

**1/25/26****The Prayer Filled Life****1 Thessalonians 1:2-3****Pastor Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

As I begin today, I want to say that I re-wrote this sermon before yesterday's events in Minneapolis, and it's possible I'm going to say something at one point or another that's going to offend pretty much every single person listening, so I hope you'll trust me and hang in and listen to my entire message to the end.

Many of us are feeling the strain of the moment we're living in. Each week brings new headlines — government actions, international conflicts, allegations of injustice, images of violence — that stir anger, fear, and grief. Some of you have asked, "Why isn't the church speaking out more clearly about... (fill in the blank)?" Others say, just as sincerely, "I don't come to church to hear what I already hear everywhere else." The people making both statements deserve respect.

Sadly, there are people who have lost the ability to acknowledge the truth, or to find any fault with the "side" they support. Something has been lost when we attempt to defend the dishonorable or indefensible, rather than having the grace and humility to acknowledge, "That was a terrible thing that happened. That was a foolish and dangerous thing to say. That was not a Christlike way of acting."

Given recent events in Minnesota, people have expressed anger to me about several things. One was the disruption of a worship service in St. Paul by protestors. That upset some people. I might say that protesting or disrupting a worship service isn't the wisest tactic, and is likely to decrease support for your cause. Some of you were angry and upset when you heard about that. However, we must also remember our own tradition, and that, in the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly picked a fight with religious leaders by healing on the sabbath, even in a synagogue. In *John 2:13-16*, Jesus went into the Temple in Jerusalem and flipped over the tables of money changers and drove people out with a whip of cords. That certainly disrupted people's experience of worship. We need to remember that what truly angers Jesus is hardness of heart and a lack of compassion for hurting people. A second example of what people have expressed anger about, based on many incidents seen on video, is that two US citizens have been shot and killed, and members of ICE are frequently acting in an undisciplined, cruel manner, threatening and arresting US citizens, acting in ways that violate rights granted in the

Constitution, and racially profiling people they are confronting and arresting. However, we must also remember, in the face of such behavior, that Jesus said to love your enemies and to pray for those who persecute you.

The church does not exist to be silent in the face of suffering, nor does it exist to function as another partisan pundit, party, or platform. Our calling is older, deeper, and — if we're faithful — more disruptive than either outrage or silence. The church exists to form people in the way of Jesus Christ.

Most of us are being disciplined far more than we realize. Not primarily by the Bible or pastors, but by news cycles, social media, and algorithms designed to reinforce what we already believe. Those algorithms are designed to keep us on the platform and have elevated the fringes and, as the far right and far left are amplified, we lose a sense of what normal is. We're trained — hour by hour — to sort the world into heroes and villains, to speak and react quickly, often without reflection or even a knowledge of the facts, to listen poorly, and to assume the worst about those who disagree with us. If the church simply echoes that formation, even with better intentions, we offer nothing new. But if the church retreats into silence, we risk something just as damaging, communicating that the life and teachings of Jesus have little to say about the real world.

Jesus charted a different path. He refused the easy categories of his time. He spoke truth without surrendering to cruelty. He confronted injustice without dehumanizing his opponents. He formed communities whose allegiance to God relativized every other loyalty. As he put it, *"My kingdom is not from this world"* (John 18:36) — not meaning it has nothing to say to the world, but that it does not speak on the world's terms.

This past week, our nation observed the day to honor the life and legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather **the conscience of the state**. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority."

The New Testament consistently pulls the church back to who we're called to be and how we're to behave as Christ followers. *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be*

*transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Romans 12:2). “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt” (Colossians 4:6). “Speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). These are not evasions; they are disciplines — hard ones — that make truthful speech possible.*

Unity, in Scripture, is not sameness of opinion. It is shared submission. *“Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26). “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).*

In a polarized age, that kind of unity is, itself, a witness. Social scientist Ryan Burge pointed out, in an interview this week, that “we are witnessing the hollowing out of politically heterogeneous churches in America.” What he means is that churches like ours — where Republicans, Democrats, and Independents worship and serve side by side — are vanishing from America. Forty years ago, there were Republicans and Democrats seated side by side in church pews. Today, churches are increasingly homogeneous, leaning one way or the other, and responding in a predictable manner in their communication based on the clear orientation of the church.

Our task is not to comment on every outrage, nor to ignore them. Our task is to keep lifting up Jesus — his teachings, his virtues, his way of being human — so that when we do speak, we speak from a different spirit. A spirit shaped by love, faith, humility, kindness, courage, mercy, and hope. A spirit capable of being heard by people whose lives, like our own, are being formed every day by forces that profit from division.

