



## Why Do We Do That? Pray

### Philippians 4:1-9

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April 22, 2018

I have long believed in the art of asking questions. Some may say it's a generational marker, I'd argue that I'm just stubborn; whatever the reason, I've never accepted that things are they way they are ... simply because they are. I've always wanted to know why things are they way they are. Perhaps it's because I'm a tinkerer. I like changing things up – always believing that in finding out why something is the way it is you can identify how to make it better.

The same is true in the life of the church. I've never been quite comfortable accepting that we do things simply because that's they way it's always been done.

In our families, we have traditions that we can trace back, and their proximity allows us to easily answer, *why do we do that?* For example, one of my dad's sisters writes a Christmas carol each year, and as the family gathers for the holidays at the Tallahassee property on which my dad and his siblings grew up, we join around the grand piano and we sing my aunt's carol. To this day, she still records the singing on a tape deck. I didn't know those still existed. It's a family tradition, that apart from the tape deck, I understand. I know why we do this. See, my grandfather before my aunt also wrote a Christmas carol every year. And, before she took the mantle for writing the carols, we would gather and sing *my grandfather's* carols around the same piano, likely recording the singing on that same tape deck.

To answer the question, *Why Do We Do That?* in regards to church practices, well, that's a bit harder. These aren't practices that originated within our lifetimes, nor our parent's lifetimes, nor in our great-great-great-great-great (you get the point) grandparent's lifetimes. These traditions and practices are steeped in the origins of the Christian church, and in the Jewish faith before that. Worship, studying God's Word, prayer, giving, and service, these practices are literally older than the Church herself.

Many of us grew up being told these are the things you do as a faithful Christian, whether you wanted to do them or not. Yet, such blind obligatory acceptance isn't the *modus operandi* for our current culture. We've departed from the days where we accepted a certain way of living, a certain way of believing, or an instructed pattern of practice that is based solely on the premise, *that's just how it's done*. Our task then is to ask, *why do we do that?* Where did such a practice originate, and why, some thousands of years later, is it still a normative practice for us in our Christian witness? Today, in that inquisitive mindset, we look at the practice of prayer.

Growing up, I attended a church that was about 45 minutes outside Atlanta. It was a pretty big church whose sanctuary was about twice this size. My family was a balcony family. My mom sat with us children in the balcony, while my dad sang in the choir. As we aged into the youth program, we broke from mom, and along with our friends, we youth claimed the back of the balcony ... it was as far from

the front of the room as you could get. It was our turf – ne’r an adult should sit with us. As we *matured* into the senior high program, we moved downstairs. The church had added on to the sides of the sanctuary to make more seats – so we claimed one of the wings. There were still some younger teens who sat in the balcony. One Sunday, some of the younger youth were sitting in the front row of the balcony causing a raucous. The Senior Pastor was preaching, and the kids were getting louder. In the midst of his sermon, the pastor paused, looks directly at the kids in the balcony, and called them out from the pulpit. “Gentleman,” he said in this terrifying mixture of pastoral and fatherly voice, “yes, you three on the front row of the balcony, if you can’t quiet down, you might as well leave.”

Can you imagine if I were to start calling people out from the pulpit? I could scan the room, pick out those whom I knew were causing problems in the church, and just make the declaration, “Doris ... Brenda ... Jack ... you need to be of one mind in the Lord. The rest of you, help these folks get right in the work we have been called to as a church.” I don’t know that I’d be in the pulpit much longer if I instituted such a practice. But as we look to our scripture for today, that’s exactly what Paul has instituted in the church at Philippi.

When Paul wrote letters to the churches he founded, the intent was for the letters to be read to the full congregation. Many in the church were illiterate, so the letters had to be read out loud for the congregation to know what was written. Just imagine that Sunday morning when this letter was being read. “I urge Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in Christ.” “You can only imagine that [these women], after briefly blanching white at the startle of hearing their names from the pulpit, then blushed in abject embarrassment. Where should they look? Where could they look without finding a pair of eyes trained on them by their fellow parishioners?”<sup>i</sup>

Paul was of the belief that were there a disagreement in the church, it needed to be called out, for the greatest detriment for the church was for it to be split in its mindset and ministry. “For Paul, ministry in a local congregation is a shared responsibility rather than a solo affair. Everyone has some gift to offer for the welfare of the whole.”<sup>ii</sup> For the church to be faithful to its call, Paul has to call out those who are at odds with one another, and admonishes them, “be of the same mind in the Lord.” Everyone needed to be participating – and not just involved, but sharing together toward a common goal.

Last week, Ryan Danker gave us a good explanation of why we study the Bible – we study, in part, because the Word of God articulates for us the mind of Christ. As Ryan read for us, in the second chapter of Philippians, Paul writes, “let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.” Our call to study is a call to seek for the mind of Christ, that we may do as Paul says here and share as community in that one mind.

After Paul calls out the members of this church who are not of one mind in Christ, he goes into an explanation of what the community looks like when they are of one mind in Christ. Beginning in verse 4 we read, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” For Paul, this joy is a shared byproduct of being in one mind with Christ. This is not an individual joy – Paul elaborates in other writings that there is no such thing as individual joy in the church; joy for any one person will bring joy for all in the body. In the same way, there is no such thing as isolated sorrow. Grief for any one member is shared by the body of Christ.

