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PAUL'S PRINCIPLES OF PRAYER

EPHESIANS 6:18

BIBLE TEACHER THEODORE EPP WROTE, "IN THE book of Ephesians prayer reaches the highest pinnacle of any place in the Bible."¹ Indeed it does. In fact, two of Paul's prayers are recorded there: in 1:15–21, he prays for believers to have the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Christ, and in 3:14–21, he prays for believers to have an experiential knowledge of Christ's indwelling work within them. Here in chapter 6, we then see a third challenge to prayer, which Paul, to underscore its importance, ends his letter with, for it is the very life blood of the Christian life.

As the context is always critical, it is here, for it concerns God's spiritual armor that the Christian is commanded to put on and never take off. After detailing six pieces of this armor, Paul gives us the seventh, which is actually an attitude that provides the energy the Christian soldier must possess if he is going to fight effectively. What is that attitude? It is prayer. I would like to share with you a tiny portion of the material contained in the soon to be published two-volume work, *The Christian's Wealth and Walk: An Expository Commentary on Ephesians*. Here in verse 18, Paul gives us no less than six principles concerning prayer.

We Are to Pray Constantly

With the words **praying always**, Paul alludes to the true definition of prayer: "constant communion with God." Prayer is not just asking and getting things from God, which is the most prevalent view of prayer. To many of us, prayer is what we use only when we are in need or when trouble arises. Biblically, however, prayer is moment-by-moment communion. As Jesus' Model Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13) outlines, prayer involves praise, thanksgiving, self-examination, and finally petition. God does not just want us to say "prayers" but to *pray*. Yes, we most certainly should set aside times when we pray specifically, but at the foundation of that is that we should be throughout the day talking to the Lord as we go about our daily tasks. Another definition that sums this up is: "Living our life in God-consciousness." Day-by-day, moment-by-moment we are aware not only of God's *existence*, but also of His very *presence* in us.

First Thessalonians 5:17 states this principle with full force: "Pray without ceasing." While *proseuchomai* ("pray") speaks of prayer in general to God, the adverb *adialeiptōs*

("without ceasing") adds a startling truth. It is comprised of the prefix *a*, "without," and *dialeipō*, "to intermit, leave an interval or gap." This word (as well as the adjective *adialeiptos*) appears several times in the NT. In Romans 9:2, for example, Paul writes of the "continual sorrow" he had for his fellow Jews who reject Christ. This word was used in Roman times for a nagging cough; while the person did not cough every moment, he would still cough often, so it could be said of him, "He's still coughing."²

Here, then, the meaning is clear—prayer is to be offered "continually, without intermission." In other words, prayer is not just those specific times when we pray, but also a *constant communion with God, a continuous consciousness of God's presence in which we view everything in life in relation to Him*. Another writer offers, "Paul's injunction means that one should be constantly conscious of his full dependence upon God."³ This doesn't mean we lock ourselves in a monastery where we do nothing but "pray." Rather every moment is a moment for prayer; like the cough, we're still praying.

If we meet someone, for example, we immediately consider where they stand with the Lord. If we hear of something bad happening, we pray for God to act in the situation for His glory and people's good. If we hear of something good, we respond with immediate praise to God, for He is glorified. *In short, we view everything that comes from a spiritual perspective*. When Paul looked around his world, everything he saw prompted him to prayer in some way. When he thought of or heard about one of his beloved churches, it moved him to prayer. That is exactly the thought of Romans 1:9, where Paul declares, "Without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers), and again in 2 Timothy 1:3, "Without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day." As Colossians 3:2 likewise encourages, we are to set our minds constantly on the things of heaven, not on the things of the earth. That is, *our life becomes a continual ascending prayer, a perpetual communion with the Lord*.

If we do not view prayer in this way, we will soon view God only as One we call on in time of need; we will, indeed, lose touch with Him. As someone has pointed out:

Some Christians seem to look upon God as a kind of spare tire. A spare tire is forgotten for months at a time

until suddenly we have a flat on the road. Then we want the spare tire to be in good condition, ready for use. Just so, many forget God during all the times when things go well, then in an emergency they want God to be on hand, immediately ready to hear and answer their cry of distress.⁴

Our “specific times” of prayer, then, are actually an outworking of our “constant communion.” As we are continuously conscious of *God’s presence* and *our dependence*, He will bring people and needs to our *minds* so we may bring them before His *throne*. Thomas Kelley well sums up this principle in His book *Testament of Devotion*: “There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. 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.”⁵ Indeed, all the “stuff” of life is just that, stuff. The real motive, the true depth of our life is a deep consciousness of God, the very breathings of God concerning His nature and workings.