The church’s voice matters most when it sounds like Jesus, and for our voice to sound like Jesus, we need to spend time getting to know who Jesus is in the New Testament — what he taught, how he lived, what he said to do, and what he said not to do. Read the gospels and watch how freely he lets people decide to follow or leave. Notice to whom he speaks gently, and to whom he speaks harshly, and why. Living a Word-centered life, as Pastor David spoke about last week, is important. We also grow in our relationship with God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — by **living a prayer filled life.**

In our series on **The Whole Life of Christ in Us**, we’re looking at the six major spiritual traditions that we see in the Bible, in the life of Jesus, and throughout Christian history. So far, we’ve talked about The Incarnational Tradition (how the Word

became flesh and the need to embody our faith), The Spirit-Empowered Life (which teaches us that power, guidance, and help are available to us through the Holy Spirit), and the Word-Centered Life (The Evangelical Tradition). Today, I'm sharing briefly about The Prayer Filled Life (The Contemplative Tradition).

When we read the Bible, one of the activities we hear a lot about is **prayer**. Prayer is a believer's communication with God. There are hundreds of prayers in the Bible. The book of Psalms contains 150 prayers and songs that teach us that we can bring every emotion and every situation we face to God. In the Gospels, Jesus is frequently portrayed as praying at some of the most important times in his life, including before choosing his leadership team of twelve apostles (*Luke 6:12-16*), in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion (*Luke 22:40-46*), and even on the cross as he gave up his life. The disciples who were around Jesus were so impressed by his commitment to prayer that they asked him to teach them how to pray (*Luke 11:1-4*), as we heard earlier. The Apostle Paul was also sustained through great challenges and difficulties through his powerful life of prayer.

Paul's deep life of prayer comes through in his letters. Wherever we'd place ourselves on a scale of prayer – from familiar and comfortable to unfamiliar and a little uncomfortable with praying – there's much we can learn from Paul. So, don't worry if you feel like a beginner when it comes to prayer; the truth is, we'll never be anything but beginners in prayer, as long as we live! Let's open our minds, hearts, and spirits to learn.

If the New Testament was arranged chronologically, with the first book being the earliest to be written, then *1 Thessalonians* would probably be the first book in the New Testament. Paul founded the church in Thessaloniki shortly after he left Philippi (*1 Thessalonians 2:1-2* and *Acts 17:1-8*). We know that the original audience for *1 Thessalonians* was Gentile believers because *1 Thessalonians 1:9* describes how they “**turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God.**”

Listen to *1 Thessalonians 1:2-3*, “**We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.**”

This scripture begins with the word “**We**”, and if you look back to verse one, you see that “**We**” refers to Paul and his ministry teammates, Silvanus and Timothy. What

benefits and strengths do we gain by working, doing ministry, serving, and praying as part of a team or group, as opposed to trying to do them on our own? **There is great value in “We”.**

Two weeks ago, I was blessed to be at Gillette Stadium to watch the Patriots win their first playoff game in seven years. As we entered, we were handed a towel with the phrase that has become the team’s rallying cry, “We All We Got, We All We Need.” While it isn’t great grammar, it arose, in part, because the Patriots did not acquire any players at the trade deadline, and wide receiver, Stefon Diggs, expressed the feeling of the players in the locker room, “We All We Got, We All We Need.” Church, like football, is a team sport, and we need each other. There are so many “**one another**”s in the New Testament that describe this – pray for one another, love one another, serve one another, encourage one another, and many more. In doing so, we help each other, because there are times when we’re up and someone else is down, seasons when we’re grieving and someone else comes alongside to comfort and accompany us. There’s a saying attributed to different sources, “***If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.***” Like Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, we can do more together, and accomplish more as a team or a group, than we can individually. **So that’s the first word of today’s scripture – the value of “We”.**

The initial phrase Paul shares in his prayer of greeting to the church is, “***We always give thanks to God for all of you.***” When we pray, how often do we begin with giving thanks? If, sometimes, we begin a time of prayer with giving thanks to God for the people in our life, what impact do you think that might have on how we see those people, and even relate to and treat them? I’m not saying we must always begin with thanksgiving in prayer, but sometimes it’s good to start by giving thanks for our blessings, especially for the people around us whom we never want to take for granted. If we pray thankfully for people, including those with whom we may be having challenges, it may alter how we view them. That’s why Jesus told us to pray for our enemies and not to call them names, insult them, or demonize them. For the Thessalonians, to hear such affirming words, “***We always give thanks to God for all of you***”, from people they respected – like Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy – surely was an encouragement to them. In the same way, when we let people know that we thank God for them, we bless them and strengthen our relationship.

