“Without Ceasing”
November 23, 2025
Rev. Andy Call, Lead Pastor

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 (NRSVUE)
16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise prophecies, 21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil.
23 May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

Today marks the conclusion of our worship series titled “Nobody’s Perfect,” a study on John Wesley’s A Plain Account of Christian Perfection. John Wesley, as you may know, founded the Methodist movement and profoundly shaped our understandings of God and the Christian life. While his teaching on Christian perfection was groundbreaking, it was also often misunderstood and sometimes ridiculed. Perfect? Us? By perfection, Wesley did not mean being without error. That would be blasphemy, because only God is without error. For Wesley, Christian perfection was nothing more and nothing less than this: to completely love God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to completely love our neighbor as ourselves.

At the conclusion of his teaching on Christian perfection, Wesley turned his focus to prayer. In fact, he did so after offering his final advice to the people called Methodist, immediately after urging us to “Be exemplary in our conduct.” Odd that he would introduce a new topic after giving his last piece of advice. But on closer examination, Wesley was simply making explicit what had been woven into the rest of his teaching on being made perfect in love. Prayer is the essential element in spiritual development, the infrastructure upon which our relationship with God is built. It is what enables us to grow in Christian love.

Prayer opens a pathway to God’s grace. Through prayer, we become aware of God’s calling and we respond. As our conversation with God develops, grace is poured into us, expanding our capacity to love. Wesley insisted that “God does nothing but in answer to prayer.” That is an extraordinary statement. It suggests a fundamental shift in the way we think about God. God does nothing except in answer to prayer. Can that really be true?

We generally think of God as omnipotent or all-powerful. Wesley isn’t suggesting otherwise. When we think of power, we often think of it as coercive, asserting one’s will over circumstances or people. But Wesley taught that God’s power is always invitational, never coercive. God does not make us love God. Even when we speak about prevenient grace, that grace by which God is at work in us even before we are aware of it, we are never manipulated by God or forced into relationship. God’s grace is always an invitation, and we are free to respond yes or no.

What a fascinating way to think about how God uses power! Could God act in our lives without our consent? Certainly. But God chooses not to, instead inviting us to participate in God's creative and liberative work.

Even the stories of creation in Genesis attest to this. The very first chapter in all of scripture models God's call-and-response grace. God called, and creation responded. God said, "Let there be…" and there was. This theme appears over and over again in the pages of scripture. Psalm 19 declares, "The heavens are telling the glory of God." It continues:

There is no speech, nor are there words;
   their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth
   and their words to the end of the world.

God loves the world, but God's love is always invitational, never coercive.

The pathway to God's grace opened through prayer allows us to respond to God's calling. That path of grace also opens to us the means to confess our sins and receive God's forgiveness. We know that we regularly fall short of God's hope for us, even as God's grace is continually working in us. Confession is an act of humility, reminding us how much we need God in our lives. It also gives us the assurance of God's grace, an opportunity to be reminded, as the first letter of John teaches, that "If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). We confess in prayer. Confession raises another uniquely Wesleyan concept. Wesley taught that we should not only confess our own faults, but those of others as well. He said we should…bear the faults of others and our own, to confess them to God in secret prayer or with groans that are too deep to be spoken in words…We are to bear with those we cannot change and be content with offering them to God.

Our prayers are not merely personal, but communal. We pray for ourselves and for one another. But confessing someone else's sin sounds arrogant…and a little dangerous. If I focus in prayer on the sins of others, I could easily overlook my own. And woe to those who make public confession of other people's sins. But Wesley is clear that such prayers are to be offered in secret – that is, in our private prayer with God. Far from being a diversion from our own sin, confessing what we notice in others can help us be more aware of our own tendencies toward those same sins. If I observe someone acting unkindly toward another person, praying about that helps me to realize the ways in which I, too, have been unkind in my actions or in my heart.

Another benefit to praying for one another in this way is that while I am praying for others, I know that they are praying for me, too. That knowledge is humbling, because I remember that what I do or fail to do is seen by others. But it also reminds me that the path toward Christian perfection is a shared journey, and we are all on that journey together.

Above all else, Wesley reminds us of the teaching of the Apostle Paul, that we are to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). You may be familiar with that phrase. It is quoted often in Christian circles. But is it truly possible to pray without ceasing?

Years ago, in another church, I was part of an interview team for a new staff member. We asked the candidate to describe her prayer life. She said, "Oh, I pray all the time. Sometimes, when I'm driving, I'll look up through the sunroof and talk to God." We didn't hire her in the end, but I was sure to watch out for her car on the roads for a long time after that.

Praying without ceasing doesn't require hours spent on your knees or being in a constant posture of prayer, in your car or anywhere else. When our lives are devoted to loving God and neighbor, everything is an act of prayer. Wesley said, "In souls filled with love, the desire to please God is a ceaseless prayer." Prayer, then, is not limited to conscious action.

