

Patterns of Daily Prayer
1 Thessalonians 5:12-21

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Today is the last message in the prayer series. But I hope we have learned a lot and had our appetites whetted for prayer. I'm concerned that you might not do anything in light of this prayer series. I'm concerned that you won't change; you carry on as you did before; you think prayer is only for the super spiritual. I'm wondering if you believe you can't teach an old dog new tricks or you think prayer is for old people who have lots of time on their hands. But you've got a busy life to live. I wonder if you'll continue to keep your distance from God or carry on with a self-sufficient existence apart from Him. I'm troubled that you're roots may not be deep into God so that you're vulnerable to the next storm coming into your life. Or that you believe there's no real need to pray.

Many of us live busy lives. We live in a world that does not encourage silence, reflection, prayer and deep thinking. We have been conditioned to expect someone or something else to keep our attention rather than learning to focus on God and His glory. I know the enemy of our souls wants you to do nothing in light of this series. I suspect he's whispered things like "you don't need to do this." "That's only for the fanatical. You're not a fanatical. There's much more interesting things to do." I'm concerned.

And yet I'm hopeful. Many other people have gone before us who faced obstacles and distractions yet they prayed. Some faced the question of survival daily. Some lived under great pressure. Some endured despicable persecution. Some were separated from family never to see them again. Yet they prayed. They were given the strength to persevere. They grew in knowing Christ and following Him to the end.

One such group was going about their regular business when a couple of traveling preachers showed up. Most of the city didn't even notice their arrival. But they went to the local synagogue on the first Saturday. For three consecutive Saturdays, one of these preachers reasoned with the Jews who attended synagogue. He explained and proved that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise from the dead. This was a new understanding of Messiah for the Jewish community. But he went even further.

He not only introduced this new idea about Messiah. He declared that Messiah had come in the person of Jesus. Some of the Jews in that synagogue joined these preachers. They believed. And Greeks from the city heard about this

stirring in the synagogue. They joined these preachers. But it wasn't only men. Several leading women of the city became believers. After only 3 weeks, an amazing work of God had begun.

But the Jews who didn't believe were not pleased. They were going to do something about it. They didn't just write a letter to the editor. They didn't just politely ask the traveling preachers to keep their beliefs to themselves. They sought out some criminal element and asked them to form a mob. These stirred up the city. A near riot broke out. The angry mob went up and down the streets until they arrived at the house of a guy named Jason. He believed these preachers. He had invited them to stay at his place. The mob searched his house but the preachers weren't there.

So they dragged Jason out and some others who had believed the message. They brought them before the city authorities. They spun a tale saying that some men came to stir up the city and proclaim a king named Jesus instead of Caesar. The officials just wanted to keep the peace. So they took money from Jason and his friends and released them. The mob disbursed and the two preachers had to leave the city by night – a very dangerous time to travel in the ancient world.

But they arrive safely in the next town. They follow the same pattern – go into a synagogue – proclaim Jesus as Messiah – many believe. But the Jews in the first city hear about this. They arrive at the next town to stir up that city's Jews and criminal element. Again the preachers have to flee. They arrive in Athens which is a bustling metropolis of the ancient world. The preachers can blend into the crowds more easily here.

But imagine what they're thinking about the Christians in that first city. They had a little over three weeks with them. People had come to Christ. Then these preachers had to leave quickly. The people who came to Christ faced stiff persecution for their faith. Would they keep the faith? Who would lead them? Would they keep gathering together? So the preachers sent someone to check out the first church. He wasn't one of the preachers so he could slip into the city anonymously. He finds they're still keeping the faith.

Somehow, he gets out of the city and back to Athens. He brings a report of what's happening in this fledgling church. People still have to work. They have busy lives. They face stiff persecution. Yet they keep the faith. The main preacher is relieved. So he writes them a letter. Within that letter he lays out for them what their lives need to begin to look like now that they are Christ followers. Within that letter, he writes a very simple command about prayer that I think is a fitting conclusion to this series.

So we will look at this simple command. Then we will stop to consider some reasons why we would want to obey it. We will conclude with a guide on how to start praying daily or grow in our prayer lives. So please find 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22 in your Bibles. Page 838 in the Bibles in front of you. Paul was the preacher who proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue of Thessalonica. This is part of his letter to them in response to the report Timothy brought back.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-22 – (ESV)

¹²We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. ¹⁵See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. ¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise prophecies, ²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good. ²²Abstain from every form of evil.

