

Pray Always, Pray All Ways

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, February 21, 2010)

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 (TEV) ¹“After you have occupied the land that the LORD your God is giving you and have settled there, ²each of you must place in a basket the first part of each crop that you harvest and you must take it with you to the one place of worship. ³Go to the priest in charge at that time and say to him, ‘I now acknowledge to the LORD my God that I have entered the land that he promised our ancestors to give us.’

⁴“The priest will take the basket from you and place it before the altar of the LORD your God. ⁵Then, in the LORD’s presence you will recite these words: ‘My ancestor was a wandering Aramean, who took his family to Egypt to live. They were few in number when they went there, but they became a large and powerful nation. ⁶The Egyptians treated us harshly and forced us to work as slaves. ⁷Then we cried out for help to the LORD, the God of our ancestors. He heard us and saw our suffering, hardship, and misery. ⁸By his great power and strength he rescued us from Egypt. He worked miracles and wonders, and caused terrifying things to happen. ⁹He brought us here and gave us this rich and fertile land. ¹⁰So now I bring to the LORD the first part of the harvest that he has given me.’

“Then set the basket down in the LORD’s presence and worship there. ¹¹Be grateful for the good things that the LORD your God has given you and your family; and let the Levites and the foreigners who live among you join in the celebration.

Luke 4:1-13 (The Message) ¹Now Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wild. ²For forty wilderness days and nights he was tested by the Devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when the time was up he was hungry.

³The Devil, playing on his hunger, gave the first test: “Since you’re God’s Son, command this stone to turn into a loaf of bread.”

⁴Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: “It takes more than bread to really live.”

⁵For the second test he led him up and spread out all the kingdoms of the earth on display at once. ⁶Then the Devil said, “They’re yours in all their splendor to serve your pleasure. I’m in charge of them all and can turn them over to whomever I wish. ⁷Worship me and they’re yours, the whole works.”

⁸Jesus refused, again backing his refusal with Deuteronomy: “Worship the Lord your God and only the Lord your God. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness.”

⁹For the third test the Devil took him to Jerusalem and put him on top of the Temple. He said, “If you are God’s Son, jump. ¹⁰It’s written, isn’t it, that ‘he has placed you in the care of angels to protect you; ¹¹they will catch you; you won’t so much as stub your toe on a stone’?”

¹²“Yes,” said Jesus, “and it’s also written, ‘Don’t you dare tempt the Lord your God.’”

¹³That completed the testing. The Devil retreated temporarily, lying in wait for another opportunity.

Paul writes in the closing verses of his letter to the Ephesians, **“Give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** This is a passage that has often caused me to stop and think: Can we be thankful to God at all times, for everything? Can a person struggling with disease and incurable illness be thankful? Our first response might be to say no – how can a person be thankful for cancer or heart disease? And yet, haven’t you heard seriously ill patients reflect on their lives with thankfulness? The disease sometimes causes a person to take time to pause and reflect, and remember with joy the good experiences, the friendships, . . .and the happiness of days gone by. I have spent considerable time with families mourning the loss of loved ones. Can a person be thankful when a loved one dies? Again, our first response might be to say no. Sadness and grief are not good partners with thankfulness. And yet, this is always what I do when visiting with the bereaved family. I remember, with them, good times, gifts that the deceased person brought to the family and friends. This is part of the grieving process, to remember with thankfulness, the life of the one who has

departed. In sickness and in death, in times of trial and times of joy, at all times, we are called by God to be thankful.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul also writes, “Pray without ceasing” Not only should we be thankful, but we should always be in prayer. In fact, someone came up with the catchy phrase that I have adopted as my sermon title, “Pray always, pray all ways.” Here again, our first reaction might be to dismiss that teaching. Pray always? I don’t have time for that. I need to work, I need to cook, I need to give my attention to these children. And yet, have you ever tried to say a brief prayer while doing something else? You don’t need to close your eyes and fall on your knees for it to count as a prayer. In our children’s message Rosina spoke about different ways people have been known to pray, but there we spoke mainly about posture in prayer. There are some actions that naturally lead us into prayer. Some people say that they feel near to God as they walk through the woods. For them, perhaps stopping and leaning against a stout old oak tree might be an action that leads them to speak to God. Some people find just coming into a church, even before they go to their pew or begin worship, they feel close to God. More than 100 years ago, Victor Hugo wrote, “There are moments when, whatever the attitude of the body, the soul is on its knees.”

Some people only turn to God in times of crisis. They seem to find no time to pray until illness strikes, and then it quickly becomes a prayer of desperation. A wise sage once wrote: He who does not pray when the sun shines will not know how to pray when the clouds roll in.

I would suggest that prayer is like exercise – the less you do it, the less you are able to do it. If you pray regularly, your prayers will come more easily, your relationship to God will be stronger, and you will find more strength in your prayers. Corrie Ten Boom wrote, “Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire? What a practical way to consider the importance of prayer in your life. Do you let prayer, your time with God, guide you through life? Or do you only bring out prayer in a time of emergency.

In our Old Testament lesson we hear some of God’s instructions to his people, through Moses, on how they might come to God in worship. Certainly every act of worship can be considered a prayer. Therefore bringing offerings is a form of prayer, as Moses instructed the people of God to do. Declaring your faith becomes a prayer. Remembering the journey of your faith is a prayer. These actions are so central to the religion of the Old Testament, and are often repeated by Moses in his teachings to the people of the Exodus. Recognizing your connection to the community of faith is a prayer. All these actions before God are a form of prayer. Just as the people of the Exodus were the people of the covenant, God’s people, so we are God’s people today, people of the New Covenant, in Christ. We are called to engage in these actions and similar actions often. Let them become a part of your regular life of faith, and your faith will be strengthened.

Pray always, pray all ways. On your knees, with hands folded, with eyes closed. Or standing up, or sitting in your car, with eyes wide open. Pray always, pray all ways. And give thanks to God.

Lent is the season to renew your faith. Give time to also strengthen your prayer life. I have often thought about the words of a conference leader at a seminar I attended a few years ago. He spoke about growth in prayer. He remembered as a child that his prayers were often prayers to God with requests to “give me.” You can probably remember such prayers – give me a puppy, give me this new toy, or maybe give me a passing grade on this test. Then as he grew to adolescence there was a change to “show me.” His faith was clouded with doubts and he prayed that God would give him proof. “God, show me, prove to me that you are real.” As he came to adulthood and into middle age, his prayers were often “why me?” As each hardship came along, as each moment of pain and grief hit him, he couldn’t help but start by asking, “Why me, God?” But finally full maturity came, and prayers began to start with the words, “Thank you, God.” and through these prayers he found more peace than at any other time in his life.

During this Lenten season, will you join me in spending more time in prayer? Prayers of all kinds, in worship, alone, praying for others, or for your own needs, but especially praying in thankfulness. Open your heart to the teachings of God. Receive the grace of God and be strengthened in faith through prayer.