Wesley said that the most effective way to pray without ceasing was to maintain a worshipful attitude in all things. He urged us to have the mindset that everything we do toward others we are doing to God. Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these… you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40). By sharing with others what God shares so generously with us, we are completing the circuit of God's love.

Still, even if our lives are a constant prayer, it is important to make time specifically to talk with God. Intentional time communing with God in prayer gives us structure to express our gratitude, to name our worries and our fears, and to pray for others. Intentional prayer focuses our minds and our hearts, reorienting us to God's hope for us and for others. It also provides space for self-examination, to reflect on our walk with God and to assess our progress at growing in love.
At the beginning of this ministry year, I encouraged all of us to read Tattoos on the Heart by Father Gregory Boyle. It is a collection of stories and reflections from Fr. Boyle's 30 years in ministry in a neighborhood with the highest concentration of gang violence in Los Angeles. The primary reason I wanted us to read it was to prepare us for ministry with people whose lives may be very different from many of ours. I also admire Father Boyle's insistence on sharing God's unconditional love as our primary job –perhaps our only job – as followers of Jesus.

Father Boyle shares a story in the book about a young man he calls Willy. One evening, as Father Boyle got into his car after a long day at work, Willy suddenly appeared beside the driver's side door. After scaring Father Boyle half to death, Willy asked him for twenty dollars so he could get something to eat. Willing to help but short on cash, Father Boyle invited Willy to ride with him to an ATM. Here is how Father Boyle describes this encounter:

Willy hops on board. He is a life force of braggadocio and posturing – a thoroughly good soul – but his confidence is outsize, that of a lion wanting you to know he just swallowed a man whole. A gang member, but a peripheral one at best – he wants more to regale you with his exploits than to actually be in the midst of any. In his mid-twenties, Willy is a charmer, a quintessential homie con man who's apt to coax money out of your ATM if you let him. This night, I'm tired and want to go home.

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"Stay here, Dog," I tell him. "I'll be right back."

I'm not ten feet away when I hear a muffled, "Hey."

It's Willy, and he's miming, "the keys," from the passenger seat of my car. He's making over-the-top, key in the ignition (motions).

"The radio," he mouths, as he holds a hand, cupping his ear.

I wag a finger. "No, *chale*." Then it's my turn to mime. I hold both my hands together and enunciate exaggeratedly, "Pray."

Willy sighs and levitates his eyeballs. But he's putty. He assumes the praying hands pose and looks heavenward (with an angelic expression). I proceed on my quest to the ATM but feel the need to check in on Willy only ten yards later.

I turn and find him still in the prayer position, only half aware that I'm looking in on him.

I return to the car, twenty dollars in hand. Something has happened here. Willy is quiet, reflective, and there is a palpable sense of peace in the vehicle. I look at Willy and say, "You prayed, didn't you?"

He doesn't look at me. He's still and quiet. "Yeah, I did."

I start the car.

"Well, what did God say to you?" I ask him.

"Well, first he said, *Shut up and listen.*"

"And what d'ya do?"

"Come on, G," he says. "What am I sposed ta do? I shut up and listened."

I begin to drive him home to the *barrio*. I've never seen Willy like this. He's quiet and humble – no need to convince me of anything or talk me out of something else.

"So, son, tell me something," I ask. "How do you see God?"

"God?" he says, "That's my dog right there."

"And God?" I ask, "How does God see you?"

Willy doesn't answer at first. So I turn and watch as he rests his head on the recliner, staring at the ceiling of my car. A tear falls down his cheek. Heart full, eyes overflowing. "God…thinks…I'm…*firme*."

To the homies, *firme* means "could not be one bit better."

Not only does God think we're *firme*, it is God's joy to have us marinate in that.[1]

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[1] Gregory Boyle. *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion.* New York: Free Press/Simon and Schuster (2010), 23.

Through prayer, God reminds us of our belovedness. The purpose of prayer is to open a pathway to God's grace, which enables God to work in us and through us to perfect us in love. Love is always the goal – to love God and to love our neighbor – and to realize how much we are loved. John Wesley thought of divine love as a kind of fire burning within our hearts. He spoke of his own experience of feeling his heart "strangely warmed.," and he wanted every one of us to have that experience for ourselves. He encouraged all of us to "Let our hearts be constantly offered up to God through Christ in flames of holy love." Or, as he and his brother Charles put it in a hymn:

Refining fire, go through my heart,
illuminate my soul;
Scatter thy life through every part,
And sanctify the whole.

Friends, let us be devoted to the cause of love, praying without ceasing. Because through prayer, God is sanctifying us, moving us on to perfection in love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

CHURCH *of the* SAVIOUR

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