



Living On a Prayer

I Thessalonians 5:16-18

TRINITY PULPIT

Eugene Peterson begins his book on prayer by telling a story about a time he was visiting in St. Petersburg, Russia. Out for a morning jog he fell and was hurt. He was on a book tour and decided to go out jogging one morning, which was his normal routine. Running in the darkness, trying to avoid construction, it seemed that he slipped on some ice. At least that is the last thing he remembered when he came to and found himself laying on the pavement, bleeding. He got up and went back to the hotel. Convinced the security personnel that he was staying in the hotel, he found his way back to the room. He had heard all types of horror stories about medical care in Russia so he decided on self-treatment. He took alcohol from the mini bar and used it as antiseptic. He and his wife tried to stop the bleeding and close some of his wounds. After a few hours of rest, he made his way to a busy square and found an Internet café. Peterson got on an old computer and found a way to send a message to friends back in the States. He told a short version of what had happened to him and then he simply said, “We need help! Please pray for us.”¹

Peterson goes on to ask the question, “Is this how prayer works?” Is prayer simply sending out a message into nowhere and hoping someone might read it or hear it? Is prayer just a shot in the dark? Some of us might say yes, that is what prayer seems like to me. Most of the time, when I pray, I am just hoping and wishing that maybe, just maybe, God will hear my prayer, and then I have less confidence that God will answer my prayer. Yes, my prayer life seems like a desperate lifeline that I throw out from time to time. Like Peterson’s email, we hit send and hope someone reads it.

Yet, when we go to the Bible we discover that prayer must be more than just a desperate cry.

Now, that is not to suggest there is anything wrong with our desperate cries in prayer; but prayer – true prayer – is more than just an occasional crying out. In fact, Paul writes to the church at Thessalonica that we should pray continually.

Paul, writing some final instructions to the church in his first letter to the Thessalonians, encourages them, “Be joyful always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances for this is God’s will for us in Christ Jesus.” Paul makes three statements that all have the instruction of present and continual action. What we notice about these three instructions is that they are choices we must make. We know this because Paul says we are to do it always, continually and in every situation. We know we cannot be joyful always, unless we choose joy. If we are joyful only when we feel like it, then our joy will definitely come and go. If we give thanks in only the time when things are going well, then we know that most of the time we will not be thankful people. If we are going to give thanks in all situations, then it is something we must choose. In the same way, Paul says, pray continually. In other words, if we are going to be people of prayer, then prayer must be a choice and discipline. Prayer cannot simply be something we do when we are desperate or when we are grateful. Paul instructs us to choose to pray continually at all times.

This summer we are going on a journey of prayer together. We are going to be looking at the great prayers of the Bible. I find the summer time a perfect time for us to focus on prayer. First of all, because summer is a time when things are not quite as normal as the other times of the year. The summer is a time when we are busy with many activities and, at the same time, the summer is a time when many of us have some

down time and a break from the normal. The summer is a great time to discover if we can develop a discipline of prayer. Can we learn to pray continually?

When Paul writes to pray continually, he means to live life in an attitude of prayer. Basil wrote that “pray without ceasing; (means) not in mere words, but live united to God, in your affections and thoughts, that your life shall be one long continued prayer.”²

I think it is important to note that Paul writes, “Be joyful always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances.” In the middle of joy and thanksgiving is prayer. Prayer is the center for us experiencing joy and thanksgiving.

How can we pray continually? First, we must have an attitude of prayer. The attitude of prayer is dependent on our attitude toward God and our attitude toward self.

To pray continually we must have the right attitude toward God. How do we view God? When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray he began with the words, “Our Father who art in heaven.” The beginning place of prayer is the acknowledgment of a God who is.

There is something universal about prayer. Every religion has some form of prayer. Even agnostics see nothing wrong with prayer. Hardly anyone ever says, “Don’t pray for me.” I had a friend who worked with an atheist and who was never open to any of his conversations about God. However, when this woman’s husband had a stroke and lay lifeless and unresponsive in the hospital, my friend received an email from his co-worker: “I appreciate all your concern and care. I know you are praying for us. That means a lot to me.” Even the person who said there is no God, in her time of need had no problem with her Christian friend praying.

