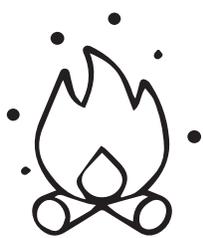


PART 5: PRACTICING HIS PRESENCE

MISSIONAL COMMUNITY DISCUSSION



Read this Overview Together

The Apostle Paul writes to the Church at Thessalonica, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thess. 5:16-18) Pray without ceasing! Really?! Most of us probably wonder how that could even be possible. It is hard enough to keep our attention on one thing, whether it be our work or the person in front of us. How are we supposed to also be constant in prayer?

Paul is not advocating for a "head-in-the-clouds" kind of spirituality that removes us from the world around us. He's not saying we should ignore our friends, families, and work in order to give our entire attention to prayer. Instead, what Paul has in mind is a constant awareness of God's will and presence that shapes and leads us through our work, our relationships, and our days. He is calling us to walk through every moment knowing that He is with us. And as we work, rest, and play, we do so in conversation with God and listening for His Spirit's guidance.

In his letter to the Philippiian church, Paul calls them to face their anxiety by bringing everything to God in prayer. Paul writes, "The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Phil. 4:5-6) Instead of living in constant anxiety, he calls them to constant prayer. What's the foundation for this? Paul says, "The Lord is at hand." He is reminding them to live in constant awareness that God is present with them... "God is near." Awareness of God's presence with us helps us "rejoice in the Lord always" rather than live in constant anxiety. And here's the result: "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (4:7)

Jesus shows us what this looks like. He lived with a constant awareness of His Father's presence with Him. He spoke the words His Father gave Him to speak (Jn. 12:50; 14:10, 31), He did the will of His Father (Jn. 5:20; 6:38), and He lived out of the reality that He and His Father are one (Jn. 10:30; 16:32). Jesus' continual connection to His Father shows us perfectly what "prayer without ceasing" looks like. And amazingly, Jesus invites us into the same kind of union with Him and His

Continued on next page...

Prayer - discipline two in our spiritual formation series

MC Discussion Continued...

Father that makes this kind of connection possible. Jesus promises to give us "the Helper," His Spirit, saying, "He dwells with you and will be in you...you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." (Jn. 14:17, 20) Through the work of Jesus Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are connected to Jesus like a branch connected to a vine. It is actually possible for us to live a life of abiding in Him, continually connected to Him and filled with His love (see Jn. 15:1-11). This is possible through the work of the Spirit in us, but we are called to pursue this active "abiding" ourselves: "Abide in me and I in you." (Jn. 15:4)

This may sound like an extra burden. You may already feel overwhelmed by life and wonder how you can add constant abiding or communion with God to your life. Dallas Willard writes, "Constant prayer will only burden us as wings burden the bird in flight." Becoming a person living in continual communion with God and in tune with His will is not an added burden, but instead will free you to truly thrive in all of your work and relationships.

Frank Laubach, an early 20th century missionary to the Philippines, set out after what he called "the hardest year of my life" to experience this kind of communion with God in constant prayer. He did not live a monastic life in solitude, but had many demands placed on his time. In the midst of this, he desired to discipline himself each minute to return to awareness of God with Him. While this discipline often required great effort and Laubach often failed, it soon began to re-shape his attention to be in tune with God and His will. After two months of what he called "his experiment," Laubach journaled, "Oh, this keeping in constant touch with God, of making Him the object of my thought and the companion of my conversations, is the most amazing thing I ever ran across. It is working. I cannot do it even half a day--not yet, but I believe I shall be doing it some day for the entire day. It is a matter of acquiring a new habit of thought. Now I like the Lord's presence so much that when for a half hour or so He slips out of mind--as He does many times a day--I feel as though I had deserted Him, and as though I had lost something very precious in my life." (Practicing His Presence, pg. 15)

Practicing the presence of God, abiding in Him, and praying without ceasing are all referring to this same idea. It's walking through our days knowing that God is right there with us, empowering us, leading us, and filling us with His love. It is learning to live in a constant dependence on Him. Yet being formed into this kind of person doesn't happen overnight. To become people who constantly abide in Jesus in prayer, there are tangible steps we must take.

Continued on next page...

Prayer - discipline two in our spiritual formation series

MC Discussion Continued...

In the midst of busy life and ministry, Jesus made space regularly and often to spend time with His Father in prayer. Luke 5:16 says, "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." These regular times of focused prayer helped Jesus continually be in tune with His Father's will throughout His life on earth. If we are to learn to constantly abide in Jesus, or pray without ceasing, we should start by doing what Jesus did: discipline ourselves to regular, planned times of prayer. If we grow in the discipline of stopping to pray as a regular part of our schedule, we will be formed into people who also begin to live in prayerful conversation with God in between those prayer times, in every other part of our day. Dallas Willard highlights this idea, "Praying with frequency gives us the readiness to pray again as needed from moment to moment. The more we pray, the more we think to pray, and as we see the results of prayer--the responses of our Father to our requests--our confidence in God's power spills over into other areas of our life." (Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 185)

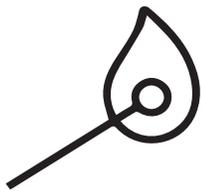
And while the benefits of "practicing His presence" are numerous (peace, rest, contentment, clarity), they are merely the side-effects. The greatest reason for pursuing this is that you get to live in communion with God! He loves you deeply and is inviting you to "abide in His love...that your joy may be full." (Jn. 15:9-11) You were made for this. As Augustine writes, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." We have the opportunity to experience life in communion with our good Father now!

