



PRAYER: PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

“12 And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; 13 And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves. 14 Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men. 15 See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men. 16 Rejoice evermore. 17 Pray without ceasing. 18 In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. 19 Quench not the Spirit. 20 Despise not prophesyings. 21 Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. 22 Abstain from all appearance of evil. 23 And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it. 25 Brethren, pray for us. 26 Greet all the brethren with an holy kiss. 27 I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren.”

- 1 Thessalonians 5:12-27

Prayer: Pray Without Ceasing

There are three verses that are strung together in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 that give us three basic commands, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks” – and then they are followed by this statement – “for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” And that refers to all three commands. It is God’s will for you to rejoice always. It is God’s will for you in everything to give thanks, as we saw last week. And in this document we’re going to find it is God’s will for you to pray without ceasing.

These things make up the constant flow of our Christian life. At all times, in all circumstances, we rejoice, we give thanks, and we pray. And as we ended last week, I just mentioned the idea of praying without ceasing as it sits in the middle. We rejoice, we give thanks, rejoicing and giving thanks because we know that God is working all things together for our good and His glory. And even though we know that, even though we are able to rejoice always and able in everything to give thanks because of the grace of our sovereign God because of His wisdom and power, still we are to pray without ceasing. And I ended up last week by saying it is because God, though sovereign and working His absolute inviolable unassailable will, chooses to operate that will in response to our prayers. Our unceasing prayers are the very instrument of God, by which He produces His will in our lives so that there is constant joy and thankfulness. God’s will for us is that we rejoice, we pray, and we give thanks, and through those things He affects his sovereign purpose.

The apostle Paul, in this simple specific command, calls on us to do something constantly, incessantly, as a way of life, just as he did with rejoicing and giving thanks. Even though we know God has a plan and that’s why we can rejoice – we know God is working that plan. That’s why we can give thanks in everything. Even though we know that consistent persistent prayer is a command. It flows from our dependence and our need. In fact, I guess you could say prayer is like breathing. It is a spiritual routine for all times, as we inhale and exhale in the atmosphere of God’s presence.

Two, I think, of the most interesting and unique parables that our Lord ever gave are found in the Gospel of Luke, and they are the story of the reluctant friend and the story of the unjust judge. And they provide a good place to start in understanding what it means to pray without

ceasing, so let's look at Luke chapter 11 for a moment. Here in these two parables, persistence is the issue. Relentlessness is the issue. Unceasing petition is the issue, and what makes these two parables distinct from all the other parables is that they teach by contrast rather than comparison. They teach by contrast rather than comparison. The reluctant friend and the unjust judge are exactly opposite God. God depicts himself as completely unlike the reluctant friend and the unjust judge, where in most parables, they tell a story that likens to God. This portrays God in an opposite fashion.

In chapter 11, we have the familiar prayer that Jesus taught. "When you pray, say, 'Father, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. Lead us not into temptation.'" Those are familiar words. And then in verse 5, Jesus tells the first of these parables, "Suppose one of you shall have a friend, and so go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves.'" This is about being hungry. This is about needing food, not just for one person, but probably a family. Well more than that. "A friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him,' and from inside he shall answer and say, 'Do not bother me. The door has already been shut, and my children and I are in bed.'" That was for the sake of warmth in ancient times. "I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he's his friend, yet because of his persistence, he will get up and give him as much as he needs."

The point is he's comfortable. He's in bed. Here's a person who doesn't have anything to give a stranger, which likely indicates that his family is deprived as well. He comes because the friend has arrived, even though it's after bedtime. He bangs on the door. He calls the man. He will not get, but he will get up eventually, because it's the only way he can shut up the persistence of his friend. What he won't do because of his need, what he won't do out of love, he will do out of frustration. And Jesus said, "And I say to you, ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives, and he who seeks, finds, and to him who knocks, it shall be opened." God says, "I'm not like that reluctant friend. All you have to do is ask. All you have to do is seek. All you have to do is knock, and you will receive."

