
Pray without Ceasing

BY PAUL J. GRIFFITHS

The scriptural teaching that we should pray without stopping seems to imply that we should make every aspect of our lives a prayer. But if this is right, then clearly a different idea about the nature of prayer is in play here than the one we ordinarily have.

In his First Letter to the Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul exhorts his hearers, among whom you and I are included, in these words: “See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:15-18). It is not merely that he encourages us to act in certain ways—to do good, to rejoice, to pray, to give thanks—no, he wants more, he wants us to do these things “always,” “without ceasing,” “in all circumstances.”

What can this mean? Should you rejoice when the person you love dies horribly before your eyes? Should you pray when you are studying, when you are making love, when you are eating, when you are sleeping? Should you give thanks when you get the news that you have contracted a fatal disease that will kill you painfully within six months?¹ It does not sound immediately sensible to say so, and there is much else in Scripture that recommends what sounds like something rather different, such as weeping when faced with the death of a friend, as Jesus himself did.² So what does Paul mean?

Let’s focus the question by asking specifically about prayer. Paul says that we should do this without ceasing, and he is not alone in saying so. Luke’s introduction to the parable of the unjust judge—or, if you prefer, the persistent widow—says much the same thing: “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always, and not to lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

At the end of the parable, the unjust judge promises to grant justice to the importunate widow, not because he has become just or reconsidered her case, but “so that she may not wear me out by continually coming” (Luke 18:5). We, it seems – we Christians – are meant to be “continually coming” before God, importuning him in prayer at every moment.

The presence in Scripture of the idea that we should pray without stopping has led many of the Church’s theologians and preachers to reflect a good deal on what it might mean to do this. Some of their formulations are striking and elegant. Augustine, for example, in his expository homilies on the Psalter, writes: “Not only do we not sin when we are adoring [God], but when we are not adoring [God] we sin.”³ Adoration (*adoratio/adorare*) is not quite prayer (*oratio/orare*), but they are closely connected: both are intentional actions that bring us before God, turn us toward God’s face. And Augustine’s formulation makes the very strong claim that adoration – and prayer, if that extension is legitimate – not only suffices to exclude sin, but is necessary for that exclusion. This means, if it is right, that whenever you are not praying (adoring), you are, *ipso facto*, sinning. This is an intensification of Paul’s and Luke’s claims, and it makes them if anything even more puzzling. If, for example, I am watching a baseball game, delighted by the beauty of the double play I just saw, am I thereby sinning because I am not praying? Just what can Augustine mean?

The reason why it is so difficult for us, Christians though we be, to understand these hard sayings about prayer and adoration – sayings that seem to imply that prayer and life are coextensive, and that all non-prayerful action is deeply damaged to the point of being sinful – is that we have in mind a series of separations that Paul, Luke, and Augustine would prefer us not to have. We separate life into compartments. There is the work compartment, the personal life compartment, and the religion compartment, to name just three, and the walls that separate them are thickly impervious. If you are an office worker, for instance, you probably find it hard to think of the parties you go to, the shoe stores you shop in, and the hobbies you pursue as having all that much to do with the projects you manage, the clients you assist, and the skills you develop on the job; and, very likely, although you may try to see and make real to yourself the connections between your life of prayer and your work and play, this will likely seem difficult, a matter of effort aimed at connecting two very different things. We have to work hard, conceptually speaking, if we are to see what Paul, Luke, and Augustine might have meant by requiring us to make every aspect of our lives a prayer, and that is because, for us, prayer is defined as an occasional activity, like eating and sleeping: these are things we must do sometimes, but that by definition we cannot do all the time.

Let’s make this point very specific indeed. The claim is, or seems to be, that if you cannot treat the most boring class you have, or your most painful

moments at the dentist, or your most negative emotional moments, as themselves prayers, active adorations of the Triune Lord, then you are, to just the extent that you fail at doing this, sinning. It is not a matter of praying about these things, of bringing them to Jesus in prayer: they are or ought to be themselves prayers. Only if we think of them in this way can it make sense to say what Paul, Luke, and Augustine seem to say. But if this is right, then clearly a different idea about the nature of prayer is in play here than the one we ordinarily have.

For us, prayer is occasional. We speak intentionally to Jesus or Mary or the Holy Spirit or the Father or our favorite saints sometimes, not all the time. We kneel before the Blessed Sacrament—another form of speaking to Jesus—sometimes, not all the time. We get on our knees before bed or offer a blessing at table at the appropriate times of day, and we think of these as moments of prayer and are certainly not doing them all the time. But for the Christian tradition, for the most part, this is an impoverished understanding of prayer. It is not wrong, it is just inadequate.

