

Praying without Ceasing - 1 Thessalonians 5:17

Ah summer camping! People I know either love it...or hate it! Which “camp” are you in?

For the Miller family, it happened the summer before. Their family’s camping experience had been a disaster. Jill, the mom of their 6 children and Paul’s wife, who had survived the ordeal, declared firmly that *she* was giving up camping for Lent.

So when the next summer rolled around, Paul (the dad) took 5 of the kids for yet another camping experience, a weekend in the Endless Mountains of Pennsylvania. Jill and 8-year-old Kim stayed home.

Paul recalls this poignant moment. “I was walking down from our campsite to our Dodge Caravan when I noticed our 14-year-old daughter Ashley standing in front of the van, tense and upset. When I asked her what was wrong, she said, ‘*I lost my contact lens. It’s gone.*’”

Paul and Ashley looked down at the forest floor, covered with leaves and twigs. There were a million little crevices for the lens to fall into and disappear.

Dad spoke first. “Ashley, don’t move. Let’s pray.”

But before he could pray, Ashley burst into tears. “What good does it do?” she sobbed. “I’ve prayed for Kim to speak, and she isn’t speaking.”

Kim – Ashley’s little sister who had stayed home with mom, struggles with autism and developmental delay. Because of her weak fine motor skills and problems with motor planning, she is also mute. One day, after 5 years of speech therapy, Kim crawled out of the speech therapist’s office, crying from frustration. Jill (i.e., mom) said, “No more,” and the speech therapy stopped.

Prayer was no mere formality for Ashley, the older sister. She had taken God at his word. She had asked that He would let Kim speak. But nothing happened. Kim’s muteness was testimony to a silent God. Prayer, it seemed [for Ashley], doesn’t work. [If prayer didn’t help Kim speak, why would it work finding a clear lens in a pile of leaves?]

Few of us, writes Paul Miller (the dad), have the courage to articulate the quiet cynicism or spiritual weariness that develops in us when heartfelt prayer goes unanswered.ⁱ

May I ask you something? Have you ever wondered why it is so difficult to pray as much as the Bible urges us to pray? My own experience reminds me of all kinds of reasons.

Take, for instance, the challenge of **INTERFERENCE**. Take an honest look at your life; there is so much clutter, so many distractions hawking for your attention. Paul Miller tells us what we know,

*“American culture is probably the hardest place in the world to learn to pray. We are so busy that when we slow down to pray, we find it uncomfortable. We prize accomplishments, production. But prayer is nothing but talking to God. It feels useless, as if we are wasting time. Every bone in our bodies screams, **Get to work!**” Try to be quiet...we get assaulted by what C.S. Lewis called “the Kingdom of Noise.”*

Or what about our penchant for **INDEPENDENCE**? For big stretches in our everyday,

we've learned to do life without God. We don't pray essentially saying to God "I've got this covered."

Outside interference, inside independence...

Maybe perceived **INABILITY** paralyzes us. You've heard flowery pray-ors pray; they seem to have all the right phrases, a holy vocabulary. Perhaps you're used to a professional up front with a collar who reads prayers out of the official book from headquarters. You don't have that book! Why should I think I could successfully pray?

Or perhaps – in truly candid moments – what is really keeping us from praying is **INIQUITY**. Stuff in your life you're not cleaning out, SIN (dare I say it) you'd rather just not deal with yet. If I've just burned hour clicking through that porn site, what business do I have praying?

But here's the truth. Despite all that wars against us – the *interference*, our habit of *independence*, our feelings of *inability*, even the shame of a nurtured *iniquity* – despite all of that and more, **the open invitation of God to you** – yes to you! – **is to revolutionize your heart and your life and your marriage and your family with a lifestyle of prayer.** Invitation = Psalm 66

¹⁶Come and hear, all you who fear God,
and I will tell what He has done for my soul.

¹⁷I cried to him with my mouth, and high praise was on my tongue.