And down in verse 13, there's a key, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who

ask Him?” If you, being evil, are willing to give to your children what they need, how much more will your heavenly Father, being absolutely holy and perfectly loving and gracious and compassionate, give the greatest gift, the Holy Spirit, to those who ask? God is not like that reluctant friend. You don’t have to hammer and hammer and holler and holler. God will hear and He will answer. And He will respond to your persistence, not because you frustrate Him, but because He cares about you.

And over in Luke 18, there is a similar parable, also by contrast, of an unjust judge. He was telling them a parable to show that at all times, they ought to pray and not lose heart. This is a parable to reinforce unceasing prayer, saying there was in a certain city, a judge who didn’t fear God and didn’t respect man. Now that’s a bad judge. That’s somebody who shouldn’t be a judge. If you don’t fear God and you don’t respect men, you certainly shouldn’t be a judge, but that was the judge in that city. “And there was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to Him, saying, “Give me legal protection from my opponent.” In other words, she had the law on her side, and she expected to be protected by the law. “For a while, he was unwilling, but afterward he said to Himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, lest by continual coming, she wears me out.’ And the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unjust judge said. Now shall not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to him day and night. Will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily’” – speedily.

God is not like a reluctant friend. God is not like the unjust judge. He is the very opposite of that. The first time you ask about a certain matter, He hears, and He responds in accord with your need and in accord with your will. When you come before God consistently, you move the mighty power of God without reluctance. He seeks to respond to those whom He loves and to whom He has made promises of care and answered prayer.

Some people think that this somehow contradicts Matthew 6:7 and 8, which says, “When you’re praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore, do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.” Don’t be like the pagans who recite formulas, written prayers, repetitious prayers, like 20 or 30 times, saying the Hail Mary prayers or any other ritualistic, heartless, passionless, empty recitations. Our Lord, when He says, “You are always to pray and not to lose heart,” means you ought always to be bringing things before

the throne of God, not coming before the throne of God and repeating and repeating and repeating and repeating the same phrases, the same sentences, the same words.

He's not forbidding a heart that is drawn into prayer. He's not forbidding a heart that pours out constantly before God its longings, its desires. What He is forbidding is religious ritual, meaningless repetition. So, when Paul says, "Pray without ceasing," or when Jesus says, "Men ought always to pray and never to lose heart," that is never to stop doing that, Paul is not in disagreement with Jesus and Jesus is not inconsistent with Himself. When we go to the Lord, He hears, and so we go back and we go back and we go back, not because we're banging on the door of a reluctant friend or because we're trying to wear out an unjust judge. We go back and we go back, and we go back for the very opposite reason, because we know God hears immediately and responds and cares for us. In fact, as we just read, He knows what we ask before we ever ask it. We are not heard for our much speaking. We are heard because our heart cries out to the one who is the source of all things spiritual and necessary.

Praying without ceasing does not mean saying the same thing over to God again and again and again and again and again. You can tell the Lord and He knows. Your heart can cry out to the Lord, and He understands your request. You don't have to repeat it with some formula. There's nothing to be gained by endlessly saying the same words, but obviously until the prayer is answered, there will arise from our heart persistent petition before the Lord.

I don't know how it is in your prayer life, but I think if you really walk with the Lord, prayer is a way of life, that you're always just at a hair's breadth away from a prayer. And I don't mean by those words, necessarily, that are audible, but that there's always this openness that thrusts everything in your life before the throne of God. You hear about a tragedy, someone you know, and immediately out of your heart rises to God a petition on behalf of the people who have been severely distressed by that. You hear about a disappointment, and immediately your heart goes out, "God, comfort those people." I don't think it's required of us that we find a formula to repeat that again and again and again, but that it rises out of our heart sort of on spiritual instinct, because we know the only source of help is God. It becomes a way of life. We start our day with prayer. We pray through the day. We end the day falling asleep very often with petitions rising silently from our heart to the throne of God.

