

1 Thessalonians 5:17 - Praying Like We Mean It

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Pray with me. Father, there may be no truer statement about us than that one.

That we need you every hour. Father, we often don't feel the truth of that.

Sometimes we feel it intensely. Would you keep our hearts in a place of dependence on you?

Father, in this hour specifically, we need you because we need you to speak to us.

We are going to be looking at your word. We want to be guided by your spirit. We want to hear from you and we need to hear from you.

[1 : 01] And so, Father, would you speak? And would you speak clearly and powerfully and in a way that would alter our hearts? Our hearts need to be changed by your spirit.

Would you indeed do that work that you do so well? Would you speak through me? Father, would you speak to me this morning as I need these words desperately myself?

And would you make your words clear even when mine aren't? Father, I ask that you would speak.

And we ask you in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Some of you who know me know that it might be fair to describe me as a little bit stuck in my ways.

As a guy who likes a good schedule, likes to make plans, and isn't particularly good when those plans are altered. My wife is not in the room anymore since she's teaching kids worship, or she would stand up and tell you that's true.

I don't do great with plans being changed. And so, this morning was, like most of the next several weeks, scheduled to be a sermon on Ephesians. And I had no intention of that changing.

[2 : 17] In fact, that would have been very difficult to convince me there was any good reason to change that. But there's going to be a little bit of a different kind of sermon this morning. Maybe it won't be too weird.

But as I prepared for this and considered what God was doing, I kept feeling the Spirit leading me back to prayer. We've talked about it a lot already this morning.

We've done it some this morning. But I felt we needed to open God's Word and talk together about prayer. Over the past few weeks, you've heard about prayer a lot, probably.

Prayer in sermon applications. Talking about prayer in congregational meetings, in officers' retreats, in search committee reports just this morning.

We've said pray in small groups. Pray on Sundays at 8.30. Now come and pray at 10. Pray on second Tuesdays of every month. Pray, pray, pray. And as I thought about that, I thought, those are all great things.

[3 : 17] And I think, though, many of us receive that in a way that is perhaps not what we would expect. We hear that and no one is upset about that or disagrees that that would be a good idea.

But many of us, if we're honest, we think, oh yeah, that's exactly what I expect you to say. I mean, y'all are a church after all. So, of course, you're going to talk about praying.

That sounds very spiritual. But it also can sound very impersonal or impractical. I'm so glad you said that. Of course.

That's what I would expect you to say. That's standard sermon application. But it doesn't grab your heart at all. And others of us hear that and we're all in.

We're marking our calendars. We're going to be there at 8.30 and 10 next Sunday. And we're going to be at all of those prayer times. Because it sounds to us, it sounds right too.

[4 : 18] We're going to be there. We're going to grab every prayer card and list we can find. But in reality, it doesn't grab your heart at all either. And so I relate to those feelings.

I remember as I was coming out of seminary, I heard a lot of professors talking about how important it was to pray. And to pray all the time and to have a life characterized by prayer.

And I thought, that sounds very spiritual and very right. I agree with that. In fact, I'm not going to be like all those other guys who say it's important but don't do it. I'm going to be a praying pastor.

I was convinced of that coming out of seminary. That would be such a good thing to be. Would be a praying pastor. But that's hard to put on a calendar and call it done.

And so you get out of seminary and you go to a church and there's lots of stuff to do. And plus, you know so much at that point at 25 years old. And you've just learned all this wonderful stuff in seminary.

[5 : 17] And you're ready. So really as things come up, you've pretty much got it for a while. You know? And all of a sudden this idea of being a praying pastor becomes not as important.

I understand that feeling of, that sounds right but it doesn't impact me personally. I get that feeling. And so I think it would be good for us to talk for a few minutes about prayer and about what God's Word has to say about it.

Because I think as long as it remains one more item on our calendar or our to-do list, it will continue to feel that way. Like the thing you're supposed to say and the thing you're supposed to do.

But, you know, really, is He talking to me? God's Word tells us it's much more than that. Look at 1 Thessalonians 5, 17.

Just three words. Two in the Greek, actually. Pray without ceasing. Pray unceasingly, the verse says.

[6 : 21] Pray all the time, right? This is not the only place where God's Word tells us this. Pray without ceasing. In fact, it's rejoice always. It's pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances.

For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Like, did you come to church wanting to know what God wants you to do? All right. Here it is. God wants you to pray all the time.

And you're not surprised, are you? Most of you, this may be your first Sunday in a church and you could have told me that, right? Praying, that's a good thing. Yes, God would want me to pray.

