

Praying Always (Part Five)

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The "praying always" that Jesus commands in Luke 21:36 affects every part of our Christian lives. It is the tool that God gives us to be in constant contact with Him so that we can truly bring every thought into captivity, under the control of God (II Corinthians 10:5). We are encouraged to make bold use of this tool for our every need (Hebrews 4:16). We need to explore some of the important implications that striving to pray always—praying at all times—has on this life to which God has called us.

In Luke 21:36, Christ also commands us to "watch." The underlying Greek word stresses the need to be alert or on guard. This fits with a major requirement of Christian life, that we examine ourselves. We are to be alert to those things about ourselves that will disqualify us from entering God's Kingdom so that we can change them.

Self-examination is such an important spiritual activity that God includes it as a major part of one of His seven festivals, the Feast of Unleavened Bread. II Corinthians 13:5 exhorts, "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified." Our ongoing efforts to submit to God's laws and standards are evidence that Christ and His faith are in us (James 2:18).

God always gives us choices (Deuteronomy 30:19). Consider the example of Jonah. He could have done exactly what God asked of him, but instead, he rebelled, having to suffer an intense trial to bring him to obedience to God's will. Notice, however, that God's purpose never changed. The only variable was how much pain and suffering Jonah chose to experience before he submitted to God's purpose. Initially, he chose rebellion and trials over submission to God.

God gives us that same choice, as I Corinthians 11:31-32 (*The Amplified Bible*) shows:

For if we searchingly examined ourselves [detecting our shortcomings and recognizing our own condition], we should not be judged *and* penalty decreed [by the divine judgment]. But when we [fall short and] are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined *and* chastened, so that we may not [finally] be condemned [to eternal punishment along] with the world. (Small capitals added.)

Verse 31 teaches that God allows us the opportunity to exercise self-discipline and avoid His judgment by watching—searchingly examining ourselves, detecting our shortcomings, and recognizing our own condition. Yet, if we fail to exercise discipline, He will not. As in the example of Jonah, He is faithful and will complete His purpose (Philippians 1:6). If we fall short, He will discipline and chasten us because He does not want to see us destroyed. God's purpose—our salvation—does not change. Again, the only variable is how much we choose to suffer before He accomplishes His purpose. We choose whether we will be humble or be humbled.

How Do We Examine Ourselves?

In many cases, not necessarily all, *we* choose our trials. It is the same in any family. If one son is dutiful and obedient, and the other is rebellious, pushing the envelope at every opportunity, it would come as no surprise which son suffers the greater trials (or receives the most discipline) in both number and severity. Each child has a choice. We also have a choice—to exercise the discipline now, or to receive it from God at some time in the future.

So, how do we searchingly examine ourselves, detect our shortcomings, and recognize our own condition? How do we find the path we should be taking? God promises us in Proverbs 3:6, "In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths." *The Message*, a paraphrase, renders this verse as, "Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he's the one who will keep you on track."

When we acknowledge His presence—which striving to pray always does—He shines His light on the decision or thought. Consciously including God in the process makes the right choice more obvious. It also makes the choice a conscious one of obeying or disobeying God, rather than relegating it to habit or impulse.

Too often, we are not exercising self-control because we are hiding from God's presence, just as Adam and Eve did (Genesis 3:8). We may hear that "still small voice" (I Kings 19:12), but we turn off our minds and just go with the flow, unresistingly following the dictates of our human nature, which has been under Satan's influence since our births.

This tendency makes striving to pray always, being in constant contact with God, the best way to accomplish effective self-examination. By communicating with God before every decision, even before every thought (II Corinthians 10:5), we invite God into the situation, putting the spotlight of truth on our thinking and motivations—human nature's worst nightmare.

With God's presence through His Holy Spirit, we are able to recognize our shame and our helplessness before God, helping to create a stronger awareness of sin that we cannot easily evade by rationalizing it. When face to face with the holy God, we cannot easily say that our sin is only a little thing. Nor can we use others as examples, saying, "They are doing it, so what is the big deal?" With God there, right in front of us, all our excuses fail.