We Are to Pray with All Prayer

I still recall a book on prayer I was required to read in Bible college in which the author dogmatically insists that prayer is only about asking—it is not about praise, adoration, meditation, humiliation, or confession—just asking and nothing else.⁶ Respectively, however, that is patently (and shockingly) false. Even the most cursory look at the seven Greek words used for prayer in the NT reveals several of its aspects, including: intercession, supplication, requests, and giving of thanks. Why so many words? The best explanation is probably that of Greek authority Richard Trench, who writes, “These words do not refer to different *kinds* of prayer but to different *aspects* of prayer.”⁷ The words **all prayer**, in fact, can also be translated “all kinds of prayer,” underscoring these various aspects. While there is a little difficulty in distinguishing these words from each other, we do see some subtle differences.⁸

First, *proseuchē* (the word behind **prayer** in our text), along with *proseuchomai* (**praying**) is the most common word for prayer, appearing some 85 times. It is a general word that speaks of prayer to God, which underscores the obvious principle that only the true God should receive prayer. Prayer to other gods or saints is less than worthless; it is utter blasphemy against the One True God. Both of those concepts, in fact, are pagan in origin.

Second, a vital aspect of prayer is described by *eucharistia*. With the root *charis* (“grace”) and the prefix *eu* (“good or well”), the idea is to “give good grace,” that is, “be thankful, give thanks.” Prayer, then, is thanksgiving, thanking and praising God for all He does (Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2; 1 Tim. 2:1; Rev. 7:12).

Third, another aspect of prayer is *aitēma*, “a petition, a request,” as in 1 John 5:15: “And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.”

Fourth, a synonym of *aitēma* is the common *deēsis*, which is translated **supplication** in our text. It means “to make

known one’s particular need.” While *aitēma* seems to be any request in general, *deēsis* appears to picture a more personal need of one’s own. So, while prayer is *much more* than “asking and receiving,” we certainly can “let [our] requests be made known unto God” (Phil. 4:6).

Fifth, we encounter *enteuxis* (1 Tim. 2:1; 4:5), which speaks of having access to someone, and even a certain amount of boldness in coming to them. What a humbling privilege! Who are we to come before God? We have that privilege only because of our Savior.

Sixth, another aspect of prayer is *hiketēria*, which appears only in Hebrews 5:7, where the Lord Jesus in His humanity “offered up prayers [*deēsis*] and supplications [*hiketēria*] with strong crying and tears.” This word, along with the context, indicates humility and earnestness in prayer. Here is a great paradox. While we can come to God boldly (*hiketēria*), without hesitation, it is, indeed, a *humble boldness*. Additionally, prayer is not something we do offhandedly; rather we practice it with all contriteness and solemnity.

Seventh and finally, *euchē*, “a wish or vow” (e.g., Jas. 5:5) is one other aspect of prayer. As one Greek authority writes, “When we pray to God, we wish that He would intervene to permit something in our lives that we feel is proper and right. . . . A Christian’s wish is for God’s will to take place in his life, even if it’s sickness.”⁹

This introduces us to the most ignored principle of prayer. Simply stated: *the plan, point, and purpose of prayer is that our will conforms to God’s will*. What shameless arrogance it is to say that we can make demands of God, such as financial prosperity or other blessing, as some teach. That is not only a total misunderstanding of *prayer* but also of *God’s nature*. One of the clearest principles of Scripture is that we are to pray according to God’s will. The idea in The Model Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13) is, “Thy reign come: Thy will come to pass, as in heaven also on the earth.”¹⁰ The bottom line is, “God, do what you want.” David prayed this way in, “I delight to do thy will, O my God” (Ps. 40:8), as did our Lord Himself in Gethsemane, “Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matt. 26:39). Should we be any different?

