

A Life Shaped and Reshaped by Prayer Reflections on Philippians

As I write this, we are still at the beginning stages of our response to the Covid-19 virus. We're not sure where it is leading or how long our time of social distancing will be. In a recent communication, someone shared with me the desire to find more time for prayer; yet was struggling with how to pray. What follows is a devotional resource, based on Paul's letter to the Philippians, with varied suggestions for prayer.

This is not meant to be an instruction manual giving a precise formula for prayer; but more like a menu describing different options; (and just as no one restaurant offers all the world's food choices, neither does this describe all the varied options for prayer). I invite you to take and use what you find helpful and leave the rest.

Prayer is something universal and at the same time very personal. What works for one person might not work for another; so too, what seems to feed the soul in one period of life, might feel 'dry' in another. I find that my own prayer life has ebbs and flows, but that what I keep coming back to is praying with scripture. I find my ability to speak and listen in prayer is facilitated by picking a book of the Bible and then reading through slowly, perhaps just a few verses a day. I consider where the scriptures seem to intersect with my own daily life, I pay attention to the people who come to mind as I read and reflect. Also, I tend to approach the experience with curiosity, wondering where God might be trying to open my eyes to something I have not yet seen.

This devotional resource, therefore, comes out of my own engagement of scripture. It's based on daily devotions that I wrote and shared with the congregation I serve in Advent of 2014; though I have reformulated it for the current moment. I offer it to you and invite you to share it with anyone else who might find it helpful.

Philippians is extraordinarily relevant in the present moment, both for its message and for the context in which it was written. Paul wrote this letter of deep encouragement from the confinement of prison. He is physically separated from any faith community, and he is under the threat of death for the way he has upset society with his bold truth telling. If any of you have anxiety over social isolation and the prospect of death, you have an ally in Paul; yet with Paul, anxiety is not the primary emotion, rejoicing is. Deeply grounded in faith, hope, and love, again and again Paul is filled with rejoicing.

I pray that you too, like Paul, might have a deep sense of God's love and presence that are ours in every moment, the easy ones and the more challenging ones; and may the grace and peace of Christ be at work deep within you.

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A Life Shaped and Reshaped by Prayer

Day 1 - Philippians 1:1-2: Identity

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The letter begins with a standard form of greeting identifying whom it is from and written to. Note that everyone is identified in relationship to Christ. Paul and his aid Timothy are named as servants (*or slaves*) of Christ Jesus. The members of the church community are called saints (*literally 'holy ones'*), a term that Paul uses for all who have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and who therefore have been claimed, washed, forgiven, reborn into a new life, and identified as God's beloved children.

Think for a moment of the labels and titles that identify you. These may be shaped by your work (lawyer, musician, student, retired, etc.), by your family relationships (son, mother, wife, single, etc.), and/or by other interests and relationships (athlete, scientist, cook, friend, etc.). Perhaps write a list. Which of these identifiers will most give shape to your day, today? Along with all those other identifiers, remember that you are also God's beloved; this identifier is not something you have earned, it has been given to you as a gift from God.

Prayer Practice: Sit quietly, breathe deeply, and focus on your breath. The word for breath in many languages is related to the word for Spirit; for example in English 'spirit' is at the root of 'respiration' and 'inspire'. Imagine as you breathe in, that you are breathing in God's Spirit of belovedness; perhaps think the word 'Beloved' with each inhale. Then with each exhale, imagine that you are exhaling not only co2, but other toxins in your system like anxiety, fear, and hatred. Breathe in belovedness, breathe out anxiety; breathe in belovedness, breathe out fear. Try it at home, in the car, or at work; and let this part of your identity, *God's beloved child*, give shape to your engagement with the world.

Thank you, O God, for breathing your Spirit into me, and for naming me your beloved. Inspire me to live my life ever more grounded in this blessed part of my identity. Amen.

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Day 2 - Philippians 1:3-11: Gratitude

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Following the opening greeting, Paul moves right to gratitude. Though he is writing from prison, he is filled with thanksgiving. Although he is physically separated from others, still as he considers all his relationships with those in the community of faith, he is filled with joy.

For what are you grateful? Take a moment and name five things...

Perhaps your list includes family or friends, food, a measure of health, possessions, work or opportunities for service. It is good to give thanks to God for them! Now consider other blessings that have come via your relationships with the Church (churches past and present). Since Christ is the center of our communal life, we might think of these as blessings we have received from Christ. Take a moment and name five things ...

When I consider the blessings I have received from Christ, I think of the hymns and scripture passages that I carry inside of me. I think of the gift of faith that helps me counter anxiety, the gift of hope that keeps fears from paralyzing me, and the gift of love that breaks into my life again and again in unexpected ways.

Prayer Practice: Practice gratitude. Give thanks for the day when you arise. At each meal give thanks for the food. Before bed, reflect back and give thanks for the gifts you received during the day. Some people have found it helpful to keep a gratitude journal, writing down those things for which they are thankful. If you choose to do this, be sure to go slowly, perhaps spreading it out over days or weeks. Rather than quickly spinning out a list, take time to reflect on each item you add, savoring it, pondering the giftedness of it, lifting it to God with a grateful heart.

Thank you O God for all the gifts you give me, for the ones I get through being part of your created world, and for the ones I receive through the love and compassion of Christ. Inspire in me a deeper sense of gratitude. Amen.