But what does He mean? Pray without ceasing. Is He exaggerating? I don't think so. There are words in the Greek for often or a lot.

And He says unceasingly. Does He mean quit everything else so that you can do nothing but pray the rest of your life? I don't think so. The Bible is clear. We're to do other things with our mouths.

[7 : 22] To praise God. To rebuke a brother in sin. To give a reason for the hope we have. All of those we're going to do. It's not that we have to continue having words of prayer come out of our mouths every moment of every day.

That's not what without ceasing means. What God is teaching us here and in many other places in His Word is that prayer is not merely an activity, but really a lifestyle.

It's not only one thing to put on the list, but it's also the way we do everything else on the list. It's an attitude of the heart, a disposition, a mindset with which we approach all of life.

That's what praying without ceasing means. That's what's so important for us as a church that we can't miss at any time, especially in a season like this.

And when we talk about prayer and prayer, and prayer is a lifestyle God has called us to. I'd say it this way, a praying lifestyle is what it looks like for us really to believe what we say we believe.

[8 : 29] I mean, churches are pretty good at talking a good game. We've got lots of lists of things we believe, things we think are important, things we all can agree on. It's not too difficult to figure out from the Bible that prayer should be a priority for Christians and churches.

But what I'm suggesting is that the nature of our prayer lives reveals a lot about some of the fundamental beliefs that we hold most dear at any church, and particularly at Southwood Presbyterian.

What fuels a praying lifestyle? How would that happen that prayer would not be merely an activity, but really a lifestyle? I think three particular beliefs that we hold dear here, that if we really believe them, would fuel our lifestyle of prayer.

Three, you notice I'm not going to make this sermon too weird. I don't want to go, you know, three points should keep us on track. So this will be not too unfamiliar to you. The first one, one of the things that we believe passionately is that God is at work.

That's foundational. It's the bottom line of what we believe about all of life, that God is in charge and in control. We often call it His sovereignty.

[9 : 49] That He is the King. He's the one at work. That He's up to something. Sometimes we treat that as something we can just pull out in the hard times and say, you know, God's sovereign.

He'll bring something good out of something bad. That's what it means. But it's true all the time, isn't it? That He's always the one working. He's constantly committed to seeing His kingdom advance. He's the one primarily at work. And He's using us as a part of that. But He's up to something. He has been since He created. He's been up to something in this world. He's been on a mission. And we Presbyterians say we believe that. But you know what we usually do? We say that God is the one mostly at work. But we usually plan. And then we think.

And then we plan some more. Because we're so smart and organized that we're going to figure it out. And then once we have a good plan, we pray for the plan. Right? Because that's important. You should do that.

[10 : 48] Listen to the way church historian Richard Loveless says it. But he says something that I think is a good critique for us. Here's where Pentecostals reflect the authentic revival tradition of Protestantism.

What he means is here's something the Pentecostals get right that we mess up. When they commence a venture, it is with hours of prayer. While with ordinary evangelicals, he could have said Presbyterians, it is with hours of talk and organization.

The result is often that charismatics achieve supernatural results while the rest of us obtain what is organizable. Do you relate to that? Are you very comfortable with what's organizable?

I feel kind of a safe place to be. We'll get exactly what we kind of plan out to get and we'll be in control of it. It makes those of us who like control feel really good, doesn't it? Anybody else like that? It's a high level of control.

We're often happy with that. We joke that as we entered a season of transition here at Southwood, the first thing we did was create a committee to decide which committees we needed to create. A very, very Presbyterian thing to do, right?

[11 : 54] You know what would be even more? Presbyterian. Praying. All the time. Because we believe that the vital work that needs to be done is the work done primarily by God rather than us.

That He's committed to this. That He's at work. That He's the one in control. You may think that sounds a little bit weird to say that praying would be a very Presbyterian thing to do.

Because you may think churches that talk about God's sovereignty, that He's in charge, means there's no need to pray at all. The Bible says exactly the opposite. It says God's sovereignty is the reason we pray.

That He's at work and has told us our prayers are part of that work. In fact, that they're powerful and effective. The reason prayer is not a waste of time is that the one to whom we pray is powerful and active.

Otherwise, what are we doing? The reason prayer is not wasting your time is that you're praying to the one who's at work. To the one who's powerful and active. That's why I said at the congregational meeting back in February that we don't just pray for the work of the church, but that prayer is the work of the church.

[13 : 10] It's coming before a sovereign God and pleading with Him. And we struggle to believe that that's true because we struggle to believe that God is the one at work rather than us. That's the truth.

Why should we pray without ceasing? Because God never ceases to be sovereign. The one who watches over His people never slumbers nor sleeps.