¹⁸If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

¹⁹But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer.

²⁰Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer
or removed his steadfast love from me!

Fast forward a thousand years from King David. In AD 40, the good news about God's Son – that Jesus the Christ has died for our sin's penalty and was raised back to life for our justification – was spreading all over the cities of the Roman Empire. All kinds of people were coming to Jesus just as they were: citizens, slaves, soldiers, city officials, entrepreneurs, husbands, wives, kids, families ...all kinds of people were personally experiencing

- God's grace and forgiveness
- a new life in God's family
- a new power for living in the Holy Spirit.

Sharing the good news with others. Gathering to worship each Sunday to worship, to listen to letters

from Jesus' apostles read. Like this one --

¹ **Thessalonians 5:14** And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. ¹⁵ See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. ¹⁶ Rejoice **always**, ¹⁷ pray **without ceasing**, ¹⁸ give thanks in **all circumstances**; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Will you circle your eyes around vs. 17? *Pray without ceasing*. Today's question – **How do you do that?** How do you...

Prayer like breathing.
At-a-moment's-notice communication with God.
Immediate, interactive, Spirit-engaging conversation
any time, any where, about any thing.

Pray without ceasing; it's like breathing. First, let's identify what unceasing prayer is not.

1. Not talking to God every second of every day (it's repeatedly)

In verse 17, Paul uses a helpful word translated "without ceasing." He uses the same word in his letter to the Romans (Romans 1:9) when he tells them that mentions the Roman believers "without ceasing" in his prayers. John Piper correctly explains:

We can be sure Paul did not make mention of the Romans in every minute or second of his prayers... When he prayed he spoke about lots of other things... [Paul] doesn't mean verbally and mentally always, every second mentioning them. [But] he does mean over and over, repeatedly, and often.ⁱⁱⁱ

2. Not a mantra of repetitious words

(Matthew 6:7) "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words."

It may surprise you to know that there are not special words found in the Bible that we have to say over and over again to get God's attention. Dare I say it, not even the *Lord's Prayer*. The Lord's prayer is a pattern or a template. It begins with God's interests (holy name, kingdom, will) followed by my needs (daily bread, forgiveness, protection from evil). God is not listening for precisely repeated words, or he won't respond.

3. Not constantly asking God for anything/everything you want.

In fact that kind of praying – constant me-centered prayers -- ^{James 4:1} What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your

passions. ⁴ You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?)

It's not every second of every day, not repetition of words that have lost their meaning, it's not me-centered I want this I want that praying. So what is it...to "pray without ceasing"?

1. **DEPENDENCE:** A **spirit** of dependence (without Christ, I can do nothing)

We will come back to this passage in a couple of weeks, but right now, let's take a quick and important listen to some of the last things Jesus said to his key disciples. John 15:

John 15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ²Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

John Piper:

First, it means that there is a spirit of dependence that should permeate all we do. This is the very spirit and essence of prayer: dependence. So, even when we are not speaking consciously to God, there is a deep, abiding dependence on him that is woven into the very essence of our faith. In that sense, we are praying. We are experiencing a spirit of dependence continuously, and that kind of disposition is, I think, right at the heart of what God creates when he creates a Christian.^{iv}

I couldn't have said that better. A spirit of continual dependence on Jesus for everything going on in my life.

2. **ALERTNESS;** An **alertness** to opportunity (looking at life's flow through God's lens)

Asking God for His presence and provision in what you are encountering along the pathways life.

Ephesians 6:18 With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, **be on the alert with all perseverance and petition** for all the saints,

Colossians 4:2 **Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it** with an attitude of thanksgiving^v

1 Peter 4:7 The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.

1 Peter 5:8 Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

You know what "alert" means. It's intentionally watching for something important. Here is a fact: **Most people I know are in some kind of battle, in the middle of a bit of a war. Non-believers and believers alike. Most people I know need alert Christians to be ready and eager**

to pray for them. They don't need people to criticize them or judge them or try to be the HS, or ignore them (e.g., "hope that works out for you"). This world needs alert Christians who *pray without ceasing*; i.e., they are ready to pray.

