



Sermon Transcript
May 26, 2019

When Jesus Turns Your Life Around
Prayer From the Heart
1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 26, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is

Sermon Text

1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

⁶But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.

⁹For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

¹¹Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹²and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Introduction

As we make our way through 1 Thessalonians, we are observing the many ways Jesus turns our life around. That is what it means to repent. To repent means that your life was going in one direction, but now through faith in Jesus, your life is heading in another direction. Following Jesus is not just a way of belief. It is a way of life. Jesus impacts the way we live. Clearly we see the change Jesus brought to the Thessalonians when Paul says of them in 1 Thessalonians 1:9, “*you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.*” Jesus turned their lives around.

The change we are going to look at this morning is a rather simple one, but it is a change that sets the tone for all of life. When Jesus gets ahold of your life, he moves you from a sense of self-dependence to a life of depending on God. It is the recognition that we are *but a breath* but God is *from everlasting to everlasting*. This change in our lives is reflected in the fact that we become a praying people. Prayer is an expression of our dependence on God. Christians pray.

J. C Ryle put it this way. “All the children of God on earth are alike in this respect. From the moment there is any life and reality about their faith, they pray. Just as the first sign of life in an infant when born into the world is breathing, so the first act of men and women when they are born again is praying.”¹ The common characteristic of the godly is that they are found crying out to God and calling on the name of Jesus.

In his book on prayer, John Onwuchekwa says, “To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.”² Last time I checked, breathing is pretty vital to everything we do. This moves prayer to the category of being essential to living out our faith. He goes on to say that when we pray, we are giving evidence that we need God—we are dependent on God. But when we don’t pray, we are in essence saying that we are alright without God—we are self-dependent. Christians pray.

And yet, if we are honest, many of us do a lot more talking about prayer than we actually pray. In fact, I appreciate Onwuchekwa’s transparent honesty in this book when he begins by writing, “Allow me to be brutally honest for a minute. Since I don’t have to look any of you in the eye, I feel a bit more courageous in admitting my faults. If you are anything like me, and reading a book makes you feel like a failure, then please know that writing a book on prayer makes me feel like a hypocrite.”³ I can resonate with that, but at the same time, I don’t want to casually dismiss it because it is a common struggle for many of us. E. M. Bounds heightens our need to think about the need to pray by saying

that no prayer or little prayer is “one of the crying evils of these times.”⁴ Evil? Really? Is he overstating his case by calling the lack of prayer or little prayer one of the crying evils of our time?”

Psalm 62 says that the lack of dependence on God is actually delusional. David says that the persons “*of high estate*” - that is the person who is self-dependent because he or she trusts in whatever makes them feel greater than others—those persons are “*a delusion.*” Why? It is arrogant—prideful—evil to think that the creature can do anything apart from the Creator. He says of those of low estate and high estate, “*in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath.*” In other words, the famous, the rich, the successful, the powerful, the ruler—the one of high estate—before God are but a breath. It is delusional—evil—to think that life can be live without depending on God. And so David says in Psalm 62:8, “*Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.*” In other words, wisdom is living a life of dependence on God in prayer. Bottom line: Christians pray.

When Paul ends this letter to the Thessalonians, he ends with a flurry of short pithy commands and reminders for the church in Thessalonica. In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 he strings three quick commands for them to remember. “*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.*” These three thoughts go together: *rejoice . . . pray . . . give thanks.*” Then he ends this statement by saying, “*for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*” So for anyone who has ever said, “I wish I knew what the will of God was for me.” “I wish God would just write his will for me in the sky for me to clearly see.” Well he has! It is God’s will for us that we persist in a life of prayer.

What I like about our passage this morning is that Paul demonstrates what it looks like to persist in prayer. Paul says to the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 3:10, “*we pray most earnestly night and day.*” So when he calls them to “*pray without ceasing*” in chapter five, he is basically asking them to imitate him in a life of persistent prayer. Paul doesn’t just talk about prayer. Paul lives a life of dependence upon God through prayer.

It is not my aim to make you feel guilty this morning. But it is my aim to call us—myself included—to a life of prayer. But I don’t want to just issue the “command” to *pray without ceasing*. Instead, I want to appeal to your heart. What are the things we observe in Paul’s heart that leads him to a life of prayer? What does it look like to pray from the heart? Psalm 9:1 says, “*I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart.*” That is what I want. I don’t want to just go through the motions of prayer because I am supposed to pray. I want to pray from the heart. So what is it that forms my heart and helps me

learn how to pray from the heart? I observe three things from Paul that I hope speak to your heart.

