

Impossible Prayer

by Stewart Ruch

The speaker calls the church to a season of prayer, emphasizing the importance of communion with one another and the Holy Spirit in praying without ceasing.

Duration: 27:32

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Acts 2:42, 2 Corinthians 6:11, Ephesians 6:18, 1 Thessalonians 5:17-19

Topics: "Prayer"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares a personal story about driving through harvested fields with friends and feeling a sense of freedom and adventure. He then relates this experience to the need for Christians to 'off-road' in their spiritual lives, breaking free from the control and isolation of the suburban lifestyle. The speaker emphasizes the importance of being open to the leading of the Holy Spirit and participating in the Kingdom of God, even if it disrupts our schedules and comfort. He warns against idolatry of control and isolation, which can hinder our communion with God and with others.

Transcript

Many, many years ago, I faced an absolutely impossible car situation. I still can't believe my parents approved me driving four and a half hours south at the age of 17 from Indianapolis to Evansville in southern Indiana, but it was a different era and they said, sure, why not? So I got in our family's Oldsmobile custom cruiser, wood paneled on both sides, a phenomenal AM radio blaring all the hits from the 1950s, and began my way down Highway 41. It was a gorgeous late afternoon and I had all the windows down and playing the music and just feeling incredible, feeling a sense of independence, feeling like here I was on my own, I could handle it.

It was just an incredible experience and I can remember so many details about that time. It got later and evening fell and it became dark and I was crossing a bridge about an hour north of Evansville, three hours south of Indianapolis, and boom! Car swerved like that and I knew immediately that I had a flat tire. I pulled over to the side of the highway and my heart was just pounding.

I got out and there was the flat, the back, and I just, I just internally panicked. I had no idea how to change a flat tire. I'd never changed one.

I don't think I'd ever seen one. There's no cell phone to reach to to call AAA. Too far to walk home.

Too far to walk to Evansville. And I just sat there with this kind of, you know, panic building in me and I was, how am I going to get out of this situation? There's no cars on the road. It's an absolutely impossible situation.

And I put my head down. I don't think I prayed. I think I was too afraid at that point to pray.

I put my head down and then I looked up and I saw up on a ridge off of the highway, a light on in a farmhouse. And I just said, OK, now I'm going to pray. Lord, I pray that when I walk up to that farmhouse, it'll be a really nice farmer.

I'm looking for old McDonald or somebody like that. And they're going to see this suburban kid who doesn't know how to change a tire and have mercy on me. And I just began with incredible nervousness to walk up this ridge and make my way to the farmhouse where the light was on.

And I knocked on the door and a 40 something farmer with the kindest face came to the door. I said, I'm so sorry to bother you, sir. I got a flat.

I don't know how to change it. I don't I don't know what to do. I got it.

He said, hold on a minute. Went inside, got his stuff, hop in the truck, broke down into the car, changed. So thankful, so relieved.

It was awkward. I didn't know what to do. I reached in my wallet.

Can I can I give you some money? No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. That's OK. This is what Christians do.

Drove off. I reflected on that a lot. How did I move from an impossible moment where I could not change my tire? I could not move from that place to all of a sudden driving south again, heading to see my friends.

How did I move? How did I transition? It was critical. If you look at the word impossible, but I took out the eye and I took out the M and I longer kept thinking, I am the only one who can change this tire. I am the only one who can get me out of this situation.

If it isn't going to happen, it's not going to happen. If it's if it's going to be, it's going to be up to me. And I stopped thinking that way out of desperation, looked around, got out of my own self and saw a light in a farmhouse and made my way to someone else.

And it was someone else who took the impossible and made it possible. What do we do with the three words the Apostle Paul gives us in the book of First Thessalonians? Pray without ceasing. For some of you, you've never heard those words before.

It's the first time because you're learning the Bible. That's I hope you're here at church to learn the Bible. Others of you have read these words.

You maybe even thought about these words. What happens for you when you hear the words pray without ceasing? Do you go? Metaphor. Really? How does somebody literally pray without ceasing? I mean, if you eat, does that count to be ceased? Take a phone call.

Is that count to be ceased? How does that work? It seems absolutely impossible to take that verse seriously. Pray without ceasing. I read one scholar who takes God's word very seriously.

