

Prayer – Why God Doesn't Answer Prayer

Selected Scripture

Introduction

Today, we will study the scriptures on the subject of prayer. There are four hundred prayers recorded in Scripture, with 1500 references. There are one hundred places in Scripture that give us prayers that are unanswered.

One thing that intrigues me is the reason, or reasons, why God answers prayer. I am equally as intrigued by the reasons why God does not answer prayer.

I understand that we are a little limited in our thinking because we tend to think that God answers our prayers when He gives the answer we want. If He does not give the answer we want, then we consider that an unanswered prayer. I am not necessarily referring to this kind of unanswered prayer. I am referring to the obstacles in our lives that can hinder God from moving in our lives. So today, I want to give a few of these obstacles.

Reasons Our Prayers Are Not Answered

Let us look at five reasons why God does not answer our prayers; five hindrances in our lives that cause God not to hear our prayers.

1. The first hindrance to answered prayer is an insincere posture.

Turn to Matthew chapter 6. This text gives us an interesting biographical account of the Pharisees. They, as you may remember, were the arch enemies of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us begin with Jesus' words in Matthew 6:1a.

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; . . .

This is, in a way, the heading for all of the thoughts that Jesus is going to give in this chapter. You should underline the words, "to be noticed by them". He continues in Matthew 6:1b-2.

. . . otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues

and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

He is saying that if we do something in front of men, just for the applause of men, we will indeed get the applause of men, but having received that, we have received our reward in full. That applause, in fact, is all we will get. So if we are after the applause of men – in the way that we give, fast, or pray – we will have our reward because people will pat us on the back and say, "Aren't you wonderful," but that is all we will get.

Continue to Matthew 6:3.

But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

It is interesting that according to the scriptures, there are three things that are to be done between us and the Lord. These include:

- praying;
- fasting;
- giving.

We are not told that our praying cannot be in public, but when we:

- pray to be seen, we lose the benefit of what God will do in our lives by that praying;
- pray to be heard, we short-change the benefit of that praying;
- pray without thought, we hinder the work of God in our lives.

The moment we let it be known that we are fasting, we are giving an attitude to people that, in effect, puts up a wall in us from receiving from God the full benefit of fasting.

Whatever we give, if we do it publicly or let people know we are sacrificing, we lose the benefit of that giving.

Now let us back up and discuss praying to be heard. Take note of what Jesus says in Matthew 6:5. He is referring to the Pharisees in this verse.

When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. . . .

In Mark 12:40, the Lord Jesus makes a reference to the Pharisees who,

. . . for appearance's sake offer long prayers . . .

The Pharisees, by the time Jesus Christ came on the scene, had developed a program of prayer with the thought that in some way, a prayer was more effective if it was long; that there was a relation between the sanctity of prayer and the length of prayer. So they would make long, verbose prayers, thinking that in some way, that really got God's attention.

If we look back in the Old Testament, do you know what we discover about the prayers of the pagans? Look, for example, at the prophets on Mount Carmel (I Kings 18). They thought by repeating their prayers; by praying lengthy prayers; by persistently approaching their false god, that in some way their god would say, after checking his time watch, "Okay, you prayed an hour, now I'll take note."

The Pharisees brought this thought into the arena of praying to God. It was so wrong. They were praying to be heard and wanted to be sure everyone heard, so they prayed long prayers.

I read the story of a meeting that D. L. Moody, who was a great evangelist, conducted. Several thousand people had gathered to listen to him teach the scriptures. Before he was to preach, a man who was a pastor from a church in the town, got up to pray. He prayed and he prayed and he prayed and he prayed. Finally, in the middle of his prayer, as it seemed he had no thought to end, D. L. Moody got up, grabbed a hymnal, and said, behind the loudspeaker, "While our brother finishes his praying, let's begin singing."

I thought that was fantastic. There is no relation between the length of our prayer and the notice that God makes. We refer to this as "pietism".

There is also no relation between the hour that we pray and the fact that God will take notice. When I was in college, it was going around that the earlier you got up to pray, the more notice God made. So being the zealous individual that I was, I would get up at 5

a.m. to go to the prayer tower on campus. I was certain that the fact that I was half sleeping through my prayers would cause God to take note. This is pietism.