A Heart for People

The first thing I notice about Paul's heart for prayer is that his prayer is fueled by his love for people. It was his relationship with the Thessalonians and his deep love for them that compelled him to pray for them.

Our passage begins with Paul receiving a good report from Timothy on how the church in Thessalonica was doing. If you recall, we noted last week that when Paul came to Thessalonica he wasn't able to stay very long. He was with them for as little as a month or at the most three months. Either way, it was not a very long time to fully establish a church. The reason Paul had to leave so quickly was because his missionary efforts were not received well by the religious and political leaders of Thessalonica. And so Paul and his companion, Silas, escaped from Thessalonica by night and went on to Berea. But in the meantime, those who "received" and "accepted" the words that Paul shared with them regarding Jesus remained in this hostile and difficult situation. And quite naturally, Paul was concerned whether or not this young church would survive under the conditions they had to endure. And so Paul tried again and again to visit them in order to pick up where he left off, but it was too dangerous. So he sent Timothy to find out how they are doing. Our passage last week ended with Paul saying, *"For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain."*

Now when Timothy returns from visiting this young church in Thessalonica, to Paul's delight he finds out that this young church is thriving in spite of the challenges they faced because of their faith. Timothy reported that this church was growing in their faith and love. We saw at the beginning of this letter, in 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7 that though they received the word of God in the context of much affliction they *"became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia."* In spite of the fact that Paul had to leave before he wanted to, their faith was growing. In addition to that, Timothy reported that the church in Thessalonica thought fondly of Paul and were grateful for his ministry among them. In other words, they didn't fault him for leaving when he did.

Paul is so excited about this news that he can hardly contain himself. He says in verses 7-8, *"for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord."* I like

that phrase, “*For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.*” One commentator suggested that the feeling Paul was expressing was “that they could now breathe freely”⁵ knowing that the Thessalonians were *standing fast* in their faith. It is like a sigh of relief has overtaken Paul upon the news he received from Timothy.

When your heart is knit together with a group of people, it is only natural to intercede on their behalf. So when Paul says in verse 10 that “*we pray most earnestly night and day*” it is something that comes naturally to him because of his deep affection for them and his concern for their faith. What do we know about life? What do we know about the challenge of living out our faith through the ups and downs of life? There are a lot of things that happen that are out of our control. Jobs are lost. Marriages struggle and sometimes fall apart. People get sick. Tragedy strikes. Injustice occurs. People of faith fall into sin. Relationships struggle. Doubts occur. Or, perhaps like in Thessalonica, our faith is tested because of some form of persecution or ridicule. And of course, death—timely and untimely—strikes every church family. And so all of these things are things that happen in a church family and they remind us how much we need God and how much we need the prayers of God’s people. And so, quite naturally, we are inclined to pray for each other because we know and love each other.

The closer you get to people in the church, the more you realize that everyone struggles and everyone experiences doubt and uncertainty and disappointment. It has been my experience that more often than not, when presented with a difficulty someone is facing, I feel inadequate and incapable of fixing whatever the issue happens to be or doing something that makes it all better. Clearly, Paul was not able to fix the situation the Thessalonians were facing. Forces outside of Paul’s control prohibited him from coming back to visit them. He said he wanted to “*supply what is lacking in your faith.*” What he meant was that there were some things he still wanted to teach them to better help establish them in their faith. In fact, when Timothy returned, he told Paul some of the questions they had and so the rest of this letter addresses some of their questions. For example, they wanted to know what happens to their brothers and sisters in the faith when they die. I am sure Paul wished he could sit down with them, like he did when he first came to them, and explain from the Scriptures the hope they have in Christ even if they die. But this brief and succinct letter would have to suffice. So how can he care for these people he loves so much? He can pray for them.

Here is what we are saying when we pray for each other. We are saying that we aren’t God. We sure aren’t omnipotent. There are a lot of things we do not have the power to change. Nor are we omniscient. Our understanding of what others need is very limited.

And we aren't omnipresent. We can't always be with each other. But that is the beauty of prayer. We pray to the one who is powerful and all knowing and always present. And so praying for each other is one of the greatest ways we can love each other.

That is the beauty of our community groups. As we get to know each other we are drawn to pray for each other. That is beauty of a prayer sheet and our prayer guide. We can pray for each other. That is the beauty of having a team available after each service to pray for you. And because of this, much to our delight, God works through our prayers to sustain his people through the trials and the hardships and the doubts and the struggles. Like the Thessalonians, we are found *standing fast in the Lord* because of the effectual prayers of God's people.

