

“Prayer: Growing in Grace”

Date: July 10, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 1:26-38 Theme: Spiritual Formation

Occasion: Prayer series

This is week three in our sermon series on prayer. Last week we learned that prayer changes things, mainly us! Today we want to continue that theme, by looking at how prayer can shape and form us. Sister Melannie Svoboda, in her book *Everyday Epiphanies*, tells us that Mary, the mother of Jesus, can be our role model. She writes: “If there’s one thing we know about Mary from the gospels, it is this: she liked to ponder things. When the angel Gabriel first appeared to her he said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28). Mary was “much perplexed by his words and *pondered* what sort of greeting this might be.” (Luke 1:29)

Later, when the shepherds came to visit the newborn child, Mary is shown pondering once again: “She treasured all these words and *pondered* them in her heart (Luke 2:19).

When Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the temple, Simeon made a prophecy concerning the child. How did they react to his words? “The child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him” (Luke 2:33). In other words, they *pondered* Simeon’s prophecy.

Twelve years later, when Mary and Joseph found the lost Jesus in the temple, Luke says, “His mother treasured all these things in her heart” (Lk 2:51). She reflected on this event and her son’s words to her. Years later on Calvary, John tells us that Mary was there,

standing near the cross. Even as Jesus was dying, Mary continued to ponder the meaning of this seemingly catastrophic event.

Sister Melannie makes her point: “What does all of this have to do with us? Like Mary, we are called to be ponderers too. We are called on to reflect on the events of our lives, to weigh matters carefully before acting, to actively seek new meanings, new possibilities. For all these times, Mary can be our model, for when it comes to pondering, she shows us the way.” (EE, p. 58-59)

An important aspect of prayer, that many of us neglect, is to bring our life before God and *ponder* what it means, asking for God’s direction, seeking God’s guidance, looking for meaning and purpose. Prayer can change us, if we bring our whole selves to God in prayer.

Prayer is simply paying attention to God. It’s bringing all that we are to God and asking for the light of the Holy Spirit to shine upon us. Prayer becomes the compass of our lives, the GPS if you will, as we ask God to guide and direct us. Prayer is asking Jesus to change us, to be more like Him.

You know, we as Christians can be very busy people, often times being very busy for the Lord. But there is a world of difference between activity and progress. How do we know if we’re making any spiritual progress? How do we know if we’re growing in grace?

We need to ponder our lives, in prayer. The unexamined life can become terribly selfish and self-centered. If we’re not willing to ponder the events of our life in the light of God’s will for us, how will we ever know we’re following God’s will for our lives? How will we know if we’re making any spiritual progress?

Let me suggest a few questions to guide us in our thinking about our spiritual progress. Are you more mature spiritually today than you were a year ago, or five years ago? Have you pondered your life lately? I invite you to do so. Eight quick questions to ponder:

1. **Are you thirsty for God more than ever before?** Is your soul thirsty for the Lord? Do you long to know Jesus more and more intimately? Like a deer pants for streams of water, as the psalmist writes, do you thirst for God like that? Or has your spiritual life become a desert, dry and barren and without much life? Are *you* thirsty for God, more than ever before?
2. **Are you more and more loving?** The mark of a Christian is love. If you are growing in love you are also growing in grace. Has God been working in your life to help you become less angry and irritable, and more patient and kind with others? Can you recall instances in your life when you felt the love of Christ going out towards others? As we grow in grace, we will also grow in love.
3. **Are you more sensitive and aware of God than ever before?** One result of a life that has been filled with God's Holy Spirit is an ongoing awareness of His presence. Does God feel near or far away from you? Have you gone to God in prayer asking to feel His presence more? The Holy Spirit prompts us to see God all around us. As we grow in grace, we also become more aware of what God is doing in us, and around us.
4. **Are you governed more and more by God's Word?** Before we give our lives to Christ, our lives are controlled mostly by what we want. But after we come alive to Him, we have a new

desire to be governed by His will. We go to the Bible more often to listen for God's direction. Has the Bible been showing you areas in your life that need to change? God's Word will reveal sin to us, so that we can confess it and change our lives. Can you point to specific ways the Word of God has been challenging you to change, to repent, to go a different way?

5. **Related to number 4, are you more and more aware of your sin?** As a person grows in grace the more they see their sin. Things that didn't bother us before, in our own lives, now get to us. We feel like we can't keep doing *that*, whatever *that* is. We feel convicted; we feel guilty. Guilt that comes from the prompting of the Holy Spirit is not a bad thing. It's what prompts us to repent and change. Are you more aware of sin in your life?
6. **Are you drawn to the spiritual disciplines more than you used to be?** John Wesley referred to them as the means of grace. Maybe they didn't seem as important to you before, but now they do. Attending worship as often as possible, spending time with God in prayer, fasting, journaling, solitude – time spent alone with God, silence in the presence of the Lord. When we grow in grace, the spiritual disciplines become a joy and not a chore. Perhaps you feel called to try a new one.
7. **Are you more attentive to the needs of others?** As we grow in grace, the spirit of Christ grows inside us. It is his nature to love others and to serve them. In your prayer life, are you praying only for yourself, or do your prayers include the needs of others? After you pray, do you hear the prompting of the

Holy Spirit urging you to get involved for someone you've just prayed for? Maybe you prayed for the victims of the flooding in West Virginia. Did the Spirit prompt you to make a donation to the flood relief? Do you feel the urge to go and help muck out houses? *Are you* more attentive to the needs of others?

8. Finally, are you more and more willing to forgive others?

God calls us to forgive others, just as He has forgiven you. Bitterness has destroyed many lives. Hatred and resentment, family feuds that haven't been resolved can all eat away at our hearts and souls. Are you willing to forgive them? Is there someone in your life whom you hold bitterness towards? Is God asking you to forgive them?

Mary pondered the events of her life. We are asked to do the same in our own lives. A daily examination will reveal to us the areas in our life where God is helping us to stretch and to grow, to become more like Jesus.

Growth in grace happens intentionally, not automatically and not accidentally. It takes effort on our part. God brings about the change, but we need to be willing to do our part.

A word of caution: don't be discouraged by slow spiritual development – as long as you are growing. Direction is more important than speed. The question isn't how *quickly* are you growing, but rather *are you growing?*

Mary is our role model, taking the daily events of our lives to God in prayer, as we ponder aloud in prayer. May we all continue to grow in grace, praying to God daily. Amen.

Sermon borrowed heavily from an article in *Discipleship Journal*, 1997. “10 Questions to Ask to Make Sure You’re Still Growing”. By Donald S. Whitney.