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1 THESSALONIANS 5:17

Series: Real Christians in Challenging Times

[PRAYER] Father, we are in desperate need of you. We recognize our limitations in the course of our week, the challenges that we face. We recognize that you have solutions, you have power, you have things that we need. So Father, we want to submit ourselves to you. We want to acknowledge our humility. We want to acknowledge our failures. We want to acknowledge our need for a Savior and ask, Lord, that you would do a work in our lives, a work in our hearts. Teach us and train us. We thank you that you've given us your word so we can study it and learn from it. I ask that now as we open up your word that you would do something special in our hearts. Use your Holy Spirit to teach us today, we ask. Guide us as we open your word. We're expecting you to do something special in our hearts. In Jesus' name, amen.

Before a significant sporting event there's usually the National Anthem. When the National Anthem is taking place most people are standing up, they take off their hats, some cover their hearts, and they're silent. There's a solemn moment there. It's very respectful. Sometimes even people ponder and they think this is an important moment because we value our country. Sure our country has all kinds of challenges, but we value it and so we experience that moment of solitude, that moment of respect, and we appreciate those moments in order to enjoy them and to give respect. When the National Anthem is over then either we clap or we cheer, and then the games begin. When the games begin, we don't really think about the National Anthem anymore. The games are going on and we're enjoying the game that we're watching. We don't think about the National Anthem anymore.

Now I think that's how a lot of people handle prayer in their life. There are times in their life when they pray. Sometimes it's when they come to church and they hear someone else praying, they pause. It's a solemn moment. When you're praying by yourself sometimes you have that pause and you know that you're praying. It's an utmost respect to God who created our world. There's a moment in time where you're honoring God and that prayer is that statement that God is important in my life. But then life goes on. And just like the games start playing and you forget about the National Anthem, there's a lot of times in our lives where we keep going in life and we forget about God. We don't pray. We're not praying to Him in the course of the day. Prayer is somehow segregated to an event that takes place where it's meaningful, but it doesn't take place in our lives.

So that's why we need a verse like 1 Thessalonians 5:17. This verse is our verse for today. Verse 17 right underneath that. It's only two words. It says – *Pray continually*. That's our verse today. We're going to talk about prayer today. We're going to try to understand what it is. It is my goal at the end of this time today that you will be inspired to pray more, that you'll want to pray more

because you recognize that prayer is bringing heaven down to earth and God has many things ready for you if you will just pray. That's where we are headed today.

Now if you were going to ask the question about prayer – how you're going to pray, what you're going to pray, what does prayer look like – and you went to the Bible, where would you go to learn more about prayer? What do you think? Anybody. You go to the gospel. Is there any place in particular? Psalms would be good. The Lord's Prayer. Yes. Okay, so the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer is a great prayer that we can pray.

There were two guys and they were talking about how people don't know their Bibles and they're just talking about how important the Bible is. One guy says, "I bet you don't even know the Lord's Prayer." The guy said, "Of course I know the Lord's Prayer. Everybody knows the Lord's Prayer."

The guy said, "I'll bet you don't know it. I'll give you ten bucks if you can recite the Lord's Prayer."

He says, "You're on! I can do that."

"Okay, go ahead," he says.

He says, "Okay. Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray thee Lord my soul to keep; and if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

His friend laughed and took out ten dollars and said, "I didn't think you'd know it." If you're not laughing at that joke, there's a problem.

We know what the Lord's Prayer is. Why? Because we go to the Bible. And the Bible records the Lord's Prayer in two places. It's in both Matthew 6 and in Luke 11. We're going to spend most of our time in Matthew 6. I don't want to look at the whole Lord's Prayer. I just want to look at the first parts of it so we can learn how and what it means to pray and how to take advantage of prayer in our lives on a daily basis. So we're going to jump from 1 Thessalonians 5:17 into that prayer.

But before we get to the Lord's Prayer, I want to look at the verse right before the Lord's Prayer so we understand a little bit more about what prayer is all about. It's that top one there, Matthew 6:8. This is right before verse 9 where it says – *This is how you should pray*. Verse 8 says – *Do not be like them...* That is the pagans and the hypocrites. Jesus is talking about prayer. Don't be like them, he says, *for your Father knows what you need before you ask him*. You know what that tells me? It tells me that prayer is not an informational meeting for God. It is not a time for us to sit there and say, "God, you probably didn't see this, but I want you to know what's going on in my life." Or "God, you've got to know this. This is really important." It's not as if God missed something. God knows everything that's going on, even before you ask Him. Wow. So prayer is not this informational meeting where we're informing God about our life situation. Number one. You got that. God already knows. It says He knows what we need before we even ask.