There's an intensity in prayer that ebbs and flows, depending upon that concentration, but there is no doubt that this is a way of life. This is a constantly expressed dependence, and there is never in the life of a believer a moment when we don't understand the need for that dependence. About that intensity, Samuel Chadwick once wrote – and I think it sort of sums up things. He wrote this concerning Jesus, because he saw in Jesus a model of incessant prayer. He wrote, and I quote, “He called upon God as Father, but in His praying, there was the sweat and agony of blood. He kneeled down and prayed, saying, ‘Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not My will, but Thine be done,’ and being in an agony, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat became, as it were, great drops of blood falling to the ground. Matthew 26 tells us that He prayed a third time. He wrought many might works in nature and in men, calming the tempest, casting out devils, raising the dead, but in none of them is there any trace of strain or travail. Virtue went out of Him, and He was wearied in toil, but there was the ease of mastery in all He did, but ”writes Chadwick,“ of His praying it is said as He prayed He sweat. He prayed in an agony unto blood.” You talk about intensity.

Jesus knew the purposes of God. He knew the plan of the Father. He knew it perfectly. He knew the wisdom of the Father. He knew the omniscience, the immutability from before the foundation of the world. The purposes were already determined and set in motion in time. And in creation the Father's plan was set. The Son was well aware, fully apprised of the plan and His part in that plan. And yet He agonized in prayer before God in a way that wrought physical trauma to His body, unlike any other thing. Chadwick is right. He performed miracles and never broke a sweat. Cast out demons and barely lifted a finger. But He sweat blood in the throes of prayer. This is the real intense connection.

The early church was marked by this kind of prayer. In Acts 1:14 it tells us that the apostles were gathered with one mind, continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women and Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and with His brothers, who had come to believe in Jesus Christ, their half-brother. They all gathered together and were continually devoting themselves to prayer. They knew what Jesus said, what he taught about the sovereignty of God, the purposes of God, the plan of God. And yet they continued in prayer, because they continued to desperately need the connection to the power available through prayer.

It was the leaders of the church in Acts 6, who were men of wisdom, to be selected to take care of duties in the church in order that the apostles should devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. The apostles knew Jesus well. They knew the plan of God, the purposes of God that were unfolding, and yet they too were passionately and incessantly involved in prayer. When Peter was in prison, Acts 12:5, “prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.” Right at the very outset, we see that prayer was a way of life, and even though they knew God was sovereign and the purposes of God were to be fulfilled – perhaps not as fully as we understand having the New Testament in its totality now. Nonetheless, what they knew to be true didn’t in any sense set them aside from prayer, rather it catapulted them into relentless prayer.

I love what it says in Romans 15:30, “I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive” – or agonize – “together with Me in your prayers to God for Me, that I may be delivered from those who are disobedient in Judea and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints, so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshment and rest in your company.” Paul says, “I want you to pray. I want you to strive and agonize together with me in prayer, that God would do this in my life and in my ministry.” In Ephesians chapter 6 and verse 18, Paul says, having given armor to the believer, he says, “With all prayer and petition, pray at all times in the Spirit” – consistent with the will of God, consistent with the mind of the spirit. He’s not talking about some kind of tongues or some kind of gibberish. He’s simply saying pray at all times with all prayer and petition consistent with the will of the spirit of God. Always praying, asking God’s will, the will of the Spirit to be fulfilled. And in Philippians 4:6, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything” – everything – “by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.” You go all through these passages – and by the way, there are many more: Colossians chapter 4, 1 Thessalonians chapter 3 – and we’re constantly called to this unceasing prayer, this prevailing, persistent prayer.

