

## Prayer Makes a Difference

**Asking According to God's Will**

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Today I am going to talk about something that is essential to our spiritual growth, to our salvation, and to our personal relationships with God and each other. It is something of great power. Its effect on the world itself can be of historical proportions. The world benefits from it, although they are unaware of its impact on them. The world needs it, the sick must have it, the church thrives on it, and ministers rely on it. It is perhaps one of the most neglected and improperly used tools in human life!

Sometimes, people tend to view praying to God as a hit and miss proposition. They think, "Maybe He is listening, or maybe He is not." They believe that maybe He cares what they have to say, but maybe He is not really interested. It may be that when some people pray, all they are doing is calling the Psychic Hotline:

Hello, welcome to the Psychic Hotline.

If you are obsessive-compulsive, please press 1 repeatedly.

If you are co-dependent, please ask someone to press 2.

If you have multiple personalities, please press 3, 4, 5, and 6.

If you are paranoid-delusional, we know who you are and what you want. Just stay on the line while we trace your call.

If you are schizophrenic, listen carefully and a little voice will tell you which number to press.

If you are manic-depressive, it does not matter which number you press. No one will answer.

We see there the attitude of the world toward God with regard to prayer. People seem to view prayer in a very complex way, as if God were only indirectly accessible. It is not all that difficult with the right attitude, but, of course, the world does not understand that. We have had much practice in prayer, which means that we do have many of the skills that are involved with it. Effective prayer requires that we are sincere, humble, and faithful, among other things; but those are certainly key elements.

The Bible has a great deal to tell us about prayer and how it should be made. It teaches us that prayer is essential and vital to us and exhorts us to pray often. Not only that, but if you read the lives of God's greatest saints in the long history of the church, you will find that they were men and women of prayer. It was a great characteristic of these individuals. The nearer people are to God, the more they pray to Him.

We see numerous incidents in scripture of what God has clearly done by way of answered prayer. The God who determines the end determines the means. If God, in His infinite wisdom, is determined that He is going to bring certain things to pass as a result of and in answer to the prayers of His people, He will do it with kindness, love, and goodness; and there will be nothing negative about it. It is His way of bringing us into and causing us to share in His work.

When we read Paul's letter to the Philippians, we find that he explicitly tells them that God is doing this through their prayer, so that they can come in for a share of the glory and the rejoicing. Thus it was that Paul, who knew the mind and will of God and was so joyful in the hands of God, still pleaded with the Philippians to pray for him and for his release from prison. Paul, a man very close to God, needed the brethren. We sometimes forget that this is God's way of doing things. As He has decided to order and maintain the creation through various laws that He has designed into nature, so also has He decided to work in the spiritual realm through prayer.

Scripture is very clear that we are obligated to pray for others. We should pray for our unconverted family members and friends. Jesus said we should even pray for our enemies.

Matthew 5:44 But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,

Here we see that we are commanded, as the elect of God, to pray for those in the world, no matter what they have done to us and no matter what they may do to us. We are to pray especially for those in the Church of God, our fellow brethren. Even when we may be annoyed or even disgusted with some of the foolish things that unconverted people do, we have to continue to develop compassion, and prayer is one of the ways to develop it. Jeremiah was able to express his compassionate attitude for those in his nation who violently lost their lives or the lives of their loved ones.

Jeremiah 9:1 Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!

We know that there is a time to mourn, to weep for the ills that are happening to this country and world because of sin. Also, Isaiah prophesied that in the last days, evil, crime, and injustice would be out of control. People would lack the courage to stand up for anyone else or to try to help people with their problems. As Isaiah described in Isaiah 59:16, God was astonished and displeased that there was no one willing to be an intercessor for the nation. There was no justice in the land. God does expect us to intercede on behalf of others by means of prayer.

However, it is also true that sometimes it serves no purpose to pray for people in the world. God told Jeremiah,

Jeremiah 7:16 Therefore do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them, nor make intercession to Me; for I will not hear you.

