

“LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY: (#4) ‘AND WHEN YOU PRAY...’”
(Matthew 6:5-6; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 3-30-25]

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1. Read CEB Text: Matthew 6:5-6; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 and Pray.
2. For the past four weeks, we've been sharing in a worship series called “*Lord, Teach Us To Pray*,” in which we’ve been looking at the meaning and practice of Christian prayer.

A--Together so far, we've explored the WHAT, WHY, WHO and HOW of prayer. And earlier this year (February 9th, to be exact, in a prior series), I shared a sermon on understanding the nature of God's ANSWERS to prayer (so I'm not going to address that again in *this* one).

B--But today, I want to conclude *this* series by looking at the WHEN of prayer -- WHEN is the “right” time and the right circumstances to pray, and *how often* should we do it?

3. Well, back when I served as Pastor of a church in Cartersville, GA, one of the ways that I was involved in our community was by volunteering to serve as “chaplain of the week” at the local community hospital (Cartersville Medical Center) for one week each quarter.

A--As I visited patients in my rounds on those weeks, one of my practices was always to offer to pray with them before leaving their room.

B--And the reaction I got from *some* of them when I offered to do this always amazed me -- as if I was giving them a death sentence, and that there was “*nothing left to do for them but pray!*”

C--Well, the sad truth I learned then is that for many people in our world (back then *and* today, too!) prayer is something that we do *only* when we're in trouble, as a last resort, or when we *really* need something from God.

4. Yet, if we study the Bible carefully, I think we’ll see -- in the words of author Croft Penz -- that “*prayer [should] not [be] a last extremity... [but] a first necessity.*” ¹

A--The great Christian missionary Corrie Ten Boom once framed the question this way: “*Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?*” ²

B--Well, for many people (perhaps even some of us, even) , we tend to see it as the latter.

C--Oh, it’s not that God doesn’t listen to or hear our prayers of distress in times of emergency or tragedy, but for anyone who has a strong relationship with God, Vern McClellan says that “*true prayer is a way of life, not just in case of emergency.*” ³

5. So with that in mind, let's come back to the original question -- WHEN should we pray?

A--Well, today's two scriptures suggest that there are at least two very different -- yet inter-related -- ways to frame the answer to this.

B--They seem to indicate that as Christians, we should pray both (#1) ALL the time, and (#2) at SPECIFIC times -- let's talk about each of these in turn.

--II--

6. First, the Bible is clear that prayer is to be a way of life that we practice **ALL THE TIME** -- this is the broad sense of the answer to the WHEN of prayer.

A--Remember in today's reading from 1 Thessalonians 5, the apostle Paul says, "*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*"

1--And in Ephesians 6:18, he says something very similar: "*Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.*"

2--Well, what does it mean to pray "*without ceasing*" and "...*at all times*"?

3--After all, I've heard it said that "*The [one] who does all [their] praying on [their] knees does not pray enough*" ⁴ (meaning that our life should include *more* than prayer at just specific times!)

4--And the 17th-century monk Lawrence of the Resurrection once wrote that "*Our biggest mistake is to think that a time of prayer is different from any other time. It is all one.*" ⁵

B--You see, perhaps Paul and these others are saying that prayer should not only be a specific *act/action* that we DO, but also an *attitude towards life* that we LIVE BY.

1--Author Victor Hugo once wrote that "*Certain thoughts are prayers,... & there are moments when, whatever the attitude of the body, the soul is on its knees.*" ⁶

2--So, to pray "*at all times*" and "*without ceasing*" means to live life constantly *aware* of God's presence with us through His Holy Spirit,...

3--...so that whether we're at church, at work, driving our car, doing house chores, helping our children with homework, or visiting someone in a nursing home, we can live life in an *attitude* of *constant* prayer.

7. Yet, as great as this is, if we're to be spiritually healthy, then we ALSO need prayer at **SPECIFIC TIMES** -- this is the more more focused answer to the WHEN of prayer.

A--In the Matthew 6 passage read earlier, remember that Jesus says, “*And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites...*” essentially by flaunting spirituality before others.

1--Instead, he says, “*whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret....*”

2--So, here and in other places in scripture, Jesus invites us both by word and example to intentionally find and make *specific times* for prayer with God (like when he withdrew from crowds and went apart to pray)

3--One way to think of this is to compare prayer with our *physical* diet: just as we can't just eat once a week and expect that to sustain us, so we can't expect only occasional prayer to sustain our spirits.