There is no relation between the beating of the flesh, getting up early, or the praying of long prayers to the attention that God gives. Some of the most effective prayers, in fact, are short. Jonah's short prayer, as you may remember, got noticed. The Pharisees had this so wrong, and one of the main reasons was the fact that they really wanted to be heard by men.

Now I have often wondered why the Pharisees would stand on the street corners if they wanted to pray and be seen. To understand the reason, we need to look at the culture of the time. It was similar to the Hindus of today. The Pharisees had developed the thought that if they prayed at 9 o'clock and at 12 o'clock and at 3 o'clock that they were disciplined individuals and God would be pleased with them.

So the Pharisees did something rather clever. They made sure they were in the marketplace at these times because those who were devout would stop to pray. They would join the mass of people in the marketplace and as soon as it was 9 o'clock or 12 o'clock or 3 o'clock, they would stop everything and stand on the street corner and begin to pray. This was, of course, impressive. The people who were shopping for goods would perhaps, look at the Pharisee and think, "They are really close to God. Notice how they stop to pray."

The problem, however, was that the Pharisees came to the marketplace for this particular purpose. They loved, as Jesus says in this text,

. . . to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. . . .

Jesus says in the last part of Matthew 6:5,

. . . Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

The thought of praying with repetition goes back to the idea of the Pharisaic formulas. In other words, they would repeat the formulas that are in false religions today. Their thought was that if they repeated it over and over and over again, then perhaps God would notice. God, however, does not want people to pray thoughtlessly.

How often we do this, though. For example, the way we pray before meals may be such that, if you

are like me, thirty seconds later, you would not remember what you prayed. Perhaps even in our devotional lives, we pray because we know we are supposed to pray. We have gotten up at a certain hour to pray, but we are praying, as it were, thoughtlessly. This is praying vainly.

Give it consideration when you pray because when we go to God insincerely, we cannot expect Him to take note.

2. A second reason for unanswered prayer is an unforgiving spirit.

Look at Matthew 6:14.

For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

Now Jesus is referring back to the prayer He has just given the disciples. This prayer, by the way, is a short prayer of only fifty-two words in the original.

Continue to Matthew 6:15 and note His words concerning going to God in prayer with an unforgiving spirit.

But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

When we go to God, part of the praying is confessing. If I go to the Lord and ask Him to forgive me for some sin that I have committed, and in my heart there is an unforgiving spirit toward someone else, God, in effect, will not answer. He is waiting for a forgiving spirit.

Look at Matthew 5:23-24. We have previously studied this, but let us briefly look again.

Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

In other words, first find forgiveness with your brother and then, present your offering.

So I can hinder the effect of my prayer by going to God insincerely and with an unforgiving spirit. We will look at the positives, or opposites, in a moment; that is, if I go to God having forgiven; if I go to God sincerely.

3. A third hindrance to answered prayer is an unrepentant heart.

Look at David's words in Psalm 66:16-17.

Come and hear, all who fear God, and I will tell of what He has done for my soul. I cried to Him with my mouth, and He was extolled with my tongue.

In other words, God took note. Continue to Psalm 66:18.

If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear;

In the margin of your text, beside the word "regard," write the word "cherish". This verse is not saying that we can only go to God when we are perfect because we will never go to God as perfect people. However, if I go to God and there is something in my heart that I cherish that is wrong; if there is a sin that I am unwilling to repent of and am cherishing as a precious thing to me; if I will not give this sin up, then David says, in effect, I am praying to a sky of brass.

4. A fourth reason for unanswered prayer is an insensitive attitude.

Turn to I Peter 3:7, which is a fascinating passage of scripture. It is directed to husbands, but I think we could broaden it to include wives and perhaps, brothers and sisters in Christ. This verse is a very convicting passage of scripture, which challenges me, as a husband. In the first phrase, Peter says, in effect, "Okay, guys, take note."

You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way . . .

You should underline the word "understanding". In other words, husbands, we are to become students of our wives. We are to study our wives and understand their emotions and their thoughts and how they feel. Peter says to live with them in an understanding way; that is, to get to know them; to become a student of them.

In the next phrase of I Peter 3:7, Peter says to live with our wives in an understanding way,

. . . as with someone weaker . . .

