

Main Idea: In Ephesians 6:18 the apostles tells us that we must pray. But not just generic prayer. We need prayer marked by two characteristics.

- I. We need prayer with particulars (18a).
 - A. Battle time prayer involves consistency.
 1. We live in the age of the Spirit.
 2. Praying ought to be as natural as breathing for the Christian.
 - B. Battle time prayer involves communication.
 1. It doesn't mean you must always be on your knees.
 2. It means you are living your life with a God-consciousness.
 - C. Battle time prayer involves cooperation.
 1. Praying in the Spirit means to pray in cooperation with the Holy Spirit.
 2. Praying in the Spirit is the same thing as praying in the name of Christ.
- II. We need prayer with persistence (18b).
 - A. This requires dependence.

Key: “Until you know that life is war, you cannot know what prayer is for.”
(John Piper)
 - B. This requires determination.
 1. It's not popular today to talk about spiritual discipline.
 2. It may not be popular, but it's absolutely essential.
 - C. This requires the denial of self.
 1. We must refuse to focus on ourselves.
 2. We must choose to focus on God's agenda for His people.

The Bottom Line:

1. We are at war.
2. We must live with a warfare mentality.

Recently my wife put up a bird feeder so we could watch the little creatures. Nothing much happened for a couple of weeks and then one day some beautiful yellow finches showed up. We enjoyed watching those spectacular, colorful creatures, and even talked about putting up another feeder to attract some other colorful creatures.

This past week, however, the tune changed. We were sitting on the porch watching the finches, when all the sudden some sparrows showed up, first a couple of them. Then four or five, then eventually wave after wave of sparrows, fifteen, twenty, and more.

I'll be honest. My first thought was to go over and shew away those pesky sparrows. They're messy and noisy. You can't fill them up, and they keep inviting their friends who are just as messy, noisy, uncolorful, and demanding.

And then something that Jesus said came to mind. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father (Matt 10:29).”

Our God cares for sparrows. *Sparrows?* He cares about the *sparrows?* I'd never really thought about Jesus' choice of birds before. Yellow finch, sure. Hummingbird, why not? They have color, and some personality. They give you some pleasure as you feed and watch them.

But Jesus didn't say *yellow finch* or *hummingbird*. He said that God sees and cares about the uncolorful, messy, what-have-you-done-for-me-lately sparrow.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

² For an earlier development of this text, see the series on “Living with a Warfare Mentality” at WBC in 2003.

Jesus' choice of bird says so much to us about our God, doesn't it? And how we view Him, will affect how we view talking with Him. Which brings us to this morning's subject. *Prayer.*

In Ephesians 6:10-18, we find General Paul giving last minute battle instructions to the army of Christian soldiers in Ephesus. Earlier in the letter, with great care he explained their resources in chapters 1-3. And then with patient detail, he summed up their responsibilities in chapters 4-6.

But what was the last instruction Paul left with the Ephesians? Ephesians 6:10, "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power." Don't try to live the Christian life on your own strength. Why not? The reason is clear. We're in a battle, a fierce spiritual battle with a clever, cunning enemy.

Verses 11-12 "Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Is there hope? Can we stand in this battle, or is our foe too great? Yes, we can stand, but first we must protect ourselves. How? By putting on the armor of God (14-17). Putting on the armor of God must be a daily priority in your life, that is, if you want to stand. When you put on God's armor, you are aligning yourself on the victory side, right next to Jesus Christ. Indeed, you are putting on Christ, for He is the armor.

What do we have if we know Christ? Here is the armor. There are six pieces: the belt of truth (14), the breastplate of righteousness (14), the gospel of peace boots (15), the faith shield (16), salvation's helmet (17), and the Spirit's sword which is the Word of God (18).

What we need, we have. And what we have, we need. Yes, we need the armor of God. Why? So we can stand against the evil one and his demonic hosts.

In the past couple of messages we've been learning about our armor. When it comes to our armor, we must know what we have. That's the purpose of verses 10-17, to tell us what we have. But merely knowing what we have is not enough.

Obviously, we must put it on. But how do we do that? Paul tells us in verse 18. In Ephesians 6:18 the apostles tells us that we must pray. But not just generic prayer. We need prayer marked by two characteristics. One, we need prayer with *particulars*. And two, we need prayer with *perseverance*.

I. We need prayer with particulars (18a).

What kind of particulars? Notice the first part of verse 18, "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests."