A Life Shaped and Reshaped by Prayer

Day 3 - Philippians 1:12-18a: Limitations

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

Paul, writing this joy-filled letter from behind bars, acknowledges that his present circumstances include a measure of suffering and limitation. Prison is, after all, a place of confinement and deprivation where there are severe constraints to where you can go and what you can do.

We too have limitations and constraints. They might include an oppressive atmosphere at work, hefty responsibilities, debt, or illness; and we are living in a time of social distancing. Some of our limitations are the result of living in a dangerous world where human greed and thirst for power continues to oppress; some may be due to chance, and others the result of our own bad habits or choices. Think for a moment of your own limitations and constraints. Can you name three?

Now consider the Good News that God is at work, not only in spite of them, but with them! Bear in mind that in the birth of Jesus, God chose to re-create the world through the limits of human flesh. In the life of Paul, God uses even imprisonment to further Christ's mission; a mission Jesus described as the inbreaking Kingdom of God: a state of social justice where all are connected, all are valued, and all have enough. Part of the surprise of life is that we actually can be *more* effective working within limits than with unbounded time and choices. As Paul will say later, "It is when I was most aware of my limits, my weakness, and my constraints that I most clearly perceived the power of God at work in and through me."

Prayer Practice: Name or confess before God your limitations. Then ask God to help you to accept those limits that need to be accepted, and to resist those forces and constraints that need to be resisted, and to know the difference. And give thanks for your limitations; for to be limited is to be human and becoming more human is where the faith journey is leading.

For the limits you have given me O God, I give you thanks; because of them I do not have to be all things to all people. For the limits that that are a result of my own sinfulness, impeding my ability to be a blessing to others, I ask forgiveness. Be at work in me still, so that I too may continue to be an instrument of your peace. Amen.

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Day 4 - Philippians 1:18b-26: Rejoicing

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance. It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Imprisoned Paul is awaiting trial, and he is thinking about what might happen. Ultimately, he expects acquittal and release “*resulting in his deliverance,*” as he writes. That’s good news. However, he knows full well that this will be an ordeal. He will be under repeated attack as he continues to speak about his allegiance to Christ (*his “fruitful labor”*); and there will be threats, perhaps even torture, intended to coerce him into denying Christ (*which would “Put him to shame”*).

As Paul sits in his little cell, and prepares for the ordeal ahead of him, he finds himself powerfully strengthened through knowing that there is this whole community of people in Philippi who love him and who are praying for him, and he finds himself rejoicing. Again and again in this heartfelt letter he will speak of his own rejoicing, and he will repeatedly encourage those who read his letter to again rejoice.

Prayer Practice 1: Create a space, a little cell of sorts, where you can go to pray. Perhaps it includes a comfortable chair or cushion for sitting (*if finding quiet in your home is a challenge, a toilet seat will also do*). Place one or more symbols there: a cross, or candle, or photo of a place in nature where you have felt so very alive, or something else that will draw your attention to God. Then, there in your little cell, pray in whatever way is natural for you.

Prayer Practice 2: At the beginning of the day, consider the challenges and opportunities of the day ahead. Then ask for God’s help and guidance, trusting that you shall have them. God’s help may come at times through God’s Spirit within you, at times through others in your daily life, at times through those in your faith community who care for you, and at times from totally unexpected places. Trust that they will come.

Thank you God for calling us to pray, and for your promise to listen. Be with me, strengthen me to act rightly; and deliver me from all dangers around me and within me so that I too may bear fruit. Amen.

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Day 5 - Philippians 1:27-30: Praying for others

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Imprisoned Paul has lots of time for prayer and finds himself thinking about people in Philippi whom he has come to care for deeply, people who are struggling. So Paul moves from quiet prayer to writing this letter of deep encouragement. (*Have you ever noticed that when you pray, others tend to appear in your mind?*)

Here's a little more background. Philippi was a Roman colony and those in the small church there were Roman citizens. However, because of their involvement in this counter-cultural movement called the Christian Church, they were upsetting others. There is a story in Acts 16:16-24 that recounts how Paul, insisting that Jesus is Lord (*not Caesar*) spoke out against a particular injustice and in so doing threatened upsetting the local economy. Paul ended up beaten with rods, flogged, and put in prison. It seems that his friends in Philippi are in some way speaking against injustice too and are facing painful consequences for it. Paul notes, he is aware they are suffering as he had.

Paul writes, "*Only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.*" A translation truer to the original Greek might read, "*Only live as citizens of the Gospel of Christ.*" That is to say, do not give up on your insistence that Jesus is Lord (*not any other political leader, party, or power, ... or virus*), and do not relinquish your trust that the risen Jesus Christ is active in this world's suffering. Hold fast to the truth that the risen Christ cares deeply for all people and has the power to bring healing and change.

Part of what we do in prayer is that we bring to mind people who may be struggling, and we pray for them; asking God to bring healing and change in their lives. So too, at times, like Paul, we may write notes of encouragement. How lovely still, 2000 years later, to receive a note from someone that says, "I care for you and I am praying for you."

Prayer Practice: Have a pencil or pen on hand when you take time for prayer. Write down the name or names of people who come to mind. Then pray for them. From time to time, consider calling or writing to someone on the list. Perhaps every few weeks, or at the start of a new season in the church year, start a new list.