He was writing on this and he said, This is psychologically impossible, psychologically out of reach. He concludes it must be hyperbole. And to give this scholar credit, this is someone that loves God's word.

They believe in the power of God and yet they look at it. It's just there has to be something else going on here. If there's something else going on here with pray without ceasing, what is it that's going on? Is that impossible prayer? I think the answer, if it's just me praying is yes.

As a matter of fact, I wonder if Jesus gave that to us through Paul to be impossible. I wondered if he wanted to have the very response of many of us who are logical and sequential and careful in our thinking. When we hear that go, it's not possible.

As a matter of fact, he just uses that teaching method often. He puts impossible things in front of his followers all the time. He says, I'm leaving.

I'm leaving this earth. He just said, but I want you to go out into all the nations and make disciples of everyone. Some of us are so used to that we forget how incredibly impossible that is.

That's not possible for someone to do. Jesus said, you know what? When I leave, you will do greater things than I. What? Really? I mean, once again, we hear that person go hyperbole metaphorical. It can't be true.

It can't be real. Or it is true and it is real. But to get to the impossible, we must remove the eye and remove the M and say it is no longer.

I was praying continuously. There's no longer I who must do these things. There must be some other way.

And there is another way. There is another way. It's the way of communion.

That's community. But communion has a stronger sort of spiritual sense to it. Look at the word.

It's common union. It's coming together in a kind of union. Communion is a Bible word.

We talk about holy communion where we have common union with Jesus himself. We talk about communion among all of us. What is the way out of the impossible and to the possible is through a communion.

And that's the only way. And Jesus puts these things in front of us. And so many of us just stop right there and go, it's not possible.

And we don't keep pushing up against those three words. And I want us to push up against those three words as a church. I want us to stretch and push and ask the Lord to show us what do these mean.

I'm not ready to accept that they're hyperbole. Let's look at this teaching. As we look at this teaching, often when I teach, I work through a passage verse by verse.

We just have three words here. Pray without ceasing. And so what I want to do in this case is provide a larger context from this book called First Thessalonians.

This wasn't originally a book. It was a letter. It was written.

It was written by Paul. Interestingly enough, it wasn't written just by Paul. He had two others that were engaged with him.

A man named Timothy, who was younger than Paul, and then a man named Silvanus. They wrote this letter. They wrote to people that they had started a church in Thessalonica.

That was a city in ancient Greece. They went in and they started a church. And now they're away from that church and Paul is living somewhere else and he's writing to the Thessalonians.

That's the background of this letter. And we see that there is the theme of communion throughout this letter. As a matter of fact, to understand pray without ceasing, you must understand the context of First Thessalonians.

If you pull them out of context, you will not get them. Sometimes we zoom in so much in our Bible reading and we don't zoom out in our Bible reading. To give ourselves the larger spectrum of what the Apostle Paul is trying to say.

Here's what he's trying to say. Communion makes the impossible possible. That's how we pray without ceasing.

Two kinds of communion. There's communion with one another and there's communion with the Holy Spirit. Both are key themes in the book of Thessalonians.

Communion with one another and communion with the Holy Spirit. Let's look at communion with one another. If you read a few First Thessalonians, what you will find and what is absolutely stunning.

If you know anything about Paul, Paul's often seen as the intellectual. He is truly genius in every capacity. He's seen as the intellectual, kind of ornery, kind of high maintenance.

If you've read him, even at times you're kind of wondering, is he snarling here? I mean, is he sarcastic there? What's he doing? Here's one thing you have to understand about Paul. And if you read your Bibles more and more, particularly Paul's letters that he writes, Here's what you learn about Paul. Paul is a person that profoundly values deep and godly friendship.

Paul was a friend. Yes, he's an intellectual. Yes, he's a church starter.

Yes, he's a challenging person in some ways, but he's a friend. And he takes friendship deeply and seriously. And when he comes to Thessalonica, he came in to start a church.

But he actually started that church, not by himself, but with two friends. Silvanus and Timothy. As a matter of fact, this church was born out of communion with one another.

And then they out of that community, these three brothers, they did spread godly friendship and deep affection throughout the church. Here's just one person. There's several examples that captured this.

This close, close community. Paul saying how much he misses the Thessalonians. He says this.