As members of God's church, we have to use wisdom in for what and for whom we are praying. We do not want our prayers to be in vain. The indication in Jeremiah 7 is that we should not pray for forgiveness for people who flagrantly break the Ten Commandments, thumb their noses at God, and then hypocritically ask for His blessing. The attitude of the people was so wrong that God would not spare the punishment that they so badly needed. However, unless God makes this evident, we should not assume it to be the case. We should assume the best of people and pray for them.

What does a true Christian do for this world? We restrain evil as far as we can and we believe that doing so is God's will. We pray to Him to have pity and mercy on the world, while remembering that because of the evil of the world, it is God's will to punish it. God's will is a very important aspect of prayer. We do not pray lightly on the assumption that, if we pray for God to hold His hand back from punishment, He will do what we ask—that would be praying in vain. The Old Testament has much to say about that. There was a time when God, in effect, said to His prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, "Stop praying for these people."

This does not mean that we should not pray for the world, but it does mean that we must pray intelligently and thoughtfully. It means that we pray in such a way that conforms to the will of God. We must see God's ultimate plan for the world; in other words, we must have vision. We do not pray as a member of a country but as a potential member of God's kingdom, as a citizen of heaven. This gives us a very unique perspective on praying for others and for the world. This is the only way we can have a proper perspective. We are of God! We are not of the world in that sense, yet we ask God to have mercy and compassion for all people. Prayer is not an isolated and optional religious exercise; it is a vital factor, significant in determining our eternal destiny! Sometimes it is even significant in determining history.

The supreme purpose that God is working out here on earth is the expansion of His Family. He wants to create, from physical human beings, immortal members of His ruling Family. We must, by our own free choice, come to fully support God's way of doing things. We must want to think as God thinks, perceive as God perceives, and react as God reacts.

We must want, with all of our hearts, to be involved in whatever God is doing. These wants and desires in the proper area should direct our prayer in the proper way. This type of attitude is essential in order to maintain, throughout eternity, harmony and peace within the Family of God. This is not something that is just a temporary element or a tool to be used.

God has made us temporarily human. This existence is a testing ground on which our Creator can try us and know what is in our hearts, whether or not He can trust us to live by His rules and laws. He must be sure. He is looking at us, closely examining our actions and reactions and how we pray for others and intercede on others' behalf. God takes note of what we say when we are talking to Him. Of course, He knows our hearts and intents, and the Holy Spirit helps when we cannot adequately express ourselves.

Romans 8:26-27 Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit itself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

Still, as Jesus showed, the actual words we use are also important, and they should be meaningful, rather than vain repetitions. One of the obstacles to effective prayer is not often identified. It is the fact that we live in the age of devalued language. Words have never been so cheap, so frequently meaningless as they are now. All around us, language is misused in advertising, politics, entertainment, and even in casual conversation. Filthy words seem to be in every sentence of the world's mouth.

Because we have been disillusioned more than once by broken promises, exaggerations, shading of the truth, even outright lies, we have come to automatically doubt that words mean what their face value would indicate. We certainly have seen this in the political system of debate that we have had between the candidates for presidency. I still scratch my head at most of that for which they stand and in which they believe. They do not want us to know exactly what they believe. Maybe they do not know what they believe. This is one reason some have difficulty believing God's promises. It also could be one of the reasons some prayers are not as effective as they should be.

Remember that God really did not have to ask Adam and Eve a series of questions about what they had done. He already knew the answer. He did not have to ask Cain where Abel was. He did not have to come down to earth to verify how evil Sodom was. He did not have to allow Jacob to contend with Him all night. He wanted to. He still wants to hear from us what we have to say and see our thought processes and our reactions and the decisions that come from them.

God is working out His plan; He keeps it on schedule and on course. He intervenes when necessary in the affairs of humanity, and He allows us with whom He is dealing to determine many of the details of how His plan develops. Twice, through prayer, Moses directly influenced the course of history. Because of the rebellion of the children of Israel, God, on two separate occasions, proposed rejecting them all and bringing forth, through Moses, a new nation to inherit the promises made to Abraham. Had Moses not fervently prayed to God to change His mind, the implication is that God would have done exactly what He had proposed. God is not a Being who says things lightly or in vain.

