

The Proof of Prayer
Philippians 4:1–9
Sunday, October 11, 2020

This past week I read a quote by Pope Francis that I couldn't stop thinking about. He said, "The proof of prayer is real love for our neighbor." Now, at first I read that and thought, "The *proof* of prayer? Why does prayer need *proof*? Isn't prayer its *own* proof? If I'm praying, that's proof that I'm praying. What am I trying to *prove* in prayer?" And then I thought, "This seems *backwards*. *The proof of prayer is real love for our neighbor*. It seems like it should be, 'The proof of real love for our neighbor is prayer.'" That's how we often think about prayer, right? If I *love* someone, one of the ways I can *evidence* my love for them is by *praying* for them. But that's not what he's saying here. He's not saying, "If you love someone, you will pray for them." What he's saying is, "If you *pray* for someone, you will *love* them." If you regularly, consistently hold someone in your heart and in your mind – even someone you disagree with – lifting them up to God for the blessing that they need, then you will grow in your capacity to love that person. *The proof of prayer is real love for our neighbor*.

For the past six weeks, we have been looking at Paul's letters to the Romans and the Philippians in the context of a quote by theologian Israel Kamudzandu, who says, "The main challenge of our time is to live with a transformed mind, a mind that is open to the other and leads to inner transformation. It is crucial for Christians to consider each human being as a loving partner on the journey of life, and to live each day beyond the self." We have focused primarily on the *second* half of that quote – considering each human being as a loving partner on the journey of life and living each day beyond the self. But the *first* half – living with a transformed mind that is open to the other and leads to inner transformation – that sounds exactly like what Pope Francis is saying. It's *not*, "If you experience inner transformation, you will be open to the other." It's, "If you are open to the other, you will experience inner transformation." If you *pray*

for someone, you will *love* them. If your heart, your mind, your life is open to this other person, if there is *room* in your life for this other person, it will transform your connection to them.

And one of the *ways* that we make room in our lives for other people is through *prayer*. How can we come to consider each person as a loving partner in the journey of life and live each day beyond the self? Through regular and consistent practices of prayer.

That's what Paul says to the Philippians. This is a really well-known section of Philippians. Chances are, if you're familiar with Philippians, this is the part that most of us are familiar with. "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice. Do not worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Those are *comforting* verses for a lot of people. But we need to put them in context. Paul isn't just offering up some timeless platitude or generic words of wisdom. He is addressing a very specific situation.

The very first thing Paul says in chapter 4 is, "I urge Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." Why would he have to urge them to be of the same mind unless they *weren't*. Paul is addressing a situation of conflict in the Philippian church, specifically naming two women who appear to be having some sort of disagreement. He is calling them to put aside their differences in exchange for this bigger picture, this bigger understanding of their life together in Christ.

And so it is immediately after saying *that*, that Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." That word *rejoice* comes from the Greek word *chairō*, and it literally means,

“grace.” It’s the word that Paul uses at the beginning of this letter when he says, “Grace and peace.” So one understanding of it is to rejoice, but another understanding at the root of it is, “Have *grace* in the Lord always; again I will say, grace.” You are in this situation of conflict, and you are called to have *grace* with one another. And the way we can *do* that, Paul is saying, is to not *worry* about anything. That word *worry* comes from a Greek word that means, “to divide or split into factions.” Do not *divide* yourselves or your minds about anything, but be of the *same* mind in the Lord by *praying* about everything. Let your requests be made known to God, and the *peace* of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Paul calls them to be united and to nurture grace, unconditional love, in their life together through a regular and consistent practice of prayer. Praying for each other will bring about inner transformation and lead them to love one another.

This is why Jesus calls us to pray, not just for the people we *love*, but for our *enemies*. When we pray for someone we love or for someone with whom we are at odds, that is an act of living beyond the self. Opening up my life, my heart, my mind to make room for this other person. We become *bound* to them, our lives become *linked*, and they *become* our loving partner on the journey of life.

Pastor and author John Pavlovitz says that “Praying for people is a beautiful expression of care and solidarity, an effort to somehow stand beside someone...to let them know that we love them and feel their urgency...It lets people understand the depth of our concern for them, to allow them to feel a little less alone, to lift them emotionally and physically...We should pray and let people know we are praying for them; that we are pulling for them and thinking of them and standing in solidarity (with them).” He says, “I believe prayer changes our hearts as we pray, it tethers us to one another, and it increases hope in otherwise hopeless situations...I believe prayer

works by unlocking our empathy for others. I believe it binds us together in relationship. I believe it to be a beautiful expression of love for people who are suffering. I believe it connects us personally to God in ways that cannot be quantified. I believe it is a sacred act of kindness.”¹