So we should be coming to Him all the time, moment by moment, even when it seems we could rely on our own planning and gifts. Commentator F.F. Bruce writes, I love that description of it.

What does it mean to have a spirit of prayer moment by moment? It means that I sense that God's here. That He's at work. And when I feel that, the natural thing to do is to pray.

When He's present, I want to talk to Him. I want to ask for His help. This is what happens when we realize God is here and He's at work. Not just in the big things, but in every moment.

[14 : 29] Do we really believe that He's always with us? That He's always the one at work? Do we really believe He's the one who will enable us to make it through the long day with the kids?

That He gives life to dead hearts? That He loves Huntsville more than we do? It doesn't mean we quit forming committees altogether. It means that every committee we form is driven and surrounded by prayer because we believe God's there and He's at work there.

And it means He's our hope for that committee. Not that the members are spiritual or smart or savvy, but that He's sovereign. That's why we pray for them.

In addition to God's sovereignty, the fact that God is the one at work, another thing we believe deeply is that we are in need. God is at work and we are in need.

And I think this is the primary reason why for many of us, prayer remains an activity rather than a lifestyle. Because we struggle regularly to feel our need in a deep way, don't we?

[15 : 35] Pastor Bert Parsons says, Prayer is hard because coming to the end of ourselves is hard. You feel that? You have a hard time coming to the end of yourself?

Do you struggle to pray without ceasing because you don't feel needy without ceasing? Not every moment of every day do I feel desperate for help?

I do. That's one of the reasons I struggle with it. You see, if you start reading through the prayers in the Bible, you'll notice really quickly a deep sense of God's sufficiency along with a deep sense of our insufficiency.

It's there almost everyone you flip to. A realization of our inadequacy and need. It's the words of Psalm 86. Hear, O Lord, and answer me, for I'm poor and needy.

That's why I'm praying to you, because I need help. Answer me, God. Help me. We are the ones who need help, who need to be changed. You know, prayer is not primarily about changing God or changing the circumstances of our lives.

[16 : 39] It's largely about changing us, isn't it? Paul Miller so helpfully says, prayer offers us not a less busy life, but a less busy heart.

In the midst of overwhelming circumstances and things that I don't know how to handle, prayer reorients me to a God that I can trust to a posture of dependence on Him.

Miller goes on in his book on prayer, and he says, if you're not praying, then you are quietly confident that time, money, and talent are all you need in life.

Ouch. That's tough, isn't it? If you're not praying, you're quietly confident that time, money, and talent are all you need in life. You'll always be a little too tired, a little too busy.

But if, like Jesus, you realize you can't do life on your own, then no matter how busy, no matter how tired you are, you'll find time to pray. I love this last part. Time in prayer makes you even more dependent on God because you don't have as much time to get things done.

[17 : 47] I hate that part about prayer. I love getting things done. I'm a list guy. And so any minute that I spend not checking a box on the list is often viewed as a wasted minute.

How come we're not getting things accomplished? Where's the efficiency? I hope I'm not the only one that struggles with that. But it doesn't feel productive sometimes because I'm confident on my own.

I think if I could just get started using my gifts and my plans, we'd get somewhere. But I slow down to pray. I asked myself this week, was what Miller said really true?

Is that how I really view prayer and how it impacts me? And I found it, for me, it really is. It's why I only prayed before the really hard tests when I was in school or sometimes the ones I didn't study for.

Then I would pray. It's why you pray before the big game rather than all of them. It's why when I came out of seminary wanting to be a praying pastor, I didn't often hit my knees until I ran out of options, until I'd exhausted all my wealth of wisdom that I'd learned in seminary, until I got overwhelmed and in over my head.

[19 : 00] It was my need that drove me to prayer. I've seen this again in the past few weeks in the life of this church. You know who's been driving the need?

You started to hear things, right? People are talking about prayer. We always talk about prayer, but it's been a lot more lately, hasn't it? It's starting to bother you a little bit? We're talking too much?

You know who's driving a lot of that, leading the charge on that with the officers?

Our search committee. As they've begun considering the task in front of them, as they've seen the enormity of what they've got, they feel an acute sense of need and thus they're helping us remember the need for prayer.

I'm so thankful for them and for what they've done for us in that regard because seeing our need clearly fuels heartfelt prayer. It's been a wonderful thing to have them lead us in that. But listen to me. Dear friends, Southwood, the enormous task in front of us, in front of Southwood, is not merely finding a new senior pastor.

[20 : 11] It should cause us to stop and think, why are they the ones feeling needy and desperate with an enormous task in front of them? Why don't we all feel that way?

