

WHAT'S THE POINT IN PRAYING?

Seventh in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *The Body of Christ* from I Thessalonians 5:9-25
“Pray without ceasing.” I Thessalonians 5:17

The apostle Paul wrote to the followers of Christ in Thessalonica and told them to “Pray without ceasing.” (I Thessalonians 5:17) Have you ever prayed with other Christians where it seemed like the praying would *never* cease? That can be a problem. Rosalind Rinker was a Christian missionary and author. She tells how when she was young she attended Wednesday night prayer meetings with other members of her church. Those present knelt at their chairs and prayed around the circle, each person beseeching God for exactly the same list of things that the one before him had prayed for—mostly various physical maladies suffered by the group or their friends and relatives. Rinker confessed that as the prayers droned on and on, she’d have trouble staying awake. So to keep herself conscious and avoid the embarrassment of snoring, she devised a little strategy. She’d kneel in front of the bookshelf, and while the others prayed she studied the titles of the books on the shelf. After her turn had come and gone, she’d safely drift off into somnambulant bliss. As a young Christian, I was grateful for her honesty.

Over the last several weeks we’ve been talking about the body of Christ. Today I want us to look at the way Christ keeps his body, the church, in touch with him through prayer. Turn with me to the fifth chapter of I Thessalonians. In verses 9-25 we are going to explore three topics. **1. The Dark City, 2. The Difficult Call to be a Christian, and 3. The Dependence of the Church on Prayer.**

1. The Dark City. Paul doesn’t say very much in I Thessalonians about the city of Thessalonica for the simple reason that he was writing to people who lived there, who already knew everything about their city. But you and I must understand something about the city in order to discover why God wants us to pray and the sorts of things he wants us to pray about. We can sum up the condition of the city in one word: It was dark.

Thessalonica was founded in 315-316 BC by King Cassander who named it for his wife, the sister of Alexander the Great. The city prospered and became the leading city of the district. It’s still a major Greek city with a population of 1.3 million people. The only thing Paul really tells us about the city is found in I Thessalonians 1:9. Paul says to the Christians, “*You turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.*” So, Thessalonica was a pagan city. Pagan temples were everywhere. Pagan philosophy and morality shaped its culture. Immorality was prolific. Homosexuality was normal. A heavy darkness blanketed the society and blotted out knowledge of the true God. There were Jews there, and a synagogue. And there were some God-fearing Gentiles who were repelled by the corruption of pagan religion. But these had little or no influence on the city’s character.

About 50 AD Paul and Silas came to Thessalonica, traveling down from Philippi where they had been briefly imprisoned for preaching the gospel. Paul spoke for three Saturdays in the Jewish synagogue, and many of Jews believed, plus some native Greeks

and a number of the city's leading women—well-educated women who could read Latin and Greek and who had connections in the upper levels of Thessalonian society. (See Acts 17:4) The church started out small, but they had strong and solid leadership. Even the light of a single candle can push away the darkness.

2. The Difficult Call to be a Christian. Paul states the Christian's calling in I Thessalonians 5:9-10. *"God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him."* We begin our lives in spiritual darkness. Human hearts are full of sin from the moment we are born. That's why little children manifest disobedience and selfishness as soon as they are able to exert their own wills. If you have a two- or three-year-old you understand this clearly. The Christians in Thessalonica had grown up in the darkness. They would have remained in darkness just as their ancestors had for 350 years, except that God had a different plan for them. *"God has not destined us for wrath,"* Paul says. Out of nothing but his mercy, God sent his Son Jesus Christ into a dark city. He died on the cross, paying with his own life the penalty for the sins of sinners like you and me. He bore God's wrath so you and I would not have to.

Paul says in verse 9 that Jesus saved us. But more than that, verse 10 says Christ secured eternal life for us, and for all those who lived and died before us, who put their faith in Christ. It is all God's doing. If he had not sent Paul and Silas to Thessalonica, not one of those people would have heard about Jesus. If God had not brought the gospel to you, you would never have heard. In chapter 1, verse 5 Paul says God dispatched his Holy Spirit to open the hearts of the Thessalonians so that when they heard the Gospel they were able to believe. God must open our hearts too if we are going to believe. I ask you, have you put your faith in Christ alone to save you? Have you trusted that he has done everything necessary to secure eternal life for you? Or are you still living in darkness, still trying to earn salvation by yourself, still living with the wrath of God hanging over your head? The call of God confronts you today. Come, and trust in Christ.