Someone wisely said: “Prayer is a mighty instrument, not for getting man’s will done in heaven, but for getting God’s will done on earth.”¹¹ Is not 1 John 5:14 clear? “If we ask anything *according to his will*, He heareth us” (emphasis added). What is God doing? He works things according to His will, for His *ultimate glory* and our *utmost good*. Oh, let us forever abandon arrogant prayer!

Some sincere folks ask, “If God is sovereign and works His will, why pray at all?” I would offer three reasons. First, God says to do it, which should be enough. Second, the definitions we just examined underscore its incalculable value and importance. Third, however, in the context of specific requests, since God is sovereign, it follows that His decree for a certain thing also includes prayer for that thing. One theologian says it well: “It is as much decreed that it shall be done in answer to prayer as it is decreed that it shall be done at all.”¹² God is so great that He not only decrees an event, but He also decrees the prayer of the saint that will bring it to pass. In the final analysis, however, we simply must recognize that prayer is the most mysterious force there is. We cannot fully comprehend it, much less adequately explain it. We do not know

exactly how it works; we just know it does. So, what is prayer? It is this:

Prayer is communion with the One True God, before whom we come boldly and humbly to praise and thank and to whom we direct our petitions for others and ourselves according to His will.

We are to Pray in the Spirit

Commenting on the words **in the Spirit**, Martyn Lloyd-Jones observes:

Nothing so appalls me as to hear, sometimes in a religious service, on the wireless or television, people talking about “saying a prayer.” I remember once hearing a man describe how he had been visiting a certain city. He told us that he suddenly saw a cathedral, “and I went in,” he said, “and said a prayer.” He then went on looking at the sights of the city.¹³

How true! We constantly hear such statements. We see it even on a national level. When some horrendous event occurs, such as the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, people are encouraged to “say a prayer,” but seldom does anyone ask, “Exactly to whom are most people praying?” As Lloyd-Jones goes on to conclude, that is “the exact opposite of praying in the Spirit.” Such glib, offhanded “prayers” are foreign to Scriptural prayer. John Calvin is well worth quoting here:

If we think to be heard by God for our babbling, when at the same time our heart is dead, and our prayers do not proceed from a well-disposed and earnest mind, we make God like an idol, or like a babe, whereby we do great wrong to His majesty, and, in short, we only transfigure Him according to our own fancy. Therefore, it is necessary for our prayers not only to be made with our mouth, but also to come from the bottom of our heart.¹⁴

Jude 20, therefore, declares: “But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost.” The biblical method for prayer is: pray *to* the Father *through* the Son *in* the power of the Holy Spirit. Without question, praying **in the Spirit** is the master key to an effective prayer life. It means we are yielded to the Spirit’s wishes, not our own. As R. C. Sproul insightfully wrote, we are to pray “not in a perfunctory manner, not by reciting our favorite syllable or empty repetitions, but praying from the depths of our souls. To pray in concert with the Holy Spirit means that the communication is earnest in its origin and its passion.”¹⁵ We are to pray not just with our mind; nor do we pray just in words. We pray from the inner depth of our soul. To pray **in the Spirit**, therefore, we must remember four principles:

First, remember that we do not know what we should pray for. Consider Romans 8:26–27:

Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

Prayer goes far beyond words. The phrase “groanings which cannot be uttered” could also be translated “groanings unutterable,”¹⁶ or if I may humbly offer, “dismayed sighs that cannot be expressed in words.” All of us have experienced times when we just cannot put something into words, when we just do not know how to pray. We must rely upon the Holy Spirit to “translate.” In contrast, we’ve all at one time or another been arrogant in prayer. We think we know what we need and what is best for us or someone else. Granted, while we might know what is *good* in a situation, we do not know what is *best*! As noted earlier, we are to pray always according to the will of God.

Second, remember that the Holy Spirit indwells us (1 Cor. 6:19–20; Rom. 8:9). Those who deny the fact of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling do not realize that they could not effectively pray without Him. I sometimes hear someone pray, “Oh, Lord, send us Thy Spirit to be among us and to bless us in this meeting.” That certainly reflects a sincere, spiritual desire for the Spirit’s presence, but let us ever remember that He is already here. He is already in us.