I love Isaiah 65:24, which says – *Before they call I answer; while they are still speaking I will hear*. You know what that tells me? Not only does God know our needs, but also He's got the answers prepared for us before we even ask Him. That is a pretty powerful description of prayer.

God has the answers ready to go. Wow. I'm just impressed. I think about that and I think God has already provided the answers for my prayer before I even ask Him. That's really big.

“So why ask Him?” you say. “Well if He's already got them done and He already knows everything, why even pray in the first place?” Well the reason we pray is because of this last verse I'm tying in here, James 4:2. It says – *You do not have because you do not ask*. That tells me that there are some answers to prayer that are waiting in heaven for us to ask God for them. For us to come to God and say, “God, I have a need. I have a challenge. I need some help here. Lord, what are you doing? How can I fit into what you're doing in this situation?” When we understand that, this is really powerful because that's going to motivate you to pray continually. If you know that God already knows your needs, if you know that God already has the answers prepared, and you know that some of those answers you're not getting until you ask, you're going to be wanting to pray continually, as Paul mentions in 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

Well verse 8 in Matthew 6 leads us into the Lord's Prayer. So when we get to that passage... I just want to say that it is called the Lord's Prayer, we call it that, but this is not a prayer that Jesus could have ever prayed because it says *forgive us our trespasses*. The idea here is because Jesus never sinned, He never needs to pray this kind of prayer. So He would never have prayed this. We call it the Lord's Prayer, but maybe we should really call it the disciple's prayer. Because Jesus is giving them a model prayer that they can pray.

You see, the disciples saw that Jesus was a man of prayer. He was continually coming to the Father and asking God for things and asking God to work on earth. So they come to Jesus and they say, “Jesus, teach us to pray.” What he's saying is we want some of that. You've got some of that. You've got something I want to get in on this thing that we're doing. I see that there's power going on here, these disciples are saying. I want some of that. So Jesus says this: *This is how you are to pray*.

Now I know I didn't have to put it up here, most of you can quote the Lord's Prayer. You've prayed it many, many times yourself. You understand what it is. But let me go through only the first part and try to understand a little bit more about prayer because Jesus is teaching us some valuable things here that we need to understand.

He starts with – *Our Father*. Why doesn't He just say my Father? Why does He use the word *our*? He uses the word *our* because you're not an only child. I hope this is okay for you to understand this. You are not an only child. If you grew up as an only child sometimes you get everything you want because you have parents doting on you because you're an only child. The reality is God does treat you individually and specially, but there's a sense in which we are together with other brothers and sisters. *Our Father*. We recognize that we live in community. There are benefits to living in community. I will even say this: That one of the benefits to living in community is there are things that God wants to give us that you would experience in community that you're not going to experience otherwise. *Our Father*. God wants to pass on things to us and sometimes He does it directly to us, sometimes He does it through other people within the fellowship. There is tremendous advantage to being connected.

That's why I'm so passionate right now in the life of our church to help virtual members and barn members feel connected, grow spiritually, and have opportunities to serve. That's what I'm looking for because I know how important it is that we all have a church where we're connected. That we have a church that we're participating in, that we're feeling connected. It is essential for us to do that. Whether we experience that virtually or at the barn, we are connected because we recognize that we live in this community. *Our. Our Father.*

Jesus uses the term *Father*, in fact teaches us in His modeling. When Jesus was connected to God on earth, He continually used the term *Father* to describe that relationship. There's only one time where He uses something different than *Father*. That was when He was on the cross and said – “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*” Because in that moment of history Jesus was taking on the sins of the whole world and it was a judicial event that was taking place. He took your sins, He took my sins on the cross, and He died for us so that we could experience eternal life. So in that moment He's not calling God *Father*; He's calling Him *God* in this position that He's in of being this sacrifice for our sins so that we could have personal relationship with God, so that we can call Him *Father*.

If you've not ever accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, you want to do that. Because then you can come to God and have this personal relationship with Him. You can call Him *Father*.

Now here's a problem that we have that many people have. They look at their own lives, their own history, and they say, “Well man, I don't think I can understand God as *Father* because my father was just a really difficult person.” So maybe you grew up with a father who was a hard person who doesn't emulate God at all. Maybe you didn't have a father. Maybe you had an absentee father. Maybe your father was in jail or in and out of jail. Maybe he wasn't even around. Maybe you didn't have a father who was present emotionally for you. So it's created damage inside of you and you know that, you feel it, it's painful. So you say, “How can I think about God as *father?*” I want you to know that that person is making a mistake. What they're doing is using an earthly model of fatherhood to imagine what God is like. That's not what we should do. What we need to do is go and learn who God is like as *Father* and understand Him thoroughly.

