

Matthew 6:5-8
When Prayers Cease

I want to tell you the most amazing story that I have ever heard. I was walking the other day when I suddenly remembered that I left home without turning the coffee pot off. Rain comes often this time of year, but not as much as the circus and the elephants. Oh, and have you heard the latest headline about North Korea? Adalee and Titus started school this past week. Ice cream I believe is my favorite dessert. Do you know what I am trying to say?

I am afraid that what we have just experienced as you were trying to make sense of my senseless story is what most of our prayer lives look like. If we are all honest, our prayer lives are dominated by distraction. I believe this is mainly because our lives themselves are dominated by distraction. We need something to center us. We need someone who is so majestic, so awesome, so captivating, to come and be the subject of our attention. Friends, Jesus has come to captivate our attention, to center us, to quiet our souls so that no matter what is going on around us, the threat of warfare, financial struggle, death, disease, whatever hardship or good thing, we can cease striving, be still and know that he is God. As the Psalmist says again, *I am at rest in God alone; my salvation comes from Him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I will never be shaken...Rest in God alone, my soul, for my hope comes from Him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I will not be shaken.* (Psalm 62:1-2, 5-6, CSB).

Ask yourself a question, is your soul at rest, or, are you running around in circles fretting over so many things? Jesus has come so that our souls can find rest. As the hymn writer from yesteryear put it:

My faith has found a resting place,
Not in device nor creed;
I trust the Ever-living One,
His would for me shall plead.

I need no other argument,
I need no other plea;
It is enough that Jesus died,
And that He died for me.

Jesus has come so that our souls could find their rest, and one of the ways that we express that rest is through a ministry that he has opened for us, a ministry of prayer. Prayer is so gloriously mysterious. If you were to ask me, "What is prayer?" I would define it the way that it has been defined for generation. Prayer is conversation with God. Prayer is that God given privilege where we, the children of God, get to approach his indescribable light and commune with he who is holy and infinite. I cannot think of anything better than prayer, and I can think of nothing that requires more discipline than prayer.

Why is prayer so hard? If prayer is our opportunity to come away and be with the Lord, why do we have to fight to do it? The more I live, the longer I pastor, the more I am convinced that more

people would like to read a book on prayer than actually pray. And, honestly, since beginning this study on the Sermon on the Mount, I am even more convinced that if this is the way that Jesus taught us to pray, then there is not much prayer going on in the world. This is tragic and may explain a great deal.

Prayer is our confession of our longing to be with the Lord and have his way fill our lives. The act of praying, coming away as Jesus tells us, is a visible expression of our communion with him. No wonder it is subject to distraction. No wonder it must be guarded and we must grow into a life of prayer. This is not natural for us. Praying the way that Jesus commands takes the supernatural work of God on our lives to give us a new heart that beats in the rhythm of the praise of God.

Have you ever considered prayer as a conversation with God? I don't mean the flippant way that we mean it. I know in this anti-authoritative world that we live in we have to define our terms. There is one way that I talk to you and another way that I will talk to my Daddy. How much more should we talk with God the right way. *Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore, let your words be few.* (Ecclesiastes 5:2) This is why we need to be taught to pray. Jesus has come to prepare us for an eternity where we will be at the King's table as his sons and daughters. We have to learn how to speak, have to learn how to listen. Though we are family, we were not always family, we were outsiders, strangers and aliens who have been brought into the family through the blood of Jesus. We have to learn the ways of the family that we have been brought into through second birth.

Katie and I have friends who have recently adopted a son from China. This young three-year-old has just recently started school. He has to learn everything, even English! He went from being an orphan to an heir and now he has to learn new ways that are fitting for his new family and his new environment. In the same way, we have to learn to pray.

Learning to pray takes discipline. In the fourth century, an Egyptian Monk was asked, "Among all good works, which is the virtue which requires the greatest effort?" He answered, "Forgive me, but I think there is no labor greater than that of prayer to God. For every time a man wants to pray his enemies, the demons, want to prevent him, for they know that it is only by turning him from prayer that they can hinder his journey. Whatever good work a man undertakes, if he preserves in it, he will attain rest. **But prayer is warfare to the last breath.**" (Apophthegmata Patrum in *Worshipping with the Fathers*, 82)

What is it that makes prayer so difficult? There are two elements that make prayer so difficult:

- God
- Us

Why does God make praying so difficult? Because he is God and being God, he is holy. There still should be an awe inspired reverence for him in us when we approach him. As I look out

today on your faces I can try to discern what you are thinking, but in reality, I won't know unless you tell me. There are only a few people who may know what you are thinking. (My wife usually knows what I am thinking, so I just try not to think anything sometimes – what are you thinking she asks. By that point she has sprung the trap. Nothing I say. And you can guess how far that gets me. Even with my wife, I can try and fool her but not so with God. I can't come before God asking him to bless my enemies when I really intend him to go all Sons of Zebedee on them (call fire down from heaven). God sees what no one else sees. Do you see where this can be a problem (it isn't really a problem but can be if our hearts are not right)?

