

Christ Presbyterian Church
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John Crosby
Starting to Pray | 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12

We have just finished a great series to begin the autumn about how we can be a faithful community. I have a small group that works with me to make our sermon series more creative—terrific people—and when I said I'd like to turn from this to do a four-week series on prayer, the response was underwhelming. One of them said, "Really? Didn't we just do that last year and the year before? Are we in the slow group?" And it was like, *c'mon, prayer, that seems so "churchy"*, and I thought, *well, maybe they have a point, you know? Should we do a series on politics or life together, I mean huge things.* I hear a *No!* At the same time, we are ten days away from the most contentious election in our lifetime, and perhaps it is time to talk about prayer. I have to tell you, the Cubs are down 3-1, and we've got to pray! God may be up there going, "I don't know, John!" But there is a sense in which we do this again and again. This is the third year we will start the autumn with a series on how to talk to God and how to hear God talk to you. We began by saying that Jesus teaches His followers how to pray, and what can we learn? Last year we talked about the Old Testament; how did they hear from God? This year we want to look at the apostle Paul and see what he teaches us about hearing from and talking to God, but my friends were saying, "Are we in the slow class?" So, I thought it might be helpful to go back to those first days when you learn how to pray.

Literally, totally disconnected from this, two weeks ago our Kids' Ministries team asked kids to write down—asked four-year-olds and five-year-olds—to write down something they want to ask God to forgive them for, or something they want to thank God for, or something they ask God for, and they shared with me what they did. The first are the non-writers. You know, the kids who are the artists. The first one of those is somebody who is begging their god (who looks a lot like mom) and God says, "Yes!" The second one is an abstract person, and all I've got to say is if my prayer life felt like that, I would be in a different place. That was just great. I identified more with this next kid who is far more practical—thank you for Dash the dog. The one I was a little worried about was the next one—thank you for our nude neighbor. Isn't that what it says? Really? Come on! There's a story there. Thank you for Black Ops 2. And then the kid who's a lot like me says *thank you for forgiving me when I sin.* I thought that was great. And then there was the Heather Hood wannabe who says, "Dear God, please bless me and be with me as I go and sing on the stage and play with the band, and please bless me with a great voice later in life."

We laugh, we smile at those, but if we were honest, how many of us feel like our prayer life is stuck at a version not too dissimilar than that? It's like, "Oh God, help me", "God, stay awake", "God, forgive me!" We're like five-year-olds. Or maybe you've graduated, you've done this long enough, you're not a five-year-old, you're an adolescent, and all the hormones are surging one way and the emotions another way, and the pressures of

life another way, and it's either the best day or the worst day of your life and it's not even noon, yet, and you're on a roller-coaster and that affects the way that you pray. A lot of us are like that.

I thought, when I was looking at the children's prayers, of Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, remember? The love chapter? And he ends by saying, "When I was a child I thought like a child, and I spoke like a child, and I acted like a child, but now that I'm an adult, I've put childish things away." Consider this, just think about this, if there really is a God, if there really is an invisible, omniscient, omnipresent, creator of the universe, and somehow you have the opportunity to communicate with that god, somehow that god knows that you exist, and likes the fact that you exist, and wants to talk to you, wouldn't that be the absolutely most important thing in life? Wouldn't that be more important than anything else? I feel like I overuse the phrase *this is the most important series of the year* and I may say that again for the next series, but I don't think so.

I think if there was an invisible god and there was an opponent to that god, there is nothing more important to that evil one than impairing your conversation with God. No wonder you still pray like a baby. God would love to hear the real you, your heart, but the evil one would like nothing more than if you not to talk to Him at all, or if you talked to Him like, (says really fast): *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord . . . yeah, I talk to God. Really?*

So, if your conversations with God are fine, then take a break for the next month, really. I would say if they're fine, then skip, but if you often feel like nobody's listening when you're praying, if you admit that you don't pray except at meals and wherever you need to get to sleep, if your prayers don't seem to work, whatever that means for you, if you don't know how to get deeper than childish prayers—I would give anything like childlike prayers, but I don't want childish prayers—then maybe we can learn together. Maybe there's a reason that we can help one another and Paul can help us talk to God and listen for God, and I'm saying together, because I did my first sermon on prayer when I came here 27 years ago and I can remember—the only thing I can remember about the sermon—is that I started out by saying, "Some of you are prayer warriors. You wake up in the morning, you pray for hours, you feel close to God, you're prayer warriors." I said, "I'm a draft dodger. In that battle, I'm not a prayer warrior, I'm a draft dodger." I am more of an intellectual, or more of an activist, or more of a leader. I pray because that's what pastors do. Twenty-seven years ago that's really how I felt. I was maybe an adolescent in my prayer life, and I have to tell you, many of you have helped me get much closer to the idea that God is a through the day experience with me. I want us to do that together, so today is just a beginning. We're not going to do a ton—we're just going to do one thing—but beginnings are so important because they set the tone for everything else that follows. They tell you what's possible, and what's possible is important.

