

Always Pray and Never Give Up!

Rich Nathan
November 1-2, 2014
Just Pray! Series
Ephesians 6.18

Have you ever prayed for something or someone, not just once or twice or three times, but dozens of times, or maybe hundreds of times, over the course of months or years, or decades? Raise your hand if you've prayed about something or someone for years, dozens of times, hundreds of times. I certainly have!

After I graduated from law school I was fired from my first job with a law firm after just a couple of months on the job. What happened was this. There was a lawsuit between two famous pornographers here in Columbus, a lawsuit that attracted national attention because it is not every day the press gets to cover a trial involving not just one pornographer, but two. And my firm was representing one of these pornographers and they wanted me to go through all of the pornographic magazines of our opponent to dig up dirt about him.

I was young. I was 24 years old. I had just graduated from law school. Marlene and I had just bought our first home and she had just quit her job as a social worker because Marlene was pregnant with our first child, Daniel. So I had a lot of pressure on me to do what the law firm wanted me to do.

But I knew as a Christian that I couldn't go through those magazines. This wasn't a particularly gray area. So I thought I had come up with a way out. I proposed an alternative to one of the older attorneys that I would help on lots of other aspects of the case, make myself really useful, but I didn't want to go through the magazines. And when they asked why, I told them I was a Christian and that I couldn't read through the magazines.

To make a long story short, I was fired the next day by the firm.

So, I am out of work with a pregnant wife, a house payment, and no income. Do you think I prayed? You better believe I prayed. I prayed every which way I knew how to pray. I claimed God's promises. I prayed in Jesus' name. I prayed in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. I prayed in the name of the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I prayed loud. I prayed soft. I knelt down. I stood up.

And my mailbox was filled with rejection letter after rejection letter. Every law firm in the city had already hired the people they wanted and no one had an opening. Six

months, every day, multiple times a day, praying. I was calling law firms trying to push my way in. Nothing. I was so discouraged.

I was about to join the military as an Army JAG Officer when a job in town opened up. That's how we stayed in Columbus. Otherwise, my family and I would have left Columbus traveling the world with the Army.

What did I learn? Praying hundreds of times about something, I learned that prayer is not magic. There isn't a set of magic words, or phrases that will guarantee success in a prayer. It is not our intensity, or our loudness that will get our prayer answered. I learned that prayer wasn't only about changing my circumstances. God had me pray over and over again about something in order to change me.

See, up until that point, I had come to believe that my success in life was primarily due to me, to my work. I had always done reasonably well in school and in making my way in life. But I learned by having to pray about something hundreds of times, that I was limited. That there were things that I couldn't accomplish without God's help. There were doors I couldn't open and walls I couldn't punch through no matter how hard I tried. All of those months I came to the end of myself.

Friend, have you ever faced a problem that is just too big for you? Have you ever faced something that you couldn't by your skills, or your smarts, by you trying harder that you couldn't change? Have you ever come to the end of yourself and forced by life's circumstances to acknowledge your limits?

That's what happened to me over those months which led to the third thing I learned. That if something was working in my life, or was going to work in my life, it was because God had graciously opened his hand, not because I was so talented, or so skillful. So, when a job finally opened and I began getting a paycheck, do you think I was thankful? You better believe it! I knew down to my toes that the only reason that Marlene and I and our new baby were eating and had a roof over our heads was because God blessed me with a job.

The Lord has been speaking to me about the importance of simply praying and calling our church to pray over the last several months. So today I'm going to begin a brief 3-part series titled Just Pray! I've called today's talk, "Always Pray and Never Give Up!" Let's pray.

Ephesians 6:18 (NIV)

18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

We examined Ephesians 6 during my series on The Story of the Kingdom. And we found that the Apostle Paul mentioned seven key weapons in our fight against the work of

Satan in the world. The last weapon that the Apostle Paul mentions is prayer. He tells us that Christian prayer is incredibly comprehensive. That the scope of Christian prayer is indicated by the four-fold use of the word “all.” In verse 18 we read:

Ephesians 6:18 (NIV)
18 ...pray in the Spirit on all occasions

So, we should pray all of the time. Then Paul says we should pray:

Ephesians 6:18 (NIV)
18 ... with all kinds of prayers

That means public prayer, private prayer, sad prayers, happy prayers, short prayers, long prayers, formal prayers, informal prayers – pray all the time with all kinds of prayers. We are told to

Ephesians 6:18 (NIV)
18 ... be alert and always keep on praying

In other words, persevere. Don’t give up. Never quit on prayer. Never throw in the towel and say, “Prayer is useless.”

