

“Pray without ceasing.”

I think the Lord will allow me to share this with you. One morning a few weeks ago I was feeling blue, so I went to prayer. Several things were heavy on my mind, and I complained to the Lord about these things (although it probably sounded to Him more like I was whining.) Before the sun set that day, all three of those very specific issues I'd raised with God were answered. I was elated not only that the concerns I had were resolved, but that the sovereign Ruler of the universe so loved me that He cared about what I cared about and did something about it.

So we should think once again about prayer. I realize we've discussed the subject of prayer often in Sunday school, but let's do it again.

What is prayer for? Did God give us the privilege of prayer so that we may have our needs satisfied and/or indulge our desire to be happy in one way or another? Is prayer to promote our personal interests? Why do we pray? Let's see if we can identify some of the reasons God invites us to pray.

But first, we need to understand that we were created to be in community with others. Our modern American culture fosters individualism, but God's intention is that we live in society, in relationship to others. Throughout Scripture, the text appeals to us to have concern for others. One of the goals of salvation is to be united with others, regardless how different they may be, forming a unified body, in the Old Testament the Nation of Israel, in this era, the Church. Sadly, forces at play around us make this objective, although it's clearly God's desire for His people, almost impossible to achieve. Few believers actually experience the loving unity the Spirit longs to create.

A second consideration, clearly related to the first, is that our sin nature compels us to be self-obsessed. Selfishness describes almost all of us, some more so than others, granted. We are hopelessly and madly in love with *ourselves*. It's a love so fierce that it effectively squeezes out everyone else. This hardly can be God's will for us! The two greatest commandments are to love *God* with all our being, and to love our neighbor as intensely as we love ourselves. Self-love has to be broken for us to please God.

A third issue, also related to the above, is God's desire that believers live in relationship to Him. It appears to be God's creational intent that humans live in God's presence, in relationship to Him. The purpose and goal of Scripture seems to be to bring God's human creatures into intimate communion with Himself, to participate in some way in the fellowship, love and joy of the Trinity. Sin alienates us from Him, but Christ's reconciling atonement makes it possible to restore a relationship. A sad commentary on modern Christianity is that we trust Christ to secure our eternal destiny – and we then proceed to live our lives as we please, totally apart from any reference to our Creator God. The Apostles would surely be horrified to see how believers today offer token worship on Sunday mornings but live the rest of the week with little or no regard for the Christ who saved us with His blood.

Prayer powerfully addresses these three core issues. It promotes unity among believers, it liberates us from bondage to ourselves, and it builds the relationship with the living God that we were created to experience. Here's how...

When we pray for others, for example, we identify with them and their needs. Compassion develops, and – assuming our prayers are sincere – we desire that their life be enriched, that their needs be met. Unavoidably, we enter in spiritual union with the one we're praying for, and our reliance on God to answer our prayer binds us to Him. As we pray, our selfishness decays, our attitudes toward others is transformed, and trust in God builds. We sense that we're partnering with God in meeting the needs of another, in knowing that someone else is blessed. The desire to see someone else blessed

expresses the love of the Spirit, who now fills us and makes further sanctification possible. Praying for others opens us up to the Spirit and enables us to grow to maturity.

We assume that God takes our petitions seriously. Regardless how He answers our prayers – for God in infinite wisdom always does what is best – God sees that we are taking responsibility for the needs of others. And we become like Christ who, for the needs of others, gave His life on the cross and continually intercedes for us in heaven. And as the targets of our prayers have their needs met, God is exalted and we are joined to God in having responsibility for the outcome. Our hearts and minds become increasingly aligned with God’s purposes. Unsuspectingly, we become His servants.

We may even suppose that our prayers move God to act. Of course, He is sovereign, and His will is infinitely perfect and good. Yet, it may be that His will includes our petitions, which give Him a reason to act in a way that’s in accord with His will. This mutuality tightens our relationship. It enhances our role in life; it heightens the significance of life.

“Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17) doesn’t mean we forego everything else in life so that we’re on our knees non-stop in prayer, 24/7. It means that as we go thru the activities of our daily life, we’re in constant communion with God. We think of Him and His will. We praise Him and thank Him for all that we experience. We want Him to be part of our life and we want our lives to be devoted to Him. In writing this, I suspect Paul understood that our lives during this Church Age are to anticipate how life will be in the life to come. Each era in biblical history has aspects that are proleptic of how things will be in a future era. Our being in continuous communion with God in this life is probably a foreshadowing of the intimate fellowship we’ll have with God in the future.

If someone refuses to pray without ceasing, that person is essentially saying, “I’m not interested in God. I don’t want God in all my thoughts. My interest is myself. I fully intend to live my life according to my lights, and when I need to, I’ll pray.”

At creation, God ordained his human creatures to rule over the physical world on God’s behalf. The intent evidently was that they would serve as kings and priests, mediating God’s wisdom and blessing to the world, and referring issues as they arose to God for His wisdom. When we pray, we’re carrying out that priestly role, the kingly role having been severely abridged due to God’s curse on His creation as the consequence of sin.

Jesus once said, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move” (Matthew 17:20). I don’t believe that Jesus was exaggerating for rhetorical effect. He was thinking of Zechariah 14, in which God will, in response to the pleas of His people Israel, whom He loves, actually move a mountain to preserve them from destruction by their [future] enemies. We are finite, of limited capacity to do all that sometimes needs be done. But this physical world belongs to God and He has the power and right to do with it as He pleases, according to His holy will and purposes. Prayer acknowledges our humble status and role and God’s exalted Person.

Finally, this thought: While we’re at prayer, unholy thoughts are unlikely to swirl around inside our heads. To the contrary, if we’re communing with God, the Spirit is more likely to give us insights regarding our lives or the Scriptures. So a life spent continually in prayer not only leads to, but of equal importance, maintains our sanctification and may result in fruit-bearing.

So, prayer is not just an option. And it’s vastly more than a privilege. It is the means by which our sanctification becomes possible, for that’s the goal of salvation. It’s the means by which we tell God how much we love Him and want to be with Him. And it’s a form of service to God, reflecting what Jesus is doing on our behalf right now in heaven.