Third, remember to do nothing either to grieve or quench the Spirit. As we see in 4:30, sin *grieves* (*lupeō*, “to sadden or bring pain to”) the Holy spirit. We also note in 1 Thessalonians 5:19 that unyieldedness *quenches* the Spirit; “quench” is *sbennumi*, “to extinguish by drowning with water, as opposed to smothering.” Some Christians do not know why their prayer life is ineffective, but here are two sure causes of such fruitless prayer.

Fourth, remember that we must be filled with the Holy Spirit. Spirit-filling is not the “sealing,” the “baptism”, or the “indwelling” of the Spirit. “Filling” (Eph. 5:18) is *pleroō* “to influence fully, control.” In other words, we are permeated by the Holy Spirit, influenced by the Spirit and nothing else. *To be filled with the Spirit is to have our thoughts, desires, values, motives, goals, priorities, and all else controlled by Him through the Word and set on spiritual things and spiritual growth.* Ponder how this parallels “setting our affections on things above, not things on the earth” (Col. 3:2). The tense of the verb is also critical. One of the most prominent misconceptions is that Holy Spirit filling is some “crisis experience,” some dramatic occurrence, a so-called “second blessing,” or life shattering event we must agonize over to attain. All such notions are obliterated, however, by the present tense of the verb, showing a continuing action. In other words, Spirit filling is designed to be a continuing reality.

We again see the application to prayer—*constant* communion. Here is another reason why many Christians are ineffective in their prayer life. Holy Spirit control is another key to effective prayer.

We Are to Pray with Watchfulness

Watching is *agrupneō*, literally “to abstain totally from sleep, to keep oneself awake” and so figuratively “to be attentive.” Our Lord used this word in challenging His disciples concerning His Second Coming: “Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is” (Mk. 13:33). We find the same concept in Nehemiah’s leading the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. When the enemy was trying to stop the work, Nehemiah defeated them by watching and praying: “Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a

watch against them day and night, because of them" (4:9). Here is another military image (as is God's armor). We are to set a watch, assign a sentry who is always on duty.

We should note one other instance of this word: "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch [*agrupneō*] for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17). God's people must not only submit to the leadership He has given them, but that leadership must be attentive to what is going on around them and be on guard 24/7/366. How we need pastors today who will watch and truly stand for the Truth!

So how does this relate to prayer? Are we supposed to "lose sleep" over our prayers? Perhaps. More to the point, however, Paul says we are to be "fully awake" in our prayer life, not "dosing off." In this context, we are to be attentive to the battle at hand and the needs that this spiritual war will bring. There will be many things that can distract us from prayer, so we need to pay attention.

We Are to Pray with Perseverance

Perseverance is *proskarterēsis*, which occurs only here, although the verb form *proskartereō* appears several times. The root verb *kartereō* simply means "to remain strong, steadfast, to endure." The prefix *pros*, however, adds a "greater emphasis [on] the time element," so the full idea is "to hold out, to persist."¹⁷ We find the verb several times in the Book of Acts. The Apostolic Church, for example, "*Continued steadfastly* in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (2:42, emphasis added). This demonstrates that steadfast prayer is as vital as steadfast fellowship and the steadfast ministry of the Word. We persist in all of these. We note it again in Acts 6:4, where we see the first "deacons" appointed to take care of temporal matters in the church so the apostles could "give [themselves] continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."

So, Paul tells us that our prayer must be persistent; it must hold out. That does not mean we are trying to twist God's arm until we get what we are praying for. Rather, it means we are deeply concerned and burdened to the point that we continue until we receive an answer (whatever it might be). Our **perseverance** always has God's will as the goal, so God wants us to persist until we know that will.

We Are to Pray for All Saints

Here is a wonderfully challenging principle. **Saints** is once again *hagios*, the ninth time Paul has used this word in this epistle,¹⁸ and in each instance it refers to all Christians, not some special group that have been canonized by the Church. As we see elsewhere (1:1 and 4:12), being a saint is not a matter of *achievement*, as is taught in Roman Catholicism; rather it is a matter of *position*. In other words, a Christian is not *made* a saint by *merit*, but rather *is* a saint by *position* in Christ. Every Christian is a saint, a set apart, holy child of God.

Paul, therefore, says that we are to pray for **all saints**. **All** is *pas*. When used *without* an article, it means "each" or "every," but when used *with* an article, as it is here, it conveys the idea of the sum total of something. We, therefore, are to pray for the sum total of the Church, **all** believers. That is quite a task!