If you want to grow a heart for prayer, then draw close to people. Get to know their problems and get to know their struggles. Your inadequacy to fix things will cause you to turn to the only one who is truly adequate. And God will use your prayers to establish his people. A heart for prayer is grown from a heart for people.

The Power of Habit

The second thing that forms a heart of prayer is the habit of prayer. The more we practice the habit of prayer the more our hearts are formed to pray. We don't learn prayer just by teaching about prayer. Rather we learn prayer by leaning on God through prayer.⁶ That is just the way it is. When Paul says that "*we pray earnestly night and day*" that was a habit formed deeply in the rituals he grew up with in his Jewish heritage. Framing his day in prayer was an ingrained habit that Paul developed early in his life as a devout Jewish worshiper. I would contend that it was such a habit for him to pray day and night, he didn't even have to think about it. It was as natural as driving a car or riding a bike. The habit of prayer isn't just something we do. But that habit itself does something to us and to our hearts.

The Jewish tradition that Paul grew up with had three prescribed hours for prayer. It doesn't mean that they prayed for an entire hour. But their day was intentionally structured around prayer. The first prayer was at 9:00 am and the second was at noon and third prayer was at 3:00. In Acts 10, when Peter is on the rooftop praying, we are told that "*it was about the sixth hour to pray.*" Peter was observing the noon hour prayer. Henry Dosker says about the observance of this ritual that its influence on the religious spirit must have been incalculable, and undoubtedly is, at least in part, the solution to the riddle of the preservation of the Jewish faith in the cruel centuries of its

bitter persecution.”⁷ In other words, this habit of framing the day in prayer, wasn’t just prayers they said and did. But they were prayers that did something to them. It held them together. It shaped their faith. It shaped their hearts.

The early church adopted this pattern and habit of prayer because in the *Didache*—an early document of the church—known as the “teaching of the apostles” the instruction was to pray the Lord’s Prayer three times a day. Say what you want about ritual or liturgy or “rules” of life—but habits shape our hearts and life. Just like the habit of coming here week after week for worship, it is not just something you do. It does something to you. So it is with the habit of prayer.

A few years ago I read a book called *The Power of Habit*. In this book I was introduced to the idea of a “keystone habit.” It is a “super habit.” It is a habit that impacts a bunch of other habits. It is like the first domino in the line to fall; thus impacting a bunch of other habits. For example, it has been discovered that the habit of eating together as a family on a daily basis has a direct impact on a bunch of other good habits. Studies have shown that families who habitually eat together seem to raise children with better homework skills, higher grades, greater emotional control and more confidence.”⁸

Justin Earley brings this thought of “keystone habit” to framing our days around prayer, just like our Jewish counterparts did and many within the wider Christian community still do. Perhaps, initially, it may seem legalistic to you to suggest the we adopt a habit of pausing to pray three times a day. But I would suggest framing your day in these prayers will shape your heart for God and for others. In time, if you tend to this habit, prayer will become the most natural thing you do.

Justin Earley says that beginning your day in kneeling prayer is a keystone habit.⁹ It is an opportunity to frame the first words of your day in God’s love for us. In fact, in his “common rule” he has adopted a pattern of morning, noon and evening kneeling prayer. Don’t forget the “kneeling” part of it. Often in the morning he will kneel and pray, “God thank you for another day I did not earn. You are so generous to me. Let me make something good of the world today. Let me love the world and all the people in it just like you love it.” And then he adds, “In the smallest shift, the whole day has been reframed.”¹⁰ It spills out to form other habits.

Let me suggest something to you. Give it a try this week. Frame your day around these three prayers: morning, noon and night. Or at least a morning and evening prayer. Set the alarm on your phone to remind you.

Morning Prayer: Spirit, I was made for your presence. May this day be one that I spend with you in all that I do. Amen.

Noon Prayer: Jesus, I was made to join your work in the world. Please order the rest of my day in love for the people you have given me to serve. Amen.

Evening Prayer: Father, I was made to rest in your love. May my body rest in sleep, and may my mind rest in your love. Amen.¹¹

No doubt, you can add other prayers to that. Some days you may linger longer in prayer, and other days it may be these brief prayers. But imagine if you framed your day in the goodness and love of God how this would shape how you view your day. And furthermore, I am convinced it will deepen your habit to pray and it will become the most natural thing to you. Let the habit of prayer shape your heart for prayer. Try it! It is accessible. It is simple. It is powerful.

