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Let Me Say That Again: Prayer is a Priority

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

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“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The One who calls you is faithful and He will do it.”

In Hugh Price Hughes' story, the “City of Everywhere,” a man arrived in a city one cold morning. As he got off the train, the station was like any other station with the crowds and redcaps, except that everybody was barefooted. They wore no shoes. He took a cab from there, and he noticed the cab driver was barefooted. “Pardon me,” he asked the driver, “I was just wondering why you don't wear shoes. Don't you believe in shoes?”

“Sure we do,” said the driver.

“Why don't you wear them?”

“Ah, that's the question,” came the reply. “Why don't we wear shoes? Why don't we?”

At the hotel it was the same. The clerk, bellboys, everybody was barefooted. In the coffee shop he noticed a nice-looking fellow at the table opposite him who was also barefooted. He said, “I notice you aren't wearing any shoes. I wonder why? Don't you know about shoes?”

The man replied, “Of course I know about shoes.”

“Then why don't you wear them?”

“Ah, that's the question. Why don't we? Why don't we?”

After breakfast he walked out on the street in the snow but every person he saw was barefooted. He asked another man about it, and pointed out how shoes protect the feet from cold. The man said, “We know about shoes. See that building over there? That is a shoe factory. We are proud of that plant and every week we gather there to hear the man in charge tell about shoes and how wonderful they are.”

“Then why don't you wear shoes?”

“Ah, that's the question.”

Don't we believe in prayer? Don't we know what it could mean in our lives? Then why don't we pray? Why don't we? Ah, that's the question... Why don't we?...

I was counseling a premarital couple in Birmingham, talking about the Christian view of marriage and how a strong faith can make all the difference in a marriage, and the groom said to me “I don’t go to church. There are too many hypocrites.” I said to him “Don’t let that stop you – we always have room for one more.” I must confess I feel like a hypocrite up here today because I have so much to learn and I need to grow so much in my own personal prayer life.

I believe we fall for the basic time management issue: Only doing the urgent things – whether they are important or not. We believe prayer is important, but prayer is never urgent. Unless we are called on to pray in public for some occasion like a wedding or banquet, we don’t take any time to prepare ourselves for prayer. Prayer is never pressing on us, unless we are totally out of control, facing a job dilemma or a life and death situation. Then, when we wait until we’re out of control to pray, we don’t seem to have the tools or the experience to make it meaningful.

Church, it is time to talk about prayer, because prayer should be central to our Christian faith. Nothing is more important than prayer. Dr. Stephen Olford, a right hand man for Billy Graham, says “No one can claim to be a man or woman of God without a life of prayer.” As Christians, we know that prayer is vitally important, and we try our best; but for many of us, our prayer lives are more disorganized than the rest of our lives – which for some of us says a lot! Why is our prayer life so haphazard? Why don’t we? Ah, that’s the question.

I believe we don’t pray because we don’t understand what prayer is. So let’s see what prayer is:

First, prayer is the encounter with God. Henry Blackaby and Claude King, in their workbook Experiencing God say “If you as a Christian do not know when God is speaking, you are in trouble at the heart of your Christian life! As you look at the Bible, you see that prayer is one of the most consistent and regular ways that God speaks to people. God *wants* to make it personal. Remember God *loves* you and the number one thing he wants is a relationship with you. God wants us to look to Him in a relationship rather than a method or technique. The key is not *how* God spoke, but *that* He spoke. God spoke to Moses in the burning bush. Moses would have been foolish to say ‘This has been a wonderful experience with this burning bush. I hope it leads me to an encounter with God!’ When God spoke, *that* was the encounter with living God, the Creator of the universe.” When God speaks to you through prayer, you will come to know that that is God. Sometimes in prayer you will have a new idea, a new hope about a situation, or a new attitude toward a person. Through prayer, you and I bring divine resources to bear on our situation. Without prayer, you and I cut ourselves off from those resources God wants to offer to us. Anything that happens in prayer – those ideas, thoughts, feelings, or new attitudes are your encounter with the Living God. Prayer is the encounter with God.

Second, prayer is a relationship. Prayer is a two-way fellowship and communication with God. You speak to God and God speaks to you. It is not a one-way conversation. Your personal prayer life may be primarily one-way communication – you talking to God. If that were all prayer was, it would make Paul’s admonishment to “Pray without ceasing” a dreadful duty. But prayer is more than that. Prayer includes listening as well, just as in a human relationship. Prayer is a relationship, not just a religious activity. Prayer is designed more to adjust you to God than to adjust God to you. God doesn’t need your prayers, but he wants you to pray. And there are things God cannot or will not do unless God’s people pray. You need to pray because of what God wants to do in and through your life during your praying. If prayer is a relationship, then prayer is dependence. It is the opposite of self-sufficiency (which we are all taught to be). Spiritually we are to be fully dependent on him. Many people discover God only when they feel bankrupt in their lives. As a parent, I want for and cherish the times when my kids really need me, when they can’t do something on their own. But how much more of a blessing it is when my kids include me in their daily lives. How much more I can help them when they check in, or stop to ask, or spend time with me daily. Jesus said God is not like a father, but God is our Father. Unceasing prayer takes obedience and dependence in relationship to our heavenly Father.