And it’s not the kind of thing that says, you know, I’m going to set my alarm to go off every hour on my computer to remind me to pray. Unceasing prayer is an attitude in which I view the world and all that is going around in my life, all that occurs, and it all sort of translates into prayer. I see something good, and immediately praise rises from my heart. I face something confusing, and immediately out of my soul comes this plea, God, grant me wisdom. I face responsibility to teach the Word of God so often as I do, and there is this

unceasing cry out of my heart; Give me wisdom, knowledge, clarity, power to convey the truth. It isn't that I walk around mumbling with my eyes closed like the bruised and bleeding Pharisees during Jesus' times. That was their title. They were called the bruised and bleeding Pharisees because they thought it was a sin to look at a woman, so whenever one came along, they closed their eyes, and they kept running into walls. We're not talking about that. Coleridge was right, I think, when he said that prayer is the highest energy of which the human heart is capable. It is an incessant kind of energy.

Prayer should be, in many ways, the dominant feature of your life. It's your breathing. You're not always preaching. You're not always witnessing. You're not always rendering service. You're not always using your spiritual gift. You can't always be here and be there and be saying that and speaking to the right person about the right issue. You can't always be addressing problems, confronting issues, because you're not there. But you can always be praying – always. While it is the highest energy of which the human heart is capable, it is also the most powerful instrument that we have. What a gift. Intensity is the essence of praying without ceasing. It is what it means to seek God with all your heart in all the issues of life, at all times, with all prayer and supplication, not being anxious, but in everything by prayer, taking your requests to God. It's that kind of prevailing prayer.

James talks about the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man that accomplishes much. Let's just talk about that phrase for a minute after that bit of an introduction. The word praise – *proseuchomai* in Greek – and it's the most common New Testament word for prayer. It just means that - general word for prayer. That prayer could contain praise. It could contain petition. It could and should contain confession. It could and should contain intercession, in which you literally interceded for someone else – submission to God. Prayer is really a desire sent Godward, a desire to be forgiven, a desire to be understood, a desire to have a need met, a desire on behalf of someone else, a desire that comfort be granted to a certain situation, that wisdom be given to a certain person, that resolution come to a certain problem. It's just a desire sent Godward, and you know, that's how Christians live their lives.

You meet somebody who's not a Christian. You have a conversation, and out of your heart goes before the throne of God: God, bring the gospel to clarity in that person's life and bring them to the knowledge of yourself. Somebody loses a relative, and unsaved relative, and immediately the instant you hear that, out of your heart before God goes the petition: Lord,

bring comfort, bring unnatural comfort to one who's lost the loved ones and knows they're in a Christless eternity. Everything in life translates into that desire that goes up. Instead of being anxious and anxiety-ridden about all the issues, you cast your care on Him because He cares for you. And then you turn to gratitude, and you rejoice, because you have now put the desire in the hands of the sovereign One who will always do what is right.

Praying without ceasing. What does that mean? *Adialeiptōs* is the Greek word for those of you who are interested in that. It simply means continually. It doesn't mean non-stop. It means recurring. It is that which, as I said, flows from a settled dependence. It's just a constant kind of running open conversation that never has really a period. It's sort of like prayer is just your Christian life and community with God with a series of commas and semicolons.

Scripture does give examples of people who pray in the morning. Scripture gives examples of people who pray at noon and people who pray at night and people who pray seven times a day and people who prayed at midnight, and sometimes people even, like our Lord, who pray all night, and sometimes people who pray before dawn and some prayed for days, and some prayed for weeks. And there are, in Scripture, very long prayers. Some of the apostle Paul's prayers are rather lengthy, I guess, in comparison to some very brief prayers. You will find in the Bible people praying kneeling. You will find them praying standing up. You will find them praying lying face down. You will find them praying lying on a bed, lying on the ground with hands up, hands down, hands out, face up, face down, et cetera. There is no official posture. It's just a way of life. It's just a way of life.