How many of you saw that movie Apollo 13? Remember where the space capsule has that terrible problem? There's a scene where they have to fix the capsule and they only have what's inside the capsule, and the engineers throw all the stuff on the table and say, "This is what we've got to work with. This is all that there is to work with." I'd like to

start with that. What is there to work with?

Take out your Bibles if you would—the ones that are in front of you—and see if you can find 2 Thessalonians 1. I'll give you a hint; it's toward the end. I'll give you another hint; it's on page 1763. I'm not going to give you any more hints. This is the very first part of the New Testament. I know we usually think that the Bible starts with the stories of Jesus: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but what was first written down first was not those stories. Instead, in the early 50s (probably twenty years after Jesus has died), are letters written by the early founders of the church—remember the church starts in Jerusalem, then scatters around the Roman Empire. At this time, Paul was going into the cities and starting Jesus-following houses, and then when they had trouble, they wrote him and asked him for advice. So, the very first part of the Bible that we call the New Testament is these letters, and the very first one of those letters is written to the town of Thessaloniki. That's where we get the Thessalonians, Paul is writing to the Thessalonians, and he writes two letters. This is the second, and it's the first time that the New Testament really talks about prayer. This, as you look at it in your Bible, is like three pages, but remember, we bought the big print Bibles, so it's only like two pages long, and in that space, Paul prays six different times. Six different times. I thought it would be helpful if I asked a couple of friends, Peyton (Gallagher) and Shirley (Bowers), to come up and pull out for you what those six prayers are.

[From 2 Thessalonians]

Peyton: Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Shirley: You need to know, friends, that thanking God over and over for you is not only a pleasure, it's a must.

Peyton: With all this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of His calling, and that God's power may bring to you fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Shirley: May the Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who loved us and by His grace gave us internal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

Peyton: And pray that we may be delivered from evil and wicked people for not everyone has faith, but the Lord is faithful and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things that we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.

Shirley: Now, may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

I love it that Peyton knows how to do that, and when we were in the room before the service someone said, “Shirley’s voice just sounds like butter.” Six prayers in two pages. On the one hand, I think it’s because Paul has gotten to a place in his journey where he looks at you and he sees Jesus standing there right behind you, and so he prays as if Jesus is in the room with the three of you. The other part I think is all different kinds of prayers: blessings and requests and teachings about prayer, because he wants to model what people who are growing in their faith should look like and sound like when they pray. That’s what the engineers just threw on the table—this is what prayer looks like guys, but I think that’s still too much. I think you can only work on one thing at a time, so I just want to take one part, and look at 2 Thessalonians 1. This is that prayer. It says:

³ We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, because your faith is growing, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. ⁴ Therefore, we boast about your perseverance and faith, we tell everybody. ⁵ All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. ¹¹ So, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. ¹² We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. [2 Thessalonians 1:3-5,11-12]

I still think that’s too much. We’re in the slow class, right? Let’s just focus on one phrase there. Remember, it’s just a beginning, but the one phrase I want to start with is: **we want to give thanks for you all the time. We want to give thanks all the time.** That’s the way it begins, like Rich said to the kids. Remember, that’s just the beginning, but the way we begin sets the tone for everything that follows. He says: **we have to pray for you and we have to give thanks for you.** If we start with thanksgiving we say we depend on God and God is dependable. It’s not just about us. God has to help us and God will help us. Thanks. When you pray with thanks you understand that it is hard to be afraid and thankful at the same time. It’s hard to be proud or angry and give thanks at the same time. When you give thanks for something, it pushes the fear away. The last reason I think Paul starts praying with thanks is that he wants his people to be thankful for the most important things in life. Usually when I thank God it’s because somebody is healthy, or somebody is wealthy, or somebody is happy—that’s why I thank God. That’s not bad; it’s just not the best. Paul thanks people for the most important things. What does he think is most important?

