

17 March 2019

More Than Words: Prayer without Ceasing

1 Thessalonians 5:17

The Apostle Paul usually began his letters with theological and scriptural answers to the questions that the churches had, but he nearly always ended them with practical words: encouragement in the face of persecution, day to day advice on living a life that honored Christ, and so on. Toward the end of his first letter to the Thessalonian church, for instance, he offered specific advice on praying without ceasing. We read 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, verse 17:

¹⁷Pray without ceasing.

One of the curious things that often happens to seminary students is that theological school hurts their prayer life. You would think that the opposite would be the case – surrounded by reminders of God, as they are – but often this is true. And as horrible as it sounds, I think I understand. You see, as I said last week, a lot of us start with a very narrow definition of prayer. We think that it's all about getting stuff from God and that the way to do it is kind of like following a recipe: add all the right ingredients plus two teaspoons of faith, place it in God's oven at 350 for 45 minutes, and it should work every time. But then we find out it doesn't work that way. It just doesn't. I think these seminary students, spending their days thinking about God, are forced to admit that their old definition of prayer is full of holes, and until they can come up with a better definition they give up the whole business. If that can happen to ministerial students, it can happen to us, too. What we're trying to do in this series is offer a better understanding of prayer, and last week I laid out a start: *Prayer is communication in relationship*.

The relationship element is key. That's one way the old definition fails: a relationship that is only about getting stuff from someone isn't a real relationship, and vending machine prayer isn't real prayer. And here's another way that the idea of a relationship changes how we think of prayer. A relationship is not something that you carve out ten minutes a day for in the midst of your real life. Relationships don't squeeze into a schedule; they influence the schedule. A relationship isn't one more thing to check off the daily task list, alongside this email and that errand; they are a part of the foundation that holds us up while we go about all our tasks. Relationships are not momentary, but continuing, and that leads us back to our scripture: Pray without ceasing.

I used to worry about that verse, actually. I heard it in a high school Bible study, and it genuinely concerned me. I just didn't see how I could do that. I mean, I was a busy teenager: I had classes to go to, homework to do, friends to hang out with, parents to resent. Where was I going to find time to pray without ceasing? But do you see the assumption I was starting with? I was thinking that a prayer was only real when I consciously stopped doing everything else to concentrate on saying words to God. And if that's what prayer is, then none of us could pray without ceasing. We'd be worthless friends, terrible employees, and menaces on the road. But what if prayer is something different? What if there were a way to pray that didn't prevent us from doing other things?

There is. A few weeks ago I made a passing reference to Brother Lawrence. He was a 17th century French lay-brother at a Carmelite monastery. His job there was in the kitchens, mostly, doing the repetitive tasks of cooking and cleaning, and yet it was in those tasks that he

discovered a life of constant prayer, described in this little book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. He starts with this, “It is necessary to always be aware of God’s presence by talking with him throughout each day. To think that you must abandon conversation with Him in order to deal with the world is erroneous” (First Conversation). How are we to do that? Brother Lawrence says, “All we have to do is to recognize God as being intimately present within us. Then we may speak directly to Him every time we need to ask for help [and we may] know His will in moments of uncertainty . . . We should offer our work to Him before we begin, and thank Him afterwards for the privilege of having done them for His sake” (Fourth Conversation).

Maybe you’re thinking, *Yeah, but this guy lived in a monastery. His life revolved around the monastic prayer schedule, and he was surrounded by other people who did the same*. That’s true. The chances are that your office or school does not stop every three hours so everyone can go to the chapel and pray. Even the church office doesn’t. So how does someone who lives in a secular world even begin to live this way? Well, first, I should point out that some actually do. Devout Muslims all over the world pray five times a day, quietly closing their office doors or going somewhere private for a few minutes whenever those times occur during the workday. Here’s another example: the Confederate General Stonewall Jackson trained himself to pause for a brief prayer at the top of every hour. In this way his pocket watch became a prayer timer. (I almost left that illustration out, inasmuch as Stonewall Jackson is best known for inspiring some men to kill other men in order to defend their right to enslave still others. So actually a terrible role model. But you know what? You don’t have to like someone or agree with him to learn something from him.) In any case, the point is that it is possible to live in a busy secular world and still develop regular habits of prayer.