In almost every horrible event that happens on this planet, the response is the same. “What can we do for you?” “Pray for us.” Whether it is a natural disaster or a school shooting, or senseless violence that has caused loss, the response from family, friends, and authorities is this: pray.

There is something in us that knows deep down that prayer makes sense. There is something, even if it is just a hope, which says that in our time of need there must

be a God who can save us. Our attitude of prayer begins with the acknowledgement of a God who is. However, it is not just a a god that we acknowledge. As followers of Jesus, we acknowledge the God who is fully revealed in Jesus. Thus we pray, because we know that the God who is, is like Jesus. We pray to a God who is present, able and caring. Jesus teaches us the nature of God. God is present.

In his book, *Everybody Always*, Bob Goff suggests that “with” might be the most important word in the Bible. Jesus is Immanuel or God with us. Jesus reminds us that God is and God is with us. We pray because God is present.³

We pray because God is able. Jesus reminds us that the God we pray to is the creator of the world. This creator has the power to change.

We pray because God is compassionate, or we might say we pray because we believe God cares. Now there might be times when we don’t feel that God cares, but the Bible paints a picture of a God who is compassionate, patient, loving and cares for us. James would write “cast all your cares upon God for God cares for you.”

We pray because of our attitude toward God. The person of Jesus defines our attitude toward God, but if we let our circumstances or our feelings define God, then we might not pray. If we let our culture’s concept of spirituality define God, then we might not pray. Even if we let our past hurts, disappointments and difficulties define God, we might not pray. We pray because we have an attitude toward God that is defined by the full revelation of who Jesus is.

We pray because of an attitude toward self. What I mean by this is that when we see who we are, we realize our need for prayer. In reading several books on prayer for this series, there seems to be some similarities of each author who suggest why we are in need of prayer. The proper attitude of self is important as we come to prayer. Let me mention two characteristics of self that lead us to prayer.

First, we are guilty. As odd as that sounds, the truth is there is a consciousness that life is not as it should be. We have a sinking sense that things are not as they should be, and we also have a sinking sense that we fail, make

mistakes and are not perfect. The Bible tells us that there is no one who is perfect. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Most of us do not need the Bible to tell us that we are not perfect and need forgiveness from someone. There is a sense of guilt that accompanies our life. Only the most narcissistic person with a skewed view of self and God would suggest they do not need forgiveness nor need to repent.

Prayer is like a mirror that is lifted up in front of us and we see ourselves as we really are and we realize what we need. We pray because we know deep down we need forgiveness.

We are not only guilty; we are also helpless. As much as we don't want to admit it, we need others. We want to say we are self-dependent but the truth is, life is lived in interdependence. This is even truer in our relationship with God. Thomas Merton put it this way, "Prayer is an expression of who we are...we are a living incompleteness. We are a gap, an emptiness that calls for fulfillment."⁴ We know we are in need. Oswald Chambers says, "We pray not because we are full but because we realize we are empty. If we are ever free from our sense of need, it is not because the Holy Spirit has satisfied us, but because we have been satisfied with as much as we have. A sense of need is one of the great benedictions or blessings because it keeps our life rightly related to Jesus Christ."⁵

It is easy to see that we pray because we have the right attitude toward God and toward self. Prayer begins with an attitude. But to pray continually also requires an action.

So what stands between our theory of the need to pray and actually praying? What is the disconnect between our attitude and our action? What keeps us from knowing about joy but not choosing joy? What is the gap between knowing we are blessed and not giving thanks? What keeps us from living in a continual state of prayer?

Peterson outlines four reasons for our disconnect. He lists technology, skepticism, prosperity and busyness. Technology enables us to be less dependent on God. Skepticism causes a lack of faith in our prayer. Prosperity frees us from praying for or acknowledging our daily bread and needs. Busyness diverts our attention. Yet, if we are going to move from attitude to action then we

must act.