You can put down your Bibles after this, but if you haven’t, as you look down at this passage: “We have to be thankful all the time” . . . I want you to circle three things. If it doesn’t have it circled, circle it. “We thank you for faith that’s growing.” It’s right there. “We thank you for love that’s increasing”, and “We thank you for perseverance that endures.” Faith that grows, love that increases, perseverance that endures. That’s how Paul is teaching people. When you pray, pray for those things, thank God for those

things. It starts, he says with, “I thank God that your faith is growing”, and I saw an example of that this week. I asked the staff, “Give me some examples of this” and one of our student directors sent me a note. He said, “Oh, you ought to tell them about Nick, Nick Bergeland. Nick and Denine came to our community several years ago and Nick was in a terrible accident. Life threatening, month in recovery, and the student team really gathered around him and made him feel like he was really part of it. So he not only joined, his faith deepened and he and Denine joined the church. He finished college and now helps with our high school ministry; he’s a young associate leader. Well, he just got a job in Chicago and Trevor, our student leader, has asked him, “Will you tell the other young student leaders how they can encourage people?” And in two minutes—and I almost cut it off in one minute, but the second half is great—in two minutes he talks about how his faith is growing. The reason I’m using this guys is because he sounds like he’s twenty, and the reason he sounds like he’s twenty is because he is twenty. He hasn’t learned to sound like a pompous sixty-four-year-old. He doesn’t have religion; he has faith. Listen to what it sounds like.

<https://youtu.be/LP4VoddDee4>

We give thanks all the times for faith that grows. Wouldn’t you like your junior in high school be rubbing up with this guy? Wouldn’t you like to have the dad of that junior in high school be rubbing against this guy’s faith? That is what we thank God for. Paul says, “I give thanks for faith that grows”. So let me ask you: who do you know that encourages your faith, and do they know that they encourage your faith? Who do you know that encourages your faith? Do you thank God for them?

The second thing he says is, “We thank God for faith that grows and we thank God for love that increases.” Now, love isn’t that unusual in families. Love isn’t unusual in groups that have a common interest or goal, a team. We love each other, but church is different. Church is a gathering of people who have nothing else in common. We come together...we are white collar, and blue collar, and no collar, we are practical, we are dreamers, we are liberal and conservative, saints and sinners, sophisticated and slobs, intense and carefree, extroverts, introverts, and everything in between. The only thing that holds us together is this idea that we share some kind of allegiance to Jesus. Wherever we are on that journey, we’re leaning more toward Jesus, and if we learned how to love one another better, it would make all the difference. Love that increases.

I heard a lecture this week and the speaker quoted a writer that I love. His name is Christian Wiman. The quote was this, “Love is always on the move. It’s never content to love just one thing.” That’s the nature of love. When one person is loved, one group starts to love each other; you need to watch out because it spreads outside. As people learn how to love, other people get loved as it spreads. People’s hearts grow used to sharing love and it’s never intuitive. It is always my first thought because my second thought is always about me. *I am the most important person in the room, don’t forget it*, but if I learn to love, then it seems to spread out. That’s why we say that groups are so essential. This Sanctuary cannot love you—you’re just one face in the crowd—but someone who knew you, really knew you and still liked you, and encouraged you, and

prayed with you, and went through the ups and downs...that's why groups are so essential to following Jesus. Who do you thank God for that loves like that? That's what Paul says, "We always thank God that your love increases." Who do you thank God for? When you think of someone that loves well, who do you thank God for? Do they know that? Paul says, "We always thank God for you and for your faith that grows, your love that increases, and that everything will end up well." We always thank God for you that they all lived happily ever after. Is that how the prayer ends? No. That's how I want the prayer to end because I'm an American. I want the good guys to win and the bad boys to lose.

Paul says, "We pray for thanksgiving for perseverance that endures. Sometimes that's because somebody is sick. Other times you need perseverance because you're in the middle of a season of boredom or doubt. Sometimes there's great pressure on you for you to give in or give up. Sometimes you just don't see how you can hang on. I think Paul should have said, "I thank God that God will fix it." That's not what God says. "I thank God for people who show me how to keep going." "I thank God for perseverance that endures."