Either way would not have impeded the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan, but Moses' prayers did determine the course that fulfillment took. Prayer does make a difference! We see that prayer made a difference in Jesus' life. Jesus commands us to pray that He will provide people to do His work. In Luke 10: 2, Jesus said, "The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest." God would not ask us to do something in vain; therefore, those prayers that are offered up for more workers for His work are answered. Whether or not or in what numbers laborers are sent out to do God's work must therefore depend, at least partly, on prayers or the lack of them.

God will accomplish His work of preaching the message preparing the world for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, even if He has to cause the very rocks of the earth to cry the message

out loud. God does not need us, but He does want us to be part of His family. He gives us the opportunity and privilege of participating in what He is doing.

The apostle Paul tells us to pray for all. It is not enough for us to pray for just our brethren.

I Timothy 2:1-2 Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.

Whether or not, or to what degree, God's work has peaceful conditions in which to function also depends, at least in part, on how diligently we pray.

Let me ask you a rhetorical question: Why should we pray for fellow Christians, when they themselves have contact with God? James admonishes us to pray one for another. It should be a mutual thing. That is, members of God's church should be so concerned for one another that prayers are offered up continually on behalf of each other.

James 5:16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

Prayer does matter; it does have an impact on our lives; and we should be praying for one another on a regular basis. Especially those who have done injury to someone else and those who are injured by someone else should pray for one other. James does not refer primarily to the prayers of the ministers of the church, as in the verses 14 and 15—although they are certainly included—but he refers to praying for one another as a duty appropriate for all Christians.

The apostle Paul wrote that he prayed for other Christians and that he did so without ceasing. In turn, he asked, "Brethren, pray for us." Praying for each other is a Christian duty, and praying for the ministry is a Christian duty, as well! I make the huge assumption, and I believe it to be true, that most of you prayed for the sermon today. That is how sermons become effective in their hearing.

There was obviously a special place in the apostle Paul's heart for the Philippian members. Paul often thought of them; and though they were out of sight, they were certainly not out of his mind. He was separated from them by distance, yet they were in his prayers without ceasing. At the very mention of them, he became grateful for them; it was always a pleasure for him to hear of the welfare of his distant friends. Even though Paul was ill-treated at Philippi by the unconverted inhabitants of the city, and it was there that he was scourged and put into the stocks, he remembered the church members with joy. At first, he saw little of the fruit of his labor, but still he remembered Philippi with joy. He looked upon his sufferings for Christ as his credit, his comfort, his crown, and was joyful every time someone mentioned Philippi, where he had suffered. The reason for this was that his joy was activated by the brethren there. This joy caused him to pray all the more fervently for them, to be excited for them, and to long to be

with them.

One of the main ways he remembered them was in prayer. Paul said in his letter to the Philippians that he "always in every prayer" for them requested that God would develop His character in them. Paul often prayed for his friends—for all of his friends—but especially for the Philippians.

Philippians 1:3-4 I thank my God upon every remembrance of you,  
always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy,

Here we get a glimpse of what Paul included in his prayers. Thanksgiving must have a part in every prayer. For whatever we are joyful, by whatever we are comforted, we should thank God for it because God must receive the glory for it. Paul thanked God, as well as made requests, with joy. True joy is the heart of thankful praise, and thankful praise is the overt expression of true joy.

In both our prayers and our thanksgiving, we must see God as "our God." This intimate relationship encourages us in prayer and increases our joy in praise, because we see mercy coming from the hand of *our* God. We should thank *our* God for others' gifts and usefulness, because we receive benefit from them. We must make sure that God receives the glory for them. The credit must go where credit is due.

Philippians 1:9-11 And this I pray, that your love may abound still  
more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may  
approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and  
without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of  
righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

God is interested in developing unity and teamwork in the future members of His Family. He wants us to stop being self-absorbed and be concerned for the well being of others. He wants us to have the same character that He has, and one of the tools that He expects every Christian to use in building that character is prayer for one another. We would not be told to pray if it were not important for our eternal salvation.

It is not wrong for us to pray for our own needs. Scripture instructs us to "let our requests be made known to God".

Philippians 4:6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer  
and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known  
to God.

