

04-22-18 Let Us Pray

1 Thess. 5:16-22

So, let me ask you a question... How is your prayer life? That's a serious question...

"Many Christians feel dissatisfied or discouraged with their prayer habits. It's difficult to set aside adequate time to seek God in prayer and to intercede for the various needs of one's family, friends, local church, city, and the world. When we do begin to pray, we sometimes struggle to know what to say and may find ourselves praying the same things again and again, seemingly making little progress. How can we experience increasing depth, vibrancy, and growth in our prayer life?" (Praying With Paul, p. 11)

READ: 1 Thess. 5:16-22

Always be joyful. ¹⁷ Never stop praying. ¹⁸ Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.

¹⁹ Do not stifle the Holy Spirit. ²⁰ Do not scoff at prophecies, ²¹ but test everything that is said. Hold on to what is good. ²² Stay away from every kind of evil. (NLT)

Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt ²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²² reject every kind of evil. (NIV)

What practices and priorities do you put on your prayer life? We all have need of improvement. Even as a pastor, the words... ***"Rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances..."*** give me angst. I want to pray more, and I want to pray more effectively. What about you? Don't you want to see your prayers answered? Don't you want to see a difference in your life and in our church? Most of us are just going along for the ride, but each of us can make a difference in our outcome, if we pray.

What do you think the greatest need of our church is? Is it that we get a senior pastor in place – soon? Do we need more effective programs? More volunteers to help? Better evangelism and a better way to reach out to our community? More Bible studies? Building deeper relationship with each other? All these and more are definite needs in our church.

“But, what we need above all is to know God deeper and better.” We have heard about the importance of prayer for the past two weeks, by unrelated sources. Pastor John and Pastor Art did not compare notes ahead of time, yet both had a section of their sermons that focused on prayer. *“We think too little about God’s attributes, His marvelous deeds, and His revealed will for His creatures. We too rarely revel in His love or tremble at His holiness. His Word doesn’t saturate our conversations or shape our priorities to the degree that it ought.”* (Praying with Paul, p. 12)

J. I. Packer said, *“Prayer is the measure of a man, spiritually, in a way that nothing else is.”*

How do you measure up? How does Paul? I think he is a great example to follow. In fact, he had the boldness in the Spirit to tell us to follow him as he follows Christ – that’s a bold statement to make. So we are going to spend a few minutes looking at some prayers of Paul. See if you can apply them to your life.

The first part of our text today says, ***“Rejoice always, Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”*** (ESV) 1 Thess. 5:16-18 Rejoicing, petitioning, and giving thanks – a summary of Paul’s prayer life. Let’s look at each of these one at a time...

“Rejoice always.”

This was so important that bible translators gave it its own verse by itself.

2 Cor. 13:11 – ***Finally, brothers, rejoice.***

Phil. 2:8 – ***Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.***

Phil. 3:1 – ***Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.***

Phil. 4:4 – ***Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice.***

The Christian life is to be lived with a deep sense of Joy in the Lord. We may not always rejoice in our difficulties, but we rejoice in the Lord who brings us through all our circumstances and is with us. *“We are to find our souls satisfied by knowing the one true God and taking pleasure in experiencing His good gifts.”* (Praying with Paul, p. 13) Paul addresses the Thessalonian church who experienced significant adversity.

1 Thess. 1:6 – *“You received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.”*

Is it possible for the Christian to rejoice always, even during times of dark suffering? YES! But how? Our focus must remain on what Jesus did for us. In Christ, we have forgiveness of sin and the hope of eternal life. That far outweighs the joy of sports teams winning the Super Bowl or the World Series. Our joy is based on something much more important and lasting.

Jesus is also coming back again in victory and power. We are called to **“Rejoice in Hope,”** (Rom. 12:12) because our **“reward is great in Heaven.”** (Matt. 5:12).

In this way we follow the pattern of Jesus who endured the pain and shame of the cross, **“for the joy that was set before Him”** (Heb. 12:2).

Where are you in this personal process? Are you able to remain joyful in the midst of trials, because your focus is on the higher prize of what awaits all true believers? Are we rejoicing in knowing our sins are forgiven and there is unending fellowship with God in His Kingdom?

“Pray Without Ceasing:”

The next point in our text says, **“Pray continually”** (NIV) or **“Pray without ceasing.”** (ESV) We are to constantly petition God for our needs and His will in our lives.

