

SOME THOUGHTS ON PRAYER

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1. Luke mentions Jesus spent the night praying to God (Lk. 6:12), and the writer of Hebrews refers to his offering up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears (Heb. 5:7). Paul told the Philippians not to be anxious about anything but in every circumstance, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, to make their requests known to God (Phil. 4:6). That tells us that prayer is a vital topic for the Christian.

2. Prayer in its most basic sense is speaking to God. It includes adoration/praise, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication (for self and others).

3. Prayer is not made to inform God of our situation. Mat. 6:8 says he knows what we need before we ask. Rather, God wants us to pray because:

a. It is an act of dependence, trust, and devotion. The very act of praying says so much: that God is real, that he hears us, that he cares about us, that he acts in this world, and that he (and only he) is in control. The (positive) answer to prayer is confirmation of these things and an expression of his greatness.

b. It is an intimate form of communion with him. He loves us and delights in our fellowship with him.

c. It allows us to be involved with God in his work in this world. As creatures made in his image, we are allowed to be involved in the outworking of his will, to be involved in matters that are eternally important.

4. Prayer can change what God does. Jas. 4:2 says, "You do not have because you do not ask." He implies that failure to ask deprives us of what God would otherwise have granted. This is all over the Bible (e.g., Mat. 7:7 -- "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you"; Jas. 5:16b -- "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.") But as with so much in theology, there is more to this than meets the eye.

a. God has a plan, and he is taking his creation to the end he determined. Nothing can stop that. In the outworking of his will, there are some things he will do and some things he will not do, no matter what. In other words, some acts of God will take place regardless of whether anyone asks that they be done or asks that they not be done.

b. But within God's will, there are many things he chooses to do or not to do on the basis of prayers, actions He chooses to condition on our requests.

5. This is the idea behind 1 Jn. 5:14-15: "This is the assurance we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything *according to his will*, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us -- whatever we ask -- we know that we have what we asked of him." It is what Jesus meant in the Garden when he prayed "if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me," and then added, "Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Mat. 26:39).

a. Many things we pray for we simply do not know if they are consistent with God's will, with how he is working. We know what we want and what seems like a good idea to us, but we are simply too limited to comprehend God's working or to see all the ramifications of what we are asking. Paul, for example, prayed three times for the Lord to take away his "thorn in the flesh," but the Lord's answer was "No" ("My grace is sufficient for you" - 2 Cor. 12:8).

b. Someone wrote:

I asked for strength that I might achieve;
He made me weak that I might obey.
I asked for health that I might do great things;
He gave me grace that I might do better things.
I asked for riches that I might be happy;
He gave me poverty that I might be wise.
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men;
He gave me weakness that I might feel a need of God.
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life;
He gave me life that I might enjoy all things.
I received nothing I had asked for;
He gave me all that I had hoped for.

c. By saying "if it is your will" we simply are saying that we acknowledge his supremacy and the inscrutability of his plan and that we accept his answer in the matter.

(1) Such prayers are not faithless or prayers of doubt. That would be very serious because faith is a requirement of effective prayer (e.g., Mat. 21:22; Jas. 1:6). Rather, such prayers are prayers of faith because we have every confidence in God, in his wisdom, his love and his power – we just realize our own place and our limitations.

(2) If a child asks his father to go get some ice cream and adds, "but only if you think it is right," that in no way reflects poorly on the father or indicates a lack of trust in him.

d. This is part of what it means to pray "in Jesus' name," which Jn. 14:13-14, 15:16, 16:23 indicate is a condition of effective prayer. To do something in someone's name means, in part, to do it in a way that is consistent with their character, that represents the way they would do it. It is in this sense that praying "in Jesus' name" approaches the idea of praying "according to God's will."

e. It is important to see that this is an attitude and not a matter of just tacking on "if it is your will" or "in Jesus' name" to our prayers. If our attitude is right, our prayer is "in Jesus' name" regardless of whether we utter the phrase. There is a danger we can make this some sort of magic formula that determines the efficacy of prayer.

6. Praying "in Jesus' name" also involves praying on the basis of his authority. As it says in 1 Tim. 2:5, "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." As Christians, we approach our Father with the authorization of Christ, with Christ as our mediator. We come to God as one of his. This is the idea in Heb. 10:19-22.

a. This aspect of praying "in Jesus' name" implies that we are genuine disciples, that we have a faith that involves the submission of heart and life. In other words, part of praying "in Jesus' name" is living consistently with our confession that Jesus is Lord. As the Psalmist wrote, "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Ps. 66:18). That is why James said "The prayer of a *righteous* man is powerful and effective" (Jas. 5:16b; see also, Ps. 34:15; Prov. 15:29; Isa. 59:1-2; 1 Pet. 3:12; 1 Jn. 3:21-22). We will not be living sinlessly, but we must be living righteously, meaning genuinely and not hypocritically.