B--Of course, the typical excuse most of us (including myself) give is that we “*just don't have enough time to pray.*”

1--But as author Catherine Marshall once put it, “*The best time for prayer isn't found. It's made.*”

2--In fact, in the late 14th-century, Saint Frances of Sales said that... “*Every Christian needs [at least] a half hour of prayer each day, except when [they are] busy; then [they] need an hour*”! ⁷

(a) You know, I used to try to “find” prayer time as a pastor at my churches during the work week, and discovered that the demands were just too great... that if I wanted time, I'd have to *schedule* it into my calendar.

(b) So now, in addition to my daily times of prayer and devotional reading, I try to have a specific time of prayer each Wednesday from 3-4pm at church to pray for each of you, and for what God wants me to be and do as pastor -- sometimes I do this in my office; other times in the Sanctuary, and still other times I'll go for a prayer walk inside or out.

3--The point is, you see, is that (in the words of one author) “*If there is no appointed time for prayer, then soon there will be no time for prayer at all.*” ⁸

C--So whether it's first thing in the morning, in the car on our way to or from work/school, on our lunch break, in afternoon, or the last thing at night, we all need to try to set aside -- to “make” -- a regular, disciplined time for prayer.

1--You see, just as an intimate *human* relationship requires specific, intentional times (like a “Date” night) set apart just to grow closer to each other,...

2--...so our *spiritual* lives also need specific, intentional times set apart for us to devote to a more intimate and meaningful interaction with God.

8. So then, the practice of praying “*at all times*” and praying at *specific times* are NOT mutually exclusive.

A--These two answers to the WHEN of prayer are obviously very different, but at the same time very connected to each other -- it's not either/or, but both/and.

B--One way to think about their relationship is in terms of the “breathing” metaphor I described four weeks ago in the first sermon in this series:

1--Our physical bodies breathe all the time. Yet, there are times when we need (and our health is greatly improved by) intentionally taking long, deep breaths.

2--Any of you that have ever taken in a deep breath of cool mountain air on a mountain top, or breathed deeply the warm ocean breeze at the beach know that these can be very refreshing!

3--Just as intentional deep breaths invigorate our *physical* bodies, so intentional, specific time of prayer invigorate our *spirits*. But we need *regular* breathing and *regular* prayer "at all times", as well.

C--According to scripture, you see, as we balance both "*praying at all times*" AND praying at *specific* times, we'll find both *continuous strength* AND *daily invigoration* in our walk with God.

9. [PRAYER]

10. One of the most powerful ways that we can have a specific experience of God's presence and grace through prayer is through the experience of Holy Communion...

11. [HOLY COMMUNION]

12. [HYMN: #496, Sweet Hour of Prayer]

ENDNOTES:

¹ Cited from Croft M. Pentz, The Complete Book of Zingers (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1990).

² Corrie ten Boom, cited in Christian Reader, Vol. 33, no. 2.

³ Vern McLellan, The Complete Book of Practical Proverbs and Wacky Wit (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996).

⁴ Croft M. Pentz, The Complete Book of Zingers (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1990).

⁵ Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (1605/1691), cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). Entry #8881.

⁶ Victor Hugo, cited in Robert C. Shannon, 1000 Windows, (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing Company, 1997). Author Henri Nouwen once said that “*As we are involved in unceasing thinking, so we are called to unceasing prayer*” (Henri Nouwen, Leadership, Vol. 8, no. 3).

⁷ Saint Francis of Sales (1567-1622), cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). Entry 8790.

⁸ Croft M. Pentz, The Complete Book of Zingers (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1990).

As an example of this fact, the story is told that some years ago a young man approached the foreman of a logging crew and asked for a job. "That depends," replied the foreman. "Let's see you fell this tree." The young man stepped forward and skillfully felled a great tree. Impressed, the foreman exclaimed, "Start Monday!" Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday rolled by, and Thursday afternoon the foreman approached the young man and said, "You can pick up your paycheck on the way out today." Startled, he replied, "I thought you paid on Friday." "Normally we do," answered the foreman, "but we're letting you go today because you've fallen behind. Our daily felling charts show that you've dropped from first place on Monday to last on Wednesday." "But I'm a hard worker," the young man objected. "I arrive first, leave last, and even have worked through my coffee breaks!" The foreman, sensing the boy's integrity thought for a minute and then asked, "Have you been sharpening your ax?" The young man replied, "I've been working too hard to take the time" (Story from William D. Boyd, Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome).

Too often today we are so busy “working for God” that we forget to take time to “sharpen our ax.” Prayer is the hone that gives us that sharp edge. Without it, the more work we do, the duller we'll get.

The famous evangelist R.A. Torrey once lamented our typical indifference to prayer when he wrote: “*How little time the average Christian spends in prayer! We are too busy to pray, and so we are too busy to have power. We have a great deal of activity, but we accomplish little... the power of God is lacking in our lives and in our work. We have not because we ask not*” (Torrey, cited from <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/the-best-time-for-prayer/>).