CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Do we need an account of prayer to address the problem for praying without ceasing?

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Abstract

1 Th. 5:17 tells us to pray without ceasing. Many have worried that praying without ceasing seems impossible. Most address the problem by giving an account of the true nature of prayer. Unexplored are strategies for dealing with the problem that are *neutral* on the nature of prayer, strategies consistent, for example, with the view that only petition is prayer. In this article, after clarifying the nature of the problem for praying without ceasing, I identify and explore the prospects of five different strategies that are neutral in this sense. I also raise problems for each strategy.

Introduction

For impact per word, top marks go to 1 Th. 5:17: 'pray without ceasing' (ESV[1]). The Desert Fathers sought to pray without ceasing by integrating prayers with their breath.[2] And, as in *The Way of a Pilgrim*, Eastern Orthodox mystics hold it is 'the all-embracing means' to 'salvation and perfection' (Anonymous (1978), 158). 1 Th. 5:17 inspires contemporary laypeople, too, with many books for popular audiences giving advice on how to pray without ceasing.[3]

1 Th. 5:17 has puzzled many, though. Origen wonders how praying without ceasing could 'be accepted by us as a possibility' (1947, ch. 7). Augustine asks, 'Are we to be "without ceasing" bending the knee, prostrating the body, or lifting up our hands ...?' (Augustine (2014), n.p.). Aquinas points out 'we have to be busy about other works' (Aquinas (1947), SS, q8, a14). This concern about whether praying without ceasing is possible remains with us to this day. Spurgeon (1872) devoted a sermon to addressing it, and Piper (2004) and MacArthur (2011) are among many pastors and theologians who have discussed it recently.[4]

Many offer proposals about the true nature of prayer to address this worry. Origen says 'we may speak of the whole life of a saint as one great continuous prayer' (1947, ch. 7), and Augustine says 'it is thy heart's desire that is thy prayer' (Augustine (2014), n.p.). For Spurgeon, promoting 'the good of my fellow creature' constitutes 'praying for his good in my actions' (1872, 5). Piper (2004, 157) suggests 'a spirit of dependence' on God is prayer. And MacArthur (2011, 15–17) holds consciousness of God is prayer.

Each of these strategies for dealing with the problem depends on an account of prayer, on substantive claims about what prayer *is*. Call such *account-based* strategies. From Origen

to MacArthur, account-based strategies predominate. Unexplored are strategies neutral about the true nature of prayer. *Neutral* strategies, let us say, rely on no substantive claims about what prayer is. A neutral strategy would be consistent with, for example, the idea that nothing except petition – making requests of God – is prayer.

I identify and explore neutral strategies, in this article.[5] To enable this, I will first clarify how to think about the problem for 1 Th. 5:17.[6]

To my knowledge, in the literature in philosophy of religion and philosophical theology, there is not yet any discussion whose main focus is praying without ceasing.[7] So, I shall err on the side of not leaving stones unturned. I will identify *five* neutral strategies.[8] My goal is not to do full justice to each. For example, one is to reject the much-debated principle that 'ought' implies 'can'. While I bring out ways this debate bears on the problem for 1 Th. 5:17, no attempt will be made to adjudicate it. My goal instead is to make these neutral strategies clear and cast some initial light on their prospects. As it turns out, if my arguments are on track, each strategy comes with problems.[9] To the degree these problems are weighty, the view that an account-based strategy is needed gains some support. In each case, though, I will leave to the reader whether the problems are conclusive or instead merely goads to further development of the strategy in question. To compare philosophy with chess,[10] my goal in this article is to add rigour to the *opening* of discussions of the problem for praying without ceasing. Middlegame and endgame are pursued in other work.[11]

In the next section, I address the preliminary issue of whether the 'problem' for 1 Th. 5:17 is genuinely philosophical. I then clarify how to think about this problem and explore five different neutral strategies.

A genuinely philosophical problem?

'Always do your best', I tell my students. Angry calls from parents later reveal that one student studied without sleep for weeks while another contracted alcohol poisoning to 'do their best' to enjoy beer. I find myself puzzled. 'Always do your best' seems a fine exhortation. It seems impossible, though, to always do our best, at least without harming ourselves. Now, should I start pondering the 'problem' for always doing your best? One might think not. My words had a clear and sensible meaning. Only hyper-literal, tone-deaf misunderstanding could generate the absurdities my students fell into. I should reproach them for their preposterous misunderstanding, not begin drafting an article on the problem for always doing your best. The 'problem', that is, does not appear to be philosophical.[12]

Just so for 1 Th. 5:17, one might think. To pray without ceasing to the neglect of one's family, etc., is to mangle a clear, sensible exhortation with hyper-literal, tone-deaf misunderstanding. One should be warned against distorting the verse's meaning, not invited into a philosophical discussion of the 'problem' for praying without ceasing.

Now, the comparison with 'always do your best' is well taken. I should be utterly clear to my students that they misunderstood what was said. Pastors should do the same to anyone neglecting family, etc., to 'obey' 1 Th. 5:17. And we should do these things even if unable to *explain why* the interpretations at issue are mistaken. Some misunderstandings are obviously so.

But even if it is often appropriate to reject a misunderstanding without an explanation, in many cases it is *even better* to reject the misunderstanding *and* invite the other into better understanding. Perhaps always doing your best is always exerting the efforts that the reasons available to you indicate are best suited to the success of each thing you are doing, as weighted by what these reasons indicate is their relative importance.[13] The reasons available to students do *not* indicate sleeplessness is suited to the success of study, or that enjoying beer is very important. Even read in this way, though, perhaps

'always do your best' demands too much similar to how consequentialism's 'always do *what is* best' is often thought to demand too much.[14] Relatedly, perhaps *always* exerting the relevant efforts would only make for the stuffy, unattractive life Wolf attributes to *moral saints*, 'whose every action is as morally good as possible' (Wolf (1982), 419). Still, perhaps 'always do your best' is suited to *loose* use, just as a falsehood like 'there is no more coffee' can fit 'the purpose at hand' of communicating whether the remaining coffee is enough to make another cup (Davis (2007, 406–407).

My point is not to draw conclusions about always doing your best. It is to illustrate that better understanding of what it amounts to is possible and that, plausibly, philosophy is among the disciplines which could help us achieve it. That is enough to commend philosophical work on a topic, even granting some contexts call more for dogmatic common sense than philosophical discussion.

Just so for 1 Th. 5:17. A pastor should sternly warn anyone who neglects family to pray without ceasing, but in some contexts there would be nothing wrong with *also* inviting them into better understanding of the verse. How things go from there, though, may depend on which scholarly commentary is at hand. For example, Morris emphasizes 'being conscious of [God's] presence with us wherever we may be' (Morris (1984), 107), while Green (2002) says 'without ceasing' 'is a hyperbole'. Philosophy could help us sort through these different approaches, and others worth considering. And a good starting point is to clarify – as I am about to do – what the 'problem' for 1 Th. 5:17 is supposed to *be*, in the first place. Indeed, even if 1 Th. 5:17 is hyperbole *à la* Green, it is, as I explain later, precisely this problem which identifies *why* we should regard it as such.[15]

The Problem for 1 Th. 5:17

A first pass

As stated so far, the problem for 1 Th. 5:17 is that praying without ceasing seems impossible. At most, we have an enthymeme: praying without ceasing is impossible; so, something is wrong with 1 Th. 5:17.

