



**BETHEL**  
PRESBYTERIAN

# **MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

---

Volume 15 Issue 37

September 25, 2016

## Church Relationships, Part 9

Donald Grey Barnhouse told the story about an American Lieutenant and forty enlisted men who were sent to a certain mountain village during WWI, one hundred miles from Paris. They were assigned the task of guarding an ammunition dump. In the course of time, the Lieutenant received permission to go on leave for two weeks, and he left the group in charge of the Master Sergeant.

A few days later word was received from General Pershing's headquarters that 2,700 men were needed to march in the peace parades of London, Paris, Brussels and Rome. The Master Sergeant read to his men that there were two conditions for any who might be interested:

- The first condition was a clean military record- which all forty men had.

- The second condition gave them pause; it stated that every man applying had to be at least 186 centimeters tall.

The corporal and sergeant looked at each other and then one of them asked how much 186 centimeters was. Neither of them knew. But the corporal said, *“At any rate, Sarge, I’m taller than you!”*

When mess time came and the news spread around the group, it was the same thing over and over again. No one knew the metric system. The men got into an argument as to their relative heights, and soon they were standing back to back to see who was the tallest in the company! It wasn’t long before every man knew his comparative heights... Slim all the way down to Shorty.

When the officer returned and heard the news and asked if there were any candidates, the sergeant replied, *“The trouble Sir, is that we don’t know what 186 centimeters is.”*

The lieutenant knew enough French to go out into the village and bring back a meter measure. Soon a mark of the required height was made on a wall and every man took their turn standing against the measured height- the shortest to the tallest. Finally, a call was made for Slim, and he came to be measured. He stretched himself up to his greatest possible height. He too was short by a quarter of an inch. Barnhouse himself watched the parade in which 2,700 US soldiers marched, all of whom measured at least 6 feet and 1 1/5 inches tall!

This is quite illustrative when it comes to our relationship with God! Without a reference point to determine how our relationship with God should be characterized, our Christian walk would be very subjective. On the outside, we might look good. In comparison to others, we might look good. Yet the bottom line is: What does God want in our relationship with Him?

Yet praise God that He has given us a *reference point* with which to measure our walks with Him; passages which describe what constitutes a healthy relationship with Him. After giving three commands pertaining to our walk with God, Paul wrote this:

1 Thessalonians 5:18b, *“...this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”*

Clearly Paul here is talking about God’s standard when it comes to our walks with the Lord!

### Characterized by Dependence, v. 17.

1 Thessalonians 5:17, *“Pray without ceasing.”*

We have here another short verse such that we might think that Paul’s command here is unimportant. Yet as with v. 16, this exhortation is given throughout God’s word! That alone tells us that this is an important facet of our lives as Christians! So let’s talk about each word.

- Pray: προσεύχομαι (*proseuchomai*); the word literally means to pray, to offer prayer, or to ask. In the Bible, προσεύχομαι (*proseuchomai*) is the most comprehensive word for prayer. For Example, in the Bible there are many words used to describe the different facets of prayer.
- εὐχομαι (*euchomai*), εὐχή (*euchē*) speak of a prayer which expresses a wish. It is very close to a vow.

Romans 9:3, “For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren...”

Acts 18:18b, “...In Cenchrea he [Paul] had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow.”

- δέομαι (*deomai*); ἐρωτάω (*erotao*); δέησις (*deēsis*) all denote a prayer of entreaty/supplication. These are used in contexts where specific requests are made...

Romans 1:9-10, “For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the *preaching of the gospel* of His Son, is my witness *as to* how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers [supplications] making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you.”

This is what primarily is in mind when the WSC #98:

Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.

- αἰτέω (*aiteō*); ἔντευξις (*enteuxis*) are used when one in a lesser position addresses someone higher than them. This is the prayer made in reference to a superior. 1 John 5:16, “If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death...”
- προσεύχομαι (*proseuchomai*) can refer to all of these or none of these (cf. Colossians 1:3; 2 Thes. 1:11; Acts 6:4; Eph. 6:18). As it is the most common New Testament word for prayer, it encompasses all the aspects of prayer found in the Bible: submission, confession, petition, intercession, praise, and thanksgiving. Its primary focus is that of devotion; it expresses a God-ward look of dependence and communion. And so, προσεύχομαι (*proseuchomai*) is depending upon God to do what He says He is going to do. It is the heart of...

Psalms 42:1-2a, “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God...”