Is Paul saying that prayer is another piece of armor? No. It's more than that. It works in connection with the armor. It's not something that you add to the armor, rather it must accompany every piece of armor.

In the original text "praying" is a participle. It modifies the verb "stand" in verse 14. We stand by praying. The word is also plural, indicating that prayer is not the task of a few elite spiritual giants in the church, but of all of us.

In his book, *The Fight*, John White writes, "Hell's legions are terrified of prayer. Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees." Prayer is how we claim what we have in Christ. Prayer is how we stand. It's ironic, yet true. We stand against the evil one by falling on our faces before God.

Though our text is brief, it's packed with vital truth for us. According to the first part of verse 18, battle time prayer involves three vital particulars.

A. Battle time prayer involves consistency. “And pray in the Spirit *on all occasions*,” Paul exhorts. “Praying always,” is how the KJV begins the verse (literally, “in all times”).

It's significant that we see the word “all” three times: “And pray in the Spirit on **all** occasions with **all** kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for **all** the saints.” The first “all” emphasizes consistency. Pray on *all* occasions. Don't miss Paul's emphasis on consistency in prayer.

Some of you may have come out of backgrounds where you read out of a prayer book, or prayed prayers at certain times of the day. The Jewish people prayed at specified times. Remember Daniel? As a good Jew, he prayed three times a day.

But when Christ came, He established a new era. He sent His Spirit at Pentecost to indwell all who believe in Him. Which means two things.

1. *We live in the age of the Spirit.* We live in the age of prayer. We don't pray merely at set times anymore. We are to pray at all times. In fact...

2. *Praying ought to be as natural as breathing for the Christian.* It was for Paul. He's already prayed twice in the letter of Ephesians (1:15-23 and 3:14-21). He certainly prayed for others as well, as his letters constantly indicate (Phil 1:3-4 "I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always. . ." Col 1:9 ". . . we do not cease to pray for you. . ." 1 Thes 1:2 "We give thanks to God always for you all" 2 Tim 1:3 "I thank God that without ceasing I have remembrance of you in my prayers night and day.").

Yes, Paul prayed a lot. He prayed continually and consistently. Do you? If we know Christ, prayer ought to be as natural for us as breathing. But for many of us, it's not. Why not? I think the answer is pretty basic. We've forgotten that we're at war.

One of the best things I've ever read on prayer is a chapter on prayer by John Piper in his book, *Let the Nations Be Glad*. He begins with these words: “Life is war. That's not all it is. But it is always that. Our weakness in prayer is owing largely to our neglect of this truth. Prayer is primarily a wartime walkie-talkie for the mission of the church as it advances against the powers of darkness and unbelief. It is not surprising that prayer malfunctions when we try to make it a domestic intercom to call upstairs for more comforts in the den. God has given us prayer as a wartime walkie-talkie so that we can call headquarters for everything we need as the kingdom of Christ advances in the world. Prayer gives *us* the significance of front-line forces, and gives *God* the glory of a limitless Provider. The one who gives the power gets the glory.”³

I'll return to Piper in a moment, but fix your thoughts on this image. *God has given us prayer as a wartime walkie-talkie.* He didn't give us prayer to be a *domestic intercom*. But that's the way we often view it. What causes us to lose our perspective on prayer? When does prayer stop being a wartime walkie-talkie and start becoming a domestic intercom? The short answer is, when we forget we're at war.

If your prayer life isn't marked by consistency, it's likely because you're ignoring the fact that we are at war against an enemy who is too strong for us to handle on our own.

B. Battle time prayer involves communication. What kind of communication? “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions *with all kinds of prayers and requests*.” The KJV says, “Praying. . . with all prayer and supplication.”

³ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, p. 41.

This is basic, yet so vital to see. Prayer is communication. We are communicating with a Person when we pray. We pray to our Heavenly Father, through the authority of the Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Praying has nothing to do with formulas. When someone says, "I can't pray in public because I don't know the right words to say," they're indicating they don't understand what prayer really is. Prayer involves communication, personal interaction with the living and personal God.

What's that mean in practical terms?

1. *It doesn't mean you must always be on your knees.* That's only one kind of prayer. Paul says to pray with "all kinds of prayers."

2. *It means you are living your life with a God-consciousness.* Are you conscious that God is with you when you're driving to work, or sitting in class at school, or watching TV? He is, you know.