If we're going to do that, we're going to come across passages that talk about God provides for us. He protects us. That God has compassion and cares for us and comforts us. That He disciplines us with His love. We learn about a *Father* that's so different and so special and so perfect that He meets every father need that we have in our lives. We all have father needs. And if your father needs were kind of messed up in your childhood, you may spend years in counseling trying to sort it all out. You may spend hours trying to plumb the depths of your heart to figure out what all went wrong in your childhood. But I want to save you some time. If you want move forward, the greatest thing you can do is look at God as your heavenly *Father* and understand Him as the perfect *Father* who wants to meet all of your needs. When you do and you use Him as the model, then you look at every earthly father and you recognize that there aren't any perfect parents. That all of our parents have challenges, some more than others. And then you're able to recognize that and forgive sometimes. Let it go. Experience God's grace to move

on. Because you now find those father needs not met in someone who can't meet them. You find them in your heavenly Father. *Our Father*.

It's a very personal experience that we have with God because we've trusted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. See, we know God personally. He is our Father. Our Father. And when you continue in the prayer – *Our Father, which art in heaven*. I know that's not how it's translated in the version, but that's how I memorized it when I was a kid. *Our Father, which art in heaven*. But the idea is He's in heaven, which means that He's not bound to earth. Which means that He doesn't have the same limitations that you and I have. He's not limited by space. He's not limited by time. He's not limited by His five senses like we are. We are confined to earth. We live on earth. And the fact that we live on earth means that we are limited, but God lives in heaven. He lives above the limitations that we experience. That's why we call on Him. We acknowledge that He has outside of those limits and therefore He is able to speak down into earth with that vast experience of heaven. We want heaven down on earth and that's why we pray. We want God fixing things, leading us, challenging us. That's why we pray. That's why we recognize that God is in heaven. We need Him down on earth. So we recognize He's here. He has solutions. They're available for us. We need those down here. That's what we're talking about. We recognize that God is in heaven.

The definition of a miracle is when God invades earth and alters the natural course of human events. Things that will naturally be going on and God steps in and a miracle takes place. That's what a miracle is. Some of you have seen miracles. When I see a husband and a wife who were separated from each other and God brings them back together in their relationship, I say wow, that is a miracle. I love watching relational miracles take place because of God's grace in people's lives. God does miracles. It's heaven coming down on earth and that's what we need in our lives. Our Father which art in heaven.

What's the next part? *Hallowed be thy name*. The word *hallowed* is the word 'holy.' And the idea of holy is to be separate. When a person becomes a Christian they're called a saint. I know some of you have a background where saints are emulated. You get the impression that a saint is someone who's really righteous. But I've got to tell you that when you become a Christian, you become a saint just where you sit. Why? Because it's not about your righteousness. It's about Christ's righteousness that He gives you and you experience that in a powerful way. God makes you a saint. Our goal then is to live up to what He's called us to act in a way that's according to the way that He wants us to live.

But this idea is that we're separate. We're not like the other people. We're not normal. We're not regular. We're the super ones. If you go to the store, there's regular and there's super. We're the super. We're not normal, regular. We have this specialness about us. And so what this does is it recognizes that God is *holy is your name*. In other words there's a separateness about God. He is not just our buddy-buddy. Now we have this balance between the fatherhood of God, which gives us access into His presence which is very intimate, and the holiness of God which recognizes how sacred this opportunity is to enter into the presence of heaven to experience that.

Separate. That's what the word *holy* means. Let me give you an illustration. One of the jobs I do in my house is that I wash the dishes. Now believe me, I don't wash all the dishes. My wife does

a lot of washing dishes. But after dinner when we're done eating and we're cleaning up, I wash the dishes and I put them in the dishwasher. I'm taking normal dishes. These are dishes that are dirty and I'm making these normal dishes clean. This is what we eat every day, these are our normal dishes. But we have some other holy dishes. How do I know that they're holy? They're separate. They don't even live in the kitchen. These other dishes live in a cabinet with glass on it in the dining room and those are our holy dishes. They're our separate dishes. When we get those dishes out, we handle them very carefully. When I'm washing those dishes, I am really careful about what I'm doing. When I'm carrying those dishes, I'm tiptoeing through the area in order to make sure I'm holding those dishes carefully. They are separate. They are holy dishes.

That's what we're talking about when we come to God. We're saying God is separate. So there's this awesome respect that we have in the privilege of prayer to come into the presence of God and recognize that He's separate. But when we can get there. We can be part of what God is doing. Holy is your name.