I am affectionately desirous of you. Verse 8, chapter 2. Listen to that. I am affectionately desirous of you.

For so many of us in our culture and subculture, we would never even use that language. That's a little too much. A little over the top.

Gets more. We came to you and we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our own selves because you had come very dear to us. At the heart of this church plant was incredible communion with one another.

Deep, deep friendship. You're so dear to us. Another letter Paul says to people.

He's writing to. I opened my heart to you and you opened your heart to me. Second Corinthians chapter six.

That's how Paul did his ministry. He did it with others to others in the community of others. And that is the critical context to the call to pray without ceasing.

It's so sown into this letter that for those of us who have not lived that kind of deep, deep community, that kind of profound, affectionate, desirous friendship, who have not known that kind of cohesiveness, it's almost hard to imagine how we would ever then hear the words pray without ceasing. But that's the context that Paul writes this in. We deeply need each other to obey the Bible.

You can't obey the Bible. If you want to seriously obeying the Bible, you have to take seriously the words pray without ceasing. And you cannot do that with on your own.

It's impossible. It is impossible. OK, but this is more than just, you know, let's love one another right now.

Come together. There's more. There's more happening here than just that is as important as that is.

There is a solidarity, a relational solidarity, but there's more. There's absolutely more. What Paul understands about the church when she is assembled and which is assembled around and the presence of Jesus and the preaching of the word and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, that when that happens, she is the body of Christ, not just profound communion.

That's true of friendship. But there is a spiritual and sacramental reality that she is the body of Christ on the earth. She's not like the body of Christ.

Paul doesn't use a simile in this case. He uses language of equivalency. What Paul is saying is you are the body of Christ on this earth.

Father Kevin gave a credible sermon last week. If you didn't have a chance to listen to it, please listen to it as part of our journey on prayer. That's about being distracted in prayer and that we engage our body when we're distracted in prayer.

We go for a walk or stand up or kneel. There's another side to the body coin that's really important. Yes, we engage our body.

But to pray without ceasing, we engage. I am the only one that can pray without ceasing. No, you're not.

It won't happen. What does that mean for us? I feel very, very stirred and convicted that we're called to move into a season of prayer like we never have before. And we are a praying church.

I'm very proud of the way we pray. Stunning res fast on Wednesday night. Incredible.

I love how you pray. I love that about you. But we're called to mourn.

We want to call this church to 24-7 prayer for 100 days in a row, starting on the Feast of Epiphany, January 6, going through Monday, Thursday. There's a chapel right behind this wall right here where prayer happens every day, 7 a.m. and 5 p.m. We want to fill this chapel for 100 days of prayer around the clock. We'll take turns, take our slots.

We'll pray around the clock for 100 days as the body of Christ. Imagine this. What if you happen to wake up at 2 in the morning? You can't sleep.

You're worried about something, the kid, finances, whatever it might be. And you're just awake. It's such a lonely moment.

Everyone else is sleeping. Then you go, wait. Not everyone else is sleeping.

Right now, someone's over at rest and they're praying. I'm connected to them. They're praying, I'm praying.

You're getting ready to go into a critical meeting at 3 in the afternoon at your office, down the loop or whatever it is. And you're anxious about it. And before you walk, you go, oh, before I walk, let me just remember.

Father, thank you that right now I'm praying in that chapel because somebody is praying 24-7. And there's a way in which the body of Christ has been called together in a radical, for us at least, not seen before way. And we are praying as the body.

And we are saying we refuse to not take the Scripture seriously. We are naive enough. And we are radical enough.

And we are wholly crazed enough to say you can't pray without ceasing. We can do it with one another. Now that with one another has an immediacy, a now that we see in First Thessalonians.

But it's also very important to remember that one another is also true across time. That we're connected with one another throughout the ages. That the body of Christ is materialized in Christ by the Holy Spirit now.

But she has been that incarnate reality for two millennia. As a matter of fact, we look at 24-7 prayer. We're like, Jesus uses an example in Matthew 13.

He says, hey, there's a person who has a house and they're wise. And in their wisdom, when they go into the house of their treasure, they bring out something old from the treasure. And they bring out something new.

Matthew chapter 13. And with that wise householder, we're saying, hey, let's bring out something new. We've never done 24-7 prayer before.