This past week someone in the church reached out to me and said, “Hey, I have this big meeting on Tuesday morning. It’s really important for my business. And I’m anxious about it. I just want to make sure that I say what I need to say in the way that I need to say it; that God would give me the words to speak. Would you pray for me?” The first thing I did was to write it down (we’ll get back to that in a minute). I said, “Of course! I’d be happy to! What time is this meeting?” They told me it was at 11:30. And so at 11:30 on Tuesday morning, I stopped what I was doing. I sat quietly in my office and pictured that person in my mind. I held them there before I said anything. I pictured myself sitting next to them in this meeting, placing my hand on their shoulder. And then I asked God to bless them and give them everything they need in this moment. That God’s word would be spoken *to* them and *through* them. That they would have peace in that moment and, whatever the outcome, they would have *peace* in knowing that God’s will was done.

Now, I don’t know what *difference* my prayers made in that meeting. But they made a difference in our *relationship*. I was tethered to this person through the power of God’s Holy Spirit, bound to them, standing in solidarity with them, and this person knew that in this anxious moment, they were not alone. That there was someone standing with them. And *hopefully*, they could feel the presence of *God* with them in that moment, and it gave them peace. This person created room in their life for me by inviting me to pray for them, and I created room in my life

¹ John Pavlovitz, <https://johnpavlovitz.com/2019/08/27/prayer-doesnt-work/>

for them by doing it. And we became loving partners on the journey of life. It increased my capacity to love *them*, and hopefully it did the same for *them* toward *me*.

One year ago (which seems like *two* years after this year that we've had) I told you how I went to a prayer school outside of Kansas City. This was a two-day retreat at a church in which I was taught a new pattern of prayer for my life. My prayer life had become stagnant (as can so often happen to all of us), and I needed to find a new rhythm, a new way of connecting with God. The person leading this prayer school was a pastor and author named Brian Zahnd, and he grounded our approach to prayer in this quote. He said over and over again throughout the weekend, "The purpose of prayer is not to get God to do what we want, but to be properly formed." What does *that* mean, that the purpose of prayer is to be properly formed?

He spent a good deal of time talking with us about *contemplative* prayer, just sitting in silence for five minutes, ten minutes, 20 minutes, just *being* with Jesus. And he said, "The goal of contemplation is *love*. Sitting with Jesus increases our capacity to love." So the purpose of prayer is to be properly formed in *love*. Love for *God* and love for my *neighbor*. That sounds just like what Paul and Pope Francis are saying, right?

One of the things I started doing coming out of that weekend that I had never done before was keeping a prayer journal. I have this little notebook in which I write down all the people that I am praying for. If someone asks me to pray for them, I write their name down. And each day when I come to God in prayer, I go through that list. "God, I ask your blessing on *this* person and *this* person." It's a way of being *intentional* about praying for people when I tell them that I'm going to pray for them. Because let's be honest. It's *so easy* to say to someone, "Oh, I'm praying for you," without actually praying for them. That's become kind of the cliché in our

society, right? *Thoughts and prayers.* But to *tell* someone that without *actually* praying for them, does that increase our capacity to love them? Does that make room in our hearts and minds and lives for them? Are we truly being their loving partner on the journey of life?

So two things about this. First, if someone asks you to pray for them, or if you tell someone you're praying for them, you need to actually do it. Even if it's just one minute a day when you stop and breathe and picture that person in your mind and hold them there and ask God to bless them. That's enough. That's *a lot*. And we all get busy, but this is about making room in our lives for this other person. Strengthening our connection to them and to God. So the second thing is that the way we can be *intentional* about doing this is by writing it down. You can get a little notebook that you keep with you where you write their name down so you don't forget. You can keep a list in the Notes app on your phone. I really want to encourage you to try this, even if you only start with one person on that list. It will grow, trust me.

It is a powerful thing to be able to say to someone, "I prayed for you this morning." It's not bragging or flaunting your prayer life. It strengthens your connection to *them* and to *God*. It increases your capacity to love them, and it lets them *feel* your love. It's an act of sacred kindness that let's us know we are not alone. We are bound to each other and to God. There is someone standing with us in the challenges and celebrations of life. And, selfishly, it feels good. It feels good to hold people in prayer like this. To be connected to them like this. There is not always something that I can do for people who are sick or hurting or struggling. But I can do *this*. And that makes me happy.

If you regularly and consistently pray for someone – someone you *love* or someone you *struggle* to love – it will increase your capacity to love them. It will change *you*, and it will change your

relationship. It will take you beyond yourself and make you loving partners on the journey of life. So let us practice this together now, coming to God in prayer, making room in our lives for the other, and binding ourselves in love to those who are on our hearts and minds. Let us pray.