

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: DRAWING NEAR**

(Growing in prayer)

### **Drawing Near - and Praying by the Book** Study #3

(Lots of passages. Really)

#### **Introduction: Figuring out prayer...**

With the approach of the Sochi Winter Olympics, our attention turns to Russia. And with the Games being held in Russia, things will be interesting - and probably not only on the ice and snow.

We've already seen some small and some not-so-small controversy surrounding how Russia has organized the Games. The fact that there is controversy doesn't surprise. With Russia, there is always a degree of intrigue. The Russians know how to stir a plot. It will, indeed, be interesting.

My own fascination with Russia began back in college, when Russia = the Soviet Union. I had taken a course in Russian history and was hooked. The country is an amazing set of contradictions.

- There is very cold weather and there are very warm people.
- There is a quite justifiable paranoia, as Russia has been plundered by outside dynasties for - but then they oppress their own people.
- Russia is a poor country by any standard, yet its capitol, Moscow, is the most expensive place in the world to live.
- Although presently overrun by alcoholism, drugs, and a scary mafia, yet the great Slavic soul has produced amazing literature (Solzhenitsyn, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy) and music (Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky), and its people have an insatiable hunger for God.

- Russia is enormous, reaching from Europe (St. Petersburg) to Asia (Vladivostok), and occupying nine time zones, so big that we don't know whether to classify Russia as Western or Oriental.

The best minds have tried and failed to figure Russia out.

Once, at a critical moment in World War II, Winston Churchill was asked what course he believed Russia would take against Hitler's Germany - remember, Russia was an ally in World War II.

Churchill responded with the now famous line: *"I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It (Russia) is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."*

Yep. That pretty well sums up Russia. And for many of us, at least in some ways and on some days, that also sums up our thoughts about prayer.

When it comes to the topic of prayer, there is mystery. A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. Thoughtful people have pondered prayer as long as people have pondered anything.

Worship is one thing. God is worthy of our worship, adoration, and praise and we gladly give it. He is awesome and majestic and holy and loving. Worship makes sense.

Confession, too, we get. We sin and so we go to God for fresh cleansing. We ask Jesus to, in a sense, wash our feet. Clean us up. We say the same thing about our sin that He does. We confess.

It is when it comes to praying FOR THINGS that things get confusing.

Of the courses I took in seminary, I remember one, in particular, being exceptionally challenging. It wasn't Greek or Hebrew or theology. It was a course on the spiritual life. It was a class on walking with God.

The professor admitted that he was (understandably, from my perspective now) wrestling with how to grade us in the section on prayer. Minutes prayed? Fervency observed? Answers received?

We wonder...

How do our prayers impact an all-knowing, all-powerful God? If God knows what is going to happen, what does my prayer accomplish? Won't God do what He has planned to do with or without my advice? How can God balance answers to my prayers with His responses to prayers by others for opposite outcomes? Why do answers to prayer seem so inconsistent, even capricious? Does prayer change God, or does it just change me? Do thousands of people uniting in prayer over an Internet request do more good than a few close friends laying hands on a suffering brother?

We live in a cause/effect world. What do I do when I see little effect from the cause of my prayer?

Once, a British pastor and theologian - D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones - wrote, *"Of all the activities in which the Christian engages, and which are part of the Christian life, there is surely none which causes so much perplexity, and raises so many problems, as the activity we call prayer."*

Yep. Prayer can be confusing, all right.

It was confusing to Jimmy Stewart's character in the old movie, *Shenandoah*. Around the dinner table, surrounded by his family, Stewart prayed:  
*"Lord, we cleared this land. We plowed it and sowed it and harvested it. We cooked the harvest. It wouldn't be here. We wouldn't be eating it if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dogbone hard for every crumb and morsel. But we thank you just the same anyway Lord for this food that we are about to eat. Amen."*

This morning, we are going to consider prayer along a very different line than we have over the past two Sundays. We've briefly explored worship and confession. Today, we are thinking together about asking God for things. Asking Him to do things. Begging Him to intervene in our world.

