

Doing the Dance Together

God's Work through Constant Communion

By Jamie Overholser



I dread one particular situation. It happens once every couple of years. It's when I'm at a wedding reception and my wife reaches out her hand and asks me to go to the dance floor. I cringe. I can't dance! I wish I could. As a musician, I can feel the beat and keep rhythm, but it does not translate into bodily movement on a dance floor. The only dance I will attempt to do in public is a slow dance with my wife since it only requires hugging and swaying.

What gets me through my fear of dancing is the thought that my wife wants to be close to me. Because of this, I will take her hand and say, "Only because I love you so much."

Perhaps you feel the same way when you sense God extending His hand in your direction. You think, I can't dance! Well, let's look at this from the same perspective that got me on the dance floor. My love for my wife always trumps my fear of dancing. Likewise, my love for God always trumps any fear surrounding what He may call me into.

Fumbling and Bumbling

I confess that I write not so much from where I am, but from where I want to be. I long for intimacy in prayer, for constant communion, for God's work and power in my life. But I often fumble and bumble my way through an awkward dance with God.

One of those awkward moments is God's admonition through the Apostle Paul to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17, KJV). That strikes a little fear in me. In a way similar to my fear of stepping onto the dance floor, I dread that I will fail in front of everyone and make a fool of myself. Therefore, I choose not to participate. If I don't try, I can't fail, right? Sure, I'll pray, but I will leave that "unceasing" part to monks and nuns who have dedicated their lives to that kind of existence.

Through the centuries many have attempted to interpret Paul's words. From Brother Lawrence in *The Practice of the Presence of God* to the pilgrim in *The Way of a Pilgrim* to theologians galore, we have tried to grasp the "unceasing" part. Brother Lawrence, the 17th century Carmelite monk, understood "that it was a great delusion to think that the times of prayer ought to differ from other times."

In *The Way of a Pilgrim*, a 19th century Russian prayer classic of uncertain authorship, the pilgrim character believed that "the frequency and the uninterruptedness of prayer, however feeble it may be," was the way to spiritual perfection.

And, for me, the well-worn interpretation of "to be continually in an attitude of prayer" is, to be honest, overused and not very helpful.

The above statements have merit and provoke thought, but none of them makes me want to jump right in. Praying without ceasing seems over my head.

From what I understand, the original language of 1 Thessalonians 5:17 could be translated "Pray without intermission." Don't stop the production. Keep the orchestra playing. Don't leave the room. Don't disengage. Don't clam up. Don't allow large gaps of time when you wander out of range.

Why? Because relationships don't go well when we do that. When things are not going well in a marriage, frustrated spouses have used threatening phrases like "I'm done! I'm outa here! It's over!" Few relationships can sustain that kind of conclusion. Perhaps John Eldredge says it best: "Relationship requires things of me that are harder than a life of comfortable distance."

Prayer assumes relationship. Good communication (speaking and listening) is essential to any healthy relationship. Perhaps then we should say that unceasing prayer beckons us to do whatever it takes to maintain healthy, consistent communication with God for the sake of our relationship with Him. We don't get an intermission. We remain in His presence, consciously aware of Him (thank you, Brother Lawrence) in the undulations of life, whether in silence, praise, intercession, thankfulness, confession, spilling our anxious thoughts, expressing our frustration, or babbling on and on. Whatever the case, we don't leave. We stay put and do the hard things that relationship requires.

Taking Time and Trust

Intimate communication evolves over time as two individuals unveil and entrust themselves (heart, soul, mind, and body) to one another beyond the surface self. In *The Pursuit of God*, A.W. Tozer wrote that "this intercourse between God and the soul is known to us in conscious personal awareness."

Ah, yes, intercourse. That word makes us blush. It implies that "nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare" (Heb. 4:13).

It also suggests contact, leaving something of oneself with the other. This is not a shameful uncovering, for it is never God's intent to shame us. It's an unveiling that allows us to know that He still loves us beyond measure in our spiritual nakedness, insecurity, and countless flaws—like a sensitive groom in the honeymoon suite with his bride.

Prayer is an intimate act because it brings the whole of our life together in union with God. Prayer exposes our longing and weakness. Many are not willing, however, to be that close because intimacy requires something of us. We're not sure we want to give that much of ourselves. A "comfortable distance" seems the less intrusive option. Indeed, it is. But prayer and intimacy will only become synonymous when we are willing to unveil ourselves before God.