This is so key. Everything I see and experience in life should simply become a prayer. It should be something I share with my Heavenly Father. I ought to view prayer as constant dialogue with my best friend.

When I'm picked on at school, I ought to talk to my friend, "Lord, you know what I'm going through. Thank you for caring. Help me to honor you in the way I respond."

When I enjoy a great family time I ought to express to my best friend, "Lord, thank you for my family."

When I read the news and see evil that shakes me, I ought to pray, "O Lord, would you make that right?"

When I rub shoulders with an unsaved neighbor, I ought to bring a request to the Lord, "He needs You. Would You cause Your kingdom to come in his life?"

If you are a Christian and you don't commune with God like that, you're robbing God of one of the very purposes for which He saved you. God saved you so that He might walk with you in perfect fellowship. 1 John 1:3 says, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ."

Take it a step further. Yes, prayer involves communication, but what kind? When you communicate with your best friend, do you repeat the same words every time you talk? Neither should we in prayer.

Verse 18 says our communication in prayer should involve variety. "Pray... with all kinds of prayers and requests ['supplication' in the KJV, a term which refers to specific requests]." In other words, there are general prayers and specific prayers. There ought to be creativity in our praying.

MacArthur explains, "There are different ways to pray. Some people think the only way to pray is on your knees. Some people think the only way you can pray is with your hands up. Others think you must have your hands folded. Some people think you have to pray out of a prayer book. Paul says, 'Pray all the time with all kinds of prayers.' You can pray in public or in private, with loud cries or quiet whispers. It can be deliberate or spontaneous. There can be prayers of request, thanksgiving, confession, and praise. You can be kneeling, standing, lifting up your hands, or lying prostrate. . . We're to pray throughout the flow of life. . . Prayer is a way of life."

Is it for you? Do you have variety in your prayer life? Or are you always praying the same thing, using the same words, in the same posture, at the same time, day after day?

I challenge you. Resolve to view prayer as communication with a Person.

C. Battle time prayer involves cooperation. “Pray in the Spirit,” Paul says. We find similar words in Jude 20, “But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.” What does that mean, to “pray in the Spirit?”

1. *Praying in the Spirit means to pray in cooperation with the Holy Spirit.* This isn’t referring to some mystical experience. Praying in the Spirit does not mean speaking in tongues. In fact, simply put...

2. *Praying in the Spirit is the same thing as praying in the name of Christ.* What we pray should be consistent with who Jesus is, and what His will is. To pray in the Spirit is to pray for those things which will please Christ, not merely ourselves. It also involves praying in the power of the Spirit, and not our own. Praying in the Spirit is simply making my prayers consistent with the mind and will of the Holy Spirit.

Remember, the Lord Jesus said He would send the Holy Spirit to be His substitute, resident helper in this age (John 14:16-17). Since the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost, helps God’s people to do those things that are Christ-like. This includes praying. Here are some related texts that elaborate:

Romans 8:15-16 “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”

Romans 8:26-27 “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.”

Galatians 4:6 “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.”

If you want to stand in the battle, my friend, you must understand that prayer involves consistency, communication, and cooperation. But above all, you must pray! Is prayer a priority to you? I challenge you to set aside daily time for prayer. I challenge you to talk with the Lord throughout the day. I challenge you to take advantage of opportunities to pray with your brothers and sisters in corporate church services (as we’ll be doing in our various deacon care groups this afternoon and this evening).

With our armor in place, we need prayer with particulars. Secondly...

II. We need prayer with persistence (18b).

Verse 18 continues, “With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” “Be alert” is actually a participle, just as “praying” was in the first part of the verse. That’s why the KJV says, “And *watching* thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.” We stand by praying and being alert. Praying and being alert (or watching) go hand in hand.

So our praying must be marked by persistence, and persistent prayer involves three things.

A. This requires dependence. Dependence upon whom? The clause begins, “With this in mind.” With what in mind? What Paul just said in the previous clause, if not in the entire previous section. We are in spiritual warfare. We have an enemy who wants to destroy us. We have received the Holy Spirit to help us. With *this* in mind, be alert.

I have to say it again. I’m convinced that the main reason we fail to pray as we ought is because we really don’t believe we are at war. We won’t exhibit *dependence* on the Lord if we foolishly forget the danger we’re in. Listen to John Piper again:

“Most people show by their priorities and their casual approach to spiritual things that they believe we are at peacetime not wartime.

