

Pray without Ceasing

Text:

I Thessalonians 5:12-28

“We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Introduction:

In concluding this letter to the Thessalonians Paul gives us a series of short and easily remembered instructions. They are similar in format, and partially parallel in content to Romans 12:9-21. There are four sets of instructions. They are:

- In verses 12-13 the church as a whole is given instruction as to how to act toward its leaders. They are to respect and love them and be at peace with all.
- In verses 14-15 the leaders are given instructions towards various groups within the church. They are to “admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, and be patient with all.” In addition they are to be certain that the teaching of Jesus to not repay evil with evil but with good is respected by all at all times.

- There is then in verses 16-18 a series of three brief commands concerning the spiritual life of all, that are to be universally respected. We are to always rejoice, always pray, and always be thankful.
- Finally, in verses 19-22 he gives a series of five commands regarding the prophetic ministry. “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.”

I want to focus on just one of these commands for the present. I am doing it within the context of the theme we are examining, how to avoid wasting our lives. We have look at Paul’s commands to “lay hold on eternal life”, and to “redeem the time”. Now I want us to listen to his three word command: “pray without ceasing.”

Experience has taught me that the most common first reaction to this exhortation is to consider it impossible to accomplish. People read it and say: “that can’t be done”. So they then assume that either Paul is exaggerating, or that the verse must mean something other than what it seems to be saying. Religious exaggeration does, unfortunately, exist. Preachers do sometimes ask people to do things that neither they nor anyone else could do. I can assure you, however, that the Apostle Paul does not exaggerate here or elsewhere. He speaks out of his own spiritual experience. He is simply asking us to do something that he has found to be essential to his own spiritual stability; something that he could not function without. In fact, on several occasions in speaking of his own prayer habits, he uses this same term “unceasing” or “continual”. In Romans 1:9 for example he writes: “For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers.” And to the Colossians he writes: “Since the day we heard of you faith, we do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” (Colossians 1:9).

So if Paul, himself, prayed without ceasing, and exhorts us to do the same, it must be possible. So let us examine this command together and try to understand first what it means to “pray without ceasing”, secondly, why it is important, and thirdly, how we do it.

I. The Meaning of the Command

We may begin by stating what this command does not mean. It is obvious that it does not mean that we are constantly on our knees in prayer. Paul says that he prayed constantly, but he certainly was occupied with many other activities. He was a busy man. He travelled the Roman Empire, worked with his hands making tents, preached, taught, and spent innumerable hours in conversation with his companions and with all who showed interest the message of Christ. Paul was anything but a monk locked away in a cloister on his knees repeating prayers the length of the day or waking up a night and

dragging himself from his bed to pray. Whatever unceasing prayer is, it is obviously not being continually at prayer in this sense.

The best explanation of what he means comes from his own words. I Thessalonians 5:17 is just the condensed version of Ephesians 6:18: “Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.” We need to establish two things relative to this verse. First it is the conclusion to the well-known passage about putting on the whole armor of God that begins with the words: “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” We are engaged in spiritual combat, and watchful prayer is an essential part of our success.

Furthermore, we should point out that Eph 6:11-20 is just an exposition of Jesus’ command to watch and pray that we enter not into temptation (Matthew 26:41). The simplest way of understanding constant prayer is as unbroken communication. This idea is clearer for us than it would have been for Paul’s first century readers. We live in the day of constant communication. With current cell phone technology, for example, parents can always know where their children and speak to them at any time they want. Using the military image of Ephesians 6, we know how important constant communication is in modern warfare. Modern technology has taken us a long way from the time when soldiers on the battle field communicated with drums and bugles and given a precision to warfare our ancestors never dreamed possible.

So to pray unceasingly is first of all to never be out of contact with God. To be in a position where we can at any moment on the one hand cry out to him for help, or on the other hand receive a message from him. Remember prayer is two-way communication. It is not just speaking to God; it is also hearing from God. To pray without ceasing is to live in such a way that our line of communication to heaven is always open. It is to be constantly aware of our need of God’s help, and to be constantly seeking the wisdom and power of God as we seek to “lay hold of eternal life”, and “redeem the time”. These two aspects of continual prayer can be summarized with two prayers from the Psalms: “Teach me thy way” (Psalm 27:11), and “Make haste to help me O Lord” (Psalm 70:1). These two prayers should never be absent from our thoughts.

In summary, we can say that, at a minimum, to “pray without ceasing” is to live with a perpetual understanding of our need for God’s wisdom, and God’s enabling. It is, to borrow another image from John 15, to be constantly abiding in Christ the vine, because we understand that without him we can do nothing.

II. The Importance of the Command

The reason for this command is the same as the reason for the last command we considered: “the days are evil”. “Our adversary, the devil,” says Peter, “is going about seeking whom he may devour” (I Peter 5:8). This is the reason we must be sober and vigilant, we must watch and pray if we are to lay hold of the eternal and redeem the opportunities of life. We cannot avoid wasting our lives without divine

insight and enabling. Human wisdom is insufficient. Grasping the eternal significance of the moments of our lives requires divine insight. If we are to walk carefully and redeem the time then we must keep the communications lines to heaven open. If we want the Lord to direct our paths, we must “trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5-6). God’s wisdom is higher than ours. His ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8), but his wisdom is given to those who seek it with humble hearts.

Life can be a mine field filled with potential dangers and traps, but God’s sees what we can’t. If we desire it sincerely He will “guide us with his counsel and then receive us into glory” (Psalm 73:24).

III. How Can We Do It?

So what can I do practically, you ask, to live in communication with God so that I am aware of the traps of the evil one on the one hand and divine opportunities on the other? What can I do to know God’s will and do it?

First you must desire it. You must trust God enough to believe that his way really is best. You must have a holy fear of his absence. Follow David’s advice:

Trust in the LORD, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed.

Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.

Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring *it* to pass.

And he shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday.

Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass.

Cease from anger, and forsake wrath: fret not thyself in any wise to do evil. (Psalm 37:2-8)

Without this profound sense that God’s way is best we will try to live in two worlds, and James says “a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways” (James 1:8). Those who live this way seek God’s counsel only after they have followed their own way and ended up on a dead end road. For them God is a last recourse, a safety net to rescue them from their own folly. God is gracious: “They that cry unto the Lord in their trouble, he saves out of their distress” (Psalm 107: 19), but is it not better to seek God before the fact and not after; to desire his guidance with all our hearts; to seek above all things to walk wisely and carefully in the world in order that our days might be redeemed for eternity.

Finally let me say that if unceasing prayer does not mean that we are not always praying, it does not mean that set times of prayer are not important. The opposite is true. We must have set times of prayer. Jesus did and he taught us to. We cannot live in communication with God if we do not deliberately seek him on a daily basis. The best time is the beginning of the day simply because the

beginning of the day sets the tone of the day. Listen to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer says about the importance of morning prayer:

“The entire day receives order and discipline when it acquires unity. This unity must be sought and found in the morning prayer. It is confirmed in our work. The morning prayer determines the day. Squandered time of which we are ashamed, temptation to which we succumb, weakness and lack of courage in work, disorganization and lack of discipline in our thoughts and in or conversation with others, all have their origin most often in the neglect of morning prayer.”
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Prayer Book of the Bible*).