In his book simply entitled *Prayer*, Richard Foster begins in chapter one talking about what he terms "simple prayer."⁶ In this chapter he outlines where we begin in terms of prayer. I want to share that with you as we are closing today.

First we must start "just as we are." We will never pray if we think we must first clean up our act, get our lives together, stop this or start that. If we wait to pray we will die waiting to pray. We must start praying as we are.

As parents and grandparents, we know that when it comes to our children and grandchildren, there is no such thing as a bad painting or picture if our child was the one who created it. How many of us have boxes of artwork done by our children who, at some point, discovered they are not really gifted artists. Yet, when it is presented to us we say, "That is beautiful." My side of our family is not very artistic. My children are, and they got that from Robin and her side of the family. I used to joke that I was the illustrator for the Bible translation "Good News For Modern Man." If you remember those little New Testaments, the illustrations were poorly drawn stick figures. That is my extent of art. My brother was not much different. Yet, when he was young he drew a picture in Sunday School of the baby Moses in the basket in the river surrounded by reeds. It is drawn in crayon and there is also a caption on the picture. The caption reads "Moses needs hep!" Yes, not even help is spelled correctly. That picture was framed by my mother and placed in one of the bathrooms in my home. The whole time my Mom lived, that picture hung there for all to see. The picture was not much to see and the prayer that accompanied it was not very eloquent. Moses needs help. You see, there is no bad picture and there is no prayer too simple when God's children pray it from the heart. Until we pray as we should, we begin by praying as we can. We pray just as we are.

We pray just "as where we are." We don't wait to this point in life or until this accomplishment. Many times we think we will pray once we graduate, once we grow up, once we get married, once we become a parent and the list goes on. We must pray not only as we are but also where we are. Remember Paul's admonitions: be joyful — when? Always. Give thanks when? In all situations. Pray when? Continually. This is God's will for you. We

pray as we are and where we are.

Now here is what is important to remember. This means that we pray when we lack the desire to pray. You might say, "I have no desire to pray." Well, then begin by praying for desire. If you don't have any desire to pray, then pray to God, "God, give me the desire to spend time in prayer." It is also important to remember to pray even when we are involved in evil. You might look at your life and think, *This sin has control of me and I cannot pray until I stop.* We think God will not hear our prayers when we are being controlled by lust, pride, addiction, selfishness, greed or any other sin. We must not put off prayer just because we have yet to put off sin. Pray as you are and pray where you are in life.

Pray "as you can." In other words, don't get weary in prayer or don't get discouraged when you cannot pray. Some of us get weary in prayer. We think we have to pray harder and harder to get God to hear us. Yet, Jesus teaches us that we can rest in prayer and know God hears our prayers. We don't have to berate God in order for God to answer our prayer. Also, pray even if it has been a long time since you prayed. Our lack of prayer in the past must not prohibit our prayer today. Forgive yourself and pray. Know that God desires, more than anything else, your attention.

We pray continually when we discover the right attitude and action for prayer.

A doctoral student at Princeton once asked, "What is there left in the world for original dissertation research?" Albert Einstein replied, "Find out about prayer. Somebody must find out about prayer."

Someone must find out about prayer. That is what we are going to do this summer. We are going to explore prayer and let prayer explore us.

Do you want a joy always? Do you want the ability to give thanks no matter what you are going through? What kind of person can do this? It is the kind of person who, at the center of life, prays continually.

God invites us...God leans in to listen...come, come my friends and let us pray. ▲

-
- ¹ Eugene Peterson, *Prayer: Does It Make a Difference* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006) 11-12.
 - ² Nick Harrison, *Magnificent Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001) 209.
 - ³ Bob Goff, *Everybody Always* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018).
 - ⁴ Peterson, 13.
 - ⁵ Harrison, 219.
 - ⁶ Richard Foster, *Prayer* (Harper Collins, 1992) pp. 7-15.