Suppose we think, instead, of prayer as most fundamentally and centrally the acknowledgment of gift. To acknowledge something as a gift is to know that it came to you, the recipient, from somewhere else, someone other than you: you did not make it, and you do not deserve it, for if you deserve it, it's not really a gift but rather a payment of debt. To treat what you have been given as a gift—to acknowledge it as such and not to pretend that it was really yours all along, or that you made it for yourself, or that it is your due—you have to be grateful, to say thank you (that, incidentally, is what the word “eucharist” most essentially means), and to keep on being grateful. Each time you look at or use the gift, if you are alive and awake and self-aware, you remember with gratitude who gave it to you. That is not so difficult with most gifts: the book on your shelf that your grandmother gave you may easily enough conjure in you gratitude for

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the occasion of its giving whenever you hold it in your hands. But when the gift is life, your very self, all that you have and all that you are—“What do you have that you did not receive?” asks Paul (1 Corinthians 4:7), expecting the answer “nothing whatever”—things are more difficult. The challenge then is to be constantly grateful, habitually aware that whatever good things there are in us or in the world around us are not ours, and, therefore, active

in the way that grateful people are active: enthusiastically, attentively, lovingly, and, above all, not as though we have done anything to deserve the good things that surround us. And that is what it means to pray: to behave as someone gifted, not as we now use that word, to mean someone to be admired for what they can do — “She’s so gifted musically,” we say proudly, meaning, usually, that she, rather than God, should be complimented for what she does — but instead to mean someone who in all she does expresses gratitude to the God who made it possible for her to do anything and for there to be a world in which she can do it.

Prayer is gratitude because gratitude is the primary form of adoration and adoration is, in the end, the only thing that counts because it is the form of human love most appropriate to God. All other loves serve this final love, which is prayer at its highest intensity.

But there are still some puzzles here. Are we to be grateful for suffering, death, sin, agony, and hatred? No. Those are not gifts. They are anti-gifts, loss and lack rather than abundance overspilling. Those we lament. Paul does not mean, as he explains with his characteristic intensity and complexity in the Letter to the Romans, that the damage the world and we ourselves have undergone are subjects for rejoicing or gratitude or love.⁴ No, they are the dark side of giftedness, the damage done to the gift by treating it as something else, as a possession to be wholly owned. Lament, then, is the prayerful response to the gift’s damage as gratitude is to its wholeness. Both are required in a damaged world, and both belong to prayer.

We have now the lineaments of an answer to the question of what it means to pray always: it is to cultivate the habit of gratitude for gift in such a way that being grateful becomes, for us, an attitude that informs all we do. Such an attitude makes a difference, in fact many differences.

First, you do not use a precious gift from your beloved — her picture, taken and framed for you; a lock of her hair, cut and given to you; a letter written to you in her own hand — in the same way that you use the t-shirt handed to you as an unwanted come-on by the credit-card company hoping for your patronage. The former’s particulars are important, and you attend to them as if they were. The latter’s are not, and it will scarcely matter to you what they are. This difference in attentiveness has mostly to do with gratitude: it is because what your beloved gives you is gift in the full sense that you attend to it with passion. And for Christians, everything we have — recall, again, Paul’s dictum that we have nothing we have not been given — is gift in this sense, given by the God who is *interior intimo tuo*, within what is most intimate to yourself, as well as being *superior summo tuo*, above what is highest in you.⁵ Cultivating gratitude, the fundamental attitude of prayer, fosters loving attentiveness to the particulars of your own giftedness, and those of the world in which that giftedness is exercised.

Second, the cultivation of gratitude, whether self-consciously or by habit, makes a difference to our receptiveness to God, which is to say to the

condition of our hearts. Augustine, again, is helpful here. In a letter written to Proba, a wealthy and well-educated Roman widow who had left Rome for North Africa (where Augustine also lived) following the invasion of Rome by Alaric and his Goths in the year 410, he responds to questions about prayer. In response to a difficulty about why the Lord commands us to petition him for particulars when he already knows what we need, he writes:

He [the Lord] knows what we need before we ask him. Why then he does this [that is, requires us to petition him for particulars] can be troubling to the mind unless we understand that the Lord our God does not want our will, of which he cannot be ignorant, to become known to him; rather, he wants our desire to be exercised in our prayers, so that we become able to receive what he is prepared to give.⁶

Roll those concluding phrases around in your mind. Prayer (*oratio*) exercises desire (*desiderium*). It is, we might say, a régime of discipline for desire, a diet for love.⁷ What does prayer do? It makes us capable of something we would not otherwise be capable of, which is reception of the gift, the gift which the Lord is always actively giving us. Without prayer, our hearts are trammled in the direction of ungrateful possessiveness: we grasp what we have as if it were ours, and in doing so try to make of it something it is not and cannot be. The result is that we lose what we think we have, and also ourselves as aspiring owners of it. Recall that we have nothing ungiven, and so the only way to have what we have been given is to receive it as given, as gift. But with prayer, whether the petitions for particulars of which Augustine here writes, or the habitual cultivation of gratitude of which I have been writing, our hearts are opened, increasingly and gradually, to the possibility of receiving the gift, which is, in the end, sanctification.

