



FIRST  
PRESBYTERIAN  
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SPARTANBURG

## DRAWING NEAR TO GOD'S...GRACE

Philippians 4:6-7

June 30, 2019

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Grace is often described as the unmerited favor of God, especially when it comes to our salvation through Jesus Christ. But, in fact, it applies to all those moments in which we receive a blessing from God, unexpectedly, in the most surprising of ways. It is a gift from God and it is so great because, like receiving a present when it's not our birthday, it comes out of the blue, knocking us sideways with the love and kindness it shows.

Let's face it, we are all in need of grace, sometimes desperately so. It is not because times are worse. Not by a long shot. In fact, *The Atlantic* reported that 2015 was the best year in history for the average human being! But even though we are better off than ever before, life is increasingly complex. And even though it is better for humanity as a whole, there are still many good reasons to be anxious. There always will be, no matter the phase of life we find ourselves in.

Those in the "sandwiched" generation find ourselves worrying about our kids *and our parents*. Those of younger years are trying to find the balance amongst career and family and a sense of purpose. Those in the latter years of life are trying to stay healthy in body, mind, spirit, and finances to be able to age in place. These are all good reasons to worry.

The apostle Paul had a lot to worry about. His life was constantly being threatened and many times he lost the support of his fellow Christians. But shockingly he writes these words from Philippians:

### ***Do not worry about anything...***

Can you imagine? No worrying...about anything?! It not only seems impossible, but wholly unreasonable given the challenges in our lives. But here is what I think he meant.

One of the great blessings of serving First Presbyterian is the staff and the church members. I

once heard David Renwick, your former pastor, say that there are more leaders at any meeting at First Pres than in entire congregations he has served! And he is right.

A few months ago, when I was going on Sabbatical, the timing meant I would be absent for almost all of the planning for the Poverty Summit. But I was not worried. I was not anxious (*okay I was a little anxious*), because I knew those in charge were far more capable than me in making this a successful event.

Last week I heard that David Dodson, our consultant for the Poverty Summit, who works all across the country, said that ours was the single best event he had ever seen. Ever!

So even though the event was complex and had many pitfalls to avoid, I knew it would be successful because I knew the people who were planning it.

Paul is not trying to tell us there is no reason to worry. Rather he is telling us to give it to God, the most capable, conscientious and wise being in all existence.

We need not worry about ANYTHING. Don't worry because God says to us, "I got this one."

And Paul tells us how to hand it off to God. To let go of it.

Prayer.

### ***But in everything by prayer and supplication...***

It is through prayer that we hand our worries to God. Furthermore, it is through the amazing grace of God that often, in the most unlikely of moments, we receive the healing we hoped for, the job we were seeking, the friendship restored, or even the blessing of a peaceful letting go of a loved one after a long illness.

I am so thankful for all of you that not only filled out the “God Experience Survey” but took time to jot down a few sentences to share the ways in which you experience the presence of God. Your examples have blessed me tremendously.

Many of you cited moments of prayer that brought you grace. I do not know who wrote any of these, but just in case you might, I have taken out some of the details. But I feel the need to share them with you because they are so powerful! They show us all that prayer works.

Some of you cited straightforward moments of grace through prayer.

Sometimes what we truly need is not so much for God to fix things but to ease our heart. I know I spent sleepless nights when Liz went to her first day of school, her first sleepover camp, her first date, and her first day of college. Basically, all the firsts! What I needed was to chill! I trusted Liz and the people who were caring for her. But I simply couldn't help but worry.

One of you shared what happened when you took your worry to God in prayer,

*While praying over a child leaving the country to do mission work...God enveloped me in his peace...I cried tears of joy!*

Sometimes God surprises us in prayer and, in the blink of a moment, we can move from fear, worry, and anxiety to tears of joy!

Other times, grace may come after months or even years of waiting. Perhaps you have been seeking a new direction for your life. Maybe you have felt it is time to move or change jobs. There is all this waiting, all this worry about what to do and you're not sure how in the world you're going to make this decision and then, one day, completely unexpectedly God's gracious surprise is clarity.

This was the experience one person shared. They came to a church event not even thinking about the decision they faced when suddenly everything in the event seemed to point to God's will for her life and so she wrote,

*I took a walk and prayed for 30 minutes...My head exploded with thoughts that were not my own. It was deeply moving...I felt so clearly God was helping me. Filling my mind with clear messages that were unlike anything I had experienced before....*

She hadn't come to church thinking her future path would unfold, but through God's surprising grace it came.

Sometimes God's grace comes even when God says no. We have all found ourselves praying for healing for a friend or loved one. We have seen them suffer greatly and seeing our loved ones in pain is agony. This is what one of your members shared,

*I had a dying friend that I tried to help in the last stages of her life. There was pain and suffering and praying and pleading. God came through for us. She passed away but did so with no pain. It was amazing.*

Even though it was a moment of loss there was grace. Because in the respite, in the release through prayer, God gave her a sense of assurance – that release from this earthly coil of pain and sickness was a moving on from this life into glory in the next.

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

God's gracious acts of love are so surprising because they grant us moments of peace when we least expect it. We can't understand it because it comes beyond expectation. In the midst of pain, parental worry, and life trajectory these people found God's peace beyond all reason because prayer works.

So believe it! Above all reasonable expectation God wants your prayers. Despite being very busy, God grants us a willing and listening ear. God wants me and you to hand over our small problems and our big ones.

What better gift for your life than the power to not worry...about anything! That is the power of praying this text from Philipians.

I invite you once again to listen in to my prayer on this text that it perhaps might cajole your imagination to prayer in your own way through this text.

Let us pray...

**Do not worry,**

*God are you serious?!*

*I have a new house!*

*Two houses now, since the first has not sold!*

*I am going away on Tuesday for a month.*

*Backpacking in the wilderness.*

*It will be amazing,*

*But I have not done this for 30 years.*

*My itinerary is not set yet.*

*Do I have all the gear I need?*

*My father has moved in with his fiancé.*

*His memory continues to fail.*

*Will it work out?*

*The poverty initiative is gaining momentum.*

*Can I leave it?*

*I love Spartanburg,*

*But how can it be that two different worlds exists*

*In the same town?*

*With 17 years difference of life expectancy*

*from Converse Heights to the Northside?*

*Help us to not only talk the talk*

*But walk the walk,*

*Joining hands with all our brothers and sisters,*

*To make this town and this world,*

*Into your vision of justice, peace and love.*

*Lord there is so much to be done....*

**[Don't worry Tom... about anything.**

**Keep working. Keep failing.**

**But you have seen my blessings all your life.**

**You have read about them in my word.**

**You know you can trust me. Let go.**

**Let go of your worry.]**

**But in everything in prayer and supplication...**

*Lord, give me the words to pray.*

*Give me the heart to pray your hopes and dreams for this world.*

*May your Spirit so fill my soul that what pours out is your will.*

**And the peace of God which passes all understanding,**

*Lord, give me that peace.*

*Lord, give that peace to our world.*

*Lord, confound us with your grace.*

*Let your grace surprise me,*

*Let it surprise us all.*

*Shows me the face of Jesus*

*in everyone I meet,*

*This day, and every one that follows it. Amen.*