

Unceasing Prayer

Today's message comes from 1 Thessalonians 5:16-25, where Paul encourages followers of Jesus to "pray continually."

Let me start out with a story. Last month I had to take a trip to Boston. If you've ever been to Boston in January, you know it can be cold and snowy. I arrived downtown at around 11 or so, but I was told that check-in time for the hotel was 4 pm. I was cold, cranky, and didn't feel like lugging my suitcase around. On my way from the subway station to the hotel, which was the longest four blocks I've ever walked, I prayed, "Please, Lord, let the room be ready. I know I'm early, but it would be wonderful to be able to check in." So I get up to the counter and ask if my room is ready. The receptionist says, "No, sir, I'm sorry it's not." Darn, (or a similar expletive) I quickly thought. "But," she hastened to add, "you can have a hospitality suite instead if you'd like for the same price." "I'll take it," I said, without hesitating. How bad can it be, I thought, as long as it has a bed, I'm fine. The suite was the size of two bedrooms, with a full-size dining table, couch, computer, a humongous tv, full bar, kitchen sink, CD player, and a phenomenal 36th-floor view of downtown Boston and the Charles River. Once the initial surprise wore off, I thanked God and said, "Man, you really came through this time. I just wanted my single room and you gave me the hospitality suite." After all these years I am still "surprised by joy" at how awesome God is.

So what is prayer anyway? Basically it's communication with God. The bible is full of prayers, the most common examples being probably the psalms and the Lord's Prayer. The bible tells us by example and by command that we should pray all the time, not just when we want something. We should follow the example of Jesus, who serves as our model of someone who prayed all the time and at important times in his life: at his baptism, the calling of his disciples, at the transfiguration, in the Garden of Gethsemane and of course on the cross.

In today's reading Paul encourages us to pray without ceasing, all day and night in other words. God enjoys hearing our prayers, He wants us to move closer to him when we address him in prayer.

Bill Hybels in his book *Too Busy Not to Pray* takes a more practical approach. He asks the reader: If you could ask God for one miracle in your life, knowing with 100 percent certainty that he would grant your request, what would you ask for? For your marriage to be put back together? For your job situation to change? For a straying son or daughter to return to the fold? For a loved one to surrender to Christ? For regained health in its various ways? Whatever your request might be, do you regularly and diligently *every single day* bring it to God in prayer, trusting that he will intervene on your behalf? I've been told that the reason the Amish women always wear those caps is so that they won't be caught off guard since believe they should pray always and they wear the cap in answer to Paul's request that women cover their heads when they are in prayer; hence the name prayer caps. Even faithful Moslems are obligated to pray several times a day, in their own space. I even heard about a group of nuns in Wisconsin who have been praying in shifts nonstop since 1878. But we should pray not because we have to, but because we *want* to.

Maybe one of the reasons we don't pray continually is we wrongly think there's a limit on the prayers we shoot up to him. How many of you have even subtly thought that prayer requests are rationed like a loaf of bread or a pair of shoes? Are we afraid of using them all up, and then when we really need one, there won't have anymore left? Not to worry. The supply is infinite! It's impossible to wear God down with too many prayer requests. Why do some people believe that we are bothering him, or pestering him with our requests? What could he possibly be doing that we'd be "interrupting" him? That's what he's there for. As for God's desire to hear our prayers, I remember what my daughter Wendy said when her youthful innocence had more mature reason that I realized at the time: "God always answers prayers. That's his job." He is interested in us and in taking care of our needs. His ability is all-powerful in responding to them and unstoppable in fulfilling them. He has the incredible power to do more than we ever dream of asking.

So what *is* the point of praying? If you think that the sole purpose of praying is so that you can get something, then you're not only headed for a theological shipwreck, but you'll also run the risk of being sorely disappointed. God isn't Santa Claus. He knows when requests are inappropriate or frivolous or unworthy. I'm reminded of the story of

the fifth grader who, after taking a geography test, prayed, “Dear God, please make Cleveland the capital of Ohio.” Prayer is not an act of attempting to manipulate God or to tell Him what to do. It is rather a means of giving God thanks and praise and calling upon him for our daily needs and those of others so that we draw closer to him.

