

PRAYING AT ALL TIMES IN THE SPIRIT

Ephesians 6:18

Treasuring Christ Church – Pastor Boyd Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

This morning we launch a two-part series that I hope to do every year to kick off the new year. One sermon on prayer and one sermon on the Word to help us renew our passion to pray and be in the Word. We live in an evil age: a time when we must be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves. And navigating this evil world increasingly calls for us to wield the word of God in complex situations.

- Think of the millions of babies in the form of frozen embryos that are often abandoned or destroyed. How should Christians think about this?
- Or, how are Christians to love our neighbors, when our neighbors may be Muslims?
- How are we to affirm the dignity and worth of everyone made in the image of God, regardless of their religion or nationality?
- How should we to love our enemies and pray for them—when ISIS threatens our soil with terrorist attacks?
- How do we honor the president and not hate him?
- How are we to counsel professing believers who feel same-sex attraction yet acknowledge that acting on those attractions are contrary to the Bible?

These are complexities that don't have pat answers. They require prayerful consideration of the Scriptures. These issues, among others, require that Christians make specific application of the word of God in sometimes new areas that previous generations never had to think about. The benefit of prayer in an age such as this is not merely to soothe our anxiety about where society is headed. The benefit of prayer in an age like this also makes you wise..

Jas 1:5: If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

This must be done in prayer.

Not only is the age that we live in evil and difficult to navigate, but also the powers of darkness are strong and they have in mind to wreck your faith this year. Your faith this year won't be strong against these kinds of attacks without prayer. Prayerlessness will lead to spiritual lethargy. We need to be in prayer for the spiritual struggles we are sure to face this coming year. Our prayer life needs to be battle-ready. So turn to Ephesians 6. Begin reading in v. 10. Focus on verse 18.

Eph 6:10-20 ¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil

day, and having done all, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, ¹⁵ and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; ¹⁷ and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, ¹⁸ praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, ¹⁹ and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

We are obviously skipping ahead in our study of Ephesians to this verse. But we'll study it again later this spring when we come to it again. Set in its context, it really is a more magnificent passage than we can grasp in one sitting.

This letter began in chapter 1 soaring in the heavenlies with all the spiritual privileges we Christians have. And it ends with a call to Christians to be on their knees. From soaring in the heavenlies to falling on our knees—that should be the posture of our heart when we read the Bible. We want to be people characterized by prayer. We want to live a life of prayer so that we are ready for whatever spiritual battles come our way.

Now, from verse 18, I want us to see three characteristics of battle-ready prayer. For us to be battle-ready, we need to have the life of prayer that we're called to in verse 18.

The first characteristic of. . .

I. BATTLE-READY PRAYER IS UNCEASING PRAYER

v. 18: praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication

Prayer must be “at all times.” This is a theme throughout Paul’s letters. If ever there was a man of prayer, it was the Apostle Paul. I have 10 references in Paul’s letters to his frequency of prayer, and I’m going to read them all so that you feel the weight of them all.

Ro 1:9: For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers

Ro 12:12: Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

Eph 1:16: I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers,

Col 1:9: And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

Col 4:2: Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

1 Th 1:2: We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers,

1 Th 2:13: And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

1 Th 3:10: as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

1 Th 5:17: pray without ceasing,

2 Ti 1:3: I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.

Paul was a man of prayer—all in favor? And that’s just in Paul’s letters!

In Luke 18, Jesus told a parable to his disciples (v. 1) “to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” There’s two options laid on the table for you for this year: pray or lose heart! Which will you choose, Christian? Pray? Or lose heart?

And we see the character of the early church in the book of Acts:

Ac 2:42: And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Ac 6:4: But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” (the example the apostles set to the church)

So constant, unceasing, devoted, steadfast, continual, night and day, always prayer. That’s what you have been called to. That’s the command here.

So how does that work? What does it mean to live a life of unceasing prayer? How would you know whether you were obeying this verse? The only other time this exact phrase “at all times” (in the Gk) is used in the NT is in Luke 21:36 in the days leading up to Jesus’ betrayal, Jesus says this to his disciples:

Lk 21:36: “But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Of course he doesn’t mean they can never get physical sleep going forward. He’s speaking of a spiritual wakefulness. In other words:

- live on alert,
- be always at the ready,
- be in a state of prayerfulness always,
- let the pattern of your life be prayer,
 - as you speak,
 - as you work,
 - as you lay your head down on the pillow, be prayerful.

Living a life of unceasing prayer isn't about whether you're praying every second of every day. It's about the thread of prayer that runs through your life. Unceasing prayer is both continuous prayer and continual prayer.

Continuous means an unbroken whole

Continual means repeated frequently.

