

# CEASELESS PRAYER

“1 THESSALONIANS 5:17”

Recently, I browsed the internet to decipher the most popular New Year’s Resolutions. I reviewed lists from 2007 to the present. For four of the last five years the number one resolution has been to “[Lose weight.](#)” The one exception was in 2009. The top resolution that year was to “[Save money.](#)” Here are some other popular resolutions... (*top to bottom*)

Fall in love.  
Read more.  
Stop biting my nails.  
Get a tattoo.  
Get organized.  
Dress Better.  
Learn Spanish.  
Read the Bible.  
Travel.  
Get a better job.

Bungee jump.  
Exercise more.  
Get enough sleep.  
Quit smoking.  
Get married.  
Drink more water.  
Learn guitar.  
Try something new.

*And this morning I’d like to add one more resolution to the list...*

Perhaps you don’t like New Year’s Resolutions. I’ve known lots of folks who shy away from them. They refuse to make promises they’re not likely to keep. *But I have a suggestion this morning you should really consider...* It’s not as difficult as “[Learn Spanish,](#)” or “[Get a better job.](#)” It’s not as painful as “[Quit smoking,](#)” or “[Exercise more.](#)” Or something you might regret like “[Get a tattoo.](#)” It’s not as expensive as “[Travel,](#)” or “[Get married,](#)” or “[Dress better.](#)” And it’s not as risky as “[Fall in love,](#)” or “[Bungee jump.](#)” In fact, if you embrace my New Year’s Resolution it’ll help you find a *better job*, and *quit smoking*. It’ll definitely help you stay *married*. It’ll take some of the risk out of *falling in love*. It’s applicable wherever you *travel*, and whether or not you *learn Spanish*. It can be done in every language. In fact, it’s certainly something you’ll want to do while *bungee jumping*...

Here’s my suggestion for 2012’s number one New Year’s Resolution... 1 Thessalonians 5:17, “**Pray without ceasing.**”

So much in your life will change if you practice [the art of ceaseless prayer](#). Paul knew his friends in Thessalonica had become targets for persecution. They were new Christians fighting the good fight of faith. The one tool they needed to cultivate quickly was *ceaseless prayer*. Though our text this morning is short – just three words – nevertheless it’s strategic. Verse 17 is foundational to everything else that might be on your radar in this coming new year. Whatever your dreams and ambitions these three words will play a deciding factor, “**Pray without ceasing.**”

Paul's instructions in verse 17 helps us in three ways... First, it teaches us how to **define prayer**. Second, it assists us in **developing priorities**. And third, it enables us to **detour pitfalls**. Paul's simple, three word command, helps us *define prayer – develop priorities – detour pitfalls*. This new year will bring new blessing, and new strength, and new wisdom, and new opportunities, and new victories if you learn to **“pray without ceasing.”** *Let's take a closer look at Paul's resolution.*

First, this short exhortation helps us **define prayer**. Obviously, God wouldn't command us to do something that's impossible for us to do. Thus, prayer has to be something I can do ceaselessly. *If prayer is simply coming to church* - I can't spend 24/7 at church, I've got a job... *If prayer is bowing my head, and closing my eyes* - what if I'm in the car, that would be dangerous... *If prayer is only about verbalizing to God* - then what about the other communications I'm suppose to have with the people around me... *If prayer is just about a conscious connection* - what happens when I'm asleep or forced to concentrate on another task.

If position, and posture, and articulation, and concentration is the essence of prayer, there's no way any of us can **“pray without ceasing.”** Obviously, prayer must be more... Bible teacher, Alexander Maclaren, writes, **“For if we are told to do a thing uninterruptedly, it must be something that can run unbroken through all the varieties of our legitimate duties and necessary occupations...”**

This was the mistake made by the monastics of church history. Sincere Christians would read this verse, and take it literally, and think the only way to fulfill it would be to retreat to the desert, or the wilderness. The monks forfeited marriage, and children, and normal social interactions. They retreated to the monastery to cut themselves off from everyday life, to devote all their time and effort to the activity of prayer. Understand, **the monks turned prayer into a life**, but the intention behind this verse is just the opposite... **God wants us to turn life into a prayer.**

When Paul says **“pray without ceasing”** he's not suggesting we quit our jobs, and ignore our families, and leave the world behind - and move to the cloister so we can spend every waking second on our knees. *No way!* God wants us to fulfill our responsibilities and enjoy our lives. Verse 17 teaches the Thessalonians and us *to create an attitude of prayer*. God wants us to live in the restful awareness of His presence. While driving a car, or mowing grass, or conducting business, or joking with friends - we can pray to God! We can even pray in the shower (don't worry, God has seen you in the buff before)! *Wherever, whenever, doing whatever* – by faith we can maintain a continual communion with God.