Two assumptions connect the dots. The first is that an imperative is faulty unless it ought to be obeyed. Something is wrong with both 'walk in front of that train' and 'spend the next hour counting by twos to one million'. For it is not the case that I ought to do either of these things – even if it is *permissible* for me to spend the next hour counting. Pristine imperatives are not just permissible to obey, they *ought* to be obeyed. The second assumption is that 'ought' implies 'can': anything we ought to do, we *can* do. Being unable to, it seems false that I ought to end world hunger by clapping my hands, wonderful as that may be.

Add these two assumptions to our enthymeme, and we have a first pass at the argument against 1 Th. 5:17, which the rest of the section shall refine:

> First Pass: 1 Th. 5:17 is an imperative telling us to pray without ceasing. Unless there is something wrong with an imperative, we ought to do what it tells us to do. But 'ought' implies 'can'. And we cannot pray without ceasing. So, there is something wrong with 1 Th. 5:17.

On 'wrong'

Begin with the notion of something being 'wrong' with an imperative. An imperative's aim is to affect, not describe, how things are. So, the standard view, which I will assume, is that

they lack truth values.[16] But they can be evaluated in other ways. So, for example, an imperative is *satisfied* just in case it is obeyed.[17] The problem with 1 Th. 5:17, though, is not that it is not (fully) satisfied, as that could be entirely *our* fault.

But, as Castañeda points out, an imperative has other statuses, too: 'reasonable or convenient, or allright, or proper, or correct, or appropriate, or justifiable, or due, or the right one in given circumstances', or their opposites (Castañeda (1975), 132). Among these, a distinction must be made. Consider

> *Button*: Our evidence indicates pressing a certain button will save a family from death. In point of fact, though, pressing it will cause them to perish needlessly.[18]

In Button, the imperative 'Press the button!' seems of a piece with the belief that pressing the button will save the family, the intention to press the button, and the action of pressing it, in the sense that each is to be evaluated positively in a subjective sense, but negatively in an objective sense. Each is 'reasonable' or 'justifiable' given our evidence, but none 'correct' or 'right' given all the facts. In the literature, such beliefs, intentions, and actions are often called *rational*, to capture the subjective dimension of evaluation, but *incorrect*, to capture the objective dimension of evaluation.[19] Let us extend this terminology to imperatives. In these terms, 'Press the button!' is rational but incorrect, while 'Do not press the button!' is correct but irrational.

First Pass is best understood as an argument that 1 Th. 5:17 is incorrect, not that it is irrational. For even if impeccable in itself, 1 Th. 5:17 could be irrational due to our being in a poor evidential situation – for example, imagine we had strong but entirely misleading evidence from psychology that human attention is too limited for praying without ceasing. That 1 Th. 5:17 is irrational is a count against it only if the evidence by virtue of which it is irrational is *not* misleading, that is, only if it is also *incorrect*. Correctness is what we ultimately care about.

Of course, outside a *context*, 'Press the button!' is neither correct nor incorrect. My talk of imperatives, then, is to be understood as implicit for talk of imperatives *in contexts*.

On 'ought'

On our refinements thus far, a central idea in First Pass is that correct imperatives ought to be obeyed.

Just as, in Button, it is rational to push the button but correct to refrain, I will assume that there is a subjective sense in which one ought to push it and an objective sense in which one ought to refrain.[20] Now, these distinctions do not guarantee that there is any sense of 'ought' on which it follows, from an imperative's being correct, that it ought to be obeyed. But we can assume that if there is such a connection, then from an imperative's being correct, it follows that one *objectively* ought to obey it, in particular.

Two other clarifications. First, I will always have in mind the all-things-considered 'ought', rather than the prima facie 'ought'.[21] For the second clarification, consider the contrast between 'Robin ought to drive more carefully' and 'Socrates ought to be alive today'. Each implies a certain state of affairs is desirable. But the first also clearly concerns what an agent ought to do, thus involving an *agential* 'ought', while it is unclear whether the second bears any relation to what any agent ought to do, in which case it would involve merely the 'ought' of *general desirability*.[22] In First Pass, 'ought' is to be understood as not only objective and all-things-considered, but agential, too.

Even with these clarifications, the idea that correct imperatives ought to be obeyed needs to be made more precise. A military officer issues a correct command to cadets beneath her. It does not follow that civilians like me ought to obey it.[23] Even were this

correct command issued to me – suppose, for example, that I sit in the wrong section during a graduation ceremony and the officer mistakes me for a cadet – it still does not follow that I ought to obey it. For, though *issued* to me, the command was not *intended for* me.

    Stipulatively, let us say

> An imperative is *addressed to one* (equivalently, one is an *addressee* of it) if and only if it is both issued to and intended for one.

Perhaps the idea is that a correct imperative's *addressees* ought to obey it.

    But even here there are problems. I am part of a crowd Lisa tells to vote for Alisha, who is by far the best candidate. By contrast with the officer's command at the graduation, Lisa's imperative is intended as much for me as for anyone else in the crowd. Unknown, though, is the fact that my children are currently hostages of an eccentric villain who will kill them if I vote for Alisha. Maybe we should say that Lisa's imperative is correct, although it is not the case that I, one of its addressees, ought to obey it.

    But the better thing to say is more complex: Lisa's imperative is correct in relation to most of its addressees, but incorrect in relation to *me*.[24] Generalizing: as a non-degreed, binary status, correctness is a property not of an imperative *simpliciter* but of it in relation to a given addressee. And, I will assume, these addressee-relative, binary correctness statuses feed into an overall correctness status which comes in degrees, where, at a first approximation, the greater the proportion of addressees in relation to which the imperative is correct, the greater the degree of overall correctness it has.

    Then the idea that correct imperatives ought to be obeyed, explicated, means that an imperative is correct in relation to a given addressee only if they ought to obey it, and that it is correct overall, to a certain degree, only if a certain proportion of its addressees ought to obey it. With these nuances in tow, ordinary cases *do* suggest correct imperatives ought to be obeyed: 'Quit that job!', for example, seems incorrect if it is not the case that one ought to quit.[25]

On 'can'

Next is the principle that 'ought' implies 'can'. Now, I can speak English and I can speak Portuguese, but in different senses. I can communicate with English-speakers right now. But to communicate with Portuguese-speakers, I would need to take some classes. I have a *general* ability to speak Portuguese, but not the *specific* ability to do so which I have in the case of English. Moreover, not now gagged, I have the *opportunity* to exercise my specific ability to speak English.[26] The standard understanding of the principle that 'ought' implies 'can' is

> OIC: If one ought to do something, then one has both the specific ability and the opportunity to do it.[27]

I will now argue we need *more* than simply OIC to feel the full force of the problem for 1 Th. 5:17. First assume we can bracket our need for sleep by reading the verse as restricted to times when one is awake. (I discuss such restrictions more closely later.) Now imagine that

> Prayerful Nun wakes with words to God on her lips, then immediately begins working through her Psalter. She completes necessary menial tasks while reciting petitionary Psalms she had memorized, continuing in this manner till sleep overtakes her. She repeats this day after day.

