

“PRAYING WITHOUT CEASING”
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Sometimes I forget to do things. I often use sticky notes on my desk, but then I either get covered in them and forget things because the messages get lost in the crowd, or they get buried under a mound of other papers. Other times I forget because I get too busy. Most times I forget because I get distracted with something else.

That seems to be how it is in my prayer life, too. I turn off all electronic distractions, and start to talk to God. But then the phone vibrates. (Just a minute, God, I'll be right back!) And of course I answer it because it might be someone more important to talk to! Or I will start to pray for someone and it reminds me of something else and my mind goes chasing rabbits. One of my all time favorite animated characters is the dog, Dug, from the movie, “Up!” When we first meet Dug he surprises his new friends when he speaks, because of a special collar invented by his master. He starts talking, then suddenly looks away and shouts, “Squirrel,” then he goes back to the conversation as if nothing happened.

I can relate to Dug. I am telling God how much I love Him, and “Squirrel!” I get distracted. But Dug does better than I do. At least he goes right back to the conversation, right where he left off. I get up and start chasing the squirrel.

So how do we do what the Apostle Paul admonishes us to do in our text – to “pray without ceasing?” Is that just unrealistic in this day and age of distractions? In years past I have read a lot of books about prayer. They are full of suggestions about how to stay focused. If the phone rings for a call, let the answer machine pick it up and pray for the person who is calling. If you get a text, turn off the alert and answer it later. If a stray thought comes to mind – it might be the Holy Spirit leading you there – so offer that new thought up to God in prayer. The most difficult task of focused prayer is to prepare ahead for your time with God and the discipline to stay focused. Because the focus is not so much staying on task, as it is, staying in the presence of God and keeping my awareness and my activities before God constantly.

One of my favorite spiritual writers on prayer is a Quaker, Thomas Kelly. In his essay, “Deep Prayer” from his book, The Light Within: “There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we may be thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings...”

“Between the two levels is fruitful interplay, but ever the accent must be upon the deeper level, where the soul ever dwells in the presence of the Holy One. For the religious man is forever bringing all affairs of the first level down into the Light, holding them there in the Presence, re-seeing them and the whole of the world of men and things in a new and overturning way, and responding to them in spontaneous, incisive and simple ways of love and faith...” “Walk and talk and work and laugh with your friends. But behind the scenes, keep up the life of simple prayer and inward worship.”

The most well known writer on practicing the Presence of God was Brother Lawrence. He was a French Carmelite monk who lived from 1611-1686. He lived and died without any fanfare, relatively unknown. He was a simple and faithful man of God who worked in the kitchen of the monastery. His journal was discovered by friends, and they were deeply moved by his depth of ongoing prayer. His life and words are recorded in what is considered a Christian classic on prayer: The Practice of the Presence of God. Brother Lawrence learned how to be in prayer in all times and circumstances. He said, "The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clutter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament."

Harvey Seifert in Higher Praise said, "The practice of the presence which clearly affirms the importance of the ordinary or commonplace things of life...Linking daily details and eternal purposes can now decisively change our total situation. 'How may we learn to practice the presence of God? ...we practice deliberately until the experience becomes spontaneous. This means that we consciously remember God repeatedly during the day'."

I found a couple of ways that have been helpful for me to remain in prayer and practice praying without ceasing. I call one, "Flash Prayer." Flash Prayer is a quick prayer or momentary thought which connects what we are doing at that moment to God. It can be a sentence, a phrase, a fleeting thought, "Praise You, Lord," "Thank You, Jesus!" "Praise Your holy Name!" It can rise up in response to something happening. It can be a reminder, such as every time I open a door, or put my shoes on, or put a piece of jewelry on, or shake someone's hand. Author and teacher, Leonard Sweet, said that whenever he shakes hands with someone, he blesses them and lifts them up before God.

The idea is to use anything as a reminder: set your watch to beep every hour and pray when you hear it; have an alarm on your cell phone scheduler to go off; place religious stickers at significant locations around the house. As you pass people in the mall or drive past them, pray for them. When you read the newspaper or go on Facebook – any reminder – send out a flash of prayer and practice the Presence of God in that time and place

A second method of prayer I have used is called, "The Breath Prayer." The Breath Prayer is an ancient form of prayer. The oldest form is from the 6th century called, "The Jesus Prayer," which is: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner!" It is short enough to say in a single breath. The idea is to eventually pray as often as you breathe. Let it offer the innermost expression of your prayer to God. It can also help to give you focus as a springboard to further prayer. Everyone can determine their own Breath Prayer.

Here are 5 steps to discovering your own Breath Prayer:

1. Sit in a comfortable position. Recall God's loving Presence. Let a passage of Scripture calm your spirit and connect you with the Living God. "Be still and know that I am God." "The Lord is my Shepherd."

2. **With your eyes closed, imagine that God is calling you by name. Hear God asking, “(Your name), what do you want?”**
3. **Answer God with whatever comes directly from your heart. Don’t let your brain kick into overdrive. Try to turn off logic for a moment and listen to your heart. Listen for a single word – forgiveness, peace, love, joy, etc. or a short phrase or brief sentence – “I want to feel Your love.”**
4. **Choose your favorite name for God: Father, Teacher, Jesus, Holy Spirit, Lord, Creator.**
5. **Combine your name for God with your answer to God’s question, “What do you want?” So put it all together: (What I want) + (Name I call God) + (Possible prayer) = Breath Prayer. This is your own prayer for what will most make you feel whole – 6 to 8 syllables that can be said in a breath.**

Then practice it; pray it! Take a word at a time to pray it. Each word will unfold more of what you are asking of God. The practice of prayer is the beginning of praying without ceasing. And when we pray without ceasing, we will always be in the Presence of God.