Praying for one another is one of the most important principles of prayer. It is challenging, indeed, that Paul sought prayer but did not ask believers to pray for his comfort or safety. Rather, he asked prayer for effectiveness in his witness and ministry. One of the biggest faults of our prayer lives is selfishness. We must be concerned with the burdens and needs of others. Intercessory prayer, in fact, is a central theme in the Scripture's teaching on prayer. We see many occurrences of this in Jesus' prayer life (Matt. 9:18-26; 15:21-28; 17:14-21; Jn. 17:9-24; etc.), as well as in Paul's (Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-14; 1 Tim. 1:3; etc.).

Now obviously, we cannot pray for every single believer on the earth; after all, we do not know all their names. What we can do, however, is to pray *specifically* for the ones we *do* know, and *generally* for the ones we *do not* know. When was the last time, for example, we prayed for the Christians who suffer under communist or Muslin rule? Have we prayed recently for believers who are in our Armed Forces, police officers, and firefighters? Do we pray for Christians who are in apostate churches or those in churches that do not preach the whole council of God and are starving because of it? Are we praying for pastors everywhere to be committed to Scripture alone and to preach that alone? (Oh, how preachers today need prayer!) And the list goes on.

Consider another thought—does **prayer for all saints** include ourselves? Of course. We bring our needs and burdens to Him, for who else can we turn to? In that wonderful verse on prayer, Paul assures the Philippian: "Be careful [i.e., filled with anxiety] for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (4:6-7). Are you *ever* alone? Certainly not. You are not only one of God's *soldiers*, but you are also one of his *children*. He is always there to comfort and give you peace.

Before we close, consider one more thought on prayer: it is the remedy for many of the ills, diseases, and depressions of life. I greatly appreciated a fascinating illustration offered here by Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He recounts that during the Spanish Civil War (just before WWII), there was an epidemic of neuroses and other psychological problems throughout England. Thousands had to go to clinics just to keep going. Then came that civil war, and it virtually emptied the clinics. People now had much greater anxieties, not the least of which was simple survival. Greater anxiety got rid of the lesser ones.¹⁹ That is exactly what prayer does, but it goes even one better—it replaces anxiety with the peace of God. Are we praying for this concerning **all saints**?

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NOTES

¹ Theodore Epp, *Living Abundantly: Studies in Ephesians* (The Good News Broadcasting Association, 1974), 301.

² Harold J. Berry, *Gems from the Original* (Back to the Bible Broadcast, 1972), 59.

³ Spiros Zodhiatus, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* (AMG Publishers, 1992), entry #89.

⁴ Cited in Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations* (Bible

Communications, Inc., 1996).

⁵ Thomas Kelly, *Testament of Devotion* (Harper, 1941), 35.

⁶ John R. Rice wrote, "Prayer is not praise, adoration, meditation, humiliation nor confession, but asking. . . . Praise is not prayer, and prayer is not praise. Prayer is asking. . . . Adoration is not prayer, and prayer is not adoration. Prayer is always asking. It is not anything else but asking" (*Prayer—Asking and Receiving* [Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1942], 29).

⁷ Richard Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Hendrickson, 2000), 202 (emphasis added).

⁸ The following definitions are from the author's, *A Word for the Day: Key Words of the New Testament* (AMG Publishers, 2006), 149–50.

⁹ Zodhiates, #2171.

¹⁰ Robert Young's *Literal Translation*.

¹¹ Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John*

(T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1909), 304.

¹² Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas Seminary Press, 1947–48), Vol. I, 256.

¹³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Christian Soldier: An Exposition of Ephesians 6:10–20* (Baker, 1978), 346.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1973; originally published in 1562), 679.

¹⁵ R. C. Sproul, *The Purpose of God: An Exposition of Ephesians* (Christian Focus Publications, 1994), 153.

¹⁶ *Young's Literal Translation*.

¹⁷ Colin Brown (Gen. Ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (4 Vol.) (Zondervan, 1975), Vol. 2, 767.

¹⁸ 1:1, 15, 18; 2:19; 3:8, 18; 4:12; 5:3; 6:18.

¹⁹ Lloyd-Jones, *The Christian Soldier*, 357.

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