

Introduction:

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act but a habit.” That quote is typically attributed to Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher. I think all of us would like to be excellent. We would like to stand head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd in this world. We especially want to stand out in the crowd on Judgment Day, don’t we? There is a problem, however. We have already learned that by ourselves we cannot be anything more than what most everybody else is. We are really powerless to accomplish any excellent thing that will truly impact anyone on the eternal scope by ourselves. However, we do not have to be by ourselves. We can become a conduit for the greatest source of power and excellence in existence. We can plug in to God. We accomplish this with prayer, inviting God to work through our lives as we heed God’s invitation to be what He wants us to be. When we are connected to God, we can lead excellent lives, accomplishing work that impacts not just our world but our eternity. However, we must recognize that the prayer that connects us to God, providing excellence in our lives is not an act but a habit. We cannot pray one really good prayer and then be plugged in for the rest of our lives. In fact, we cannot even have just one really good month of prayer and be plugged in for the rest of our lives. We must never view prayer as an act. It must be a habit. As we wrap up our focus on prayer today, we must not believe we have arrived. We must not believe we are done. We must believe that we are only beginning. As we move from this moment on, we must be committed to let prayer permeate our entire lives.

I Thessalonians 5:16-18 provides the guidelines for our prayer habit. Paul said, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” When I first began to study this passage, my attention was turned to the progression from “rejoice” to “pray” to “give thanks.” However, the more I studied, I realized that the progression Paul really wants us to notice is not the action. Rejoicing, praying and giving thanks were just three ways of emphasizing the same action. The progression he was emphasizing was how the action was performed from “always” to “without ceasing” to “in everything.”

Discussion:

I. “Rejoice always”

- A. The word translated “always” (*pantote*) is a compound word that literally means “every when.” If the moment can be described as a “when” then we should be rejoicing. In modern vernacular we would say, “Rejoice all the time.” Whether it is morning, noon or evening we should be rejoicing, praying and giving thanks (*cf. Psalm 55:17*). Whether times are good or times are bad we should rejoice, pray and give thanks (*cf. Acts 8:39; II Corinthians 6:10*). Whether it is meal time, time to get up, time to go to bed, time to go to work or time to just sit and relax, we ought to be praying. Whatever kind of time it is, it should be filled with prayer.
- B. Having said that, we need to recognize the figure of speech used in this passage. One of the most common figures of speech used in the Bible is “hyperbole,” which is simply an exaggeration to drive home a point. We use this figure of speech all the time (as I just did). If you were to ask me, “Edwin, do you drink enough water?” I might say, “I love water. I drink it all the time.” Clearly, you know I do not mean I constantly drink water, non-stop. You know I just mean I drink it a lot. Based on that statement you would think I probably drink water at most meals. I probably keep a water bottle with me on a regular basis. But you would not call me a liar just because you saw some time when I was not drinking anything or even some time when I was drinking coffee. That is how “always” is used in this passage. Consider another passage in which “always” is used and we know it must be a hyperbole. In **John 18:20**, when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the garden, He said, “I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where the Jews always meet, and in secret I have said nothing.” Was Jesus in synagogues and in the temple 24 hours a day, 7 days a week? Were the synagogues and the temple the only

places Jesus ever taught? No, He taught in people's homes. He taught while walking on the road. What was His point? His point was that the majority of His work was done publicly. Why didn't these soldiers come get Him while He was working in public? You see the hyperbole.

- C. Therefore, to fulfill this statement and have the proper habit of prayer, we ought to be able to say, "I love to pray. I pray all the time." We won't mean that we pray constantly without ever taking a break. We will mean we pray consistently, habitually and a lot. Keep that in mind. Do not run wild with the figurative nature of this command. We must not think we can claim to "pray all the time" if really we only pray while in the assembly or if the last time we really prayed was a week ago. Nor can we claim to pray all the time if we had just one really good month of prayer last year. You have to be able to say, "I pray a lot," to claim you are meeting this command.