Prayerful Nun prays without ceasing. So, trivially, she has the specific ability and opportunity to do so. And so, then, do we. (Well, at least once we've memorized a petitionary Psalm, or similar, which is easy enough to do.)

That is, we *can* pray without ceasing, after all.[28] We can imitate Prayerful Nun. But 1 Th. 5:17 is still in hot water. I have a job. I want to be present with my friends. Such activities are not consistent with imitating Prayerful Nun. So, there are *good reasons* for me to do otherwise than imitate her. In fact, I think these reasons are *conclusive*, that is, by virtue of them, I *ought* to do otherwise. And if I cannot pray without ceasing without there being conclusive reasons to do otherwise, then I ought to do otherwise and, so, plausibly, it is *not* true that I ought to pray without ceasing.[29]

The problem, in fact, does not require that the reasons to do otherwise be conclusive. They just need to be what I shall call *adequate*, where

> Reasons to do otherwise than something are adequate if and only if they are weighty enough that it is not the case that one ought to do it.

A common view is that if one ought to do something, it is not permissible to do otherwise.[30] On this view, reasons weighty enough for doing otherwise to be permissible – *sufficient* reasons to do otherwise, as they are often called[31] – are *ipso facto* adequate in this sense. But some, for example, Jones and Pörn (1986) and McNamara (2019), reject this common view. On Jones et al.'s view, it might well be, say, that I ought to visit my mother this weekend – that would be best, morally speaking – even if it is permissible for me to not visit her. So, for Jones et al., sufficient reasons to do otherwise may *not* be adequate. Happily, we can stay neutral on this matter.

Given Prayerful Nun, the real problem for 1 Th. 5:17 is not that we cannot pray without ceasing. The real problem, if there is one, is that we cannot do so without there being adequate reasons to do otherwise. Now, were I able to petition God as Prayerful Nun does *and simultaneously* read, write, teach, and be with my friends and family as I am wont to, I *would* be able to pray without ceasing without there being adequate reasons for me to do otherwise. But I am not able to do this. I have too many limitations. It is these limitations plus the desirability of the relevant activities which suggest I have adequate reasons to do otherwise than pray without ceasing.

So it is not mere OIC which causes trouble for 1 Th. 5:17 but

> OIC*: If one ought to do something, then one has both the specific ability and the opportunity to do it without there being adequate reasons for one to do otherwise.

Note OIC* speaks of there *being* adequate reasons, not our *having* them. This aligns with the fact that, just as correctness and 'ought' are objective, the reasons in view are objective, too. The problem is not that I happen to *have*, perhaps by virtue of my believing them, reasons against imitating Prayerful Nun. That could be due to my irrationality or lack of imagination. The problem, if there is one, is that there *are* such reasons, objectively.[32]

The argument against 1 Th. 5:17

Our refinements to First Pass give us this argument against 1 Th. 5:17:

(1) 1 Th. 5:17 is an imperative telling its addressees to pray without ceasing.
(2) Unless an imperative is incorrect in relation to some of its addressees, each of its addressees ought to do what it tells them to do.

(3) OIC*: If one ought to do something, then one has both the specific ability and the opportunity to do it without there being adequate reasons for one to do otherwise.

(4) Some of 1 Th. 5:17's addressees do not have both the specific ability and the opportunity to pray without ceasing without there being adequate reasons for them to do otherwise.

(5) So, 1 Th. 5:17 is incorrect in relation to some of its addressees. [from (1), (2), (3), and (4)]

'Reasons' and 'ought' are, and shall be, objective in the sense Button highlighted. Also, I will use 'can', 'able', etc., to refer to the combination of specific ability and opportunity.

What conclusions should Christians draw if (5) is true? It depends, but they seem nontrivial. Those who believe Scripture has no faults whatsoever would need to give up that view.[33] 1 Th. 5:17's being incorrect in relation to so much as one addressee is a fault, even if minor. Besides, if (5) is true, a significant proportion of the verse's addressees are likely to have the relevant limitations and obligations, which would make the verse incorrect to a significant degree.[34] Of course, what this proportion is depends on *who* the verse addresses, but it would be significant even if, for example, it addresses only the Thessalonians.[35]

Christians who allow for faults in Scripture, by contrast, should include 1 Th. 5:17 among them.[36] But even here there is a kind of loss insofar as there is a default desire to preserve from the charge of fault as much teaching we may profit from as possible.

Perhaps most importantly, as made clear at the start of this article, it is just a fact that 1 Th. 5:17 inspires many, many Christians. However (5) bears on views on Scripture, and however we settle who 1 Th. 5:17 addresses – an issue to which I am about to turn – one inspired by an imperative does well to consider whether or not it is correct, and to what degree.

Neutral strategies

Given that (1)–(5) is the problem for 1 Th. 5:17, a neutral strategy will be a way of objecting to (1)–(5) which relies on no substantive claims about what prayer is. I will identify and explore five different strategies with a claim to be neutral. They get increasingly promising as we go, at least as I see things. Even so, I will raise at least one problem for each of them.

Strategy 1: 1 Th. 5:17's addressees are a select group

Imagine 'Walk with good posture' in a letter read aloud to a diverse group. It is false that handicapped persons ought to obey this imperative. But this is no count against it, as it is *intended for* the able-bodied. Even if issued to a diverse group, differences between individuals can implicitly restrict those for whom an imperative is intended – and, so, restrict those to whom it is addressed, as that notion was defined earlier.

Maybe 1 Th. 5:17 is addressed to a select group in this way. The parts of the body of Christ have different functions (Eph. 4; 1 Cor. 12). Maybe 1 Th. 5:17 is intended for those specially situated to obey it. Indeed, John Cassian says 'the aim of every *monk*' and 'the destination of the *solitary*' – not *everyone* — is 'continual and unbroken perseverance in prayer' (2015, IX, 2; X, 7, italics mine). As Simsic points out, praying without ceasing was traditionally 'considered a practice reserved for those in religious communities' (Simsic (2000), 9). If 1 Th. 5:17's addressees are restricted in this way, perhaps each of them *can* pray without ceasing without there being adequate reasons to do otherwise. Perhaps, for this reason, (4) is false.

But Paul can be quite explicit about restrictions on his intended audience. Note, for example, how he addresses 'wives', 'husbands', 'children', 'bondservants', and 'masters' in Eph. 5:22–6:9 and those with the gifts of 'prophecy', 'service', 'teaching', etc., in Rom. 12:6–8. No such indicators occur in 1 Th. 5:17, a verse near injunctions to not repay 'evil for evil' and to 'seek to do good' (1 Th. 5:15), which appear unlikely to have implicit restrictions on their addressees. So, the interpretation of 1 Th. 5:17 at issue appears *ad hoc*, at best.