Questions for Missional Community Discussion

1. Have you noticed God changing your desire to pray in these last few weeks?
2. How do you initially feel when you hear Paul call Christians to "pray without ceasing?" Why do you think that is?
3. What do you think is the relationship between planned, regular prayer times and the "prayer without ceasing" conversation with God that happens throughout the day?
4. How would knowing "the Lord is near" (Phil. 4:5) shape how you live in prayerful awareness of God's presence throughout the day? What helps you remember that God is near?
5. What did Jesus tangibly do to help Himself be constantly in tune with His Father and His will? What would it look like for you to follow Him in this?
6. Take some time to look over and discuss the individual practice below together.

Individual Practice on next page...

Prayer - discipline two in our spiritual formation series



INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE: FIXED-HOUR PRAYER

For centuries, God's people have engaged in regular, set daily times of prayer. Early Jewish practice included set times of prayer throughout the day. Even in exile, Daniel knelt to pray three times each day despite orders from the King against doing so (Dan. 6:10).

In Acts 3:1, we see Peter and John go to the temple "at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour." And today, around the world, Christians continue to engage in "fixed-hour prayer," stopping to pray at the same time each day. While there is no formula and we have a lot of freedom in how we do this, it is clear the Spirit uses the discipline of regular, fixed-hour prayer to form us into a people who live in continual awareness of God's presence in the in-between moments.

In this practice, try engaging in "fixed-hour prayer" for a whole week. Initially, you will likely need to rely on reminders, alarms, and discipline to stop and pray daily. However, as you practice regular prayer while asking the Spirit to help you, you will notice a change in your desires. You will begin to look forward to these times of prayer and depend on them, and they will increasingly spill over into the rest of your day.

To prepare for this week of "fixed-hour prayer," **make a quick plan:**

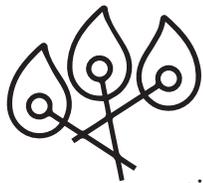
1. **What fixed times will you pray?** We recommend starting with "morning," "mid-day," and "evening" prayers (when you wake, lunch time, and after dinner or before bed). Take a moment to decide on your "fixed-hours" for the week. "Fixed-hour" doesn't mean you need to pray for a whole hour, so set a length of time that is attainable. If you're trying this for the first time, set aside 5-10 minutes. You might even pick one of the "fixed-hour" prayer times to go 15-20 minutes. If you're a veteran, consider extending one or two of these fixed prayer times.
2. **What will be your focus in each prayer time?** It may help if you assign a focus for each of your scheduled prayer times for the day. Use the different kinds of prayer we've explored in this guide, along with the more contemplative prayer we explored in the "[Silence & Solitude Guide](#)." Here's just one example:
 - **Morning Prayer-** Spend Time with the Father in [Listening Prayer](#), [Lectio Divina](#), or journaling your prayers.
 - **Mid-Day Prayer-** [Intercession](#) (keep a rolling list)

Individual Practice continued on next page...

Prayer - discipline two in our spiritual formation series

Individual Practice Continued...

- **Evening Prayer-** Close your day by praying through [The Lord's Prayer](#) (or another [prayer from Part 4](#)) or praying (journaling) about your day, thanking Him and asking for help or wisdom.
3. **Schedule it and set reminders.** Because we all forget, set recurring reminders or alarms. Half of the battle is actually remembering to stop and pray.
 4. **Pray!** Remember the incredible privilege of the Father's invitation to come to Him in prayer. It's okay if it is hard for you to focus or engage. Be patient with yourself as you begin to develop the spiritual muscle for regular prayer. Some moments will be hard and distracted. Some will be rich and sweet. It's okay if you don't feel like you "love" these times of prayer. The Spirit will use your discipline to pray to form you more and more into a person who loves to pray not just in these fixed times, but throughout your day.



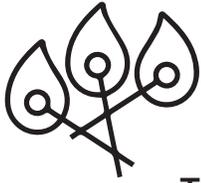
DNA GROUP OR PERSONAL REFLECTION

After you have tried the individual practice, find time to meet with your DNA group. Reflect together on your experience of prayer. Let the conversation go wherever God leads, but here are some questions that might be helpful.

1. How did trying to engage in daily, fixed-hour prayer go for you? What did your schedule and plan for this look like? How did you remind yourself to do it?
2. What were the biggest challenges for you?
3. What did you see God do in you through this time?
4. When you think about God's presence with you at all times ("the Lord is near"), does that frighten you or comfort you? How does that make you feel? Do you really want that?
5. Did you notice God give you a more constant awareness of His presence this week through this?
6. Is this something you want to continue? What changes would you make to your plan to help you sustain this practice?

Practice with Kids on next page...

Prayer - discipline two in our spiritual formation series



PRACTICE WITH KIDS

This section can be used by parents or missional communities to help kids be formed through the practice of prayer.

The Main Idea: We want to help kids know that God is present all of the time. He is with them; not just at meals or bedtime, but in every moment. We can go to Him in confidence at any time of the day. Did you have a fight with a sibling? Stop and pray. Thankful for a walk outside? Stop and pray. Lost something in the house? Stop and pray! Your Father is with you and loves to hear your prayers.

Something To Do

Read Philippians 4:5 – “the Lord is near.” Because we know that the Lord is near, let’s practice stopping during the day to remind us that He is here with us. For the next week, pick a time as a family to stop and pray that is in the middle of the day or at a different time than you normally pray. You will need to help and invite little ones into this prayer time. Ask older kids to help by setting alarms and reminders.

Questions for Kids

1. Is it hard to remember that God is near during the day? Why or why not?
2. List as many activities you do during the day as you can remember. Do you believe God is near during those activities?
3. How can knowing that God is near be comforting to you?