

February 2024

Rev. Dr. Belton Joyner, Jr - Based on the scripture lessons from Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

February 4

Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24 “Pray Without Ceasing”

The other day, I was at a breakfast meeting of local clergy. One of the pastors asked, “What are you doing for your sermon this coming Sunday?” One colleague smiled and replied, “My life is a walking sermon.”

Maybe that quip gives us a handle for this week's study text. If I “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), then my life must be a walking prayer.

How does this work? For example, how can I give thanks in every circumstance (1 Thessalonians 5:18)? In a time of tragedy, maybe I can give thanks that God has given me sensitivity to loss. In a time of defeat, I can give thanks that God has given me an opportunity to learn how to do better. In a time of victory, I can give thanks that God has given me the joy of celebration.

That does not mean that God has given me loss or defeat or even victory. It means that God has given me gifts for each of these circumstances. How else can I “pray without ceasing,” until my prayer-life includes the full range of life?

When I was in the sixth grade, I had a classmate who would bow her head in prayer before each test. One time she got back her grade and saw that she had flunked the test. I teased her and asked her if she had prayed before she studied for the exam. She shook her head and mumbled that she had not had time to study that week. Hmmm.

We pray with our attitude as much as we do with our words. To “pray without ceasing” is to live with an attitude of thanksgiving, an attitude of supplication, an attitude of intercession, an attitude of repentance, an attitude of trust, an attitude of service, an attitude of relationship, an attitude of resurrection.

When are my prayers just words?

When is my life praying?

What Someone Else Has Said:

In her book *Bathed in Prayer*, Jan Karon has quoted William Law who said, “There is nothing that makes us love someone so much as praying for them.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Hear my words, O God, but help me match my life to Your will. Let me ‘take time to be holy,’ but move my very being and doing to holiness...”

February 11

Text: Matthew 6:1-8 “Putting Practices of Piety in Perspective”

Our group read Matthew 6:1-4. It didn't make sense to me, so I asked the young pastor who had been assigned to watch over us college students at the national youth event: “Why do the hypocrites get rewarded for making a big public deal in their almsgiving?” He thanked me for my question and said he would get back to me later.

Two days later, he called me aside and said, “I think I have an answer to your question.” He continued, “The hypocrites got the reward they wanted: public recognition and praise.” So, I asked, “What about those who give their alms ‘in secret’? What is the reward that God gives them?” He replied “Let me get back to you.” I guess the event ended before he had the chance to answer my question.

In a commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew, Alan Hugh M'Neile answers my question: “The reward will be given in the coming Kingdom.” And I know that in Christ Jesus that Kingdom - some know it as Kin-dom - is breaking in upon us even now.

About the time we take a breath after struggling with verses 1 to 4 about almsgiving, Jesus continues and applies the same spirit to our prayer life. No matter the words we use, God knows the secrets of the heart. (Jesus is not saying we should not pray together. In fact, in the example prayer He gave, He uses plural words - Our Father...Give us...Forgive us, etc.) Secular society has different standards and values than does the faith community. In these verses, Jesus is reminding us to pray (and give alms) by the standards and values of His followers.

In a translation called, *The New Testament in the Language of Today*, William Beck has made a helpful rendition of verse 6: “Pray to your Father who is with you when you're alone.” For me, that is both an encouragement and a caution. Encouragement: Just when I think it is all up to me, Jesus reminds me that I am not alone; God is with me. Caution: On the other hand, just when I think I can behave as I want to because no one is looking, Jesus reminds me that I am not alone; God is able to see my secrets.

Giving and praying are clearly part of the journey.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Do I Stay Christian?* (St. Martins), Brian McLaren begins a prayer: “Source of all truth, help me to hunger for truth, even if it upsets, modifies, or overturns what I already think is true....”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Listen to my heart, O Lord, and open me to Your will...”

February 18

Text: Matthew 6:9-13 “The Lord’s Prayer”

In our corporate praying, most of us pray the Lord’s Prayer in forms that grow out of the King James translation. Other translators stir new images from the familiar words that Jesus taught.