Strategy 2: rejecting 'ought' implies 'can'

If

> OIC: If one ought to do something, then one has both the specific ability and the opportunity to do it.

is false, so is (3), since (3) is just OIC*, a specific version of OIC. Now, some reject OIC by appeal to determinism. They hold its being causally determined that one will not do something implies one lacks the opportunity to do it. OIC's falsity then follows from the observation that sometimes people ought to do what they will not do; in such cases, they ought to do what they cannot do.[37] If OIC is false for this reason, praying without ceasing would be of a piece with many things we ought to do but cannot because it is causally determined that we will not. This argument, though, is both well-worn and polarizing: many argue that opportunity to do what will not occur is consistent with determinism,[38] and libertarians, of course, argue that determinism is false.[39] So I will set this argument aside.

Another kind of argument claims there are counterexamples to OIC, for example:

> Wedding: Thirty minutes before his 11am wedding in Los Angeles, Larry boards a plane to New York. Though at 10:45am he is unable to be at his wedding, it is still true that he ought to be there.[40]

> Funeral: Jordan has negative memories of his grandmother, but for morally irrelevant reasons. At her funeral, he learns that she often saved his family from financial disaster. Jordan ought to feel gratitude. But he finds himself unable.[41]

Now, even if these succeed as counterexamples to OIC,[42] it does not follow that the *step* of the argument that (3) represents is doomed. Even OIC-deniers tend to accept that, in *some* cases, being unable to do something implies it is not the case that one ought to do it. For example, Armstrong, who denies OIC, says one's being tied up implies it is not the case that one ought 'to get the police', because it is 'a substantive moral truth' that in *certain* cases 'moral judgments with 'ought' are not true when the agent cannot do the act' (Armstrong (1984), 254). In the absence of some such 'substantive moral truth', I suspect, we might be hard pressed to explain OIC's popularity. But what if praying without ceasing is among the cases this truth concerns? Then we should be able to build this truth, rather than OIC, into the step of the argument that (3) represents, and the result would do everything we need it to do.

I will seek leverage on this question by asking whether praying without ceasing is relevantly similar to what it appears Larry and Jordan ought to do in Wedding and Funeral. If so, these cases give us reason to think that (3) not just false but irreparable. If not, then even if (3) is false, we should expect to be able to repair it.

Larry culpably makes himself unable to get to his wedding on time. Have we culpably made ourselves unable to pray without ceasing? No. Recall Prayerful Nun. I argued that we

have adequate reasons not to imitate her. But whatever our previous missteps, we still *can* imitate her. We are not like Larry, who has neither the specific ability nor the opportunity to go from mid-flight to New York at 10:45 a.m. to Los Angeles at 11:00 a.m.

Jordan ought to feel gratitude but cannot. Could it be that, in a similar way, we ought to pray without ceasing even though we cannot? Notice 1 Th. 5:16: 'rejoice always'. Perhaps this implies we ought to always feel joy. Even so, perhaps we cannot do so, given our current limits. If so – keeping in view that the 'ought' here is agential, not that of general desirability – the point of the (purported) fact that we ought to always feel joy seems to be that there is an *ideal* we are to strive for and incrementally approach, despite never being able to achieve. Just so for the fact that we ought to pray without ceasing, perhaps. To visualize the ideal, we might imagine someone whose capacities are expanded to the point where, even when engaged in difficult mental work, she simultaneously prays.

This objection to (3) has promise. It has a problem, though. Much that I ought to do I *can* do. It is *hard enough* for me to do these things consistently. So, if my choice is between doing more of what I can do and striving for the unachievable, I will – rationally, I suspect – prefer the former. Sure, steps of approach to the unreachable ideal are among the things I can do. But I find most helpful those imperatives mapping out this approach: for example, if all I can do is pray *hourly*, I find it most helpful to focus on praying hourly. That, again, may be hard enough. If all of this is right, the objection to (3) at issue leaves 1 Th. 5:17 less helpful than we might have hoped.

Strategy 3: we together *can* pray without ceasing

So far, we have taken 'addressees' in (1)–(5) to refer to *individuals*. But perhaps 1 Th. 5:17 addresses entire *groups*. Perhaps praying without ceasing is like barn-raising: a *collective action* no individual could perform by themselves.

1 Th. 5:17 in the Greek is ἀδιαλείπτως προσεύχεσθε. προσεύχεσθε is second person *plural*, meaning either 'each of you pray' or 'you all together pray'. The early church was more group oriented than contemporary Western culture;[43] so, the latter may have been more easily heard in Paul's time. Intensive group prayer was the norm in the early church (see Acts 1:14; 12:12), and the Lord's Prayer, we should not forget, begins with 'Our Father', not 'My Father' (Mt. 6:9). In his commentary on 1 Th. 5:17, Aquinas approvingly quotes the lives of the fathers, who say that 'he who gives alms is the one who always prays, for the person who receives alms prays for you even when you are asleep' (Aquinas (1969), n.p.). The idea here is that we can coordinate with others to *together* pray without ceasing though *individually* we cannot. And this idea has been put into action. Groups such as the International House of Prayer in Kansas City organize 24/7 prayer rooms with sign-up slots for each hour of the day, some of which have run continuously since 1999.[44]

Suppose we read 1 Th. 5:17 in this way. Then, plausibly, (4), which says we cannot pray without ceasing without there being adequate reasons to do otherwise, is false. We *can*, just *together*, leaving us as individuals plenty of time to keep up with our work, friends, and families.

This is a fascinating neutral strategy. But it has the problem of specifying the group(s) which are to pray without ceasing, as well as how many individuals in a group are to pray at a time. If the group is the whole church invisible and only one individual need be praying, then, for nearly all of us at nearly all times, nothing whatsoever must be done to ensure 1 Th. 5:17 is obeyed. That one successful 24/7 prayer room suffices. This makes obedience too easy. But if more than one group is to pray without ceasing, or more than one individual per group is to pray at a time, it is unclear how to specify these groups

and these numbers. A principled proposal is one individual per local Christian community. But this threatens to make obedience too hard. Imagine a small community and an emergency situation. That situation might be adequate reason for *all* members of that community to do otherwise than pray at the relevant moment, which means they cannot pray without ceasing without there being adequate reasons to do otherwise, after all. There is a dilemma. Make the group too large, and obedience is too easy. Make the groups smaller, in anything like a natural way, and obedience can be too difficult.[45]

Strategy 4: getting precise about 'without ceasing'

Grice's maxim of quality says that when we interpret what others are saying, our default assumption should be that they intend to communicate something 'true' (Grice (1989), 45–47). Such a maxim, applied to imperatives, would have us expect others aim to communicate *correct* ones. Maybe getting precise about ἀδιαλείπτως, 'without ceasing', will make clear that we *can* pray as much as the verse says we are to pray, without there being adequate reasons to do otherwise.

According to Barry C. Black (2015), ἀδιαλείπτως 'doesn't mean nonstop' but 'constantly recurring'.[46] Outside Scripture the word could refer to, for example, a bad cough (Moulton and Milligan (1914), 9), which constantly recurs, sure enough, but is not strictly nonstop. And it seems we can ensure our prayers constantly recur without there being adequate reasons to do otherwise. Praying before bed each night is enough. Indeed, doing this once a month is enough, if one is consistent.

