

7 September 2014

## **More Than Words: Prayer without Ceasing**

1 Thessalonians 5:17; Lamentations 3:21-24

1 Thessalonians 5:17. *Pray without ceasing.*

At the end of last week's worship service, after I had started this sermon series on prayer, one of our members told me something that had amazed her years ago. A friend of hers who had been a minister had told her that many of his fellow-students had stopped praying once they went to seminary. I've heard that from others, too. It sounds horrible, doesn't it? But I think I understand.

You see, as I said last week, a lot of us start with a very narrow definition of prayer. We think that it's all about getting stuff from God and that the way to do it is kind of like following a recipe: add all the right ingredients plus two teaspoons of faith, place it in God's oven at 350 for 45 minutes, and it should work every time. But then we find out it doesn't work that way. It just doesn't. I think these seminary students, spending their days thinking about God, realize their old definition of prayer is full of holes, and until they can come up with a better definition they give up the whole business. If that can happen to ministerial students, it can happen to us, too. What we're trying to do in this series is offer a better understanding of prayer, and last week I laid out a start: *Prayer is communication in relationship.*

The relationship element is key. That's one way the old definition fails: a relationship that is only about getting stuff from someone isn't a real relationship, and vending machine prayer isn't real prayer. And here's another way that the idea of a relationship changes how we think of prayer. A relationship is not something that you carve out ten minutes a day for in the midst of your real life. Relationships don't squeeze into a schedule; they influence the schedule. A relationship isn't one more thing to check off the Outlook task list, alongside this email and that meeting; they are a part of the foundation that holds us up while we go about all our tasks. Relationships are not momentary, but continuing, and that leads us back to our scripture: Pray without ceasing.

I used to worry about that verse, actually. I heard it in a high school Bible study, and it genuinely concerned me. I just didn't see how I could do that. I mean, I was a busy teenager: I had classes to go to, homework to do, friends to hang out with, parents to resent. Where was I going to find time to pray without ceasing? But do you see the assumption I was starting with? I was thinking that a prayer was only real when I consciously stopped doing everything else to concentrate on saying words to God. And if that's what prayer is, then none of us could pray without ceasing. We'd be menaces on the road. But what if prayer is more than that? What if there were a way to be in prayer that did not prevent us from doing other things?

Well, there seems to be. Have you ever heard of Brother Lawrence? He was a 17<sup>th</sup> century French lay-brother at a Carmelite monastery. His job there was in the kitchens, mostly, in the simple and repetitive tasks of cooking and cleaning, and yet it was in those tasks that he discovered a life of constant prayer, described in this little book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. He starts with this, "It is necessary to always be aware of God's presence by talking with him throughout each day. To think that you must abandon conversation with Him in order to deal with the world is erroneous" (First Conversation). How are we to do that? Brother Lawrence says, "All we have to do is to recognize God as being intimately present within us. Then we may speak directly to Him every time we need to ask for help [and we may] know His will in moments of uncertainty . . . We should offer our work to Him before we begin, and thank Him afterwards for the privilege of having done them for His sake" (Fourth Conversation).

Perhaps you're thinking, *Yeah, but this guy lived in a monastery. Lay-brother or not, his life revolved around the monastic prayer schedule, and he was surrounded by other people who did the same.* That's true. The chances are that your office or school does not stop every three hours so everyone can go to the chapel and pray. Even the church office doesn't. So how does someone who lives in a secular world even begin to live this way? Well, first, I should point out that some actually do. Devout Muslims all over the world pray five times a

day, quietly closing their office doors or going somewhere private for a few minutes whenever those times occur during the workday. Here's another example: the Confederate General Stonewall Jackson trained himself to pause for a brief prayer at the top of every hour. In this way his pocket watch became a prayer timer. (I almost left that illustration out, inasmuch as Stonewall Jackson is best known for inspiring some men to kill other men in order to defend their right to enslave still others. So not really a perfect role model. But you know what? You don't have to like everything about someone or agree with him at all before you can learn something from him.) In any case, the point is that it is possible to live in a secular world and still develop regular habits of prayer.

But even that may take some time to get started. Let me make a couple of practical suggestions. First, sometimes while you're driving alone, turn off the radio. Use that silent time to actually notice the world around you. In a city, notice the people. In the country, notice nature. God is good. Second, pray while waiting. We spend a lot of time doing that. Whether you're waiting in a line at a store, in traffic, or more likely these days, on hold for tech support, try to tune out the irritating background music and pray. Pray for the person ahead of you in line, for the person in the car behind you, for the person whose depressing job it was to record that message that reminds you that your call is important. In every day, there are moments for prayer. Some people suggest, as a next step, designating a certain day every week, or even every month, when you intentionally pray for everyone you meet. If you do that, and if your health permits, that might be a time to try fasting – maybe just skipping lunch and praying during the time you would normally have been eating.

But we need to go deeper. All these suggestions are still basically ways to squeeze in some prayer alongside everything else we do. That's a start, but what Brother Lawrence is really talking about is doing our daily tasks *as* prayers. Buddhist teaching calls this “mindfulness,” and it has to do with the attitude with which we approach our daily activity. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh puts it this way: “There are two ways to wash the dishes. The first is to wash the dishes in order to have clean dishes and the second is to wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes” (*Miracle of Mindfulness*, p. 4). Do you see the difference? If the goal is the doing, then you are living in the present moment, when we can be aware of God, not straining toward a future goal. Another word from Thich Nhat Hanh: “I like to walk alone on country paths, rice plants and wild grasses on both sides, putting each foot down on the earth in mindfulness, knowing that I walk on the wondrous earth. In such moments, existence is a miraculous and mysterious reality. People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth” (p. 12).

Do you see what happened there? Being mindful of walking or even doing daily chores has suddenly *become* prayer. One of the goals of this sermon series is to broaden our definition of prayer – prayer is more than words. After all, communication in relationship is more than words. As some of you know, Rebecca and I celebrated our fiftieth birthdays by going hiking in Scotland. We went about 80 miles together, but we did *not* walk side by side talking the whole way. If either of us had tried that, that person's strangled body would have been found at the bottom of a loch. No, we walked more or less together, but sometimes a hundred yards or more apart, depending on which one of us stopped to take a picture or climb a waterfall. That was fine. Whether we were beside each other or not, talking or not, concentrating on each other or not, we were still together, and sooner or later one of us would resume the continuing conversation and say to the other, “Look at that” or “Did you eat the last granola bar” or something. We can be with God like that: not constantly speaking, but constantly aware that God is present as we live our lives. And when we are, that is prayer – prayer without ceasing. We close with one more scripture, from the Book of Lamentations, chapter 3, verses 21-24.

*But this I tell my heart, and therefore I have hope:  
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.  
'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.'*