

Good Habits for Christians – The Christian Life Pray without ceasing 1 Thessalonians 5:17

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Paul wrote in the final chapter of his letter to the young church at Thessalonica one of the shortest verses in the Bible; “Pray without ceasing.” Of course he wasn’t expecting them to be permanently knelt in a prayer meeting. So what was he encouraging them to do? He was expecting prayer to be woven into their personal lives and into their fellowship as the Lord’s people. So let’s explore how this works.

In three words, Paul focuses our minds on the importance of prayer and the need to commit ourselves to the ministry of prayer. He starts simply by writing “pray.” Prayer is a vital part of the Christian’s experience. Prayer takes us into the presence of God. Through prayer we praise and worship God and seek His will. We also ask Him to meet our needs and those of our fellow Christians and for the people and circumstances He lays on our hearts. And we should always pray in a spirit of thankfulness. It is helpful to think that when we read God’s word, He speaks to us; and when we pray, we speak to God. But I have discovered as I pray, that the Lord speaks to my heart during prayer to bring to mind the needs of others and to encourage my thankfulness by reminding me of answered prayer. Prayer is a ministry; a ministry we are all involved in. Paul didn’t write, “Elders pray with ceasing”, he addressed his exhortation to us all.

As with all ministry it is important to be spiritually organised. We need to devote specific times to prayer and we need to have a spirit of prayer. Specific times of prayer include the time we devote to pray personally, when we pray as a family, and our regular and special prayer meetings. The spirit of prayer is being always in a state of readiness to lift up our hearts to God knowing we have constant access to the Throne of Grace. Prayer can be made in a particular place at a given time. But it is not confined by place and time it can also be spontaneous. We should be a people of prayer.

Daniel was a man who always prayed. He gives us a good example of an organised prayer life. Even when his life was in danger he prayed as he always had:

“Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days” (Daniel 6:10).

Notice the important features of Daniel’s prayer life:

1. His home was his primary place of prayer; private prayer is the foundation of the life of prayer.
2. He lived in Babylon, but his heart was in Jerusalem and the temple of God; an illustration of looking to the Throne of Grace.

3. He knelt to pray, the humility of prayer.
4. He prayed, the activity of prayer.
5. He gave thanks, the thankfulness of prayer.
6. And he did this all his life, the persistence of prayer.

When Paul outlines the armour of God in Ephesians 6, he uses the armour of a Roman soldier as an illustration. But before detailing the armour of God he writes,

“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might” (verse 10).

And then, after describing the armour of God he writes,

“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints— and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak” (verses 18-20).

There are two things additional to the armour of God which we need, “to be strong in the Lord”; and to “pray always with all prayer.” These two things are connected. We are strong in the Lord by abiding in Him.

“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

It is the Holy Spirit Who connects us to Christ. And both the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit are actively involved in the prayerful ministry of intercession.

“But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:24-25).

“Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts and knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God” (Romans 8:26-27).

That fact that Christ “always lives to make intercession for us” demonstrates the importance and constant activity of prayer. It is this atmosphere of prayer that we need to breath. It takes us into heaven, and it brings the power of heaven to earth, “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Let’s look now at Paul’s description of “praying always” in Ephesians 6:18-20.

First, he encourages us to always pray: “Praying always with all prayer.” As we have seen this thought embraces our regular times of prayer and also our readiness to pray at any time. Nehemiah, like Daniel, is an excellent example of this. When he heard the walls of Jerusalem were destroyed, he systematically fasted and prayed for many days. Then when he was sad in the presence of King Artaxerxes, he spontaneously prayed in his heart to God and spoke to the king. We are always close to the throne of God. There are things we need pray for regularly throughout our lives. And there are things which we pray for, for a period and then stop because God has answered our prayers. There are also things we were not expecting and need to spontaneously

bring them to God in prayer.