The enormous task is not finding a new senior pastor, but reaching Huntsville and the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen? That's the enormous task in front of this church.

That's what God's put us here for. For His glory to fill the whole earth. For His kingdom to be advanced all around us where we already are. That everyone we can reach would know the grace of King Jesus, right?

That this is what we're here for. That's enormous. He has called us now to be transformed by the gospel so that we can be agents of transformation in our culture.

He wants Southwood now to be turned inside out by grace so that He can use us to turn Huntsville and the world upside down. With the good news of the gospel.

[21 : 11] Now. We're not in a waiting game or holding period. The enormous task in front of us is reaching Huntsville and the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's a big task. Consider that for a second.

And then ask yourself the obvious question. Seriously, God? Us? Reach Huntsville and the world for Christ?

Us? The ones who have trouble reaching our spouses to hold a marriage together? The ones who have trouble reaching our kids to keep them on track?

The ones with trouble reaching our neighbors to have even a conversation with them? Us?

Southwood, do you see our need? We all should have an acute sense of our need in light of the enormity of the task that God has given us.

It's a high calling. And we are clearly inadequate on our own. We need Him. We need Him every hour. We need Him now and today.

[22 : 19] That might not just get you up at 8.30 and 10 on Sundays to pray. It may wake you up in the middle of the night praying. It may have you crying out to God as you drive to work or discipline your kids or serve on the PTA or plan a budget or watch the news or coach a ball team or in the midst of life and wherever you are you might all of a sudden find yourself praying because what God has called you to is so much bigger than what you're capable of.

And that's when prayer begins to become a lifestyle rather than merely an activity when we have a regular sense of our need. Now those are two very important things that we believe.

God's sovereignty that He's at work and our need. But I'd suggest to you that just the two of those aren't actually enough to fuel a lifestyle of prayer.

Let me explain it this way. You may have a need that you're aware of and you may know a very powerful person who would be capable of meeting that need but that won't be enough for you to bother him when he's busy.

That reality in itself won't be enough for you to text him in the middle of the night and for you to call every few minutes and think that you could talk to this very important powerful person about what's on your heart.

[23 : 42] One more thing is necessary for that to happen. And so while the law or your own guilt can drive you to schedule a time to pray occasionally at least only the gospel can drive you to a lifestyle of prayer because that one thing that's needed is relationship and the gospel gives us that.

The one thing you have to have is a relationship and one more thing we believe passionately here is that the gospel changes everything. This is what I mean with regards to prayer.

Because of the gospel of grace the powerful person with the provision for your needs those two things you feel is not just some powerful person out there somewhere he's your father.

Isn't he? So praying can become a lifestyle because I have a father who wants to hear my needs and won't reject me when I cry out to him at some crazy hour.

Think of all the things a child will wake his father up for in the middle of the night. You can laundry list them. A cup of water gotta use the potty can't find blankie had a bad dream keep going do any of those things stop a young child in the middle of the night for crying out for daddy?

[25 : 02] They don't do they? Why? Why is that? Why do we love that? He doesn't think twice about coming to his father who loves him.

That's how Jesus taught us to pray isn't it? He said you say our father so prayer is crawling into the lap of my father not climbing the ladder to my father.

I'm not trying to earn his affection by scheduling in some times to pray I already have his affection so I pray whenever I feel the need whenever something strikes prayer becomes reveling in his love all the time not reaching for something I don't have yet.

In fact if you've ever fallen asleep praying anybody ever you're not going to admit that are you?

Have you ever fallen asleep praying? Did you wake up feeling guilty?

Frustrated like a failure or an annoyance? You ever had a child fall asleep in your arms? A child falling asleep in a father's arms is a precious moment that a father cherishes.

[26 : 13] He loves that and we never grow up or get too big or too strong or too independent to fall asleep in our father's arms. Maybe you've never thought about prayer that way.

Maybe you thought we shouldn't make such a big deal about prayer because we're a grace church and we talk about grace and the gospel and prayer that seems like it's a little bit maybe that's getting a little bit too legalistic or something like that.

Listen, a grace church that's not a praying church is a contradiction in terms. A grace church that's not a praying church is a contradiction in terms.

You pray because you now have a relationship with God so you can talk to Him. If we really believe what we say we believe that the gospel changes everything that we have a new relationship with God by His grace that we're actually His sons and daughters not just pretending to be then we'll talk to Him.

We'll pray. Do people ever ask you about your relationship with God? Sometimes feel a little bit weird. My relationship with God? What do you mean my relationship with God? Well, Christians talk about having a relationship with God, don't we?