A believer, all through his life or her life, feels the insufficiency that that believer bears and lives in this constant flow of dependence. And thus, praying without ceasing is simply engaging in the recognition of that dependence by taking everything directly to the throne and to the power supply. We recognize the stupendous resources that are ours in the power of God as well as the promise of God. So, we live in a constant state of humiliation, perpetual recognition of personal insufficiency. I remember reading about one of my old favorite teachers from centuries past, who ascended the pulpit with quite a few more stairs than I have to climb up, and he developed the habit, as he set each foot on each stair, he repeated, "I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit," reinforcing his dependency. Maybe it was

bordering on meaningless repetition, but it certainly wasn't meaningless to him. It was an affirmation of the fact that he was ascending into a pulpit to do something for which he had not the human ability. This is dependence.

Great commentator, Lightfoot, said, "It is not in the moving of the lips that the essence of prayer consists of. It is in the elevation of the heart to God." You may in a day say many words to God verbally; you may say none. But the question is your heart. This is essential in Christian living. This is the will of God for you. Clearly, the text says that. This is a way of life. Just like always rejoicing and always giving thanks, you are always praying. You acknowledge then that no matter what happens, you have reason to rejoice. No matter what happens, you have reason to be thankful, because God overrules all the bad things to produce good. No matter what happens, you recognize your utter dependence on divine supply. And so, you just live in this kind of environment, this kind of spiritual air of joy and thanks and prayer.

You know, you show me a mature Christian and I'll show somebody that lives like this. They're just always thankful, always joyful. And by that, remember now, I'm not talking about silly, foolish, shallow. I'm talking about somebody with a deep-down, rock-solid confidence in the purposes of God, unfolding through all the difficulties of life and the knowledge that their wellbeing is the first thing in God's heart and mind, and therefore, all things are working together for the good of them who love Him and are called according to His purpose. And it's out of that deep-down confidence that you have a deep-seated profound, unassailable joy, and out of that joy rises thankfulness, and connected with that is this matter of dependence – dependence. That's the big picture of what prayer really is. It's that rising, constant elevation of the heart before God. And when you do something that you know displeases God, up from your heart comes the desire for cleansing. Up from your heart comes the desire for forgiveness. Up from your heart comes that confession that says: Lord, I didn't want to do that. I'm so sorry that I did that. I want You to give me the strength not to do that again or say that again or behave in that way.

Now let me talk about some practical ways to kind of look at this. I want to talk about what motivates prayer. I talked about what motivates joy and gratitude, so I want to talk about what motivates prayer. Let me just give you some things. When a person prays without ceasing, when a person lives their life like that, there are some things driving them. Let me

just suggest what they are. Number one, a desire for the Lord's glory – a desire for the Lord's glory. When you take everything before the Lord, you are saying: Lord, I'm going to be looking for Your answer. I'm going to be looking for Your power. I'm going to be watching You display Yourself.

When Daniel prayed in the ninth chapter of his prophecy, he prayed to the Lord, he said, "I prayed to the Lord my God and I confessed. Then I said, 'Alas, O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and loving kindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments.'" And what Daniel was saying is: Oh God, I'm praying to You because You're such an awesome God, a God of grace and loving kindness. And I'm praying because I want to see You put that on display. At the end of that prayer, later in the chapter, he says, "For Your sake, for Your sake, for Your sake."

And the one who really does love God's glory, the one who really does live for God's glory, the one who does want to see God's glory on display is the one who prays so that they can rejoice when God answers. God may do what He will do, but it's those people who prayed for that work of God, for that specific request, for that specific answer, who will give glory to God when it comes. If you pray for the salvation of someone and that desire rises out of your heart before the throne of God again and again, and sometimes year upon year upon year, eventually God answers in this perfect timing and that person is saved, praise will fill your heart, and it won't fill the heart of one who wasn't engaged in those petitions. But one of the reasons that we pray, one of the motives that drives us is so that when God puts Himself on display, we can join in the praise.