Now, the philosophical questions I've been raising are important. I wrestle with them as much as the next guy (or as much as Lloyd-Jones, anyway). But those questions are not my focus today.

If you also wrestle with these and other questions about prayer I will tell you that I've found real help in turning to gifted Christian thinkers like C. S. Lewis<sup>1</sup> and Philip Yancey.<sup>2</sup>

The goal of today's message, though, is not to explain the intricacies of prayer or the mind of God or the interchange between man's free will and God's foreknowledge.

Today's goal is loftier.

I would wager that above and beyond your desire to "figure out" prayer is your desire to pray. As a child of God, you have a bent toward prayer, what we'll call a "prayer instinct."

You want to *"draw near to God."* You want to express your deepest longings to the One who loves you best and ask Him to do the things that only He can do.

Well, Scripture both feeds and directs your prayer instinct and we're going to listen to the Bible instruct us in prayer that pleases God.

Today, we are coming to God by faith, believing that He listens when we pray. We are coming to the God who calls us to pray, to the God who promises that He responds to our prayers.

We are coming to the God to whom Moses prayed when the Israelites rebelled - and God spared them. The Bible tells us that God *"changed His mind"* (Exodus 32:14) about what He had planned to do when Moses prayed.

We are coming to the God to whom Hannah prayed for a son - and God gave her Samuel in answer to her prayer. (1 Samuel 1)

We are coming to the God to whom Elijah came, praying once that it wouldn't rain - and, sure enough, it didn't rain for three and a half years - and then praying again that it would rain - and God sent an end to the drought. (See 1 Kings 17, 18)

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<sup>1</sup> Mere Christianity; his short letter to a friend, "Work and Prayer" is brilliant, found in God in the Dock

<sup>2</sup> Especially, Prayer: Does it Make Any Difference?

And about that prayer of Elijah...

Listen to what James says to us, by way of encouraging us to pray, *[James 5:17] ELIJAH WAS A MAN WITH A NATURE LIKE OURS, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. [18] Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.*

In other words, there was nothing special about Elijah. He was just a guy who prayed. And if God did wonderful and amazing things when he prayed, well, God will do wonderful things in response to your prayers, too, Christian. So pray!<sup>3</sup>

With confidence that God will do great things as we pray for things, we are going to take lessons in prayer from a great pray-er: the Apostle Paul.

So, if you frequently find yourself on the receiving end of prayer requests, if people ask you to pray for them on a regular basis, if you want to be the most effective pray-er possible, you'll want to pay extra close attention today.

Paul will show us not only what we would have expected to see (*THAT God wants us to ask Him for things*), he will also show us what we might not have expected to see (*WHAT it is that God most wants us to ask Him for*).

Today, we uncover a biblical sense of praying priority, of what is primary when it comes to the matter of praying for each other and praying for stuff.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 21:22 - *“And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive.”* Mark 11:24 - *“All things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be granted you.”* Matthew 6:6 - *“Your Father who sees in secret will repay you.”* Matthew 7:11 - *“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him.”* John 15:7 - *“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it shall be done to you.”* John 14:13-14 - *“And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.”*

Now, here at Northwest, nine times out of ten our practice on Sunday morning is that we will open the Bible to one passage and mine that passage for all its worth. Not today.

Today we are going to jump around from passage to passage to get a broad overview of what Paul has to say about asking God for things.<sup>4</sup>

First, we will turn to his letter to the Philippians, where he lines out the limits of things for which we may pray.

### **“Let Your Requests Be Made Known to God...” (Philippians 4:6-7)**

*[6] Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God [7], and the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

### **Prayer: Washing Away Worry**

How are we to eliminate worry and anxiety from our lives? Pray.

Now, of course, we Christians don't worry. We are *concerned*. We don't get anxious. We have *burdens*.