The word "weaker," or "asthenes," does not mean intellectually, but physically and perhaps, even emotionally. Peter says to live with our wives in an understanding way as with someone weaker,

. . . since she is a woman; . . .

Now note Peter's next words in the last part of I Peter 3:7,

. . . and show her honor as a fellow heir of grace of life, . . .

The word for “honor” is “timao”. It is the same word that is given to a child in Ephesians 6:1, when it says,

Children, obey [honor] your parents . . . (Ephesians 6:1)

In the Old Testament, one of the commands that we have previously studied gives children the command to honor their father and mother (Exodus 20:12). It uses the word that could be translated “reverence them; show deference to them; respect them”. We often think of wives respecting husbands and reverencing husbands, but Peter chooses this word for the way husbands are to treat their wives.

This is the same word, in fact, that describes what we are to give to God. Throughout the scriptures, we are told to give God “honor” or “timao”.

This word “honor” or “timao” is a powerful word. Husbands are to reverence their wives; to show deference to them; to respect them.

Then, it is as if Peter is saying, “Now, men, do this,”

. . . so that your prayers will not be hindered.

This is a fascinating thought. One of the ways that we can hinder our prayers; that we can block the avenue of fellowship and communication with God is by not treating our wives, and perhaps even vice versa, our spouses, with reverence.

The word “hinder,” in this verse, is an interesting word. It refers to the way Roman armies used to break up the roads on which they were traveling on their way to besiege a city. They did not want an enemy army coming in behind them and attacking them from the rear, so they would make sure that army could not move their machinery and their weapons of warfare. The Roman army would have their last legion break up the road, throw stumps and leaves, and chop it up so the other armies could not follow.

This is the idea used in hindering prayers. If we, in effect, live out of sync with our spouses, and I think even with other believers, we break up the road; we hinder the impact, the movement, the machinery of prayer and its effectiveness.

These are powerful words. I cannot come to God as an insensitive man toward my wife. I had better check that relationship first.

5. A fifth hindrance to answered prayer is an impure motive.

Turn to the book of James and look at James 4:1-3.

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, . . .

We could consider this perhaps, an unanswered prayer. Why?

. . . because you ask with wrong motives, ...

The word “ask” is in the middle voice, which means that you ask with yourself in mind; you ask with only yourself in the thought of the prayer.

. . . so that you may spend it . . .

The word “spend” means, “squander foolishly; give it away”. On what are you squandering?

. . . on your pleasures.

The word “pleasures” is “hedone,” from which we get our word “hedonist”. I think the point is clear – we sometimes go to God, although we may not even admit it to ourselves, to ask for things only for our own pleasures.

When we are sick, for example, we ask God for health. However, when we receive health, but do not give that health and energy back to Him in a way that honors Him, we are spending, in a sense, that prayer request on ourselves. If we ask for a job promotion and ask on the basis of gaining greater leverage in the company in order to share Christ, that is wonderful. But, if we ask for a promotion because it may give us more to be spent on ourselves, then we ask amiss; we ask for hedonistic reasons.

This is the thought in these verses. So James says, “Don’t pray for something that you desperately want, yet when the mask is pulled back, it is something you really want for yourself.”

This happens a lot, obviously. The Spirit of God has to do surgery in our hearts, especially when we pray, because we so often pray to change God instead of allowing Him to change us.

Ways God Answers Our Prayers

Now when we pray, we tend to say, “God didn’t answer that prayer because He didn’t say, ‘Yes,’ and I wanted Him to.”

I recently read that there are three basic answers to prayer. Let me give these to you because it helps in understanding God’s response to our prayers.

1. The first basic answer to prayer is, “No, not now.”

In other words, “Wait.” The answer is not, “No, never,” but, “No, not now.”

You find yourself in a waiting mode, which is one of the most difficult spots to be in. God’s answer is simply, “No, not now.”

2. The second basic answer to prayer is, “No, because I love you.”

God will never give us something that He knows will hinder our pursuit of Him. So often we go to Him and pursue things that would, in effect, hinder our relationship with Him.