The next phrase is the last phrase I want to look at today and that's this phrase that says – *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*. God's will is taking place in heaven and we want that will to be coming down on earth. We want to call on that to take place so that things are changed on earth. We need God's power; we need His solutions. We need all kinds of things that comes, and that's part of the prayer here. From heaven down to earth.

Well how do you know which ones of your prayers God is going to answer the way you want? Well let me try to explain that by talking about two kinds of will. That's the word there. *Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*. There's two kinds of will I want to talk about of God. One is the unconditional will of God and the other is the conditional will of God.

The unconditional will of God doesn't have anything to do with you or me. God is going to accomplish what He wants to do and that's His will. He's going to make it happen. That is the unconditional will of God. But then there's the conditional will of God, which is where there are some things that He would like to dispense, but He only dispenses those based on human activity. Only when we act. For example it says in 1 Peter – *It is not God's will that any should perish, but all would come to repentance*. That means all would get saved. God's will is that everybody get saved.

But we know that not everybody makes that decision. Not everybody trusts Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. That's a conditional part of God's will. Christ died on the cross for everyone. He died on the cross for you. But you don't experience the benefit of salvation unless you make a decision to say, "I want to trust Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior." And when you make that decision then He gives you those benefits that come with salvation, which are awesome, which we know about. It's a conditional part of God's will.

Now the reality is we don't know which parts of God's will are conditional and which ones are not. But we do know this: God has, as we saw already, He already knows what our needs are in heaven. He's already packaged them up in solutions that are waiting there, and that our job is to ask them. So that motivates us to say, "I need to pray more. In fact I want to pray continually."

Just imagine it's like having a line of credit, money that's available to you. All you have to do is use it. It's like you have this line of credit in heaven that God wants to provide for you. It's all waiting there for you. So since you don't know exactly where God wants to exert His conditional will, it makes you want to be praying continually.

So when you get up in the morning you have this active communication with God. God, please show me how I can serve you today. Lord, show me what's going on. Lord we're having a problem here at work. Would you step in and help solve that? Lord, I'm feeling a little bit under the weather here today. Would you help me with that? Lord, I'm having a challenge in my personal finances. Lord, would you work with me and help me with solution with your grace? As we're continuing to go through our day, what we do is we experience God in this new way, in a powerful way because He wants to dispense these things. He wants to bring *His kingdom come, His will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*. Sometimes God uses prayers to accomplish His work and He gives those things to us because we trust in Him and because we come in prayer. God could do it a whole different way, but He chooses to use our prayers to accomplish His conditional will.

When the feeding of the five thousand took place, Jesus broke the bread and looked up to the Father and asked for God to bless the situation. He asked for the Father to bring down heaven on earth. Now God could have done it a different way. He could've said, "Okay, everybody stand back. Get ready. I'm going to bring manna down from heaven like I did in the Old Testament." But He doesn't do that. What does He do? He chooses the twelve disciples, He says to them, "You guys go out and tell all those people around that what they need to do is get into groups of fifties and a hundred and sit down. And when they're seated down there I'm going to pray and then you're going to distribute the food." So He uses people to distribute the food so that those people could see a miracle of God.

In the same way, God wants to use you and me. He wants to use our prayers so we can experience the miracles that God wants to do. So we want to pray continually. We want to come to Him and we want to talk to Him. We want to give Him our thoughts. We want to pour out our hearts and we want to share. Sometimes God already knows what we need, but sometimes just sharing with someone is so helpful. God cares about us, so we share with Him and then we ask Him to work in our lives and then He does things in our lives.

See, the Christian is characterized by all of these things in 1 Thessalonians 5. One of the things the Christian is characterized by is they pray continually. That means that actually becomes a testimony for you. Because as you're going around in life and someone is experiencing a challenge, you can say to them, "I'll pray for you." Many people will receive that, even if they're not Christians. If you say, "Hey, I'll pray for you," that expresses concern. But you actually will! And you can say, "God, I want to pray that you'll bring down power and demonstrate to this person that you are in control and that you are powerful." We are characterized by prayer.

I want to encourage you today not to view prayer like the National Anthem where you just do it. Even though it's honoring, you just do it. I want to encourage you to tie it into the rest of what you're doing into your daily life so you can pray continually and allow heaven to come down to earth because God wants to use you and your prayers to do that. Amen?

Alright. Would you stand with me and let's pray together before we sing one more song together.

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, we're coming to you now because we are in need and we know that we have challenges right around us and you have spiritual resources that we can experience. We want to see you more. Lord, reveal heaven to us. Provide guidance for us. Teach us and lead us, we ask. Lord, we need you. We want you in our lives and we want to have that continually taking place. We dedicate ourselves to you. In Jesus' name, amen.