Paul also writes about always coming to God with all our supplications. Supplication is asking God to meet the needs we bring to Him. We come in faith and the confidence of knowing that "God supplies all our need according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus." Supplication leads into worship (Philippians 4:19-20).

We should always pray in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit guides our prayers and sanctifies our prayers to bring them into harmony with the will and purposes of God.

Paul encourages to always watch: "being watchful to this end." Prayer should be characterised by alertness. We should be watchful and anticipate the spiritual and material needs of ourselves and others (Acts 20:28).

We are always to be steadfast: "with all perseverance." Prayer is a service. It demands thoughtfulness, commitment, and persistence.

Paul exhorts us to always pray for all the people of God: "and supplication for all the saints." No one is excluded. There are those we know and can pray for in detail, but we can also pray for those we know little about who the Lord lays on our hearts. We don't just pray for our friends and family but for all the family of God. And he especially highlights the need to always pray for the servants of God: "and for me..." The preaching of the Gospel and those communicating it should always be in our prayers. Paul was a man of great spiritual power, but he was always conscious of his need of the prayers of his fellow believers. Those who serve God in the gospel, in building up God's people, and on the mission field, need our prayers.

Prayer in the life of Christ

Let us also look at prayer in the life of the Lord Jesus. Prayer pervaded every aspect of His life beginning with His baptism:

"It came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened" (Luke 3:21).

So today, prayer opens heaven to us. He prayed in the wilderness:

"So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed," (Luke 5:16)

And He prayed all night on a mountain:

"Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God " (Luke 6:12).

Times of prayer need quiet places without distraction so that we can concentrate and focus on the ministry of prayer. The Lord prayed at His transfiguration:

"Now it came to pass, about eight days after these sayings, that He took Peter and James and John and went up on the mountain to pray. As He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe became white and glistening" (Luke 9:28-29).

The Lord's glory was revealed whilst He prayed. Pray also changes us into the people God wants us to be.

The Lord's constant prayerfulness had an effect on His disciples so that in Luke 11:1 they ask Him, "Lord, teach us to pray." They witnessed the closeness of the Lord Jesus to His Father when He prayed and wanted to experience the same kind of communion with God. This is the starting point of an effective prayer life. Do we want to experience real communion with God? Prayer is not about asking God for things, although it includes this. Prayer is about a living relationship with the God who loves us and wants us to enjoy His presence and His power. This, of course, means that we have to be ready to do His will. Although the disciples in Luke 11 wanted to pray like Jesus, it

was some time before they understood what real prayer was. Before this happened, they were to discover the depth of the Lord's love for them expressed through His intercession and sacrifice.

In Luke 22, in spite of the fact that Peter was to deny his Lord, Jesus had prayed for him that his faith would not fail and, when he was restored, he might be a source of encouragement to his brethren. It is a beautiful example of the Lord's constant service of intercession. Intercession is to pray on the behalf of others, and it is a service the Lord Jesus still continues to this day. In the words of Hebrews 7:25, "He is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them."

In Matthew 26, Jesus takes His disciples to the Mount of Olives and asks Peter, James, and John to watch with Him whilst He prayed. It is in the Garden of Gethsemane that we see the true nature of prayer. Jesus expresses this in His prayer to the Father in verse 39, "Not as I will, but as You will." Prayer is about discovering and doing God's will. Once the holy matter of His sacrifice had been settled in the Father's presence, Jesus finishes praying and goes on to the cross, "Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?" (John 18:11).

The Lord's Prayer

In response to a disciple's plea, "Lord, teach us to pray", the Lord gives us what has become known as the Lord's Prayer in Luke 11:1-4. It begins, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come." In these opening words we have God's person, God's home and God's honour brought to our attention. The prayer teaches us that we have a relationship with God as our Father. It is a relationship of nearness but there is also a sense of God's greatness and holiness. We should never take God for granted or cease to be reverent in His presence.

