

Learning to Pray with Dependence

Part 4 – Now is Always the Best Time to Pray

I Thessalonians 5:12-24

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 29, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹² But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; ¹³ esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴ And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. ¹⁵ See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. ¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil.

²³ May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. (I Thessalonians 5:12-24, NRSV)

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A recent survey asked Americans what they pray for when they pray. Here are the top five answers on the board. 82% said they pray for the needs of their family and friends. 74% pray for personal problems. 54% regularly take time to thank God for good things in their life. 42% ask God to forgive them. And 38% said they often pray for victims of natural disasters.¹

I read those statistics and I noticed a trend. People tend to pray when they are in need. We need help for ourselves or those we know, so we pray. We need forgiveness so we pray, or guidance, or wisdom, or strength, or patience. Even when we thank God for good things he has given us, in doing so we are acknowledging that we need those things. If this is true, therefore, that we pray when we are in need, it figures that the more we realize our need for God the more we will pray. In the same way, people who tend to think they've got life under control or figured out probably don't spend much time on their knees.

In the passage we just read from Thessalonians, we find Paul writing to encourage the church of his day to live into the calling they have been given by Christ. His directives almost sound like a to-do list: "Esteem your leaders. Admonish idlers. Repay evil with good. Help the weak. Rejoice always." And right in the middle of the list we find this curious command, "**Pray without ceasing.**" What I want to show you is that this directive isn't simply one among others in the list but one that exists *because of the others*.

Think about what Paul is asking here. We are called to love those who hate us, doing good to those who do evil. We are called to find joy in something other than how we are treated or in the nature of our circumstances, rejoicing always. We are called to live in a continual disposition of gratitude, giving thanks to God at all times. We are to adhere to every good teaching and to avoid every sort of evil. Piece of cake, right? No way! This is hard stuff. It's counterintuitive and countercultural to live this way. In fact, we can't even *begin* to do these things on our own strength or goodness. Now do you see why Paul tells us to pray and to pray without ever stopping? We've got no choice but to ask for God's help.

The Amazon rainforest is the largest rainforest in the world at 2.14 million square miles. By comparison, that's 13 times bigger than the state of California. In fact, the Amazon is about the size of the lower 48 states. Imagine having never been there before but suddenly finding yourself dropped into the very center of the forest. Remember, this isn't high desert where you can see hundreds of miles. This is a dense jungle where you often can't see more than a few yards in front of you. It is fair to say that on your own, you would never find your way out alive.

But what if you had a guide, somebody who knew every corner of the forest? What if there was somebody with you who not only knew how to navigate through the forest but how to survive along the way, somebody who had lived there all his life, somebody who had made it his life mission to get you out alive! Would you not stay with that person? In fact, wouldn't your first priority be to stay with that person whatever it took. The first thought when you awoke every morning

¹ <http://www.theblaze.com/news/2014/10/02/the-top-5-things-americans-pray-for/>

would be, “Where is my guide? I can’t lose my guide!” You’d never let him out of your sight.

Think about the Christian life, this life of following Jesus. We are forever forgetting that our sole identity in life is that of beloved sons and daughters of our Father in Heaven and so we need constant reminding. We are always in danger of temptation. We need so many things to live and everything we need comes from God’s hand. For one, we always need grace, not just to be forgiven for the people we have been but grace to become the people we are meant to become. We are perpetually in a place where we ought to give thanks. And when does our worship end? Never. And so Paul directs us, “Pray without ceasing. Never stop praying. Pray all the time. Never let prayer out of your sight!” Because without God and God’s help, we are hopelessly lost.

But how does that work? In a practical sense, how can a person pray all the time? I was in a meeting the other day and one person in the meeting never once stopped talking. This person talked without ceasing, on and on, the entire meeting. Nobody else could get a word in edgewise. And the only thing that every other person in the meeting wanted was for this one person to just shut up. And afterwards, as I walked to my car, I have to admit that I was thinking to myself, “I wonder if I talked too much in the meeting?”

I’m not even sure God would want us talking to him every minute of every day nonstop, as if such a thing were even possible. So the first thing we must do is to understand what exactly Paul means here. Well, the root of the Greek verb here we translate as “pray” is the word *prosecho*, which literally means “to hold your mind towards”, “to pay attention to”, or “to give heed to.” In Paul’s day this was nautical term which referred to the attention required from sailors to make sure their ship continued on in a particular direction.² You may have noticed that the English word “echo” is found in this Greek word *prosecho*. While I don’t think that’s where we get our word “echo”, it’s not a bad way to remember what Paul is driving at here because an echo is not a constant tone. Rather, an echo reverberates. It keeps coming back, again and again and again. You see, we are not being directed here to pray on and on, but over and over.

