



## Praying Without Ceasing Pursuing Holiness Together, #4 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

David Sunday

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This is our last week in our New Year's series on Pursuing Holiness Together. Dan and I have tried to set the tone for what we hope will be a reviving work of grace in the life of our church throughout this year. Next week we'll dive in to a major expositional series that we hope will be a "spiritual blood transfusion," awakening us to what it means to live life in the Spirit and flowing from the great implications of the gospel in the potent chapters of Romans 5-8.

Today we will wrap up this thematic series with one more message: Pursuing Holiness Together – Praying Without Ceasing. We will be reading 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. Hear God's Word:

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Let me say it again. "*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing....*" The New Living Translation says, "*Never stop praying, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will in Christ Jesus for you.*" It doesn't get any clearer than that. That's straightforward exhortation. We're going to focus on verse 17, but I would argue that verses 16 and 18 can only happen through the practice of verse 17. We're only going to be joyful and thankful if we're living lives of unceasing prayer.

### **Is prayer without ceasing an impossible command?**

As we listen to Paul say in verse 17, "*Pray without ceasing,*" or "*Never stop praying,*" I know what you're thinking. "Paul, are you serious? Is that even possible?" Do we have in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 an impossible command? Just think about all the things we've got to do this week: meals to prepare, homework to complete, clients to serve, logistical log jams to fix, wood to cut (if you've got a wood burning furnace), maybe snow to shovel a couple days from now, weight to lose, muscles to build, friends to meet, books to read—not to mention the need for sleep.

How do you pray without ceasing? Is it even possible to spend a whole worship service in prayer without ceasing? With everything we've got on our plates, do we have any time for more than just a couple minutes of prayer in the morning, or around the dinner table, or a bedtime blessing? Yet the Apostle says it pretty clearly here: pray without ceasing, "*...for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*" I like the way the ESV punctuates verses 16 through 18 because I think that last clause—"this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you"—modifies all of the commands that precede it. God's will in Christ Jesus for His people is that we be a people who pray without ceasing.

Now, lest we think the Apostle Paul just got kind of carried away with a rhetorical flourish here, he tells us similar things in other passages. In Romans 12:12 he says, "*Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.*" There it is. Or Colossians 4:2, "*Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.*" So there's this expectation here. It sounds like Paul is serious after all, that he is calling us to a serious and lifelong pursuit of a sacred duty, something that is actually very attractive to him.

What is that? I believe that in this command Paul is calling every follower of Jesus to be in constant communication with God at all times and in all places. We are to live our lives before the face of God, constantly aware of His presence, constantly dependent on His power, constantly feeding on His grace, constantly grateful for His providence and constantly rejoicing that He is near at all times. That's what Paul is calling us to—to keep an open conversation with God going at all times and in all places.

### **What is prayer?**

So what is prayer after all? John Calvin called prayer "the chief exercise of faith." I think that really captures it. The primary way true faith expresses itself is by prayer—by constantly calling on God. It's a constant open communication with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That's how faith reveals itself. We start to pray.

I love the passage in Acts 9 that describes the conversion of Saul—who later became Paul. The Lord appeared in a vision to a man named Ananias in Damascus, telling him, "Go to the house of a man named Judas on a street called Straight, and there you will find a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying." This is the first thing we are told about Saul after his conversion: "*...behold, he is praying*" (Acts 9:11). He's expressing his new-found faith in Jesus and expressing the fact he's a born again child of God through prayer.

Prayer is the chief exercise of faith. It's no wonder that we find examples in Scripture of God's people striving to keep this open conversation with God going at all times and in all places.

Let me give you a few examples. It's all over the place in the Psalms. Think of how many times King David talks about constantly praying.

Psalms 55 is a good example. David is facing very heavy burdens and he tells us how he deals with those burdens in verses 16 and 17: *"But I call to God."* I pray to God, *"and the Lord will save me. Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice."* King David says, "There is a regular rhythm to my life. I come to Him in the evening. I come to Him in the morning time. I come to Him in the noon time. I'm always calling on His name, and He hears me."

We see something similar in Psalm 119:164, where the psalmist says, *"Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous rules."* There's a rhythm in his life that is almost like perfection. "I'm just constantly praising You. Seven times a day I'm praying to You for what You've revealed here in Your Word." You see the correspondence between being in the Word and being in prayer. The Word fills us with the mind of heaven, then prayer takes the thoughts, promises and the life of heaven and makes it real to us in our experience.

