
“Prayer: Getting Our Way, or God’s?”

The Doctrine of Prayer

Various Passages

This lesson is a bit different in that it actually goes with two different series. It goes within the context of my doctrinal studies and therefore focuses on the doctrine of prayer. At the same time I am doing it in the context of the series on Ephesians and therefore it is the thirty-fourth lesson in that series.

In that context we see that prayer underlies the armour of God. Prayer is vital if we are going to put it on that armour. And next week, having looked at prayer doctrinally, we will see it in the specific context of Ephesians 6 and finish up the chapter and study as well. I would recommend you begin reading Jonah for the next study.

(If you need previous lessons from either series, go to www.cfdevotionals.org and follow the Bible study link. This lesson will be found in both series.)

As with the previous doctrinal studies, the material is drawn primarily from Through the Bible in One Year.¹

I don’t know if this story is apocryphal or not. But as I heard it, a missionary couple was in the field with two other couples. The wife had just found out she was pregnant. The couple was young and theologically naïve so they called together the other couples and decided they should pray together that the child would be born without original sin. The logic of course is if the kid never got into trouble they’d be able to be more active for the Lord. The verse they “claimed” was:

“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven” (Matthew 18:19).

Of course with that kind of thinking they shouldn’t have been out in the field of all. The problem for them and, while hopefully not in such an extreme way, for us is, do we believe prayer is getting our way or God’s?

But there is a different, biblical and more practical approach to prayer. Consider this conversation between an unknown individual and “Brother Lawrence.”

“ He told me that all consists in one hearty renunciation of everything which we are sensible does not lead to God. That we might accustom ourselves to a continual conversation with Him, with freedom and in simplicity. That we need only to recognize God intimately present with us, to address ourselves to Him every moment, that we may beg His assistance for knowing His will in things doubtful, and for rightly

¹ Stringfellow, Alan B., ed., Through the Bible in One Year, Vol. 3, “Great Truths of the Bible,” Copyright © 1981 by Virgil W. Hensley, Inc., Publisher, Tulsa, OK, p. 221-226.

performing those which we plainly see He requires of us, offering them to Him before we do them, and giving Him thanks when we have done.”²

I Introduction

II The Truths of Prayer

A. The Pattern of Prayer

B. The Power of Prayer

C. Hindrances to Prayer

III The Spirit in Prayer

IV Application

I Introduction: Prayer, like the whole area of spiritual warfare, is a greatly misunderstood subject. Much of the teaching of the positive confession movement is that prayer is the way to get God to do you want Him to do.

“In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name” (John 16:23).

And this verse proves it. But, what is conveniently overlooked is prayer is to be carried out within God’s will not ours. The other thing overlooked is the primary purpose of prayer is not “to get,” but to “get it.” Stringfellow describes prayer as ...

“ ... the immediate desire of the heart of a new life in Christ to talk with, commune with the Father. The Holy Spirit indwells the believer and plants the “spirit of prayer” in the heart.”³

The involvement of the Holy Spirit, which I will talk about a bit more later means that the words aren’t as important as the spirit. And an exact formula isn’t the bottom line either. Technically we pray to the Father, because of the access we have through the Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is why when we pray we say in Jesus’ or Christ’s name. But what is important is that we are in conversation with God.

And this is the difference between saying prayers and praying. Saying prayers isn’t praying. Using a formula certainly isn’t praying. Praying is being in fellowship and communication with God. Communication mean speaking and listening. Communication is a way of growing in our understanding of the person we communicate. And yes, this means interceding and asking for needs, but prayer in never to be limited to this.

Finally, and what is one of the most offensive truths of prayer is generally God does not hear the prayers of those who are not Christian. Certainly God hears the prayers of repentance and acceptance from the unbeliever. And there are times where God “answers” the prayers of the lost, but here the question is, is He answering their prayers, or is it just that for some reason their prayers line up with His intent. So, let’s talk about ...

II The Truths of Prayer: A. The Pattern of Prayer: The most obvious example of prayer, actually the model prayer, is found in “The Disciples’ Prayer.”