If we are ever going to do this, however, effort is not the first thing that we need. Effort has its place, of course, but only after understanding. As we’ve said here many times before, right thinking leads to right

living. In other words, I believe we will naturally begin to pray without ceasing, in the way Paul means here, once we *understand the reasons* why this is necessary and how this is possible. Along these lines there are at least three things we must believe in faith if we are ever going to pray without ceasing as Paul directs us to do so here.

First, we must believe that God is the only one who is our source of ultimate identity, security and provision in life.

Every person on the planet has identified something as the source of these things. What is it for you? Well, the way you can know what it is for you is to pay attention to how you respond to hardship or need in life. For example, if you believe that your own efforts or your own morality are the source of these things, then when things don’t go well in life your response will be to work harder and to try and be better behaved. If you believe money is your savior, then when you get in trouble your first instinct will be to think, “How can I buy myself out of this mess?”

As we already said, a Christian is somebody who has become convinced that God, as we know him through Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, is our only hope in life and death. Our identity is rooted in Christ, as is our security and our provision. That means that God is the only one who can give us what we need. He’s our guide not only through the jungle but the one who can provide what it is we need along the way. When we get into trouble, our immediate instinct is to turn to him. If we don’t believe this we will never pray ceaselessly, and we may not even pray at all. But when we come to believe this, prayer, even ceaseless prayer, will come naturally.

Second, we must also believe that God, who is the only source of ultimate identity, security and provision, is always with us.

Charles Spurgeon was an English preacher who lived in the 19th century. Once in a sermon on this directive to pray without ceasing he insightfully pointed out that this directive actually implies that if it is possible for us to pray without ceasing, as Paul suggests that it is, then the following must also be true about prayer.

Words, though helpful in prayer, are not necessary because even the worst chatterboxes among us can’t talk without ceasing. Apparently, therefore, audible language isn’t essential to prayer. As Spurgeon puts it, “Silence is as fit a garment for devotion as any that language can fashion.”

² *Word Study Dictionary*, edited by Spiros Zodhiates, (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, c. 1992), p. 1231.

Posture is also of no great importance in prayer. While praying on our knees can be a great tool to help us learn humility, we can't stay on our knees all day. So apparently we can pray as we are walking, running, laying, sitting, falling – in whatever physical position we find ourselves.

Place is also not essential. Of course, praying here at church, or in a special spot you have set aside at home, or out in nature, can be a wonderful aid to prayer which we ought to use. But if we are directed to pray at all times than apparently it must also possible to pray in school, at work, in your car, on the golf course or in an airport terminal. As Spurgeon puts it, "Every place is hallowed ground to a hallowed heart."

The idea that we are to pray without ceasing also overthrows the idea that there are only certain *times* meant for prayer. It's not that there aren't good times to set aside for prayer, even seasons like Lent when we commit ourselves more intentionally to prayer, but just as every square inch of creation is filled with God's presence, so is every last second of creation. That means that the right time to pray is always now, whenever now is.³ God has no limited office hours; the door is always open.

Finally, if we are to pray without ceasing, that means that no matter what we are doing, that activity can be an act of prayer. In Romans 12:1 Paul makes this stunning challenge, "**I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.**"⁴ That verse has been translated this way: "**Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.**"⁵ What a beautiful vision. Any action done in this life, even the most mundane and ordinary, if it is done with an awareness of God's presence and a heart devoted to honoring God in that moment, is this not prayer?

If you have ever loved somebody dearly, with the sort of love that is other-centered, you may know what this is like. I listened to a woman recently talk about her deceased husband, a man to whom she had been married for over 60 years. She told me that he was so in love with her that whenever they were together he was always thinking about what he might do to please her.

³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, from a sermon entitled "Pray Without Ceasing", delivered on March 10, 1872, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Read it in full at <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/1039.php>

⁴ NRSV

⁵ The Message

Now, on occasion that involved extraordinary things like a diamond ring or a cruise ship vacation. But mostly it was ordinary tasks done on ordinary days. A cup of coffee made every morning. A kind word about how beautiful she looked that day. An effort to make sure she had the lion's share of the covers on cold nights. Opening a car door. Showing interest in the events of her day. Whenever he was with his wife his focus was on pleasing her. Not to earn love. No, not at all. He already had that. But simply because of love.