It is unclear whether this move works. ἀδιαλείπτως derives from an adverbial form of διαλείπω, meaning 'cease, stop', and the negating α, from whence, for example, the 'a' in 'atheism' (Aland and Aland (1998), 43). That is, it is the Greek equivalent of an adverbialized 'nonstop': 'nonstoppingly'. It is not without reason that Aland *et al.*'s (1998, 3) dictionary has 'constantly, always' for the word, Arndt and Gingrich (1952, 17) have 'constantly, unceasingly', and many NT translations have similar. And as we saw earlier, ἀδιαλείπτως made the church fathers feel pressure to expand our notion of prayer. They would not have felt this pressure if they took 1 Th. 5:17 to require merely, say, monthly prayer. I would feel uncomfortable insisting they inadequately grasped the Greek.

Let us try another angle. Let us assume ἀδιαλείπτως is an adverb which universally quantifies over times – just as, for example, 'always' normally does.[47] Still, very, *very* often, universal quantifiers quantify over *restricted* domains. 'Everything is on sale', for example, does *not* say the Pacific Ocean is on sale, except in some extraordinary context.[48] Instead, 'everything' quantifies over *the purchasable items in the relevant store*. Especially in view of the Gricean maxim, perhaps, similarly, ἀδιαλείπτως quantifies over a suitably restricted domain.

Begin with the following domain of times:

PF: all times *t* such that the agent exists at *t* and, relative to her, *t* is a *present* or *future* time

PF, though, seems too expansive. *PF* includes times when the agent is asleep. But, plausibly, 1 Th. 5:17 addresses the waking. So, consider

PFA: the subset of *PF* in which the agent is *awake*

Prayerful Nun prays at each time within *PFA*. What our earlier discussion showed is that the problem is not that one cannot pray throughout *PFA*. Rather, the problem is that, at many of these times, there are adequate reasons for one to do otherwise.

It will not do to restrict *PFA* to either of the following:

> *PFAO*: the subset of *PFA* in which the agent *ought* to pray
> *PFAP*: the subset of *PFA* in which it is *permissible* for the agent to pray

Regarding *PFAO*, it is trivial to be told to pray whenever we ought. We can just as sensibly be told to take cocaine whenever we ought. Presumably, this is *never*. And there is the same problem with *PFAP*: then 1 Th. 5:17 could be correct even if it is never permissible to pray. Paul's words, though, are not trivial in these ways, or similar.

Consider finally

> *PFAF*: the subset of *PFA* in which the agent is 'free' or 'has to themselves'

But, on this interpretation, 1 Th. 5:17 is no longer the challenge to us it is surely meant to be. Unaware of my workaholism, I may pack my schedule so full I have no 'free' time, no time 'to myself'. I have not thereby prayed without ceasing. Rather, to do so, I would need to make some changes.

These failed attempts to identify the domain over which ἀδιαλείπτως quantifies do not prove that a suitable domain cannot be identified. But they do suggest a dilemma that a specification of a domain would have to see its way between. Allow the domain to be wide, as with *PFA* (*present and future times during which one is awake*), and there will be many times at which, intuitively, there are adequate reasons to do otherwise than pray. But attempt to narrow the domain, as with *PFAO* (*times one ought to pray*), *PFAP* (*times it is permissible for one to pray*), and *PFAF* (*times one has 'free' to pray*), and 1 Th. 5:17 seems to be trivialized.

Strategy 5: the hyperbole strategy

Thus far, we have assumed that what 1 Th. 5:17 *says* we are to do is what it *means* for us to do. But perhaps this assumption subjects the verse to a demand for precision unsuited to natural language. A natural way to drop this assumption is to hold that while the verse *says* we are to pray without ceasing, it *means* we are to do something else, something less extreme – for example, pray *a lot*, or *persistently*, or *assiduously*, or *fervently*, etc. This is to hold that 1 Th. 5:17 is *hyperbole*, which a number of commentaries recommend.[49] Call this *the hyperbole strategy*.[50]

A few comments about hyperbole. It is *non-deceptive* exaggeration. Exaggeration can be meant to deceive. I could claim a $385 traffic fine was over $500 and really wish others believe this.[51] Not so with hyperbole. Taking an example from Walton, if any more than two cops on my street are abnormal, upon seeing around two dozen from the window I may say

  (a) There are hundreds of cops out there. (Walton (2017), 107)

I do not want others to believe there are actually 200-plus cops on my street. ('No, my street is *not* on a parade route!') Rather, I rely on its being so obvious that what I say is false that others immediately understand me to mean something less extreme, for example, that there are *lots* of cops out there. Hyperbole lands when a 'joint pretence' materializes between speaker and addressee within which they take an obvious falsehood

to communicate a truth (Clark (1996), 143). Following Walton, call *that there are hundreds of cops out there* the *explicit* content of (a) and *that there are lots of cops out there* the *assertive* content of (a) (Walton (2017), 107). I put forth (a)'s explicit content as obviously false because unrealistically extreme on the relevant scale[52] and expect others to immediately recognize its meaning to be a less extreme assertive content. That is how hyperbole works.[53]

Cruise (2018) discusses signs of hyperbole in Scripture. They include that what is said 'conflicts with what Jesus says or does elsewhere', 'conflicts with Scripture', and 'if literally fulfilled, would not achieve the desired goal' (*ibid.*, 93). Consider Mt. 5:39: 'Do not resist the one who is evil'. This is often taken to be hyperbole – unsurprisingly, given Cruise's criteria.[54] Ps. 82:4 tells us to 'deliver' from 'the hand of the wicked' 'the weak and the needy', which, for a school security guard the day a gunman begins firing, conflicts dramatically with Mt. 5:39. There is good indication, then, that Mt. 5:39 is hyperbole.

Just so for 1 Th. 5:17, one might think. Rather than cloistered away praying without ceasing, Jesus spent time with tax collectors and sinners, taught disciples and crowds, healed the sick, etc. He told us to not 'heap up empty phrases' or 'many words' (Mt 6:7). Thus he promoted a life consumed not by prayer but with doing 'good to one another and to everyone', as 1 Th. 5:15 puts it. Moreover, if 'literally fulfilled', 1 Th. 5:17 would destroy rather than 'achieve the desired goal' of mutual love and support Paul obviously meant to inculcate among the Thessalonians.[55] These signs indicate that 1 Th. 5:17 is hyperbole. That is, they indicate that Paul puts forth the verse's explicit content as obviously incorrect[56] because unrealistically extreme on the relevant scale and expects his addressees to immediately recognize its meaning to be a less extreme assertive content.

What to make of the hyperbole strategy? Recall that for a strategy to be *neutral* is for it to rely on no substantive claims about what prayer is. Initially, it might seem obvious that the hyperbole strategy is neutral. Its central claim is not about prayer but about what 'without ceasing' means – viz., in essence, that it is hyperbolic for *a lot*. And, indeed, it seems we can pray *a lot* without there being adequate reasons to do otherwise on a wide array of accounts of prayer – whether prayer be petition, consciousness of God, etc.[57] I will argue, though, that while the bare hypothesis that 1 Th. 5:17 is hyperbole involves no substantive claims about prayer, *motivating* that hypothesis *does* involve such claims. The hyperbole strategy, that is, is neutral only if unsubstantiated.