For example, instead of offering “Thy kingdom come,” Moffatt renders it “Thy Reign begin!” Some ask for forgiveness of “our debts”; instead of “debts,” some say “trespasses.” Some say “shortcomings” (Weymouth). Some say “offenses” (George Lama). Some say “the wrong we have done” (New English Bible). Some say “what we owe to you” (J. B. Phillips). There is a richness in our Lord’s words!

As noted in last week’s commentary, Jesus uses plural pronouns in this prayer: Our, Us, We. He is acknowledging that we are in this together. Even when I am alone when I pray the Lord’s Prayer, I am identifying myself with the family of God --- Our, Us, We. The faith is not to be lived in isolation. It is a community venture.

The phrase “Lead us not into temptation” is a prayer of confession. We know how we fail when we are faced with temptation/trial. It is a way of saying, “Lord, deliver us from such because we know we would fail.” That is a particularly appropriate prayer during this season of Lent.

Ancient manuscripts do not agree on how the prayer ends. We usually pray, “For Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever and ever. Amen.” Check various translations and you’ll find that many do not include these traditional words. Some students of the Bible have said that the phrase is a liturgical addition and is not in the biblical text. The King James Version includes it. The Revised Standard Version does not.

Luke has a shorter version of this prayer. Luke 11:1-4 contains what Jesus offered when the disciples asked him to teach them to pray. In many editions (and translations), there are footnotes offering that many ancient authorities have included phrases that are omitted here.

I was at a meeting once when we were invited to pray together the Lord’s Prayer. I began, “Our Father, Who art in heaven...” Next to me, a man began, “Padre nuestro que estas en el cielo...” I think God heard both prayers.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Andrew Murray (*Prayer Is the Answer*, Smith Freeman) wrote: “Though in its beginning prayer is so simple that the child can pray, yet it is at the same time the highest and holiest work to which (we) can rise.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Our Father, Who art in heaven...”

February 25

Text: John 12:20-36 “Prayer in the Time of Trouble”

It must have been hard to have to hear what Jesus had to say, right after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. It’s certainly not what his followers wanted to hear after that grand spectacle when the crowds shouted “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord - the King of Israel!” (John 12:13)

As John tells the story, right after that praise-worthy moment, some Greeks who happened to be in the crowd said they wanted to get to meet Jesus (John 12:21). But then Jesus started talking about how a grain of wheat has to die before new life can emerge from it. Then, He says that anyone who follows Him must be a servant (John 12:24, 26).

It gets more difficult. Jesus then begins to tell those who would follow Him that He was going to die (John 12:33). That’s not exactly a good way to recruit disciples! That’s a long way from “Hosanna”!

But, there is an encouraging word when Jesus offers that He is light so His followers don’t have to live in darkness (John 12:35-36). The Greek word for “darkness” is *skōtia*. It is a word that not only means “absence of light,” but also means “obscurity.” What are the things that obscure/block out our relationship with Jesus? What are the relationships that obscure the Light of Christ? Are there ways in which my life blocks the Light of Christ from others?

Even when He speaks of His death, Jesus sees victory. In John 12:24, he describes how a grain of wheat dies, so there can be much fruit. He anticipates that eternal life will be a gift for those who know death in this life (John 12:25). He asserts that His own death will be an occasion for triumph (John 12:32).

Much fruit (John 12:24). Eternal life (John 12:25). Father will honor (John 12:26). The light is with you (John 12:45). Children of light (John 12:36). With Jesus, even difficult times can bring us good news.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Leonard Sweet (*Me and We: God’s New Social Gospel*, Abingdon Press) has written: “The darker the night, the brighter the stars. The deeper the roots, the higher the promise of bloom and beauty... Darkness helps us see the stars that ultimately lead to Jesus. The light is found only in the darkness, just as peace is found only through suffering.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Light of the world, and shine in the midst of what works to obscure Your presence. Come, Lord Jesus, and walk with me on this journey...”