II. "Pray without ceasing"

- A. Having a healthy prayer habit not only means we pray all the time. It means we never stop praying all the time. Perhaps we have done well throughout our series on praying all the time. I know I have done fairly well. However, if we get two weeks out from our focus on prayer and drop our habit, then we have failed in Paul's exhortation here.
- B. In **Luke 18:1**, Jesus taught that we "always ought to pray and not lose heart." No matter what happens around us or to us, we ought to continue to pray all the time. No matter what we think God is doing with our prayers, we ought to continue to pray all the time. Even when times of discouragement come, we must continue plugging away and continue praying all the time. In **Ephesians 6:18**, as Paul described the role of prayer in God's armor; he said we should pray always "with all perseverance." That is an interesting way of putting this. Our prayer habit takes perseverance. Perseverance implies going through hardship. Perseverance implies continuing on despite obstacles. Perseverance implies maintaining our prayers despite everything working against us to stop our praying.
- C. Regrettably, if you are like me, it is all too easy to cease praying, which is really an amazing thing. Prayer is really not all that hard. It is not as though God has asked us to carry a thousand pound boulder on our shoulder without ceasing. All He has asked us to do is to communicate with Him regularly. Yet, I have gone through times in which you would think prayer must be the most difficult aspect of life the way I procrastinated getting to it. Here is the deal—Satan does not want us praying. He will throw anything and everything at us to get us to stop. If we are going to maintain the habit, we have to persevere through whatever he hurls our way.
- D. To see perseverance in prayer, look at Daniel in **Daniel 6:6-10**. Suddenly, I feel a little foolish. I think about times when I stopped praying. I have stopped praying because things weren't going my way in life. I have stopped praying because my wife or my kids made me mad. I have stopped praying because I just did not have time. My life was so full of television watching, internet surfing, game playing and book reading that I just could not fit it all in and something had to go, might as well be prayer. Then I look at Daniel. Despite a law which made prayer punishable by death, Daniel persevered in prayer. He prayed all the time and he refused to stop praying all the time.
- E. To maintain our proper prayer habit, we must pray all the time and never stop praying all the time. Of course, if you find you have stopped. Pick up and start over. Get back into the habit and don't quit again.

III. "In everything give thanks"

- A. A sure way to pray all the time and never stop praying all the time is to make prayer a part of every aspect of your life. Too often we compartmentalize prayer. Prayer is worship. That means we pray when we come to worship (meaning the church's assembly to worship). Instead of compartmentalizing prayer to worship times, we should pray in everything. That is, prayer should permeate every aspect of our lives.
- B. Prayer should be a part of our work. We should thank God for our ability to work. We should thank God for the job we have. We should thank God for what He provides us through our job. We should ask God to help us work harder and provide more effectively for our families.

- C. Prayer should be a part of our family lives. We should pray that we be the kind of spouse, parent or child we need to be. We should thank God for our spouse, parents and children. We should pray for other families and other members of our family.
- D. Prayer should be a part of our relationships with others. We should give thanks for our relationships with others. When we learn about a struggle someone is facing, we should pray.
- E. On and on we could go with this list. Of course, this verse specifically speaks of giving thanks in every thing. We should take a consistent look at everything going on in our lives and find the reason for which we can give thanks. I cannot help but think about the apostles in **Acts 5:41** when they were able to rejoice for a beating because it meant God considered them worthy to suffer shame for His name.
- F. We will pray all the time and never stop praying all the time, when we consistently find the reason to pray in everything we face and do.

Conclusion:

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” This is the prayer habit we must develop. Remember, excellence is not an act, but a habit. If we desire God’s excellence to flow through us, then prayer must not be an act, but a habit. If you are struggling with establishing the habit, don’t be overcome. Find some help. **Ecclesiastes 4:9-12** says two are better than one. Whatever you do, get this prayer habit established, praying all the time without ever stopping your habit because you consistently find the reason to pray in everything you face and do.