Once we bring God into the picture, the right way is more obvious, removing the many excuses our human nature concocts to allow disobedience. Then, the stark choice of obedience or blatant rejection of God faces us. When this occurs, it is a good time to pray for the will and power to do the right thing (Philippians 2:13).

Aversion to God's Presence

Do we *really* want fellowship with God? Our frequent contact with God, or lack of it, is an easy, concrete measurement for both God and ourselves to know the true answer.

A Laodicean's central characteristic is an aversion to God's presence. He does not gladly throw open the doors to let Christ in. Instead, he wants his privacy to pursue his own interests, unimpeded by the constraints God's presence would impose. Notice Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me."

Striving to pray always throws open the door of our minds to God, and just as Luke 21:36 indicates, by vigilant watching we can spot our Laodicean tendencies, overcome them, and avoid tribulation. Commentator Albert Barnes makes some interesting points on Revelation 3:20:

The act of knocking implies two things:

(a) that we desire admittance; and

(b) that we recognise the right of him who dwells in the house to open the door to us or not, as he shall please. We would not obtrude upon him; we would not force his door; and if, after we are sure that we are heard, we are not admitted, we turn quietly away. Both of these things are implied here by the language used by the Saviour when he approaches man as represented under the image of knocking at the door: that he desires to be admitted to our friendship; and that he recognises our freedom in the matter. He does not obtrude himself upon us, nor does he employ force to find admission to the heart. If admitted, he comes and dwells with us; if rejected, he turns quietly away—perhaps to return and knock again, perhaps never to come back.

Striving to pray always is our conscious choice to let God in. Psalm 4:4 (*Contemporary English Version*, CEV) emphasizes the seriousness of examining ourselves: "But each of you had better tremble and turn from your sins. Silently search your heart as you lie in bed."

Every night, at the end of another busy day, provides us—and God—an opportunity to evaluate the true intent of our hearts. We can ask ourselves: How much and how often did we acknowledge God throughout our day? How much did we talk to Him and fellowship with Him today? Where did we miss opportunities to do it? Why?

Perhaps the biggest question to ask is this: When did we hear the "still small voice" today and hide from God's presence? Our daily answers to these self-examination questions and our practical responses could in a large measure determine where we spend both the Tribulation and eternity (Luke 21:36).

Walking With God

Nearly fifty times in the New Testament, walking is used as a metaphor to describe how we live our daily lives. These numerous references signify just how important this concept is to God. For instance, Paul exhorts us to make our walk a worthy one (Colossians 1:10), one accomplished by faith and not sight (II Corinthians 5:7).

Enoch walked with God for 300 years (Genesis 5:22, 24). For three centuries, Enoch included God in every aspect of his life. In other words, wherever Enoch was, God was. In life, they were inseparable partners. We can please God as Enoch did (Hebrews 11:5) by following his example.

How do we include God in *every* aspect of our lives as Enoch did in such an exemplary way? How do we ensure that God is wherever we are? Striving to pray always accomplishes both. It is a major element in walking with God.

How do we compare to Enoch's example? Can God say of us what He says about Enoch, that He is a partner in every aspect of our lives? Rather than running from God as a Laodicean would, Enoch

wanted God to be present and involved in his life. He willingly and without fear subjected himself to God's minute evaluation and examination because of their intimate relationship developed through time and contact.

Enoch's walk with God is an example of a life lived with true dedication, and it can be the same for us. Praying always clearly demonstrates the true intent of the heart and our true dedication to God. The first Great Commandment is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:36-38). Because it is first, we will probably be evaluated on it most thoroughly. Praying always demonstrates our desire to comply with it.

