



“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it...”

## Pray Always, Being Watchful

Colossians 4:2 (ESV)

### Introduction

As we stand at the beginning of a new year, I find myself attracted to the subject prayer. It seems fitting at this time that we are once again reminded of how precious is the gift of prayer. During the final days of last year, my daily Bible reading plan had me in Paul’s letter to the believers who lived in the city of Colossae. Verse two of chapter four jumped out at me.

### Colossians 4:2 (ESV)

**2** *Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.*

In this sentence Paul teaches us three facts about prayer: 1) God’s people are to **continue steadfastly** in it, 2) God’s people are to **be watchful** in it, and 3) it is to be filled with **thanksgiving**. These three facts will serve as our outline this morning, though we will only have time for the first two.

## A Definition of Prayer

I believe having a clear definition of prayer before us will be helpful. American evangelist D.L. Moody (1837-1899) was in the 1850's invited to Scotland to preach. While he was there he was asked to speak to the children at a local elementary school. He decided to speak to the children about prayer. At the beginning of his talk, he asked the rhetorical question, "What is prayer?" To his surprise, immediately about a hundred little hands shot up. Moody called upon one little guy seated closest to him and the little boy replied,

"Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, by the help of the Holy Spirit, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies."<sup>1</sup>

If you were raised in a Presbyterian church background you will know that this is the answer to question 98 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Moody smiled and replied, "Be thankful, my son, that you were born in Scotland." That is a wonderful definition of prayer.

If one my children were to ask me, "Dad, what is prayer?" I would probably answer, "Prayer is talking to God." But the Westminster Catechism gets it right by being a bit more specific than my answer. Prayer is the offering up of our desires to God. This is confirmed by doing a simple word search in the Bible.

I opened up my Bible study software and searched for every verse that included the word 'prayer.' The word occurs in 142 verses. I then scrolled through each of them and in every instance where a prayer is recorded, it was someone asking God for something or that He do something—they were offering up their desires unto God. Those prayers also included elements of praise, thanksgiving, and confession, but every instance involved a person expressing his or her desires to God. Prayer is intensely personal. Therefore, we might define prayer as 'sharing your heart with God.'

## Continue Steadfastly In Prayer

Paul says in Col 4:2 that believers are to **continue steadfastly** in prayer. This translates one word in the Greek *proskatereo* (προσκαρτερέω) which means "to continue to do something with intense effort, with the possible implication of despite difficulty—to devote oneself to, to keep on, to persist in."<sup>2</sup> The NIV & NASB both translate this as "devote yourselves." The Contemporary English Translation renders it this way, "never give up praying..."

The command to continual prayer is repeated throughout Scripture.

**Romans 12:12** (ESV)

*12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.*

**Ephesians 6:18** (ESV)

*18 praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints,*

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<sup>1</sup> Morton H. Smith, *Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession Standards*, electronic ed. (Greenville SC: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 662.

**1 Thessalonians 5:17-18** (ESV)

*17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

You may note that each of these verses were written by Paul. But if we ask the question, “From where did Paul get this understanding of prayer? How can he so boldly command constant prayer?”

The answer is that Paul learned this from Jesus.

### The Lord's Prayer

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he responded with a prayer that has been called The Model Prayer or The Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:9; cf. Lk 11:1-4) and in it he says, “*Give us this day our daily bread.*” This clearly teaches us that Jesus intended for them to **pray every day**.

### The Persistent Friend

In Luke's account (Lk 11:5ff), Jesus then immediately told a parable about a man who had an unexpected visitor arrive at midnight. The man then went to his friend and asked if he could borrow some bread to feed his guest. His friend replied, “I'm in bed, go away!” But the man did not go away. He kept begging and pleading with him. So finally the man got out of bed and gave him what he was asking for. Jesus explains the point of the parable: **the man received what he desired because he was persistent in asking.**

Jesus then said,

*“I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened to him. Even horribly wicked fathers know how to give good gifts to their children, so how much more will a good and holy God give good things to those who ask Him?”* (Lk 11:11-13; cf Mt 7:10-11)

### The Parable of the Persistent Widow

Then he went on and told the story of the persistent widow who kept asking a wicked judge to give her justice. Finally, the wicked judge gave her what she asked for just to get her off his back. Jesus is crystal clear about the meaning of the parable.

**Luke 18:1** (ESV)

*1 And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.*

Jesus was teaching His disciples **to be in constant prayer**.