“In wartime the newspapers carry headlines about how the troops are doing. In wartime families talk about the sons and daughters on the front lines and write to them and pray for them with heart-wrenching concern for their safety. In wartime we are on the alert. We are armed. We are vigilant. In wartime we spend money differently—there is austerity, not for its own sake, but because there are more strategic ways to spend money than on new tires at home. The war effort touches everybody. We call cut back. The luxury liner becomes a troop carrier.

“Very few people think that we are in a war that is greater than World War II, or any imaginable nuclear war. Few reckon that Satan is a much worse enemy than any earthly foe, or realize that the conflict is not restricted to any one global theater, but is in every town and city in the world. Who considers that the casualties of this war do not merely lose an arm or an eye or an earthly life, but lose everything, even their own soul and enter a hell of everlasting torment?”⁴

If we really believe we’re at war, we’ll be alert and pray. And we’ll view prayer not, as Piper says, as an intercom in the den but a wartime walkie-talkie.

I can’t say it any more clearly than Piper. Let these words sink in:

“*Until you know that life is war, you cannot know what prayer is for* [my italics]. Prayer is for the accomplishing of a wartime mission. It is as though the field commander (Jesus) called in the troops, gave them a crucial mission (go and bear fruit), handed each of them a personal transmitter coded to the frequency of the General’s headquarters, and said, ‘Comrades, the general has a mission for you. He aims to see it accomplished. And to that end he has authorized me to give each of you personal access to him through these transmitters. If you stay true to his mission and seek his victory first, he will always be as close as your transmitter, to give tactical advice and to send air cover when you need it.’

“But what have millions of Christians done? We have stopped believing that we are in a war. No urgency, no watching, no vigilance. No strategic planning. Just easy peace and prosperity. And what did we do with the walkie talkie? We tried to rig it up as an intercom in our houses and cabins and boats and cars—not to call in fire power for conflict with a mortal enemy, but to ask for more comforts in the den.”⁵

Be alert, fellow soldier, be alert! That requires a conscious dependence upon the Holy Spirit, a constant calling out, “I need Thee every hour!”

B. This requires determination. “Be alert and *always keep on praying* [‘with all perseverance’ in the KJV].” Keep on. Persevere. Our tendency is to sleep when we should be watching. Remember Peter, James, and John in the Garden (Matt 26:36ff)? It takes determination to be alert in the battle.

The historian Edward Gibbon suggested that one of the reasons for the fall of Rome was—get this—the lack of discipline in the ranks or Rome’s soldiers. Many soldiers complained of the weight of the armor and stopped wearing all of it. You can guess what happened. As a result, many were injured or killed in battle.

Allow me to be frank. Many of us here today are resisting the fact that living the Christian life involves spiritual discipline.

1. *It’s not popular today to talk about spiritual discipline.* Things such as prayer, watching, and fasting are downplayed as “legalism.” We don’t like to be told we “have

⁴ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, p. 44.

⁵ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, p. 46.

to” do something. “Nobody can tell me I *have to* read my Bible, memorize Scripture, or go to prayer meeting,” we’re inclined to think. We’d rather do what we *want* to do, what we *feel* like doing.

Spiritual disciplines are not in vogue. Satan has infected the American church with a lazy, sloppy approach to living for Christ. We have the attitude that such ingredients are optional. “I’m going to heaven, so who cares if I’m doing these things. They’re just the icing on the cake, aren’t they?” No, they’re not icing. We’re not talking about icing. We’re talking about armor. The issue is, do you want to stand in the battle?

2. *It may not be popular, but it’s absolutely essential.* I know you struggle with this because I do, too. I neglect the spiritual disciplines of prayer and watching too often. Far too often, I fail to see their importance and relevance. My soul becomes stifled by the tyranny of the urgent.

When Polish pianist Ignace Jan Paderewsky played before Queen Victoria, he won her enthusiastic approval. “Mr. Paderewsky,” she exclaimed, “you are a genius.” Paderewsky shook his head. “Perhaps, Your Majesty, but before that I was a drudge,” he replied, alluding to the number of hours he spent practicing every day.⁶

Don’t misunderstand. We don’t pray in order to earn God’s favor, any more than we do *anything* to earn His favor. He saves sinners on the basis of His grace, not our merit. That’s why He sent Jesus, so that through *His* merit, sinners like us could be rescued and restored to Him. Jesus lived a perfect life, then died as a substitute to pay the sinner’s penalty for sin, and God raised His Son from the dead to prove His atoning sacrifice satisfied His justice and is sufficient to save any sinner who will repent and trust in Jesus.

