

# *Pray Constantly*

## *1 Thessalonians 5:12-28*

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A year or so ago, about a week after what we refer to in our family as my “unfortunate little episode”—a brief hospital stay to treat a racing and irregular heartbeat—I went to see my doctor for a follow-up exam. He’s been my doctor for about ten years, and I like him very much. He’s very competent and thorough and, as a charming bonus, he has a thick Irish brogue.

After checking my blood pressure and that sort of thing, he spent quite a bit of time going over the records that were sent from the hospital. Without looking up from those records, he asked me questions about my eating, drinking, and exercise habits, which I rather awkwardly answered, knowing that my answers were not in every instance what he would want to hear. Then he asked if I experience any stress in my life, and I said something like, “Well, sure.” I wanted to add, “Doesn’t everyone?” He expressed some surprise that someone who, in his words, “spends his days caring for souls,” could experience anything like stress.

Then he closed my file, and for the first time, he looked me straight in the eye and said, “Here’s the most important question. Are you praying?” Finally there was a question I could answer without feeling self-conscious or inadequate. “Why, yes, I pray every day.” But then came his follow-up question: “Half an hour every day, uninterrupted, no distractions?” “Uh...well, uh...hmmm...not exactly. Not every day, at least.” Without shifting his gaze a bit—he wasn’t about to give me any wiggle room—he went on to say, “It’s the most important thing. For some people I might suggest meditation, but for you it’s prayer.” My first thought was, “This is not the prescription I’m used to getting from a doctor.” But then I thought, “Half an hour a day, uninterrupted, no distractions? Does he have any idea what my life is like?”

I used to love to quote the spiritual advisor who said that we should each spend a half hour a day in prayer, with this exception: if the day is really jam packed with too many things to do, then half an hour is unrealistic. On such days it should be a full hour devoted to prayer. I used to love to quote that. But now my doctor was saying something like that to me. “Hey, that’s supposed to be my line!” That’s what I thought. What I said was, “I’ll try.” And I have, with some success. Some. But my life, perhaps like yours, is messy much of the time. It doesn’t stay in neat compartments, at least not for long. I have my plans and my intentions, but then life, in all its messiness, intervenes, and interrupts.

Now, if half an hour a day for prayer, uninterrupted, no distractions, sounds hard to pull off, what are we to make of Paul’s exhortation to the Thessalonians that we are to “pray continually”? Or, as other translations have it, “Pray without ceasing,” “Pray constantly.” Pray all the time. Put in that way, the challenge suddenly becomes more than trying to fit prayer into our lives, but actually more like trying to conform our lives to a spirit of prayer.

Perhaps the first thing to say is that in order to pray without ceasing, it is not enough to set aside time to pray. Clearly, Paul had something else in mind here. In order to

pray constantly, prayer has to be something other than an isolated activity. In order to pray constantly, it has to be woven into the fabric of our lives. But how does one do that? That's the question I want to explore with you.

First, I want to define prayer. I once wrote a book in which the chapter on prayer was entitled "Conversing with God." At the time that was how I thought of prayer. But I now think that is too narrow a definition. Talking with God is part of what prayer is, as is listening to God—both talking and listening are parts of conversation, and both are parts of prayer—but there is also silent prayer and meditative prayer.

So I now think of prayer more broadly as consciously spending time with God. Obviously, we are always in God's presence, every moment of our lives, but much of the time we are focused on other things, we are not consciously relating to God. Prayer, then, it seems to me, is what happens when we come alive to God's presence. Through prayer we are not only in God's presence, but we know we are. So prayer is consciously spending time with God, consciously relating to God. It may involve talking and listening, as we do in conversation, or it may involve just being aware that God is with us, like taking a walk with God, neither of us saying a word, just enjoying one another's company.

That's not where you begin, of course. Prayer begins, as most relationships do, perhaps with a bit of shyness and almost certainly a measure of self-consciousness. I remember a visitor to one church I served telling me about how she was making some initial, tentative gestures toward God in her life. Saying a prayer seemed like too big a step, and she didn't feel ready for it. So, instead, at various points during her day, she would pause and say, "Hello," and then quickly go back to what she was doing. Just that—a shy little "Hello," nothing more. And I remember thinking, "Well, that's how a lot of relationships start." Anything more can be too much at the beginning. You know how it is when you first meet someone? It's not as relaxed as seeing someone you know well. There are more conventions about what happens in a conversation between people who don't know one another well than, say, a conversation between close friends. You say certain expected things like "Good to meet you," and you do certain things like try to follow your father's often-repeated advice to always look someone in the eye when you shake her hand. So there's a certain self-consciousness about relating to someone you don't know well. You are careful about what you say. You don't want to say the wrong thing. You want to put your best foot forward, make a good impression. So you weigh your words. And silence! If you don't know someone well and there is silence in the conversation, it's awkward, to say the least. The silence feels like an emptiness that needs to be filled, and you'll say just about anything to fill the silence.