O God, thank you for being present in all of our lives. Forgive me for being complacent in many things, including prayer. Help me to trust throughout this day that you are with me and for me; and bring healing to those who now in this moment I name before you...

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Day 6- Philippians 2:1-4: Listening in daily life

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Writing from his forced confinement, Paul has learned that there are tensions in the church community he founded in Philippi. There are always tensions in a church, in any community filled with a variety of human beings. Paul has received some form of communication from them expressing how much they love Paul, are concerned about his imprisonment and want to help. Paul is responding by saying, in essence, if you really care about me and want to give me a gift, then give me the gift of joy that will well up within me when I hear about how you are tending to one another, collaborating with humility, striving for a common purpose that is beyond your own self-interest.

In his plea for unity Paul uses this curious phrase, "In humility regard others as better than yourselves." What does that mean? Is this a call for self-deprecation, for an abandoning of any sort of self-confidence, ("Woe is me, I am nothing, a lowly worm, with little to offer; everyone else is better, woe, woe, woe") I think not!

Elsewhere (1 Corinthians 12) Paul describes how we all are given gifts: insights, truth, wisdom, knowledge, etc. These are gifts from God meant to be shared. Everyone has gifts to share! Yet no one gets all the gifts, therefore we are all, each of us, limited. We are *limited witnesses*. When we enter into conversation with others, we have gifts to share; yet if I become so captivated by what I have to say, then I will be unable to receive the different gifts which others bring. The call for humility is not the call to devalue one's own gifts, ("Hide it under a bushel, no!") Rather it is a call to grow through listening.

Part of our prayer life happens in private. Then too, part of our prayer is intended to be lived out in public. When Paul writes elsewhere, "Pray without ceasing," he is meaning that our engagement with the world is to be prayerful. One way to engage others prayerfully is to mindfully consider each person in our workplace, school, church, family, etc. as being a gifted person, a 'limited witness', from whom we can learn something.

Prayer Practice: Today, when you are engaging another person in meaningful conversation, pray inwardly, "God open my ears to listen to whatever truth you would have me hear."

Gracious God, thank you for the wisdom, the knowledge, the insight, and the experiences with which you have blessed me. Know, Lord, that I seek to grow and deepen still; and so make me more curious about the insights and experiences of others. Help me to be a better listener; and when it is time for me to speak, may I do so with boldness and humility, knowing that I have gifts to share, but not all the gifts. Amen.

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Day 7 – Philippians 2:5-11: Ceding control

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

This is perhaps the oldest piece of Christian liturgy that we know of. It is believed to be a hymn to Christ that early Christians sang. Paul didn't write it; instead he inserts it in his letter as a way of encouraging his readers to change their minds about how they are viewing things. There is some sort of conflict in the Philippian Church, and Paul is writing to encourage them **all** to change. Notice that he does not side with one faction, as if the problem is about who is right. Rather, he calls upon everyone to begin thinking and acting like Jesus.

Thinking and acting like Jesus, will be addressed today and in the three ensuing days. This includes giving up the need to be in control (today), living with intentionality (tomorrow), self-emptying (next day), and living with questions (day after that).

Paul's instruction to "*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*" is a call to give up the need to be in control. Bear in mind that Jesus was out of control; that is, he did what he believed he was called to do, without having the ability to control the reaction of others. At times it got him cheered and praised, at times it got him reviled. In the end it got him crucified. The disciples wished he would seize more control, calling down an army of angels, but he did not. Instead he engaged his daily life boldly, trusting that God would guide and provide.

Note how the second stanza of the hymn above proclaims the resurrection and the exaltation of Christ. This is a witness to the truth that although Jesus was out of control, God was not. God came through for Jesus, resurrecting and exalting him, vindicating Jesus' absolute trust in God. Dare we trust that God will ultimately come through for us too?

We live our daily lives attending to various responsibilities, making plans and seeking to follow through with them. This may give us the illusion that we are in control. In truth we are not; we are one accident, medical crises, fiasco away from only God knows what. So too, the emptiness we experience at times, is beyond our control to fill.

Prayer Practice 1: Consider your varied responsibilities, then prayerfully ask where you might, in one aspect of life, let go of a measure of control. It could be in parenting, in a difficult relationship, a conflict at work, a long 'to-do list,' or something else. Then as you get ready to attempt to follow through, speak this truth before God, "I confess I am not in control, though I want to be! Help me to put my trust in you."

Prayer Practice 2: Memorize a verse or verses of a favorite hymn. Sing it, or let it be sung inside of you, during times when anxiety over being out of control is arising.

As Paul quoted an old hymn in his writing, so shall I,

*I am weak, but Thou art strong;
Jesus, keep me from all wrong;
I'll be satisfied as long
As I walk, let me walk close to Thee.*

Refrain:

*Just a closer walk with Thee,
Grant it, Jesus, is my plea,
Daily walking close to Thee,
Let it be, dear Lord, let it be.*

*Through this world of toil and snares,
If I falter, Lord, who cares?
Who with me my burden shares?
None but Thee, dear Lord, none but Thee.
When my feeble life is o'er,
Time for me will be no more;
Guide me gently, safely o'er
To Thy kingdom shore, to Thy shore.
(anonymous)*

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Day 8 - Philippians 2: 12-13: Living with intentionality

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Paul was a strong leader who was highly respected. It appears that when Paul was present, the people tended to respond with devotion to God and faithful service to others. It's sort of like when the CEO visits your office, or the school principal sits in on your class, everyone is on their best behavior. Sometimes the appearance of the authority figure may even induce a measure of fear and trembling.

