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The Need for Persistent Prayer

Colossians 4:2

Intro: Having just finished delivering some concrete examples of how believers are to express their love for Christ in the everyday routine of Christian living, Paul now rounds off his practical advice for the Colossian church with a few more final thoughts. The first, our text today, has to do with the necessity of prayer. A life lived for Christ, in which daily life is offered to Him as worship and service, is not an alternative to conscious prayer, but is actually supported by it. So, in order for the Colossians (and all other believers) to properly and successfully live for Christ, they must be diligent in their prayers.

Unlike the Jews, early Christians had no set times of prayer and we still don't today. The reason for this is because all Christians are expected to pray spontaneously and often. Of course, this doesn't rule out the useful discipline of having set prayer times, it simply removes the legalistic necessity for them. So Paul instructs the Colossians (and us) to devote themselves to prayer, or to persevere in prayer.

2- We should never underestimate the power of speech. A judge can say a few words and a defendant's life can be spared or condemned. A doctor can speak a few words and a patient either rejoices ecstatically, is filled with fear and dread or just gives up in despair. Whether the communication is oral or written, there is great power in words. It has been calculated that for every word in Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, 125 individuals lost their lives in World War II. I haven't seen the totals for the writings of Karl Marx but I will bet they are greater.

The power of speech is a gift from God and if it's to be used successfully, it must be used the way God has ordained. In the Epistle of James, the tongue is compared to a bridle and a rudder, a fire and a poisonous animal and a fruitful tree and a fountain ([Jam 3](#)). These 3 pairs of pictures teach us that the tongue has the power to direct, to destroy and to delight. The tongue is just a little member in our bodies, but it can accomplish great things for good or for evil. In the first half of [ch4 \(2-9\)](#), Paul will present 4 important ministries of Christian speech. The first ministry is prayer.

This call for devotion to prayer recalls the early days of the disciples immediately after the ascension of Jesus. We see them continuing...in prayer in [Acts](#) ch [1](#), [2](#), [6](#). Paul directs the same thing to the believers in Rome ([12:12](#)) and t to the Thessalonians ([5:17](#)). It is a constant call and practice throughout the NT by disciples of all stages of spiritual development. As far as a ministry of Christian speech, both prayer and worship are probably the highest uses of the gift of speech. In the very next verse we will see that Paul is neither too proud nor ashamed to ask his friends to pray for him. Even though he was an apostle, he knew he needed prayer support for himself and his ministry if he was to continue to be successful for the kingdom of God. If a great Christian like Paul felt the need for prayer support, how much more do each of us need this kind of spiritual help?

In just a few words, Paul describes 4 necessary characteristics of a satisfying and spiritual prayer life. The first of these is that our praying must be faithful: Continue...in prayer. Now, to be faithful in prayer doesn't necessarily mean that we must have faith in the God that we pray to – that sense of faithful is a given. Of course, every Christian must already have faith in God or else they wouldn't be a Christian, right? And yet, in another sense, I've always believed that our prayer life is inextricably connected to our faith in God. You could even say that our prayer life is a gauge of our faith in God. Prayer done properly is hard work and so few believers engage in it as they should simply because they have told themselves that: God's too busy, God won't answer or I don't really want to hear God's answer. Still, the Bible consistently calls for believers to continue in prayer.

What Paul actually means here is to be steadfast in your prayer life, be devoted, don't quit. This is exactly the way the early church prayed. Of course, this doesn't mean they always did it full of believing faith. One of the funniest stories of an early church, all-night prayer vigil was when Peter was arrested by Herod and put into prison. When this happened, the Bible says that constant prayer was offered to God for him ([Acts 12:5b](#)). You know the story, late one night as Peter was in his prison cell, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison ([7a](#)). Not that Peter noticed it! Either he was earnestly praying with his eyes closed or, more likely, he was sound asleep; either way, the angel had to smack him on the side to get him up. As Peter stood up, his chains fell off, the prison doors flew open and the

angel said, Get dressed and follow me. They walked past 2 different guard posts and then out of the gate that led to the city. It wasn't until the angel disappeared that Peter realized, "It must have been the Lord."