There is also an understanding of where God is, in heaven. Prayer makes the great link between heaven and earth. Even in today's world, with its bewildering range of technology, sometimes communications break down. Mobile phones are not always answered. The Internet can lose its connection. But we never lose our connection with God. He is always there to listen and respond to our prayers. "For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers" (1 Peter 3:12).

The Lord's Prayer also expresses a desire for God's kingdom to come. Prayer should look forward to the hope of Christ's return and the promise of the establishment of His kingdom on earth. I wonder if the same hope colours our prayers. Do we pray in view of a coming kingdom and ultimately an eternal state? Do we look for God to be glorified in our lives now as He will be glorified in the future?

The Lord's Prayer then turns to God's will. "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." This is a very powerful part of the Lord's Prayer. As we have seen, the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane prayed for the Father's will to be done. So, in this prayer, the will of God is central. It is in the light of God's will that the prayer then turns to daily provision, forgiveness, and deliverance before ending with God's Kingdom, God's Power and God's Glory. God does provide for our daily needs and we should not forget to ask God to provide for us and to thank Him for the blessings we receive. There was once a Christian farmer who was invited to an important banquet. Alongside him were some well-educated but rude guests. At the beginning of the meal the farmer bowed his head and gave thanks for the meal. One of the guests scornfully asked the farmer if everyone down on the farm gave thanks for their food. "No", replied the farmer, "the animals never give thanks!" Ungodliness is marked by unthankfulness. Paul reminded the Colossians, "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful" (Colossians 3:15). Our prayers should always express thankfulness. "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6).

The need and willingness to forgive is the next aspect of the prayer. The Lord Jesus teaches that we need to confess our sins but also to be willing to forgive others, thereby displaying the character of God revealed in Christ: "Bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do" (Colossians 3:13).

The prayer goes on to the importance of being kept from temptation and the evil one. I used to live near Oldham in Lancashire where Winston Churchill once had a constituency. One day when he was campaigning in an election, he asked a passer-by if he would vote for him. "Vote for you," exclaimed the man, "I would rather vote for the devil." To which Churchill replied, "As far as I know the devil is not standing in this election so perhaps you might vote for me!" Too often we can unintentionally "vote for the devil" by giving way to temptation. Prayer keeps us from the evil one and away from spiritual and moral dangers.

The Lord's Prayer ends with God's Kingdom, God's Power and God's Glory. It ends in worship. The Lord's Prayer focuses on God's interests yet in doing so ensures God's blessing in my life. One of the great lessons of prayer is that as a consequence of seeking God's will and glory we are blessed.

Constant prayer in the early church

Prayer was a constant feature of the early church. In the first chapter of Acts we see the disciples praying together,

"These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers" (Acts 1:14).

In chapter 2 verse 42 we see prayer as a key feature of the newly formed church,

"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."

In chapter 4 they prayed for boldness to preach the Gospel (verses 29-30). Stephen prayed as he fell asleep in Jesus (Acts 7:59-60). Peter prayed before restoring Dorcas to life: he prayed when God led him to the house of Cornelius in Acts 10: and the church prayed earnestly for his release from prison in Acts 12. Prayer and fasting preceded the first missionary journey of Barnabas and Paul. In Philippi prayer was evident in the remarkable ways God worked in the lives of Lydia, the slave girl, and the Philippian jailor.

Paul continues this theme of constant prayer in his letters.

"For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding" (Colossians 1:9).

Paul's ceaseless prayers for the people of God embraced every aspect of Christian living but especially focused on the spiritual growth of his fellow believers. He knew that as they grew in grace, they would be better equipped to face the trials of life and persecution and to glorify God.

Let's move on to other essential features of praying without ceasing.

Ceaseless prayer characterised by faith

The Lord Jesus teaches us to pray believingly,

"And all things whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (Matthew 21:22).

"But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

These principles of prayer have not changed. It has been said that prayer is the key to heaven and faith is the hand that turns that key.