### The Example of Jesus

Jesus modeled this. He himself prayed constantly. How many times did the disciples wake up only to find Jesus already up and off by himself praying to the Father? Jesus spent entire nights in prayer (Lk 6:12; Mk 6:46-48). Again and again in Scripture we find him up before the sun, off alone in some secluded place, praying to the Father.

Jesus prayed continually, otherwise he could not truthfully say, “*I do nothing of my own accord, but only what the Father tells me to do*” (Jn 6:19, 30). Jesus talked to his Father all the time about everything. He even went so far as to say that all he said and taught was only what the Father told him to say and teach (Jn 7:16; 8:28-29). If Jesus was telling the truth, and everything he did and said was always only what the Father wanted him to do and to say, then he must have been praying constantly.

And if Jesus lived this way and he was the Son of God, then how much more should we do the same? ***If Jesus needed to pray constantly, then how much more do we?*** If we are his followers and this is the path he walked, then shouldn't we follow in his footsteps? He is our example and we should emulate him.

The problem is that simply making you aware of these commands and the example of Jesus will probably not cause you lean more into a life of prayer but maybe understanding why God commands prayer will?

### Why Command Us To Pray?

It is a fact that wants His people to pray to Him continually. It is God's will that we pray (i.e. talk) to Him. But why does He want us to pray? If prayer is bringing our desires before Him, then why do we need to pray?

### Because He Lacks Knowledge?

Is it because He does not know our needs? Is that why we are commanded to pray? No. Certainly not. Prayer most certainly is not for God's education. God is omniscient. He knows everything. He doesn't need us to tell Him anything. Jesus tells us that He knows our needs before we ask (Mt 6:8). So why does He command us to pray?

Have you ever considered that one of the reasons God commands His children to pray is because He enjoys your company?

### Tell Me What Happened Around the Christmas Tree?

This week, as a family, we took down the pitifully wilted, dry, crumbly, Christmas tree. As we were doing this, we put on some Christmas music. My oldest son, David, was tired of hearing Christmas music and so he grabbed his iPad and put on his headphones so he could listen to some music of his choosing. I became a little frustrated because the iPad rendered one hand completely unavailable for removing the ornaments from the tree. With two hands the work could progress much faster. So I suggested he simply choose to endure the music that all the rest of us were enjoying and get rid of the iPad. This resulted in a small discussion and large amount of frustration for everyone in room as David and I tried to avoid each other.

Later that night before going to bed, I sat down alone with David and said, “So tell me, what happened around the Christmas tree today?” I said that not because I didn't know, but because I wanted to restore the closeness of our relationship and once again enjoy his company.

I think prayer works the same way. God commands us to pray constantly, not because He doesn't know what we need, but because He enjoys a close relationship with His children.

That might be a nice story, but is there any Scriptural evidence that this true?

Turn to Proverbs 15:8.

**Proverbs 15:8 (ESV)**

**8** *The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,  
but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him.*

I love the ESV translation, but on this particular verse, the translation is lacking.

[By the way, you can now get a free digital copy of the ESV translation through [www.olivetree.com](http://www.olivetree.com). Their Bible study app is available for iPhone and Android phones and is also available for your PC in both Mac and Windows platforms. This is a great Bible study tool. The app also includes several Bible reading plans which you can sync across multiple devices.]



The key word in **Proverbs 15:8** is ‘acceptable.’ The word translated ‘acceptable’ in the Hebrew is *raw-tsōne* (רָצוֹן), which means, “favor, delight, or pleasure” of God.<sup>3</sup> The KJV & NASB both translate the word as ‘delight’ and the NIV translates it ‘pleases.’ The word can mean ‘acceptable,’ but given the context of the verse, ‘pleases’ or ‘delights’ much more effectively captures the meaning than does ‘acceptable.’ The parallelism here is obvious.

The word ‘abomination’ connotes an intense hatred for the sacrifice of the wicked, while the word ‘acceptable’ does not convey any emotional intensity for the prayer upright, while ‘delight’ or ‘pleases’ would convey such intensity. If the Lord simply *rejected* the sacrifice of the wicked, then we might expect him to *accept* the prayer of the righteous, but God does not merely ‘reject’ the sacrifice of the wicked, He hates it. Therefore, ‘delight’ or ‘pleases’ is a much better translation of this word.

‘Delight’ rather than ‘accepts’ much more effectively captures the contrasting intensity of emotion being conveyed toward the righteous. The next verse affirms this line of thinking.