Years ago, we were on our way home one night, cruising down the interstate, when I asked my family to join me as I prayed for the church. At that moment we were kicking off a new ministry at Calvary Chapel, and I was thinking about the people who were attending the first meeting. As I drove down the freeway, I led the family in prayer. When I said, **“Amen,”** Zach, who had just turned six, leaned his head over the front seat, and asked, **“Dad, did you have your eyes closed?”** I assured him my eyes had been wide-open. Zach was learning - what some adults have yet to learn - you don't have to have your eyes closed to pray.

It reminds me of the three theologians discussing the proper posture for prayer... One of the scholars said the key was with **the hands**. He held them together and pointed them upward as a symbol of unity and devotion. The second man said **the knees** were key. Bowing expresses humility. The third theologian insisted that neither folding the hands or bowing to your knees was enough - real prayer occurs when you're **flat on your face**.

Well, there was a fourth man in the room. A telephone repairman had been listening to the conversation. Finally, he couldn't resist. He had an opinion. He told the three distinguished theologians they were all wrong... He explained, "The most powerful prayer I ever prayed was dangling upside down by my heels from a power pole, suspended 40 feet above the ground." I'm sure that's a posture that would provoke a passionate prayer!

Hey, no matter what posture you assume - or position you find yourself in - or the activity you're involved with... even in the midst of whatever you're in the middle of, you can still carry on a quiet conversation with God. Thomas Kelly writes, "On one level we can 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." I love that idea, "a gentle receptiveness to God's breathings."

Bible commentator, Matthew Henry, once wrote, "Prayer is the key of the morning and the bolt of the evening." In other words, we should both open and close our day in prayer – *but Paul takes it even further!* Don't just make prayer the bookends of your day, learn to spend the whole day in communion with God. Spend all day on the edge of prayer. In Psalm 119:164 the psalmist cries out to God, "Seven times a day I praise You..." We're told in Daniel 6:10 that the prophet prayed three times a day – morning, noon, and night. Kind of like Dr. Pepper – at 10, 2, and 4.

Paul's words, "pray without ceasing" is an encouragement to never drift far from God. Never go off-line. Log on and keep a constant connection. Even when you're doing other stuff maintain a God-word attitude. I've heard it said, "The heart may rise to the throne of grace in inward prayer when the hands are busy with the duties of life."

*Our lives are like a river...* There're places on the river that contain rocks and rapids. Other spots have quiet pools and eddies. But throughout the river there's a current flowing downstream. In some places the current is strong and sweeps you off your feet. At other places it's barely felt. But go anywhere on the river and you'll find the constant current. *And prayer is the current – the river - of our lives.* There are moments when you find yourself on your knees in strong, concentrated prayer. At other times you're busy at work, and people around you wouldn't know you were praying. Yet underneath the activity there's an attitude, a heart-posture of praise, and thanksgiving, and communication with God.

These three words in verse 17 teach us that the essence of prayer isn't a place, or a posture, or words – real prayer is an unbroken, spiritual stream of feeling and thought, and attitude, and faith toward with God. It's like taking a walk with your wife. The two of you are discussing your day, you're even speaking to people you pass, you're engaged in sight-seeing – but all the while the two of you are holding each other's hand. Well, ceaseless prayer is holding hands with God.

Albert Day once wrote, "The function of prayer is to set God at the center of attention." A person who really prays is a God-centered person. One of my commentaries translated this phrase "pray without ceasing" as "pray without intermission." *I like that interpretation.* An intermission is a break in the action – an interruption - a diversion from the main attraction. At the intermission people wander from their seats – they go out into the corridors for refreshments. They're being distracted from the big show.

A prayerful heart never takes an intermission from God. There's never a break or disconnect in the communication. *Ceaseless prayer is seamless prayer.* It's realizing you can pray to God and never have to say "Amen."

Paul's words "*pray without ceasing*" teach me how to *define prayer*, but they also assist me in *developing priorities*. You don't maintain this kind of communion with God without making Him your top priority. And *reworking* or *rearranging* your priorities can be a difficult chore.

This was why marriage was such a tough adjustment for me. Not that I didn't love my wife... I was just an independent, single man... *I struggled*. After we married, Kathy wanted to know *where I was going* and *when I planned to be home*. It wasn't that I minded telling her or didn't understand the need for accountability... I just wasn't use to reporting my whereabouts. I was use to doing whatever and whenever I pleased. The idea of considering someone else in my comings and goings didn't come naturally.

But after 31 years I've been domesticated. I've been house trained. Today, I seldom make plans without consulting or informing my wife. She knows where I am and what I'm doing 99% of the time. I've learned to see myself as one-half of a couple rather than as an solitary individual. And in a sense, this is the same attitude behind ceaseless prayer.

