

*This is War*  
**Praying All the Time...Seriously?**

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Ephesians 6:18-20

Dr. Billy Kim, a Korean evangelist, recounts the story of an American soldier hiding in a bunker during a skirmish in the Korean War. His commander ordered him to move out under enemy fire so he could rescue several fallen comrades. He nodded his head, waited for his commander to walk out of sight, stole a quick glance at his watch, and then stayed right where he was. After several minutes a colleague reminded him of his assignment to go out under fire. Again he looked at his watch and delayed. Finally he sprinted out of the bunker at full speed and fearlessly began the risky process of carrying his fellow platoon members back to safety.

At day's end a friend asked him why he kept looking at his watch instead of complying with orders. As Billy Kim tells the story, "The soldier threw his head back, fighting off the tears, and said, 'I was afraid – afraid because I knew I was not ready to die. I lingered for the moment when I knew my fear would be overcome – remembering that at a certain time every hour my mother had said she would pray for me. As soon as that minute struck I knew I was under the shelter of her prayers, and that no matter what awaited me, I could face it.'"

Here's a grown man who was surrounded by military firepower. Yet his ultimate confidence was in his mother's prayers. The book of Ephesians resonates with a similar conviction. Paul the apostle begins his letter by assuring the Ephesians that he is praying for *them*. Now he comes to a close by asking his readers to respond in kind. As Paul continues to step into the spiritual line of fire, he wants to know that he'll be under the cover of the Ephesians' prayers.

Let's turn together to Ephesians 6:18-20. Whether reading from your own copy of Scripture, or looking up here at the screens, or reciting these words from memory, let's stand together and give voice to this part of God's Word:

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.

With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Do you remember where Paul was when he wrote the book of Ephesians? He was in jail. Notice his description of himself as "an ambassador in chains." Some

commentators think the reason he utilizes the dramatic metaphor of putting on the full armor of God here in chapter six is that fully armed Roman soldiers – his guards – were always in his line of sight. Last week Pat Smith helped us understand what it means to “be strong in the Lord” and to take our stand in the midst of spiritual battles. Christ’s soldier – and that means every person who endeavors to follow him – is to stand with God and for God. Do you remember the refrain of that popular Billy Joel song a few years ago?

*So here you are with your faith  
And your Peter Pan advice  
There are no scars on your face  
And you cannot handle pressure*

There most certainly were scars on many places on Paul’s body. And like few people who have ever lived, he knew how to handle pressure. So what does Paul tell us as he brings to a close his comments concerning spiritual warfare? He tells us that the antidote to pressure – pressure of any kind – is to pray. This is not a recommendation. This is a command. From Scripture and from twenty centuries of Christian experience, we know a great deal about coming to God in prayer. This morning let’s look at five crucial dimensions of what it means to sustain a lifelong dialogue with the Lord.

*First, **God calls us to approach him with confidence.*** In the end, the vitality of our prayers is largely dependent on who we think God really is.

We need to stop talking *at* God – a God of our own imagination – and instead get a reality-based understanding of God’s character – his holiness, his grace, his mercy, and his eternal glory. This is where Ephesians helps us so much. We don’t arrive at these words about prayer until we have received a thorough-going portrait of God’s character and identity in the first three chapters of Paul’s letter. One of the very purposes of this book is to tell us why we can have confidence as we approach God.

Do we or do we not think that God is someone worth spending time with? Why would any of us want to pray to a Cosmic Killjoy, or an Absentee Architect of Countless Galaxies, or an Angry Landlord who is ticked off with how we are abusing the Earth, or a Heartless Manager who allows both a tsunami and a volcanic eruption to strike Indonesia with deadly force within 30 days?

Paul, however, has painted a dramatically different portrait of the God who is really there. Through Christ we can be God’s called, chosen, blessed, forgiven, and deeply loved children, if we will abandon ourselves to him. We can know that history is in fact *his story*, not a disconnected series of human tragedies. Back in Ephesians 2:12 we read, “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.”

What we learn in the Bible is that God doesn't *need* us. But he *wants* us just the same. The irony is that we ourselves *need* God more than anything else in the world. But most of us don't really *want* him all that much. Yes, we're quite taken by the gifts and blessings that God provides. But do we yearn to know and pursue God for his own sake, even if he would choose to give us nothing? What would we think of a child who said to his parents, "I'm not all that interested in spending time with you, but could I still have my allowance every week?" Even in the face of our less-than-perfect motives, God incredibly still seeks to share his love with us. Therefore we can confidently approach him in prayer

Our *second* observation about prayer is considerably more challenging: **God calls us to open our hands to him.** More than 40 years ago, the Catholic contemplative Henri Nouwen huddled with a group of 25 theology students. What did they think constituted their greatest personal resistance to prayer? The majority agreed that it was the way they wanted to hold on to something, out of fear, instead of entrusting that something to God.