Maybe a verse in James can help us think through this. James 4:1-3:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. (ESV)

Now, just like in Matthew, James takes for granted our praying. He also takes for granted that there is a God in heaven who listens to our praying. And more than listens, he knows what we need before we ask. Even if we don't know what we need, God knows. So why even ask? Some might say. Do you tell your wife you love her? Do you like it when she tells you she loves you? God loves us and love loves to be told what it already knows.

But there is something else that Matthew and James are telling us about praying. Remember the way that Matthew 6 starts with *Beware*, and then Jesus has to teach us how to pray. Here James says the same thing, there is a right and wrong way to pray. I want us to put these two together – praying first and then praying the right way. Both are important. Many are dedicated to one and not the other and therefore are not dedicated to any. We can't just make up our mind to pray, we have to pray the right way.

Look back at Matthew 6. Notice this phrase that keeps repeating itself – *When you pray*. This verb is in the subjunctive mood meaning that Jesus' desire is for us to pray. Jesus doesn't say, if you pray, but when you pray. If he wanted to say if he could have easily said it. Prayer is normal for a follower of Jesus. We don't go up to each other and say, "Hey, are you planning on praying this week?" Christians pray, and we pray in a certain way, a Christian way given to us from Christ.

How much does Jesus want us to pray? Incessantly, without ceasing. Isn't that what Scripture says? 1 Thessalonians 5:17, you can get much plainer than this, *Pray without ceasing*. If that verse is true, and Jesus is calling us to never cease from praying we better make sure we understand what prayer is all about. Billy Graham was preaching to a group of ministers and after his sermon he took questions. One asked him, "Dr. Graham what does it mean to pray without ceasing?" Dr. Graham thought for a moment and answered, "The whole time I have been preaching, I've been praying." What did he mean, and was he right to answer that way? Praying the way that Jesus calls us to is not to be separated from our life in Christ, having an attitude of

prayer, never ceasing to pray, is this life that Christ is calling his followers to. That doesn't mean that we don't ever have to go into our closets, come back next week for that, but what it does mean is that prayer is not mechanical or dutiful, prayer is organic and delightful. Prayer is the expression of our life with God.

Let me be plain. The reason that we don't pray is that we don't desire God like we should. This is why James is so important for us to make clear. There is a connection between us not praying and our desiring the wrong things. If God is who he is, an awe inspiring, all consuming God, then how could our every thought be captive by him?

In the moments that we have left, I want to give you two ways to cultivate a life that prays without ceasing.

1. Set Your Heart to Desire Christ

To stay in prayer, don't be carried away by desires that are not Christ. Think Hebrews 12:1, *lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us*, (ESV) Or, Romans 12:2, *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect*. (ESV). God, by calling us to pray this way is calling us to order our minds around his ways. The Bible has a word to describe a person who orders their lives around God's ways – wise.

Examine your desires. Do you have any desires that are attempting to compete with a desire for God? This is an important question. God doesn't want what's good for you, he wants what is best. Even if you are pursuing a good thing, God is calling you to pursue best. The greatest enemy to great is good.

The enemy wants to keep us distracted by so many things. He is fine with our pursuit but wants to keep us going in the wrong direction. Does this describe your prayer life? Busy but headed in the wrong direction? Satan is satisfied with our pursuit of lesser things because if we can spend all our time pursuing the lesser we will never even think about the greater. By keeping us distracted he keeps us under devoted. (See *Screwtape Letters*).

God wants to get us to the place of total devotedness to him so that our hearts will beat to the rhythm of his praise. Anything else that is not in keeping with his praise will be out of rhythm for us. This takes absolute surrender. This takes a disposition this is ready to give your all to Jesus and be satisfied with nothing less than all of him. This isn't an easy life, but this is life at its best.

2. Constantly Call Your Heart Back to Devotion

Have you seen the commercial where the guy does one pushup, or the gal eats one Brussel sprout for a healthy heart? If only things were that simple. Even the thought is nothing but absurdity! There are adverse passions in your life that will keep creeping back up. Just remember when they

do, they will keep you ineffective for Christ. Remember, those adverse passions are not what it means to have life.

When we pray is not a call for a one and done. Jesus is calling us to pray without ceasing.

How many of you are satisfied with your prayer life? Earlier in the service we read Matthew 26 where the disciples failed to pray with Jesus. Does that scene characterize your prayer life? Are you distracted? Are you desiring God like he is calling you to? If we are honest, we all have more times like the disciples falling asleep than we want. Thankfully, listen, salvation didn't depend on the disciples praying. Jesus prayed and then went to the Cross to open up a way of praying like the world had never seen – Spirit empowered praying. And today when you and I cease to pray, this Jesus ever lives to plead for us.

This same Jesus is praying for you today too. He may be praying for you to come to him for the first time. He may be praying for you to keep coming to him. Jesus is praying for you so that you can pray.

When you pray, pray this way.