So how does prayer work? How does prayer help us move closer to God? The answer comes from none other than Jesus himself in chapter 6 of the gospel of Matthew when he introduces his disciples to the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus tells them (and us) to pray *regularly*. Notice he doesn’t say *if* you pray, he says *when* you pray. He assumes and expects that we’ll do it all the time. How many of us say we don’t have time to pray but we manage to find time to do other things, like surf the Internet, play video games or watch an Ohio State football game? I think it was Martin Luther who said he prays two times a day and then when he is really busy, he prays three times. Also if we pray incessantly, we’ll get better at it and it will become more natural. I enjoy swimming, and I know that I’ll never be as good as Michael Phelps no matter how hard I try, but if I want to stay reasonably good at it, I should keep practicing, as often as I can. The same with prayer. Praying continually will help us get better at it.

Jesus also says that we should pray *privately*, one on one, not as a display of showing off our piety. If you remember, Jesus would slip away from the crowds to find a solitary place to pray. Prayer is not a spectator sport. To pray only where others notice you indicates that your real audience is not God. Think of the God you’re addressing, rather than those who may be listening. Finding a private place to pray serves two purposes: it not only ensures a minimum of distractions but it also provides a holy place where God meets with you. In a private, silent place I’ve even been known to *think* a prayer, that is to not utter it even silently to myself, but God knows it’s a prayer even if we don’t say it out loud or call it one.

Next, Jesus wants us to pray *sincerely*. Just tell him what’s in your heart. It doesn’t matter if the words don’t come exactly as you say them or if you get tongue-tied, God knows the true meaning behind the words. After all, God knows what we need anyway, even without our having to ask for it. It says in Matthew 6:8: “your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” There is no “right” way to pray, no set of cookie-cutter

templates; sincerity is the companion of heart-felt words. Someone once said that if you're already praying, then you're already doing it right. Repeating the same words over and over again like a magic chant is not the way to ensure that God hears you. It's not wrong to come to God many times with the same requests as long as they are offered with a sincere heart. We can never pray too much if our prayers are honest and sincere. This may come as a surprise to you, but despite my God-given linguistic aptitude, I often have a difficult time praying naturally and spontaneously to God. I could blame it on my Catholic upbringing, where all you did was memorize the prayers you were taught and were told that was enough. But it's more than that. Maybe I'm still cowering behind a mask of inhibiting vulnerability or of offending him or fear of saying the wrong thing or a sense of unworthiness to make my needs known to the awesome deity. If you have that same concern, maybe we all just need to relax and let go. Let the words speak for themselves as they fly from the heart. Even if our requests are less than perfect, God gets the idea.

But prayer is more than just about technique; it's more about establishing and maintaining a relationship. As we pray more often, our relationship with God deepens. And as the relationship deepens, our conversation becomes less about the stuff we can get from him and more about the stuff other people need and about growing closer to him. Prayer is a way to maintain constant communication with God, it means keeping company with our God who is already present. As we heard in the other reading from John: "If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." The more you pray, the more you sense that God is with you all day. No matter where you are—at work, at play, in your car, in a swimming pool—you begin to grow closer to God. When you share your heart with him, you'll come to know that he's listening. It has nothing to do with being in a church building or on your knees. It has to do with detecting God's presence in and around you wherever you go.

One thing you gain when you increase your awareness of God's presence is divine companionship. God, as our heavenly Friend, always listens. He is patient with us, forgives us when we transgress, and stays committed even we ignore him for a long period of time. He is always faithful. How many earthly friends will stay our friends unconditionally? So if we get nervous about praying, we should keep in mind that we

should pray as if we were talking to our best friend. Is there one person you confide in the most on this earth? God should be like that, as our heavenly friend, the one we open up to and be assured that no matter what we say, his unconditional love will neither rebuke nor forsake us.

Another benefit of living in God's presence acquired through prayer is supernatural confidence. Our lives may be clear sailing right now, but at some point we're all going to have shipwrecks of heartache, disappointment, tragedies, and unsolvable problems. It's times like that, when God's presence is in our lives, that we'll be able to face these trials with confidence.

Another benefit of practicing the presence of God is increased compassion for other human beings. By instilling his love in our hearts, we therefore instill his compassion in the hearts of all followers, who then minister to each other and to the whole world.

When we live in constant communication with God, our needs and those of others are met, our faith increases and our love expands. We feel God's love in our hearts and we spontaneously worship him.

True prayer changes us and makes us better Christians. It allows us to actively participate in God's work in the world.

So in conclusion if we pray continually, sincerely, personally, authentically, and honestly, then maybe we'll get the hospitality suite, too.