Paul indicates that when we make our requests known to God, we must do it with thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is a major factor, or element, in prayer. Obviously, if no one else is praying for a Christian in need, certainly God will hear the prayers of the needy and answer them. I am not saying that God cannot save someone who has not been prayed for. However, scriptures about

intercession show that God likes to supply the answers as a result of the prayers of another concerned and sincere person. Through these prayers, He sees concern for others, rather than for only the self. Paul encourages us to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6: 2). The law of Christ is the universal law of love. The law of love drives Christ's mind; it is the same mind we must have if we want to be in God's Kingdom. It is the same mind we must have for our prayers to be effective.

Epaphras was a faithful minister of God's church who looked out for the interests of others. When the apostle Paul wrote to the brethren in the city of Colosse, he said that Epaphras was always laboring fervently for them in prayers so that they could stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.

Colossians 4:12-13 Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis.

Epaphras' great zeal drove him to pray for others, that they may be perfect and complete and that they may live their lives according to the will of God. He worked long and hard praying for others, that they could overcome and grow to perfection. Did the prayers of Epaphras really make any difference in whether the brethren overcame and grew to perfection? Did Paul mean to imply that they could not "stand perfect and complete in all the will of God" without Epaphras' diligent prayers? If they could, what good was all the effort Epaphras put into it? What is the purpose served by intercessory prayer?

Our prayer life not only reveals to God how deeply we want Him to be involved in our lives and how deeply we want to be involved in what He is doing, but prayer also shows how interested we are in other people. Can God have anyone in His kingdom who is not genuinely interested in people? God wants to see a spontaneous and universal expression of outgoing concern in all members of His church. That is the only way to guarantee peace and harmony. Love for our neighbor is the essence of God's law, and it should be the essence of our prayer.

One of the greatest gifts we can give to others when we are close to God is to pray for them. God loves it when people pray for each other. If God will hear the prayers of an individual, praying for his own needs, how much more will He hear the prayers of someone praying on behalf of someone else—especially someone in need? God especially enjoys hearing and answering the prayers of one person for the needs of another. The apostle Paul would not have petitioned the saints to pray for him if it did not make any difference.

Hebrews 13:18 Pray for us; for we are confident that we have a good conscience, in all things desiring to live honorably.

Paul felt that the prayers of the brethren for him were very, very important.

When you have a specific request from God, have you ever thought to pray that the identical

request be granted to someone else who needs it? In doing so, we get our mind off ourselves and on the welfare of others. That is what happened with Job. Job eventually got his mind off himself and focused on God, and then he was able to help his friends. Because Job had spoken according to God's will what is right, God used Job as an intercessor for His friends. Job's friends were forgiven through His prayers.

Job 42:7-8 And so it was, after the LORD had spoken these words to Job, that the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has. Now therefore, take for yourselves seven bulls and seven rams, go to My servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and My servant Job shall pray for you. For I will accept him, lest I deal with you according to your folly; because you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has."

We see there a great qualification for having answered prayer when we pray for others: We have to be right with God. We have to be obedient to Him—submissive, humble, and faithful.

God wants to hear prayers of intercession. It was through the prayers of Abraham that Abimelech was forgiven. In Jesus' early childhood, there was an elderly woman named Anna who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. We can be sure that most of that prayer and fasting was not to seek Anna's own needs and desires. There were probably many people in the area who, over the years, went to Anna when they had a problem. They asked her to pray for them because God heard and answered her prayers, and everyone knew it. Everyone desired to have her help in that way. Prayer makes a difference! It changes things! There is no doubt about that; we have God's promise that such is the case.

You have all probably grown to love someone to the point that you feel a special sentiment toward him or her. We commonly call this feeling a close friendship. With this type of relationship, we very much want to do something for that person that would help him or to give him something he needs. Maybe neither distance nor time nor finances will allow you to carry out that overwhelming desire to do something for him. What can we do for him if we are so limited? You already know the answer. We can cause an outpouring of physical and spiritual blessings to rain down upon that person by praying for him. Of course, that has to be according to God's will. We cannot pray for a friend of ours to get a boat so that we can go on the lake and water ski with him.