But actually when we do that, we're bringing out something old as well. Adam and Eve, prior to their fall, in the garden, continuous prayer with God. 24-7.

Maybe that's why we were given 24 hours, 7 days. So we can just mark with joy our time with God. Friendship.

Vision of the kingdom. Freedom. When the church had a pivotal moment, and Peter, who's leading it, calls together people.

We see this in the book of Acts. And we're told that they prayed with one another. And they prayed continuously through the night.

24-7 prayer. Right there at the origins of the holy church. But it continues to march on even from the scriptural times.

We see then that people begin to leave cities because they so wanted to pray. They wanted to live, pray without ceasing. And they would develop hermitages.

And they would live by themselves. And they were trying to do this reality. And there was some fruit.

And there was some incredible riches there. But a man named Benedict, one of my heroes, came along in the 6th century. He said, let's draw those who are praying on their own.

And let's draw them together in community. Monasteries of men and monasteries of women. And they will pray 24-7.

They will pray continuously. And out of that call that Benedict had to draw people together into prayer and the life of God. Mission went forth.

As a matter of fact, many scholars say the European civilization was profoundly birthed in that Benedictine call to prayer. Because thousands of monasteries spread throughout. From France, throughout Europe.

Huge influence on the Anglican church and the church of England. 24-7 prayer. That's where it's had its origin.

We march on from there to the 18th century. In a very small village in Germany. A man named Zinzendorf.

A very wealthy man. Had an estate. And he had a love for the kingdom of God.

Out of his call, the Moravian tradition developed. And Zinzendorf called people together in this little village. And he said, we have enough people to pray 24-7.

24 women, 24 men. Sign up. And I'll know if you didn't.

That's what they had. And they just leapfrogged. Day by day by day.

Women's prayer day and men's prayer day. Women's prayer day and men's prayer day. 100 years.

100 years of 24-7 prayer. The Moravians went all around the world on mission. Out of that prayer movement.

John Wesley met the Moravians. He was so struck by their call to prayer. Their love of worship.

Their belief in the things that everyone was saying was impossible. That God said would be possible. That Wesley connected with the Moravians.

And he too moved into a season of continuous prayer with his community. This is quoting Wesley about a prayer meeting. A continuous prayer meeting.

About 3 in the morning. As we were continuing in urgency and intensity in prayer. The power of God came mightily upon us.

And many cried for exceeding joy. And others fell to the ground. What we are being called to step into has been happening for centuries.

And century in and century out, the Holy Spirit stirs people with a heart to pray like this. And to do mission. And to step into the kingdom of God in ways that are new and fresh for that generation.

But are not new and fresh for Holy Church. And that's what God is doing. 24-7 prayer is the name of a prayer movement that began the summer of 1999.

The very same summer, if you've been through CORE, where I teach. That we began a movement of prayer here at Resurrection at Sunday night prayer meetings. After reading a particular book.

We started September of 1999. 24-7 prayer started in England in July of 1999. And all we're doing is stepping into what God has already been doing.

Communion with one another. Through the ages. Now.

But also then and most foundationally. Communion with the Holy Spirit. You see in immediate context.

If you look in your passage there. In immediate context. Paul is laying out different admonitions.

Rejoice always. Verse 16. Pray without ceasing.

Verse 17. Give thanks in all circumstances. Verse 18.

And then verse 19. Do not quench the Holy Spirit. He's taught on this prior in this book of Thessalonians as well.

And what we see, yes, is communion with one another. But it is first and foremost communion with the Holy Spirit. That will empower us to pray without ceasing.

The Holy Spirit, we are told, brings freedom. It was for freedom that Christ has set us free. Where the Spirit of the Lord is.

We read in Corinthians. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And when the Holy Spirit begins to move among his people.

And last week at 11 o'clock. One of our women here came forward. I asked people to come forward and pray for us.

And she prayed what I think was a prophetic word over us. For freedom in prayer. And it grabbed my mind.

And it grabbed my heart. It's called a freedom in prayer. And the Holy Spirit brings that work of freedom.

He doesn't bring chaos. He doesn't bring mayhem. But he brings freedom.

For those of us that aren't used to that much freedom. It might seem a little chaotic at first. A little messy.

