

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

PART I

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Have you ever wondered why some people receive from God what they pray for while others do not? For some it appears that nothing is too big or too much to ask and God seemingly always says "yes" to them. Yet I've seen others ask for simple, small requests and God, by all appearances, says "no" to them. To our human reasoning it looks as though God is simply showing some kind of whimsical favoritism. But we know "that God does not show favoritism." (Acts 10:34 NIV).

In this two part article we will explore the various aspects of prayer, including why we should pray, how we should pray, what we need to do in addition to praying, and finally, how we should bless others as God answers our prayers.

Why Should We Pray?

1. Jesus Prayed

I believe the overwhelming reason we should pray is that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, prayed. Jesus is our best role model in the area of prayer. He prayed to His Father with great intensity and frequency.

We have numerous Scriptures which tell us about Jesus' praying:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. (Mk 1:35 NIV). After leaving them, he went into the hills to pray. (Mk 6:46 NIV). But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. (Lk 5:16 NIV). One of those days Jesus went out into the hills to pray, and spent the night praying to God. (Lk 6:12 NIV). (When was the last time you spent the night in prayer?)

John 17 contains a record of Jesus praying for himself, then for His disciples, and finally, for all believers to come through the ages, which includes you and me. Jesus said:

"I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours....My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you." (Jn 17:9,20 NIV).

Nowhere are the Lord's prayers more powerful than on that fateful night in the Garden of Gethsemane as recorded in Matthew, 26. It was there that Jesus prayed to His Father three times asking Him to take away the cup of suffering that He was about to undergo. "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Mt 26:3 NIV).

2. Jesus Commanded Us to Pray

Not only do we have Jesus as an example to us to pray, but we also have His instructions to us concerning prayer:

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites....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." Jesus continues by giving His disciples the Lord's Prayer after telling them, "This is how you should pray." (Mt 6:5,6,9 NIV).

Jesus, at the Garden of Gethsemane, tells his disciples, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." (Mt 26:41 NIV).

Jesus devotes much of Luke 11 to teaching his disciples how to pray. In Luke 18 we read, "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." (verse 1 NIV). These verses are very direct instances of Jesus' admonishing us to pray diligently.

3. The Early Church Prayed

We also have the example of the early church and its extensive participation in prayer.

They all (the disciples) joined together constantly in prayer... (Acts 1:14 NIV).

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...(Acts 2:42 NIV).

The first century church experienced great and mighty acts of God through prayer. To name just one instance, once when Peter was imprisoned, he was miraculously freed. Before his escape we read, "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him." (Acts 12:5 NIV).

The Apostle Paul certainly prayed much and directed all believers to pray. There are numerous statements from Paul in all his writings about his praying for himself and others. "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful." were his directions to the Colossian church. (Col 4:2 NIV). He writes to the Ephesian church:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." (Eph 3:14-17 NIV).

4. Our Prayers Please God

Another very powerful reason we are to pray unceasingly is that our prayers please our Father in heaven. Note what the Book of Revelation says about the prayers of the saints:

"And when he [the Lamb] had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, *which are the prayers of the saints*." (Rev 5:8 NIV, emphasis added). Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. (Rev 8:3-4 NIV).

When we begin to realize how meaningful our prayers are and how they are presented to God in the heavenlies, I believe we will take much more seriously the frequency and content of our prayers.

5. God Answers Prayer

From a more selfish point of view, a very good reason we should pray is that God answers prayer: Even the unbelievers in the Bible knew that. For example, when God sent the various plagues on Egypt, Pharaoh repeatedly told Moses to pray to God to deliver Egypt from the plagues:

Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Pray to the LORD to take the frogs away from me and my people..." (Ex 8:8 NIV)....

Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron.

"This time I have sinned," he said to them. "The LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Pray to the LORD, for we have had enough thunder and hail. I will let you go..." (Ex 9:27,28 NIV).

Even Pharaoh knew God answers prayer.

We have countless Scriptures that tell us over and over again that God hears and answers our prayers. To cite just a few:

"Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know." (Jer 33:3 NIV).

"Go back and tell Hezekiah, the leader of my people, 'This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you....'" (2Kg 20:5 NIV).

"I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted my what I asked of him." (1Sam 1:27 NIV).

"Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." (Acts 4:29-31 NIV).

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. (Jms 5:16 NIV).

6. It is Sin If The Lord Burdens Us to Pray and We Do Not

One of the most effective ways God's purposes are accomplished here on earth, especially when it involves spiritual warfare, is through our prayers. We have all had the experience of the Holy Spirit burdening us for someone whom we perhaps have not seen for several months or even years. But the Lord lays that person or a work heavily on our hearts and spirits. We can rest assured that when that happens we are to pray for the one for whom we are burdened. We must pray through until the burden is lifted.

