

**Communion with God**  
**Rev. Brian R. Louis, Faith Presbyterian Church**  
**Oct. 15, 2023**

James 5:13-16

<sup>13</sup> Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup> Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup> The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup> Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

Holy Wisdom Holy Word.

Pastor: What's this fly doing in my soup?

Waiter: Praying.

Pastor: Very funny. I can't eat this. Take it back.

Waiter: You see? The fly's prayers were answered.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most famous ministers in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a man by the name of Harry Emerson Fosdick. He studied for the ministry at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and eventually became the founding pastor in 1930 at Riverside Church in New York, a famous non-denominational church that was built and endowed by oil magnate John D. Rockefeller. Fosdick was also a famous preacher on the radio from the 1920s to the 1940s and he was the author of almost 50 books. One of those books was *The Meaning of Prayer*, published in 1915.<sup>2</sup> It is a fine book, and the fact it's over 100 years old does not take away from its usefulness and wisdom. In today's sermon I'm going to talk a lot about it.

Sometimes church members will come up with an idea for a sermon and share them with me, and this is one of those times. One of our congregants suggested a sermon on Prayer. What is it? How do we pray? Prayer is a topic on my mind a lot, because I try to do it a lot. From what I can tell, it's on the minds of this congregation a lot as well.

We are a praying congregation. We have the prayer chain email that goes out when something serious happens to someone and they need some extra help. We have our period during worship where we express our joys and concerns, and we lift them up in prayer to God communally. We open our church meetings with prayer and close with prayer. Many times each day I hear someone say they are praying for something. Prayer is on our minds and hearts a lot around here.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.stewardshipoflife.org/jokes/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://200.colgate.edu/looking-back/people/harry-emerson-fosdick-colgates-most-distinguished-graduate-now-unknown>

So, let's start with a question, why do we pray? Well, Dr. Fosdick writes that one reason we pray is that we can't help it. He lists quotes from the psychologist William James, who said that "The reason why we do pray is simply that we cannot help praying."<sup>3</sup> He also mentions the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, who said that "every man of sense before beginning an important work will ask help of the gods."<sup>4</sup> People have been praying for thousands and thousands of years. Fosdick writes that since prayer is a natural tendency that people when in physical danger make use of prayer even when they usually never do. He argues that prayer's "spasmodic use is a futile thing" and it is selfish.<sup>5</sup>

As Christians, if all we do is pray when we're in a jam, well, we sure are missing the point of prayer. And it is selfish. Our relationship with God is only occasional, and we only call on God when we're in trouble. It's not a relationship. We just treat God as Santa Claus, or a pinch hitter in baseball who we turn to in special circumstances, but whom we never call on otherwise. In this type of prayer, if it's all we do, it means we're sure missing the point of prayer.

So why should we pray? To have a relationship, a friendship with God. As Fosdick points out, "The Christian God desires to be to every one an inward and abiding friend, a purifying presence in daily life, the One whose moral purpose continually restrains and whose love upholds."<sup>6</sup> That seems a great reason to pray.

Prayer is communion with God, according to Fosdick. To be effective, it must be habitual to build up that relationship with God. It is a commitment to the relationship with God, not an occasional demand for gifts or favors. "So prayer is a cumulative life of friendship with God"<sup>7</sup> and it is a "conscious fellowship with the Father who cares."<sup>8</sup>

How do we pray? Well, we all pray in our way. There is no "right" way to pray. Fosdick points out a ton of ways that are outlined in Scripture. Paul prays by kneeling (Acts 20:36); Jeremiah prays by standing (Jer. 18:20); sometimes sitting, like King David (2 Sam. 7:18); and some prostrate like Jesus (Matt. 26:39), and in bed (Psalm 63:6.). That's just to name a few. So, if you ever think you're not praying "correctly," don't worry about it. If you're praying to God regularly (ideally daily and multiple times a day), you're doing it right. You can talk to God as you would a friend. You can tell God about what is going on inside of you. You can tell God what you're afraid of, the pain you're going through. That you're mad at God. That you love God. That you love Jesus. That in Jesus is your hope. Help me God, is a prayer. You can recite prayers that you have memorized, such as the Lord's Prayer. You can read devotional books such as the booklet "These Days" that we have in the narthex. Of course, reading the Word of God

