

Be Constant in Prayer

Romans 12:12

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As you now know, we are entering Bethel's annual Week of Prayer. Why do a week of prayer? Because while the church is called to do many things, prayer is certainly near the top of the list. We aspire to be a praying church filled with praying people to the glory of God. Our Week of Prayer is meant to keep us praying. It also is intended to keep prayer as a priority for the other 51 weeks of the year.

How good is your prayer life? This is one of those gotcha questions as there are few more humbling questions for any Christian than that one. I remember years ago being part of a church where we took a survey and ranked our prayer lives on a scale of 1-10. Compared to whom? Using what criteria? When we are thinking clearly about our spiritual lives, we all wish for a more vibrant prayer life.

That's the goal here. The intention today is not to lay down any guilt trips but to equip us to grow in this area. Maybe you say you are at a 2 or a 5; how can we move up the scale? Wouldn't it be great if a year from now you were a 5 or a 7? Here's one thing we can all be confident in; God's will is for us to grow in our prayer lives.

Today we are skipping ahead slightly in Romans 12 to verse 12. I'll begin reading in verse 9 and you will notice a series of short exhortations, all applications flowing from the mercies of God noted in verse 1.

"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." (Romans 12:9-12 ESV emphasis added)

Our focus is "*be constant in prayer*" but we need to note that there is a symbiotic relationship within verse 12 between rejoicing in hope, being patient in tribulation, and being constant in prayer. Our prayers feed our patience in trials. Patience feeds rejoicing when we need hope. These are three legs of the same faith stool. Neglect one and the three-legged stool doesn't work. You are quickly on your behind, and maybe that summarizes where you are at spiritually this morning. "*Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation,*" how? "*Be constant in prayer.*" See these three as friends.

My outline will be simple. *Prayer. Be. Constant. In.* Sounds like the Yoda translation, but you'll get it.

Prayer

What is prayer? The simple definition for a Christian is: *talking with my heavenly Father.* As we saw in Romans 8, a Christian is an adopted son or daughter of God himself. We have the incredible privilege of being in the family of God. By virtue of this new and eternal relationship with God, prayer is family communication. God speaks to us through his Word. We speak to him through prayer. Therefore, prayer should always be reverent because our heavenly Father is Almighty God. But it should never be less than personal because Almighty God is our heavenly Father. Prayer is family talk.

In a healthy family, family talk has a spectrum. Sometimes it's talking through the needs of the day. Sometimes it's sharing feelings. Sometimes it's urgent, even an emergency. I know with my parents, if it's been awhile since we talked, when I call, my mom will say, "It's just so good to hear your voice." Should we suppose our heavenly Father is any different? When we pray, we are making a call to our heavenly Father who delights to hear our voice.

Therefore, prayer isn't merely the mouthing of words to God. True prayer flows from the heart and the mind. Strive to make your prayers deeply personal. God knows those deep thoughts and desires anyway. Better a short personal prayer than a long, formal, disaffected prayer.

Before the Fall, Adam and Eve and God talked freely. Sin cut the phone wire. Isn't it wonderful to realize that as forgiven and adopted children of God, the Garden talk times with God are restored? We can talk with God anytime. He welcomes it. He hears. *Hello Son. Hello Daughter. It's so good to hear your voice.*

Be

Class, what tense is "be"? Present. Today. Now. In other words, prayer is an everyday sort of thing for us. It's not like 6th grade. Been there, done that. Done with it. We never check the box on prayer. It's to be an ever-present ongoing reality in our lives.

Rather than be constant, there are many "was"-constant-in-prayer Christians. You know, when my kid was sick, I prayed. When I was without a job, I prayed. When I needed direction in my life, I prayed. I "was" constant in prayer. Past tense in prayer.

There also are many well-intentioned Christians who are "future tense" prayer people. They like knowing prayer is there just in case they need it. It's like the bat phone. If I need help, I can lift this phone and Batman will help me.