² Lawrence, Brother, The Practice of the Presence of God, Fleming H. Revell, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005, p. 25.

³ Stringfellow, p. 221

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray:

***Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.”*** (Matthew 6:5-13).

Remember what we’ve already noted. This was not intended to be a formula. In other words, although it isn’t wrong to pray it, that’s not its purpose. Instead it is to be a learning tool. And what do we learn from it?

Well the first thing learn is what prayer shouldn’t be. It should be a way of appearing righteous. It isn’t intended to make us look religious, to look like the “hypocrites” who are self-righteous.

Instead prayer is to be a way of coming to God. And there are three aspects to the model prayer. First, it is directed to and about God. After all, it is because of who God is and who we are in Him that allows us to pray in the first place.

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Second, prayer is inward in the sense it is asking God to meet our needs. But it is important to note here that it is asking God for immediate needs. The model asks for our “daily bread.” This aspect of prayer is generally called petition.

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:7-11).

This aspect also includes the need to ask for forgiveness, because in spite of the teaching of some that since we're forgiven we don't need forgiveness to maintain fellowship with the Father, we need to deal with our sin on an ongoing basis.

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Finally, implicit in the request for forgiveness is the call to forgive others. And as we pray to forgive, we also pray for the needs of others. This is intercessory prayer, which is a vital part of our prayer ministry.

“... bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:28).

“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:16).

B. The Power of Prayer: Keeping in mind the purpose of pray is to bring us in line with God's will rather than the reverse, when we are in praying in His will prayer is very powerful.

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us...” (Ephesians 3:20).

Do you understand? Prayer can accomplish great things. And in prayer we get to be part of God's working. We are blessed in participation. What is sad is I have frequently found that Christians are surprised when God does answer prayer. Yet we are told to ask in faith, faith in our loving Father.

“But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt.”...“And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (James 1:6; Philippians 4:19).

We can ask because God is our father and we have access to Him through the work of Christ on the cross.

“And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it” (John 14:13-14).

What is clear here is that Christ's answers are intended to bring honour to the Father. This is why so much of prayer is empty because it is focused on self-gratification rather than concern over our testimony about God.

C. Hindrances to Prayer: We've seen Christ's model for prayer. Prayer should include a Godward focus of praise, an inward focus of repentance and need, and an outward focus on the intercession for others.

We've seen that in faith and dependency prayer can be all-powerful, accomplishing all God desires. We pray through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, bringing honour and glory to the Father. So, all this being true, what's the problem? Because clearly there is one.

The problems flow from what we have already identified. First is the lack of faith. This is not what is meant by lack of faith as defined by the faith movement, it is more of a lack of trust in God's working.

“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

Of course we don't obtain the answers we want when the answers we want aren't the answers God wants for us.

“When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:3).

Remember we need to keep short accounts. If we don't deal with the sin in our life, we end up breaking fellowship with God and then our prayers are hindered.

“If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened” (Psalm 66:18).

There is the principle that we are to be consistent and constant with our prayers.

“... pray continually”...“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful” (1 Thessalonians 5:17; Colossians 4:2).

Parenthetically, remember that sometimes the way God intends us to get answers to our prayers is by doing rather than asking. An example is maybe we need to go beyond praying for a family member's salvation, we may also need to witness to him or her. We need to live our testimony. In other words maybe there are times we are to be the answer to our prayers.

“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?” (James 2:14-16).

III The Spirit in Prayer: The Holy Spirit was vital to the work of our salvation. The Holy Spirit is vital to our walk. This is why we have talked so much about the ongoing need of being filled with the Spirit to fight the spiritual battle. So it isn't surprising the role of the Spirit is also vital to our prayer life. Walvoord notes:

“The prayer life of the believer is inseparably integrated with his spiritual life. The teaching ministry of the Spirit reminds of the many promises of the Word of God. The guidance of the Spirit is essential to intelligent prayer, asking for the revealed will of God.”⁴

“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” (Romans 8:26).

⁴ Walvoord, John F., The Holy Spirit, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1972, p. 223.