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Finally, the cultivation of gratitude attenuates fear and brings peace. The risen Lord, after Easter Sunday, constantly reiterates to his disciples when he appears to them that they should not fear and that he brings them peace. The Church's liturgy re-enacts this day-by-day and week-by-week. Our desires, sculpted into gratitude's shape by ceaseless prayer, become

attuned to the fact that the happy or blessed life, the *beata vita*, is in fact being constantly offered to us by the Lord, and that the only thing asked of us is its reception for what it is: prevenient gift. Gratitude of this sort removes deep anxiety. It does not do this immediately, of course, but over time this is the direction in which it tends. If you not only assent to the claim that the Lord wants desperately to give you the blessing of a happy

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life, but also, by the cultivation of desire-disciplining gratitude, become the kind of person who acts as if that were true — who responds to the world as if its sufferings and injustices and agonies, though real, are not the last word — then you will also find fear removed and anxiety assuaged. These are not gifts given all in a moment, but they are

delights that become increasingly apparent as the life of prayer deepens and extends itself over the course of a life.

To pray as you work, to make of your work a kind of prayer, is to take it seriously as an exercise in loving gratitude. You don't, if you are a Christian, think of the work you do merely as a means to gather resources to do something else. No, you begin to think of the assignment you have been given to do and the colleagues you have been given to help you do it, as gifts that permit you to show gratitude — not principally gratitude to them, though that should also be present, but to God, who has made it possible for them to work alongside you. The particular tasks you do, the particular clients you help, the particular skills you learn — all these, if you pay close attention to them rather than treating them with the bored indifference of those who wish to get through them as quickly and effortlessly as possible in order to get on with real life, will become, increasingly, windows into God's creation and occasions for joy. Your work is in this sense an opportunity for prayer, and also an opportunity for training in sanctity: for while you might be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, which is to say justified by being washed in his blood, you are not yet sanctified, and your work, whatever it is and however you have been given it, will be among the principal means by which you might become more holy than you are now, a more perfect image of the God who made you, and, therefore, someone who is increasingly transparent to the light of God, increasingly equipped for the eternal praise-shout of gratitude which is, I hope but do not know, your and my final destiny.

I have tried to make sense of the scriptural advocacy of prayer without ceasing by depicting prayer as an attitude of gratitude. That attitude can be cultivated, and then eventually inhabited, like a second skin. Understanding prayer in this way does make it possible to say that prayer can be unceasing. Explicit verbal address to the Lord, then, whether as petition or ejaculation of gratitude, should be understood as an instance of this attitude. Such verbal address has a special importance for Christians, not least because it was prescribed for us by Jesus; but we ought not to understand prayer to be identical with it. Explicit address to the Lord, whether in private or in corporate worship, is a moment of filigreed ornament in a deeper and more quotidian process which is identical with the Christian life as a whole.

NOTES

1 Though it should be noted that, in a passage which makes difficult and painful reading, Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897), a saint and doctor of the church, welcomes with delight the expectoration of blood that marks the presence of the tuberculosis that would kill her at the age of twenty-four. See *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Thérèse of Lisieux*, third edition, translated by John Clarke (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996), 210-211.

2 Jesus weeps at the death of Lazarus (John 11:35).

3 “*Non solum non peccemus adorando, sed peccemus non adorando,*” Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 98.9, commenting on Psalm 98(99):5. Latin quoted from www.augustinus.it/latino/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm (accessed April 29, 2009).

4 I have in mind here especially Paul’s discussion, in Romans 8:18-25, of the groaning that accompanies gratitude in a fallen world—groaning that belongs to hope in such a world and can therefore be understood as a constitutive element of both prayer and adoration.

5 Quoting and paraphrasing Augustine, *Confessiones*, 3.6.11, in J. J. O’Donnell, ed., *Augustine: Confessions*, volume I (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 27.

6 Translating from the Latin of Augustine’s *Epistola* 130.8.17 (to Proba), as given at www.augustinus.it/latino/lettere/index2.htm (accessed April 29, 2009).

7 I have in mind here John Donne’s poem, “Love’s Diet.” He writes about disciplining, or dieting, the appetite of a lover for his mistress, but the conceit can apply as well, and certainly did apply in Donne’s mind, to the disciplining of desires for God.



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