Our Day

Consider this scenario: A person spends the entire day walking from Point A to Point B with his best friend. However, he speaks to his friend only a little in the morning and mumbles a few words at night before falling to sleep, ignoring him for the rest of the day. What would be his friend's likely assessment of the state of their friendship? Even two extremely introverted friends would share interests and converse on them to some extent.

Is there a better friend than God? We have a great deal to discuss with Him every day, for every day is filled with decisions: what to eat or not to eat, what to purchase or not purchase, what to spend time doing or thinking about. We must also decide how to respond to other people and how to respond to our own emotions and attitudes.

Every significant choice should be brought to God (Proverbs 3:6). If we do not, we are making decisions based on human nature and declaring ourselves to be Laodiceans, self-sufficient and needing nothing, directly contrary to the teaching of Jesus Christ (John 15:5). These do not have to be on-your-knees prayers, but we should at least silently ask God to bring His light to bear on the situation and to supply our needs, whether we need wisdom, discernment, strength, courage, understanding, patience, etc.

Notice the command in Galatians 5:16, 25: "I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. . . . If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit." If we are walking in the Spirit, made possible by praying always, we cannot be sinning (verse 16). They are mutually exclusive.

Praying always is a major component of walking with God and one of the two tickets to avoiding tribulation and gaining entrance to God's Kingdom. As such, Enoch's life contains a point worthy of note that may apply to those living at the end time. God says of Enoch in Genesis 5:24: "And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him." If we walk with God as Enoch did, will God, true to His patterns, likewise take us away from the trouble on the horizon? Luke 21:36 indicates the answer could be, "Yes."

Opportunities

To help us to see the many opportunities we have during our day for self-examination and for walking and talking with God, notice the following possibilities. When:

» we or a family member is leaving the house, ask for God's protection. We should not take God's protection for granted (James 4:13-15).

- » we or loved ones return home without incident, thank God for allowing this (Ephesians 5:20).
- » faced with worry and anxiety, acknowledge God's presence and its power (Psalm 23:4).
- » someone we care about comes to mind, thank God for allowing them in our lives and pray for their protection and about any challenges they may be facing (II Thessalonians 1:3).
- » a difficult person comes to mind, pray about our attitude and for wisdom to treat them as God has already treated us (I John 4:19).
- » an enemy comes to mind, pray for them (Matthew 5:44) instead of nursing ill feelings.
- » reaching for food that is not good for the body, acknowledge God's stern warning in I Corinthians 3:17.
- » faced with choices of right and wrong, ask for the will and power to do the right (Philippians 2:13).
- » a decision needs to be made, acknowledge His presence so that His light may shine (Psalm 36:9).
- » tempted not to work on vital items in our lives, ask for the strength and power to prioritize properly (Psalm 68:35).
- » our thoughts do not match the standards of Philippians 4:8, ask God for help to make our thoughts acceptable to Him (Psalm 19:14).
- » we see something beautiful in nature, thank God for His creation (Psalm 104:24).
- » something good happens, no matter how small, thank God for allowing it (I Thessalonians 5:18).
- » meeting people, ask for the help to be a good example in word and deed (Philippians 2:14-15).
- » facing a problem of any kind, acknowledge God's promises (Psalm 34:4-10).
- » faced with indecision, ask for insight and guidance (Proverbs 2:3-7).
- » dealing with a bad habit that is an enemy to overcoming, acknowledge God's presence (Psalm 9:3).

This list is by no means a complete list, but it can be a springboard to realizing how intimately involved God wishes to be in our lives. It can help us to see the many opportunities that He gives us throughout our day to choose to walk with Him and to build the relationship. Psalm 119:37 (CEV)

tells us we find life, eternal life, by going God's way, walking with God: "Take away my foolish desires, and let me find life by walking with you." Are we taking the steps to find eternal life? Praying always is a vital first step.

Self-examination and walking with God are not the only facets of our lives affected by praying always. The final article in this series will give additional examples of how praying always helps to accomplish our goal of being in God's Kingdom.