A second thing, I think, motivates prayer and that's desire for fellowship with the Lord, just to have access – immediate access to His presence. You know, David longed for that. Psalm 42:1, "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for the O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" David got himself into situations where he felt so isolated. He felt so alienated. He felt so far away from God. Sinful situations, iniquitous situations, and his heart screamed and cried out for God. In Psalm 27, the Psalmist writes – again it's David – "The LORD is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the defense of my life. Whom shall I dread? When evildoers came upon me to devour my flesh, my adversaries and my enemies, they stumbled

and fell. Though a host encamped against me, my heart will not fear. The war arise against me, in spite of this I shall be confident.”

There’s an ascending thing here. The enemies come and the adversaries and they come, and then finally there’s a host, and finally there’s an army of them. And what does David say? “One thing I have asked from the LORD, that shall I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD and to meditate in His temple. For in the day of trouble, He will conceal me in His tabernacle. In the secret place of His tent, He will hide me. He will lift me up on a rock, and now my head will be lifted up above my enemies around me. I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy. I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the LORD. Here, O LORD, when I cry with my voice. Be gracious to me and answer me. When Thou didst say, ‘Seek my face,’ my heart said to Thee, ‘Thy face, O Lord, I shall seek.’” In the midst of trouble, your heart is motivated to run into the presence of God, for there is protection and there is succor, as the old word expressed it. There is comfort. There is nourishment. There is safety. How often the Psalmist talked about hiding, as it were, under the arms of God, in the everlasting wings as if he were nesting under the protection of God. Now there are so many times like that in life, when trouble overwhelms you, when sorrow overpowers you, when loss so sweeps across you that it engulfs you in that terrible loneliness that you long for the communion with God. You rush to the presence of God in prayer.

Another thing that motivates prayer is personal need. Matthew 6:11, “Give us this day our daily bread.” You know, when you don’t know where the basic answers to life are, when you can’t find your next piece of bread, when you can’t solve your problem, when you can’t get just what is basic to life and basic to relationships, just what you need at the very core of your heart, be it physical or emotional or social or spiritual, you don’t have anywhere to turn and you’re like the friend who comes and yells at his indifferent friend, “I need bread. I need bread,” or like the woman who came before the unjust judge and wouldn’t leave until she got justice, that’ll drive you to prayer. And when those things that are just basic to life, and sometimes it’s a meal, and sometimes it’s a job, and sometimes it’s a car, and sometimes it’s a child in your home who is breaking your heart or a spouse or an illness, cancer, a child that is ill with a terrible illness, those are the kinds of things that just tip and tear at our ability to cope with life on a daily basis. Now those things motivate us to prayer.

You know, in my own life, when those tragedies strike at the core of your life, and you have nowhere to turn and you can't solve the problem. There is this absolutely helpless feeling. You have nowhere to go. There are no human resources, particularly for a person like me who's used to being able to solve problems – that's a way of life for me – and you're absolutely impotent. You can't do anything. What happens is, there is this rush into the presence of God, and there is a communion there that's indescribable as He covers you with His feathers and protects you.

I think another thing that drives us to prayer is the need for protection – the need for protection. Jesus said, "Pray like this: Do not lead us into temptation." Or the words of Psalm 27:11, "Teach me Your way, Lord." Lord, this is a very dangerous world I'm living in. This is a very, very scary world that my children are facing and my grandchildren and my church and my beloved friends. Oh Lord, we need your protection. We're not safe. This isn't a safe place. My heart reaches out to God on that front very often. Keep me safe. Keep Patricia safe. Keep my children safe. I'm not talking so much about safety on the freeway. I'm talking about safety from the kingdom of darkness and all that threatens. I pray that as I look into the faces of my grandchildren and wonder what the world is going to be like when they're in the throes of making choices that have immense implications, moral choices, spiritual choices.

