

**“Pray continually”
1 Thessalonians 5:17**

Introduction

- 1. A friend of mine bought a new iPhone.** He jokingly told me that his first two hours trying to figure out how to make everything work were two of the worst hours of his life. Now he types texts, reads email, makes calls and surfs the web with speed and ease. He just needed to learn what to do and get some practice.
It can be the same with learning a language, directions to a new office or operating an Xbox. When first learning we need reminders until good practices turn into habits. We tell children to “look both ways before you cross the street,” “wash your hands after you go to the bathroom” and “chew your food before you swallow.”
- 2. St. Paul wrote a quick list for the Christians in Thessalonica to remind them how to act like Christians.** He figured that reminders would help them turn these good practices into habits. Here’s what he told them.
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18
Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.
- 3. We’ve already talked about a Christian life where we are joyful always—that happiness is about circumstances but joy is about Jesus.** Today let’s check out #2 on Paul’s learner list: *“Pray continually.”*
- 4. Some Christians have taken these words so literally that they have attempted the impossible.** They have tried to pray non-stop 24/7. Not many have tried but some monks in monasteries are said to have disciplined themselves always to be praying. Non stop. I’ve read that they even figured out a way to keep their lips moving with memorized prayers while sleeping. It gives a new meaning to talking in your sleep.
It seems to me that this is taking the Bible literally to the point of silliness.
- 5. To “pray continually” is to pray a lot.** It is to punctuate life with prayer. It is kind of like having a cold with a chronic cough—the cough is woven into conversations, driving, eating and maybe even sleeping.
- 6. Maybe the best analogy is to texting.**
Celina Aarons of South Florida made the news with a shocking bill from T-Mobile dated August 11, 2011. She lent her smartphone to her brother for his two week trip to Canada. He never talked on the phone but he did a lot of texting. The bill came to \$201,005.44. That’s a lot of texting.
“Hyper-texting” is now calculated by psychologists as anything more than 120 text messages per day. To paraphrase 1 Thessalonians 5:17, it is “texting continually.”

7. **The comparison is actually a good one.** Texting is about a continual flow of communication—where you are, what you’re doing, how you’re feeling and what is happening in life. That’s pretty much what “praying continually” is all about—it is a steady flow of communication with God about everything happening in life.
This is what the Bible encourages us to make into a habit—not texting continually but praying continually.

8. **Apparently Paul prayed a lot.**
1 Thessalonians 1:2
We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.
1 Thessalonians 3:10
Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.
2 Thessalonians 1:11
We constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling....

9. **There are many good times to pray—in church; in crisis; for wisdom; for help; in a daily designated prayer time.** These are all wonderfully good, but when the Bible says to “pray continually” it refers to prayer being integrated into all of life.

10. **To best understand what continual prayer is all about, let’s answer some of the most frequently asked questions (FAQs) about prayer.**

FAQ #1: What is prayer?

1. **The basic definition of prayer is communication with God.** Actually, I like “communion with God” better because communion is more intimate and personal. Prayer is not communication in the sense of a radio broadcast or a website. Prayer is communication like the communion between a parent and child or lovers or best of friends.

2. **The biggest problem with correctly understanding prayer is that it is so often used as a synonym for “ask.”** Christians often say that “God answers prayer” or “I prayed and God didn’t give me what I wanted.”

3. **Yes, prayer may include asking but it is not mostly asking.** In any good healthy relationship, asking is only a small percentage of communication. There is something wrong if the only time a child talks to parents is when asking for food or money or some other favor.

4. **When we pray continually we talk to God about what we’re thinking, how we’re feeling, what’s important, what we like and don’t like.** Continual prayer praises God, thanks God, loves God and talks to God about everything on our hearts and minds. It is wonderful communication; it is intimate communion. It is continual praying.

FAQ #2: Does prayer work?

- 1. The frequently asked question, “does prayer work?” is often based on the misdefinition of prayer as asking.** So, I guess the question needs to be answered in two different ways.
- 2. Does prayer work when we ask?** The theological answer is “yes” but the practical answer is “not always.” It is just so obvious that God does not say yes to everything we want. He couldn’t because so many requests he receives are contradictory—Packer fans and Vikings fans both ask God for a victory in the same game.
No loving parent ever says “yes” to every request from a child. I’ve said to my own children that “I love you and would do anything for you” but everybody knows that doesn’t mean I will do something to harm them or something that is essentially evil. Neither will God.
The question gets more difficult when it seems so obvious that what we ask for is good and right. We ask for justice. We ask for healing. We ask God to save a marriage, save a life, or save a soul. And sometimes the answer is yes and sometimes the answer is no . . . and we can’t always make sense of the answers God gives. In fact, it may seem that God’s “no” is flat-out wrong.
I don’t pretend to explain when God says yes or no. Sometimes I am surprised. Sometimes I am deeply disappointed. Sometimes I am angry. But, always I’ve got to let God be God. It comes down to a decision about who I think is smarter and who I think is morally superior—God or me? Even if I don’t like God’s choices and even if I totally disagree, my faith is in a God who is bigger, better and smarter than I am. I must respect and accept God’s “no.”
- 3. Does prayer work when we communicate?** This is a better question. And, the answer is a resounding “Yes!” Communicating with God always works. Connecting with God. Staying in touch with God. Talking to God. Listening to God. This is the communion of the Christian life. This is the fuel for our relationship with God. This is the source of our strength.