Daniel is a great example. He prayed so consistently that his enemies knew just where they could find him and at what time he'd be praying. So they went to King Darius and urged him to issue a decree that no one could pray to any god or man for 30 days except to the king, or they would be thrown into the den of lions. What does Daniel 6:10 tell us?

*When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.*

Again, there's a regular rhythm, a pattern, a consistency and constancy in prayer. And of course Jesus is the ultimate example. A couple years ago I preached on the prayer life of Jesus. We discovered that Jesus prayed at His baptism and at His temptation. He prayed early in the morning while it was still dark. He prayed before He had to make momentous decisions. He prayed in the middle of the night. He spent whole nights in prayer. He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed as He hung bleeding and gasping for breath on the cross.

Throughout the Gospels, prayer was the undercurrent of Jesus' life. It's been said of Jesus, "He did not just say prayers some of the time. He was praying all the time." That's our Lord and Savior. And He hasn't stopped praying. As Hebrews 7:25 reminds us, "He ever lives to make intercession for us." In the words of the song by Charitie Lees Bancroft:

Before the throne of God above  
We have a strong and perfect plea  
A great High Priest whose name is love

## Who ever lives and pleads for me

So as followers of Jesus, we want to be like Him. We follow in His footsteps. We read in Acts 2:42 that the early Christians “*devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*” There is a regularity and consistency, a pattern and rhythm, to their lives, probably at regular intervals. We see this in Acts 3:1. “*Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.*” They were regular in this because they wanted their whole life to be an open conversation before God.

It’s kind of like if you say to your wife, “Yeah, you can call me anytime. I’m always ready to talk with you,” but you never make specific times, specific dates, when you get together for the purpose of cultivating that relationship. “Yeah, call me anytime” starts to sound pretty stale or flat. So in order for our prayer lives to be robust and constant, there needs to be set times when we specifically draw aside to pray.

But that’s what stimulates the open conversation all of the time. The Apostle Paul practiced this himself, as recorded in Ephesians 1:16: “*I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.*” Then look at what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 3:9-10:

*For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?*

So when Paul says, “*Pray without ceasing,*” he’s commending to us something he himself practices. He’s doing this night and day. Prayer—“the chief exercise of faith”—is found throughout Scripture, as God’s people expresses daily rhythms of dependent prayer.

### **What does our prayerlessness reveal about our faith?**

This is the part that’s kind of hard, okay? I read a great book by British theologian Michael Reeves titled Enjoy Your Prayer Life. It’s really an encouraging little book, but not everything he says is easy to hear. One of the things he says is that our prayer lives are disgustingly revealing. Is there anyone here who has not been disgusted at times by your prayer life? Is there any Christian who says, “Yeah, I’ve got 1 Thessalonians 5:17 down. I’m great at that. I always pray without ceasing”? Is it not a source of shame to us sometimes, when we think about how our prayer lives reveal how much we really want communion with God, how much we really depend on Him?

Our prayer lives tell us the truth about how spiritually mature we really are and how much we really love the Lord. It’s easy to say all these things, but prayer is really what tells you

the reality. What I find when I look at our prayer lives is that it reveals we're simultaneously saints and sinners. You're a saint if you find in your heart a desire to pray to God. And if you grieve over your prayerlessness and you want to grow in this area, that's something that indicates you're a child of God. You've got a heart cry going to your heavenly Father and you want to grow in this. That's the Spirit of God at work in you. So the fact that you lament your prayerlessness is a good sign. It's a sign that you've been set apart by God to be one of His children.

But at the same time, prayerlessness is a sin. Can we agree on that? Prayerlessness reveals self-sufficiency, self-dependence, lukewarmness, lack of love, lack of desire. So, it's a problem. It makes us vulnerable to the attacks of the enemy. It's no mistake that Paul includes in the armor of God, "*Praying always at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication*" (Ephesians 6:18). Without that piece of the armor, we're vulnerable to attack.

Samuel Chadwick, a Wesleyan Methodist pastor in the early 20th century, famously said:

Satan dreads nothing but prayer. Activities are multiplied that prayer may be ousted, and organizations are increased that prayer may have no chance. The one concern of the devil is to keep the saints from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray.