One of the worst things that God could ever do to me is answer all of my prayers in the affirmative and give me everything that I want and ask for. I asked to win the *Reader’s Digest* sweepstakes. I will confess it – I really did! I filled that form out, while thinking, “This will buy the land and the building that the church needs . . .” – liar!

One of the best things that happens is for God to say, “No.” We are even unwilling, or unable, to understand that what we have asked of Him is not for our best. It is a little like our young children asking if they can drive home from church. We know they really want to, but it would not be best for them.

Let me share a story of something that happened when we first started this church. When this church was about three months old, a man who had never attended this church, came to me and told me that he wanted to give us five acres of land and 80,000 dollars!

I thought, “Wow, this is it! We’re only three months old and we’re going to get five acres and 80,000 dollars!”

I just imagined building a hundred “seater” church building on the five acres, with an acre left for parking! I thought, “This is it, Lord!”

My wife, Marsha, and I were on a roller coaster that lasted about six months. I would not hear from

the man and then, he would call me. He called me one day, and said, “I’m inheriting a stone quarry and I want to give you all the stone to build the church with.”

I thought, “Oh, my goodness! Now we’ve got this hundred seat stone church building! Lord, this is it! I’m in heaven!”

Then, the guy disappeared from planet earth.

I saw him, interestingly enough, about three months ago. I wanted to let the air out of his tires!

However, I now know that it would have hindered us to receive the man’s gifts. We would have thrown up something on a five acre location that is somewhere we would not even want to be. But I went to God, certain that this was the answer. God said, “No, because I have other plans for you.”

Frankly, God wanted us to get together and struggle to pay for the land. He knew we needed more land; He knew we needed more than a hundred “seater”. He knew, but I did not. At the time I thought it was tremendous. He knew, however, and said, “No, because I love you.”

3. The third basic answer to prayer is, “Yes, this is exactly what I want for you.”

God has a way of reshaping our desires so that our desires match His. He then, answers prayer in the affirmative. God comes through with a positive response to our prayers, or a response that we consider positive, and we find that it is something that *He* would desire for us. He basically says, “This is exactly what I want for you.”

Now I want to read something to you. I know when a pastor says, “I want to read something to you,” people settle back and go to sleep. Stay awake! I am going to end with this. These are powerful words that I think, probably convey some of the greatest theological truth about prayer. Listen and catch what George McDonald writes.

What if God knows prayer to be the thing we need first and most? What if the main object, in God’s idea of prayer, is a supplying of our great and endless need – the need of Himself?

Hunger may drive the runaway child home, and he may or may not be fed at once, but he needs his parents more than his dinner.

Communion with God is the one need of the soul beyond all other need. Prayer is the beginning of that communion of talking with God; of a coming to one with Him, which is the sole end of prayer; of existence itself.

We must ask that we may receive, but that we should receive what we ask, in respect to our lower needs, is not God's end in making us pray. He could give us everything without prayer, but to bring His child to His knee, God withholds what men may ask.

God wants us for Himself. He desires communication with us. His purpose in prayer is not to make us sit up and beg, He wants us to know Him, and prayer is His method to accomplish that.

McDonald then gives an illustration.

I used to play a game with my two children when they were young. I would clutch some pennies in my hand and allow them to pry open my fingers to get the coins. My children would sit in my lap and work feverishly to get the money. Once they captured the coins, they would scream with delight and jump down to treasure their prize. I loved having my youngsters laugh and play while sitting on my lap – the pennies were insignificant.

When we pray, we often concentrate on the gifts in God's hand and ignore the hand of God Himself. We pray fervently for the new job or for the return of health. When we gain the prize, we are delighted and then, we have little or no more concern with the hand of God. If we are only after the coins, God's hand serves only as a way to pay the rent, heal the sickness, or get through the crises. After the need has been met, the hand of God itself means little to us.

While God, in His grace, does give good gifts to His children, He offers us more than that, He offers us Himself. Those who are merely satisfied with the trinkets in the Father's hands, miss the best reward of prayer – the reward of communicating and communing with the God of the universe.

As we go to prayer, let us remember that the greatest thrill in praying to God is not the potential of Him saying, "Yes," or "No," or "Wait." The greatest

thrill of praying to God is knowing that we can communicate with a loving, sovereign God, who is in total control.