But when it's the Spirit, it's freedom. He brings freedom from other spiritual powers. And this is critical if we're going to move into the next kingdom season of resurrection.

Of prayer and outreach and loving those who are far from God. Those who are marginalized on the borders of society. We must understand he brings freedom over familiar spiritual realities.

And I do believe that for us here in the suburbs. We battle with certain spiritual realities. Principalities are what Paul calls them in other places.

Powers. Now, I speak as an inside suburbanite. Raised in the suburbs.

I lived my almost entire life in the suburbs. I had two years in the city of Chicago and eight months I lived on a mountain. So, pretty much all suburbs.

And I'm thankful for the suburbs. I love raising my children in a place where it's safe. I love it.

I'm very thankful. I'm thankful for the clarity. I'm thankful that I get in my car and I drive somewhere and I don't have to stop at a barricade and have soldiers checkpoint me.

I'm very, very thankful for that. There are many gifts. But we need to be clear if we're going to step into kingdom prayer.

That there are spiritual powers as well. That stand against us doing so. But they are elusive powers.

They are subtle powers. We view them as habits. The habit of comfort.

The habit of convenience. The habit of having a significant measure of control over everything that we do. The habit of isolation and living independently in such a way that we don't really have to depend on anyone at any time.

Often remarked upon. Many of us talk about it. But when we talk about it, we talk about it more as habits and sort of cultural conditions.

They are far more than that. Those are spiritual realities that have demonic impetus that are meant to keep us from one another. And communion with each other.

And communion with the Holy Spirit. That what happens for us in a place like the suburbs is we get locked in our certain way of doing things. And we begin to not only prize the order which is good and holy that we can have.

But we begin to prize the control. And we begin to realize that I can always get where I want to go at what time when I want to be there. And there's never any problem.

I can go down Geneva Road and travel east. And then I can go right on President and go left on Roosevelt and go to the store. And it's always open.

And I can get what I need. And I can go home and I can close my door. And I'm done.

I've got this night and I always watch this show. And I never have to not watch this show because I always watch this show. I don't have somebody I'm trying to feed that night.

Or care for or serve. I've got it under control. I know what's happening.

It's incredibly measured. And I can connect with people when I want to connect with people. And on my schedule and when I can manage it.

And brothers and sisters, there can be a spiritual idolatry that comes upon us. And when we're called to break out into prayer. And 24-7 prayer.

All of a sudden we're forced by 24-7 prayer, for example, to say, oh, but I committed to pray tonight. I've got to be there. I committed to be a part of this movement of the kingdom of God.

It is critical that we can ask the Lord, remove our blinders. Wherever we have idolatries that are about a certain kind of control. And a certain kind of isolation, Lord, that is not of the kingdom of God.

Oh, Lord, remove them. I remember when I was in high school, on lunch hour, after the fields had been harvested. We'd be out for lunch and I had a friend who had a four-wheel drive truck.

And every once in a while, Chris Bauer would just get the muse. And rather than take us to lunch, we'd be driving through a subdivision. And he would pop off the subdivision and over the gutter and into a farmer's already harvested field.

And all of a sudden there were four or five of us in this big old 4x4. And we're driving through the fields and we're laughing our heads off. There's just an incredible sense like we're off the grid.

Can you do this? We're doing it. This is actually super fun. And we're just laughing.

And this incredible sense of, oh my word. Oh, I just felt alive for the last 20 minutes. And there's a way in which we need in the Holy Spirit to off-road here in the suburbs of the Western area.

We have got to get off the grid. We've got to find ways to stop this living life like this. It's a living life like this, as the Holy Spirit leads.

And no, it won't be disorder, but it may get a little messy. And that's really okay. As a matter of fact, it may be exactly what our souls need because we need the Holy Spirit.

And we need one another. And when you need the Holy Spirit and you need one another, you will find that the categories you live by will be changed. I am in a place of repenting of my own idolatry, of control and comfort.

I love convening. Intrinsicly, they are not bad things. But when they get put in place, when they get put in the Western Berber, we can actually achieve them.

It can be very spiritual. Let's follow the Lord where He is leading us. Let's love those far from God like we've never ever loved them.

Let's give up our lives. It's possible in the Lord. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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