The fourth “all” is:

Ephesians 6:18 (NIV)
18 ... always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.

Pray for everyone. Most especially, pray for our Christian brothers and sisters in the church and around the world. Pray all the time, with all kinds of prayers, always for all the Lord’s people.

Now, as the great Bible teacher John Stott put it, these four all’s are precisely what most Christians don’t do in our prayers. Most Christians pray sometimes, with some prayers, and some perseverance, for some of God’s people. We replace the word “all” with “some.”

Today I’m going to combine the first and third “all.”

Pray in the Spirit on all occasions

And

Always keep on praying

Because these two “all’s” – praying on all occasions and always pray are really quite similar. Pray all the time and never give up.

Paul begins by telling us to pray in the Spirit.

Ephesians 6:18 (NIV)

18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.

What does it mean to pray in the Spirit?

To pray in the Spirit certainly includes what the Bible calls the gift of tongues, but its way broader than that. To pray in the Spirit is to pray in harmony with the Spirit-inspired Bible. To pray in accordance with the Holy Spirit’s nudge in your heart. To pray in the Spirit is to pray with the guidance of the Spirit, under the leading of the Spirit, in submission to the Holy Spirit. What does that look like?

Let me unpack this for you. This business of praying in the Spirit gives us insight into what Christian prayer is all about.

What is the purpose of prayer?

Is the purpose of prayer mainly to get stuff – a new car, another job, having your team win? God, have the opposing team fumble the ball right now, allow us to throw a touchdown now. Have you ever prayed for a sports team? Of course you have. Is the purpose of prayer to find a parking spot at the mall, to pass an exam, to find romance? Certainly there is an aspect of prayer in which we petition God for what we want and need. But every culture and every person from the beginning of time has prayed to God, or the gods, or they’ve knelt down before the sun or the moon, or before some statue and prayed for what they wanted and needed. Rain for their crops; fertility for their herds, victory over their enemies, to have the man or woman of their dreams fall in love with them, to have children. Everyone who has ever prayed, whatever their view of God, or the gods, has asked for what they wanted and needed.

What is distinctive about Christian prayer? This business of praying in the Spirit tells us what is unique about Christian prayer. See, the reason the Holy Spirit was given to us was to point us to Christ. Jesus said in John 15:26:

John 15:26 (NIV)

26 “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.

And Jesus said in John 14:26:

John 14:26 (NIV)

26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

The reason Jesus gives us the Spirit is that the Holy Spirit centers us on Christ, on Christ's person, on Christ's words, on Christ's works. The Holy Spirit reminds us of what Christ said and what Christ did, and who Christ is. So the unique thing about Christian prayer as opposed to prayer by everyone else, the special thing about Christian prayer, the thing that makes Christian prayer different than the prayers of everyone else is that the purpose of Christian prayer is to gain Christ.

The purpose of prayer is to Gain Christ

I think of what the Apostle Paul said in Philippians 3:8:

Philippians 3:8 (NIV)

8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ

What do I mean by praying in order to gain Christ? Let me suggest a few things here.

We pray to open the door to Christ

One of the first Christian books I ever read was an old book by a Norwegian pastor named Ole Hallesby simply titled, Prayer.

Book cover of Ole Hallesby's Prayer

The book is a great book. And when Hallesby is trying to define what prayer is for a Christian, he quotes Revelation 3:20:

Revelation 3:20 (NIV)

20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

Hallesby says:

To pray is nothing more involved than to open the door, giving Jesus access to our needs and permitting him to exercise his own power in dealing with them. To pray is to open the door to Jesus.

Now I love this. See, the Christian life begins when a person responds to Jesus' knock on the door of their hearts. Maybe you meet a Christian friend, or listens to a sermon or a

parent, who explains to you that God loves you, that God loves you so much that he sent Messiah Jesus into the world to die for your sins. If you trust him, and invite him into our life, you will come into a personal relationship with God that will change your life forever. Jesus is knocking on the door of your heart, invite him in. The Christian life begins when a person opens the door of their hearts to Christ.

As I always tell people who are seeking a personal relationship with God, no one is born a Christian. To be a Christian is simply to be a follower of Messiah Jesus. You are born as a Gentile, you are born as a Jew, but you choose to be a follower of Jesus. You're either a Messianic Gentile, or a Messianic Jew and you become a Messianic, that is a Christian, which is just the Greek word for the Hebrew word "Messianic." You become that by opening your heart to Christ.