And just in case your *concerns* and *burdens* sometimes look a whole lot like *anxious worries* LIKE MINE DO (!), Paul's words are very helpful.

There is plenty of stuff to worry about if we're looking. Chief among them - for me! - is that I have the least control over the things in life I care about the most.

The welfare of those I love. Broad, societal direction. Spiritual growth in the lives of my friends. Salvation to come to my neighbors. Health - beyond what I can manage.

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<sup>4</sup> There are obviously many other places in Scripture that address prayer beyond the writings of Paul. I'm restricting myself to Paul today due to time.

Well, prayer defeats anxiety because prayer is a purposeful handing over of the reins of control of our lives to Someone stronger than we are, Someone who is in control.

The blessing of peace is a by-product of a life built on trust in God. And a life of trust in God is best built on a foundation of prayer.

### **Prayer: “everything” means “EVERYTHING”**

In these two verses Paul also gives instruction about what kinds of things we can feel free to pray about. It’s a big list. When he says “*everything*” he means that **nothing** is off limits.

- We can pray about the condition of our own soul, or about the purchase of new shoes.
- We can pray for the salvation of friends, or for a convenient parking place at the mall.
- We can pray that Jesus will return soon, or that our spouse makes it home safely from business travel.

I have conducted an exhaustive study of the Greek word for “*everything*.” It means “EVERYTHING”.

If you want to, you can pray that you will make that green light ahead of you, that we will get the rain we need, that our church will become increasingly healthy, or that you will have safety on your vacation.

You can pray that your backyard garden produces a good yield of tomatoes, that your child makes good friends at school, or that she makes good grades at school.

You can pray about what clothes to wear, your sex life, where to invest your money, what job offer to say “*Yes*” to, or whether to say “*Yes*” to a guy who asks you out for a date.

God welcomes prayers about our health, about the discipline to stay on our diet, about upcoming elections,<sup>5</sup> and about the federal deficit.

In Philippians 4:6-7, God opens up the door to His throne room and says, “*Come on in. Let your requests be made known - all of them. I’m listening.*”

We know from lots of passages in the Bible that when God’s people pray, He answers.

Sometimes, His answer is “*No*” and sometimes His answer is “*Not yet.*” And, of course, sometimes He comes through with a remarkable “*YES!*” But He always listens to our prayers and He always responds. He never ignores.

The point of Philippians 4:6-7 is **not** that God will do exactly what we want Him to do for us. (In fact, that would make prayer more like magic than asking a heavenly Father for something. How frightening it would be if God were to grant all of our requests!) Instead, Paul wants us to take note of the fact that God always listens.

We show how much we depend on Him by taking our cares to Him in prayer. By praying to a totally dependable God, our hearts learn to relax. Our anxieties really do begin to diminish.

One of the first things that we need to know about prayer is that we have the freedom to pray about anything and everything.

God’s throne room is open to you and you can always come to Him with your deepest desires, your fleeting cares, your pressing burdens, your highest aspirations, your most dread worries.

Everything in your life fits nicely under the broad umbrella of “*everything.*”

Interestingly enough, though, while Paul stated this broad freedom we have to approach God in prayer with any request we might have, the overall record of Paul’s actual prayers shows a much narrower focus.

Some years ago, I thumbed through Paul’s letters, paying special attention to his prayers. I wanted to get a feel for the flavor of the prayers that he prayed. I wanted to get the “big picture” when it came to prayer.

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<sup>5</sup> Christians vote, sure. But we honestly believe that more good is done on our knees than in the voting booth.

Well, Paul prayed a lot and he urged those to whom he was writing to pray a lot, too. What did Paul actually pray about? What did he urge Christians like us to pray about?

As I noted the emphasis and thrust of Paul's prayers, I became increasingly impressed that the kinds of things Paul primarily prayed for were often NOT the kinds of things that I primarily prayed for.

Since that time I have sought to bring my prayer life into conformity with the biblical model.