But what happens if we don't pray? I believe that the Holy Spirit will simply move on and burden another who will be obedient and pray. Where does that leave us? Well, we

have missed the blessing, that's for sure. But, I believe we have also sinned; it is a sin of omission. Note what Samuel says concerning Israel, "As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you." (1Sam 12:23 NIV). Samuel recognized his responsibility to pray, and he recognized that he would be in sin if he did not pray as the Lord had directed him.

How Then Should We Pray?

Now that we examined the reasons why we should earnestly pray, let us examine what appears to be a basic dilemma as presented by certain Scriptures relating to prayer. On the one hand we have Scripture which appear to tell us that, no matter what we ask, we will receive it. Luke 11 contains one of Jesus' teachings to us about prayer. He tells His disciples the story of the man who went to his friend's home at midnight asking for bread. At first the neighbor said, "Don't bother me, it's too late at night." But because of the man's persistence, the neighbor finally got out of bed and gave him some bread. Then, in verses 9 and 10, Jesus states:

"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be open to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened." (Lk 11:9-10 NIV).

Elsewhere we read Jesus' words: "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." (Jn 14:13-14 NIV).

"If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." (Mt 21:22 NIV).

"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." (Mk 11:24 NIV).

Yet in contrast to this first set of Scripture verses, we have the following:

"You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." (Jms 4:2b-3 NIV).

God's Purposes Accomplished

Are these Scriptures in contradiction? I don't think so. Rather, they lay out for us some basic principles we will now examine.

I believe there are three areas in which the Lord is already predisposed to answer our prayers. All three have to do with God's purposes being accomplished. They are, praying for a need to fulfill the call of God on our lives, fulfilling a vision, and/or fulfilling a rhema, and praying with the mind of Christ.

1. A Need In Order to Fulfill a God-given Task

I believe that God has a call on every person's life. That call encompasses using that person, his resources, his mind, his body, and his energy in furthering the purposes and plans of God in these last days. This is often labeled a call to ministry. Now I am not referring to the narrow view of "ministry" which is often thought of as "full time ministry vs

lay-people." I am talking about the will of God for your life. God's will always includes the lifting up of the name of Jesus and reaching out to the lost. Each of us are ordered to "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations..." (Matt 28:19 KJV). This means we are to go next door as well as to the far corners of the earth.

I firmly believe that when our prayers are directed at a need in our lives that will further our ministry call, God always answers that prayer. Hudson Taylor, that great missionary to China, said, "God's work, done in God's way, will always have God's provision." We have very clear Scripture to support this principle. Jesus states:

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit -- fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." (Jn 15:16 NIV).

Thus, if we ask for a tool or a provision which we need to accomplish God's work, He will grant our request. This tool may be some form of transportation, getting our bills paid each month, a healthy body, or whatever. If it is truly a need in our ministry work, not just a desire of ours, then you can be sure that God will see to it that we have it.

So the first question we must ask ourselves about our requests to the Lord is this: Is this request related to God's kingdom?" Or, more specifically, "Am I hindered or unable to fulfill my God-given task without this request?" If the answer to these questions is, "Yes!" then you are on firm ground. You can count on receiving what you ask.

You see, the Lord is the Lord of the harvest; you and I are called by Him to be harvesters...laborers in His vineyard. Then whose responsibility is it to provide tools and supplies for the workmen? Is it the responsibility of the individual worker? Absolutely not! It is the vineyard owner's responsibility. In the same way, our heavenly Father is the owner of the vineyard of souls. We are just transitory laborers. He will supply all the tools needed for the completion of the harvest.

While in Nigeria, Carolyn met an evangelist who regularly preached in public markets and at bus stops. He was asking the Lord for a portable bullhorn so his message would carry farther. It's easy to see that he is a laborer in the Lord's vineyard asking for a tool so he could accomplish his task more effectively. There is no doubt in my mind that God will supply that man with his bullhorn.

Another Scripture which reinforces this principle is John 15:7,8:

"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." (NIV).

In this passage Jesus is telling us that as we show ourselves to be His disciples and as we bear much fruit, fruit that will bring glory to the Father, He will grant whatever we wish. Notice that it is conditional. We must 1) remain in him, 2) His words must remain in us, 3) we must show ourselves to be His disciples, and 4) we must bear much fruit to the Father's glory. It is then that we are free to "ask whatever (we) wish, and it will be given (us).

Thus, again as we pray, we should ask ourselves, does this request truly produce everlasting fruit which brings

glory to the Father? If the answer is "yes", we can count on the Lord to be faithful in granting whatever we ask.

Finally, we note Jesus' words in John, 14:13,14:

"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."

Here Jesus is saying that whatever we ask, which results in the Son bring glory to the Father, then He shall do it. Thus, again we see the qualifying factor of asking in prayer that which will result in God's glory. If this is the case, then Jesus will grant our prayer.

2. Vision or Rhema

The next two instances in which I believe we can count on God to answer our requests have to do with either a vision or a rhema from God. Here too both a vision and a rhema have to do with God's purpose.

