Sermon- Praying without ceasing, hyperbole or higher consciousness

Scripture: 1 Thess 5:14-18 Sunday, June 18, 2017

This has been an eventful week. Our church has lost an icon of perseverance and faithfulness for a century. His legacy to us is his example and the family he has left behind who are also great examples of faithfulness and perseverance in the face of many challenges. I just want to commend you Pastor Mervin and Judy for persisting in your care for Walter so faithfully and being faithful through all your other challenges that you have faced so well. May God continue to bless you all and keep Walter’s legacy alive though you. We also had a wonderful week of VBS with our VBS leaders from all parts of the country and even as far as Indonesia with us lead by Cheri Baer. We had I think 19 students come through our VBS and for a 100% outreach VBS that was completely God’s going and we give thanks to God. I also wanted to acknowledge Arlis and Marsha for all the background work they did in making the VBS happen. They hosted most of the team, Marsha coordinated all the meals, and Arlis did all kinds of background things to make sure our facility was clean and things were functioning the way it should. A really big thank you to Arlis and Marsha. Finally, today is Father’s Day. Those of us who were blessed to have Fathers who were there for us and helped shape who we are today, we thank God for them. For those of us who did not have perfect Father’s, know this, that you do have a perfect heavenly Father who promises to never leave you or forsake you and can never make a mistake in putting your faith and truth in our heavenly Father. That is the message we hope our VBS kids heard this week and that is the message we hope that anyone who walks into our church will hear every week from this pulpit.

Today, I want to turn our attention once again to topic of prayer. The way we relate to our heavenly father. In our passage today, Apostle Paul is giving his final instructions to the Thessalonians. These instructions have to do with how they are to relate to our heavenly Father. And he gives many instructions but for our purpose today, I want to focus on just one phrase, verse 17, pray without ceasing. In the Greek it is really just two words, ἀδιαλείπτως προσεύχομαι (Adialeiptos proseochomai)

And that is all we are going to focus on today. ἀδιαλείπτως προσεύχομαι

The first thing I want to say about this is that, when Paul is talking about praying ceaselessly he is not talking about, going on your knees folding your hands and talking to God endlessly. That kind of pray is important but no person in the Bible did that continuously and Jesus himself did not pray like that. There are monks in other religious who have sat to meditate and pray continuously literally for years at a stretch but that is not what the Bible asks us to do, neither in this passage or anywhere else. Paul in chapter 2 verse 9 of 1st Thess claimed to have worked “day and night” while we preached the Gospel to you in order not to be a burden to anyone. But that hardly means that they were working continuously without a break. That is an example of a figure of speech which means they worked really hard and I am sure that included working at all times of the day but it does not mean that Apostle Paul never slept at all. He was human and he had to sleep at some time you can be sure of that. But even though Apostle Paul took breaks and eat and slept like the rest of us, he worked very hard there is no doubt about that. And not only was he working a great deal but he exhorted the Thessalonicans to “pray without ceasing”. Meaning he was wanting them to engage in some kind of prayer that you would do that is almost like you and I breath.

So what is he talking about we need to get some basic things cleared. Firstly, what is prayer? 1 Chron 16:11 says, ***Look to the Lord and His strength, seek His face always.***  This means that we are to find a way to seek to connect with God and draw from his strength. When you walk into a room, I am sure most of us will be scanning the room and seeking faces to connect to. Pray is about making sure that our attention inside us is turned to God in some way and that will enable us to draw our strength from God. Understand, I am not talking about a verbalized prayer here. I am talking about and internal attention that is turned towards God and tuned to God.

I want to just pause here for a minute and establish why it is such a big deal to be constantly in tune with God. And to do that I am going to take you to a fascinating field of study that I am not sure many of you have heard of. It is called Game Theory. So please indulge me for a few minutes. Now what is Game Theory? Game Theory is the study of mathematical models that study conflict and cooperation between intelligent and rational decision makers. I am sure you are familiar with the fact that computers can play chess with human beings and even win. People have found a way to translate strategies of winning at chess into computer software so that the computer can now win against the smartest chess players in the world. But game theory is applied in all kinds of situations. When the internet was invented, the problem people had to solve was, how do you get thousands and even millions of computers to talk to each other, in an interconnected network so that computers would actually function in coordination with each other across the whole globe without creating data traffic jams that would bring everything to a halt. These are real world problems and it takes mathematicians who understand game theory to understand the complex issues involved and design the rules of the game so that the whole system can work as it is supposed to. So why am I discussing game theory with you in this sermon. It is because Game Theorist have made a most fascinating discovery in recent years. In this fascinating book called “Algorithms to Live by” by Tom Griffiths Tim writes that when you look at the largest game of all, that is the functioning of the whole human society, with each person trying to gain the maximum advantage for themselves while avoiding the threats to themselves, if all people on the planet were to just do these two things we would get complete anarchy and the destruction of the planet. So what have computer scientists concluded about the biggest game of all, human life on planet earth, that human life on planet earth would not be possible unless there was an ultimate game designer, a God the Father who puts in place rules like “thou shall now do this and that”. Tom Griffiths writes that is the only reason why we don’t have complete chaos in this world. I hope you don’t mind me sharing these things from different fields of human endeavor that tickle my fancy. But the lesson for us from game theory I believe is this, unless you and me are in constant tune with the will of God the Father and designer or our world we live in constant danger of stepping into anarchy and even contributing to it ourselves. When we follow the rules of our Father and Designer God, then we become the salt and the light of the world preventing this world from devolving into that anarchy that we will quickly bring into this world.

