

Community Church of Issaquah

January 11, 2026

Learning to Pray without Ceasing

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One of the most fascinating things about trying to understand everything that appears in the Scriptures is that everything in the Bible is open to interpretation. I may read the letters that Paul wrote to the church as Thessalonica and it seems to say one thing to me but when I hear someone else's version, it is very different than my own. What is your interpretation of that one verse we heard this morning that says, "Rejoice always; pray continually"? Do that really mean that for 24/7 we have to only rejoice and never complain? And does it mean that we have to pray for 24/7 every day of our Christian life in Christ? I have my doubts that was what Paul intended to say to the new converts.

Our reality is that we don't really do anything without stopping except breathing until we take our final breath. From the simplest to the most complicated, we tend to have total fluidity in completing a task, Let me give you a couple of examples. If you've ever been to the Ross's home, you will be like me and in awe of the beautiful landscaping there. Does that task of maintaining your lawn and garden require you to be working outside 24 hours a day 7 days a week? No. True, it looks like Woody and Merry do garden without ceasing, but I think they likely take breaks for eating meals, sleeping, visiting, and much more. They don't only work in their yard continually.

How much time do you think it takes a minister to plan a service, write a sermon, and do additional studying to make sure that church is relevant? I can tell you without reservation that all of that does take time, but trust me, I do not spend 24/7 doing only that without ceasing. The same rule

applies to the time you and I spend in prayer. Paul was not laying down a requirement for a believer to literally pray without ceasing or to rejoice always. The guidelines are intended to help us keep focused on the reality and importance of praying. God wants us to understand that it is our attitude concerning prayer that governs our behavior. It is important to remember that prayers are not just words uttered with an amen at the end of them. Prayers are words, thoughts, feelings, blessings, and so much more. Prayers govern how we live our life in Christ.

There is a vital element about this concept of praying without ceasing, and it has to do with our accepting the responsibility of praying for others and ourselves believing that God will answer. Suppose I offered a prayer just one time for my limping leg thinking God only needed to hear it once to do something about it. Suppose we only once offered a prayer for a loved one who is in a desperate life shattering situation and thought that was all we needed to do. Praying continually actually has a much deeper meaning than that. We are called upon to offer our prayer requests to the Lord until we believe God has provided the answer to our prayer, then we can move on. It is the principle of offering a request until we sense God's response.

Is a one-time prayer asking God to help in the healing of our nation enough or should we continue to offer our prayers of concern as we await God's reply or response. Do we only pray one time for a loved one who is very ill or do we continue to lift them in spirit as we await God's mercy. When I tell you that I pray earnestly every day for my husband's ongoing medical crises, that would be a part of my concept of praying continually or without ceasing. No, it's not a 24/7 time of praying, but an ongoing conversation with God seeking help and strength, and most definitely, patience.

Like most people, I find it much easier to pray for someone else rather than myself. Most days, my name isn't on the list of those seeking prayer support. But we must remind ourselves of the very purpose of this time in prayer is to focus on ourselves. That isn't a selfish thing, it's an essential thing. One response I get when interacting with an individual that always makes me smile is when I say, "Let's talk about you," and the reactions is, "Oh no, let's don't talk about me." We tend to want to divert the conversation away from ourselves and move it toward someone else or something else. Have you ever imagined how you would react to some of the teachings of Jesus if you were there when he spoke? Try this one as written in the book of Matthew: *Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food and the body more important than clothes? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?"*

I heard someone make a very profound statement recently concerning life. We often say, "One more day head." But the opposite of that might be truer. Not one more day ahead but one more day behind. There is a need for each of us to understand that time is limited. With that in mind, it makes being continually focused on prayers for ourselves and others so much more important. Connected to that reality is another mind boggling thought. This idea makes our prayers a good bit more meaningful, I think.

Are you ever aware of the Holy Spirit bringing someone to mind? Last night I was sorting out Christmas cards that we received this year. Some I keep, some I don't. There is a trend these days that instead of a nice Hallmark card with a sincere greeting inside, the majority of cards these days seem to be only photos of families. My nephew and his five small children was one of those cards this year. No handwritten note, nothing to make it personal, just a picture with the printed words "Merry

Christmas.” But in the midst of preparing a load of recycle, the Lord brought to mind a dear friend that I have known for more than 50 years but haven’t heard from recently. My immediate reaction was to lift a prayer for her. First, thanking God for her being part of my very blessed life, and second, asking God to surround her with loved ones and friends who would make her new year more memorable. Then I called her at the assisted living home where she lives now, and we had a precious time sharing. I think it was a nice gift of memories for both of us.

The Lord brings people to our minds and hearts often out of the blue, and when that happens, it leaves us with several choices of action we can do. First, lift that person in prayer. We don’t have to know the specifics of what they might need us to pray for, but the Lord knows and will honor our prayer request. Second, the thought of someone might move us to action or doing something to minister to them by our presence. Has the Lord ever brought someone to your mind out of the blue and left you offering prayers of support and thankfulness? I am fairly sure that happens to all of us from time to time.

Here is one final but important question for us to consider as we continue to learn about this concept of praying without ceasing. It centers on the question, “When is it enough? When can I stop praying for some person or some life reality?” If the Bible says we should pray continually, can we stop praying for a person or thin? The answer to that is simply that the Lord will offer His response when we ask that question. I heard a minister delivering a sermon on prayers without ceasing and his comment was, “When the person is gone from this life to the next, you can quit praying.” I’m sorry to disagree with him, but I most definitely do.

My mother died in 1999 – 27 years ago now. Have I stopped praying for her? No. My prayers have simply changed. When I used to pray for

her living alone and struggling with health issues, I now pray prayers of gratitude that God provided her to give guidance to how I can and should live my life in Christ. When she comes to mind, I smile and say, “Thanks, God. My mother did a good job.” There won’t be an ending to that prayer time. I’ll continue to pray gratitude each time the Spirit brings her to mind.

Let me close our message time today with this summary concerning how we can learn to pray continually or without ceasing. The core message or request in our prayers for ourselves or others may change. Health might improve or not. Memories may flood our minds of good times and bad. Our focus of our prayers might change. But God’s Spirit will always be at work showing us or telling us for whom and for what we can pray in ongoing spiritual work and growth. Don’t ever stop requesting prayers for yourself or others when there is a need. The pages of our prayer book are filled with the names of others you have lifted in prayers, and often your name is there. These requests are there because the Lord Jesus Christ tells us and shows us who and how to pray. There’s no end to that continuing prayer time. None.