b. This may be what is behind 1 Pet. 3:7. Mistreatment of one's spouse (and others) reflects a lack of submission to God. God will hinder that person's prayers, meaning render them ineffective, as a form of fatherly discipline.

c. Christ's role as mediator suggests that non-Christians are on a different footing when it comes to prayer. Indeed, they have no expectation of being "heard" (in the sense of having their prayer granted). Ps. 34:15, 66:18, Prov. 15:29, Isa. 59:1-2, and 1 Pet. 3:12 indicate that the Lord does not, at least normally, listen to the prayers of those who still are in their sins.

d. Wayne Grudem's comments on this are worth repeating:

But if Jesus is the only mediator between God and man, will God hear the prayers of those who do not trust in Jesus? The answer depends on what we mean by "hear." Since God is omniscient, he always "hears" in the sense he is aware of the prayers made by unbelievers who do not come to him through Christ. God may even, from time to time, answer their prayers out of his mercy and in a desire to bring them to salvation through Christ. However, God has nowhere promised to respond to the prayers of unbelievers. The only prayers that he has promised to "hear" in the sense of listening with a sympathetic ear and undertaking to answer when they are made according to his will, are the prayers of Christians offered through the one mediator, Jesus Christ (cf. John 14:6).

7. For prayer to be effective, it must be offered with proper motives, meaning out of a sincere heart rather than "to be seen by men" (e.g., Mat. 6:5-6) and out of a desire to glorify God rather than to indulge our selfishness (Jas. 4:3). You see, God knows what we really want, not just what we say. And he also knows how strongly we want it.

8. For prayer to be effective, it must be offered by one who forgives others. In Mk. 11:25 Jesus says (NRSV), "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses" (see also, Mat. 6:12-15). If we refuse to forgive, God will apply that standard to us and not listen to our plea for forgiveness (the making of which is to be a regular part of our prayers).

9. From the other side, for prayer to be effective, it must be offered by one who has sought forgiveness from the person he has wronged. In Mat. 5:23-24 Jesus said, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." The point is that reconciliation with believers is so important that God's worship can wait until it is done.

10. We are to continue praying over time. Luke says Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow to show the disciples "that they should always pray and not give up" (Lk. 18:1). Paul urged the Thessalonians to "pray constantly" (1 Thess. 5:17) and encouraged the Colossians to "continue steadfastly in prayer" (Col. 4:2).

11. As we do these things, we need to remember that prayer is not to be a source of guilt or anxiety but a means of relieving anxiety. Paul told the Philippians not to be anxious about anything but in every circumstance, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, to make their requests known to God (Phil. 4:6).

12. How does all this square with Jesus' unconditional promises that God will answer prayer? In Mat. 7:7-8, for example, he says simply, "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."

a. Jesus taught his disciples that there were conditions to effective prayer.

(1) He taught that only prayers offered "in his name" would be effective (e.g., Jn. 15:16). As I mentioned, to do something in someone's name approaches the idea of praying "according to God's will." If this link between praying "in Jesus' name" and praying "according to God's will" seems too vague, note that Jesus used the latter terminology when teaching the disciples to pray in Mat. 6:10 ("your will be done").

(2) The requirement that prayer be offered "according to God's will" is implicit in the oft-stated requirement that prayer be offered in faith. As Craig Blomberg says about Mat. 21:22, praying with faith ("if you believe") *presupposes* that we leave room for God's will to override ours. It does so because the faith of the disciple is in a God who is sovereign.

(3) Jesus also taught his disciples that to be effective prayer must be offered with the right motive (Mat. 6:5-6) and by one who forgives others (Mk. 11:25). And he taught them "that they should always pray and not give up" (Lk. 18:1).

b. Given that these conditions were part of Jesus' teaching on prayer (and undoubtedly part of the Jewish understanding), the disciples to whom he spoke would not have taken his unqualified statements about prayer literally. They would have understood that Jesus spoke without qualification in those instances to drive home forcefully the point that the Father delights in answering the requests of his children. Cataloging the understood conditions would have detracted from the point the Lord was emphasizing.

c. I can imagine a father wanting to emphasize the giving nature of his heart toward his child saying to her, "I'll get you whatever you want." He would do so with the unspoken understanding that he would not get something he considered dangerous or morally harmful to her. He would leave that condition unspoken because it would rhetorically blunt the point he was stressing.

d. I can do no better than to quote N.T. scholar Robert Stein (who has written a book on biblical interpretation):

In conclusion, Jesus' promises on prayer should be interpreted as broad general statements meant to emphasize God's readiness and desire to hear and answer the prayers of his people. Built into these statements is the understanding that believers should pray only for those things that will be good for their well-being, or, what will be in accord with God's will. At times believers may not even know for what or how they should actually pray (Rom. 8:26). In so praying they know that when they ask, they shall receive.