Paul is aware that when he was present the people acted one way; but now that he is absent, tensions and conflicts have crept in. The remedy for this problem *cannot* be Paul's physical return; he is in prison after all. Moreover, the remedy for this problem *should not* be Paul's physical return, for this movement called Christianity is not about Paul, it's about Christ! "I am absent," Paul writes, "but God is not!" *God (in Christ) is present, at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

What about that "fear and trembling?" As I see it, ultimately this is rooted in the belief that what God wants for us is wholeness; (the Greek word we translate as salvation can also be translated as wholeness). To turn toward God and "obey," (to use Paul's word) is the path to wholeness. To turn away from God, perhaps out of economic fear or trembling over your status in life leads to isolation, desolation, brokenness. The invitation of faith is to engage life with a bit more fear and trembling of the consequences of turning away from God and bit less fear of all else.

One way to seek to turn toward God responding to the movement of God's Spirit within, is to seek to live with intentionality. This is no formula for this, living with intentionality does not prescribe what you must do. However, in the plethora of choices modern life offers, many are distractions or temptations, others may be someone else's calling but not yours. Seeking to live with intentionality can be a helpful guide toward what we seek most deeply.

Prayer Practice 1: If you pray in the morning, consider your plans for the day ahead. If you have a 'to do' list, include that in your prayer. Consider how your plans for the day resonate (or not) with your own unique intentionality? "*Help me Lord to live with intentionality.*"

Prayer Practice 2: If you pray at night, think back and review the day that is past. Give thanks for those times when in your work, conversations, hobbies, daily duties, rest, and recreation you sensed that you were living with intentionality. Then gently ask for forgiveness for the times when you were not.

Thank you, Lord for being present with us in everything. Inspire me to live my life with even greater intentionality so that I and others might come to experience a deeper sense of wholeness, purpose, and life. Amen.

A Life Shaped and Reshaped by Prayer

Day 9 - Philippians 2: 14-18: Self emptying

Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you - and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

“Do all things without murmuring or arguing,” Paul writes. Why is it that we might be tempted to murmur and argue? At times because others are exerting power and getting their way. Behind the tensions in the Philippian Church, and often behind the tensions in our families and workplaces, is an issue of power. Who gets to say how things are going to be done? Who gets to define the expectations for your work environment? Who gets a voice in how the Church in Philippi is going to move forward now that Paul is absent? These are all issues of power.

What then is Paul driving at? Is this this a call to meekly give-in whenever there is a conflict? (*“Yes dear, whatever you say.”*) I think not, for Paul rarely seems to give-in in the face of conflict as evidenced in his passionate, articulate letters; and Jesus didn’t meekly walk away from conflict either. Jesus confronted his opponents, overturned tables, and upset the economy of the day. Yet Jesus did so with a degree of humility, without insisting on his own way, without crushing the weakest members of the community around him.

When Paul writes, *“Do all things without murmuring or arguing,”* we may wonder what spiritual discipline he is driving us toward. I’m reminded that this is still all commentary on the great Christ hymn (quoted in Tuesday’s reading). Verse 1 of this hymn notes that Christ had all the power, *“being in the form of God,”* yet he emptied himself of that power so as not to exploit, and so as to serve. At the end of verse 1, Christ is empty and weak. Verse 2 then declares that later, in a great reversal, God raised him up and highly exalted him.

Prayer Practice: In your daily life, pay attention to times of murmuring and arguing; in yourself and in others. When moments arise, prayerfully consider what might be driving the behavior (insecurity, fear, resentment, anxiety, lack of power?) “What’s behind this, O God?” Then prayerfully ask for the strength to follow Christ’s example of self-emptying. At times this may lead to more reserve and quietness, at other times to more boldness.

Lord God, give me the inner strength to resist murmuring and arguing, and the boldness to act with conviction. Give me courage to risk trusting that you often act in and through what the world deems as weak; and continue to surprise me with your grace. Amen.

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Day 10 - Philippians 2: 19-24: Living the questions

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you. I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy's worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. I hope therefore to send him as soon as I see how things go with me; and I trust in the Lord that I will also come soon.

In the midst of this report of how he is sending his co-worker Timothy as his emissary, Paul makes this appeal for his readers to, "seek not their own interests, but those of Jesus Christ." Here is another spiritual discipline, seeking the interests of Christ. How does one do this? And what are Christ's interests?

Paul does not explicitly say; perhaps because this is a questions not to be *answered* by the writer, but *lived* by the reader. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) once wrote,

"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

What does God want for your life? Of the many and varied interests of Christ, which of them are you being called to attend to this day? These are questions to be lived by you, not answered by someone else. In your work today, in your relationships, in your care of your own self and the lives of others, in your allocation of time, in your moments of connectedness and joy, or isolation and sorrow, bring the question of *Christ's interests* to mind and live the question.