Satan trembles to find the weakest saint upon his knees, crying out to God.

### **So what are we going to do about this?**

I think everything I've said so far is true, but it's not true enough. I've found that guilt doesn't do a very good job of producing sustainable change in my life. When you feel guilty about not witnessing enough, you might try for a couple days, but then you'll say, "Ah, I'm a failure at this," and give up. When you feel guilty about your prayer life—and that's all you feel—you might try to get more disciplined for a week or so, but it won't last.

We need more than motivation of guilt if we're going to keep an open conversation going with God at all times and in all places. If that's going to happen, you've really got to enjoy God. You've really got to feel like God is near and He delights to bless you and He is good to you. You've got to desire Him and want to know Him. You've got to believe there's a fruitfulness that will come into your life through cultivating unceasing prayer.

I want to ask three questions to help us overcome the problem of prayerlessness; to motivate us—by God's grace—to pursue a life of constant open communication with the Father through the Son by the Spirit.

1. Do you believe God is your exceeding joy? Do you honestly believe that? I love what the psalmist says in Psalm 43:3-4:

*Send out your light and your truth;  
let them lead me;  
let them bring me to your holy hill  
and to your dwelling!  
Then I will go to the altar of God,  
to God my exceeding joy,  
and I will praise you with the lyre,  
O God, my God.*

Wow! Do you feel that about God? Do you believe that about God? He is my exceeding joy. So I pray, like the psalmist, “Send out Your light, the illumination of Your Spirit, and Your truth, the promises of Your Word. And as the Spirit breathes upon the Word and takes those promises and makes them alive to me, I am led to the altar of God, to the place where I pour out my soul before Him—and I find Him to be my exceeding joy.” That’s Who God is to the believer. He is our exceeding joy.

I read an email this week from a member of our church that was very encouraging. She’s going through a physical trial and she beautifully described how prayer is becoming more meaningful to her these days. I quote these words with her permission:

If you have faith in prayer, you could become bitter and angry with God when He does not give you what you have asked for. But if you pray with your faith in God Who sees the whole picture of your life, you have faith that the answer He gives is what is best for you. It probably seems elementary, but I had never thought about it that way before.

I read that and thought, “That’s good. She’s learning that God is her exceeding joy.” It’s not just going to God, trying to get what I want from Him. It’s going to God to get to know God. So prayer is never wasted. Even in the hardest times, this dear sister is learning that she’s growing to know God better, to rejoice in God better—which is what we really need if we’re going to cultivate an open conversation with Him. If He is our exceeding joy, then even while we’re in the middle of work, while we’re changing diapers, while we’re doing our homework, while we’re laughing or playing or even while we’re sleeping—we can do so with a consciousness of God’s presence with us, with an enjoyment that He is near, with an on-going dependence on Him.

It’s like breathing. I don’t always think about it—until I’m having trouble breathing. Likewise, living life in constant dependence upon God doesn’t mean you’re always praying,

praying, praying in a verbal sort of way. But you're living your life aware that He is here and He is your exceeding joy. You're in fellowship with Him.

2. Do you believe that when you pray, God will answer? I want you to think carefully about this for a minute. Do you believe that when you pray about something, God will do something in that situation that He wouldn't have done had you not prayed? Put on your mental apparatus for a minute and think about this. I know that God is not dependent on our prayers to get anything done—and God does billions of things every day that we don't pray for Him to do. God is independent. God is sovereign and self-sufficient. He doesn't rule the universe based on whether or not I pray or how I pray.

But I'm not asking you if you believe that. I do believe that and I hope you do, too. What I'm asking you is this: do you believe Jesus when He says these words?

*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened....If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!*

(Matthew 7:7-8, 11)

I'm asking this: do you believe that whenever you pray as a child of God through Jesus that God is doing something in your life that He wouldn't have done had you not prayed? Do you believe that God is working in your life through prayer? Maybe another way of thinking about it is this: do you believe Jesus when He says that prayer is effective, or do you believe Satan when he says that prayer does nothing? It's God working through prayer. It's not prayer working, but God working through prayer.

I love this statement by Steve Fuller that was on the Desiring God blog:

Jesus promises that every time we pray, God will answer. He will either do exactly what we ask, or something even better, which He would not have done had we not prayed. So if I start the day praying about my heart, marriage, children, work and ministry, then God will do things in my heart, marriage, children, work and ministry that He would not have done had I not prayed. Trust Jesus' promise about prayer—and pray.