Well, just as you begin the Christian life by opening the door to Christ, so you move on in the Christian life by continually opening the door to Christ in prayer. The way in is the way on.

How does this work? Whatever your emotions, friends, whatever you're feeling, whatever your mood, invite Jesus into that. When you are angry, or have been offended by someone, instead of trying to work out your anger on your own, or pretending you are OK, be emotionally honest with Christ and invite him into your anger to help you sort it out. When you are discouraged, be emotionally honest with Jesus. Tell him, "I'm disappointed. I thought things were going to turn out differently." Instead of stuffing it, let the circumstances of your disappointment be the knock of Jesus and invite him in. "Jesus, this is how I feel. I tried so hard. I thought it was going to work out differently. Fill my heart again with hope."

Don't let doubt cause you to keep Jesus at arm's length. Invite Jesus into the doubt. Be honest with Jesus. "I'm really struggling with God's goodness, with God's existence, with God's concern for someone as small as me. Step into my doubt!" When you are tempted, don't let the feeling of temptation create so much shame in you that you hide from God. Invite the Lord into the temptation. "Lord, here is how I'm feeling right now. Here is the thought that just came across my mind. Here's the desire." God knows it anyway. You are not going to say something to God where he slaps his head and says, "Oh myself (he doesn't say 'OMG'), I didn't know that." Invite him into your temptation.

Invite him into your tough circumstance, when you are at odds with someone else. Invite Christ into the conflict.

What's the purpose of prayer? It is to open the door to Christ. What's the purpose of prayer? To grow in relationship with Christ.

We pray to grow in relationship with Christ

Prayer is the way we develop our relationship with Christ. All of our relationships are based on communication. So many marriages break down, why? It is because of a lack of communication. Husbands and wives simply don't talk to one another, or they don't talk about anything really meaningful. Families break down because of a lack of communication.

The same thing is true in our relationship with God. You aren't going to have a very deep relationship with God unless you communicate with him. And the communication has to go beyond the surface. Let me just read a laundry list of what I want, God. Communication that builds a relationship has an element of emotional honesty in it. Here is what I'm feeling, God. Here is what I really care about. Here is what I really want. This is why this really upset me.

Prayer is not a matter of a bunch of religious jargon that keeps God at arm's length from us. Prayer is emotionally honest communication that builds our relationship with Christ.

What is the purpose of prayer? To open the door to Christ. To grow in relationship with Christ. And we

Pray to embrace the person of Christ

When a Christian prays we're saying we fundamentally want more of Christ. See, Jesus perfectly did what he asks us to do. He perfectly forgave people and then he asks us to forgive people in the same way. He perfectly loved people and he asks us to love other people in the same way that he loved people. Jesus perfectly healed people and he tells us to go and heal people. Jesus perfectly worked justice; he changed the situation around him. And then he asks us to go and work justice.

So what does it mean to embrace the person of Christ? It means

To embrace the character of Christ

The Apostle Paul said this in Galatians 4:19:

Galatians 4:19 (NIV)

19 My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you,

That's why we pray – not just to change circumstances, but to change us, to have Christ formed in our souls. I want to look more like you, Jesus. I want to have the fruit of the Spirit in my life – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self control. Father, I'm so far away from being like your Son, Jesus. Form the character of Christ in me.

What does it mean to pray to embrace the person of Christ?

To embrace the counsel of Christ

Listen, we need wisdom all the time. We need direction about our future. All of us have lived enough life to know that our plans alone are not enough - our plans for ministry, our plans for our careers, our plans for our lives. We want God's plan, God's direction, and God's wisdom. Psalm 127.1 says:

Psalm 127:1 (NIV)

1 Unless the LORD builds the house,
the builders labor in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the guards stand watch in vain.

How much labor have we spent in vain because the Lord was not building the house? Because the Lord is not at work in our work? So often we reject the counsel that we're receiving from scripture, from our brothers and sisters and leaders in the church. We set out on our own and it doesn't work out. And then what? We're frustrated. I can't believe, God, how you let me down. You've rejected the counsel of Christ, but you still want the blessing of Christ. We pray in order to embrace the counsel of Christ.