This call to follow Christ has a second aspect, however: How we live after we have initially put our faith in Christ. The first part of the call of Christ was impossible from a human point of view. So God himself did the impossible. The second part of the call is merely difficult. We carry it out, but we must also have God's help to do it. In chapter 1, verse 6 Paul says to the Thessalonians, *"You...received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit."* In other words, they were glad to receive God's gift of eternal life, but when they did, they immediately plunged into trouble. If your highest priority in life is your own comfort and peace, then the gospel is not for you. Acts 17 tells us some of the Jews from the synagogue opposed Paul's message. Since the Christians had influence in the city government, the Jews could not force the courts or the city administration to act against the believers. So, verse 5 says, *"They took along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob, and set the city in an uproar."* The term *wicked men* literally means, *"men who urinate on the wall."* This tells you something about the tactics the Jews employed. Because of the riot Paul and Silas were forced to slip out of town, leaving the Christians on their own.

In I Thessalonians 1:7-8 Paul reminds the Christians of Thessalonica what happened next. He says, *“You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith in God has gone forth.”* Jesus commanded his church, *“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.”* (Mark 16:15) The new believers, following Paul’s example, began to tell their neighbors about Jesus. They told everyone in the city. They went into the surrounding district and told those people. They went into the adjoining provinces and told them. That was as far as they had gotten by the time Paul wrote to them a few weeks after he had left. You and I have the same call. From the day that we become Christians you and I are to tell everyone we can about Jesus.

When the Thessalonian Christians responded to the call of Christ they were caught up in controversy and violence. In I Thessalonians 2:14 Paul tells them, *“You, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews.”* This shouldn’t surprise us. In verse 15 Paul says the enemies of the gospel are *“hostile to all men.”* They don’t want people to be free or to be saved because they’ll lose their support and power and influence. In chapter 2, verse 16 Paul says they’ll do everything they can to *“hinder...us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved.”* And in verse 18 he says that behind their opposition lies the power of hell itself. *“Satan thwarted us.”*

The Christian may face spiritual opposition, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t real. Or that it lasts only for a short time. Two hundred fifty years after Paul was forced out of Thessalonica, Christians were still facing persecution. A prominent Christian, a leader in the city government named Demetrius stepped out into the city’s marketplace and began preaching the gospel. In part of his speech he condemned the bloody violence of Roman gladiatorial contests in the city theater. Demetrius was arrested and dragged to the Roman baths where he was executed. Today he is the patron saint of Thessalonica and the city holds a great holiday and parade each year in his honor. The Christians in Thessalonica faced this kind of opposition year in and year out for generations, and yet they continued to proclaim the gospel until the cause of Christ prevailed.

In chapter 5, verse 11 Paul tells the Thessalonians, *“Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you are doing.”* Keep on! Build up the church! Expand the kingdom of Christ. This is your calling even though it is a difficult one, Paul says. We Americans can hardly understand what it means to be a Christian in other parts of the world. Most of us have grown up at relative peace with our culture. Oh, we’ve occasionally suffered an insult or some small social discrimination. But being a Christian here is not very hard. Especially in the South where Bible believing churches are well attended and fellow believers populate every level of society. But that’s all changing now—and rapidly. The enemy gains strength day by day. The pagan religions sit smugly across from one of our campuses and just down the road from where our second campus will be. Gross immorality floods the television airwaves and enters our homes through the TV cable. The opponents of freedom heavily influence our Congress

and Senate in Washington, DC. Imposed opposition to the gospel slithers down from our courts. Our streets are awash with violence and crime. And terrorists insinuate themselves among us. It is beginning to cost something to believe in Christ, and it is going to cost a lot more for our children and grandchildren. God has called us to salvation through faith in Christ. And God has called us to be light in the darkness by proclaiming the gospel. To do that Christians must be different from the world around us. And that is a difficult thing to do.

3. The dependence of the church on prayer. God has not left us helpless in this difficult calling. In I Thessalonians 5:17 the apostle says we can and must pray to God for help. Perhaps you are beginning to understand the point of praying. In I Thessalonians 5:12-17 Paul gives us four things we as the body of Christ must do to fulfill our calling. The fourth of these is prayer. The first has to do with pastors. In verses 12-13 Paul says, *“We request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.”* Paul left Thessalonica only three weeks after he had launched the church there. He hadn’t finished teaching them all they needed to know, so he was forced to leave those new Christians in the hands of men he appointed to be pastors and teachers. This is God’s general pattern for the church. In Ephesians 4:11-12 we’re told that God gave a gift to the church: *“Pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”*

A church is blessed if it has a good pastor. Paul tells churches to appreciate their pastors. They should appreciate their pastor’s work. Jim Baird, who is one of the most respected leaders in the Presbyterian Church in America has said on many occasions that pastors live under more pressure than even men with high demand jobs. People in the congregation generally don’t realize it. Paul says, appreciate the hard labor a pastor does.