Also know that "the question" itself may be phrased in various ways: What is Christ up to and where am I being called to join in? Is this a time for boldness or meekness? Should I speak up or remain quiet? Do I make a decision for the sake of tomorrow or for today? Does this fall under Christ's gentle invitation to "Do not worry nor be anxious," or his more urgent call to "Be salt and let your light shine!" The point is to live the question for over time it will shape and re-shape our motivations.

Prayer Practice: Ask yourself, "What is a deep question I am living with?" Then take time to sit with the question.

O God, lighten our path. Reveal to us the way in which you would have us live, and then give us the courage and the strength to live into what you are in the process of revealing. Amen.

PS: Here are some references to "Christ's interests": Luke 4:16-19; 6:26-42, 9:23-27, 10:25-27, 11:1-4, 12:22-34, 14:25-33, 16:19-31, 18:1-8, 21:1-4, 22:14-19, 24:36-49 .

A Life Shaped and Reshaped by Prayer

Day 11 - Philippians 3:1-4a: Resisting legalism

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard. Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh— even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

Christianity has always had some potentially divisive issue to deal with; one of the first was the issue of circumcision. The earliest Christians were Jewish, as was Jesus, and in that tradition male babies are circumcised as a matter of course, receiving this physical sign that they are to be numbered among God's chosen people. But then Christianity began spreading among non-Jewish peoples, and the issue of circumcision became hotly debated. Some said that in order to become a "real" Christian, a male would have to be circumcised first; Paul and others insisted that what was decisive for Christianity was not something we do (like circumcision), but what God has done in the death and resurrection of Christ.

What must one do to be considered a "real" Christian? When I occasionally tune into a so called "Christian" TV station or "Christian" radio program this seems to be the urgent question raised by the impassioned preacher. Are you good enough, holy enough, worthy enough to be considered a "real" Christian? Is your purity, worship, prayer, believing, giving, serving, resisting evil, (and the list could go on) solid enough that you know you will get to heaven after you die?

I loathe these programs, not so much because I am personally offended, but because I ache for those troubled souls, (so thirsty for life, for meaning, for community, for God) who may easily get drawn into arguments rooted in legalism; arguments that replace the image of a gracious God with a picture of an angry, terrible God who consigns to hell those who are not pure enough. Paul writes, "Beware those who mutilate the flesh!" a reference to those insisting on circumcision. I will add, beware those who turn the attention away from the Good News of what God has done for humanity, focusing instead on one's own personal purity.

Paul begins this segment inviting us to rejoice, once again rejoice! You are God's beloved, right now. Are you good enough, holy enough, worthy enough? It's the wrong question. God is good enough, God is holy enough, God is worthy enough! Through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ we are clothed in God's righteousness and declared God's beloved.

Prayer Practice: Return to the practice from day 1. Breathe in God's belovedness, breathe out your own failings, anxieties, and fears. Take a moment of quiet to rejoice in the truth that you belong to God; and may that moment be a little slice of heaven on earth.

Thank you O God that we are yours and that nothing can separate us from your love.

A Life Shaped and Reshaped by Prayer

Day 12 - Philippians 3:4b-9: Resisting pride

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus was regularly in conflict with many of the religious leaders of his day. Here were men (all men back then) who worshiped God, prayed, read scripture, gave alms to the poor, and tithed their income. The problem was not that they were somehow practicing the “wrong” religion (as if any great religious tradition can be defined by the categories “right” or “wrong”); after all, they were practicing the same religion as Jesus. So what was the problem?

I could not even begin to give a full answer; but will offer one partial response. As I understand it, religious traditions are meant to connect human beings with God, with others, and with all of creation in such a way that people experience a degree of *liberation*. We find that Jesus often ended up in conflict with religious leaders because they were using their power to maintain a religious system that imposed such burdens on people, particularly the poor, that instead of *liberation* many were experiencing a greater degree of *oppression*. Disciplined as they were, many of these leaders justified their actions in part because they had developed a strong sense of their own holiness and worthiness. With a measure of spiritual pride, they are depicted as looking down on the unclean commoners, deeming themselves better.

Spiritual pride may still be a temptation. If you go to church, set aside time for daily prayer, and give generously, might that tempt you in feeling a bit superior to others, a bit self-righteous? Yet Paul urgently proclaims that no one is righteous on their own, all fall short, all end up making a mess of things at some point. What becomes decisive for Paul is not his own righteousness, nor his own disciplines and practices. What Paul proclaims as decisive is what Christ has done on the cross and his gift of righteousness that is ours. Paul declares that we walk around clothed in Christ's own righteousness!

Prayer Practice: “To err is human.” Tell someone a story of one of your failures, perhaps even an ‘Epic Fail.’ Then give thanks for the gift of being human.

O God, make me ever more aware of your presence with me, your righteousness covering me, and your Spirit empowering me to live more freely, with more humanity, in such a way that I (and others) may experience a greater measure of liberation. Amen.

A Life Shaped and Reshaped by Prayer

Day 13 - Philippians 3:10-11: Resisting the fear of change

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Death and resurrection is not just what happen at the end of this earthly life, death and resurrection is the pattern to all of life. A child leaves the comforts of home for the first day of pre-school; this is a mini-death, a way of life is ending. The child may cry, in part due to the sense of what is being lost (the comfort of an ever-present parent), and in part out of the fear of the unknown. The pattern continues with each major life change. Some move to a new part of the country leaving important relationships behind, yet with the hope of making new ones. Some get married and must die to a degree of independence in order to assume a new life of interdependence. You may take a new job, take a stand against injustice, publicly admit your dependency at a 12-step meeting, get divorced, become disabled, etc. and life changes irrevocably. Death (the ending of one whole way of life) and resurrection (the receiving of a new way of life) is a pattern.