[27 : 25] You've heard that. Would your spouse say your relationship is healthy if you haven't told him how you feel for months? Would you say your relationship is healthy if the only times you ever talk are when you schedule the conversation?

Listen, I love scheduling conversations. We do this a lot. Sometimes there are things you need to talk about and you need to put it on the calendar and you need to have a meeting and talk about it. And I'm very, that's very important to me.

Scheduling things is a good thing. But if that's the only time I ever talked to my wife, I wouldn't work in a relationship, would it? That's not what a relationship is like.

It's great to repent during Lent, for example, but we should always be repenting. It's great to pray during a senior pastor search, but we should always be praying.

I hope that we come together and pray a lot in the next few months. Scheduling that is a good thing. There's great encouragement in praying with others. We should do it.

[28 : 28] We should have to reschedule the room we're meeting in. So many of us should want to gather and pray. But I hope way beyond that that you know you've got a Father who will hear you anywhere, anytime, that you'll pray to Him.

One of my favorite prayers in the Bible has always been Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20. You may remember the situation. He's the king of God's people, Judah.

And the Moabites and the Ammonites are coming to attack them. And Jehoshaphat prays in 2 Chronicles 20. In verse 6, he says this, O Lord, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might so that none is able to withstand you. God, you're sovereign and powerful, right? We're coming to you because we know you're at work.

Look down at verse 12, what he says at the end. We're powerless against this great horde that's coming up against us. We do not know what to do but our eyes are upon you. Do you hear his need? The sense of his need there?

[29 : 32] We're powerless. We don't know what to do. That classic line, we don't know what to do but our eyes are upon you. That's beautiful. But why? Why is it Yahweh that his eyes are on?

Because the God of his fathers from verse 6 by verse 12 has become what? Our God. Oh, our God. The one in relationship with us. The one who loves and cares for us. We look to you. Our Father is the one who's sovereign to meet our needs.

Listen, if you leave this morning thinking merely that you should probably pray a little bit more, then you'll be just where I was coming out of seminary. Probably where you were when you came in this morning if we're honest.

I knew prayer was a good thing. You really want to pray more but you'll be missing the long-term motivation that changes your life not just a couple of meetings that you go to. I've shared with you before Paul Miller's analogy that focusing on prayer like that is like trying to drive by focusing on the windshield.

[30 : 40] You don't look at the windshield. You look through the windshield to what's beyond it. Look through prayer to your Father who in His kind provision is the one at work and meeting your needs.

Then prayer becomes not a have to but a get to. Not a to do but a need to. Not a duty but a delight. Then we'll pray at meetings and gatherings and worship services and small groups in hallways and parking lots over meals over coffee by ourselves with our kids.

It might not be just a spiritual platitude that doesn't mean much to you anymore. It might start becoming a lifeline. A lifestyle where we pray without ceasing.

Where we desperately need our Father to get through each and every moment of each and every day. and that's exactly what this table that's set before us reminds us of this morning.

What a gift that we come now to a table where the Father spreads it before us and says you're needy and I've come to meet your needs. A Father who's provided lavishly for our deepest needs through sending His Son for us.

[31 : 57] That's the kind of Father we pray to. He comes and prepares this table at which we get to feast. What a kind and gracious Father we have.

Remember the words of institution that Jesus gave in 1 Corinthians 11. Paul repeats them. Paul said, I received from Jesus what I passed on to you that the night He was betrayed He took bread and when He'd given thanks He broke it and said, this is my body which is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way also He took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. This is as I said the Lord's table. Not a Southwood table or a Presbyterian table.

He's the one who sets it and He invites all of those who are in relationship with Him to come. The ones who know Him as Father. Those who by faith have cast their hope not in themselves but in Jesus He says, come and eat.

[33 : 06] And if that's not you if this all seems a little bit bizarre if you hear me talk about prayer and a lifestyle of dependence upon God and you think I don't even know what that would mean then let me invite you not to come to this table this morning but to consider to consider the possibility that someone offers you life not found in yourself where it all doesn't hang on you where it's not all up to you and the burden's not all carried by you and that Jesus would offer you that kind of life.

Come and consider Jesus and who He is. We'd love to talk with you not about fixing your life but about the Savior who is working on our broken lives.

We'd love to have that conversation with you. Let's pray. Jesus we came to the Father completely dependent on your grace not our goodness.

We live today completely dependent on your grace not our goodness. Would this meal remind us of that strengthen us to that end.

We pray in your name. Amen. For more information visit us online at southwood.org For more information visit us online at southwood.org