About now, you may be saying: Prayer is an encounter with God? All that is contained in prayer? God is speaking to me? Now that may seem a tall order, especially if lately you haven't experienced your prayers going any further than your ceiling. Maybe it's because we tend to reserve prayer for last place, when we don't have anything left on our schedules. When we're totally exhausted is when we say "Oh well, I guess I'd better pray." Imagine if your best friend calls you up on the phone 30 seconds before they fell asleep every night. But isn't that what we do to God? And yet God loves us and is crazy about us still.

Third, prayer is hope. The hope for our prayer lives is found in Romans 8:26-27: "*The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the believers in accordance with God's will.*" What a promise! When you run out of words, maybe that's when the Holy Spirit becomes freed up to pray on your behalf to the Father. When we empty ourselves of ourselves, the Holy Spirit can fill us. The Holy Spirit has an advantage over us – he already knows the will of God. In our weakness he is strong. You don't have to fight that battle by yourself. Let God do it for you. If you don't know what to pray, just empty yourself and let the groaning of the Holy Spirit take over your prayers. Silence in God's response could mean God is pointing out some sin to you. Silence from God could also mean that God is ready to bring into your life a greater revelation of himself than you have ever known. Prayer involves watching and waiting and watching and waiting – in hope.

"*Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*" The church Paul had started there was facing persecution. They were facing internal conflicts within the church. In the previous verses Paul was telling them how they were to get along with one another. He seems to imply that it is impossible to live that way on the outside unless you are in communion with God. These are Paul's admonitions for living inwardly the life that will in turn impact your life outwardly.

"*Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*" (Graham Scroggie), an old professor of homiletics (preaching), used to tell his students "Pray when you feel like it. Pray when you don't feel like it. Pray until you feel like it." Pray without ceasing. This kind of prayer calls for obedience and reliance. The fact that we fail so often in our prayer times shows us the cost of obedience. If there were no cost for following Christ, we would have no problem with prayer. Nevertheless, we are to "*pray continuously.*"

Paul calls us to pray right in the middle of telling us to "*rejoice always*" and to "*give thanks in everything.*" Remember Paul and Silas, locked in a Roman jail. Despite being beaten with rods and locked in stocks, they were joyful, singing hymns of prayer to God until the foundations of the prison were shaken. They were outwardly chained, but inwardly free in their spirit, and no amount of bondage could take that away from them. Had they waited until they were locked up to pray, things may have been different. But because they were in a life of prayer, it was completely different – and better.

But together with Christ, we have this hope: We may not understand what is happening in our lives, but we know that God is faithful, and for that we can be grateful, even in the midst of great tragedy. God has not left us alone. In their anguish many people ask "Why doesn't God intervene more for people?" But the truth is God *did* intervene. He died for them long before they were born. He died even for those who would never believe in him. God does not hide in times of trouble. He proved that 2000 years ago on a cross. In that critical moment that spelled the difference between life and death for everyone in the whole world through all of time, God intervened. He could have remained safely in heaven instead of taking on human form. But instead he put himself directly in harm's way. "*There is no greater love than the one who lays down his life for another.*" (John 15:13).

Because of this hope, this confident expectancy, we can be thankful "*in all things,*" because God has already taken care of us. God has already loved us. Jesus already died in our place. We can enter into prayer thankfully for all that Jesus has already done. When you have that under your belt, prayer can become thankful, even joyful. Though we don't understand everything, we can know that God's plan can never be thwarted. Do you want continual hope? Then pray continually.

Pray. It's as basic to our Christian life as shoes are to walking. Pray. Don't worry about the words. Sometimes I just breathe in: "Lord Jesus Christ", and breathe out: "Have mercy on me." Remember the Holy Spirit intercedes for us when we don't know what to do. Do it with joy. Do it with thanksgiving. Because of prayer, as a Christian, you can no longer say "There's nothing I can do." You can always pray. You can pray always. Prayer does something in us. Prayer does something for us. Prayer does something through us.

Can you see it? Do you see? Prayer isn't a last resort. Prayer isn't even preparation for the battle. Prayer is the battle. And let me say again: the church God had in mind is a praying church. If we are to pray continuously, then we can't say "The only thing I can do is pray" or "There's nothing left to do but pray." Prayer is the first thing, the last thing, and the best thing.

Are you ready? Let's pray! Heavenly Father, Lord, we thank you that you have not left us alone. We thank you for this promise and this guide. We hear your command to rejoice always, and to pray unceasingly, and to give thanks in all things, for this is your will for us in Christ Jesus. Lord, many of us are coming from difficult times. Many of us walked in here heavy laden, troubled with care and anxiety. We have a sense of being lost and alone. So Lord, right now we take all those things and give them to you. We don't want them back. Help us even as we breathe, in and out, in and out, to be in prayer: speaking and listening, speaking and listening. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, trusting that your Spirit intercedes for us when we don't have the words. Amen.