This morning we hope you received a penny when came into the sanctuary. If you would, put that penny right now into one of your hands and clench it with a tight fist. Imagine that this is your last coin. This is the last thing you can depend on to create your own security. This is a picture of our resistance to God. We hold on to what is familiar, even if we're not proud of it – even if we couldn't possibly make a case that this last penny could really save us. Maybe we're holding on to bitterness, or pride, or fear. Maybe we're deeply disappointed in God. We don't want to let go of our conviction that this is just the way we are, or the suspicion that life can never really be different. As Nouwen puts it, "It's safer to cling to a sorry past than to trust in a new future."

When we pray – when we actually open up our hearts to God – we're taking the risk that things can change. We're believing that God can give us hope. How do we unclench our fists? We begin by trusting the words of assurance that we find more than 350 times in the Bible: "Don't be afraid." Let's open our hands right now. We can receive what God wants to give to us.

Perhaps this prayer based on the words of Henri Nouwen will encourage you: "Dear God, I am so afraid to open my clenched fists! Who will I be when I have nothing left to hold on to? Who will I be when I stand before you with empty hands? Please help me gradually open my hands to discover what you want to give me. For I know what you want to give me is love: unconditional, everlasting love. Amen."

Here's our *third* dimension of establishing an ongoing dialogue with the Lord: **God calls us to pray all the time concerning every issue of life.**

That is literally what Paul says in verse 18. "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on

praying for all the saints." Paul uses the word "all" four times in this one verse; the word translated into English as "always" is actually "all" in the original Greek. Paul reinforces this point over in I Thessalonians 5:17, which is one of the shortest and most challenging verses in the Bible: "Pray continually." Realistically, how is this possible? The average American Christian admits to watching more than four hours of television every day, but invests just 10 minutes per day in focused prayer. In order to live out these verses, are we somehow supposed to sustain a 24/7 devotional life?

Over the years I have felt overwhelmingly defeated by the high bar that Scripture sets for prayer, and by the examples of a number of celebrated followers of Jesus. Martin Luther set aside at least three hours for prayer every day – not only that, but what he described as "the best three hours," when he could bring his greatest energy and focus to talking with God.

John Wesley was relentless in his spiritual pursuits. He preached more than 40,000 sermons over the course of his life, traveled almost a quarter of a million miles on foot and on horseback in order to conduct ministry, and was still preaching twice a day in his 80s. He wrote in his journal at age 86: "Laziness is slowly creeping in. There is an increasing tendency to stay in bed after five-thirty in the morning." You know, when I read that what I really want to do is head over to Dairy Queen and then take a really long nap.

What are we to make of Paul's command that we keep our eyes always fixed on God and pray in every possible circumstance? How can we ever live such a life? The answer is actually rather simple. We take the life we already have and infuse it with a continual dialogue with God. We keep company with God no matter where we go, and no matter what we do. Our goal becomes to live all of our moments in the joyful awareness of God's presence. We not only *live* our life but we choose to *pray* our life, one moment at a time.

This approach to all of our minutes and all of our days requires significant re-thinking and courageous commitment. But it *is* possible. This can become our actual way of living...if we will choose to seek it. Let's affirm that it is important to set aside daily designated times for focused prayer – where we bring to God specific praises, requests, and expressions of thanks. Now...how do we wrap the rest of our moments in an ongoing conversation with God?

We begin by recognizing that most of us have such a brittle understanding of what it means to communicate with God that we discount much of the praying we are already doing, and we condemn ourselves for not being more spiritual. Experience suggests that we pray a lot more than we know – even in school. No matter what federal law says, there will always be fervent prayer in school as long as there are final exams.

Do you believe in God? Do you believe that God is present in this place right now, and in your car, and in your kitchen, and wherever you happen to work or study? Just believing that God is present is the start of what it means to keep company with him wherever we go.

Let's be more specific. What would it be like to sustain a conversation with God as you walk from this sanctuary this morning out to the parking lot? It might include a silent expression of thanks as you step into the corridor: *Lord, thank you that we have the freedom to worship like this any time we want.* As you approach a friend you can be praying, *God, encourage her today.* A couple of children run past you in the gathering space carrying donuts: *May they experience your love in this place.* When you shake hands with someone you don't know, pray secretly: *Send your Spirit to join us during this conversation.* As you step into the parking lot: *Challenge us, Lord, to be generous with all this you have given to us.* Under your breath you can pray any time at all: *Father, have your way with me.* Short, continuing prayers. We learn to pay attention to God and pay attention to others no matter what is happening.

What does Paul mean in verse 18 that we are to pray "in the Spirit"? As Christ-followers we can know that God's Holy Spirit lives within us, and will be continually reminding us, nudging us, and even jabbing us with ideas and insights as we live moment to moment. It is the Holy Spirit who faithfully manages this kind of ongoing conversation with the Lord.