I think that sometimes our problem is that we love Jesus but we forget that Jesus, by his Spirit, is always with us. If Jesus was physically with you all day every day wouldn't you act differently, even think differently? You wouldn't ignore him for long stretches at a time would you? We don't even do that with one another usually. You'd probably talk to him along the way, though sometimes you'd just enjoy each other's company in silence. When you got into a jam you wouldn't wonder who to turn to for help – the Creator of the universe was right there with you! Evil wouldn't threaten you. Who's going to threaten Jesus! When good things came your way you'd notice his smile and remember that these were gifts from him. When you messed up, forgiveness would be right there at hand. No task would be too great to do together.

The thing is, Jesus *is with us* every moment of every day. He's even with us more closely than he was with his disciples when he walked the earth because there were times then when they couldn't find him. But now, by his Spirit, Christ is always with us, literally dwelling within, closer to us than our own breath. Remember the last promise Jesus made to us before ascending to heaven, "**Remember I am with you always, to the very end of the age.**"⁶ Once we believe this and become aware of this, doesn't ceaseless prayer, not only with our words but often with our simple awareness, become more natural?

So, God, who is our only source of ultimate identity, security and provision in life, is always with us. This leads us to the third thing we must believe, which is that as Christ is with us he doesn't simply want to give us things but wants rather to give us himself.

To understand this we need to refine our understanding of grace. Too often we think of grace exclusively as something that God gives us one time to forgive us and make us ready for heaven, like a one-time inoculation that forever protects us from the viruses of sin and death. While that is certainly a very important part of grace, however, that's a very limited understanding. In

⁶ Matthew 28:20

fact, grace itself is not something, but Someone. There is no grace apart from Jesus. It's not something that he can give to us to take away on our own. It is only as we have Christ that we have grace.

Imagine a sailboat that wanted to cross a vast ocean but only asked the wind for one giant gust to get it out of the harbor and on its way. After that, the sailboat could handle things on its own. Ridiculous, right? Any sailor worth his salt knows that a sailboat will quickly come to rest unless there is *constant* wind. No wind, no movement.

It is no different with grace. We don't just need Jesus to set us on our way but we need him every step *of the way*. As he himself put it, **"I am the vine...Abide in me as I abide in you...You are the branches. Those who abide in me and I am in them will bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."**⁷ Jesus doesn't say, "Apart from my grace you can do nothing." No, he says "apart from *me* you can do nothing." This is why Dallas Willard can say, "A Christian will consume much more grace by leading a holy life than you will by sinning, because every holy act you do will have to be upheld by the grace of God."⁸

Much of my life I have thought about prayer this way. Pray in the morning and ask God for all the things you need from him that day and then trust that he has loaded up your spiritual backpack as you go on your way. Then, at the end of your day, check in with God and let him know how it went. That's like a sailboat asking for all the wind it needs to cross the ocean in one big gust out of the harbor, or a branch asking a vine to give it what it needs so it can disconnect itself and wander around the vineyard by itself.

God doesn't work that way because we can't work that way. God doesn't give us strength; God gives us *himself* who is strong. Patience, love, power, and wisdom, these aren't commodities that God doles out to us. Instead, Christ, who is love and power and patience and wisdom embodied, gives *himself*. By his Spirit he wants to come and fill your heart and your life. When you in faith allow him in, he becomes like wind which fills the sails of your life and begins to move you towards the holy and abundant life he wants for you. Along the way Christ will then remind you never to become too dependent upon what he can give you but only on Christ himself. When we believe this, that God is our only and ever-present hope in life, and that he also is, in himself, everything we need, then ceaseless prayer will become the most natural thing we do.

Now, this doesn't mean, of course, that there is no effort required on our part. Even though the wind is the power which moves the sailboat, the sailors have to work hard to read the wind, and till the sails, and guide the rudder, and navigate with the compass. Effort is not the opposite of grace. Works, striving to earn God's favor, that's the opposite of grace. Grace is given but effort is still required. And so there are some things we can do which will help us learn how to pray without ceasing, not things we do to please God but things we do in response to God's pleasure. In the few moments I have left, let me offer a couple of practical suggestions.