We look no further than the example of Jesus Christ to see what a present tense prayer life looks like. Jesus prayed before his wilderness temptation, before naming his disciples, before healing people, in the Upper Room, at Gethsemane before his crucifixion and many other times. He neither rested on past prayer efforts nor saw it as a future emergency thing; he prayed daily. Isn't that what he taught us in his model prayer, *give us today our daily bread*? He didn't say, give us today our weekly bread or monthly bread. He didn't say, just pray over the groceries. No. Daily bread prayers require daily prayers. Present tense—**"Be constant in prayer."**

Constant

This is the interesting and challenging word in this little exhortation. *Constant*. Other translations go with *faithful*, *devoted*, or *persevere*. The Greek word is an interesting one. **Προσκατερέω** - to continue to do something with intense effort, with the possible implication of—despite difficulty—"to devote oneself to, to keep on, to persist in; ¹ to persist obstinately in."²

Obstinate is a bad quality except when it comes to prayer. God urges us to be obstinate in prayer, meaning that we are like donkeys when we pray. Donkeys are famously obstinate

¹ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 662). New York: United Bible Societies.

² Liddell, H. G. (1996). *A lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English lexicon* (p. 692). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

animals. They don't quickly move on. They will stand in the same place a long time, especially if you try to get them to move.

Some of you are of an obstinate nature. That's good, at least when it comes to prayer as God urges us to be diligent. To continue with it. Keep persevering in prayer. Don't move on. Don't give up. This isn't the only place we find this:

- "*Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.*" (Colossians 4:2)
- "*Pray without ceasing.*" (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

Pray is what we are to do. Persistence is the attitude with which we are to do it. The Puritans famously said, *pray until you pray*. We all know the truth behind that. When we start a prayer, how quickly the prayer seems flat or cold or lifeless or we are quickly distracted thinking about other things: the to do list, the grievance list, the whatever.

Start to pray and your mind will be flooded with a thousand other things to think about or do. It takes a kind of mental obstinacy to overcome these things. Keep praying until you pray. Keep praying until the distractions move to the mental background and your heart and mind and words flow from your heart to your heavenly Father. Then, you are really praying. What does it look like? It looks my daughters and their requests to me. "Dad, can we get a doughnut?" *No*. One minute later, "Dad, when can we get a doughnut?" *Never ever for the rest of your life*. One minute later. "Dad, I really want a doughnut." These kids are relentless!

It may drive us crazy, but our heavenly Father urges us to persistence in both prayer and what we pray. You may feel guilty going to God again for the same request. The same concern. The same ask. Earthly parents grow weary of it. Our heavenly Father delights in it. Why? Why would God want us to be constant in prayer? ***Because constant in prayer means we are showing we are constantly dependent on Him.*** God is glorified in our dependence, and prayer is the number one indicator that I understand all that I really need today comes from God. So, pray like a donkey (*sound*). Prayer meetings should sound like a herd of donkeys.

In

When you bring up prayer or suggest prayer, there's lots of talk about prayer. People will talk about prayer, perhaps brag about their prayers, but not actually be IN prayer. An observation about many prayer gatherings is that there is way more sharing of prayer requests than there is praying about prayer requests. *Oh, look at the time, we'd better pray...*

"*Be constant in prayer.*" This doesn't mean we are praying 24/7, although our church is this week. It means that as I'm thinking about other things and doing other things, my heart is in a state of God-awareness that easily slips into prayer throughout the day. Little prayers sometimes. *God help me with this appointment. God, give me strength as I feel weak. God, I love you, etc.* There are longer conversations at other times.

Perhaps the best example is a smartphone addiction. How long do we go without checking our phone? Not long. In fact, we check them so constantly that many of us are accurately described as being "constantly" on our phones. Constantly aware of our phones. What does that look like? Lots of little communications and texts sent throughout the day. I have a niece whose dad checked, and she was sending 15,000 texts a month. That's pretty constant. Sometimes it's a longer real conversation. Life requires us to do other things, but

the phone remains in the back of our minds; *there may be some communication needed, I'll check.*

That's an unhealthy relationship with my phone, but it illustrates a healthy relationship with my Father. Yes, do other things as life requires. Give attention to your job, family, driving, life stuff. But in my heart throughout the day, there's an awareness that I may need to check in, communicate, have little and long conversations with my Father. As we are constant in prayer, God provides resources to rejoice in hope and be patient in tribulation. So, Bethel Church, let's grow in this and allow this Week of Prayer to facilitate the other 51 weeks so that our spiritual lives are marked by this, "*Be constant in prayer.*"

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