Paul emphasizes some basic Christian attitudes that he repeatedly taught to different churches throughout his ministry. Respect those in leadership in the church. Those who labor and engage in the hard work of leading & admonishing a church body need support. Yet it seems that the leaders in the church had not been highly regarded and their authority resisted. The leaders may not have exercised their authority tactfully or with wisdom.

So he also exhorts them to live at peace with each other. This followed Jesus prayer for us in John 17. Jesus prayed “I ask for those who will believe in me that they may all be one, just as you Father, are in me and I in you, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” When a church community is united it shows the world that God is in this place.

Yet the people of God are also called in verse 14 to admonish or warn the idle. Since the time for significant living is always short, idleness or laziness was not to be tolerated within the Christian community. Paul may have been speaking about some in the Thessalonian community who had stopped working because they believed Christ was about to return. This was an unacceptable response. It damaged the church’s witness and it created tension within the body. So they needed to spur each other out of idleness.

Believers also needed to encourage those who were faint hearted or timid. Some might have lost their courage in light of the severity of persecution. Other believers had to help them continue despite this pressure. Neither were they to take revenge – don’t repay evil for evil – seek the good of one another. A willingness to leave vengeance to the Lord

was supposed to be a distinctive mark for the Christian. Faith in God's perfect justice released the Christian from taking revenge. And it enables us to actually pray for and love their enemies.

Rejoice always – we talked last week about this – not that we are happy all the time. But we can experience a deep joy even in the midst of sorrow because of God, His promises and His power. Give thanks in all circumstances – an attitude of thankfulness should permeate our lives.

Don't quench the spirit or the put out the Spirit's fire – we can live in a way that we can quench the Spirit's work in our lives. A life of habitual ongoing sin or apathy towards Christ can quench the Holy Spirit in us. We fight against this by engaging in the basic Christian practices – Bible Reading; Meditation on God's Word, Prayer; Worship; Gathering with Other Christians; Serving. Don't despise prophecies but test everything – prophecies not fore telling – on November 8, this person will win the US Election – but a word or encouragement from the Lord.

Hold fast to what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. All these commands describe the growing Christians' life and attitude.

In the middle of this list, we find the simple command regarding prayer. 1st Thessalonians 5:17. Pray without ceasing. How do we do that? Are we to pray out loud to God on our knees throughout the day. There might be special occasions where such prayer is necessary. But it is possible to go through the day in a spirit of prayer, here we realize our dependence on God for all we have and are, conscious of his presence wherever we are and yield ourselves continually to do his will.

Now some of you have no problem with this command and recognize its wisdom. You might have some problem I have in living it out. But you see value in going through each day in prayer. Others might have a little more problem with this. You may find prayer hard or boring. Why would we even want to pray continually?

To answer that question, I searched the New Testament for similar commands to pray constantly looking for reasons why we would do this. Here's what I found:

Luke 21:34-36 – Jesus said – “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” So Praying at all times protects us from getting

weighed down by wasteful practices, addictive behavior and the cares of life – then we will be ready when the Lord comes. We will be well prepared to stand before Jesus.

Romans 12:1-2 – Therefore, in view of God’s mercy, present your body as a living sacrifice to the Lord. Do not conform to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. Then Romans 12:12 “Rejoice in hope; be patient in tribulation; be constant in prayer.”

So constant prayer fulfills the call to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God and helps us be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Ephesians 6:16-20 – “In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one, and take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints and also for me that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly as I ought to speak.” Through praying at all times, we take up our shield of faith to extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one. Through prayer we connect to the one who saved us and use the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. Through praying at all times we lift up others and give others courage to proclaim the Gospel.

Colossians 4:2-4 – “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ on account of which I am in prison – that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.” Constant prayer is a necessity of the Christian life. It helps us be watchful and see reasons for thanksgiving. It opens a door for God’s word to spread and for others to declare it clearly.

Mark 14:38 – Watch and pray so that you may not fall into temptation. Constant prayer alerts us to our weakness and tendencies to fall into temptation. When we constantly pray, we are more likely to be alert when temptation comes along. We will more likely immediately call out for help to resist it. We are more likely to overcome it by the Lord’s strength.