First, while we ought to learn to pray at all times and in all places, dedicating certain times and places to give our full attention to commune with God can enhance our awareness of God's presence during the other times of the day. Jesus himself often went out in the morning alone to pray.⁹ As somebody once said, "The first hour of the morning is the rudder for the day." There is something about beginning each day in prayer that sets a tone for the rest of the day. For centuries monastic communities have set fixed times during the day to stop everything else to pray. But you don't have to be a mystic, monk or hermit to do this. Set a time each morning, or at lunch, or at the end of the day, or all three, when you step out of the rush of things to give some moments to focused attention on God. Set up reminders on your smartphone which prompt you to pause and pray each day, wherever you are and whatever you are doing.

Listen to worship music during the day, as you drive or work, and let the lyrics guide you in prayer.

Cultivate the habit of praying at meals. And don't just offer a rote, mechanical prayer but really pause and give thanks for what you are about to receive and for those around the table with whom you are about to receive it with. Pray for those who don't have what you are about to receive.

Pray when you drive, keeping your eyes open of course. When somebody cuts you off in traffic, ask Jesus to bless that person instead of taking it into your hands to curse them. Then watch what happens to your spirit when you do.

There's an old monastic tradition which instructs brothers to say this little prayer every time somebody knocks on the door of the monastery: *Benedicamus Domino*. It means, "Lord, send me a pizza." No, it actually is a prayer that means, "It may be the Lord." What if you trained yourself to pray that brief prayer at

⁷ John 15:1-5, NRSV

⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (Harper, 2006), 62.

⁹ See Luke 5:16

every phone call, every text, every knock on the door. “Jesus, how am I going to meet you in this interaction?”¹⁰

When you remember God along the way, pause to adore him – “You are our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name.” When you see injustice, pray under your breath, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on this earth as it is in heaven.” When you see a need, your own or somebody else’s, ask for daily bread. When you sin, ask for God’s grace right then and there. When others sin against you, ask for God to help you forgive. Don’t battle temptation or evil on your own. Pray immediately on the spot for deliverance and leading.

You see, there are things we can do, efforts we can make, to pray without ceasing. But again, effort alone will never do it. First we must believe. We must believe that God loves us and has become, through Christ, the ever-present and ultimate source of our identity, security and provision. As we do we will also learn to pray without ceasing.

I love what Oswald Chambers, the old Scottish evangelist, said about all this. “The grace you had yesterday will not be sufficient for today.” I would add that the grace you had last hour will not be sufficient for this hour.

We must learn to pray in the moment, moment by moment, for prayer is never the preparation for our service, but is the practice of drawing on God. Never say, “If I can just get through this I will get away and pray!” No! Pray now! Pray without ceasing. And God, who is ever-faithful, ever-loving, ever-ready, ever-present, will always give what is needed, mainly Himself¹¹

Amen.

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¹⁰ Taken from a sermon by John Ortberg, “With...”, preached at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church on June 13, 2010.

¹¹ From Oswald Chambers’ classic devotional, *My Utmost for His Highest* (The reading for June 26th). It is well worth reading the whole passage at <http://www.oswaldchambers.co.uk/Readings.php?day=26&month=06>

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read I Thessalonians 5:12-24 again. What is the first thing that stands out to you in this passage?
2. Of all the directives that Paul gives the church in this list, which one do you find to be the most challenging or hard to follow?
3. When you read in the Bible that we are directed to “pray without ceasing” how do you respond? Does this feel like a burden or a gift?
4. Prayer is certainly talking to God or listening to God. Can prayer also be simply being humbly and gratefully *aware* of God? Why or why not?
5. Dallas Willard says, “A Christian will consume much more grace by leading a holy life than you will by sinning, because every holy act you do will have to be upheld by the grace of God.” How do you respond?
6. Do you believe that Christ is always with you as he says he will be? Do you live as if Christ is always with you?
7. Oswald Chambers writes that we “tend to make prayer the preparation for our service” instead of making prayer the “practice of drawing on the grace of God [in the moment of need].” Can you see this tendency in your life? Do you tend to pray when you set out or when you return, more than you tend to pray along the way?
8. What is one practice you can employ in your life which might help you to remember to pray more throughout your day?

Table to Table Question A question for kids and adults to answer together

When is the best time to pray?
Is there any time that is not a good time to pray?