The older I get the more contemplative I become. I want to hear God's voice, see Him in the ordinariness of my life, and experience the power that raised Jesus from the dead. I've come to understand that unceasing and powerful prayer cannot be divorced from life itself. Unceasing prayer calls us to uncover our lives before God. Paul's words ring true: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Phil. 4:6). If we turn all our anxiousness into prayer, that alone will keep us praying constantly!

Glimpsing Intimacy

In Psalm 139, David, the warrior-king and poet, gives us a peek behind the veil to see what intimacy looks like: "You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways" (vv. 1–3).

David welcomed this invasion of his heart and personal space by his loving and tender God! Prayer becomes intimate when we

surrender to His searching and knowledge of us. We underestimate the importance of intimacy in prayer when we keep our distance and feel unnerved that God would dare be this invasive. David said, “Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely” (Ps. 139:4).

Do you know husbands and wives who know each other so well that they finish one another’s sentences? The ultimate indication that we’re becoming intimate with God is the assurance that God knows what we’re going to say before we say it. He knows the rhythm of our prayers and the manner in which we pour out our hearts. Prayer becomes intimate when the sound of our voice becomes so familiar to Him that He finishes our sentences. How dare we think that God is bored to tears with our rambling! David continues:

You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast (Ps. 139:5–10).

Prayer becomes intimate when we are aware of His constant presence that brings peace, stability, and security. Using Tozer’s phrase again, this is our “conscious personal awareness” of His loving company in the midst of our joy and depression, happiness and sadness, calmness and anxiety. God is constantly touching us in the midst of consolations and desolations, mountaintops and valleys, bright mornings and dark nights. His omnipresence brings calm, not angst. He is there to guide us and hold us tight.

We miss the importance of intimacy when we assume that God wouldn’t want to be with us in our messiness, doubt, and

confusion—or that He simply stalks us to expose our wrongdoing. Prayer—unceasing and powerful prayer—melds with life itself. Unceasing prayer, then, calls us to uncover our lives before God, to expose every angle to His outstretched hand, to unveil ourselves to the core, to join Him in the dance because He wants to feel us close.

On this lifelong journey, for the serious disciple of Jesus, to live is to pray.

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Intimacy and the Lord's Supper

Psalm 23 provides us with a glimpse into how the Lord receives us when we come to His table. As part of David's description of the table prepared for him, he said, "My cup overflows" (v. 5). Naturally, we tend to equate this with the many blessings God graciously gives us. But in this context that would be an erroneous interpretation.

In that ancient culture the host would keep filling the guests' cups for as long as he wanted them to stay. Our western culture is similar. If we keep offering food and drink, it indicates that we don't want our guests to leave quite yet.

So imagine David at the table with the Lord as his Host. The Lord not only keeps filling David's cup, but He fills it to overflowing!

What would that communicate about how the Lord feels about you? Can you hear Him?

“I never want you to leave, My son.”

“I want to commune with you always, My daughter.”

God never tires of our company. We never have any reason to ask to be excused from the table. Our cups overflow—and no one frantically rushes to clean up. I believe the Lord wants us to stay at the table because He enjoys the conversation, the intimate connection that the table brings, and the sound of our voices. He wants the mutual conversation to keep going.

As a pastor I enjoy making Communion a little more interesting and participatory. On one occasion I lined up several eight-foot tables in the middle of the sanctuary to form one long table approximately 48 feet long. After covering it with a long paper tablecloth and placing chairs all around it, I positioned the bread and the cup at several places in the middle of the table. I then scattered a variety of pens, pencils, markers, and colored pencils on the table.

When it was time to partake of the elements, I encouraged our people, as the Spirit directed them, to come and sit at the table to eat the bread and drink the cup. But I encouraged them to stay for a bit and talk to God by writing to Him on the tablecloth. I asked them to express their thankfulness and love for their Host with words and pictures that overflowed from their hearts. When your heart overflows in love and thankfulness, it demonstrates that you don't want to leave the table either. He overflows your cup, which in turn overflows your heart.

What a wonderful experience we had! The tablecloth was filled with prayer through love notes, doodles, and thank-you notes to Jesus in appreciation for giving Himself to us—not only on the cross, but every single time we come around His table.

—JAMIE OVERHOLSER