



Ten Habits That Make Your Life Better

Habit Three

My office looks out into the church parking lot but if I gaze over to the left I can see people walking down the sidewalk that runs along the street in front of our church. I developed a habit years ago that sprang perhaps out of my difficulty to concentrate on whatever writing I was doing, whether it was a sermon, devotional or trying to come up with ideas on a video. I pray for people when I see them pass the church property. Of course I don't know them and I have no idea what I should pray for each one, but it is a regular practice of mine. I do the same thing for people I see as I am driving or when I take my morning walk. I call it "spot praying". Spot praying is a part of my effort to keep a very particular command found in the Bible. It also is a way of managing my mental health. As I have grown older, spot praying has become a regular practice. When I come up against an aggravating problem, a difficult situation, a decision I need to make or a task I am about to start, I regularly spot pray. Perhaps you do this too. Maybe not consistently but you find it becoming a part of your daily routine.

There are very few scientific studies on the value of praying, mostly because there is little funding in academic circles for research on "religious" concerns. What has been uncovered is not surprising. Prayer seems to reduce anxiety, increase the sense of gratitude and thankfulness that are keys to a healthy personality, shift our focus from ourselves and our personal problems to a concern for others, reorder and straighten out our priorities and of course bring us closer to God. It is pretty clear that prayer reduces depression, fear and dread. Spot praying is the practice of praying outside "religious" settings such as a church worship service or a Bible study. Spot praying is the spontaneous desire to bring to God anything that comes to mind wherever you might be. Spot praying is not something new, but it is increasingly becoming an important part of the lives of those who want to stay connected to God 24/7.

In one of the shortest verses found in the Bible, the Apostle Paul gave this command from God. **...pray continually;** (1 Thessalonians 5: 17 NIV) The emphasis on this verse is not on praying but of course that is the main idea, but it is the direction of doing it continually. Continually is emphasized in the original Greek and one way to translate it would be, "continually pray continually". Most people think of praying as the work done in religious activities and limited to those special times. The Bible insists that praying is to happen throughout the day and even during the night. Some might wonder why God would make that demand of them! "How is it even possible?", they might ask. The truth is that like a doctor might tell her patient to "Walk more", a dentist insists his patient "Floss" or a mechanic reminds a customer to check the oil each week, God is only relaying to you what will make your life happier, more peaceful and contented. The more you pray, the better your life is.

To "continually, pray continually", you have to start somewhere and often spot praying begins with a crisis. Nehemiah in ancient times was the wine taster for the king of the most powerful empire in the world. His responsibility was to "take the bullet" so to speak by taking a sip of every drink provided the king to make sure he wasn't being poisoned. This was not a job for moody or emotional people as the king kept a close eye on the demeanor of the wine taster. If he or she looked scared or depressed or seemed shaky, the king immediately became suspicious and a suspicious king could bring an end to a wine taster's career...and life. Nehemiah was in a bad place. He had discovered how devastated his hometown of Jerusalem had become and he was afraid to ask the king for permission to go help rebuild it. **In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart." I was very much afraid, but I**

said to the king, **"May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"** The king said to me, **"What is it you want?"** (Nehemiah 2: 1-4a NIV) Nehemiah immediately responded with a spot prayer. **Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it."** (Nehemiah 2: 4b-5 NIV) Notice how quickly and without premeditation he prayed. Nehemiah instantly knew that his life may have depended on God intervening right then and so reflexively he prayed for help.

You see something similar in the book of Genesis. A servant of the great prophet and founder of the Hebrew and Arab peoples was sent on a mission to find a wife for his master's son, Isaac. Abraham commanded the servant to go several hundred miles and find his relatives and pick out a wife for his son Isaac there. What an incredibly daunting task! But because he was a servant, he left and when he finally arrived at the well where they lived, he made a spot prayer. **Then he prayed, "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham."** (Genesis 24: 12 NIV) In both cases God intervened and gave Nehemiah and the servant the help they wanted. Do you realize what God might do for you if you pray? A miracle might take place. Divine guidance might be given you. A change in circumstances may occur. Peace might come to you. Supernatural joy may be yours. A strategy could come to you and turn things around. A spot prayer suddenly opens you up to all the greatness and wonder of God.

If you want to become a better person and change the world around you and make it better, begin spot praying. I have literally experienced several hundred times where something turned around, I immediately discovered a solution to a problem, became unstuck in a sermon or video idea, saw a change in a person's attitude or behavior when I made a spot prayer. Psalm 22 has an example of a spot prayer of David and which Jesus seems to have used also. **But you, O Lord, be not far off; O my Strength, come quickly to help me.** (Psalm 22: 19 NIV) Jonah's spot prayer got him released from the belly of a great fish. **From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said: "In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.** (Jonah 2: 1-2 NIV) When we are upset and we don't want our anger and frustration to get the best of us, we can spot pray like Samuel who was disappointed when the people of Israel rejected God's direct leadership and called for a king over them. **But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord.** (1 Samuel 8: 6 NIV)

Spot prayers can turn your day around! They can transform defeat into victory and despair and frustration into hope. The best thing you can do for yourself is begin the practice of spot prayer. The supernatural intervention of God begins the moment a spot prayer is offered. All the resources of heaven are at work in you. Make a spot prayer for strength, for help, for direction, for gratitude or for praise. When something great happens, make a praise spot prayer. Praise the Lord with happy excitement. Bring the angels into your joy and include them in your celebration! Every moment in your day is an opportunity for a spot prayer, regardless of what you face. Oswald Chambers once said that prayer was the one thing you can do where you know you are always in God's will. It doesn't matter what your attitude is or your motives are when you make a spot prayer. God immediately becomes involved and works on what is going on within you and straightens out things for you. Do you remember Jonah's spot prayer when he was angry with the Lord for holding off judgment on the people of Nineveh? **Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.**" (Jonah 4: 3 NIV) Even your worst prayers, those you mutter when you are in a terrible mood are better than ignoring God or keeping to yourself. God will fix what is inside you and turn you and your day around when you offer a spot prayer! It is good for your mental health, great for others and wonderful for you to pray as often as you can, continually. The more you pray, the better your day, and the better you will be.