Paul says a church should appreciate a pastor who holds them accountable and protects them. Jesus compares the church to a flock of sheep. The pastor is their shepherd. The word pastor means shepherd. Sheep tend to wander. They need to be guided to what David called the green pastures and the still waters. Then there’s the one sheep out of a hundred that Jesus told about, who wanders off and the shepherd must search him out and restore him to safety. Sheep don’t especially want that. But they need it. Paul says a congregation should appreciate a pastor who instructs them in the things of God. Pastors often joke among themselves that every time we stand up to preach we face a roomful of people who know they can do it better. But a pastor has been thoroughly trained during three years in seminary. He’s been rigorously examined by the Presbytery. He devotes his life to studying the word of God so that he can teach his people and enable them to know God and receive his blessings as they grow spiritually. The wise congregation values what their pastor teaches them week by week.

In verse 13 Paul says a congregation should hold its pastor in esteem—respect him and honor him and love him because of what he does for them. And yet, today in America pastors are perhaps the most discouraged men you’ll find. The drop out rate for

pastors is alarmingly high. It's never been higher. The average time a pastor stays in a particular church these days is 4.8 years. That's the lowest it's ever been. Studies show that a pastor becomes most effective after five years. A pastor friend of mine said to me on Friday, "It's like a congregation somehow realizes, 'if we don't move this fellow out now, we're going to lose our control of our congregation.'" Paul says Christians will not fulfill their calling unless they value the pastor God has kindly given them.

The second thing Paul says we must do to fulfill our calling successfully is to preserve the unity of the congregation. In verses 14-15 he says, "*We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men.*" When the church goes against the culture and works to lead their neighbors to Christ, you can expect that some believers will act inappropriately, some will grow discouraged because of the circumstances they face, some will be knocked out of the ring by the enemy's blow, some will be slow to join the work or slow to learn, some will want revenge for what the opponents have done to them. We must help these people. Notice what Paul prays in verse 23. "*May your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Most of read this verse and think Paul is talking about us as individuals. But the whole context is the church together. We are to do all we can to keep the church united. We must help our fellow believers not to fall away, not to abandon their faith, not to drop out of the work, or leave the church and be scattered..

Third, Paul says in verse 16, "*Rejoice always.*" In other words, we must maintain a positive outlook. It is so easy to be negative or to grumble or complain. But that displeases God. That's not to say that we pretend there aren't problems. Instead, we make a conscious choice to focus on the positive things. God is still in charge isn't he? He's still at work. It must have been hard for Paul to be driven out of Thessalonica. He feared for the very existence of the church. He sent Timothy back to find out what was happening. Timothy returned and reported that the church was hanging on and even prospering in spite of the difficulties, and Paul celebrated. What about us? God calls us to be positive people who see the possibilities in the spite of the hardship.

Finally Paul says in verse 17, "*Pray without ceasing.*" If we are committed to our calling we will have plenty of things to pray for. We pray for the lost that they will come to Christ. We pray for our opponents. We pray for the pastors and teachers who work hard for the church. We pray for those who struggle, who've been beaten up, who waver in their faith. We pray for the unity of the body. We pray for the opportunities God has given us, the ministries that we develop, that they will produce the fruit of salvation for many. Do we pray for those who are sick or grieving? Of course! But if our prayers are exclusively for church members' physical needs, it's a sure tip-off that the church is not fulfilling its calling. All of our prayers fit into the context of the work Christ has called us to do. A couple of years ago I sat in a meeting with our deacons as they suggested things they ought to pray for that evening. One man after another mentioned a person he was witnessing to, or someone to whom the gospel had been presented, or a family that was wavering in its faith. These were prayers that had to do

with the church's calling. And I was so proud of our men. I could say the same thing about our elders when they gather to pray for you each month. As they pray for you they pray for the work. What about you? What do you pray for? If there is an urgency in your prayers to see the work of Jesus carried out then you will find it easy to pray without ceasing, and you won't have to read the titles of the library books to stay awake!

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