---

<sup>3</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer* (New York: Association Press, 1915), republished by HardPress Publishing, Miami, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Fosdick, 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

in the Bible is a great way to pray. Reading the Psalms. Those are prayers. As Fosdick writes, “There are as many different ways of praying as there are different individuals.”<sup>9</sup>

There are also many different types of prayer. Fosdick points out that there is adoration, confession, communion, consecration, and thanksgiving. The psalms are full of prayers of adoration. If you can't find a prayer of adoration or thanksgiving, just pick up one of the psalms. You won't have to look long to find one. Psalm 146 opens with, “Praise the Lord! Praise the lord O my soul. I will praise the Lord as long as I live. I will sing praises to my God all my life long.” For thanksgiving, there is Psalm 118, which starts, “O Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever.”

There are also prayers where we ask God for something. There are Intercessory prayers where we ask God for things on behalf of other people or a group. We pray for people all the time who are sick and ask God to help them, to cure them, to comfort them. Fosdick points to Paul praying for the Romans in his letter to the Christians there, writing that “I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God's will I may somehow at least succeed in coming to you” (Romans 1:9-10). And Jesus prays for Simon Peter in Luke 22:31, where he says, “I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” Jesus also commands us to “pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44).

Our prayer should be unselfish and be in the service of God. Prayer should be “the endeavor to open our lives to God so that God can do in us what he wants to do,”<sup>10</sup> Fosdick says.

Fosdick writes that we should pray for our own needs so we can help others better. Unselfish prayer also includes common prayers we have together.<sup>11</sup> For example, praying for our politicians that they may make decisions that are in the best interest of the country.

## PAUSE

When I was a little boy, I remember asking my mother for a younger sibling. She told me to pray to God for one. So, I did. I don't know how many times I prayed for it, I suspect not too many times. When it didn't happen on the schedule of my childish wishes, I was left with a feeling that God was a great disappointment because I didn't have a little brother or sister. While that's a silly example, it does hit on the topic of what happens when we don't get what we would like when we pray for something. Will we stop praying because we think God hasn't answered our prayer? Or do we think it's a punishment for something? Or that we didn't pray hard enough? Or well enough? Well, Fosdick writes that, “To make unanswered petition an excuse for abandoning all prayer is clearly unreasonable when we stop to consider how utterly unfitted we are to substitute our

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>10</sup> Fosdick, 56

<sup>11</sup> Fosdick, 180.

wish for God's will, and what appalling results would follow if all our requests were answered."<sup>12</sup>

Sometimes we're not patient. Sometimes God answers prayers in ways we don't expect.<sup>13</sup> And sometimes prayers aren't answered because we are not ready for what we desire.<sup>14</sup> God always answers prayer, "either the circumstances are changed or God supplies power to overcome them."<sup>15</sup>

Today we are going to gather after worship and share with each other ideas we have for the future of our church. Who are we? And what do we want to be? What ministries are important to us? What can we do together with a limited amount of people. I pray each day for our congregation. I pray that God strengthens us and makes us strong.

Let us not forget to find solitude to pray, and to listen to God. In these times of quiet when we are seeking answers from God to our prayer, we need to go deep inside ourselves in the silence and listen to our conscience, when we are struggling with an issue, or seeking guidance on something. We pray and then listen. In the silence Jesus says to go to a quiet place in Matthew 6:6. "But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Friendship with God. Communion with God. Unselfish prayer.

"<sup>16</sup> Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." Keep praying friends. Keep praying for each other, keep praying for yourself, that you may do God's will. Pray. Revel in, and bask in that Communion with God. What a gift we have to commune with God. Enjoy it. And feel the energy and glory and courage and comfort that comes from it. As Paul writes in first Thessalonians, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18) Amen.

---

<sup>12</sup> Fosdick, 116.

<sup>13</sup> Fosdick, 117.

<sup>14</sup> Fosdick, 127.

<sup>15</sup> Fosdick, 130.