Prayer is my willingness to be constantly accountability to God. An attitude of prayer doesn't resent that accountability. It relishes the intimacy. A prayerful person wants God to know everything that's going on. I want God to know where I'm at, and when I'll be home. I desire for Him to be a part of what I'm doing and thinking at all times. It's full disclosure!

Nolan Ryan pitched for 27 seasons in the big leagues. He recorded 324 victories and 5,714 career strike outs – more than anyone else in history. Nolan also pitched a record 7 no-hitters, and was elected to Baseball's Hall of Fame the first year he was eligible – by an almost unanimous vote. But his wife, Ruth, has a different perspective on her husband's career.

In her book, "*Covering Home*," Ruth Ryan writes: "It probably happened the first time on the High School baseball diamond in Alvin, Texas, in the mid-1960s. Then it happened repeatedly for three decades after that. Inevitably, sometime during the game, Nolan would pop up out of the dugout and scan the stands behind home plate, looking for me. He would find my face and grin at me, maybe snapping his head up in a quick nod as if to say, '*There you are; I'm glad.*' I'd wave and flash him a smile. Then he'd duck under the roof and turn back to the game." I love how Ruth Ryan concludes her thoughts... "It was a simple moment, never noted in the record books or career summaries. But of all the moments in all the games, it was the one most important to me."

When two people love each other they're conscious of each other's presence – they're thinking about each other - they even send little flashes of communication to each other while they're involved in unrelated tasks. In short, they're relationship transcends other priorities. This is why if you love God... even during the game of life, you'll pop your head out of the dugout from time to time... *to seek His face - to let Him know you're thinking about Him – to catch even a fleeting glance*. Ceaseless prayer lets God know how important He is to me!

There may've been a time when constant availability was viewed as an invasion of privacy, but no longer. I've seen you all – you stay connected. Even in church you're checking your messages and texting someone.

The other night my wife was on her I-phone playing “[words with friends.](#)” And get this... she was playing ten different games - with ten different people – carrying on ten different chats – all at the same time. How’s that for being connected! Today, people live their lives tethered to technology.

That’s why the concept of ceaseless prayer should be appealing to us. We’re so use to multi-tasking online. We’ve got forty programs open on the same screen – *why not keep a window open toward God at all times!* As we do business, or conduct family, or enjoy our leisure, or handle our chores - let’s never forget that we’re also online with God. Once, a little girl, familiar with long-distance cellular communication, was asked to define prayer. She said, “[Prayer is calls made at night and on Sundays when the rates are lowest.](#)” What a shame to think that way. Real prayer isn’t just offered at bedtime and on Sundays – when the rates are less - it’s offered everyday, throughout the day – even at peak hours.

When an airplane crashes the investigators immediately look for the black box. The cockpit voice recorder reveals the reasons for the crash. Well, let me ask you a question. “[If you died today, and your black box was recovered and examined, what would the cockpit thought recorder reveal?](#)” Did you worship God on Sundays, and then not give Him a second thought the rest of the week? Or did you “[pray without ceasing?](#)” In essence, was God a top priority in your life? Again, Maclaren writes, “[Into all our daily duties... however absorbing, however secular, however small, however irritating they may be, however monotonous... into all our daily duties it is possible to bring Christ.](#)”

When Jacob saw the ladder extending from heaven to earth there were angels ascending and descending the ladder. In John 1 we learn Jacob’s ladder was a type of Christ. Jesus is the ladder between God and man. But the point of the vision is not that the ladder was lowered for a single climb, it remained extended from heaven and earth so God’s messengers could go up and down. And likewise, Jesus’ mission doesn’t just establish a one time transport to God. He opens up *continual communication* for us. Through Jesus we can ascend and descend constantly – we go back and forth to heaven in communication with the Father. *Prayer gives us wings.* It enables us to rise to the throne of grace to find help in time of need. Then dive back into the muck of this Earth and do the work of God.

Three words, “[pray without ceasing,](#)” not only teach us to [define prayer,](#) and assist in [developing priorities](#) – they also enable us to **detour pitfalls.** The Greek word that’s translated “[without ceasing](#)” is a word that’s rendered elsewhere “[a hacking cough.](#)” When your body detects a foreign object clogging its airway it gags it loose. Coughs clean out the ductwork. *Though they’re loud,* coughs are healthy, and needed, and good.

The ceaseless prayer Paul is discussing is a lot like a recurring cough! All throughout the day you should be praying and coughing up obstacles. *Feel a little fear coming on, and cough,* “[Lord, give me strength!](#)” *Hit a snag in the road, and cough,* “[Lord, help me overcome!](#)” *Run across a perplexing problem, and cough,* “[Lord, give me wisdom!](#)” *Hear about a sick friend, and cough,* “[Lord, please heal Bill.](#)” Sometimes prayer is nothing but a short, spontaneous soul-cough. Call them eruptions of the heart. Your spirit coughs up doubt, and fear, and discouragement, and pride, and anger. It clears out the spiritual irritations.

