

# PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

## 1 THESSALONIANS 5:17

*by Pastor William P. Terjesen*

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As St. Paul draws to the close of his first letter to the Thessalonians he makes a number of brief statements of exhortation, one of which is this: "Pray without ceasing." When I was a younger man I found it difficult to deal with that word. You mean we're supposed to actually pray ceaselessly? How would we ever get anything done? Over the years, however, I've come to understand that Paul is here referring to a life lived in constant communication with God.

Romans 5:1 Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:  
2 By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

A believer is justified by faith. That is, he is accounted righteous through faith because Christ Jesus has borne the penalty for his sin. Thus through Christ we have peace with God. We also have access to God. The doors of loving communication and friendship are always open. Therefore, the Christian lives every moment in the grace and peace of God with the lines of communication open.

Now on the one hand this means that all our lives and service as Christians is a prayer. Serving the Lord day by day in your appropriate vocation is a prayer. On the other hand, it means that a Christian is a praying person; the Christian life is a prayerful life. The idea of a prayerless Christian is a contradiction in terms. Now it's true that some people are particularly gifted so that prayer comes easy to them, while others have a more difficult time of it. But whether it comes easy or hard, all Christians have the command of God to pray, and all Christians have the promise that He will hear and answer every proper prayer in His own way and time.

Matthew 7:7 Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: 8 For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

Psalms 50:15 And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me.

Note that both of the passages above have both the command to pray and the promise of an answer to prayer.

Now in the light of this, the question must be asked: Are you a prayerful and devout person? I don't mean: "Do you pray occasionally?" Nor do I mean: "Do you say a prayer before you go to bed?" I mean, do you live a prayerful, devotional life; a life lived in communion and communication with God through Jesus Christ? If not, why not? The Incarnation of the Son of God means that The Lord has come to us in grace and mercy; He is come to save us. What hinders you from enjoying the reconciliation that He has effected with His atoning death?

A Christian who wishes to take the privilege of prayer seriously should consider the form that the devotional life should take. I say "form" because the faithful life of prayer takes discipline and form if it is to continue. Spontaneity has its place, but it is usually the refuge of the lazy. People who insist on being spontaneous seldom finish what they start. So let's be disciplined and structured in our devotional life.

First, there are certain times of the day that call for short, formal prayers: when you wake up, when you eat, and when you go to sleep. These are usually not times well suited to extended or extemporaneous prayers. Short, formal prayers are just what are needed. And there are none better than those found in Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism. In section two of the Catechism (p. 22ff. in the 1943 edition) we find Luther's Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and prayers for asking a blessing and returning thanks at meals. When you wake up, before anything else, pray the morning prayer and then get up and go about your business. At meals ask a blessing and return thanks. And let me interject here that there is absolutely no

excuse for a professedly Christian family not to say grace together at every meal. At bedtime say Luther's Evening Prayer and go to sleep.

Second, every Christian should have some time set aside every day for a more extended time of devotion. Devotions involve the praying of psalms and the prayerful reading of the Scriptures, and may also include the singing of a hymn, the use of the Catechism or a prayerbook. Daniel had three times of prayer each day, morning, noon, and evening. The custom among Lutherans since the Reformation is to pray Matins and Vespers, that is morning and evening devotions. At the very least there should be one time a day when the believer sets aside time to pray and use God's Word. This is the proper place for me to encourage you to become thoroughly familiar with the Psalms. They are God's divinely inspired, infallible prayerbook for His church, and yet most Christians sorely neglect them. It takes modern western people some time to adjust and accustom themselves to the Psalms, but one or two Psalms a day read prayerfully will soon overcome that unfamiliarity. In addition to the Psalms, the prayerful reading of Scripture should also be a significant part of our daily devotions. I'm not talking about a quick reading of a chapter of the Bible, but an attentive serious consideration of a portion of Scripture, praying about what one reads and how it applies to one's life.

Now what I've said above relates to the individual Christian. Families, too, should have daily devotions, if not every day, at least on most days. This is an aspect of the Christian life that is so sorely neglected by professing Christians that it is almost non-existent. And the fault, for the most part, lies with fathers who fail to take their God given headship over the family with due seriousness. Fathers, if you are not gathering those in your home together for brief regular group devotions around God's Word, why not? What answer will you give on judgment day?

Third, there will be circumstances and needs that arise during the day, when a Christian, in the midst of his daily work will offer brief, fervent prayers to God. For example, you may be vacuuming or driving to an appointment when you suddenly think of a person who is in need and pray for them. You may be going for an extended drive in the car with family members, and ask God to protect you all in your travels and to protect your home while you are away from it. You may get a bit of bad news and suddenly cry out to God for help. None of these spontaneous prayers need interrupt your proper duties. They may be prayed silently while you work, or audibly as circumstances permit. God's door of communication is always open to you; you always have access to Him. Make the most of it.

So then, there are three tiers of daily prayer that make up the devotional life: brief formal prayers when waking, eating and sleeping; extended devotions, private or family, around God's Word; and spontaneous prayers that arise from our and our neighbor's needs throughout the day. This is the devotional life that we should cultivate. God commands it, and promises to hear, answer, and bless. You have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand. Don't waste it.