Now contrast that with spending time with a dear friend who knows you well, perhaps in some ways better than you know yourself, a friend who, after all these years, knows all of the back stories and all of your secrets, who has seen you at your best and at your worst, who knows your weaknesses as well as your strengths, who was there with you in times of joy and with you in times of despair, the one from whom you cannot hide how you are really feeling, because this friend knows you so well and can read you like an open book.

Think about the kinds of conversations you have with a friend like that. The conversations will not be self-conscious. They will not follow any established conventions, except perhaps those that you have established yourselves over the years. With

a friend like that you have all different kinds of conversations. Some will be long, heart-to-heart conversations—that is, after all, how you got to be such good friends—but other conversations between the two of you will be on the run, perhaps just a few sentences to check in, almost using a kind of shorthand or perhaps using incomplete sentences because the friend knows you well enough to know how you would complete those sentences, so you don't have to. And those fragments of conversations on the run can nurture a relationship. It's not all about long heart-to-heart talks. But, if it has been some time since you last had an extended conversation in which you were able to go deeper, beyond the day to day, to the places in your heart and mind that you would share only with your friend, you will say, "We must spend some good uninterrupted time together, no distractions." Silence between dear friends is a different kind of silence from the silence shared by those who do not know one another well. Silence between dear friends is not awkward, but actually, in its own way, can be savored, as you enjoy the satisfactions of just being together, a companionship beyond the need of words, at least for a time.

You can probably see where I am going with this. I think there is a similar dynamic at work when we first start relating to God in prayer and when that relationship deepens. When we begin to relate to God through prayer, there is a certain self-consciousness about it. There are conventions one follows, even a kind of formality. You say certain things like, "Dear God," and you do certain things like bow your head. You are careful about what you say. You weigh your words. The silences feel empty. And that's okay. That's what happens in the early stages of a relationship.

But if the relationship is nurtured, all of that begins to change. Prayer becomes more like spending time with a dear friend who knows you well. You interact in all kinds of ways. The relationship is not measured or self-conscious; the more formal conventions just seem to fall away because they are no longer needed. There are a lot of words that are shared and a lot of things that can go unsaid because they are just understood. I love how Francois Fenelon put it. He was a French Christian author of the early eighteenth century. Here's what he wrote:

If you pour out to God all your weaknesses, needs, troubles, there will be no lack of what to say; you will never exhaust the subject; it is continually being renewed. People who have no secrets from each other never want subjects of conversation; they do not weigh their words, because there is nothing to be kept back. Neither do they seek for something to say; they talk together out of the abundance of their heart—without consideration, just whatever they think.

Prayer approached in this way, as spending time with someone who knows us so well, frees us from the notion that every word must be carefully weighed. God is not concerned with the words we use. We can let participles dangle and leave sentences incomplete, because God knows us well enough to know how to complete them. Or, sometimes, if we use the language of the heart, we may even abandon words entirely and instead merely open our hearts and invite God to take a tour of all that resides there—the half-formed thoughts, the elusive longings, the inescapable, yet indefinable sense of need. And silence, instead of an emptiness that begs to be filled, can itself be deep and rich, something to be savored, and words just don't seem necessary. If one

has nurtured that kind of relationship with God, prayer can take as many forms as there are ways to relate to a friend—sometimes in long heart-to-heart conversations and other times in incomplete sentences that sound like shorthand. And that is how we begin to do something like pray constantly.

You wake up in the morning and, with God, you think about what awaits you in the day ahead. You pre-live the day as a kind of prayer. At the breakfast table, you open up the newspaper. Another day of horrific stories from Iraq and Darfur, and as you read, you simply think, “God, be in that place, be with those people.” You get in your car and the traffic is terrible, so you say to God, “The traffic...” and you don’t need to say any more because God knows that the way that sentence ends is, “and traffic always makes me tense, because I will be late and I hate to be late, and I have a hard time not taking out my frustration on the first person I meet when I get there.” When you arrive, there is a message from your mother. She sounds more confused than ever, and before you pick up the phone, you say to yourself, “God, you’ve got to help me here.” And on like that through the day.

Jimmy Carter once said that he probably prays a hundred times a day, and I think these are the kinds of prayers he was referring to, very few with his eyes closed, perhaps very few that begin with “Dear God,” and end with “Amen.” Rather, I imagine that his prayers are more seamlessly woven into his life, like spending time with a friend who knows him well. In fact, his life and his prayers are so interwoven that you can’t separate the two, which I think is what Paul had in mind when he told the Thessalonians, “Pray constantly.”

And then, if you are Jimmy Carter or someone else who has that kind of relationship with God, at the end of a full, messy day, with many distractions and a hundred short prayers, you give a deep sigh and say to God, “Really, we must find a time to get together for a real heart-to-heart.” And, in reply, God says, “Thirty minutes, uninterrupted, no distractions?”