As I actually presented it, the hyperbole strategy involved reasons to accept the hypothesis that 1 Th. 5:17 is hyperbole: that praying without ceasing conflicts with Jesus' example, his words, Scripture, etc. These were presented as reasons to think the verse's explicit content is *obviously incorrect*. But notice. If these reasons show this, it could only be because they make (4) true, that is, it could only be because they make it the case that we cannot pray without ceasing without there being adequate reasons to do otherwise. For imagine, *per impossibile*, that praying without ceasing conflicts with Jesus' example and words, etc., but is *still* something we can do without there being adequate reasons to do otherwise. Then such conflict would be perfectly consistent with praying without ceasing still being something we ought to do, and so perfectly consistent with 1 Th. 5:17's explicit content being correct. That is, the reasons to think that 1 Th. 5:17 is hyperbole work only insofar as they motivate (4) and so link up with the argument against 1 Th. 5:17 formulated earlier, now read in terms of the verse's explicit content.

Whether these reasons really motivate (4), though, depends on substantive claims about prayer. Consider an example from *The Way of a Pilgrim*. A king asks you to sit next to his throne and write an essay. Even if soon 'completely engrossed' in the task, you would not 'forget even for a moment that you are not working alone', for, throughout, you would have a 'very real awareness of the presence of the king' (Anonymous (1978), 152). The

example is meant to show that one can pray even while 'engaged in mental work' (*ibid*.). It highlights peripheral features of consciousness. And, to relate the outlines of an account-based strategy I develop in other work,[58] suppose the following: some such features suffice for *listening for God*, which condition suffices for *consciously communicating* with him, which in turn suffices for praying at a time. Now, the peripheral features of consciousness at issue seem consistent not only with difficult 'mental work' but also with *ministering to others as Jesus did*. But then if these features are sufficient for prayer, there is no longer any reason to think praying without ceasing conflicts with Jesus' example, or his words, or Scripture, and so no longer any reason to think (4) is true, and so no longer any reason to think 1 Th. 5:17 is hyperbole in the first place.

True, if only petition is prayer, the argument that 1 Th. 5:17 is hyperbole has a foothold. *Petitioning* without ceasing *does* conflict with Jesus' example. But to hold only petition, or similar, is prayer, in preference to the account of prayer just sketched – not to mention others worth considering[59] – is to make a *substantive* commitment about prayer. For all I have argued, such a commitment may be *true*. But to make that commitment is to step outside neutral strategy. The hyperbole strategy, that is, can marshal support for its core hypothesis only if account-based.

Conclusion

Until now, account-based strategies have predominated. To add rigour to the opening of discussions of the problem for praying without ceasing, in this article I have explored five different strategies with the claim to be neutral.

If my arguments are on track, each has problems, at least insofar as it retains neutrality. It seems *ad hoc* to say that 1 Th. 5:17 addresses only nuns and others specially situated for the task (*Strategy 1*). Maybe the practical point of 1 Th. 5:17 is that there is an ideal of continuous prayer we are to strive for and approach, though we can never achieve it (*Strategy 2*). But if being told to do something one cannot do is less helpful than being told to do something one can do, then 1 Th. 5:17 is less helpful than we might have hoped, on this strategy.

On the other hand, maybe 1 Th. 5:17 tells *groups* to pray without ceasing, not individuals (*Strategy 3*). Alternatively, maybe getting precise about which domain of times 'without ceasing' quantifies over will result in an imperative we can obey without there being adequate reasons to do otherwise (*Strategy 4*). But both strategies face a dilemma. Shrink down the group responsible for praying without ceasing in anything like a natural way, for example, by identifying it with one's local community, and obedience to 1 Th. 5:17 can be too difficult. Leave it large, for example, as the church invisible, and obedience is too easy. Regarding making precise the domain of times at which an individual is to pray, make it wide, for example, present and future times during which she is awake, and obedience is too difficult. But narrow it and, at least given the ways of doing so explored thus far, obedience is made trivially easy. So, obeying 1 Th. 5:17 is either too difficult or too easy, depending on the size of the group, for the one strategy, and the wideness of the domain of times, for the other.

The problems for these neutral strategies make the pursuit of an account-based one more intelligible. My discussion of the hyperbole strategy (*Strategy 5*) generates a similar upshot. I argued that motivating this strategy requires substantive commitments about prayer and so the abandonment of neutral strategy. Here again the intelligibility of the pursuit of account-based strategy shines through.

In addition, clarifying the problem for praying without ceasing sheds some light on what it would take to execute an account-based strategy. One way to do so would be to establish that, in view of what prayer is, we are indeed able to pray without ceasing

without there being adequate reason for us to do otherwise. Another could be to show that, in view of what prayer is, we are indeed *un*able to do that. For a strong case here could *ipso facto* function as a good reason to read 1 Th. 5:17 as hyperbole.

At the same time, I do not take to be conclusive the problems I have raised for the neutral strategies I identified. Nor have I discussed all neutral strategies worth considering.[60] But I hope to have given a sense of what they could look like. And raising a problem for a strategy clarifies the work required to execute it. Thus, in addition to shedding some light on why one might pursue an account-based strategy, I also hope to have provided fruitful directions of research for neutral strategy. Work on either front could inform our spiritual lives, which, I take it, is a particularly strong reason to pursue a research project.

Notes

1. All scriptural references will be to the English Standard Version.
2. See Cunningham (2012).
3. See, for example, Simsic (2000), Farrington (2002), and McHenry (2005). 1 Th. 5:17 is not the only verse indicating that prayer should be ceaseless. For example, Eph. 6:18 says to pray 'at all times in the Spirit', and in Ps. 16:8, David says he has 'set the Lord always before' him. So even if, as suggested by an anonymous referee and discussed in more detail in endnote 35, 1 Th. 5:17 addresses only the Thessalonians, that all Christians are to pray without ceasing might still have a Scriptural basis. For discussion of a number of passages and argument for a Scriptural theme in this regard, see, for example, Giardini (1998), 331–335.
4. See, for example, Wellman (2014); Black (2015); Beeke (2018); O'Dell Stanley (2018). For a helpful survey of church history and theology on praying without ceasing, see Giardini (1998).
5. I explore account-based strategy in other work, for example, in Hatcher (in preparation).
6. As I hope to explore in future work, the problem for 1 Th. 5:17 may be structurally similar to problems for imperatives from other religions. Consider, for example, 'Be mindful of breath continuously', suggested by this line from *Maha Rahulovada Sutra* on Burke's translation: 'If mindfulness of breath is practiced continuously, then your last breath will be in knowing, not in unknowing' (Burke (2012), 177).
7. Kleinschmidt gives an account of prayer as 'a communicative act directed at God *qua* divine entity' and says this may not capture the sense of prayer at issue in 1 Th. 5:17 (Kleinschmidt (2017), 155). But she does not pursue the issue, her topic being whether atheists can pray (and do so rationally). Tugwell (2010, 26), fleshing out Aquinas' account of prayer gives an important, though brief, argument that account-based strategies face a temptation to misconstrue the nature of prayer; I plan to discuss this argument in other work.
8. I thank two anonymous referees for this journal for convincing me that the idea that 1 Th. 5:17 is hyperbole should be among the strategies I discuss. I discuss that idea in detail later.
9. More exactingly, to foreshadow the point I will make later about the idea that 1 Th. 5:17 is hyperbole, each strategy comes with problems *insofar as it retains its neutrality*.
10. As, for example, Bailey (2015, 172) does.
11. See, for example, Hatcher (in preparation).
12. I thank an anonymous referee for raising the question of whether this article addresses a genuinely philosophical problem. The 'always do your best' example is theirs, though I believe I have put my own spin on it.
13. To my knowledge, this possible explication of 'always do your best' is original here. Much would need to be said to unpack its constituent concepts, but, alas, that is not my project here. I will mention, though, that for discussion of what makes an effort suited to an activity's success given that effort is finite, see Houy et al. (2020).
14. For discussion of this objection to consequentialism, see Scheffler (1982) and Mulgan (2001).
15. I take it that whether the problem for 1 Th. 5:17 is 'genuinely philosophical' matters primarily insofar as it bears on whether philosophical work on it is worthwhile. I hope to have motivated the idea that such work is worthwhile. Still, one might wonder whether the problem for 1 Th. 5:17 is genuinely philosophical in a more substantive sense. An anonymous referee proposes that a genuine philosophical problem obtains when certain views appear to be 'in irreconcilable conflict with each other'. I am not sure this is a necessary condition on genuine philosophical problems. But even if it is, by my lights the problem I am about to clarify meets this condition, especially since, read charitably, the condition should have some flexibility regarding both the degree of plausibility of the views at issue and the depth of the appearance of irreconcilable conflict.