Illustration of Bottles

It's like this. These bottles represent your prayers in a span of time. Viewed from this angle, your prayers are continual. You are frequently praying. But viewed from this angle, your prayers are continuous. It appears unbroken. So "praying at all times" or living a life of unceasing prayer means that the very character of our life is praying.

- Short prayers. Long prayers
- Morning prayers. Evening prayers.
- Scheduled prayers. Spontaneous prayers.
- Prayers alone. Prayers with people.
- Silent prayers. Out loud prayers.

All of that. You look at the world and are prayerful. Prayer is like breathing, in that sense. You reframe your life so that God is always in the picture. You eat a meal and it tastes good and you silently offer up a prayer of thanks to God. You hear a name on the radio, and you offer up a prayer of intercession. You detect sin in your life, you confess it. You feel tempted or weak, you ask for help.

But don't let all your prayers be 10 second prayers. Quick blooming, spontaneous prayers grow in the soil of longer, intentional prayer times. Last year I challenged the men's study to pray every day for 30 minutes a day in one block of time for two weeks. My first semester of seminary, we were required to pray 1 hour a day in one block of time for the whole semester. This has been one of the most helpful exercises I've done to improve my prayer life. It forced me to pray longer than I knew how. Longer, intentional prayer times tends to create deeper prayer times.

If your whole prayer life consists of spontaneous prayers, you'll have a shallow prayer life overall. You won't be able to think of anything else to pray for than the weather. Cultivate a time in your day for prayer. And then be prayerful all day long. So first, battle-ready prayer is unceasing prayer.

The second characteristic of. . .

II. BATTLE-READY PRAYER IS EXTENSIVE PRAYER

v. 18: praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication

"With all prayer and supplication" speaks to the variety of prayers we should pray. There may be some distinction between prayer and supplication.

Prayer is a fairly general word that can cover requests or intercession. Supplication could have the idea of pleading because of an urgent need. But here, the idea isn't likely that we should categorize our prayers. Placing two synonyms next to each other is a literary technique frequently found in the Bible. The point isn't so much how they are different—but combining them together emphasizes the whole of it. In other words, pray every kind of prayer. As varied as the situations of life—as varied as the subject matter of life—pray prayers of all kinds.

- Prayers of thanksgiving
- Prayers of praise
- Prayers of intercession for others
- Prayers for needs
- Prayers of confession

Learn to pray many kinds of prayer. The best way to learn is by praying through the Psalms. Just as I have modeled over this last year, take the first psalm, read it, and use it as your guide. If you do this, you'll find yourself praying all kinds of prayers and for all kinds of things you've never thought of. You'll never run out of things to pray for.

A second thing I've found helpful is to find a way to capture things to pray for. I've tried prayer journals, index cards, phone apps. . . but the thing that has worked best is a prayer file folder. So find your way of doing it. We've seen that battle-ready prayer is unceasing prayer and extensive prayer.

Finally, the third characteristic of. . .

III. BATTLE-READY PRAYER IS SPIRIT-ENABLED PRAYER

v. 18: praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication

All of our prayer should be offered up “in the Spirit.” The Spirit refers to the Holy Spirit, just as it does throughout this letter, including v. 17: “the sword of the Spirit.”

So what does it mean to pray “in the Spirit”? How would you know whether you are praying “in the Spirit.” We get help from another place in Paul's writings that he connects the Spirit and prayer and that's Romans 8.

Ro 8:26-27: Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

So a couple of things we learn is, first, that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness when we pray. When we don't know what to pray—he knows. And the second thing we learn is that the Holy Spirit intercedes/prays for us according to the will of God. That is, the Holy Spirit—who is God—always prays perfectly in line with the will of God for you. He is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17).

So praying in the Spirit means two things:

1. Trusting the Spirit to help you pray in your weakness.

It is to pray acknowledging that you need the Spirit's help to pray in line with God's will.

“Trust God for help to pray when you are too weak or too confused or too depressed or too angry or too dull to pray at the moment.” (Piper)

So praying in the Spirit simply means to pray in faith. It means to have a posture of your heart that seeks the Spirit's help.

2. Guiding your prayers with God's Word.

The Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of truth (Jn 14:17). And the Word of God is called the sword of the Spirit (6:17).

So shape your prayers by the word of God.

As you read the word, your mind is transformed to want what God wants; to hate what God hates; to feel as God would have you feel.

This is how the Spirit guides us in praying.

Informed prayers by the Word of God is a praying in the Spirit.

So linger long in the Word of God so that you can know how to pray God's will.

CONCLUSION

Every Christian here would like to improve their prayer life. And every Christian here will be tested spiritually this year. So let's encourage one another to excel still more in our prayer life by making progress in battle-ready prayer. Prayer is the Christian's battle cry. If you go into this year with the sword of the Spirit in your hand and the prayers of the Spirit in your mouth—you will be ready for whatever comes your way.