



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Pray without Ceasing  
(*Prayer*, pp. 11-17)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Prayerful Intimacy  
(*Prayer*, pp. 80-83)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Pray without Ceasing

Why are we so deeply challenged by the Apostle Paul's instruction to make every aspect of our lives a prayer? We tend to think of praying as occasionally talking to God. But clearly the Apostle has a different idea about the nature of prayer than the one we ordinarily have.

## Prayer

**Scripture Reading:** 1 Thessalonians 5:15-24

## Meditation<sup>†</sup>

All our capacities — reason, speech, volition, affection, and action — must be molded by the activity of prayer. Moreover, as prayer becomes central in our lives, all that we do becomes part of prayer. As the Benedictine motto has it, *laborare est orare* — to work is to pray.

*Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba*

## Reflection

"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," notes Paul Griffiths. "But for the Christian tradition, for the most part, this is an impoverished understanding of prayer. It is not wrong, it is just inadequate." In the Apostle Paul's astonishing call for unceasing prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:17), Griffiths discerns a deeper understanding of the nature of prayer.

Paul sees all the good things we enjoy — talents, opportunities, and virtues; family, friends, and institutions; food, clothing, and latest technologies; indeed our very lives — as undeserved gifts from God (1 Corinthians 4:7). To be grateful for them is to acknowledge our indebtedness to and welcome a relationship with God — two attitudes that are essential to adoration and prayer. This suggests, writes Griffiths, that to pray constantly "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."

Developing a habit of unceasing prayer would change how we perceive, care for, and act in the world. It would make us:

- ▶ *more attentive to the particulars of our own and others' giftedness.*

Contrast how you would treasure a keepsake from your beloved with how you might neglectfully use a pushy advertiser's unwanted 'gift.' In the former case, you notice the details of the gift and lovingly guard it. Through prayer, one begins to experience other people and the good things of this world that way, Griffiths says, as "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."

- ▶ *more receptive to God.* When Augustine (354-430) wondered why God, who already knows everything we need or want, tells us to petition for things in prayer, he concluded: "God wants our desire to be exercised in our prayers, so that we become able to receive what he is prepared to give." Prayer trains our love. When we do not pray, "our hearts are trammelled in the direction of ungrateful possessiveness," Griffiths notes. But through the



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practice of prayer, "our hearts are opened, increasingly and gradually, to the possibility of receiving the gift, which is, in the end, sanctification."

- ▶ *less anxious and afraid*. "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," writes Griffiths. This allows us to see the world as it is—its "sufferings and injustices and agonies, though real, are not the last word."

Unceasing prayer, then, is a grateful attitude toward God that undergirds all our thoughts and activities. Verbal prayers of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, petition, or intercession, become instances of this attitude, Griffiths concludes. "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."

### Study Questions

1. Why do we tend to think of prayer as only explicit talking to God? How is this view "not wrong," but "inadequate"?
2. The fourth-century desert Christians believed "unceasing prayer soon heals the mind." In light of Paul Griffiths' account of prayer, how would you describe this "healing"?
3. On Griffiths' view of unceasing prayer, what would it mean for our work to become prayer? List the daily jobs that you rarely experience as prayerful. Are there ways to make them part of your prayer, or should you stop doing them?
4. Consider how Charles Wesley characterizes the fundamental attitude of prayer in "Talk with Us, Lord." How might this attitude become unceasing?
5. In "Prayerful Intimacy," Les Hollon recounts a busy day during which he was acutely aware of "the tenacious desire of people to live intimately with God." How was the day filled with different forms of Christian prayer? Have you experienced such days suffused with prayer?

### Departing Hymn: "Talk with Us, Lord" (vv. 1, 3, and 4)

Talk with us, Lord, yourself reveal,  
while here o'er earth we rove;  
speak to our hearts, and let us feel  
the kindling of your love.

Here, then, our God, vouchsafe to stay,  
and bid our hearts rejoice;  
our bounding hearts shall own your sway,  
and echo to your voice.

You call on us to seek your face,  
'tis all we wish to seek;  
to attend the whispers of your grace,  
and hear you only speak.

Charles Wesley (1740), alt.

Suggested Tunes: ST. COLUMBA or MCKEE

† Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba, eds., "Introduction," *The Phenomenology of Prayer* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 2.

# Pray without Ceasing

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

### Teaching Goals

1. To interpret the Apostle Paul's instruction to pray without ceasing as calling us to cultivate a grateful attitude toward God that informs all that we think and do.
2. To discuss how this grateful attitude of prayer would make a difference in how we perceive, care for, and act in the world.
3. To consider the role of explicit verbal prayers in light of this more fundamental understanding of prayer.

### Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prayer (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Talk with Us, Lord, Yourself Reveal" locate one of the familiar tunes ST. COLUMBA or MCKEE in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

### Begin with a Comment

In the section devoted to "unceasing prayer" in the *Apothegmata Patrum*, the early collection of sayings by and stories about the fourth-century desert Christians, you will find this pithy gem: "A hermit used to say, 'Ceaseless prayer soon heals the mind.'" (Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christians*, 12.12)

Consider that amazing promise: it "soon heals the mind." If ceaseless prayer is "an attitude of gratitude," as Paul Griffiths says, how does it transform our capacities to experience, think about, and care for the world rightly?

### Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for "every good and perfect gift" (James 1:17) in our lives.

### Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Thessalonians 5:15-24 from a modern translation.

### Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

### Reflection

This discussion of unceasing prayer focuses on the centrality of prayer in the life of discipleship. It raises central themes that we will explore in more detail in the other study guides for the Prayer issue. What is the essential nature of Christian prayer, and how is it tied to the story of God's gracious work through his people of Israel and the Church? How does the habit of praying to the Lord transform the one who prays? Why are explicit

verbal prayers, in private and in communal worship, so important? Why would it be wrong to “reduce” prayer to those occasions of explicit talking to the Lord?

When Paul Griffiths describes unceasing prayer as a pervasive attitude of grateful adoration to God for every good gift, he does not mean we should constantly wear a religious “smiley face” as though everything is good and from God. “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 overflowing. Those we lament,” he writes. “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.” The next study guide, “Learning to Pray,” will emphasize the importance of honest prayers of lament. For members of the study group who are enduring undeserved suffering or righteous anger, lament may be a significant part of their unceasing prayer.

### **Study Questions**

1. Paul Griffiths notes that we separate life into compartments, thinking of our religious duties as distinct from our personal time and work responsibilities. Thus, adoration of God and prayer become activities we perform at certain times and places, but not all the time and everywhere. Furthermore, Scripture teaches us to talk to God, privately and corporately, with words of adoration, thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession. If we reduce prayer to explicit talking to God, however, we tend to isolate God from our daily activities and make religion only an intellectual exercise.
2. Griffiths describes three ways that unceasing prayer changes us. We become more lovingly attentive to the details of the world, ourselves, and others’ lives; more willing to receive God’s good gifts; and more confident to invest our lives and care for the world as God cares for it. Members might discuss how each of these changes makes us less “conformed to this world,” but rather “transformed by the *renewing of your minds*, so that you may discern what is the will of God” (Romans 12:2). In other words, how does each change help us to perceive and love ourselves, others, and the world more accurately and fully?
3. Griffiths does not mean that we speak a blessing before each activity. Our work becomes a prayer when we work more attentively, with welcoming appreciation for divine giftedness, and confident investment in God’s gracious activity in the world. Daily jobs that are filled with distraction, that lure us to prideful isolation from God and isolation from others, or that appear to have little purpose, will not be experienced as prayerful. Even necessary and difficult chores, however, can be done attentively and filled with purpose.
4. Charles Wesley characterizes prayer as *carefully listening* while God talks to us, as *actively tuning out other noises in our lives* in order “to attend the whispers of [God’s] grace.” God does not speak through explicit words, but in movements of awareness in our hearts as we are stirred by God’s love (verse 1) and filled with joy at God’s presence (verse 2). As the Lord is revealed to us in this way, we are changed so that our love, our ‘speech,’ becomes an “echo to [God’s] voice” in the world. Encourage members to reflect on how the most mundane activities offer opportunities to listen closely for God’s redeeming presence in the world, through other people, and in our own thoughts and transformed desires.
5. In a paragraph that begins “During a recent Wednesday’s press” (*Prayer*, p. 82), Les Hollon recounts sixteen events during the day that were suffused with prayer. Several included explicit talking to the Lord (e.g., a men’s prayer breakfast, a weekly gathering of women to pray, a funeral and graveside service, a time of prayer with his wife, and texting a prayer to a man whose wife had just suffered a miscarriage). Other activities were prayerfully done in grateful awareness of God’s presence and gifts (e.g., a congregational Bible study, a visit with a family seeking a church home, and an evening writing session). Encourage members to list their typical daily activities that include explicit prayers or are prayerfully done. Do they remember special days or events that were suffused with prayer?

### **Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.