We pray

To embrace the composure of Christ

The surest cure for our worry and anxiety is to give our burdens to Christ. Here is what the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 4.6-7:

Philippians 4:6-7 (NIV)

6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Here is what Peter says in 1 Peter 5.7:

1 Peter 5:7 (NIV)

7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

I think of the verse of the hymn, "What a Friend We Have In Jesus,"

*O what peace we often forfeit
O what needless pain we bear*

*All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer*

Instead of lying in bed tossing and turning fretting about the future, fretting about your kids, fretting about your finances, fretting about your exam – take that burden and place it at Christ’s feet. Let Christ into your worries.

We pray to embrace the character of Christ. We pray to embrace the counsel of Christ. We pray to embrace the composure of Christ. And we pray

To embrace the kingdom of Christ

Jesus teaches us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Prayer is the bridge over which the kingdom of God comes to the earth. I picture this enormous train called “the kingdom of God” loaded down with healing for our bodies, loaded down with healing for mental illness, loaded down with healing for marriages, loaded down with justice for the poor, reconciliation between the races, and this train called “the kingdom of God” loaded with kingdom blessing is rev’d up in heaven waiting to come and be manifested in our midst. How does that train get from heaven to earth? It’s over the bridge of prayer – your prayers, my prayers.

If we want to see more of the kingdom of God in our city, pray. If you want to see more of the kingdom in our school system, pray. If we want to see more of the kingdom in the Muslim world, pray. Do you want to see the kingdom of God end violence and murders in our city, pray. Do you want to see the kingdom of God manifested in healing, pray.

See, prayer bridges the gap between what I read in the Bible about the way the world is supposed to be and my experience of life the way it is. We Christians pray to gain Christ. Yes, we want our circumstances to change. Yes, we want our loved ones’ circumstances to change. But fundamentally, we know that the greatest need of human beings is Christ. That if we had more of Christ, if our loved ones had more of Christ, if the world had more of Christ, we would be experiencing heaven on earth.

What does it mean to pray all the time?

Ephesians 6:18 (NIV)

18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.

To pray on all occasions means that we don’t need a special place to pray. It is fine if you have a preferred place to pray in the morning or in the evening, a special room in your house with your favorite chair and your favorite mug for your coffee, and a little picture of Jesus in the corner. That’s fine. But you don’t need that in order to pray. I like to

take walks to pray. But I don't have to be outside to pray. We can pray in the gym. We can pray on the bus. We can pray when we're riding our bikes. We can pray in the car. We can pray as we're walking down the hall towards an important meeting, or on our way to a class we're taking.

The Columbus Dispatch wrote an article about the woman who won the Columbus Marathon a few weeks ago. She said that while she was running, she just kept praying for all the patients at Nationwide Children's Hospital. I picture this woman running thousands upon thousands of steps, 26 miles, praying for children.

To pray on all occasions means that we don't need a certain place, and we don't need a certain bodily posture. Whether you like to kneel down when you pray, or sit down, or stand, or walk – we don't need that in order pray. When I think about what it means to pray on all occasions, I particularly think that we don't need a certain feeling in order to pray. You don't need a feeling of faith to pray.

The great Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, who is considered to be one of the greatest preachers in all of history, said:

We should pray when we're in a praying mood, for it would be sinful to neglect so fair an opportunity. We should pray when we're not in a praying mood, for it would be dangerous to remain in so unhealthy a condition.

Pray regardless of what you feel like. Hudson Taylor, who was one of the most famous missionaries in all of Christian history, saw amazing answers to prayer. Tens of thousands of Chinese people were reached for Christ through Hudson Taylor and his mission to China. Late in life someone asked him did he always feel joyful when he prayed? Did he always feel the presence of God when he prayed? Hudson Taylor replied that his heart usually felt like wood when he prayed and that most of his victories came through emotionless prayer.

So pray on all occasions. Pray when you feel like it. And pray when you don't. Pray at set times and pray throughout the day.

I want to read to you something from Charles Spurgeon, who in the 19th century had the largest church in the world, and who preached to, it's estimated, over 10 million people. Here is what Spurgeon said:

Never give up praying, not even though Satan should suggest to you that it is in vain for you to cry unto God. Pray in his teeth; "Pray without ceasing." For if for a while the heavens are as brass and your prayer only echoes in thunder above your head, pray on; if month after month your prayer appears to have miscarried, and no reply has been vouchsafed to you, yet still continue to draw near unto the Lord. Do not abandon the mercy seat for any reason whatever. If it

be a good thing that you've been asking for, and if you are sure it is according to the divine will, if the vision tarry wait for it, pray, weep, entreat, wrestle, agonize until you get that which you are praying for. If your heart be cold in prayer, do not restrain prayer until your heart warms, but pray your soul unto heat by the help of the ever blessed Spirit who helps us in our infirmities. Never cease prayer for any sort of reason or argument. Never, never, never renounce the habit of prayer, or your confidence in its power.