16. See, for example, Vranas (2008) and (2011). See Babb (manuscript), though, for an argument that imperatives have truth values.

17. See Dorschel (1989), 319–322.

18. Button is inspired by the trapped miners case discussed by Björnsson and Finlay (2010) and Kolodny and MacFarlane (manuscript). See also Graham (2011), 339–340.

19. See Wedgwood (2007), 154–159.

20. For discussion of these two senses of 'ought', see, for example, Björnsson and Finlay (2010); Graham (2011); Wedgwood (2016).

21. The distinction comes from Ross (1930). Assuming correct imperatives ought to be obeyed, I take it that the all-things-considered 'ought' is at issue. Your text 'meet me as promised', sent just as my spouse enters cardiac arrest, is rational enough, and I *prima facie* ought to meet you as I promised, but that text is not correct, and it is not correct precisely because it is *not* the case that I *all-things-considered* ought to meet you.

22. For this distinction, see Wedgwood (2013), 71–72.

23. I thank Thomas Crisp for this case.

24. I thank Thomas Crisp for suggesting that correctness is relative to addressee.

25. Compare with Castañeda (1975), 243. Not all cases are ordinary, of course. My friend stares at a row of identical tuna cans, unable to decide which to take. A thief demands my wallet. I may say, 'Take that one!' to my friend, and 'Take my money, but not my family pictures' to the thief. (Compare, here, with *ibid.*, 140–141 and Hamblin (1987), 29.) These imperatives seem impeccable even if it is false that my friend ought to take the gesticulated can rather than any other in the row, and false that the thief ought to take my money. These cases, though, are outliers and can, I think, be screened off. 'Take that one!' is what Castañeda calls a 'procedural' imperative: it encourages my friend to select *some* option among multiple equally advisable ones (Castañeda (1975), 140–141). 'Take my money' is what Hamblin calls a 'permissive' imperative: it permits the robber to do something but does not so much as advise it (Hamblin (1987), 30). That procedural and permissive imperatives lack a connection to what one ought to do does not mean that normal, central, paradigmatic imperatives – pieces of advice, demands, commands, etc. – also lack it. Hamblin calls such central imperatives 'proper' (*ibid.*, 44–45). 'Imperative' in the main text, then, is to be read as referring to *proper* imperatives.

26. For the distinction between general ability, specific ability, and opportunity, see, for example, Wedgwood (2013), 80–81.

27. See Vranas (2007), 171, and Mizrahi (2009), 20.

28. We can do so in the sense of 'can' at issue in OIC, that is. And that is how 'can' and cognates shall always be used in the main text. In the *deontic* sense of 'can', however, this is far from clear, as we are about to see; for clarity, though, I will put the point in other terms.

29. Whether this strictly follows depends on whether there can be genuine *moral dilemmas*. For further discussion, see endnote 60.

30. This 'common view' is part of what McNamara (2019, §1.2) calls the 'Traditional Scheme' in deontic logic.

31. See, for example, Schroeder (2015), 159.

32. For precedence for calling *objective* those reasons that exist independently of whether one *has* them, see especially Schroeder (2008).

33. Consider, for example, those who endorse the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978), which says Scripture is to be 'obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires', being 'without error or fault in all its teaching'.

34. Recall our assumption that the proportion of addressees in relation to which an imperative is correct feeds into an overall, degreed correctness value.

35. Limitations and obligations are not unique to contemporary culture, of course. I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting that 1 Th. 5:17 addresses only the Thessalonians. This referee suggests there could be any number of reasons why this might be the case. They suggest, for example, that perhaps the Thessalonians were particularly apathetic about prayer, and that perhaps Paul thought the best way to motivate them to achieve an 'acceptable' standard was to demand an especially high one. Now, there is some reason to doubt that the Thessalonians were apathetic about prayer. Paul positively glows over them early in 1 Th., going so far as to say they are 'an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia' (1 Th. 1:7). Perhaps that is consistent with apathy about prayer, but probably not. But then, of course, Paul might be specially aiming 1 Th. 5:17 at the Thessalonians not due to their apathy but, on the contrary, due to their having achieved a standard of prayer which makes them ready for an even higher standard. At all events, the referee's main concern is that if 1 Th. 5:17 addresses only the Thessalonians, it is not clear why Christians in general should take praying without ceasing, and any potential problems with it, seriously.

In response, genuinely evaluating the proposal that 1 Th. 5:17 addresses only the Thessalonians would require a general account of how what was originally written for others should bear on the belief and practice of present-

day Christians. That is a large, complex topic beyond the scope of this article. I will, though, offer two reflections on this important issue raised by the referee.

First, as mentioned in endnote 3, it is not just 1 Th. 5:17 but also Eph. 6:18, Ps. 16:8, and many other passages which can be interpreted as recommending ceaseless prayer. See Giardini (1998, 331–335) and *The Way of a Pilgrim*. To the extent that praying without ceasing is a Scriptural theme, not only does the proposal that 1 Th. 5:17 addresses only the Thessalonians lose some plausibility, but that proposal also becomes consistent with there being, even so, a Scriptural basis for the view that all Christians are to pray without ceasing.

Second, while a Scriptural basis for the view that all Christians are to pray without ceasing is an important kind of reason for all Christians to take praying without ceasing seriously, it is not the only kind of reason. Another, for example, is simply that praying without ceasing plays a fairly central role in Eastern Orthodoxy. While, obviously, not all Christians need take seriously every practice endorsed by some Christian group or other, to the extent that a practice is *central* to a *significant* portion of Christianity, all Christians do well to take it seriously enough to, at a minimum, *evaluate* it.

