

Sermon Title: A Methodist Prays Constantly
 Primary Text(s): 1 Thessalonians 5:13b-19 (by pastor in sermon)
 Other Texts: Luke 11:1-13; Romans 8:26-27 (worship leader)
 By: Rev. Terry Carty
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 Season: 9th Sunday after Pentecost
 Series: The Distinguishing Marks of a Methodist

Main Point: Pray without ceasing is not only a goal for a Methodist (i.e. disciple), but it is practical.

 Read Luke 11:1-13

Jesus teaches the disciples to pray

A Methodist Prays Constantly

We have been looking at the characteristic marks of Methodists, which indeed are goals appropriate of all Christians. As with each sermon in this series, I want to start with the disclaimer that reminds us that Mr Wesley was an Anglican minister throughout the 1700's in England. He sought only to make faith come alive on a day by day, minute by minute basis for himself and those who he mentored. Out of this came a particular method of discipleship that involved prayer, Bible study, and the mutual support of others who were like minded. They became known as Methodists. But Wesley consistently insisted that their goal was to spread the scriptural holiness of Christianity to everyone.

 Thus far we've learned that, according to John Wesley the founder, a Methodist loves God by opening one's heart to be completely filled with God's love. Being so filled to overflowing, a Christian (a Methodist) rejoices in God and gives thanks. Today we focus on **the fourth characteristic mark: A Methodist Prays without Ceasing**. This recalls a phrase from one of Wesley's go-to passages which is in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians:

1 Thessalonians 5:13b-19

Live in peace with each other. 14 And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 15 Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 19 Do not quench the Spirit.

A Methodist prays without ceasing. How is that possible? The word "constantly" sounds rather ominous. If someone washes their hands "constantly," we consider that a symptom of obsessive-compulsive disorder! If we think of prayer primarily as an activity in which we are on our knees with head bowed, eyes closed, and hands folded speaking formally to God for 16 hours a day, then praying "constantly" doesn't even seem practical, let alone doable.

 An anthropologist at Notre Dame once **studied the bones of a large monastic community that lived in Jerusalem in the fifth century**. She examined more than 6,000 skeletal elements from the crypt beneath Saint Stephen's Monastery. She discovered that those Byzantine monks shared several traits: they were robust, well-

nourished men; they lived on average into their 40s; and they had bad knees. In almost every monk over 20, there was damage to kneecaps, leg bones and heel bones. The anthropologist concluded, "If you consider prayer an occupation, then we have a case of occupational stress."

John Wesley himself spent four hours in prayer every morning beginning at 4:00 a.m. In his house in London, there is a little prayer room where Wesley prayed. His kneeling bench has grooves in it, a witness to his disciplined prayer life.

From Wesley's *Character of a Methodist*: **Not that he is always in the house of prayer; though he neglects no opportunity of being there. Neither is he always on his knees, although he often is, or on his face, before the Lord his God.**

When I was first appointed as a student pastor at Gallatin 1st UMC (1980), I found that I was often asked to pray in public. My prayer life up until that point had been private and silent. **I didn't even know how to compose a public prayer.**

I went to one of my professors at the seminary and asked for help. I got some pointers about praying about what was on my mind, but I was worried that my mind my be to shallow and my prayers would be hollow. Another student taught me a device that has been very helpful in structuring public prayer: ACTS
Aclamation Confession Thanksgiving Supplication (petition or intercession)

In my own prayer life, I found depth in using the pattern of the Lord's Prayer to structure my own thoughts.

Yet my public prayers were still rough hewn. They were sincere and from the heart. But they were not lovely and holy-sounding like preachers should pray.

I have absorbed a little along the way from the wonderfully eloquent prayers of the saints. And I have learned from the lyrics of hymns, especially those of John's brother Charles Wesley who poetically put the hopes of Methodist disciples into verse.

But the content of my primary prayer life often never finds verbal expression.

Now that gets me to this "pray constantly" thing.
Again From Wesley's *Character of a Methodist*: **But his heart is ever lifted up to God, at all times and in all places. In this he is never hindered, much less interrupted, by any person or thing. In retirement or company, in leisure, business, or conversation, his heart is ever with the Lord. Whether he lie down or rise up, God is in all his thoughts; he walks with God continually, having the loving eye of his mind still fixed upon him, and everywhere "seeing Him that is invisible."**

Wesley's conception of a disciple - a Methodist - is of one who turns to God at every pause. Whether along or with someone, at work or play, active or at rest, one is walking with God.

The apostle Paul gave us some familiar help in his letter to the Christians in Rome:
Romans 8:26-27

²⁶ **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 through wordless groans.** ²⁷ **And he who**

searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

Anne Lamott, a popular Christian author, gave a very helpful way to keep us in prayer constantly. She gives three essential prayers that we can use in most occasions.

Help, Thanks, Wow. We can use words or simply let these be feelings. But when offered as our expressions to God in the face of what God gives us, they can keep us constantly in touch with Father, Son and Holy Spirit - our God, our Redeemer, our Guide.

Help, help me get through these next hours, help my loved one get well, help our world
Thanks, thanks for my children/grandchildren, thanks that I have shelter/food/friends
Wow, reserved for those moments when we are overwhelmed by awe at God's goodness and the wonders that God has created.

A Methodist loves God, rejoices in God, gives thanks, prays constantly. The Love that is poured into our hearts and fills us with joy, happiness, and gratitude, also pulls us into relationship with God in prayer. And it is the love that flows out to all others and to the whole creation.

May God wow us this day with the joy and power of this holy love.