Proverbs 3:27 Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in the power of your hand to do so.

Each and every one of us has it in the power of our hands to do good to someone else through the power of prayer. It is in the power of your hand with God's help to do it through intercessory prayer.

Moses pronounced a wonderful blessing upon the unconverted house of Israel, God's physical people. If this is so, then surely God can be asked to place a similar blessing upon a member of spiritually converted Israel, the church of God. Listen to the priceless blessing God instructed Moses to pronounce through Aaron upon the Israelites.

Numbers 6:24-26 The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.

This is the type of prayer that we can pray for one another in God's church. This command to Moses and the Aaronic priesthood to ask for God's priceless blessing on the physical Israelites is a type of one of the ways we should be asking God to bless His Church. Peace is important because the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace. Peace is something that we should ask God to provide for each and every one of us. Intercessory prayer can be offered for the church as a whole as this prayer was for Israel. We must always be aware of the necessity to intercede for God's Work. Paul asked the Colossian Christians to pray for the work of God. He said, "Praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ" (Colossians 4: 3). The brethren, by their prayers, can increase the effectiveness of the ministry. By prayers of intercession for the work and the church, we can help turn many to righteousness.

The principle of praying for others works both ways. If you have a need, instead of just praying about it yourself, ask some of the brethren to pray about it. Sometimes the answer comes very quickly when there are many faithful brethren praying.

Intercessory prayer can be offered especially for those whose needs we know, those who are going through trials, those who are sick, those who need to be comforted by God.

Ephesians 6:17-18 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.

There is another element that is part of the preparation for prayer: watching. We should be watching, as it says here, for opportunities to pray for others. It is a matter of being aware of the needs of others. This verse is part of the section dealing with the Armor of God found in verses 10-19. Parts of that armor, such as the shield, the helmet and the breastplate, are basically for defense; they protect against the attacks of the enemy. However, the armor that Paul describes is not for defense only. Using the "sword of the spirit" (in verse 17) and prayer (in verse 18), we are to go on the offensive against—to attack—the powers of darkness. Paul told the Corinthian congregation, "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds" (II Corinthians 10: 4)

Nothing can be done spiritually by our own power. Of and by our own strength, we are not capable of pulling down strongholds, nor are we capable of blessing, healing, or granting any spiritual gift. Even Jesus, as a human, affirmed, "I can of myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge;

and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me." That is from where the power of prayer comes: doing the will of God and praying according to His will. Jesus Christ kept in close personal contact with His Father in heaven. As a result, Jesus' life was filled with love, faith, and power from God. His frequent and fervent prayers made possible His and others' victory over sin and death.

Jesus' disciples were aware that their teacher knew how to draw close to the eternal God and call upon His help in every situation. So one of them asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. Jesus' instructions are preserved for us in Matthew 6 and Luke 11.

Matthew 6:9-13 In this manner, therefore, 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 this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

It is always a thrill when the sermonette and the sermon tie together so well. Mark Baker's sermonette on forgiveness tied in with prayer, because one of the major elements, if not the major element, in answered prayer is that we ask for forgiveness for our debtors as God forgives our debts.

Jesus did not call this the "Lord's Prayer" as many do today, or in any way encourage His disciples to memorize this specific prayer and repeat it when they prayed; He had just forbidden them to do that. Jesus was simply outlining the correct approach to God in prayer and the basic things we should ask for. Jesus came to reveal the Father to humanity and He always addressed the Father in His prayers. This Father-child relationship is also open to all of us. Such a private relationship with our heavenly Father should be as real and intimate as the physical relationships we ideally should have with our human fathers or children. With God's Holy Spirit, it is on an even higher plane.

Jesus said that our Father is in heaven. When we address the Father in our private prayers, we have to realize that we are having a personal audience with the supreme ruler of the universe. As we begin our prayers, we should not only address and think of God as our Father but also honor and praise His name and His office as Creator and Ruler, as well as His character of unselfish love, great goodness, and generosity.

God's name, and all for which it stands, is to be held in absolute reverence. Our deep respect and awe for our heavenly Father should be total and absolute. Addressing God in an attitude of praise, worship, and adoration focuses our att