When a man comes to a biblical view of God’s sovereignty, one of the first questions asked is, “If God is sovereign, why pray?” That is a good question! Yet let me ask a more difficult one;

“If God is sovereign, and Christ is God, why did Christ pray?”

Matthew 26:36-39, “Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’ And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. Then He said to them, ‘My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.’ And He went a little beyond *them*, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt.’”

So if God is Sovereign and Christ is God, why did He pray here? In fact, why is it that a study of the life of Christ reveals, more than anything, He was a man of prayer? Christ prayed:

- Early in the morning, Mark 1:35.
- All night and often, Luke 5:16.
- During the day, Matthew 14:19.
- From Afternoon till evening, Matthew 14:23.
- During the evening, Luke 22:17.
- When He was physically tired, Mark 1:35.
- When He was rejected, Matthew 11:25.
- When He was misunderstood, John 6:15.
- During spiritual conflict, John 12:27.
- When He was in the Garden, Matthew 26.
- When He was dying, Luke 23:46.

From all of this and more it is obvious that Christ’s ministry was saturated with prayer! And so again, thinking of His deity, we ask “Why?” *If prayer is the means to get something from God... if prayer is the way mortals influence the divine... why would incarnate God bother with praying?!* The answer is going to challenge us when it comes to our understanding of prayer. If prayer is the means of getting something from God or influencing Him to do something He otherwise wouldn’t do, then it makes absolutely no sense at all why Christ prayed. But that is NOT what prayer is in Scripture. That is NOT what προσεύχομαι (*proseuchomai*) speaks to. Again in Scripture, προσεύχομαι (*proseuchomai*) speaks of a God-ward look of dependence and devotion. It is the heart’s cry for succor and support, reflecting dire need and so longing for the presence of God in one’s life.

Matthew 26:36-39, “Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’ And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. Then He said to them, ‘My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.’ And He went a little beyond *them*, and fell on His face AND PRAYED, saying, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt.’”

This passage is NOT about prayer, if prayer essentially is getting God to act on our behalf. It is not about the fact that Christ prayed, but the focus here is upon that which prompted Christ to pray. More than anything, this passage is about communion, support, and fellowship- which is the essence of prayer (which means this passage is all about prayer)! In fact, we see this emphasis when Christ exhorted the disciples in His rebuke for their prayerlessness:

Matthew 26:40-41, "And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, 'So, you *men* could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying, THAT [ἵνα (*hina*)- this clause shows purpose NOT content] you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.'"-

Christ here didn't tell the disciples WHAT to pray; He told them WHY they should pray, "...[that they] may not enter into temptation!" *Cling to God and He will uphold you!* That is what prayer is all about!

Truly, the reason why Christ prayed (and why we ought to pray) is because "Prayer" (προσεύχομαι [*proseuchomai*]) is NOT primarily requesting (that would be δέομαι [*deomai*]). RATHER, prayer primarily is an act of dependence upon and so communion with God!

So, when we ask the question, "If God is sovereign, why pray?" we really are asking, "If God is sovereign, why depend upon Him?" When viewed this way, the answer is quite simple: We pray because God IS sovereign! "Prayer" primarily speaks of a relationship of dependence upon, devotion, and so communion with God which therefore expresses itself at times in formal prayer!

With that, notice the next phrase; "without ceasing" ἀδιαλείπτως (*adialeiptōs*). This means "without intermission," "without interruption." It should be obvious that this does NOT imply non-stop petitioning (that of course would be impossible for we would die of starvation or a lack of sleep). RATHER, the qualification implies a characteristic of life!

"Pray without ceasing" is the command to cultivate a life which is *characterized* by dependence upon and communion with God! That, secondly, is what God wants when it comes to our relationship with Him! Recall the passion of Christ.

John 17:24a, "Father, I desire that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am..."

In His high priestly prayer, Christ expressed His desire that His people would always be with Him where He was/is. That is the Lord's heart toward you and me! This is what it means to live *Coram Deo*! J. B. Lightfoot wrote:

It is not in the moving of the lips that the essence of prayer consists. It is in the elevation of the heart to God. Thus, amidst the commonest duties and recreations of life it is still possible to be engaged in prayer. (III, 2006, p. 186) (Lightfoot, 1957, p. 81)

R. L. Thomas added:<sup>1</sup>

[Unceasing]... does not mean some sort of nonstop praying. Rather, it implies constantly recurring prayer, growing out of a settled attitude of dependence on God. Whether words are uttered or not, lifting the heart to God while one is occupied with miscellaneous duties is the vital thing. (Thomas, 1996, pp. 291, Volume 11)

As we've seen, salvation is much more than a ticket to heaven. In its most essential form salvation is a relationship with God (John 17:3). Thus, it is God's plan for our lives that we live in constant dependence upon and communion with Him. That is what is behind this command!

