

What Is 'Constant Prayer and Why Is It Important?

The core of the approach of Simply Pray is to build a prayer life starting from short prayers or verses that we learn by heart and gradually expanding outward, first to different times of day or situations and later to different forms of prayer. Part of the reason for this approach is that the Bible tells us we are to pray constantly, yet it seems many of us find it difficult to pray regularly at all. This series of suggestions of simple ways to pray is offered to all those who, like me, have struggled to pray or to pray regularly, let alone to pray constantly. To many of us the very idea of constant prayer may seem at best intimidating, maybe even wildly unrealistic. Before we dismiss the idea out of hand, though, perhaps we should attend to what the Bible says about the matter, for the suggestion that we pray constantly comes, not from some extraordinary athlete of prayer who inhabited a cave, but from Scripture itself, the word of God addressed to all of us. So let's look at what the Bible has to say about constant prayer.

Biblical Background: 'Pray without ceasing' (1 Thess 5.17)

1 Thessalonians 5.17 must be one of the shortest verses in the whole Bible. In Greek, it is even shorter than in English, only two words. The command it conveys is nevertheless breathtakingly uncompromising. We are to pray constantly, or unceasingly (in Greek, *adialeiptos*). How could anyone possibly do that? Even monks, nuns and hermits must have some minutes in the day when their minds have to attend to mundane matters. Even if we assumed Paul did not intend his exhortation to include the hours when we sleep, we are still left with an instruction that seems impossible to keep.

Some commentators get around this problem by claiming that 'unceasingly' or 'constantly' does not signify 'all the time', but only means that we are never to give up.¹ While that interpretation gets us off the hook of the impossible, it just does not fit with the plain meaning of the Greek: *adialeiptos* means 'constantly' or 'unceasingly', pure and simple.² There just are no recorded instances of this word's being used to mean 'perseveringly' or the like.

Perhaps we could deal with the apparent impossibility of the command by simply ignoring this verse. We could put it down to Paul's scribbling hastily, not really thinking through

the implications of what he was writing. The problem with this approach is that while this verse takes the prize for being short, plain and uncompromising, there are plenty of other places in the Bible that express similar ideas. In the Letter to the Ephesians, for example, we are told to 'Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion' (6.18). We are also told there to be persistent, but since this is an additional counsel, we can assume that 'at all times' does not merely mean that we should persevere. In the Letter to the Philippians we are told to 'pray about everything' (4.6). Paul writes that he is praying 'night and day' for the church in Thessalonica and for Timothy (1 Thess 3.10 and 2 Tim 1.3). Granted, he could not be praying for both simultaneously, so 'night and day' might be taken as meaning 'on and off whenever I'm awake' or perhaps it is merely a hyperbolic way of saying 'a lot' (and his prayers were probably not limited to intercession for these two causes, or even to intercession itself). Even allowing for these considerations, however, Paul clearly signals more than perseverance over time here. Likewise, in Colossians 4.2, he urges that his readers devote themselves to prayer and in 1 Timothy 5.5 claims that 'the real widow' continues her supplications 'day and night'. The notion of constant prayer is not found solely in the New Testament, either: The psalmist tells us to seek God's presence continually (105.4), claims he calls upon God 'all the day long' (Ps 86.3), and in Ps 34.1 says (of God) 'his praise shall be always in my mouth'.

There are also plenty of texts that urge perseverance in prayer. In Luke 18.1-7, Jesus tells the story of the importunate widow, the point of which, we are told in verse 1, is that we should always pray and never give up. In Luke 21.36, he tells the disciples to stay alert at all times, praying to escape the troubles that will come (a similar text can be found in Mark 13.33). In Romans, Paul tells his readers to be 'patient in trouble and keep on praying' (12.12). Perseverance is urged in the Bible, then, but seems to be taken as something different from praying constantly.

