope many of you will come and take part in this informal hour of prayer. It is one way we can devote ourselves to prayer and encourage one another.

A heart for prayer is at the heart of the Christian life. May it be the cornerstone of all we do.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.