*“ There is hardly an aspect of the spiritual life which does not have a relationship to both prayer and the ministry of the Spirit. The prayer life will prosper in proportion to the spiritual life of the believer in Christ.”*⁵

IV Application: Probably the most important truth we want to take from this study is understanding that prayer, being communication with God, is intended to bring us in line with God’s will for us. It is not intended to turn God into the great genie in the sky. It is not intended to bring us material wealth, but spiritual wealth. It is not intended to bring physical health, but spiritual health. This isn’t to say God doesn’t give material prosperity, sometimes. This isn’t to say God doesn’t give physical health, sometimes. But as we’ve noted on many occasions, God is primarily concerned with our spiritual wellbeing, and prayer is a major part of the process of sanctification and conforming us to the image of His Son. Stringfellow summarizes this study by saying:

*“ God always answers prayer. The prayers of faith, the believing prayer for the glory of God, is always answered. The prayer for something that is not good for us is answered with a “no.” The prayer for something or someone is often delayed until God knows that by answering the prayer it will work for good. ... Prayer should be as much an attitude as an outward act. The person who communes with God in silence almost constantly is the one who has discovered the secret of prayer.”*⁶

Many find Brother Lawrence’s words provide some of the best examples of the practical nature of praying, so I find it appropriate to close with a few of them.

“ Being questioned by one of his own society (to whom he was obliged to open himself) by what means he had attained such an habitual sense of God, he told him that, since his first coming to the monastery, he had considered God as the end of all his thoughts and desires, as the mark to which they should tend, and in which they should terminate.

That in the beginning of his novitiate he spent the hours appointed for private prayer in thinking of God, so as to convince his mind of, and to impress deeply upon his heart, the diving existence, rather by devout sentiments, and submission to the lights of faith, than by studied reasonings and elaborate meditations. That by this short and sure method he exercised himself in the knowledge and love of God, resolving to use his utmost endeavour to live in a continual sense of His presence, and, if possible never to forget Him more.

That when he had thus in prayer filled his mind with great sentiments of that infinite Being, he went to his work appointed in the kitchen (for he was cook to the society). There having first considered severally the things his office required, and when and how each thing was to be done, he spent all the intervals of his time, as well before as after his work, in prayer.

*That when he began his business, he said to God, with a filial trust in Him: O my God, since Thou art with me, and I must now, in obedience to Thy commands, apply my mind to these outward things, I beseech Thee to grant me the grace to continue in Thy presence; and to this end do Thou prosper me with Thy assistance, receive all my works, and possess all my affections.”*⁷

*Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer,
That calls me from a world of care
And bids me at my Father’s throne
Make all my wants and wishes known!
In seasons of distress and grief,
My soul has often found relief,
And oft escaped the tempter’s snare
By thy return, sweet hour of prayer.*

*Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer,
Thy wings shall my petition bear
To him whose truth and faithfulness
Engage the waiting soul to bless:
And since he bids me seek his face,
Believe his word and trust his grace,
I’ll cast on him my ev’ry care,
And wait for thee, sweet hour of prayer.*

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Stringfellow, p. 226.

⁷ Lawrence, p. 28-29.

*Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer,
May I thy consolation share,
Till, from Mount Pisgah's lofty height,
I view my home and take my flight:
This robe of flesh I'll drop and rise
To seize the everlasting prize;
And shout, while passing thro' the air,
"Farewell, farewell, sweet hour of prayer!"*⁸

⁸ Walford, William, "*Sweet Hour of Prayer*," Public Domain

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 - (Matthew 18:19; John 16:23)*

- II The Truths of Prayer
 - A. The Pattern of Prayer
 - (Matthew 6:5-13; Hebrews 10:19-22; Matthew 7:7-11; 1 John 1:9; Luke 6:28; James 5:16)*

- B. The Power of Prayer
 - (Ephesians 3:20; James 1:6; Philippians 4:19; John 14:13-14)*

C. Hindrances to Prayer

(Hebrews 11:6; James 4:3; Psalm 66:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; Colossians 4:2; James 2:14-16)

III The Spirit in Prayer

(Romans 8:26)

IV Application: