

Praying Always (Part Four)

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To this point, the articles in this series have searched out a deeper meaning for Luke 21:36, highlighting the importance of watching (giving careful attention to overcoming) and praying always, as well as how the latter is a primary tool for accomplishing the former. The obvious next question is, "How does 'praying always' work?" Why is consistent, thoughtful prayer such a powerful tool in the process of overcoming?

The answer to these questions begins with a simple yet powerful fact of human nature: The mere presence of authority significantly improves performance. Compare motorists' compliance with the speed limit when a trooper is in plain view versus when everyone believes no patrolman is watching. Even if a driver cannot see him or his squad car, just a person's belief that a trooper *could* be present will normally keep his speed in check. As Ecclesiastes 8:11 shows, a lack of belief in the presence of authority reinforces bad behavior, making it easier for a person to believe the lie told from the beginning—that there is no penalty for sin (Genesis 3:4).

Praying always takes advantage of this proclivity, reminding us that we are in the presence of the greatest Authority Figure of all. Praying is consciously choosing to have a conversation with God, and that conscious effort puts God front-and-center in our minds.

Too often God is vague and in the background, and at these times, it is easy to rationalize bad behavior. Praying always changes that dynamic. If we are communicating with God about what we are doing and why we are doing it, asking Him for guidance, our behavior, our words, and especially our thoughts will change if we are truly converted.

It is a sad commentary on the perversity of human nature that there are things we would not dare think, say, or do in God's presence but would think, say, or do them when under the delusion that He is not looking. We have only to consider our experiences growing up. What was the difference in our behavior when our parents were in plain view as opposed to when they were not? Praying influences us to be always aware that we are before and in plain view of our spiritual Father in heaven.

David comments on the power of God's presence in Psalm 9:3: "When my enemies turn back, they shall fall and perish at Your presence." David's enemies were physical people. Our enemies, however, are Satan, his distracting world, and our human nature, which he has been molding in his image since our births. If we are not to "fall and perish," these enemies must be vanquished—it comes down to "them or us." If God does not fight the battle, we will ultimately lose because our flesh is weak; we have little spiritual power against our enemies, especially Satan and his devices (John 15:5). Striving to pray always puts us in His presence at every opportunity, and our enemies' power over us recedes and eventually disappears.

God With Us

What do we actually *do* to "seek first the Kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33)? *How* do we in our daily actions put God first? How do we take Christ's abstract statement and turn it into concrete steps that we can employ in our lives? One answer is Luke 21:36. Matthew 6:33—seek God—is the solution to

all our problems. Luke 21:36 gives us the first step in implementing that solution—praying always. This is a foundation on which to build eternal life.

By being in conscious and constant communication, we are acknowledging God. We are bringing Him into the picture, obeying Matthew 6:33 by seeking Him first. When we do that, we create the opportunity to put some interesting dynamics into action that will facilitate overcoming.

Could we have any better companion than God? With no other could we possibly find better fellowship. God designed prayer to be an act by a free-moral agent who consciously chooses to be with Him to develop their relationship. When we pray, we acknowledge that we are in the presence of God, giving Him the opportunity to rub off on us, like iron sharpening iron (Proverbs 27:17).

When person A rubs off on person B, it implies that B becomes a little more like A—he begins to take on the other's characteristics. The same holds true with the relationship between God and us. Who has the easier time dealing with temptation—God or us? Of course, God does (James 1:13)! It follows, then, that if the more God rubs off on us, the more we become like Him—the more successful our battle against temptation becomes. The more God rubs off on us, the more the battle becomes God's, not ours.

To have the right kind of fellowship and relationship with God, we have to be aware of the reality that we are *always* in His presence; He is "a God near at hand" (Jeremiah 23:23). Because God has promised never to leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5), and since we are the Temple where His Spirit dwells (I Corinthians 3:16), God is constantly with us. For His children, the question is never whether He is present, but whether we *acknowledge* His presence. Praying always accomplishes this.

If being in the presence of a friend of fine character improves us on a human level (Proverbs 13:20), how much more true is this when we are in the presence of God Himself, the very definition of character and wisdom? That is how He can rub off on us: We are with Him, in His fellowship, in His presence, through prayer. When it comes to His children, He is never way off somewhere, if we would but acknowledge this fact.