God Works Through Prayer

The final thing I notice about Paul's heart for prayer is that it is grounded in the conviction that God works through prayer. This passage ends with an actual prayer that Paul offers for the Thessalonians. Notice how Paul commits his desires for the Thessalonians to God's care. *"Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."*

He still wants to see them again, but he is leaving that in God's hands. *"May our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you."* And furthermore, he prays for their continued growth in the faith, knowing full well that this too is a work of God on their behalf. *"May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."* In other words, he is praying that their faith would be such that when the Lord returns, he would find them to be faithful. While Paul can't be there to offer them the help he wants to give them, he recognizes that God is with them and God works through his prayers. So he has a heart to pray because he is convinced that God works through prayer. Are you convinced of this truth?

Rabbi Abraham Heschel has this to say about prayer. “The issue of prayer is not prayer. The issue of prayer is God.” Lois Tverberg said of this quote, “How you pray reveals what you believe about God.”¹² It brings to mind the question, “what is a prayer of faith?” Is it faith that God will do for you what you want him to do for you? In other words, if I have enough faith it will come to be? Tverberg said, “It hit me that faith we are supposed to have is not in the outcome, but in God himself. God wants us to be absolutely convinced of his love for us and his power and desire to take care of us.”¹³ Often when we pray, we think we know what is best for us. But God knows what is best and so we commit ourselves and others to God’s good care. That is what Paul did. He committed his desire to visit the Thessalonians and the growth of their love for others to God, knowing that God was able to work in their lives. Are you convinced of this? Are you convinced that God works through our prayers to complete his work in others? If so, your heart will grow for prayer. You can actually impact places you have never gone and people you have never met through prayer.

So pray for the next generation growing up in this church with the full conviction that God will raise up young people from this church who will continue to walk in faith. Pray for church planting through WEFC with the conviction that God will use our efforts and prayers to establish churches in Connecticut that will proclaim Christ to others that no one else is reaching. Pray for missionaries in areas of the world you may never go and for people you won’t meet until you get to heaven. Pray for the effectual work of WEFC, that we would grow in our love for each other and for others so that if Jesus were to come back in our lifetime, he would have no trouble recognizing us as his children. Bottom line, pray, knowing that God is at work in your prayers.

Conclusion

A heart for people. . . . the power of habit the conviction that God works through prayer. All of these things form within us a heart to pray. What will you do? I think it is ok to ask this question. What will you do with what you heard this morning?

Perhaps you could get a little closer to some people in the church and as you become aware of the challenges they are facing, turn them into opportunities to pray. Or take the situations you already know about in people you know and pray for them.

Maybe you need to work on the habit of prayer. Take the challenge of framing your day around these three prayers and frame your day in God’s love. Do it for a week and then another week...and another...and another. Next thing you know it will be a keystone

habit that will shape other habits—even other habits of prayer.

Make God your object and pray with the confidence that God is using your prayers for his good. Like Paul, rejoice and give thanks when you hear the delightful news of answered prayer. Often, it is an answer you never would have dreamed. God is good!

¹J. C. Ryle *A Call to Prayer* (Laurel: Audubon Press) 5

²John Onwuchekwa *Prayer* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018) Kindle Reader Location 176

³*Ibid.*, Kindle Reader Location 211

⁴E. M. Bounds *E. M. Bounds on Prayer* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006) 118

⁵E. J. Richard quoted in Michael W. Holmes *1 and 2 Thessalonians: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 100

⁶Onwuchekwa, Reader Location 1050

⁷Henry Dosker “Hours of Prayer” www.biblestudytools.com

⁸Charles Duhigg *The Power of Habit* (New York: Random House, 2014) 109

⁹Justin Whitmel Earley *The Common Rule* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2019) 36

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 37

¹¹*Ibid.*, 45

¹²Lois Tverberg *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) Kindle Reader Location 2076

¹³*Ibid.*, Kindle Reader Location 2089

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What is your favorite gadget? What do you like about it?
2. What is your biggest challenge when it comes to prayer?
3. What was one thing that stood out to you from the sermon?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. What kinds of prayer do you find in these verses? Why do you think these prayers are “the will of God” for you?
5. Read 1 Thessalonians 3:6-8. How did God answer Paul’s prayer? How does this encourage you to intercede for others? What is a way you can better intercede for others?
6. Read 1 Thessalonians 3:9-10. Go to the top of page 9 of the transcript and read the morning, noon and bedtime prayers. What do you notice about how these prayers frame the day? What kind of impact could this habit have on your approach to the day?
7. Read 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13. What was the content of Paul’s prayer? How does it reflect his dependence on God? What does his prayer teach you about prayer?

Taking It Home

8. What do you want to do about your prayer life as a result of your conversation?
9. How can you better intercede for each other?