Why should we pray always?

Ephesians 6:18 (NIV)

18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

Let me tick off five reasons quickly. We always pray because

We always have access to God

During the Civil War a soldier wanted to have a conversation with President Lincoln about a tragedy in his family. He couldn't get in to see the President. He was sitting in a park in Washington DC with his head down. Lincoln's son, Tad, came up to him and asked him what was wrong. He said that he wanted to get into see the President. Tad said, "I can get you in." They went into the White House and walked into the President's office. Abraham Lincoln looked kindly down at his son and said, "Tad, what can I do for you?" He said, "I just met a new friend and he has something to say to you."

That's what its like to have Jesus as your friend. You always have access to God the Father through the Son. Day or night, when we perform well, or badly, we always have access to God.

Why should we always pray? Because

We always have needs

Prayer is, as I said in the opening, acknowledging our limits. We can't get for ourselves what we need. Can you think of anything that you need, friends? If you can't think of anything that you need, we always pray because

Others always have needs

There are others near to us who are sick. There are people who are dying. There are people who are grieving the loss of a loved one. There are folks around the world who are suffering. Today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Christians in China, in Iraq, in Iran, in South African, in the Sudan and elsewhere are

being persecuted. We can pray for them. There are people who are walking away from Christ, people who have never met Christ. Others always have needs.

We always pray because

Satan is always at work

There is never a time that Satan says, "OK, I'm done. You've gotten to the level of maturity now where I won't work overtime in your life. The church is so great that I won't work overtime to sow division and distrust, to tempt leaders, to throw obstacles in the way of the gospel, to waste your time on some black hole of a problem."

We always pray because

Your pastor and your church always needs your prayers

Church, if I were sick would you pray for me? If you would pray for me when I am sick, why not pray for me when I'm well? That God would use me and help me to be the leader I need to be. Would you pray for the church if we were seeing no one come to Christ? Our church is blessed to see many people come to Christ. Is that a reason to stop praying? Should we only pray when we see no blessing? Should we not cry out to God even more whenever we see blessing come?

I'm going to start a practice once a day on my Twitter and my Face Book to ask you to take 10-20 seconds a day to pray for me and for the church and for the Vineyard's leaders. Start following me on Twitter, or ask me and I will "friend" you on Facebook.

Hash tag #VCJustPray

Let me close with this story. There was a Christian woman named Monica who had all kinds of problems with her teenage son. He was lazy. He had a foul temper. He was always getting in fights. He was a liar. He was stealing stuff. But he was a bright kid and he grew up to be a lawyer. He still wasn't a nice person. He lived with a number of women. He had a son by one woman out of marriage. Then he got involved in this cult.

Throughout all of this time Monica just kept praying for her son. Day after day, year after year she always prayed and didn't give up. One day she had a vision and she saw the face of Christ and he was smiling at her. He gave her encouragement to keep praying. She prayed for another 9 years. At age 28 her son finally came to Christ.

Monica's son's name was Augustine. He's better known as St. Augustine. He was converted in 386 AD. He was ordained in 391. He became a Bishop in 396. He was almost certainly the most influential theologian that the church produced for 1000 years. And St. Augustine always attributed his conversion to his mother's prayers.

Always pray. Never give up. Let's pray.

Always Pray and Never Give Up!

Rich Nathan
November 1-2, 2014
Just Pray! Series
Ephesians 6.18

I. What does it mean to pray in the Spirit?

II. What is the purpose of prayer?

- A. We pray to open the door to Christ
- B. We pray to grow in relationship to Christ
- C. We pray to embrace the person of Christ
 - 1. To embrace the character of Christ
 - 2. To embrace the counsel of Christ
 - 3. To embrace the composure of Christ
 - 4. To embrace the kingdom of Christ

III. What does it mean to pray all the time?

IV. Why should we pray always?

- A. We always have access to God
- B. We always have needs
- C. Others always have needs
- D. Satan is always at work
- E. Your pastor and your church always need your prayers