Even more numerous are texts urging prayer at various times of the day. 'From the rising of the sun to its going down let the name of the Lord be praised' (Ps 113.3), the psalmist urges, advocating prayer that is both continual and spread throughout the day. More specifically, morning, noon and evening are named as times of prayer (Ps 55.17). Elsewhere, morning and

evening are named (Ps 5.3) or simply day and night (Ps 88.1). The lifting up of hands (a traditional gesture of prayer that continued into the early Christian period and is reflected in posture of celebrants at the Eucharist in a variety of traditions) is equated with the evening sacrifice in Ps 141.2. The psalms also make clear that at least some people followed the practice of rising from sleep to offer prayer in the middle of the night (Ps 119.62). Others in the Old Testament also prayed at regular times: for example, we are told Daniel prayed three times a day (Dan 6.10). Not surprisingly, the New Testament portrays the apostles as continuing these Jewish practices of prayer. Peter and John went to the temple for the 3 o'clock prayer service (Acts 3.1) and Peter went up to the housetop at the sixth hour to pray (Acts 10.9-11). Like the psalmist, Paul and the apostles prayed around midnight (Acts 16.25).

The Bible, then, gives us a pretty clear pattern of urging constant prayer and of prayer at fixed times throughout the day (and even night), as well as of persevering prayer for particular purposes. There is not much ground for thinking Christians are to pray only during church services or when the mood just happens to hit us or even once or twice a day. The Bible moreover tells us not only that we ought to pray day and night, but tells us *why* we should pray so assiduously.

In the first place, prayer is a 'sacrifice of praise, which, according to the Letter to the Hebrews, is to be offered continually (13.15) and our thanksgiving to God can also be described as a sacrifice (Ps 107.22; Ps 116.15). These formulations may sound odd to people of our time. To us, a sacrifice is something you give up, generally something costly or precious. However heroic this sacrificing may be, it also has an unmistakable aura of pain about it. Like going to the dentist, it may be the right thing to do, but few actually enjoy it.

We sometimes forget that the background to both the psalms and the Letter to the Hebrews was the worship of the temple in Jerusalem, where the daily round of worship included all manner of sacrificial offerings. While these sacrifices certainly involved giving something up—whether a choice animal of one's flock or money to buy some other commodity—in the first

place, sacrifice was an act of worship, a consecration of the self to God in thanksgiving and praise.

To call prayer a sacrifice of praise or thanksgiving, then, means that we worship and that we give back to gift to God out of the abundant store which God has given us; it does not mean that prayer should be painful or difficult. In the first instance, we offer our time. If we think of our lives as consisting of 86,400 seconds each day, all of which were given to us free of charge and which we did nothing to earn, then it seems a very small thank you to spend even a few minutes, seven times a day, praising God. The astonishing thing is not that some people manage to praise God seven times a day, but that so many faithful Christians go for hours and hours, day in and day out, without giving so much as a glancing thought to God, the Giver of all good gifts and of life itself. Even more significant than the widow's mite of time we give God when we pray, however, is the gift of our very selves, our mind and heart. If we think of prayer that way, then it seems that even if we prayed continually throughout the day (but less than at every single moment), we would still be giving a pittance to God in comparison to what we have received.

In prayer, moreover, we not only give ourselves; we receive as soon as we give. The divine Persons are always present to us, but we are often not consciously present to them. Turning to God in prayer, whether with a word of praise or thanksgiving, or in a cry of anguish or remorse, means that we remind ourselves that our whole lives are lived in the presence of overwhelming Love, perfect Justice, the most tender Mercy. We are blessed simply in having such companions as the Holy Three of the Trinity always at our side, every willing, and yes, even eager, to listen to our stumbling words, our most trivial phrases or thoughts.

The more often we turn in prayer to these companions, the more our minds become flooded with the awareness of this luminous reality: this world we inhabit, which seems so full mischief and malevolence, belongs in fact entirely to Goodness. The world will neither be overrun by misrule, nor need our own hearts be flooded by the deluge of unsalutary thoughts and emotions that sometimes threaten to engulf us, despite our best intentions: 'I have overcome the world' (Jn 16.33 NLT). To pray continually is to seek a larger, more generous

awareness of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in our lives. That is no sacrifice, but a blessing. If we think about the practice of constant prayer this way, it may be more understandable that the Bible commends a practice that at first blush seems so unreasonable.

It may be desirable—but is it possible?

