

Dynamite Prayer: Offering Thoughts and Prayers

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Sermon Audio file

Scripture Text: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Have you noticed that the phrase “thoughts and prayers” has become fodder in the struggle over gun control in the United States? At least since the time of the Columbine school massacre 20 years ago, “thoughts and prayers” has been almost standard vocabulary in official statements of condolences from politicians and other public figures after major tragedies and natural disasters. “Our thoughts and prayers are with all those affected by this cowardly attack ... this horrific shooting ... this senseless tragedy ... this unprecedented calamity.”

And for a time, the phrase “thoughts and prayers” seemed a good combination of words. “Prayers” was a shorthand way of saying that all of us who are religious are in sympathy with you and are speaking to God on your behalf. And “thoughts” indicated that those of us who aren’t religious are feeling for you as well. It was like saying “Happy holidays and merry Christmas” to cover all fronts. But more recently, the phrase has been denounced as an empty platitude used in place of meaningful action.

After the slaughter of 49 people by a gunman at two mosques in New Zealand in March of 2019, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez upset some people by tweeting, “What good are your thoughts & prayers when they don’t even keep the pews safe?” She followed that tweet with another that said, “‘Thoughts and prayers’ is reference to the NRA’s phrase used to deflect conversation away from policy change during tragedies.”

In short, thoughts and prayers as an expression of condolence has been mocked as a means of political obfuscation (confusion) and as a form of civilian slacktivism —supporting a cause by means such as social media or online petitions, actions requiring very little effort or commitment. Here are a couple of examples:

The social-media meme captures a common reaction to the frequently voiced offer of “thoughts and prayers.” It depicts two orange cats, indolently stretched out upon a lounge chair. The caption says: “I named my cats ‘Thoughts’ and ‘Prayers.’ Because they’re useless.” (me.me. Retrieved May 23, 2019.)

A political cartoon depicts two angels standing beside the Pearly Gates. Floating up into the air around them are several fluffy clouds labeled “Thoughts” or “Prayers.” Behind them is a cluster of teenagers walking through the Pearly Gates. One of their backpacks is labeled “School Shooting Victims.” One angel says to the other, “They keep sending us their ‘thoughts and prayers’...” “... and their kids,” replies the other. (Kevin Necessary, editorial cartoon of May 18, 2018, Scripps Howard News Service. wcpo.com.)

Some critics of the phrase have referenced the Bible to reinforce their point that thoughts and prayers without effective action are meaningless. They quote James 2:14-16: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?"

Likewise, Pope Francis said in an address, "Prayer that doesn't lead to concrete action toward our brothers is a fruitless and incomplete prayer. [...] Prayer and action must always be profoundly united." Certainly, James and Pope Francis are right that words without action aren't enough, no matter how good the words. But not everyone agrees that the phrase "thoughts and prayers" is little more than verbal junk food.

About the same time as Ocasio-Cortez's tweet, Andrew Klavan, a widely published writer of crime and suspense novels, commented in his Daily Wire podcast that "When tragedy or atrocity strikes ... thoughts and prayers are not just an expression of compassion. They are ... an expression of humility and helplessness. They are a way of saying: 'There is nothing we can do in the face of this wickedness, but we stand in solidarity with the victims and ask God to comfort their families in their sorrow.'"

What brings the debate over this terminology to mind is today's reading from 2 Thessalonians. The New Testament presents 2 Thessalonians as a letter from Paul to the followers of Jesus at Thessalonica. And the lectionary has broken today's passage from the first chapter into two blocks of verses: 1-4 and 11-12.

In verses 1-4, Paul makes clear to his readers that they are in his thoughts. But he gets specific about it, saying that he and his companions "give thanks to God for you ... because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing" (v. 3). He even goes on to say that he and his coworkers boast about the Thessalonians "among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring" (v. 4). Obviously, Paul has spent some time thinking about those to whom he addressed the letter.

In verses 11-12, Paul tells his readers that they are in his prayers as well, but not in just a general, "I'll say a prayer for you" way. Rather, he gets specific about the content of his prayers: "We always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him" (vv. 11-12)

Because Paul spells out his thoughts and prayers, they have the ring of sincerity. They are genuine expressions of his feelings toward the Thessalonian believers. Thus, Paul shows us how to put meat on the bones of thoughts and prayers. No matter how helpless we may feel when expressing solidarity with someone who has suffered great loss, and no matter that we know words alone will not suffice, sincere

thoughts and prayers are not just empty words.