**Prov 15:9 (ESV)**

**9** *“The way of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,  
but He loves him who pursues righteousness.”*

The way of the wicked God *hates*, while those who pursue righteousness He *loves*. Similarly, God does not merely *accept* the prayers of the upright, He *takes pleasure* in them. The point being made is that God does not merely *endure* your prayers, He *enjoys* in them. The God of the universe does not merely tolerate the prayers of His children, He *delights* in them!

He yearns for you to tell Him what you are thinking about. It *pleases* God when you share your desires with Him. ***It is the desire of His heart, for you to share with Him the desires of your heart.*** He does not tire of hearing from you what is on your mind and heart.

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000), 953.



### Isaiah 62:6-7 (ESV)

6 On your walls, O Jerusalem,  
I have set watchmen;  
all the day and all the night  
they shall never be silent.  
You who put the LORD in remembrance,  
take no rest,  
7 and give him no rest  
until he establishes Jerusalem  
and makes it a praise in the earth.

These are an amazing two verses. God ordains ‘watchmen’ to stand before Him and **to never be silent** but all day and all night **give Him no rest**, as it were, until he fulfills His promise to establish Jerusalem and cause all the earth to praise her!

God desires that His children express their desires to Him. Not only does He desire this, but He **delights** in this. Your praying to Him makes Him happy. When you go to God with your desires, it gives Him pleasure and delight. Though we may tire of repeated requests, God does not.

### Become Like A Child

Jesus often used children as examples. Children can ask for the same thing a million times until parents finally tire and give in. In your praying be like a little child. Trust in the Father’s goodness and love for you enough to keep asking Him. Keep going to Him in prayer and keep talking to Him. I say unless you become like a little child, you will never have any of your prayers answered.

And do not believe that lie that your prayers are a burden to Him. We have already seen that Jesus prayed constantly. Do you think that God the Father (who was well pleased and delighted in His Son) ever thought,

“Good grief, Jesus, will you stop talking to me for one minute! Will you not give me a little peace and quiet? You’re talking my ear off. Will you just grow up and make a decision on your own? Why do you have to ask me what I think about everything? Come on, Son, you’re going to have to learn to stand on your own two feet. I’m not always going to be with you every minute!”

Can you imagine God ever thinking that? Of you can’t imagine it, because God never thought like that. Just because we sinful parents think like that, does not mean that God the Father thinks like that. He never thought like that about Jesus and He’ll never think like that about you. If you change the way you think about God, then maybe you will change the way you think about praying to Him.

God does not merely endure, your prayers, He **enjoys** them. So if you want to make God happy in 2013, then decide now to make praying to Him a perpetual practice. Don’t ever stop praying to our heavenly Father. He enjoys being pestered by your perpetual praying to Him, because to Him, it’s not pestering, it’s an expression of God-glorifying trust. **Continue steadfastly in prayer.**

### Be Watchful In Prayer

The second instruction Paul gives in Colossians 4:2 is to **be watchful** in prayer. Being watchful? What does this mean? I’ve never had anyone to teach me to be watchful in prayer. Does this mean that

we supposed to pray with our eyes open? The Greek (*grēgorountes*, γρηγορέω) word literally means, ‘keep awake;’<sup>4</sup> “to remain awake because of the need to continue alert—to stay awake, to be watchful.”<sup>5</sup>

So the first clear application is, do not fall asleep while you are praying. When you pray, stay alert. Don’t be lazy when you pray. When you pray, do not allow yourself to get drowsy. Remember, prayer is talking to God. Prayer is having a conversation with God. So do not fall asleep in the middle of your conversation with Him. It is incredibly rude to fall asleep on guy while you are talking to him.

Aside from being rude, is there any other reason why Paul might say this? Jesus uses almost the exact same language in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before he was murdered. Speaking to Peter, James, and John, Jesus said,

**Matthew 26:38 (ESV)**

**38** Then he said to them, “*My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.*”

Notice Jesus does not say, “pray with me,” but “watch with me.”

**Matthew 26:40-41 (ESV)**

**40** And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “*So, could you not watch with me one hour? 41 Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*”

Notice that watching is different from praying. In verse 41 Jesus says, “watch and pray.” They are two different things. They are related, but they are different. Remember ‘watch’ means “stay awake.” Jesus admonished them for falling asleep, but then he says, “watch and pray.” He wants his followers to do both. Staying means staying awake and alert physically, but also spiritually. We are to be fully alert and awake when we pray.