Even someone who accepts that the Bible instructs us to pray constantly and to pray throughout the day, and even someone who is persuaded that, commanded or not, it might be desirable, might at this point wonder: but how on earth could an ordinary person manage to do it? Praying at fixed hours throughout the day probably seems a more realistic goal to most people than praying constantly, but it, too, presents undeniable challenges. People who have jobs cannot simply drop whatever they are doing during the day and go to a prayer service or open a liturgical book, nor can everyone necessarily schedule events or meetings so that they are free at particular hours.

There have been various approaches to the practical challenge posed by the Bible's expectation of prayer throughout the day and continual prayer. I will outline some of these classic methods, along with some newer and lesser-known approaches, in the pages that follow, but the focus will be on what I myself have found helpful. I do not claim any originality for the approach I recommend: it is merely a hybrid of hints and techniques I have learnt from others over the years, gleaning some suggestions from people much wiser and holier than I. Precisely because I myself am neither very wise nor very holy, I can vouch for the feasibility of this approach: if I can do it, any Christian can.

Extensive versus Intensive Prayer, Communal versus 'Individual' Prayer

The forms of prayer I will be describing nevertheless have a specific purpose and are not proposed as the entire content of a complete life of prayer. Praying briefly at moments spread throughout the day is a wonderful practice that helps to keep our minds focused on God and our hearts grounded in love and goodness, but the forms of prayer I will describe in later chapters are necessarily short. Most would fall into the category of 'arrow prayers': short, pointed, targeted to a specific need or purpose of the moment. As such, they contrast with what you

could call ‘intensive prayer’, resting deeply in the divine presence for an extended period of time, often in silence. There are many ways of praying that would answer this description and I commend them as an essential part of a Christian prayer life, but they are not what I am concerned with here.³

Nor am I concerned with communal prayer, properly speaking (i.e., praying in the physical presence of others), even though this, too, should have a place in any Christian life. I say ‘properly speaking’ because the forms of prayer I will be describing are in a sense part of a fabric of prayer that connects the one praying at any given moment to a wider community of praying souls. When we pray by ourselves at the traditional hours of prayer—morning, noon, dusk and late evening—we are in a way joined to others who pray at these times, those in monasteries around the world, those in various Christian traditions who pray a version of the Daily Office, and those throughout the ages who have prayed the office or who have dedicated themselves to the enterprise of constant prayer. The doctrine of the communion of saints, affirmed in the Western text traditionally known as the Apostles’ Creed, reminds us that the Christian community is limited in neither space nor time: just as our prayer links us to Christians now living all over the world, in places far from where we are and places we cannot even name, so our prayer joins us to all the Christians who have ever prayed, in any century. This ‘great cloud of witnesses’, of which the Letter to the Hebrews speaks (12.1) surrounds us as we pray, offering their prayers with us, so we are never actually praying alone. Nevertheless, we can make a distinction between times of prayer when we are physically solitary and times when we are in the company of others. Just as the forms of prayer suggested in this book are not meant to substitute for ‘intensive’ prayer, they are also not meant to substitute for communal prayer in the sense of a gathering of living persons in a single place. The techniques suggested here are supplementary, though they may also function as preliminary steps along with way to the practice of, for example, ‘intensive’ or contemplative prayer.

¹ For example, one study Bible's note on this verse reads: '*Never stop praying* means not giving up it does not mean praying at every moment.' (*NLT Study Bible* (2nd ed.). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008.

² See the entry in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (*BDAG*). 3rd ed., rev. and enl. Frederick William Danker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. It gives 'constantly' and 'unceasingly' as translations for this word. It does not record meanings such as 'perseveringly'.

³ There are dozens of books on contemplative or wordless prayer. If you are interested in exploring this practice, I would recommend: Mariano Ballester, *Introduction to Profound Prayer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997); the methods in the 'Awareness and Contemplation' section of Anthony de Mello's *Sadhana: a Way to God. Christian Exercises in Eastern Form* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1984); and Thomas Keating's *Open Mind, Open Heart: the Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*. (New York: Continuum, 1986). Although they do not provide much in the way of practical guidance the works of Thomas Merton and Abishiktananda (Dom Henri le Saux) give valuable insight into the nature of contemplation. For the latter, see *Prayer* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2006) and for the former, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973).