Thoughts are work, because they push us to view what's happened, not from our view, but from the view of those directly affected. Thoughts are work, especially when they lead us to consider if there's any concrete action we might do, or support others in doing, that will help. Could the grieving person use a hand right now with kids or an aging relative for whom they are the caregiver? Is there some task we can take off their plate for a little while?

In his book, *New Mercies I See*, Stan Purdum talks about being the pastor of a little country church where several of the members were dairy farmers.

One day, a child of one of those farmers died suddenly. So Purdum rushed to their home to offer what comfort he could. When he got there, he found the father and mother of the deceased child in the house, with their other children around them. He knew at that time of day, the father would normally have been in the barn, milking cows, a procedure that needs to be done without fail twice a day. But a family member told Purdum that two of the neighbors, farmers themselves, had come to handle the milking without being asked. Their thoughts had been with the grieving family, and it led them to act.

Likewise, prayer is work. If you say your prayers are with someone, and you follow through by intentionally praying for them, you're putting yourself in a place to see beyond your own horizons and walk in someone else's shoes. Prayer deepens our empathy and puts us in a place where God can change us and lead us to some action we can take. Though all good things come from God, praying for others trusts that God may allow our prayers to be a means by which God does good for others.

In addition, you're speaking to God on their behalf, seeking God's grace for them at a time when they may be so wounded that they just can't pray for themselves. Peter advised the early Christians to "be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray" (1 Peter 4:7 NIV). But in times of deep trouble or pain, people are likely to be anything but clear-minded and self-controlled.

That's not to say that they can't call out to God, but praying is not easy when grief has us in its grip. Prayer in which we petition God can be at least as demanding of our attention as writing a letter or carrying on a serious conversation, and when someone is in grief, we can shoulder some of the work of prayer for them.

If we have a loving relationship with God, then our prayers are a key factor in that relationship. And when we offer prayers to those in need, it may not be a pivotal act, but it is a beneficial element in the situation which we are presenting to the ones for whom we are praying. It's asking for God's help, and what greater

source of help is there? Put briefly, in times of tragedy, whether it affects many or only a few, thoughts and prayers will never be the whole answer, but often, they are all we have.

Writing about the difficulties of life, author Anne Lamott said, “It’s funny: I always imagined when I was a kid that adults had some kind of inner toolbox, full of shiny tools: the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience.

“But when I grew up, I found that life handed you these rusty, bent, old tools — friendships, prayer, conscience, honesty — and said, ‘Do the best you can with these, they will have to do.’ And mostly, against all odds, they’re enough.”

God has also given us thoughts and prayers in that box of seemingly inadequate tools and told us to do our best with them. Thus, our thoughts and prayers, sincerely and genuinely offered and followed through on, are never just empty words. Our thoughts and prayers are Christ-like ways the Lord has given us to love our neighbor.

Laura Coward gives us a final justification for offering our thoughts and prayers to persons in times of great disaster, suffering, grief, and pain. In a 2016 post in huffpost.com titled “In defense of offering our ‘thoughts and prayers,’ she wrote this:

“The places that used to fill our souls with culture, entertainment, knowledge, and faith have each experienced mass casualties at the hands of those who hate us for our differences. We’ve accepted the fact that stepping into a movie theater, school, sporting venue, concert or building of faith might result in death. That’s our world now.

“We’re living through a collective nightmare, and our empathy is included in a casualty count that’s already too high. Our world feels out of control, so we bolt down what’s ‘ours’ and we protect what’s ‘ours.’

“But we’re called to love, protect, and pray for everyone. Our prayers aren’t throwaway gestures. And for many of us, our thoughts and prayers aren’t simply all that we’re willing to give. Our thoughts and prayers are all that we have. They’re our foundation, our everything, and they are needed now, more than ever. They are what propel us to the acts of loving, protecting, serving, and understanding others. (Laura Coward. “In defense of offering our ‘thoughts and prayers.’” [HuffPost](http://HuffPost.com), July 9, 2016, huffpost.com.)

So, let's never underestimate the dunamis (or dynamite power) of the thoughts and prayers we offer on behalf of others. And even though they are often ridiculed, let's not neglect to offer with Christ-like sincerity and compassion our thoughts and prayers to those in need, remembering that often they are all we have to offer and they are important ways God gives us to love our neighbor.