

Pray Without Ceasing: A Life Application of 1 Thessalonians 5:17

A Greek Orthodox bishop was being interviewed by a newspaper journalist. This was back when we had such things. Reporters who were curious and asked open-ended questions in search of the truth. Anyway, the bishop was having a interview-as-conversation with this journalist, who was asking many questions about the Orthodox faith, as well as their practices. The conversation went on for over an hour. The journalist, who knew a bit about the Bible, toward the end of the interview, asked, “In 1 Thessalonians, Paul gives the command to ‘pray without ceasing.’ But we’ve been talking for an hour and I haven’t seen you pray. How do you apply Paul’s command?” The bishop looked at the man and smiled, and said, “How do you know I’m not praying right now? How do you know I haven’t been praying this whole time?”

In case you’re not familiar with the passage, it is a short exhortation at the end of Paul’s first letter to the Christians at Thessalonica (I give the fuller context):

*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.* (1 Thess 5:16-22)

Isolating the command, the modifying adverb is the thing that gives this imperative its teeth—**constantly, unceasingly**. Any Christian from the Western Tradition, certainly one who is not a monastic (someone whose life is devoted to prayer and charity), certainly one who is not a theologian or pastor (those guys have all the time in the world to pray!), certainly one who has a job, and a family, and hobbies, and commitments all week...how could anybody take Paul seriously? Are we to take Paul seriously? What did that Greek Orthodox bishop mean? This article will explore several potential applications of Paul’s simple command. We will discuss what he means (truly), but more importantly, how our lives of prayer might be enriched, enhanced, and enlivened.

Likely, if you are reading this, you are from a small Lutheran congregation in mid-Missouri, with an active membership of around a hundred people...you probably already pray in some fashion. You might have a special time set aside in the morning or before bed. You probably pray before meals. You probably worship and pray at church. You likely pray before big or scary moments in your life. So, if that is the case, great job! Keep it up. And if you are reading this and never pray, start today! If you don’t know how, come see your pastor. But I primarily write to Christians who are already praying...but encounter this command from Paul and are left scratching their heads. *Because it seems impossible*. And when things in the Bible seem impossible, we generally have two reactions—ignore them completely or feel a pang of guilt about them. But I think if we consider the context of the imperative (pray constantly), we might view this as **an invitation to draw closer to Jesus in the Christian life**.

The Text Considered

☞ again give the text, but this time I'll use my translation:

Rejoice (plural) at all times

Pray (plural) constantly

In all things, give thanks...for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you!

Never quench the Spirit

Never despise prophecies

But all things carefully discern, the good things hold fast!

From every variety of evil, keep away from!

There is so much I'd love to unpack, but I'll restrain myself and focus on "pray constantly." I note in the parentheses that these are *plural commands*. Paul is giving them to the community at Thessalonica, in other words, the churches there. They are meant for Christians, but apply to all individuals. It's helpful to see that Paul is giving this imperative to ones who worship together, live together, share common spaces. An isolated Christian is a target! Paul doesn't even consider the possibility that Christians are trying to do these things, even prayer, alone.

The second thing to mention is the translation *constantly*. Instead of thinking of this as "without stopping," we might better think of it as praying "in any and every situation; in any and every season of life." Does he mean to pray all the time? Yes! But he also means to invite Christians *to draw nearer to Jesus in every time of the day, on every day of the week, in any and every circumstance*. Sometimes imperatives seem intimidating. "Pick up your socks! Unload the dishwasher! Knock off that racket!" But imperatives, through the power of the Spirit of Jesus, can become **beautiful invitations to something better**. If my wife says to me, "Come over and sit down next to me," strictly speaking, that is a command (sit down). But in the spirit of love, it is a gracious invitation to do something that is edifying and wonderful. This is the way we can read "pray constantly."

The Struggle

☞ But it's a struggle! It *is* a struggle to pray. It's a struggle because we don't know how, or when, or what to say. We are self-conscious. There are many barriers to praying constantly. The chief one being our own sinful flesh and the lures of the world around us. Consider this from another direction. What if the struggle is kinda the point? In other words, prayer in a fallen world, with a fallen nature is going to be a struggle. So, we engage in the struggle. We fight the fall, and find a way to pray. The devil does not want you to pray. Your own emotions and lifestyle do not want you to pray. The Christian life is, in part, *to overcome those struggles in prayer*. And the struggle is good, because it mortifies the flesh as we seek to draw closer to God with our prayer.

I mentioned earlier about the command being a "plural." The Christian life *flows out of the plural*. I know it's common to only consider your personal relationship with Jesus. But as a Christian, in the struggle, we are never alone. Rightly ordered prayer flows out of the Divine

Service. Think of how many prayers are imbedded in worship—*Lord have mercy; peace be with you; give thanks to the Lord for He is good*. We pray in the act of worship as we receive the gifts God has for us. We pray the corporate prayer of the Church. We pray the Lord's Prayer. We pray before the Supper. We pray after the Supper. We pray after the sermon. We pray in the Collect of the Day. We pray the Introit. Do you see? We pray all the time, in many ways, together. So, if you are in worship weekly (more during certain times of the year), your prayer life is super-charged.

The Application: What to Pray

☞ anticipate some objections. Maybe you are a very regimented person, and you pray every morning. You say the same prayers, for basically the same people, and when you're done, you move on. But Paul invites us to pray constantly, or unceasingly. So, hear me out if you are that type. But I suspect there are more of you who struggle to pray because we don't know what to say. So, whether you are type one or type two (or some other type), I am here to help you.