But there's another thing that motivates prayer and that's the desire for wisdom. Did you ever feel like you don't know where to turn? I'm so glad James wrote what he wrote. It just sticks out in neon light. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." That's pretty straightforward. Isn't it? You need wisdom? Ask. Ask. And I don't know about you, but I need that a lot. Lord, just give me wisdom. That's a prayer that rises out of my heart quietly, repeatedly in my times of study as I struggle to understand something in the Word, and I don't want to misrepresent the truth of God. I don't want to put words in God's mouth. I want to rightly divide it. So, Lord, please, give me wisdom. Help me to understand this. Give me wisdom in dealing with this issue or that issue. Solomon was wise even before he was wise, because when he was given the opportunity to ask for anything, he asked for what? Wisdom. And when we need wisdom, we need the promise of God, if you lack wisdom, just ask and you'll receive it.

Another thing that motivates us is trouble – trouble. We kind of hit at that earlier, talking about personal needs. When we get into some deep trouble – I always think about Jonah. Jonah was in some serious trouble. And in the middle of his trouble, what did he do? He had the most significant prayer experience of his life from the belly of a great fish. Psalm 20 verse 1, “May the Lord answer you in the day of trouble.” When you’ve gotten yourself into some serious trouble, pray. God is very skilled at getting His people out of trouble.

Another motive for prayer is desire for relief from worry – desire for relief from worry. Philippians 4, “Be anxious for” – what? For what? – “nothing.” Jesus said, what’s worry going to do for you? Is it going to add to your stature? Does it have any benefit at all? It has none. Worry is an act of distrust in God. Psalm 4:1, “Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness. Thou hast relieved me in my distress.” You want relief from worry and fear? It rises to the Lord from your heart. Lord, I can’t deal with this. I cast this care on you.

There are other things that prompt our prayers: guilt and sin. Read Psalm 32, Psalm 51, psalms of confession. Read Daniel 9, where Daniel embraces the sins of the whole nation of Israel and carries them before God in confession. If you’re a Christian, sin will prompt prayers of confession.

Another thing that motivates prayer is thanks for blessings. Do you find yourself doing that a lot? “Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord.” I find myself just sort of saying that. Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord. No matter where I turn. I am blessed and I know that. I look at my life, I look at my family, God put me in a family of people who love Christ for which I will always be grateful. God gave me a wife to love, who loves Christ, loves me, loves our family. There’s just an unceasing thanks to God for that gift, for children, for grandchildren, for this ministry. I don’t know anybody that has a more blessed ministry than I do. Maybe God knows that that’s the only way I could survive was to be loved and blessed and encouraged by all of you. Because I’m not necessarily loved everywhere, but I am blessed. I am blessed to be surrounded by the elders and pastors that I am and people in this church and in every area of my life. It’s just a cause for unceasing prayers of thanks.

Another thing that motivates or prompts this kind of unceasing prayer is the desire for the salvation of the lost. Paul’s heart’s desire was for the salvation of Israel, Romans 10:1. And it just rose out of his heart before the throne of God, that God would be gracious and save the

Jews. The apostle Paul also instructed in 1 Timothy chapter 2, “That prayers ... be made on behalf of all men ... This is good and acceptable in the sight of God, our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.” So pray. Pray for leaders, pray for people in authority, pray for all people to come to the knowledge of the truth. And you know, as I meet people who don’t know the Lord, there is just that immediate reaction: Lord, somehow bring this person to the knowledge of the gospel, to an understanding of salvation.

And then maybe one other thought to add to the little list. Prayer is prompted by a desire for spiritual growth in your life and the lives of others. You know, this is so critical to the life of the servant of God that I think it’s at the very heart of our prayers. If you follow Paul’s prayers, they were almost all prayers that believers would grow. Ephesians 1, he says in verse 16, “I do not cease giving thanks for you while making mention of you in my prayers; that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ the Father of Glory may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope of His calling, the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.” I mean, he’s praying for their understanding, for their wisdom, for their knowledge, for the power, and that’s only one of many prayers.

Another favorite of mine is in chapter 3, “For this reason,” verse 14, “I bow my knees before the Father” – and what do I pray? “... that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through his spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.” He just says, I just pray that you’ll understand it all, grasp it all, live in the present realization of all that God has provided for you in Christ.