If you get into the habit of constantly coughing up prayers to God it will detour you around a lot of potential pitfalls. *Constant references* to God, and *ceaseless contact,* and *continual access* – only serves to remind you of God’s presence, and His greatness, and His wisdom, and

His purposes. A commitment to ceaseless prayer keeps drawing us back to God. It keeps pointing me heavenward, and away from the dangers around me.

I'll never forget the night my son Nick taught me a lesson in prayer. We were at Little League football practice, and as one of the coaches my job was to make sure the team ran wind sprints. Nobody in their right mind likes to run wind sprints so I decided to spice up the hated chore. I had each kid sprint 30 yards, as if they were streaking into the end zone for a touchdown. Then once they crossed the goal line they could do their favorite touchdown dance. It was funny. We saw the *dirty bird*, and the *crazy chicken*, and who knows what else! *Then it came Nick's turn...*

Nick sprinted the 30 yards, crossed the goal line, and dropped to one knee in prayer. That was his TD celebration – thanking the Lord in prayer. My son was “*Tebow-ing*” before anyone knew about Tim Tebow! I thought, “*Wow, he's taking after his mamma again!*” Here Nick was in the middle of football practice. We're having a crazy time, and he's got the Lord on his mind. I think that's what Paul meant when he wrote, “*pray without ceasing.*” Live in an awareness of God. Never drift too far away.

The person who maintains this attitude will avoid a lot of pitfalls. They'll avoid distraction, and resist temptation when God is *ever-on-their-mind*. Ceaseless prayer is the best deterrent I know to making bad choices. *If you've got a grip on God, how can the same hand clutch onto sin?*

Think of it this way, if you're in the middle of an serious conversation with God you won't be inclined to pick up a Playboy magazine. “*Excuse me God, let me put you on hold while I lust after a few naked ladies.*” No way! If you're constantly talking to God – and He's got your attention – then the opportunities for you to sin will be less apparent and pressing. If I'm in the middle of a continual conversation with God there're places I won't go – and things I won't look at – and activities I won't get involved in. Ceaseless prayer is a tremendous protection against temptation.

Listen carefully to the words of CS Lewis. He writes, “*The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And your first job each morning consists in shoving it all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.*” Lewis was talking about morning prayer, but let me suggest those same wild animals don't just show up in the morning they prowl all day long. Selfish thoughts, and self-centered desires can rush us at any moment. This is why we need to “*pray without ceasing*”. Don't just listen to the other voice in the morning, stay tuned in all day long. Never relinquish the other point-of-view. Let the other, larger, stronger, quieter life flow continually.

Verse 17 is just three words, but it's part of a continual train of thought. Paul adds in verse 18, “*In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*” *Comprehensive thanks* and *ceaseless prayer* are God's will. He understands their importance in the life of every believer. Anyone who's had experience on the battlefield will agree that victory is often determined by the effectiveness of your communications. The key to success in the trenches is the ability to stay in contact with headquarters. This is why Paul encourages us to “*pray without ceasing.*”



Many years ago Microsoft Magnate, Bill Gates, had an email address just like any other person. That is until, the New Yorker magazine mischievously published his address. Instantly, Bill's in-box was swamped. As a result, Bill Gates started limiting his email access.

Even with today's technology, humans are still limited to the number of communiqués they can process at any one time. I'm sure there's even a limit to the number of games my wife can play at once on her I-phone. There are restraints to human capacity. But here's the good news – **God has no such limitations!** He can process billions and billions of *prayer-mails* simultaneously from hearts all around the globe. *It's a challenge for us to pray to God without ceasing, but it's never a stretch for God to abide with us without ceasing.*

A 17<sup>th</sup> century monk named *Brother Lawrence* was a mere cook in the monastery, but he cultivated an extraordinary sense of God's presence. In his book "*The Practice of the Presence of God*" he writes... "*It isn't necessary that we stay in church in order to remain in God's presence. We can make our heart a chapel where we can go anytime to talk to God privately. These conversations can be so loving and gentle, and anyone can have them...*" Brother Lawrence concludes, "*So why not begin? God may be waiting for us to take the first step...*" *Why not begin?*

*Anytime, anywhere*, in the midst of *any activity* you can lift up your heart to God, and commune with Him. Make it your goal not only to climb Jacob's ladder, but to spend all day, every day ascending and descending. I hope you'll adopt at least one New Year's Resolution for 2012 - "*pray without ceasing.*" Let's all cultivate a prayer life that never says "*Amen!*"