I certainly have not arrived at an apostolic level of praying. But I am seeking to grow in giving priority and emphasis to the things that received emphasis and priority in Paul's prayer life.

So, for the next couple of minutes, sit back and listen to an Apostle at prayer.

### **Making a Difference in Others - Through Prayer**

#### **Praying For Others' Spiritual Growth**

*Ephesians 1:17-19a - Increasing knowledge of God*

***[15] For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints, [16] do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; [17] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. [18] I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, [19] and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe."***

Simply put, Paul asks that God would allow the members of the church at Ephesus to know Him better.

He prays again later in the same letter, this time asking God to grace these same Christians with a faith that is based on the love of God toward them in Christ.

*Ephesians 3:14-19 - Spiritual riches*

***[14] For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, [15] from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, [16] that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, [17] so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, [18] may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, [19] and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.***

Paul told the Philippians what he prayed for them. He focused on their need to live out the faith in tangible ways - specifically for love and discernment.

*Philippians 1:9-11 - Growth in love and discernment*

***[9] And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, [10] so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; [11] having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.***

Again, as he writes to the Christians at Colossae, he prays for their spiritual progress. Just listen to all the requests Paul makes of God on behalf of the folks in the church there.

*Colossians 1:9-12 - Spiritual progress*

***[9] For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, [10] so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; [11] strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously [12] giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.***

When we turn to 1 Thessalonians, we find Paul emphasizing, in his prayer, a fervent passion that love for each other in the church would flow freely.

*1 Thessalonians 3:11-13 - Growth in love*

***[11] Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; [12] and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; [13] so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.***

As he wraps up the first letter to the Thessalonians, he prays for the completion of a work that had begun in their hearts the minute they trusted Jesus for salvation - their sanctification, their growth in holiness.

*1 Thessalonians 5:23 - Entirely sanctified*

***[23] Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.***

Then listen to his prayer for the same group in the second letter he wrote to Thessalonica.

*2 Thessalonians 2:16-17; 3:16 - Comfort, hope, and peace*

***[2:16] Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, [17] comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word...[3:16] Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all.***

Finally, in his letter to his good friend, Philemon, Paul prays.

*Philemon 6 - Faith to result in good deeds.*

***[6] and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake.***

These passages I have just read represent the largest body of prayers in the New Testament. And in these prayers it is clear what was the Apostle Paul's major theme.

He was, first and foremost, concerned that believers make progress in their walk with Christ.

That concern was so close to his heart that he (of course) labored tirelessly to help Christians grow in their faith AND he frequently and fervently prayed about it.

What better model to follow than the model of Paul? Not just in knowing that prayer is important, but also in knowing what it is important to pray for. We can involve ourselves in the process of spiritual growth in one another's lives - through prayer.

- You can pray that God would open my eyes to understand the love of Christ for me better.
- I can pray that you would be sanctified entirely - body, soul, and spirit, so that you would be blameless when you stand before Christ.
- We can all pray for each other's growth in love.

If you are growing, spiritually, isn't it likely that someone is praying for that growth? Isn't it likely that we are going to find out in Heaven that praying parents and grandparents and friends were behind much of the spiritual development in people around the world?

God loves to respond to these prayers for spiritual maturity.

There is a second category of prayers that also get top billing from the Apostle Paul.

Over and over again, we find him praying that God would knock down barriers to effective ministry. He actually believed that prayer was essential for ministry impact.

Listen first to these words from Colossians.

## Praying For Ministry Impact

*Colossians 4:2-3 - For open doors to evangelize.*

***[2] Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; [3] praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned;***

Then, over in Ephesians, Paul asks that his friends pray for him to have boldness to walk through doors God has opened.

*Ephesians 6:18-20 - For utterance AND boldness in proclamation.*

***[18] With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, [19] and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, [20] for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.***

In Romans 15 (and then in Philippians 1) Paul asked that his readers would pray for his physical deliverance from prison. Why? So that he would be freed up for unrestricted ministry outside of prison walls.