Let me offer six suggestions that may be helpful.<sup>6</sup>

1. **Get to bed.** Go to bed early enough to get the rest you need in order for you wake up early enough to have time alone with your Father at the start of each day. Yes, pray always throughout the day, but like any relationship, in order for it to grow you need to give intentional space for intimacy to grow. I can send a quick text or have a quick phone call to my wife many times throughout the day, but my marriage will not thrive if we never have dedicated and concentrated time alone together. It’s the same with God the Father. If you want to stay awake in prayer, then make sure you get plenty of sleep.
2. **Get up.** Don’t try praying in bed or lying down on the couch. You will fall asleep. Get up. Stand up or sit up, but don’t try praying lying down. Go for a walk with the Lord. Be watchful. Stay awake. Don’t pray in a situation in which you can easily fall asleep.

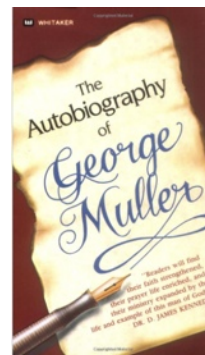
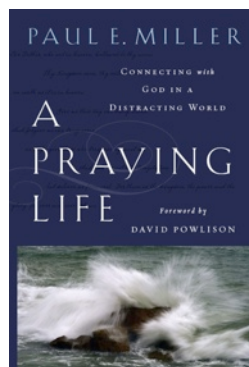
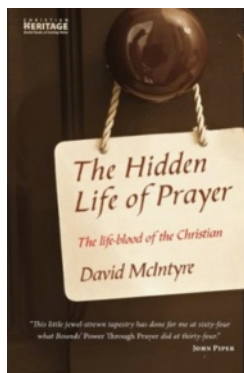
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<sup>4</sup> Curtis Vaughan, “Colossians” In , in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 11: Ephesians Through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 221.

<sup>5</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 259.

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from Paul Miller, *A Praying Life: Connecting With God In A Distracting World*, p. 50.

3. **Get awake.** I do not believe you will have the sweetest times with the Lord at the end of the day. Plan time alone with the Lord first thing in the morning. There are too many examples in the Bible of people meeting with the Lord early in the morning. Get awake and give Him 10 or 15 minutes (or more) at the beginning of the day. Get up, make a cup of coffee (or tea), wash your face, and then pray to your Father.
4. **Get a quiet place.** Find a spot to be alone. Jesus went for long walks early in the morning in order to find a solitary place. Find one or make one. No computers, no cell phones, no TV, just you and your Father.
5. **Get comfortable.** You don't have to pray on your knees. Find a comfortable position that will allow you to stay awake. Be watchful. Be comfortable.
6. **Get a plan.** Make an appointment. Set a time. Treat the Lord like you would any other person. Have a schedule. Start with 10 minutes. Don't set some lofty goal. Just set a plan and stick to it.
7. **Get a book.** It might be helpful to read a book on prayer. Let me suggest three.
  1. *The Hidden Life of Prayer* by David McIntyre (1891) Kindle Store \$.99
  2. *A Praying Life: Connecting With God In A Distracting World* by Paul Miller (2009)
  3. *The Autobiography of George Muller* (1996)



One thing to be watchful for is answers to the prayers you pray. The first time in my life that I became excited about prayer was in high school when some friends and I started keeping a notebook of prayer requests. We would write down requests and then record when and how they were answered. When the notebook started filling up and lots of people started asking us to pray for them, I became excited. I think it's time for us to do the same. There is a clip board to my left for you to write down requests. Some requests might not be appropriate to write down, but some will be. As I church I would like us to do this and plead with the Lord graciously reveal Himself to us.



Another thing to be watchful for is opportunities to pray. 24 Hour Prayer Watch coming up Jan 25-26. Why do we call this a Prayer Watch and not just a 24 Hours of prayer? Because for 24 hours we as a church community come together to be alert and watchful in prayer both to offer up our requests and also to listen for what the Lord may say to us.

**Continue steadfastly in prayer.** The LORD delights in when His children share their hearts it Him and He always reciprocates, if we are patient enough to listen.

**Be watchful in prayer.** Stay awake physically and spiritual alert for the LORD to move.

**Be thankful** for Jesus. He purchased the right for you to speak to the Father. Be thankful that He poured out His Holy Spirit in your heart to enable you to pray and also helps you know what to pray for. Be thankful for Jesus.

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