Now family of God, in this regard you must see that "praying without ceasing"- cultivating a Godward look of dependence and devotion- will NOT be an easy thing. Essentially we are dealing with an infinite, eternal, and unchangeable Being! Accordingly, one of the most difficult things we will ever do as sinful, created beings is endeavor to cultivate a life of fellowship with Him. This no doubt is why Paul gave the glorious promise:

Romans 8:26, "And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, BUT THE SPIRIT HIMSELF intercedes for *us* with groanings too deep for words."

I find this promise so comforting and encouraging. Yes, cultivating a life of communion with God will NOT be easy. Yet the Spirit of God is there aiding, encouraging, and enabling us! We need only be willing and desirous!

With this in mind, how do we cultivate a "God-ward look of dependence and devotion"? If this is NOT where we live, how do we get there? The order of Paul's commands here is progressive, "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing." From this we saw that "rejoicing" is a gateway virtue! It truly is the *sine qua non* (lit. *without which it could not be*) of the Christian life! Recall the words of Leon Morris wrote as he described the essence of "rejoicing" in v. 16:

The various derivatives of joy occur with startling frequency throughout the New Testament. The word for 'grace', for example, is from this root, as are one of the words for 'to forgive', one for 'to give thanks', and another for 'gifts of the Spirit'. (Morris, 2009, p. 104)

And so get this... where "rejoicing in the Lord" exists, so also will be grace, forgiveness, gratitude, the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit, and a life of prayer/dependence upon God! As that is true, if we want to cultivate a life of prayer/dependence upon God, we must be people who "rejoice in the Lord"! Rejoicing is "joy expressed" and so is a *corporate* word! It is the corporate expression of joy on the part of God's people.

In this regard, “rejoicing” can occur in your home when you are by yourself. Yet this is NOT the *prima facie* or the ground from which this virtue arises. “Rejoicing” is a *corporate* word which involves a *corporate* expression/dialogue! It is found amongst a people who individually delight themselves in the Lord and then gather and express this delight to one another. And so, show me a gathering of God’s people who do this, and I’ll show you a strong church! Remember the words of Nehemiah:

Nehemiah 8:10b, “...the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Let me ask you, “Do you think it would be hard to cultivate a God-ward look of dependence and devotion if every time you got together with God’s people you gave yourself to discussing the character of God, the beauty of our Savior, His glorious, redemptive work in your life, and so the ongoing graces with which He blesses you?” Absolutely not! Christian! That is the “community” Paul had in mind when he gave the closing words of this epistle!

In this regard, in closing let me remind you of a discipline I’ve exhorted in the past. Purpose within your heart to have something to add to the corporate expression of joy that ought to occur when two Christians gather. You say, “What does that mean?”

- Read and study the word of God and so the perfections of your Savior NOT merely for yourself, BUT for others in the body of Christ!
- Have a quiet time not merely for yourself, but for others!

You say, “*That seems weird... almost verging on the arrogant.*” Is that what you call what I do every week in studying for a sermon? John Stott said great preaching occurs when a text drives a man to the pulpit rather than the pulpit driving a man to a text. And I say, this isn’t just great preaching... it is the grounds for fellowship in the body of Christ! As we rejoice in the Lord individually, our joy will overflow to the community as we share of the glory of Christ with one another. When this occurs, the body of Christ begins to live more and more with a Godward look of dependence and devotion! If you don’t believe me, believe Paul, “Pray without ceasing.”

## References

- III, B. W. (2006). *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eardmans.
- Lightfoot, J. B. (1957). *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul: (I and II Thessalonians, I Corinthians 1-7, Romans 1-7, Ephesians 1:1-14)*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Morris, L. L. (2009). *1 and 2 Thessalonians Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Thomas, R. L. (1996). *Expositor's Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Thessalonians*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

### End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris wrote, “It is not possible for us to spend all our time with the words of prayer on our lips, but it is possible for us to be all our days in the spirit of prayer, realizing our dependence on God for all we have and are, being conscious of his presence with us wherever we may be, and yielding ourselves continually to him to do his will.” (*1 and 2 Thessalonians*, TNTC, p. 104)