There is good news and bad news about this pattern. The good news is that new life is promised! Christ is risen and he goes before us, he is there waiting for us in each new school, each new home, each new relationship, each new job, each new way of being. Christ is risen. He goes before us and he has power to surprise us with people, resources, opportunities, signs of his love, and as yet undiscovered talents.

There is also some bad news, however; this promise of new life comes at cost. First it may cost us a degree of comfort, for dying to an old way of life can be painful. Then too it costs us control, for we cannot see, feel, or know what the new life will be like until we die to the old, and there is no going back. "My job is crushing me," someone reports, "I want to quit but don't know how I would survive if I did." How much suffering would this person endure if she quit? Would she find meaningful work? Would God surprise her with blessed opportunities, or would the weight of the financial insecurity crush her? The only way to know is to quit. The only way to know a new life would look like is to die to the old.

Many people simply are too scared to end one way of life, regardless of how unhealthy, because they cannot yet see what the new way of life looks like. Paul understands that death and resurrection are the pattern to new life in Christ; and so he tells us that the way in which we will most powerfully experience Christ and the power of his resurrection is by, again and again, dying to an old way of life.

Prayer Practice: As you prepare to engage the world ask, "What in me needs to die today?"

Lord Christ, we too wish to experience you alive and among us. Give me the insight to know what I need to leave behind in order to live more fully; then give me the power to do it. Amen.

A Life Shaped and Reshaped by Prayer

Day 14 - Philippians 3:10-14: Resisting the power of regret

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Forgetting what lays behind, Paul strains forward to what lies ahead. Some people are so tied to the past that they find it hard to live contentedly in the present and harder still to press onward with life. For some this is because of a great tragedy or loss, for others it is due to great regret.

Paul had regrets too. We read in Acts chapter 8 how formerly, Paul was what we might today label as a religious terrorist. He consented to the stoning death of one Christian; and then passionately focused his attention on destroying the Christian Church, supporting those who were going from house to house, dragging off men and women and putting them in prison (Acts 8:1-3). But then Paul encountered the risen Christ, and through that experience came to understand that he was being granted the undeserved gift of a brand new start. From that moment onward, his profound gratitude for this astounding gift of grace is what will motivate Paul's passionate work, sacrifice, and suffering for the building up of a variety of church communities.

Baptism is a new start. Baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we too are promised the gift of undeserved grace. Through Christ, a great exchange occurs; he gets our brokenness and sin and we receive his righteousness, his forgiveness, and his Spirit. With Christ at work in us, each day is an opportunity for a new beginning.

Prayer Practice: Start each day with some symbolic gesture that reminds you that God's is yours. Martin Luther advised beginning each day by making the sign of the cross and acknowledging that you will be living this day marked by that sign, "In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Others begin by quoting this line from Psalm 118:4, "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Note, if you suspect you have made such a mess of things in your own past that a new future is nearly impossible, bear in mind that the family of Abraham and his two wives was a mess, Jacob was a cheat, Moses was a murderer, David was an adulterer, and Jesus' closest friends abandoned him in his hour of need. It seems God does some of God's best work with screw ups.

This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.

A Life Shaped and Reshaped by Prayer

Day 15 - Philippians 3:17-21: Resisting Lawlessness

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

In place to place, Paul has been preaching about our freedom in Christ. We are freed from the religious law that demands circumcision, the abstaining from certain foods, the keeping of holy days, and being overly focused upon our own purity. The problem, however, is that some are interpreting Paul's words to mean that anything goes.

When he wrote of "*enemies of the cross*," Paul was addressing what Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to as "Cheap Grace." Cheap grace says that if God in Christ forgives you anyway, then do whatever you want, even though doing whatever you want may lead to emptiness. Costly grace, however, holds in reverence the truth that God's blessings come to us at a great cost to God and are meant to transform us, leading us into a new way of living. This new way is defined neither by legalism nor lawlessness; but is a middle way. This middle way has the power to deliver to us God's gifts of faith, hope, compassion, peace, wisdom with a measure of laughable foolishness, love, humility, contentment, and more – all of which combine to deliver to us a measure of what Jesus would call *abundant life*, here and now before we die.

When Paul writes that *our citizenship is in heaven and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior*, he is not talking about life after we die. He is talking about our expectations in this life. Who or what are we expecting will come and deliver to us abundant, meaningful life? Paul is saying that what we thirst for most deeply cannot be delivered by Netflix, a fully stocked wine cellar, another sexual partner, or our favorite sports team; but can only be delivered by the one who died, rose, and ascended into heaven. We will always be restless in this life, for this world will never quite be home; yet we live with expectation that we will meet the risen one on a journey through life that follows the middle way between legalism and lawlessness.

Prayer Practice: Seek to live with moderation in what you eat and drink, purchase and give away. Enjoy movies, sports, and the arts, yet without an obsession that might numb you God's call to be a partner in addressing this world's suffering. Each year in the season of Lent, consider giving up that which might be pulling you away from moderation.