So why would anyone want to pray constantly? It protects us from wasteful and addictive living. It keeps us focused on the eternal. It awakens us from being too preoccupied with the cares of life. It prepares us to be ready for the Lord’s

return. It helps us on the journey of discipleship to offer our lives as sacrifices and change our thinking to become more God-centered. It helps us extinguish the devil's flaming darts. It is the means by which we use the sword of the Spirit, God's word. It helps others proclaim God's word clearly and fearlessly.

It opens doors for the Gospel to be heard. It alerts us to temptation and opens our eyes to reasons why we can be thankful. It helps other people and their needs. It helps us keep perspective and constantly draws on the strength and resources of Almighty God.

How can we pray continually? By following a pattern of daily prayer in dependence on the Holy Spirit's help. This assumes that we've worked through the reasons why we need to pray. This assumes that we desire to have a close relationship with God. This assumes that we recognize that prayer was purchased for us through Jesus' death on the cross. It assumes that we understand our need to come to God with everything in life.

I have included for you today in the bulletin 3 patterns to help you begin or continue to grow in daily prayer. (Download copy available separate from Sermon).

On the first page you will see a starter plan for 15 minutes of daily prayer. This pattern that can keep your thoughts focused as you learn or grow in prayer.

So first we approach God. We think about who we are approaching. We remember what He has done in sending Jesus so we could have the privilege of prayer. If you need a passage that helps this focus, use Psalm 95.

Second – read a short portion of the Bible. I would encourage you to do Bible reading at another time during the day if you only have 15 minutes to start with in the morning. It is very important to read and understand the word. But during a focused prayer time, we read a shorter portion. You might read a Psalm. You might read a part in the Gospels. You might read a paragraph from one of Paul's letters or you might start in Genesis. Read maybe a chapter. Then meditate on what you've read.

Choose one verse or truth that jumps out at you. Ask some questions of it. How does this help me praise God? Does it reveal some sin to confess? Does it show me something to ask from God?

Then pray the Bible. Pray in response to what you're mediation on the word has revealed, say Psalm 23.1 - The Lord is My Shepherd. I thank you Lord that you are my shepherd. I thank you that I don't have to go through my day

wondering if I'm alone or absent from the protective hand of my shepherd. Thank you for being my shepherd and watching out for me.

Then pray about your day and anything that's coming up. Conclude with a little time of reflection thanking God for what He revealed to you. I believe you'll find those 15 minutes fly by and serve as a great blessing to start your day.

Pages 2 and 3 of the handout offer a little more developed pattern. It calls for morning and evening prayer. This concept was new to me when I expressed dissatisfaction with my prayer life a couple of years ago. I grew up in a church. We were taught to do a daily devotion or quiet time. You read the Bible and spent some time trying understand what it said. That is very important. But then you closed your Bible and prayed with little or no reference to what you'd just read. Then it was like you were done with God for the day. It never really occurred to me to do an evening devotional. Why would I do that after I'd already had my quiet time with God? But it is a great practice to sift through the day with God. It can contribute to a calmer sleep when we entrust what's on our mind to the Lord for the night. So this pattern builds on the starter pattern and adds a section on evening prayer.

On the last page you will find 4 prayers to be used at different times during the day. I have been using these off and on for the past 2 years. I use them more as a spring board to prayer. But imagine how our days might be different if we pray as soon as we wake up. Then we pray when we're about to start work, or school or the day with the things before. Then we pause midday to continue that conversation with God. Then we pray again just before bed.

You can get copies of this from the church website under the discipleship tab. But if you would like a Word document copy of this so you can use this on your computer or tablet and write in your own reflections, please send an email to the church office and we will get one to you.

But my greatest concern is that you respond to God's invitation to a close relationship with Him. My heart prays that this won't be just another message series. I pray that you will take hold of the blood bought opportunity to pray and enter God's throne room of grace through Jesus' sacrifice. I pray that you will stand against the enemies schemes to discourage you from doing something different. I pray that you, I, we will pray more to connect to our loving God for strength, hope, counsel, forgiveness, healing and salvation that we cannot find anywhere or in anyone else.

So let us pray.