Clearly, Peter didn't bother himself with too much constant prayer inside the prison but when he got to the house where the church was constantly praying for him, they didn't believe he was there. The girl that went to the door recognized his voice but she got so excited, she ran back and told the prayer warriors, who promptly told her she was crazy. I laugh every time I think of Peter standing outside on the curb, banging on the door, pleading with the praying church to let him in. He could walk out of a securely locked prison but he couldn't get inside to the prayer meeting. In their defense, who among us would have thought that God would have answered our prayer so quickly and so miraculously?

The real problem is that too many of us pray only occasionally – when we feel like it, think about it or when there is some kind of crisis in our lives. I heard an interesting quote about prayer the other day from author Corrie Ten Boom. She asked the pointed question: In your Christian life, is prayer a steering wheel or just a spare tire? Do you employ prayer as a means to seek out and discover God's will for your life or is it merely something you turn to in times of trouble? Is prayer constantly in front of you directing your life or is it hidden away in the back of your mind ready to be pulled out for any unfortunate eventuality? In case of emergency – break glass! That's not the mind set Paul is recommending here, not at all.

The ancient root word translated continue comes from a root word that means to be strong. "Pray without ceasing" is God's command to us ([1 Thess 5:17](#)). This doesn't mean we should walk around all day muttering prayers under our breath. Instead, it means we should be constantly in fellowship with God so that prayer becomes as normal to us as breathing. It's a wonderful privilege to be able to speak to God at any occasion, for any reason. It doesn't need to be an emergency, but it can be. God desires for us to pray to Him; He listens intently to our prayers. If we believe that this is true, then we should have no problem coming to Him and making our requests as a child to their father. Have you noticed that kids have no problem asking for things, constantly – without hesitation or trepidation. If an idea crosses their mind, whether it troubles their mind or strikes their fancy, it immediately comes out of their mouth in the form of a very crude petition.

Kids ask for a lot and the older they get, the more expensive the request. Still, parents want them to ask so they can use the petition as a teaching opportunity.

This leads us to the 2nd characteristic: earnestness. Paul says to continue earnestly in prayer. The word relates to having an earnest adherence to a person or thing. In our text it implies not only persistence but also fervor. You might think that if someone is persistent in their prayers, they would also be earnest by default but that is not necessarily so. You can pray constantly but do so without any passion or any real concern. Too many Christians go through the exercise of prayer, but that's all it is to them: a spiritual exercise; something to get out of the way before they start their day or finish it. The sort of earnest prayer Paul speaks of here is important, but it doesn't come easy.

The word earnestly speaks of great effort steadily applied. Think of something you really enjoy doing, then imagine doing that constantly, with great effort steadily applied. I enjoy doing a lot of different things but if I had to do them like that, I wouldn't enjoy them for very long. I love playing with the grandkids but eventually Pawpaw's got to take a nap! The picture this word conjures up is that of Jacob wrestling with a Man in [Gen 32](#). No name is mentioned for this Man but later, Jacob declares, "I have seen God face to face" ([30](#)). The Bible says Jacob wrestled with God all night and as dawn began to break it says that God saw that He did not prevail against him so He touched the socket of Jacob's hip and put it out of joint. Did Jacob relent and throw in the towel? No, even with this painful injury, Jacob persisted and wouldn't let go of God unless and until He blessed him. That's the idea behind earnest prayer: coming before the throne of God and ply every promise, use every argument (legitimate) and wrestle with all your might.

Of course, this is not to suggest that God is reluctant to answer our prayers and that we must wear Him out by our praying. The truth is quite the opposite: God delights to answer our prayers. But He sometimes delays the answer to those prayers for different reasons. Sometimes the delays are to increase our faith and devotion to Him. After all, if we pray for something we believe to be serious but only pray once or twice, then it really doesn't seem to be that important to us. If our petition is not important enough for us to persist in prayer, why should it be important to God? Now, it may very well be important to Him, but he will accomplish it through the constant, earnest

prayer of someone else. Sometimes the delay is so that God can accomplish His purposes at the right time. What we should understand is that God's delays are not always God's denials. As we continue in prayer, earnestly seeking His will, our hearts are being prepared for the answer God gives. We may even find ourselves growing in grace before His answer comes.

The next characteristic of an effective prayer life is watchfulness. Paul's call to devoted prayer is modified by the participle being vigilant. This phrase holds the basic sense of being awake and alert. In [1 Thess 5:10](#), for example, the same verb translated awake is contrasted with being asleep. The text in 1 Thess also illustrates another facet of this verb as used in the NT: it often calls for Christians to be alert or watchful in light of the imminent return of Christ. 12 of the 22 NT occurrences are used in that context. What the watching believers are to do in these 12 texts is not to watch for Christ's return necessarily, but to watch their own lives in light of the return of Christ. Believers need to constantly be awake to the nature of the times they live in – the last days – and to orient their lives accordingly.