So when we pray persistently we’re not adding to Christ’s work. We’re acknowledging our utter dependence upon Him and His work. And when we don’t pray, we’re proudly (and foolishly) acting like we don’t need Him.

There’s one more requirement. Persistence in prayer requires dependence, determination, and...

C. This requires the denial of self. “With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” For whom are we to pray? For ourselves? Yes, but that’s not what Paul says here. *Pray for all the saints.*

Answer this. If you’re going to pray for someone else, what must you do? This is profound. You must stop thinking about yourself, right? Self-focused people don’t pray for others.

D. Martin Lloyd Jones shares a pertinent illustration. “Before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, in Barcelona, Madrid and other places, there were psychological clinics with large numbers of neurotics undergoing drug treatments and others attending regularly for psychoanalysis and such like. They had their personal problems, their worries, their anxieties, their temptations, having to go back week after week, month after month, to the clinics in order to be kept going. Then came the Civil War; and one of the first and most striking effects of that War was that it virtually emptied the psychological and psychiatric clinics. These neurotic people were suddenly cured by a greater anxiety, the anxiety about their whole position, whether their homes would still be there, whether their husbands would still be alive, whether their children would be killed. Their greater anxieties got rid of their lesser ones. In having to give attention to the bigger problems they forgot their own personal and somewhat petty problems.”⁷

⁶ *Today in the Word*, August 3, 1993.

⁷ M. Jones, *The Christian Soldier: An Exposition of Ephesians 6:10 to 20*, p. 357.

The lesson for us is clear. Do you want to experience a vibrant Christian life? Then take your eyes off of yourself and live like you believe there is a war raging, for there is. Die to yourself and pour all your energy into what really matters, the spiritual battles of *other* people. Devote yourself to *kingdom praying*. The byproduct will be a change in your own personal anxieties.

To put it another way...

1. *We must refuse to focus on ourselves.* Ephesians 6:18 is calling on us to...
2. *We must choose to focus on God's agenda for His people.*

You say, "Well, shouldn't we pray for personal matters?" Sure. We're to pray on *all* occasions with *all* kinds of prayers. But that's the point. Many of us, if we pray at all, seldom get beyond praying for things that are temporal.

MacArthur offers this challenge, "We also need to get past physical needs. We pray for someone's rheumatism, heart problems, broken leg, and surgery. We need to pray for those things, but they are near the bottom of my prayer list. I'm more concerned about the spiritual battle. Are the believers winning the battle? The physical is immaterial by comparison. What gets my heart anxious is someone who is not seeing victory in their life and seeing God do His mighty work. I am praying for the advancement of the kingdom of God in the lives of His people. I am praying for souls to be won to Jesus Christ...I pray for people's physical needs, but more than that I pray that God will give them victory in the battle against the enemy. I don't really care what happens to my physical body as long as I gain victory for the glory of God."⁸

Paul apparently didn't care either. When he asked the Ephesian church to pray for him, what were his requests? He didn't say, "Ask God to get me out of this prison." Nor, "Pray for my sore leg to heal. These chains have rubbed them raw." What was his request? Verses 19-20, "Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should."

Paul wasn't too good to ask people to pray for him. He needed prayer. But the prayer request that most consumed him was for boldness in telling others about Jesus. Can you imagine what would happen to our church if we started praying that prayer fervently for each other? "Lord, please open up doors for us to talk to people at school, at work, in our community about Jesus. Don't let us be intimidated and afraid of their reaction. Fill us with boldness so we initiate conversations and spread the good news about Your Son."

The Bottom Line:

1. *We are at war.* Jesus Christ died to redeem lost people. He gave His life on Calvary to rescue sinners from eternal condemnation. He rose again and told us to go and invite sinners to believe in Him and receive eternal life. If you are lost, you can be saved today. I invite you to receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

But know this. When we share the good news we are invading enemy territory. Satan doesn't like it. If we're going to stand, we must pray and be alert. Simply stated, here's my challenge...

2. *We must live with a warfare mentality.* Not a peacetime mentality, but a wartime mentality. And keep your walkie-talker turned on. You'll be okay if you do.

⁸ J. MacArthur, *The Believer's Armor*, p. 198-9.