Being in one mind in Christ leads the community to rejoice in the Lord. How so, you ask? Well, we must understand joy as Paul is defining it. "Joy [for Paul] is not an escape from the pain of life; it is a reconsideration and reinvestment in life from a different, liberating perspective. ... It is an outcome and a sign of the presence of the risen Christ."<sup>iii</sup> Joy is not a simple reaction to hearing good news. Joy is not a momentary feeling that comes and goes as quick as a smile across our face. "Joy, for the apostle, ... comes when we experience God's action and presence even when life is difficult and full of pain."<sup>iv</sup>

In this joy we have in the Lord – in rejoicing in the Lord in both good and bad times – Paul then says, "Do not worry about anything, but in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

If joy flows as a byproduct of having the same mind as Christ, ***prayer flows as a byproduct of the joy we have in Christ.*** In the simplest of explanations, this is *why* we pray. We pray because of the joy we have in Christ.

However, I find that often this is not the mentality we have when we approach prayer. Somewhere in the past couple thousand years, prayer has become less about rejoicing in the Lord, and instead, it has become a venting session with the Lord. We turn to God because we want something, or we want God to do something, or because we are suffering, or because we've lost direction. Praying for the things we need ... praying in supplication ... these are not immediately incompatible with prayer flowing from joy. In fact, Paul says that is what should happen as a response to our joy in Christ. We should be praying, offering supplications, and giving thanks while letting our requests be made known to God. Yet, there's a difference in praying from a place of frustrated entitlement, saying, "Dear God, give me some extra income to help me pay my bills this month," and praying from a mindset of joy, offering something like, "Almighty Lord, you have always gifted your creation with grace sufficient, and I come to you in thanksgiving for the joy of your mercy. Yet in this time, I find myself struggling to pay the bills, and could benefit from your abundance once more." (I don't have time to go in to this, but don't misunderstand joyful prayer with sweet-talking God ... those too are two different things.)

Too often there is no joy at all in our prayers; "More often than not our prayers are a last resort when we can no longer bring order out of the chaos of life and we rely on a higher power to straighten out our mess."<sup>v</sup> We go about our lives in a mistaken isolated and independent narrative, claiming that we have enough or are good enough on our own and that we need no higher power. As such, we often wait to turn to God until we are so broken that *joy* sounds like a foreign persuasion, a word we can't even understand.

Such a practice is noted in the patterns of worship participation. I offer this not as a critique of *this* church, but of Christendom writ large. We have our high holy days when the church is packed - Christmas and Easter most specifically, but also for baptisms, weddings, and confirmation. But look at attendance in the church over the past 20 years and you know what you'll find? The highest attended Sunday across all denominations in the past 20 years was September 16, 2001 - just 5 days after the 9-11 attacks. Outside of the days where we celebrate the most joyful of occasions in the church, the

most predictable events that will lead to people showing up at church are the most harrowing and devastating. We gather to celebrate, and we gather to mourn.

When prayer and thanksgiving are offered *only* in the most joyful and most detrimental of life experiences, our witness to faith relegates God to the fringes. We go through life without acknowledging God's presence in the mundane, as if the average week offers us no reason to share in the joy of the Lord. The reality is, "The 'anythings' and 'everything's' of life can be sources of endless worry – [or they can become the foundations for prayer.]"<sup>vi</sup>

Prayer is not meant to be a last resort option where in we only go once we have exhausted all human efforts. Prayer, flowing from joy, is a mindset in which we allow ourselves to be open to the mind of Christ that God permits us to consider. In such a statement, it seems quite obvious why Paul makes the declaration in 1 Thessalonians 5, "Rejoice always, and pray without ceasing." If prayer is not meant to be a momentary pause for lamenting the woes of life, or a singled out day of celebrating God's death-overcoming power, but is indeed a regular mindset that flows from rejoicing in the Lord, then praying without ceasing makes perfect sense. If prayer flows from our joy in the Lord, and we are to "rejoice in the Lord, *always*," then we should be in a place of prayer, always – without ceasing.

Our joy in the Lord is not earthly or temporary – it is heavenly and eternal due to our being reconciled through Christ to new life, and through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. These are not momentary revelries; these are the everlasting things of God's almighty love. And such should also be the practice of prayer.

So why do we pray? You are right to ask. We pray because prayer is our way of connecting with the Holy One – the one who gives us the joy of new life. We pray because God gives us peace beyond understanding – peace that brings joy to life. We pray because in our human ways, we need to be reminded of God's justice – a justice that offers joy for all people. We pray because we are broken, and we know that true healing comes from the one who gives us eternal joy. We pray because at times we are divided, and we need to be reminded to return to the mind of Christ, in which we rejoice. We pray because God hears us, even when all we have to offer are deep prayers of unmentionable pain, and because God hears us, we rejoice. We pray because God is in all things, and where God is, there is joy ... even in our days of mourning and suffering, and in the passing of time mundane – we pray in all things because God's love is steadfast, and when all else fails, we can still rejoice for we are still claimed as the beloved children of the Lord.

We are a people of prayer because we are a people who have reason to rejoice. So let us rejoice in the Lord, always, and let us pray without ceasing.

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<sup>i</sup> Scott Hoezee. cep.calvinseminary.edu. Retrieved April 18, 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> Daniel L. Migliore. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Philippians and Philemon*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014.

<sup>iii</sup> Nathan Eddy. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 4*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

<sup>iv</sup> Taylor Mertins. thinkandlethink.com. Retrieved April 18, 2018.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Eddy.