36. For an argument that Scripture has faults, see, for example, Stark (2011).

37. See Broad (1952), Haji (1999), and Hobbs (2013).

38. See Glynn (2010) and Wedgwood (2013).

39. For a survey of libertarian views, see O'Connor and Franklin (2020), §2.5.

40. See Sinnott-Armstrong (1985).

41. See White (1975), 148.

42. It is controversial whether they are. Vranas (2007), for example, defends OIC from Wedding and Funeral-type cases.

43. On this point, see Hellerman (2017).

44. See, for example, https://www.24-7prayer.com/ and https://www.ihopkc.org/prayerroom/about-the-prayer-room/. See also https://www.gotquestions.org/prayer-vigil.html for an explicit appeal to 1 Th. 5:17 in this context.

45. There is another problem, too. Suppose I administrate a 24/7 prayer room and ensure its continual use. But suppose I myself *never* pray. On the reading of 1 Th. 5:17 we are considering, I am in obedience to Paul's words, much as the project manager of a construction site may fulfil all their duties without ever taking up a hammer. I find it hard to believe, though, that I am truly obeying Paul's words, in this case.

46. Thomas and Kostenberger (2017, np) make the same claim.

47. There is a way to resist this assumption. Consider

    (i) Zoe always studies.

    (ii) Zoe is always studying.

Jóhannsdóttir argues that, in (i), 'always' universally quantifies over, for example, the study-suitable times near each class and exam but that, in (ii), there is no particular domain over which the word quantifies, so that (ii) says something like *Zoe studies a lot* (Jóhannsdóttir (2007), 158–159). That is, for Jóhannsdóttir, 'always' in (ii) is a *frequency adverb*, not a quantifier (*ibid.*). And one might think ἀδιαλείπτως is also a frequency adverb.

Now, I am not sure Jóhannsdóttir is right that 'always' in (ii) is a frequency adverb as opposed to, say, a *hyperbolic* employment of a universal quantifier over an unrealistic domain of times. (More on hyperbole soon.) But suppose she is right. Still, ἀδιαλείπτως does not appear to be a frequency adverb. If 'always' is a frequency adverb in (ii) but not (i), this is due to the *aspect* of the verb phrase in (ii): it is present *continuous* (*is always studying*) rather than *simple* present (*always studies*). By contrast with English, Greek verbs in present form are identical whether the aspect is simple or continuous, making context alone determinative of aspect. Given the absence of translations of 1 Th. 5:17 akin to '*be praying* without ceasing', it seems that, as the context of this verse is standardly understood, the aspect of the verb is simple. If that understanding is right, then, even on Jóhannsdóttir's view, ἀδιαλείπτως is not a frequency adverb.

And this understanding of the context of 1 Th. 5:17 should not surprise us. Consider 1 Th. 16–18a in both Greek and English:

¹⁶πάντοτε χαίρετε· ¹⁷ ἀδιαλείπτως προσεύχεσθε· ^{18a}ἐν παντὶ εὐχαριστεῖτε

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing,   ^{18a} give thanks in all circumstances

ἀδιαλείπτως clearly parallels πάντοτε ('always') and ἐν παντὶ ('in all circumstances'), which are hard to hear as anything but universal quantifiers. So, plausibly, it is a universal quantifier, too. For helpful discussion here, I thank Ralph Wedgwood.

48. This kind of point is often made; see, for example, Stanley and Szabo (2000), 235–236. Note that 'Everything is on sale', uttered in a store in which every purchasable item is indeed on sale, is *not* hyperbole. It is *not* that it *says* every entity in the universe is on sale but *means* every purchasable item in the store is on sale. Rather, what it *says* (not just *means*) is affected by a context that fixes the relevant domain, a domain that includes purchasable items in the store and excludes the Pacific Ocean.

49. Like Green (2002), Weima (2014, 989) calls the verse 'formulaic and somewhat hyperbolic'. In the same vein, Wanamaker (1990, n.p.) says '[o]bviously he [Paul] does not mean this to be taken literally'.

50. I thank two separate anonymous referees for recommending I consider hyperbole as a strategy.

51. Compare Walton (2017), 106.

52. The relevant scale can be 'appropriate for measuring quality, quantity, length, weight, distance, time, intensity of affect, etc.' (Popa-Wyatt (2020), 452).

53. There is a lot more to hyperbole, of course. For example, Popa-Wyatt (*ibid.*, 457) emphasizes how hyperbole can express surprise at how things are relative to how they were expected to have been, hypothesizing that the more the explicit content overshoots the assertive, the more surprise is expressed.

54. See, for example, McNeile (1928), 69 and Cruise (2018). Also relevant here is Cadoux (1941).

55. I thank an anonymous referee for insight on how to put this point.

56. A quick clarification. Hyperbolic *imperatives* do not have truth-evaluable content as hyperbolic *statements*, such as (a), do. I will assume, however, that the 'explicit/assertive content' distinction applies to them and that they are *correct* just in case their assertive content is correct in the sense of 'correct' explained earlier. Perhaps I should mention, though, that it is a bit untoward to my ear to speak of an imperative's 'assertive' content: an imperative does not assert *that* something is the case but tries, as it were, to *make* it the case. However, Walton's distinction is particularly clear and often used in the literature on hyperbole (e.g. see Popa-Wyatt (2020), 454). And whatever connotations 'assertive' may have, Walton's is simply the distinction between what is *said* and what is *meant*, which applies equally to imperatives.

57. Not on an *endlessly* wide array of accounts, of course. If to pray is to punch oneself in the face, we cannot pray a lot without there being adequate reasons to do otherwise because there are, of course, adequate reasons to do otherwise than punch oneself in the face a lot. That punching oneself in the face is not prayer is, I take it, a *non*-substantive claim about prayer.

58. See Hatcher (in preparation).

59. Consider, for example, an anonymous referee's proposal that prayer comes in many types, including *laudatory*. One could praise God on one's knees with words, sure. But surely one can stand and sing, too. But then one can praise by painting an icon, too, or by dancing or even, quite to the point, by ministering to others as Jesus did. Laudatory prayer, that is, seems just the kind of thing one could extend throughout every waking moment in a manner consistent with Jesus' example. I thank this referee for this fascinating suggestion.

60. For example, consider the notion of a *moral dilemma*, a (purported) situation where – in the all-things-considered sense of 'ought' – one ought to do something and one also ought to do otherwise (for a survey, see McConnell (2018), §5). In *Sophie's Choice*, a Nazi officer tells Sophie that exactly one of her children Jan and Eva may survive, but only if she decides which. Some hold Sophie is in a moral dilemma. If they are right, Sophie can save Jan without there being *adequate* reasons to do otherwise because, strong as these reasons are, they are not weighty enough to make it false that she ought to save Jan. There is a similar upshot if 1 Th. 5:17 places us in a moral dilemma – namely, that we *can* pray without ceasing without there being adequate reasons to do otherwise because, strong as these reasons are, they are not weighty enough to make it false that we ought to pray without ceasing. This upshot, that is, is that (4) is false.

Now, I take there to be problems with the idea that 1 Th. 5:17 places us in a moral dilemma. But I leave these problems, and their significance, as an exercise to the reader, in addition to the identification of further neutral strategies worth considering.

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