FAQ #3: Why pray?

- 1. Maybe our third Frequently Asked Question isn’t really all that frequent: *Why Pray?***
The answer seems obvious. It’s the same reason that we answer the phone, read a text, visit over dinner or kiss the people we love. Because communication is essential to a healthy relationship.
- 2. Every now and then someone tells me that they are “not on speaking terms” with a family member or coworker.** That is hard for me to understand because I’ve never personally experienced such a breakdown in interpersonal communication. I never saw that in the family where I grew up. Charleen and I have never gone off speaking terms in our marriage or with our children. I’ve never had anyone at church or in the community that I wouldn’t talk to. Even people whose religion, politics, beliefs and behavior are repulsive to me—I’ll still talk to them.
So, it is inconceivable to me that any Christian would not pray. Prayer is the juice of our relationship with God. Of course Christians want to pray continually because Jesus Christ is

the most important person in our lives and our relationship with him matters more than anything.

FAQ #4: How to pray?

1. **The more frequently asked question is “how to pray?”** There are a lot of us who don’t really know and are afraid to ask. We are especially reluctant around other people whom we assume are really good at praying and we think we’re not very good at all.
2. **There are some practices of prayer that are highly personal and some that are biblically standard.** It’s important to know the difference.
3. **Let’s start with the personal.** Just as each of us has a distinctive voice and style of talking, so each of us has our own way of praying. We can learn from others but our prayer should always be in our own voice and personality.

When I was learning to pray better I read a lot of books on prayer. Some were helpful and some just made me feel guilty and pathetic. One of the books I read was a biography called *Praying Hyde*. It is the amazing story of John Nelson Hyde (1865-1912). A native of Illinois, he went to the Punjab of India as a missionary but had a difficult time learning the language because he was partially deaf. So he started to pray for people of the Punjab to become Christians at a time where there were almost none. He prayed on his knees all night. He prayed for a convert a day for a year; other missionaries through he was crazy. The next year there were 400 converts. So he prayed for 800 converts; the next year there were 800 new Christians. He prayed for days and nights at a time. Once he prayed for 30 days straight. I read his biography and wanted to become “Praying Anderson.” I knelt down and prayed for 30 minutes, my knees hurt and I couldn’t think of anything more to pray about. I felt like a colossal prayer failure. But, God doesn’t want me to be John Hyde; he wants me to be me. My continual prayer must be spoken in my voice with my accent and through my personality. And, it’s the same with you. This should never be grounds for an excuse not to pray but recognition that each prayer life is distinct and different.

4. **Let’s include biblical standards.** There is a definite biblical pattern to prayer. As Christians our prayers are to God the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit and through the name of Jesus Christ. As Christians our prayers should be God-focused and not just about ourselves and what we want. When praying always praise God, love God, honor God. Pray for God’s will—sure, tell God what you want but include what Jesus included on the eve of his crucifixion when he said, “not my will but your will be done.”

5. **Let’s get really practical:**

If you are can’t think of what to say while you’re praying, write out your prayer and read it to God. After a while you probably won’t need to do that anymore. But, it’s a good way to get started. The only reason we can read any of the prayers in the Bible is because someone wrote them out.

Pray in Jesus’ name. Think of your prayers to God as having Caller ID. You’ve got a whole lot more clout when God sees the call is coming through Jesus’ number.

One day recently my cell phone rang and the Caller ID said “Unknown Caller.” I thought, “If some salesperson is blocking the number it’s someone I don’t want to talk to and won’t

answer. Let it go into voicemail.” But, with reluctance, I answered the call and it was from the White House. OK, it wasn’t the President calling me, but let me tell you that I would always answer a call if the Caller ID said “White House” no matter who was calling. Think of our prayers to God going with “Anonymous. Out of area.” Or, think of God the Father getting a call where the PrayerID says “Your Son Jesus.” Even if it isn’t Jesus calling, God is always going to pick up. As Christians we are privileged to call God on Jesus’ private line with his name.

Start habits of praying about everything. A long time ago someone told me about praying when the siren went off at a local fire station. So, I started praying every time I heard a siren. When I hear a police siren, see the ambulance lights or watch the fire trucks with emergency sights and sounds I always pray for the EMTs, the firefighters, the people in distress, the family whose house is on fire, the patient in the back of the ambulance.

I say “always” because that’s about right. What started as an experiment has become a habit. You and I may be driving in a car together when the ambulance passes and I’ll be silently praying for God to save a life.

- 6. “Pray continually” is frequently communicating with God.** It is wishing Jesus a Happy Birthday on Christmas morning, it is praying for firefighters rushing to a call, it is praising God for the sunrise, it is pleading for a friend undergoing chemotherapy, it is asking God’s blessing on the food for lunch, it is seeking wisdom for important decisions. This is our amazing ongoing, intimate, personal relationship with God himself. Pray continually.

November 12-13, 2011 Wooddale Church

© 2011 Leith Anderson