The second part of the scripture is, ***“and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father”***. What difference do you think it makes to be ***“constantly remembering”*** someone in prayer, versus forgetting – or only infrequently remembering – someone in prayer? While it’s hard to know how constantly remembering someone impacts God’s response, I suspect it changes how we feel and respond to the person we’re praying for. I think it likely increases our sense of compassion and caring, and that may even be part of how God moves through our praying for them. It’s nice to be remembered, isn’t it? And that’s a gift all of us can give to someone else.

In the third verse of his earliest letter, **Paul introduces three of the great themes of the Christian life to which he will return repeatedly – faith, love, and hope, which are all supported and undergirded by prayer.** Paul is writing to a community that was threatened by social pressures – and, at times, outright persecution – to turn back to the life from which they’d come. In referring to ***“Your work of faith”***, Paul is addressing the fact that while faith is a gift and a result of grace, it also takes effort and work to live out our faith. **Faith doesn’t grow stronger without our active participation.** If we want our faith to get stronger, we need to be “working” at it. Like a muscle, faith gets stronger by being exercised, especially when it’s tested and pushed to the limits of what we think we can endure.

In addition to ***“Your work of faith”***, Paul mentions their ***“labor of love”***. The Greek implies toil, or troublesome labor, which we are motivated by love to bear. When you hear the phrase ***“labor of love”***, what comes to mind? The phrase implies that some aspects of loving other people aren’t easy – and remember, these words are written *to a church*, and not to a couple in a romantic relationship (although there are some labors of love involved in those relationships, too). Last Sunday, we heard from *1 Corinthians 13*, in which Paul gives some examples of what a *“labor of love”* is – it’s being *patient* when we’re tempted to lose our cool; it’s being *kind* rather than indifferent or mean; *“...love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.”* We wouldn’t need to be patient, kind, etc., if love weren’t sometimes a “labor”. Love is not all moonlight and roses. True love involves sacrifice, acceptance, negotiation, speaking the truth in love, confession, forgiveness, a commitment to resolve

conflict peacefully, and more. All these are needed in relationships within a church, as well as in our personal relationships. How are you doing when it comes to your **labor of love**?

Because prayer is the language of love, **prayer is multidimensional**; it takes on the “*breadth and length and height and depth*” of the love of Christ, which is always broader than our limited human love. Is our prayer life wide enough to encompass others who look, believe, or think differently than we do? Is it long enough to patiently persist? Is it high enough to praise God? Is it deep enough to deal with profound sadness or pain? God invites us, in prayer, to share the real needs and concerns of our hearts. There are many types of prayer beyond asking for things, including confession, intercession, silence, listening, and thanksgiving.

**The final part of Paul’s prayer is thanks for the Thessalonians’ “steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ”.** The opposite of “steadfast” is wavering, unreliable, weak, or untrustworthy. Having steadfast “*hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*” makes a significant difference in our lives. Having hope that is unwavering, reliable, strong, firm, and resolute is especially important when life is difficult, when we feel anxious, angry, or worried. We can have steadfast hope in our Lord Jesus Christ because Jesus is reliable, strong, and trustworthy. Remember what those three words mean. **Lord** means Jesus is our Leader – not the Roman Emperor at the time of Paul, nor any politician today; our first allegiance is to Christ. **Jesus** means “*he will save his people from their sins*” (*Matthew 1:21*). **Christ** means Anointed one or God’s Chosen One. Jesus is all three of those things to the Thessalonians, and for us. In just two verses from *1 Thessalonians*, we see the value of “We”, of a team serving and praying together, of giving thanks, and the impact of praying constantly to grow in faith, love, and steadfast hope in Jesus.

The words and language of our prayers may change as we grow, but the reality of prayer remains the same. Depending on your age, think about your prayer life as a small child, as a teenager, as a young adult, as someone in middle age, as a senior. Hopefully, we have learned things about prayer as we have matured. While some prayers we learn as children can be used meaningfully throughout our lives, such as the Lord’s Prayer, we also need to grow in our life of prayer.

Praying is not just something we do only in one place, in one way, at one time. We can pray at home, at church, at work, at school, at the beach, in our car, wherever we are, at any time. When Paul writes to the Thessalonians that we're to "*pray without ceasing*" or "*pray continually*", he's telling us that true prayer is not separate from our daily life, it's a way of being. Henri Nouwen wrote in his book "Spiritual Direction", "**There's a difference between *reciting* prayers and *prayerfulness*.**" When we come to the place of discovering that prayer is more an attitude toward God and a life, rather than an obligation, duty, or a badge of our spirituality, we'll discover that God is truly with us, right now, and forever.