God designed human beings to adapt to their environment. Before conversion, this world and its influences were molding us into an anti-God form. Acknowledging God's presence is the antidote that counteracts the influence under which we have lived since birth.

God's calling is an invitation to fellowship with Him, and getting to know Him is our salvation (John 17:3). If this is so, then the means—prayer—is a vital part of the foundation on which we need to build. That is the message of Luke 21:36. Praying always leads to overcoming, and both will lead to an escape from God's wrath and fellowship with Christ on into God's Kingdom.

Notice another illustration of the power of presence. What happens to us when we are around people who are pessimistic, angry, fearful, whining? Compare that to our reaction when around those who are positive and enthusiastic, facing life with gentle humor, determination, and energy. The former can quickly drain and depress us, while the latter can energize and enthuse us. In these situations, a literal transference of a spiritual attitude takes place. However, as we increase our physical distance from either of these examples, their power to influence erodes.

What happens on the human plane is no different from what happens spiritually. The spirit—good or bad—of people radiates out from them. It can affect, even change our spirit. Likewise, Satan's spirit permeates our environment, influencing us unless we choose to counteract it.

That choice is praying at every opportunity, willingly submitting ourselves to the persuasion of the most positive, righteous, and unchanging attitudes that exist in the entire universe! This is why after prayer, after spending time in the presence of God, people can feel peace, joy, or confidence. On the other hand, they can also feel humbled and chastened because God has led them to remorse and repentance. Prayer changes things—us.

Character

God's great desire is for us to have the qualities of His Spirit. Christ Himself gives us a major tool to accomplish this in Luke 21:36, praying always so that God's character can rub off on us. Scripture exhorts us to draw near to God—to enter His presence to facilitate our transformation. For instance, the apostle writes in Hebrews 10:22, ". . . let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

This transformation transfers qualities that we call "character." We are to be putting on God's character image. How important is character? Notice this quotation from Herbert W. Armstrong's *Mystery of the Ages*:

So mark well this super-vital truism—that perfect, holy and righteous *character* is the supreme feat of accomplishment possible for Almighty God the Creator—it is also the means to His ultimate supreme purpose! His final objective! . . . Perfect, holy and righteous character is the ability in such separate entity to come to discern the true and right way from the false, to make voluntarily a full and unconditional surrender to God and his perfect way—to yield to be *conquered* by God—to determine even against temptation or self-desire, to *live* and to *do* the right. And **even then such holy character is the gift of God.** (pp. 69-70; bold emphasis ours)

How does the gift of character from God happen? Hebrews 1:3 explains: ". . . who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." "The express image" is from a single Greek word, from which comes our word "character." The word appears only here in the New Testament.

William Barclay explains that it literally describes "the *impress* that a seal leaves on wax," so he renders that part of Hebrews 1:3 as, "He [Christ] is the exact impression of his [Father's] being, just as the mark is the exact impression of the seal." Physically, a seal can make an impression only by making contact, which is exactly what must happen to us spiritually. For God to make us in His "express image"—to stamp His character on us, to give us the gift of His qualities—requires contact, that we be in His presence. Praying always does just that.

This verse also suggests that godly character is not really the result of battling temptation, a battle we are powerless to win on our own. Rather, character is created by our continual, conscious choice to

be in contact with Him, to submit everything we are to Him, to acknowledge that He is the only source of strength, and then to trust—to have faith in (I John 5:4)—His love and willingness to do battle for us, to give us the gift of His character.

Praying always is that first step in overcoming—submitting. Then He can take over to do what we are not able to do on our own. After our decision to submit, He may still require certain actions from us, to take those few steps in faith—our walk with God—but then we have Him on our side, giving us guidance and strength.

Even in the world, we can see the power of character. While character can make an ordinary man extraordinary, a lack of character can make an extraordinary man quite ordinary. Many thought Ronald Reagan to be very ordinary, and later, they could not believe the extraordinary things he accomplished. He based some of his most crucial decisions solely on what he believed to be right, when there was little evidence at the time that he would receive good results from those decisions.

Conversely, even Clinton's enemies considered him extraordinary in intelligence and ability. Yet, the history books will probably remember him as an ordinary President, accompanied by a picture of him shaking his finger in the faces of the American people as he lied to them.

Character has power because it connects us with divine wisdom. Without character, we are limited to human intelligence, and most of history is a record of its woeful inadequacy. Character links us to a godly intelligence that can see the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10). A person who exercises character exercises faith. He may not foresee the good it will bring, but he trusts that the divine intelligence behind his faith knows more.

If we are not continually praying, we will be using human intelligence with the same ratio of success that history has shown it to have. Praying always, striving always to be aware of His presence, allows His Spirit to rub off on us. God has chosen praying always as a primary method to allow us to get to know Him, to receive His character as a gift, to overcome, and to receive eternal life and salvation.

If God has given us this powerful tool, why do we not use it more? Why do we not seek God for every decision, every thought?

The Light

Too often, because of the deceitfulness of human nature, we do not really want to know God's will—and we definitely do not want God involved in what we desire to do. We also wish to avoid facing the tough decision to submit to Him. We would rather unthinkingly follow human nature because it is the easy road that brings immediate gratification.

However, when God shines His light on our situation, we have no place to hide and no excuses to shield us. We must make a choice. Most carnal human beings find it is easier to go with the flow by leaving God out, deceiving themselves into believing that they truly love God but just cannot help themselves because they are weak. As we try to implement Christ's command to pray always, the realization eventually dawns that the problem is not that we are weak, but that we are evil with desperately wicked hearts (Jeremiah 17:9). The claim of weakness is merely a cover story created by deceitful nature as a euphemism for the real problem: rebellion.

At times, we, frankly, do not want to submit. We may hear the "still small voice" (I Kings 19:12) of God (some would call it their conscience), but we ignore it or drown it out with activity. Why? Because, at that moment, we want to do what we want to do, how and when we want to do it. Deep down, we know that bringing God to the fore would only thwart our carnal desires.

We humans have a "zombie mode," in which we can switch off our thinking and just flow with human nature. In this mode, because we are not actively choosing to sin (as we might justify it), our human nature can again claim weakness, which implies that it is out of our control. It is, in actuality, rank rebellion. At the outset, we consciously chose to leave God out of the process.

For a Christian, this zombie-mode is, in effect, an aspect of Laodiceanism (Revelation 3:20). We hear Christ's knock at the door, and rather than excitedly open it and let Him in, we instead turn out the lights, pull down the shades, hide under the covers, and pretend we are not at home. It is no wonder that the Laodicean is so deceived about his spiritual condition—he will not allow himself to recognize the truth about himself! It is far better to discover the truth about ourselves now and have the opportunity to make the necessary changes than to wait for God to expose it in a time of tribulation (verse 19). Luke 21:36 suggests that praying always while giving careful attention to overcoming may be a factor in separating those who have to go into the Tribulation from those who do not.

Acknowledging God brings the light of His truth and character to our attention. Human nature, however, is like a cockroach. When the light shines, it heads for the darkest place it can find. The biggest decision we make—one we make every waking moment—is to choose consciously to run to the light. That is what striving to pray always is, choosing to run to the light. For human nature, that is a scary proposition, for the light will expose every dark corner of our lives. "But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God" (John 3:21).

As scary as walking in the light is, it is exactly what God has called us to do: "Blessed are the people who know how to praise you. They walk in the light of your presence, O Lord" (Psalm 89:15, God's Word Translation). Being in the presence of that light makes our way more plain and teaches us. God deeply desires that His thoughts become our thoughts (II Corinthians 10:5). When they do, our character will reflect His image, and we can then witness of Him before others (Matthew 5:16).

Prayer is the mechanism that allows much of the communication of His thoughts to ours. Access to God through prayer is one of the greatest gifts that He gives to us (Deuteronomy 4:7), allowing us into the presence of the sovereign Creator and Lord of all, the One who possesses all wisdom, power, and love. When we allow Him into our lives by praying always, God unleashes a power that can do far more for us than we could ever imagine or ask (Ephesians 3:20).

Praying always has important implications for all aspects of Christian life, as we will continue to see.