“The Gospel of Luke illustrates this posture of persistent prayer in view of the faithfulness of God.” (Praying with Paul, p. 13)

Luke 18:1-8 - And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. ² He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ ⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” ⁶ And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

The woman’s petition was for justice from the judge. He couldn’t care about this woman, but she kept coming to him asking for justice. Eventually, she wore him down and he gave her justice. Jesus uses this story to show that we need to be persistent in prayer, because God will give justice to those who continually come to Him for it. Pray continually – pray without ceasing. This doesn’t mean you can have whatever you want if you just nag God long enough for it, but if it is something in the will of God, continual prayer will give God room to work.

The commentator, Gordon Fee writes, **“Continual prayer is the ongoing reminder that God’s children are always and wholly dependent on their heavenly Father for all things.”**

“Give thanks in all circumstances.”

This is the final part of our text today. These three components work together. As we rejoice in all areas, and as we continually pray, we will be moved to give thanks to God for His answers to prayer, His deliverance in our situations, and for richly supplying all our needs. We then continue to make our requests known to Him in prayer, rejoicing and thanking Him regularly. The Psalms record regularly giving thanks to God for His answer to prayer in times of need and distress.

**Ps. 30:8-12 - *To you, O LORD, I cry,
and to the Lord I plead for mercy:***

**⁹ *“What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the pit?***

Will the dust praise you?

Will it tell of your faithfulness?

¹⁰ *Hear, O LORD, and be merciful to me!*

O LORD, be my helper!”

¹¹ *You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;*

you have loosed my sackcloth

and clothed me with gladness,

¹² *that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent.*

O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever!

So, why should we rejoice, pray and give thanks?

1 Thess. 5:18 – “... for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

This is to be our way of life as commanded by God. We are “*to rejoice, to petition Him for our needs, and to express gratitude to Him as the source of every blessing we enjoy.*” (p. 15)

How can we apply this to our lives in a meaningful way? Here are 8 lessons we can glean.

1 – We must plan to pray – this can’t be a hit and miss part of our lives. We must purposely set aside time just to pray. It is not just going to happen when you accept Jesus into your life. This is an entire new discipline we need to cultivate. We have to build prayer into our schedules.

2 – Adopt practical ways to impede mental drift – Whenever we determine to pray, the enemy will be active to distract. You will think about everything and anything under the sun to keep you from staying focused on prayer. I had a pastor once who said, “as soon as you start to pray, the parade will begin – thoughts, things that need attention, etc. Just wait for the parade to end and continue to pray as you determined.”

3 – Develop prayer-partner relationships – Meet regularly with another Christian or small group of prayer warriors. Develop a prayer relationship with your spouse, if they are a believer. Build consistent times of intentional prayer into your schedule.

4 – Carefully choose models for prayer – Don't try to imitate the words, phrasing, or mannerisms of others, but listen to the content and purpose of mature believer's prayers.

5 – Develop a system for your prayer lists – possibly keep a prayer journal or a folder filled with prayer requests and the answers – even a prayer calendar on your cell phone. We have the church member directory online – pray for those you fellowship with. Use prayer lists.

6 – Combine praise, confession, and intercession – ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication). Our text reminds us to rejoice, pray, and give thanks. It's all the same stuff, just in different orders. The three Rs is another method – Rejoice, Repent, and Request. Try to tie your requests and intercessions closely to Scripture (as you can).

7 – Those in positions of spiritual leadership should work at their public prayers – leaders should take the responsibility of praying in public seriously. This is a means of teaching others how to pray. Prayer is more easily caught than taught. We need to be effective models.

8 – Pray until you pray – *“we should seek to pray long enough and authentically enough that we move past formalism and unreality and begin to delight in God's presence and esteem His will.”* (Praying with Paul, p. 16)

So – how's your prayer life? It is critical to your spiritual life and it is critical to our church life. God is waiting to hear from you – now. Take these eight lessons and try to apply one or two this week. You may not be able to master all of them quickly. Start small, but start. I'm going to do the same thing. God bless you and speak to you as you dedicate time to pray.

“God isn't an immovable object at the center of the universe. He's not a fixed point on an astronomer's map. He's active and moving – he comes. And this movement has direction – he comes to us. He doesn't wander around window shopping from galaxy to galaxy, juggling the moons of Jupiter and casually admiring the rings of Saturn. We are his destination.

And he didn't simply come once and then return to spend the rest of eternity, like an old tourist, telling stories of his trip and boring the angels with slides of his visit to earth. He came, and he will come again. The Christian life, consequently, is lived between those two comings.

In light of that, how should we live?

This chapter in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians has been important to Christians for two thousand years by showing us how to live wholeheartedly between the great fact of Christ's coming and sure expectation of his coming again. The words “Be alive!” sum up Paul's counsel.”

- Eugene Peterson