Ceaseless prayer is characterised by patience

Jesus tells the story of the widow in Luke 18:1-8 who persistently pleaded for justice from an unjust judge until he answered her cry. He finishes the story with the words, "And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?" Patience is a great characteristic of the Christian faith and one which we often learn through a patient prayer life. God teaches us to wait His time and discover that His timing is always perfect.

Ceaseless prayer is characterised by righteousness

James also writes about prayer using the example of Elijah,

"The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit" (James 5:16-18).

James gives us the secret of an effective prayer life. For our prayers to be effective, we have to live lives consistent with the will of God - righteous lives. It is no use expecting God to answer our prayers if we are not living lives consistent with following Christ. It is no use speaking about the love of God if I refuse to forgive. It is no use speaking about the holiness of God if I am dishonest.

Ceaseless prayer is characterised by fervency

Elijah lived righteously and he also prayed fervently. To him praying was hard work. It needed effort. This challenges my heart when I analyse how much effort I put into praying. Great blessing comes through prayer and, like Elijah, it is possible for it to begin in the heart of one person. I remember, many years ago, in our young people's fellowship young Christian girl suggested we should meet to pray before work each morning. We young men did not think this was such a great idea as we had enough problems getting up in a morning! But we agreed. From those early morning prayer meetings, several young people were led to Christ and several more grew as believers. The word 'fervent' has the idea of stretching - using your strength to reach out. That is exactly what God wants us to do. He wants us to reach out to Him and prove His ability to bless. This takes time, effort, and strength but if we are to know God's power, we need to make this sacrifice.

Ceaseless prayer is characterised by clarity

Hannah in 1 Samuel 1 is someone who teaches us about praying. You might be thinking Hannah only prayed once for Samuel and you would be right. But I am absolutely sure she carried on praying for her son the rest of her life. She teaches us about honesty and clarity in our prayers. There was no mistaking what Hannah wanted. We can, over a period of time, develop prayer jargon and lose clarity in speaking to God. Hannah came into God's presence with a great sense of burden and knew that only God Himself could answer her need. Do we approach God in this way? Do we have the same sense of bringing our needs and those of others to the Throne of Grace because there is no other place where they can be met? Hannah shed tears. Do we feel deeply about the

matters we lay out before the Lord or are they simply a well-worn list? Hannah spoke in her heart. Do we understand that, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart- These, O God, You will not despise" (Psalms 51:17)? Also, as Hannah's son Samuel learned as an older man, "The Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Hannah also asked for what she wanted. Hers was a simple, straightforward prayer - not like the Pharisees who thought they would be heard for their much speaking. Hannah prayed quietly and privately - not like the Pharisees who loved to be seen at street corners praying. God is not interested in outward display but in simple quiet faith. The Lord Jesus teaches us to pray succinctly, "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words" (Matthew 6:7). Finally, Hannah finished praying. Praying without ceasing is about the whole scope of prayer and within this scope of prayer there are those matters we simply leave with the Lord and then wait for His answer.

Prayer meetings

Prayer meetings are key part of "praying without ceasing." Often, even very large churches have surprisingly small prayer meetings. We noted at the beginning of this study that the early church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). The prayer meeting has been called the powerhouse of the church. That power as we have seen comes from the Holy Spirit. He not only has an intercessory role but He guides and empowers our prayers, "praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints" (Ephesians 6:18). We have seen how prayer was a vital part of the lives of men and woman of God in the Old Testament. We have seen how the Lord Himself prayed constantly. The prayer continued steadfastly in prayer, that is they prayed without ceasing. Prayer was at the foundation of all of the missionary journeys and the apostles practised and encouraged at every opportunity the service of ceaseless prayer.

Perhaps we need to be exercised afresh to take up this ministry with fresh vigour and determination and in the word of Malachi,

““And try Me now in this,”
Says the Lord of hosts,
“If I will not open for you the windows of heaven
And pour out for you such a blessing
That there will not be room enough to receive it”” (Malachi 3:10).

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on Pray without ceasing, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, talk number T1173.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.