In our text, it's not clear what Paul means by being vigilant in prayer. It could be a recognition of the tendency to let the mind wander or even to fall asleep when praying. Or it could be a reminder that the kingdom is coming. With each moment passed, and with each prayer for the coming of God's final victory, the return of Christ draws nearer. Neither of these is clear from the text, though, and it could be that what Paul really has in mind here is the need for a mental engagement with prayer. There is no power in dull, listless praying. If there is no fire on the altar, the incense will not rise to God ([Ps 141:2](#)). Real praying demands spiritual energy and alertness, and this can only come from the Holy Spirit of God. Routine prayers are unanswered prayers.

Prayer is not some rote task to be plowed through with dogged determination, it is to be an exercise of awareness – awareness of God's gracious acts in our undeserving lives so that our thanksgiving will be genuine; awareness of the current needs of others so that our intercession for them is properly focused, not just shotgunning general platitudes; and awareness of oneself, so that there is honesty in our confessions and our petitions.

The final characteristic is thanksgiving. This should come as no surprise as Paul has now mentioned it no less than 5 times in this very short letter. Thanksgiving is an important ingredient in successful praying ([Phil 4:6](#)). If all we do is ask, and never thank God for His gifts, we are selfish. Worship and praise, prayer and service, all spring from the constant awareness of what God has done and continues to do, both in bringing salvation and in particular aspects of the life of the individual Christian. A true appreciation of the believer's new status: dead to the world and its powers, alive to God in Christ with all our sins forgiven and destined for glory, will inevitably produce thanksgiving. We should rightly be thankful for the major things but we can also be thankful for the little mercies as well. Sincere gratitude to God is one of the best ways to put true fervor into our praying.

This stress on thanksgiving also had special relevance to the Colossians, who were tempted to think that they could add to what Christ had given to them. They couldn't, of course, and their proper attitude was not to seek for more spiritual experience but to give thanks for all that had been done for them, which was all that could be done for them, all that needed to be done for them. Such an attitude of thankfulness would thus serve as a powerful deterrent to the inroads made by the false teachers in that church as well as serving as an effective stimulus for prayer.

A new technique used to increase efficiency in automobile manufacturing is to have materials manufactured only as they are needed. That tactic may work in the auto industry, but it doesn't work in the life of a believer because it doesn't work in prayer. If we expect our prayer life to have any effect in our own lives and in the world around us, it cannot be sporadic or haphazard. We cannot fall back on prayer only when we think we need it, we must devote ourselves to it. It cannot be our "last resort" after exhausting all other avenues; it should be the first thing we do, even before the emergency appears.

Prayer requires serious discipline. Later in this chapter, Paul describes the fervent prayer of Epaphras for these Colossians as something akin to a wrestling match ([12](#)). Just like Jacob, Epaphras prays for them with all his might, straining every nerve and muscle. If Christians prayed with the same zeal that some people manifest to keep themselves physically fit for a longer healthier life, they might see different results in both the life and witness of the church.

A church in a rural part of a rural state experienced phenomenal growth, both spiritually and numerically, and they attributed it to the work of the Holy Spirit and their prayer ministry. The associate pastor commented that, "God is doing some unbelievable things here because His people are daring to open up the channel for the power of the Spirit to flow...They are paying the price in prayer." That's the real power of faithful, earnest, vigilant, thankful prayer. The will of God is revealed, the power of God is engaged and the kingdom of God is advanced. Charles Spurgeon pastored the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London for 38 years. The ministry was successful and the facilities were quite naturally large. One day a group of visiting pastors asked to see the powerhouse of the church, expecting to be shown a boiler room or some such thing. But Spurgeon took them to a small room in a back hall and opened the door for them to see. Inside were some of the men of the church, giving themselves in earnest prayer for the services that would occur that evening. Spurgeon said, "Here's the powerhouse of this ministry."

We serve the same God, we possess the same Holy Spirit but are we willing to pay the price in prayer? The goal of Grace Chapel has never been to grow a large church but to advance the kingdom of God. We can't do that sitting on our hands. We can only see it accomplished by going to our knees in prayer. 😊