We have a small community called The Table that gathers here, part of the CPC crowd, on Sunday nights. They meet at 5:00PM. A couple of weeks ago, I had the privilege of doing the Communion part of their service and the announcements. As we got ready to do the announcements, they said they'd like Susan to come up and give a short announcement with me. Susan Pfau is the one in the middle, so I say sure and she says something to me as she comes up the stairs, and then she turns to the crowd and says, "My name is Susan Pfau, most of you know me as Chase's mom. Chase Johnson was my son. Chase came here when he was twenty-three and he was a great athlete and a wonderful young kid and then he got cancer, and for eight years you guys loved him, and encouraged him, and held him up, prayed for him, prayed with him, and you brought him chocolate, and you had fun, and for eight years you battled together. Then Chase died, and you haven't stopped. I just wanted to thank you for a minute because we had an event recently. We had a 'Let's Remember Chase' painting party, and a bunch of you came to this painting party and we painted in the afternoon. We were laughing at each others paintings and then we all gathered together at the end and what struck me was that I looked at this crowd of people, half to two-thirds of the people who were you, and I just wanted to say thanks." And she sat down. But what she said to me as she walked up the stairs was, "If it wasn't for you, I couldn't have hung on." And I knew she wasn't talking about me, she was talking about us.

Paul says, "I thank God for perseverance that endures." Some small sign that somebody knows that I'm struggling. A note that's ten words long that just makes me turn from despair to hope. Maybe just one phone call saying, "Hey, just wanted to check how you were doing" or somebody that says, "I admire the way that you are not cursing God and dying, but you're hanging on." Who do you know? Who do you know that you admire how they hang on? Who do you know that encourages people to persevere?

Yesterday I'm in a study, and this guy who was fairly new to the faith was saying *I love it*

when I'm in my small group Bible study and we're doing this stuff, I feel like I can hear God and God hears me, but on Tuesday afternoon I need some reminder. Is there anything that will remind me in the middle of the day, God saying, 'I'm here, remember me!' Is there an app for that? I realized we live in two different worlds. There ought to be an app for that—there probably is an app for that—seventeen of you will show it to me after the service, but here's what I want to do . . . I want to create an app for thankfulness and I want to do it even this way. Tomorrow, Monday, is 25 days away from Thanksgiving. What I would like to ask you to do is for 25 days between tomorrow and Thanksgiving, just once a day, write down something that you're thankful for. Thank God for one thing and write it down. You could do that, couldn't you? Just one thing one time a day for 25 days. It will change your Thanksgiving because you will have a card that says *I thank God for this and that and the other thing*. I thank God for faith that grows, love that increases, and perseverance that endures. Start with those, and here's how we'd like to help you do it. Those of you who are like me and low-tech, every week when you leave the Sanctuary there's going to be a card like this: 25 Days to Thanksgiving and it will have a space each day where underneath you can write down that one word. Put it in the bathroom, put it in the kitchen, I don't care, put it someplace where you can just write it down, okay? If you are slightly more adventurous . . . here, let me start with words I never thought I'd say in church, would you please take out your phones and turn them on? Everybody do that. Take out your phone and turn it on, okay? Smart phone or not, so even dumb phone, anything that you can text with, okay? If you have a phone that can text, pull it out and do this, this is easy. Trust me it's easy. David taught me and it only took me two hours, okay? Go to your messages thing where you send text messages, get ready to send a new text and all you do in the "to" part is write down 555888. Easy. The only message that you type in is CPCTHANKS, all one word. That's easy to do. When you hit send you will almost immediately get a text back that says, "Thank you for joining 25 Days of Thanksgiving. What will be your medium for prayer? Journal, sticky note, social media?" And everyday for the next 25 days, it will send you a reminder of something to be thankful for. That's so easy even I did it.

Let me give you one more and I'll stop preaching and start meddling. At each pew there's a basket and inside the basket there are sticky notes and pens. I'd like us to practice giving thanks. Those are the three categories we've talked about thanking God for. For love, for faith, for perseverance. What I'd like you to do is think of just one thing in any one of those categories. Maybe it's *I love my family*, maybe it's *I thank you for the legacy of my mom*, maybe it's *her faith*, maybe it's *I pray that you will give her hope through cancer*—perseverance. One thing, not all three, just one thing. Then take your sticky note and go to that three-sided thing you saw in the Great Room, and put it on the side of hope, on the side of faith, on the side of love, on the side of perseverance. It will be your day one prayer of thanksgiving.

Lord Jesus, I thank You for realizing that I'm in the slow group. I need all the help I can get to hear Your voice on Wednesday morning. To talk to You on Friday night. I thank You for the way that You taught Paul that when he talks to You, he should think of what he's thankful for, and thank You for it. Some of my friends

are thanking You for people whose faith increases. Others are thanking You for someone whose love has grown. Still others of us are thanking You for the example of people that persevere or people who help people persevere. We don't need to turn this into a lecture Jesus, we just need to have the sense that You're listening and we thank You for that. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.