By vision, I mean a revelation from God regarding a mission He wants you to accomplish. It may be a ministry to the needy, building a church, evangelizing in foreign nations or whatever. Such visions or revelations are usually very compelling.

By rhema I mean a direct and specific word from God. "Rhema" is sometimes translated from the Greek New Testament text as "word." God sometimes speaks a direction or word into our hearts. This is the rhema. It is something God has told you or something He has shown you. As with a vision the force of the rhema is compelling and powerful.

By their very nature, a true vision or rhema comes from God and is personally directed by the Holy Spirit into our spirit and consciousness. It is God telling us of His will for some future purpose or plan. As with the fulfillment of the call on our life, if we pray for the things which are needed to fulfill a vision or rhema God has given us, He will see to it that we receive what we need. We have an excellent example of this principle in I Chronicles, chapter 17 when David is praying to the Lord. As part of his prayer, he refers to God's promise to him and says: "You, my God, have revealed to your servant that you will build a house for him. So your servant has found courage to pray to you." (verses 25-26 NIV). Here David was praying directly into God's promise that He would provide David with a house. This statement wasn't referring to a literal "house" as we think today, God was speaking of the "House of David", or David's progeny. God intended for that vision or rhema to come to pass and it is perfectly correct for us to pray to that end.

Let me insert one caution here. I also believe we can, by our own actions, thwart or block the fulfillment of God's vision or rhema which we have received. If we do so, God may not grant our prayer. Let me give you an example. If the Lord has given you a vision of some future ministry and you get ahead of the Lord, you may begin to ask for all kinds of things that are not needed, at least, not now. Or you may become prideful and, by the reaction of your own flesh, cause God to back away from the fulfillment of the rhema or vision. You see, at that point, there is no longer any compelling reason for God to grant your request.

Our Personal Needs or Heart's Desires

But what do we do if we search our hearts and come to the conclusion that what we are praying for is probably not really connected to God's eternal plan or our ministry call? Does that automatically mean that God will not grant our request? Happily, the answer is "no". We serve a merciful, kind, loving God who takes great pleasure in giving His children the desires of their heart. God cares about our small, daily need, too. God grants countless requests from us which flow from His love for us and just because he wants to bless us.

But here is where James 4:3 come into play. God tells us clearly that if we pray with wrong motives, so that we may spend what we get on our pleasures, we will not receive. God is not in the business of being our own personal butler to serve us and fulfill our every whim and desire. He is in the business of calling us to grow up into the fullness of the measure of the stature of Jesus Christ. (Ref. Eph 4:13). I believe we are free to pray the desires of our hearts, after we are sure our motives are pure, and then we must leave the outcome to God. We should be able to rest in whatever the outcome may be because we know that God always wants His best for us or the one for which we are praying. Always remember, His best may not be exactly what we perceive to be the most desirable outcome.

Finally, one last caution. It is possible to cause the Lord to answer our requests even when the request may displease Him. We may demand something of God with such repetition and forcefulness that He will grant it - to our own detriment. Psalm 106:15 says, "So he gave them what they asked for, but sent a wasting disease upon them." (NIV). Surely the psalmist didn't really mean that God would send a wasting disease on His people for self-indulgent prayers...would He? The King James Bible says that "And he

gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul." I don't want either!

Certainly we are all aware of Hezekiah's prayer to God. (Ref. II Kings 20). When Isaiah told him that he was going to die, he prayed to the Lord to let him live and the Lord gave him 15 more years of life. It was during that 15 years that Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, was born. Manasseh turned out to be one of Judah's most wicked kings. There is little doubt that it would have been better for Judah had Manasseh never been born. Again, we must pray and ask for things with great care and wisdom.

Lord, continue to teach us how to pray. Help us to focus our prayers on Your call on our lives and Your purposes. May our prayers always be pleasing in your sight. May they continually be a sweet fragrance before Your throne, Lord.

In Part II of this teaching we will cover:

- Pray with the mind of Christ.
- The prayers of a righteous man.
- Dealing with God's sovereignty.
- Believing prayer.
- Dealing with circumstances.
- Dealing with Satan.
- Doing our part as we pray.
- Our will and our flesh.
- Prayer "formulas."
- The trap of "easy believism."
- Developing a thankful heart.
- Prayer in the spirit.
- How to properly handle God's blessings.

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Rev. Jim Murphy and his wife, Carolyn, of Blue Jay, California, United States, head Hundredfold Ministries, International. They write Christian teaching literature and travel to the Developing Nations of the world teaching Christian leaders. Hundredfold Ministries, Int'l is a cross-denominational Christian ministry dedicated to strengthening the church in the Developing Nations of the world.

Hundredfold Ministries, Int'l provides in-country Bible school courses and leadership training seminars. The classes and seminars are taught by seasoned, anointed teachers. The subject matter is directed towards the development and maturing of Christian leaders. The goal of the Ministry is to produce leaders who will be better equipped to lead and direct national churches.

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