First, what to pray. Sometimes the perfect becomes the enemy of the good. Sometimes because we don't have the "perfect prayer," we don't pray at all. But there are some very simple prayers that are always at your fingertips. You might even know some.

The Jesus Prayer—Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. This prayer packs such a punch! It confesses precisely Who Jesus is, who we are, and what He came to give. This is a great prayer when we feel temptation coming. When we feel the pull of Satan, or the lure of lust. When we are inclined to blaspheme our neighbor or tear down a family member. It can be said in less than five seconds. It can be said in any situation. The Jesus Prayer has a long and deep tradition in Christendom (5th century). Does it say everything? No. But it says a lot. And sometimes that is enough.

"He who dwells in the shelter of the most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty..." This is a great one when you feel threatened or in danger. When you feel anxious or uncertain. When you are about to undertake something new or scary. It is the first line of Psalm 91. It might take a minute to commit it to memory, but it is a comforting confession of an eternal verity. There are many, many other "first lines" of psalms that are also terrific short prayers. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love"; "God is my refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble"; The psalms are the heart language of the Christian faith. Use them to pray constantly.

Maybe these aren't resonating with you. Maybe you think the better prayers are the extemporaneous, from-the-heart sort. There is nothing wrong with those...but my experience teaches me that we can find ourselves at a loss for words, especially when rattled, angry, or shocked. Wrote prayers (drawn from Scripture!) are very powerful and to the point. So, even more simpler, are the three or four line prayers we have in our back pocket:

Help me, Jesus!
Be near me, Jesus!
Thank you, Jesus!
I put my trust in You, O Jesus

A good routine of prayer is essential to the Christian faith. Luther suggests a wonderful routine of morning prayer in the Small Catechism: make the sign of the cross, invoke the Triune name, pray the Creed and the Lord's prayer, and Luther's Morning Prayer. This can provide great bookends to your day. The resource I produce, *The Congregation at Prayer*, is built on this model. But we pray constantly when we are open to invoke Jesus **in any and every situation**. Using short, simple prayers helps us do just that—draw nearer to God to feel the fact of God's presence in our lives...constantly.

The Application: When to Pray in a Life of Busyness and Waiting

This might all sound fine...so far as it goes. But there is a deeper, more systemic problem most people face when trying to pray constantly—*time* and *distraction*. We have so little time (it seems) and are very rarely in-tune with what's happening because we are constantly on our phones. Running around and zoning out. Amusing ourselves to death. Can't catch our breath.

The first thing is, slow down. Be mindful of what you're doing and what's happening around you. The second thing is, be quiet. *Get quiet*. It's hard to pray with a bunch of noise and screens around. Find a place and a time when you can be quiet. Even if it's in the middle of a busy day. Make a time at home when there is no TV on, no iPad in reach, no smart phone in your pocket or palm. This is a conscious choice. *These things block prayer*. Turn everything off, and get quiet. Build it into your daily routine. Imagine this—an hour on a Saturday, maybe in the morning, when everyone is quiet and unplugged. That is when pray *happens*. Because you start to pay attention. You give yourself “space” to be in tune. Seek to build these moments in your day, throughout your week. So simple. Because when we get quiet, we are invited to pray.

You will tell me, “Pastor, you don't know my life! It's so crazy...so much going on.” Yes, I actually do know, and I would say, “Make good choices with your time.” But I would also point out how many times in our busyness *we are waiting*. Waiting in traffic. Waiting at the pharmacy. Waiting in the doctor's office. Waiting to get an oil change. **Pray when you wait!** Short, simple prayers...on a loop. Recite a piece of Scripture or a hymn as a type of prayer. Make this a habit. I cannot tell you how many times I see people in the grocery store check-out line immediately take out their phones. What if you prayed in those moments?

The Application in a Life of Convenience and Efficiency

The flip-side of the busyness, noise, and chaos is just how convenient our lives have become. We have “hacks” for everything. We have AI vacuum cleaners. We have “smart” dishwashers. If there is a problem, there's an app for it! If you don't know how to do something, You Tube it!

But the downside is that we have come to *chase convenience*. We are a slave to it. We are trained to want things done now. We expect everything to happen quickly. **But that is not the Christian life.** The more efficient we've become, the more apt we are to look for what's next. Which means we move onto the next thing, leaving no room for quiet prayer.

When's the last time you hand-washed the dishes? Do you know how wonderful it is, especially if you have a nice view outside your window, to just wash the dishes? When's the last time you've washed the dishes *and prayed*? I know I'm losing some of you, but stay with me! Instead of quickly throwing the dishes into the dishwasher (you don't even have to scrape them anymore!), what if you took the twenty minutes to do a task that invites reflection, meditation, and prayer? Perhaps, if our lives were less convenient and a bit more inefficient, we'd have more time to "pray constantly."

In all of this, the point Paul makes, is not to put some burden on you...or not to guilt you into saying mindless prayers so you can fulfill the obligation of the imperative. Prayer is not a transaction you make, or a checklist item. It is an invitation to draw closer to our Lord, and to have a deeper relationship with Him. It is to call upon Him in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks. It is a life of worship, a life of devotion, a life of contemplation, a life of order. We have too much chaos. Too much "running around." Know that God invites you into a deeper communion with Him through prayer. Know that God is always listening, and always attentive to our pleas. He is "our Father Who art in heaven." Praying constantly is a gracious comfort to the Christian in the times we live in. Prayer also has the effect of blessing our lives, families, and congregations.

Lord Jesus, help us to be more attuned to your love, remind us of Your mercy for us, and give us Your grace at all times so that we can better pray. In Your Name, amen.

