

Does 1 Thess 5-16 mean Breath Prayer?

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Can short biblical phrases be employed to pray in a wrong way? To answer this and other questions, we should first analyze the message of [1 Thessalonians 5:17](#), and then consider breath prayers in the broader context of Jesus' teaching and example of prayer as well as that of the apostles and prophets. Scripture must determine whether or not believers should employ breath prayers in their devotional lives. For Protestants, the Bible ought to be our authority in all matters of faith and practice.

First, we must note that English translations consider 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 to be one sentence consisting of three present imperative verbs. Considered as related and coordinate commands by the translators, the verses are separated by either semi-colons or commas (see NKJV, NASB, NIV, NRSV, 1901 ASV). The text reads, "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:16-18, NASB).

Therefore, what did Paul mean when he commanded the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17, NASB, KJV, NKJV, NRSV, etc.; "pray continually," NIV; "Keep on praying," NLT)? We can understand that Paul's admonition to continually pray lies in combination with his parallel commands to rejoice ("Rejoice always," v. 16) and to be thankful ("in everything give thanks," v. 18). In other words, a believer's day-to-day walk with the Lord ought to be consistently joyful, prayerful and thankful. In fact, Paul's epistles reveal rejoicing and thanksgiving were constant themes of his consistent prayer life (See Rom. 1:9-10a; 1 Cor. 1:4; 2 Cor. 6:10; Eph. 5:20; Phil. 1:4; 4:4; Col. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess 1:3; Philemon 4).

Second the word to "pray" (*proseuchomai*) includes all types of praying (i.e., thanksgiving, petitions, praise, etc.). In that Paul used the comprehensive word for prayer we may infer that he was not directing the Thessalonians to pray in a certain way by employing a certain phrase to be repeated over and over throughout the day. That reads far too much into the command. Low and Nida advise that when translating this word for prayer into various languages, "It is normally best to avoid an expression which means primarily 'to recite'." [7] In contrast to the free spontaneity of prayer, breath prayers are recitative and repetitive.

Third, other than it is to be "without ceasing," **Paul leaves the manner and method of prayer undefined.** Elsewhere the New Testament describes prayer to have been "earnestly" (James 5:17), directs it to be with head covered (1 Cor. 11:4) and orders it to be "in the Spirit" (Eph. 6:18; Jude 20). Given that under the Holy Spirit's guidance Paul left out advice on how to pray, why should spiritual directors then proceed to recommend a method of prayer based upon this verse? Where in his providence the Holy Spirit left a blank, why do spiritual directors attempt to fill in the blank?

Fourth, the command "pray without ceasing" is a present iterative imperative, the sense of the tense being that believers ought to maintain a spirit of prayer throughout

their waking hours.[8] Prayer should be a constant part of Christian consciousness. As defined by the surrounding commands to rejoice and give thanks, **"pray without ceasing" defines more the attitude of vigilance that ought to characterize a believers' prayer life than a particular technique of prayer.** Just as the attitude of a believer is to be continuously joyful and thankful, so also their attitude is to be continuously prayerful. Though there is no indication that the apostle practiced or taught breath praying, Leon Morris noted that "Prayer was as natural to Paul as breathing. At any time he was likely to break off his argument or to sum it up by some prayer of greater or less length. In the same way our lives can be lived in such an attitude of dependence on God that we will easily and naturally move into the words of prayer on all sorts of occasions . . ."[9]