Paul's letters are full of alert prayer. He's always saying, "I know where you are, I know what you're facing, I'm always thanking God for you and praying for you." About all kinds of things – their spiritual growth, the challenges they face, the depth of their insight into the things of God, the persecution that is eating their lunch. A praying-without-ceasing habit.

Our Savior-shepherd set the pace.

(Matthew 9:36-38) Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."

Jesus said, "if the Gospel is ever going to impact the thousands of people that swarm around us every day, we need some alert prayers and laborers. We'd better be asking Lord of the Harvest."

Praying without ceasing is a breathing of dependence; it's an alertness to the need around me.

3. **VIGILANCE:** A discernment/response to temptation

(Matthew 26:41) "Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

In this very critical hour of Jesus' life, facing arrest and death and struggling with all of that, the Lord speaks these words to his sleepy disciples. In the moments of temptation, he begs them to pray.

Because when temptation gets after our flesh and our flesh is weak, what is needed is immediate communication with God. Paul would remind the Corinthians:

(1 Corinthians 10:13-14) No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and **God is faithful**, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

Praying without ceasing means a vigilance about what is going on in your life, and when you see temptation coming...you know God has already measured it for you...but you pray, and you flee

4. **INTENTIONALITY**: A **response** to mistreatment

Matthew 5:44

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you

Luke 6:28

Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

The facts are that most people who are out to make your life miserable are full of sin. Which is why our Lord prayed as they beat him and brutalized him, “Father, forgive them for *they know not what they do.*” The real problem that your enemy has is not with you, it is with God. And at the end of the day, what they really need is not simply to be nice to you, but to be broken by God’s Spirit and reconciled to God. The rationale for praying for your enemies is a simple one – love for their souls.

Finally, God’s Word teaches that praying without ceasing is a habit expressing itself in

5. **EAGERNESS**: A **readiness** to joyfully thank God (1 Thess 5:16-18, cf. Psalm 104)

¹ Thessalonians 5:16 Rejoice **always**,
¹⁷ pray **without ceasing**,
¹⁸ give thanks in **all circumstances**;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Psalm 104

³³ I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
³⁴ May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I rejoice in the Lord.

CONCLUSION

Admittedly, I do not know what may be keeping you/me from praying without ceasing. Could be all the **interference** and noise that is grabbing your attention, perhaps a spirit of **independence**. You may not think you can (**inability**), or there may be **iniquity** you’re not willing to surrender. Who knows, you may be **indifferent** – God hasn’t said yes to something very important to you. Why pray? Why pray without ceasing?

The “rest of (Paul Miller’s) story is helpful --

When Ashley burst into tears in front of our mini-van, I was frozen, caught between her doubt and my own. I had no idea that she’d been praying for Kim to speak. What made Ashley’s tears so disturbing was that she was right. God had not answered her prayers. Kim was still mute. I was fearful for my daughter’s faith and for my own. I did not know what to do.

Would I make the problem worse by praying?

I had little confidence God would do anything, but I prayed, silently, *Father, this would be a really good time to come through. You've got to hear this prayer for the sake of Ashley.* Then I prayed aloud with Ashley, *"Father, help us find this contact."*

When I finished, we bent down to look through the dirt and twigs. There, sitting on a leaf, was the missing lens. Prayer made a difference after all.^{vi}

May I encourage you to crucify whatever "I" problems you've had with praying, and dependently, alertly, vigilantly, responsively, thankfully *pray without ceasing.* We have a good Father who loves to say "yes" at just the right time.

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ⁱ Paul Miller, *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World* (NavPress, 2009), 13-14.

ⁱⁱ Miller, 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/how-do-i-pray-without-ceasing>

^{iv} <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/how-do-i-pray-without-ceasing>

^v New American Standard Bible translation

^{vi} Miller, 17-18.