*Romans 15:30-32 - For protection SO AS TO minister more effectively.*

***[30] Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, [31] that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; [32] so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company.***

*Philippians 1:19-20 - For deliverance from difficult situations.*

***[19] for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ,***

***[20] according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.***

When he wrote to the Thessalonians, Paul prayed that he would get a chance to visit them, so that he might further engage in spiritual ministry to them.

*1 Thessalonians 3:9-10 - For opportunities to bless others.*

***[9] For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account, [10] as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?***

In each of these prayers (or requests for prayer) the primary thought is that of the progress of God's work on earth.<sup>6</sup> And here is where we get our second critical instruction when it comes to the matter of prayer as petition.

- We pray for our own and for each other's boldness in sharing the Gospel.
- We pray for open doors to spread the message of Jesus and to build up our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- We ask God to move in the church in such a way that everyone is "on mission" for Jesus' Great Commission.

I am to be fervently praying that God would give you opportunity to share your faith at work, on the street, or in school. You pray that I would be effective as I carry out my ministry.

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<sup>6</sup> Another passage illustrating the same prayer priority is Acts 4. The early disciples were responding to the first persecutions leveled against them because of their outreach efforts for the Lord. Listen to what they pray. ***[24] And when they heard this*** (the Jews' command to never speak about Jesus again), ***they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, "O Lord, it is You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them... [29] "And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, [30] while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus."*** The disciples prayed for the boldness to continue to get the word out in the face of increasing persecution.

I pray that you will be effective in fulfilling yours. We each pray that we would all develop a servant's heart for Jesus, as we ask ***“the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”***

We become cheerleaders and askers and pleaders for each other in the presence of God.

Now, in addition to praying for the advance of God's work on earth, and for personal progress toward spiritual maturity, the New Testament also records prayers which are concerned with physical and material needs.

No doubt it is good and right to be praying about these things, too.

#### **Praying for Physical, Material Needs (see Acts 12:5; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; James 5)**

- In Acts 12:5, the disciples were fervently praying for Peter's release from prison (which God miraculously accomplished, much to their delight and surprise).
- Paul tells us that he prayed three times that he would be delivered from an unidentified ***“thorn in the flesh”*** (2 Cor. 12:7-10). God said “No” to that request, and Paul learned to depend on the grace of God to uphold him in his weakness.<sup>7</sup>
- James encouraged people who were suffering to pray (James 5:13).

So, in anything that I've said this morning, I'm certainly NOT saying that we shouldn't pray about health, safety, provision, home purchases and vacation plans and 401(k) balances.

And besides these verses I have just mentioned, there is the “EVERYTHING” of Philippians 4, which gives us the freedom to bring every conceivable need to God's throne of grace.

And it was Jesus who taught us to pray, ***“Give us this day our daily bread.”*** (Matthew 6:11)

Friends, there is so much for which to pray! And we should by all means pray about EVERYTHING.

But let's not miss that the same Jesus who said, ***“Give us this day or daily bread”*** also said, ***“Seek FIRST God's Kingdom and God's righteousness.”***

Paul would tell us, *“Of course pray about EVERYTHING, but especially pray about issues concerned with building up what God is doing.”*

We seek FIRST His Kingdom and righteousness by the way we **LIVE**.  
We seek FIRST His Kingdom and Righteousness by the way we **PRAY**.

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<sup>7</sup> This certainly shows Paul's confidence in the efficacy of prayer. Even though God said “no” to Paul's request regarding the thorn, nevertheless, he still prayed, just as we do and should do today. There are certainly many other examples of godly men and women receiving unexplained, even apparently brutal “no's” to their most urgent requests. In the words of C. S. Lewis, “If an infinitely wise God listens to the requests of foolish and finite creatures, then He will sometimes grant and sometimes refuse them.” Nevertheless, Paul prayed, and asked that others pray about his physical situation.