Oh God, help me to live with greater moderation, less fear, and more hope; and help me to be of use to others in this broken and blessed world. Amen.

A Life Shaped and Reshaped by Prayer

Day 16 - Philippians 4:1-3: Tending Relationships

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

There are tensions among members of the Philippian Church, and Paul is calling for unity. The key for Paul is not getting one's own way, but paying more attention to the way of Christ and together following it. He names two women, Euodia and Syntyche, who presumably were important leaders and whose conflict with one another has become public. We don't know their issue, but we do know that it was drawing focus and energy away from what was truly important – what Paul names as “The work of the Gospel.”

The work of the Gospel includes the proclamation that in Christ, God's favor is being extended to all humanity, not just Jews, not just Romans, (not just Americans). In his letter to the Galatians Paul warns one community that all are welcome as they are (circumcision not required). In Philemon he asks that a slave owner release his slave because we are all siblings now (no masters and no slaves). In 1 Corinthians he chastises the church community for favoring the rich (chapter 11), and also favoring those whose giftedness was more obvious (chapter 12). Rich and poor, extroverted or introverted, gay or straight, privileged by the society around us or oppressed by it - in Christ all are welcome; we are given to one another as siblings and our unity with one another matters greatly.

When there are tensions or conflict, Paul is instructing that we are to address them. Yet we are not to address them in typical fashion (so often defensively), but with honesty, humility, and compassion; compassion that includes both bold truth telling and a willingness to suffer for deepened or restored relationships. (Note: this is not the same as passively taking abuse!)

Prayer Practice: Consider your relationships, at home, in the church, and elsewhere. Consider if there is someone you whom you feel you are 'out of relationship.' Then in your prayer ask God whether there is anything to do about it this day. A first step could be as simple as asking another person, “Are we OK?”

O God, teach me the way of Christ, and a greater ability to follow that way. Help me and others in the community of faith to maintain healthy relationships. Then help the Church to more boldly proclaim and hear the gospel word that in Christ each person matters. Amen.

A Life Shaped and Reshaped by Prayer

Day 17 - Philippians 4:4-7: Practicing Trust

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

This is one of my favorite passages in all of scripture. I still find it stunning that Paul writes this from the confinement of prison. This is not a 'Pollyanna' text, offering illusory hope. Paul knows that he is on a journey leading to a trial in Rome, where tradition maintains he was killed. Still he is rejoicing!

This verse offers no falsely optimistic promise that your investments won't fail, your immune system will triumph over any virus, and that you will not suffer. In fact, Paul would argue the converse; namely that if one truly follows Christ, they will find themselves travelling down a path that leads to the confrontation of injustice and acting on behalf of the marginalized, and this always entails a measure of discomfort and/or suffering.

Still he is rejoicing! Because Christ is Risen and is with us. Because weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30:5). Because already our lives are under the protective care of God. "Trust this and live, with rejoicing, in this very moment," is Paul's message.

Prayer Practice: Memorize a favorite passage of scripture. If you don't have one and would like a suggestion, you can't do much better than the one above. (The Lord's Prayer and 23rd Psalm work well too). Perhaps write it on an index card and carry it with you. Write it on your heart and recite it when you are anxious. Let these deep and powerful words serve as a means through which the Holy Spirit might deepen your trust.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

Help me Lord in my anxiety to have a spirit of rejoicing.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

Give me a deeper trust that you will provide for me that I might become more gentle with others (and myself too).

The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything,

It's hard not to worry, please keep reassuring me O God.

In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Help me to keep praying, O God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Let it be so!

A Life Shaped and Reshaped by Prayer

Day 18 - Philippians 4:8-9: Practicing Reflection

Finally, beloved whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Every so often we need a bowel movement. Having consumed food and processed the nutrients, we must expel the refuse so that our body does not become poisoned. There is a parallel 'movement' in our emotions and spirit. All of the emotions find their way inside each one of us: joy and sorrow, patience and impatience, gentleness and anger, love and hate. If someone were to tell you that they never harbor selfish or hateful thoughts, beware of what they are hiding or repressing.

A healthy person must find ways to regularly expel the anger, the resentment, the hate. We may wake from sleep remembering some unbidden dream about revenge, we may indulge a short fantasy about giving someone else "what for", we may have moments of grumbling with a trusted friend. In small doses I suspect these may help provide a means of exit for that which might otherwise poison us; however in larger doses, the dreams of revenge, the rehearsing of old wounds, the persistent grumbling might in fact only serve to poison the spirit. Paul is calling upon us to pay attention to our thoughts and emotions.

Prayer Practice: One way to pay attention to our thoughts and emotions is by practicing a form of prayer called the Examen, developed more than 400 years ago by Ignatius of Loyola. It is a means of prayerful reflection on the day that is past, or portion of a day. (For a more detailed description go to www.ignatianspirituality.com) One simplified version of this is to prayerfully look back and ask God to help you think through your thoughts and emotions at key moments, such as ones listed below. When you pick a moment, picture the scene and consider the emotions that were going through you: confidence, resentment, elation, anger, boredom, joy, sadness, something else? Next ask yourself, "Mindful of these feelings, what might God be trying to communicate to me through them?" Then bring to God whatever arises within you, following wherever your prayer leads: whether to gratitude or repentance, intercession or praise, or somewhere else.