Our task then is to be in constant tune with our God allowing him to do three things in us all the time, to constantly guide us in the way we should go, to constantly defend us from spiritual attacks and to constantly shape us into the image of Christ. Let me first give you an instance of how this has worked in our church just last week. Our VBS began with a kick off picnic in the park. A lot of people put a lot of effort into making that work right. There was the bounce house and the Christian rap artist, all the food we had arranged and the VBS team who came from all over the country. So when we had everyone at the kick off party except the kids it was kind off discouraging right? But here is the thing, the enemy would have loved that we were discouraged enough to be dejected and want to give up. But we did not give up. We got together and we prayed. And I can tell you and when we prayed something powerful happened. In fact I can tell you the precise moment when the turning point took place. One people among us prayed that if there is the smallest desire in the heart of a child to come for the VBS or if there is the slightest inclination in a parents heart that they should send their kids then that desire should start welling up and become a strong desire and a strong desire be transformed into action. That was the prayer. I remember hearing one of you pray that pray and I remember agreeing with that prayer. Then we waited in faith setting up the rooms and putting everything into place like Noah building an ark in anticipation of a flood he had never experienced. And finally God worked in the hearts of all the families and caused them to act and bring and we had our flood of souls to ministry to over the week of VBS. None of that would have happened if we were not in tune with God. It takes being in tune with God to think that we have to stop and pray, it takes being in tune with God to even stop and listen while we pray and it takes being in tune with God to act in faith.

Now at the practical level, the problem is not that we don’t know we have to be in tune with God. At the practical level the problem is that we are in tune with God only 10% of the time. Now this 10% problem is overcome when we come together as a group of believers, because when we are together even if at any given time only one person out of 10 is in tune with God, then that person can help bring everyone else in tune with God. It is a bigger problem when we are by ourselves. So how do we come into tune with God a little more, maybe from 10% to 15% and so on?

Well the answer is to prayer style that Apostle Paul was talking about. Ceaseless prayer. There are two people whose books I have found helpful in this area. One is Richard Foster and his book Finding the Heart’s true home and the other a compilation of the thoughts of brother Lawrence a Carmelite monk in the 17th century called The Practice of the Presence of God. Both these people talk about what ceaseless can look like. And they both describe a prayer form that can happen almost like breathing, very naturally and constantly. In the Eastern Orthodox church there is a prayer called the Jesus prayer that is just a one sentence prayer that can be repeated, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy on me a sinner. This is a prayer that pictures who God is, who you are in and how you want God to relate with you. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy on me a sinner. But your prayer can be even shorter that that. Something that can be said in one breath. Like “be still and know that I am God” where you are listening to the words of Ps 46:11 over and over. You can discover your own breath prayer. There is an excerise I found on the internet and it goes like this. Allow God to call you by name. Now if God were to ask you what do you want? Just answer that simply. It could be one word, like “peace” or “joy” or “to understand truth”.

The next is connect that what you want with your most comfortable way of addressing God. Mine is loving father or loving God. What every is your term, connect it to what you want. So your breath prayer would become something like, “loving Father, help me to understand truth”. Now what this author says is as you keep praying this prayer for a few days, it will begin to transform a little. From “help me to understand truth, Lord” for example it could become “help me to live your truth, Lord”. The prayer will slowly transform you and you become more and more in tune with our loving father.

And as we are transformed we are acquiring a higher level of consciousness. Imagine this, we are at that point not just living through life as one player in a vast game but we are living as one player in a vast game but in tune with the one who created both the game and us the player. And as we play out our part in tune with the one who designed it all we also get to fulfill perfectly our individual purpose. Because with every breath we are reminded of our connection with our creator and He is reminding us of how he wants to direct us in this incredible situation he has placed us in to play our part.

Praying without ceasing is not just for the spiritual giants. It is for everyone who wants to be in tune with their heavenly father every moment of the day. Hey your heavenly father wants to be in tune with you so why would you not want to be in tune with him? May each of us grow in our consciousness of God and tune in to the voice of our father who is calling us by name and wanting to direct your steps today. If you have never discovered your breath prayer before Father’s Day is not a bad day to begin. Let us pray.