There are things God wants to do in our lives that He will do when we pray and they are always good. They may not be what we are praying for, but He's always doing something—either giving what we're praying for, or even better.

3. Do you believe your prayerlessness can be conquered in Christ? I'm trying to get to the heart of where we struggle because I think what happens is this: We act as if a successful prayer life depends entirely on us, and we feel very defeated in this area. We get very distracted by the attractions of this world and by the downward pull of the flesh and bad habits. We feel like we've failed so many times that we just end up saying, "You know what? I'm never going to become a good pray-er, so I'm not even going to try."

That's where Andrew Murray's statement is really encouraging: "The greatest stumbling block in the way of victory over prayerlessness is the secret feeling that we shall never obtain the blessing of being delivered from it." I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but I wonder how many of you almost check out when you hear Paul's command, automatically saying, "That's not going to happen with me. I can't pray without ceasing."

Andrew Murray says you've got to believe that there's a blessing of being delivered from prayerlessness. The answer is it's through the redemption in Christ Jesus that we get delivered from the sin of prayerlessness. Just as Jesus' redemption on the cross delivers you from lust and greed and envy and all kinds of other sins, there's deliverance from this sin too. Paul understands that. Look one more time at 1 Thessalonians 5:18, looking at how he ends these commands: "*For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*"

Those aren't throw-away words. That's at the heart of the Apostle's vision of the Christian life. This is what empowers us: "*in Christ Jesus*" we can become prayerful people. Christ Jesus, through His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, has opened the way for us now to have an open conversation with the Father at all times. It's one of the gifts of His death and resurrection for us. He now gives us His Holy Spirit so that we can pray in the Spirit at all times and on all occasions. Jesus has opened the way.

So when I want to grow in my prayer life, it's not all up to me to just discipline myself harder. No, I need to realize that when I bow before the Father, Jesus is there, opening the way, helping me, watching over me and teaching me to pray just as He taught His first disciples. I don't need to be eloquent—I just need to be needy. I don't need to be a hero in prayer—I just need to realize how much I need God. When I hear the words "*in Christ Jesus*," I get hope. Rather than simply a command—"Pray without ceasing"—this starts to sound like an enticing invitation to fellowship with God.

I want to close with Michael Reeves' description of prayer:

- "Prayer is learning to enjoy what Jesus has always enjoyed." Jesus has always enjoyed communion with the Father. He knows the Father

always hears Him, and now through His death and resurrection He says we can enjoy what He's always enjoyed.

- "Prayer is enjoying the care of a merciful and mighty Father, instead of being left with the frightening loneliness that everything is up to you."
- "Prayer is the Spirit of the Son crying to the Father through us."

I want to take a few moments to think about these things and ask our Lord Jesus to lead us into a deeper life of prayer. What is the Lord inviting you to today? Based on what we've discussed, what does He want to do in your life this week? Pray to Him about that for a minute.

I would like to ask our brother Patrick Havens to lead us as a church in prayer for the application of these truths in our lives and for the experience of this blessing to grow in us.

**Patrick:** Father, we have access to You. Thank You that You have opened this way for us to come to You as children, looking to You as our Father, our heavenly Father, Who is willing and able to help us. May we be like trees planted by still waters each day. May we draw from You by Your Holy Spirit. Give us life-giving water. Help us in temptation this week through prayer. Help us to love our wives better this week through prayer. Help us through prayer to talk to our neighbors, our co-workers, people with whom we're struggling.

And when we're not sure what to pray for, we ask for help, Lord, that we might come to You more often this week, expressing our love to You, our desire to know You better. We need illumination. We need to know how to pray from the Bible. Help us. Show us things to pray for that are on Your heart this week. Help us to grow and be a community growing in prayer.

We pray for our world, for our neighbors, for each other, for our church. We lift each other up, that we might be a community that really enjoys praying for one another. Lord, help us have a culture of prayer this year. Thank You that You care about these things. We want to relate to You in this way. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

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## New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ [www.newcbc.org](http://www.newcbc.org)

*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

Text provided by sermontranscribers.net ♦ [emily@sermontranscribers.net](mailto:emily@sermontranscribers.net)