Prayer is a source of power and the language of love. Prayer is multidimensional, expressing itself in a variety of ways, postures, forms, times, and places. As we pray with an attitude of humility, God's Spirit helps us to become more like Jesus, enlarging our vision and acting in ways that exceed our imagination. Prayer is something we all can do, no matter how young or old we may be. God only knows the impact of the prayers that brought us to faith, protected us, and empowered us to love, serve, and give. Who knows what lives will be shaped by our prayers, in the generations to come?

Engaging in actions that exercise and strengthen our faith, putting our love into practice even when it feels like toil or labor, and maintaining steadfast hope in our Lord Jesus Christ are vital steps we all can take in these challenging times.

I want to give the final word to a pastor, who is one of my closest friends from seminary. I met Paul forty years ago, in our first year of seminary, and he spoke at our wedding. Paul, who served in the Coast Guard before being called to ministry, lives in Minnesota. I asked him, this week, what he would say to people like us, and how we could pray. This is part of his reply:

"As I write this, I realize we need a lot of prayer. It appears to me that some of the recent additions to the federal law enforcement seem to be the ones that are acting and reacting unprofessionally, I pray that we will get back to the normal amount of immigration enforcement officers for MN. We have nothing against law enforcement, but the tactics being used here now are not normal law enforcement. Specifically for prayer, we need to remember our immigrant population. Pray for all those detained. Many of them are already citizens, most others are already in the process of becoming citizens. There is blatant racism. An African American woman who is a Brooklyn Park

police officer was off duty when she was pulled over by ICE. They even knocked her phone out of her hand, and didn't believe she was a citizen until she showed them proof she was an officer. Then they left the scene without another word to her. Police Chiefs are reporting this is happening frequently to their officers. Pray for our local police. There are five times as many extra agents here than we have on the Minneapolis police force. Pray for those protesting this large deployment of agents. May they have wisdom and good decision making in their protesting. Pray for all the ICE agents, that they would use compassion along with their law enforcement skills. Mostly, pray that they will be done. And alongside that prayer, pray the serenity prayer, and pray that it would guide us to live out our faith in ways that will be most productive, in doing our part to bring God's reign on earth as it is in heaven."

**Please join me in prayer**

**Leader:** *Jesus said, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:39)*

God of love, we pray for our nation and for all who serve in government, that they may be guided by wisdom, humility, and care for every neighbor. Help us all to seek the good of one another.

**People:** *Lord, hear our prayer.*

**Leader:** *"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." (Hebrews 13:2)*

Merciful God, be near to those living in fear, uncertainty, or separation, and soften our hearts to recognize your image in every person.

**People:** *Lord, hear our prayer.*

**Leader:** *The Lord says, "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land." (Deuteronomy 10:19)*

We pray for communities affected by immigration enforcement, including in Minnesota, Maine, and other places where there is anxiety and pain. Sustain families, protect the vulnerable, and guide all actions toward justice tempered with compassion.

**People:** *Lord, hear our prayer.*

**Leader:** *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” (Matthew 5:7)*

Gracious God, we pray for those who carry heavy responsibilities in law enforcement and public service. Grant them discernment, restraint, and a deep awareness of the human lives entrusted to their care. We pray for our sisters and brothers in Christ who are mercifully caring for and looking out for their neighbors.

**People:** *Lord, hear our prayer.*

**Leader:** *“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)*

Lord Jesus, shape us as your people. When fear divides us or anger hardens us, draw us back to your way of love. Teach us to listen, to repent where needed, and to walk together as brothers and sisters. Loving God, may our common life reflect your grace and your peace.

**People:** *Lord, hear our prayer.*

**Leader:** Gracious God, by the power of your Spirit, inspire us to diligence in our work of faith, selflessness, and humility in our labor of love, and grant us a sense of unwavering hope in our Lord Jesus Christ that sustains us in all the trials and triumphs of life. In Jesus’ name we pray,

**People:** *Lord, hear our prayer. Amen.*

**Blessing:** *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)*

**Live by Faith, Be known for Love, Be a Voice of Hope.**

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. What are your earliest memories of praying or prayer?
2. Did anyone (a parent, grandparent, Sunday School teacher, pastor, counselor, etc.) ever teach you how to pray? If so, what did you learn?
3. Is prayer something you do? If so, how often (daily, weekly)? Are you comfortable praying aloud in the presence of other people? Why or why not?
4. What benefits do we gain from prayer becoming a regular part of our life, like eating meals or brushing our teeth?
5. Paul highlights three things in his prayer to begin 1 Thessalonians: “***your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.***” Why do you think faith, love, and hope are such a significant part of Paul’s teaching of the Christian life?
6. What step can you take in the coming days and weeks to make prayer more a part of your daily life?