But even that may take some time to get started. Let me make a couple of practical suggestions. First, sometimes while you’re driving alone, turn off the radio. Use that silent time to actually notice the world around you. In town, notice the people. These are God’s children. In the country, notice nature. God is good. Second, pray while waiting. We spend a lot of time doing that. Whether you’re waiting in a line at a store, in traffic, or more likely these days, on hold for tech support, try to tune out the irritating background music and pray. Pray for the person ahead of you in line, pray for the person in the car behind you (yes, the one with the horn), pray for the person whose depressing job it was to record that message that reminds you that your call is important. In every day, there are moments for prayer.

But we need to go deeper. All these suggestions are still basically ways to squeeze in some prayer alongside everything else we do. That’s a start, but what Brother Lawrence is really talking about is doing our daily tasks *as* prayers. Buddhist teaching calls this “mindfulness,” and it has to do with the attitude with which we approach our daily activity. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh puts it this way: “There are two ways to wash the dishes. The first is to wash the dishes in order to have clean dishes and the second is to wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes” (*Miracle of Mindfulness*, p. 4). Do you see the difference? If the goal is the doing, rather than the product, then you are living in the present moment, when we can be aware of God, not straining toward a future goal. We never encounter God in the future. Only in the present. Another word from Thich Nhat Hanh: “I like to walk alone on country paths, rice plants and wild grasses on both sides, putting each foot down on the earth in mindfulness, knowing that I walk on the wondrous earth. In such moments, existence is a miraculous and mysterious reality. People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth” (p. 12).

Do you see what happened there? Being mindful of walking or even doing daily chores has suddenly *become* prayer. And it doesn't necessarily involve words. Prayer is first an expression of relationship, and communication in relationship is more than words. Rebecca and I celebrated our fiftieth birthdays by going hiking in Scotland. We went about 80 miles together, but we did *not* walk side by side talking the whole way. If we had tried that, one of our bodies would have been found at the bottom of a loch. No, we walked more or less together, but sometimes a hundred yards or more apart, depending on which one of us stopped to take a picture or climb a waterfall. That was fine. Whether we were beside each other or not, talking or not, concentrating on each other or not, we were still together, and sooner or later one of us would resume the continuing conversation with, "Look at that" or "Did you eat the last granola bar" or something. We can be with God like that: not constantly speaking, but constantly aware that God is present as we live our lives. And when we are, that is prayer – prayer without ceasing.

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So let's pray together. An essential ingredient of mindful prayer is awareness: awareness of those around us, of our circumstances, of ourselves, and of God. You wouldn't think awareness would be a difficult habit to develop, but it is. We run most of our lives on auto-pilot, doing nearly everything with practiced, habitual motions that we no longer have to think about, or – worse – already thinking about the next task, before we've even started the one in front of us. So let's take a moment to simply be aware. Don't close your eyes. Look around, first for someone or something that you are grateful is in your life. Think for a moment about why that person or thing makes you glad. * Give thanks to God, smile, and let that go. * Now look around or within yourself for something that you feel is unfinished: a word left unspoken, a word spoken and never apologized for, a fear never admitted even to yourself. * Breathe deeply. * If there is a way to fill this gap, make that plan and offer it to God. * If there is not, let this go as well. * Now think of something that has enraged you and filled your mind. * As much as I'd like to, I'm not going to tell you to let that go; it's not that easy. But for now, be aware of those feelings of helpless anger. * Recognize that they have been a weight on you without fixing anything. * Now think again about the thing that filled you with gratitude. * Amen.

Children's Sermon: [Pantomime a children's sermon, about me praying to God and God loving me and listening to me and holding me close] Did you all understand that children's sermon? No. Let me ask you this: do you think God understood what I was saying? So God understands us even when we don't speak. Then that means we're always talking to God, doesn't it? Hmm. Let's pray.