- For what moment today am I most grateful. For what moment am I least grateful?
- When did I give and receive the most love today? Where the least?
- When did I feel most alive today? When did I most feel life draining out of me?
- When was I happiest? When was I saddest?

O God, save me from 'bad mind,' that propensity to give too much space in my mind and time in my life to unfruitful thoughts. Help me to more deeply know what is good for me, pleasing to you, and integrated with the rest of creation; and help me to dwell on these. Amen.

A Life Shaped and Reshaped by Prayer

Day 19 - Philippians 4:10-14: Practicing Contentment

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

While Paul was in prison there must have been a few friends or small community nearby who were taking care of his needs; bringing him food, supplies for writing, news of the outside world, etc. When the church community in Philippi learned that Paul was in prison, they took up a collection and sent the money by trusted messenger to those who were caring for Paul. The messenger also brought news of their love and concern. Paul responds with this letter of gratitude and encouragement thanking them for their love, concern, and for their financial support.

In his words of gratitude Paul writes about his own contentment. Having known times of plenty and times of want, he writes that he has learned a secret that leads to contentment. *"I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry,"* he writes. What is that secret? When he answers, *"I can do all things through him who strengthens me,"* I believe he is revealing the secret; namely, that he has come to trust that he is not alone, ever! God in Christ is with him and God is not yet done with him. Therefore every situation is temporary, and whether the next situation will turn out to have a little bit more or a little bit less is God's problem, not his. He simply needs to focus on the path God sets before him and walk it.

Paul says he is content with his material needs. Notice, however, he does not tell anyone else that they should be content, perhaps because contentment and discontent are deeply personal and spiritual matters; and we are all a mixture of the two. Paul is content materially; but he is not content with the state of the world nor the churches he founded, so he keeps writing, urging, advocating. In his letter from the Birmingham jail in 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King chastised white leaders of Christian churches who were calling upon Negroes [sic] to be *content* with the slow progress of civil rights. Jesus in his parables of the 'Pearl of great price,' and the 'Treasure hidden in the field,' along with his urging to 'Be salt' and 'Be light,' is encouraging a form of discontent.

Prayer Practice: Prayerfully reflect upon contentment and discontent. Where are you content materially, physically, socially, vocationally, economically, relationally? Where are you discontent? Then (praying for the Holy Spirit's guidance) reflect on where your unique mixture of contentment and discontent resonates with God's desire for you, and where not.

O God, help me to trust that you are with me, and that since I am still breathing you are not yet done with me. Thank you for all I have and all I am at this moment; please nurture in me a deeper spirit of contentment for these. Then too, help me to discern where you would have me cultivate a stronger sense of discontent, for the sake of your mission - the healing of all creation. Amen.

A Life Shaped and Reshaped by Prayer

Day 20 - Philippians 4:15-20: Practicing Generosity

You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Paul notes that not only have the Philippians shared with him on this occasion, providing a significant financial gift, but they have also done so before. Clearly they care deeply about Paul and are willing to make personal sacrifices for his care. Note however, that Paul does not commend them for their generosity.

I find that generosity is a tricky term. At what point does a 'small' gift count as a 'generous' one? Then too there is the issue of whose money is it anyway? Supposing someone tithes their income. Are they generous for sharing 10% of *their* money? Or, if all of it is *God's* money that has been entrusted to us (some more, some less), might it be the case that for some wealthy folk keeping back a full 90% might be considered stingy, while for others sharing 5% might be considered deeply faithful. And what if you grew up poor and have been scarred by times of scarcity? And the list of 'What ifs' could go on. Thus, I find it helpful to think of generosity in a different way.

This alternate way begins with the obvious truth that generosity is good for us. It releases endorphins, makes us feel better about ourselves, and combats feelings of isolation. Most everyone already knows or intuits that generosity is good for us. So why are we not more generous more often? At times because we are afraid; afraid of running out, afraid of not having enough for ourselves, afraid that the God who has provided for us thus far along the way will one day stop.

Now consider, what is the opposite of being afraid? Courage? Confidence? In I John 4:18 we encounter the line, "Perfect love casts out fear." In other words, according to scripture, the opposite of fear is not courage but love. Think about times when you have been truly generous with your time, listening, money, or compassion. How often our generosity is an expression of love! If we want to grow in generosity, perhaps what we need is not more money, nor more courage, but more love. I have come to think of generosity as an expression of love.

Prayer Practice: Prayerfully ponder the question, "Where have I been generous recently, and where have I been stingy (with money, time, listening, compassion, etc.)? Now ask God if there is someone else you are being called to add to your 'circle of love,' holding them in your heart like a parent, sibling, child, or friend even if just for a moment, day, or season.

Thank you O God for your never ending love that is ours through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Help us to trust that through Christ you will fully satisfy our every true need. Then open our hearts to those whom you would have us love; and may our love overflow in generosity. Amen.

A Life Shaped and Reshaped by Prayer

Conclusion - Philippians 4:21-23

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Grace, God's grace in Jesus Christ, is the Final Word!

For you who have made this resource part of your devotional life for a time, it is my hope and prayer that it has been helpful. Helpful to you, and in some way helpful to the Holy Spirit who desires that all of us come to a deeper sense of God's grace for our own selves, for our neighbors, and for the creation. *And may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:7)*