These are the kinds of things that, if dominating our minds, prompt prayer. And they reap immense benefits. I don’t have time to go into detail, but what are the benefits of prayer? They activate the power of God. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. It affects much. Victory over Satan is a result of prayer in Scripture. Blessing from God comes as a result of prayer. Spiritual growth comes as a result of prayer. Joy comes as a result

of prayer. Cleansing comes as a result of prayer. Power comes as a result of prayer. All spiritual blessings are tapped through prayer.

Now, if you're not living this way, if you're not enjoying the blessing of unceasing prayer, let me tell you why. Here's a few things to think about. One: sin. "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me," Psalm 66:18. If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me. God is not going to hear, in the sense of hearing and answering your prayer, if you are sinning. Secondly, let me define that down a little bit. What are some of the sins that thwart our prayers? Well one is a lack of forgiveness. If you're holding a grudge against somebody, if you're bitter against somebody, Jesus said you're not going to be forgiven. I'm not going to forgive you and give you joy if you're not forgiving others. If you want to enjoy the blessing of God's forgiveness in your life, then you must give the same forgiveness to those who offended you. Also Proverbs 21:13, "He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be answered." The sin of unforgiveness thwarts your prayers and so does the sin of lacking compassion. You shut your ears to the cry of those in need, and God will shut His ears to your cry.

Another thing that hinders prayer is lack of faith. That is you don't want to pray because you don't either believe God could answer or you don't want to expose yourself to what His answer might be. So James says, James 1, you are asking in a doubleminded fashion. You have to ask in faith, without doubting God's wisdom, God's power, God's plan, God's will. Because if you doubt, "Then you're like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. And let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, because a double-minded person is unstable in all his ways." You have to have a firm and confident faith in God's purpose and will and power and goodness and wisdom. Where there is unforgiveness in your heart, where there is indifference to those in need, and where there is a lack of trust and faith, your prayers are hindered.

There are other sins that the Scripture particularly identifies as hindrances to prayer. Asking selfishly, James 4, is one that I think is familiar to most everybody who knows the New Testament. "You lust and you do not have, so you commit murder. You are envious, cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend it on your pleasures." I had a little story in the book on prayer I just wrote and finished last week. A little boy was

praying, and he said, “God bless mommy and God bless daddy and God bless my friends, and God, I want a new bicycle.” And his mother said, “Why are you yelling? God isn’t deaf?” And he said, “I know, but Grandma’s in the next room, and she’s hard of hearing.” Well, I think some of our prayers are directed at God with that same attitude. This is what I really want, so I’m cranking up the volume.

There’s another thing that’ll hinder your prayers, and that’s to fail in your marital responsibility. First Peter 3:7, “You husbands likewise live with your wives in an understanding way, as with the weaker vessel, since she is a woman, grant her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.” And then I think you could go either way. If you’re not being the husband or the wife you should be, you’re short-circuiting what God is going or could do in your life.

Let me sum it up. First John 3:22 – write that one down – 1 John 3:22, “Whatever we ask, we receive from Him.” Is that good? You like that? Here’s the qualifier. “Because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.” I mean, that’s the general truth that I’ve been sort of particularizing. You’re going to receive what you ask, because you keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight, which are clearly revealed on the pages of Scripture.

So, pray without ceasing. Simple, yet profound. Not vain repetition, and yet it’s a continual rising of the longings and desires of the heart into the presence of God. It’s normal. It’s like breathing, and yet it’s so strenuous that it can tax every ounce of our energy. And sometimes it gets so intense that it almost tears us apart physically and calls for the setting aside even of food in a prolonged fasting, because we have no appetite in the throes of such intense longing. It’s so natural to the Christian to do it that it doesn’t need to be taught. And yet it’s so far beyond us that it has to be learned by being in the Spirit. This is a great thing, the greatest connection we have to all the divine resources. God will hear and answer as we obey His commandments and do His will.