Let's turn to our *fourth* point, which is especially important: **God calls us to pray as we can, not as we can't.**

I have found it immensely liberating to realize that prayer does not have to be bound by certain cultural patterns of our own day and age. Do we need to close our eyes or fold our hands when we pray? Not once in the Bible do we see anyone praying like that. Closing the eyes and folding the hands actually originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a Sunday School child management technique. In Scripture we see Jesus looking up when he prays. It was typical of ancient Jewish prayer to keep the eyes open so one could affirm that God was actually present – right here and right now.

We don't need to begin every prayer with "Dear God," either, nor do we need to bring things to a close every time by saying "in Jesus' name." Praying in Jesus' name simply means that we always keep in mind the grounds for our confidence in coming to God. We can open our hands and our hearts to our Father in heaven because of what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross. Nor do we need to pray in a particular kind of voice, or with some kind of sacred grammar. God is present with us whenever we are talking, and he will not be offended – in fact, it's more likely he will be honored – by our choosing to talk with him just as we would speak with any other real person.

Perhaps our greatest hang-up is that our minds so often seem too cluttered or unspiritual for us to pray. When we approach God we try to raise subjects that we *think*

we ought to be praying about – like missionaries, world peace, or the depletion of the ozone layer. Our minds, however, keep circling back to the kinds of issues that actually weigh on us all day long: *I wonder if there's a lot of cholesterol in this pizza. Am I paying too much for my phone service? Is it ever going to rain again? Do I look fat in this suit? How am I going to survive my extended family this Thanksgiving? Will I still have a job next January?*

What can we do? We must pray what is really in us, not what we *wish* were in us. We must pray as we can, not as we can't. We don't have to clean up our motives or our grammar before we talk to God. We don't have to sound more spiritual or less selfish than we actually are. We will always come to God as sinners, because we *really are* sinners. That's simply who we are.

We can prayerfully share with God all of our thoughts and feelings and decisions during a typical day. *God, would changing phone providers be a better way to manage the resources you have given to me? Please prepare me now, Lord, to speak with grace this Thanksgiving. Thanks that you are always watching over me, even when I feel anxious about my job.* Prayer in this sense becomes a kind of spiritual breathing – a never-ending dialogue with someone who is walking with us every step of the way...because God is in fact walking with us every step of the way. I have personally begun connecting with God like this during the past year or so, and it is revolutionizing my life.

This is what Paul was talking about when he said that we can “pray on all occasions.” If you're mourning the fact right now that you honestly have no desire to seek such a life, take the risk of asking God to put such a desire within you. He will do so.

*Fifth*, and finally, **God calls us to pray fearlessly so his kingdom might advance.** Paul is astonishingly vulnerable in verse 19: “Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel.” Then he repeats the word “fearlessly” in verse 20. Even this apostle, the author of almost half the books of the New Testament, knew that he would be battling fear and hesitancy whenever he went out on the spiritual firing line. He sought the protecting shelter of the Ephesians' prayers, recognizing that their prayerful trust in God would help pull down the strongholds of the enemy.

Two months ago, at the *Iron Sharpens Iron* conference for men here in Indianapolis, I heard a pastor from Tennessee named James Ryle tell his life story. James seemed to be such a warm, genial, and mainstream guy that I don't think any of us suspected his life had taken so many dark turns. When he was just a kid growing up in the state of Texas, James' father was sent to prison for armed robbery. His mother abandoned him and his siblings to an orphanage. James went into the orphanage at age six and was never adopted. As a teenager, Ryle ran away from the orphanage and

dived into drugs and crime. He, too, ended up as a resident of the Texas state prison system.

Ultimately James came to a moment of crisis when he realized that he could stay on the path he was on, or surrender himself to Christ. He chose the Lord. The Lord adopted him – not only to experience a new life but to leave prison and launch a ministry that would bring hope to other men.

The day came, as he suspected it would, that he felt the Spirit's nudge to search for his father. He prayed. "God, do you really want me to reconnect with this man whom I barely know?" God supervised the search process. Father and son sat down together. James discovered that his father was filled with longing to experience a genuine relationship with God. He was devastated, too, to learn that James had followed him into prison. "In which jail did you serve your time?" he asked. When James told him, his father was stunned. "Son, years ago I served on a prison work detail. I was a welder. I helped build the prison where you did your time."

In the midst of that discovery, God spoke clearly to James Ryle. "James, I set you free from the prison your father built for you. Now go and set others free from the prisons their fathers built for them." We are called to tear down whatever strongholds the enemy uses to hold us captive, and to show others that they can come with confidence to a new Father who will give them a whole new life.

We can talk to this new Father at every moment. We can open our hands and receive what he wants to give to us. We can come just as we are, not as we wish we were. This morning you can take something with you. You can leave this place with the confidence that all this can really happen. You can also leave something behind. As you feel led, put your penny in one of the baskets as you exit the sanctuary. Leave your resistance behind – that last stronghold of your wanting to be in control, and to manage your own life.

Don't wait for tomorrow. We can talk to our Father right now. He is waiting to talk with each of us.