

Hindrances to Prayer II

INTRODUCTION – We have been commanded by God to pray without ceasing. This means that before anything is done, the child of God ought to pray and seek God’s guidance and blessing. This helps the believer to be sensitive to the presence of God in his life. He grows in faith and trust in his heavenly Father whenever he prays and sees the hand of God helping and strengthening him. However, when believers are supposed to act after prayer, and they do not, then they could be hiding behind prayer as an excuse not to act. They claim to be waiting for God to intervene from heaven when in reality they are supposed to act. There is a place and time to be still and wait for God to act. But there is also a time when believers need to act after prayer. It is cowardice and sinful to not act and to use prayer as excuses. Prayer which is a gift from God has become an excuse for man when such a transgression occurs.

Another common sinful phenomenon is to ask God to do our bidding rather than to ask in accordance with God’s will. When the motives are man-centred, it is absolutely wrong to expect God to answer. Such selfish reasons for prayer make prayer a mockery. The prayer may sound good to man but it will not be heard by God! Prayers must be sincere. It should be like a little child talking to his father whom he trusts. He hides nothing. In the case of a Christian praying to his heavenly Father, he must have no pretence. He approaches his heavenly Father sincerely. All he desires is to please his heavenly Father in all his requests.

The hindrances that we are dealing with this evening target these two hindrances to prayer.

PRAYER AS AN EXCUSE NOT TO SANCTIFY (not to deal with sin but just pray) – Joshua was the newly appointed leader of the people of Israel to succeed and complete Moses’ work in bringing Israel out of Egypt into the Promised Land. Moses disqualified himself from completing the final phase of the exodus because of sin. His health was not the issue but his disobedience was. God would complete the entrance into and conquest of the Promised Land to Joshua, the son of Nun. When God called Joshua, He promised him total and complete success. All Joshua needed to do was to be courageous in obeying the Word of God. Everywhere he set foot within the Promised Land would be a victory. There was no way he could fail unless it was faithlessness or sin. **Joshua 1:1-9**, “Now after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD it came to pass, that the LORD spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ minister, saying, **2** Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, *even* to the children of Israel. **3** Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses. **4** From the wilderness and this Lebanon *even* unto the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and unto the great sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your coast. **5** There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee. **6** Be strong and of a good courage: for unto this people shalt thou divide for an inheritance the land, which I sware unto their fathers to give them. **7** Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest. **8** This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success. **9** Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God *is* with thee whithersoever thou goest.” [Emphasis added]

God promised Joshua that He would be with Joshua and Israel. They would be successful. No enemy would be able to stand against them. Every place where Joshua set his foot upon within the boundaries of the Promised Land would be given to him. No one would be able to stand against

Joshua and the Israelites because the LORD would be with them. The LORD said that He “will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.” Joshua just had to obey all that God said and he would not fail. For him and Israel to fail was the same as God failing. If they were defeated it also meant that God would be defeated. But who can defeat the almighty God? No one!

The Defeat -- Joshua 7:1-5 (KJV), “But the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed thing: and the anger of the LORD was kindled against the children of Israel. **2** And Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which *is* beside Bethaven, on the east side of Bethel, and spake unto them, saying, Go up and view the country. And the men went up and viewed Ai. **3** And they returned to Joshua, and said unto him, Let not all the people go up; but let about two or three thousand men go up and smite Ai; *and* make not all the people to labour thither; for they *are but* few. **4** So there went up thither of the people about three thousand men: and they fled before the men of Ai. **5** And the men of Ai smote of them about thirty and six men: for they chased them *from* before the gate *even* unto Shebarim, and smote them in the going down: wherefore the hearts of the people melted, and became as water.” – After Joshua and Israel soundly defeated the city of Jericho and all her inhabitants, the Israelites were full of self confidence. They sized up the city of Ai and concluded that the entire army of Israel did not need to go. About two or three thousand men would be sufficient to deal with the comparatively smaller city of Ai. Their self confidence resulted in great failure. The men of Ai killed about 36 Israelites. They were soundly driven away. The hearts of the people of Israel melted. They became like water! They were devoid of strength within them.

The Prayer – “**6** And Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the LORD until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads. **7** And Joshua said, Alas, O Lord GOD, wherefore hast thou at all brought this people over Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? would to God we had been content, and dwelt on the other side Jordan! **8** O Lord, what shall I say, when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies! **9** For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land shall hear *of it*, and shall environ us round, and cut off our name from the earth: and what wilt thou do unto thy *great name*?” [Emphasis added] – Joshua rent his clothes and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the LORD until evening. This was a long time in prayer. As a leader, he had forgotten God’s promises to him when God called him to take over the leadership. Joshua could not fail! Yet he failed! What could have been the cause of Israel’s defeat? There were two possible answers. Either there was sin in Israel OR the LORD was weak and could not keep His promises to Joshua! It can never be the latter. It has to be the former. Joshua had learned and experienced that whenever there was DEATH in Israel during the past 40 years of Moses’ leadership in the wilderness, it was due to sin within the camp of Israel alone. There was no other reason! Joshua had apparently forgotten this truth as can be seen from the content of his day long prayer!

He complained and said that God ought not to have brought them across the River Jordan to be destroyed by the Amorites, for they were contented to remain on the side of the Transjordan! This kind of prayer was not only wrong, it reflected the kind of heart and lack of faith that Joshua had! What he should not have done was to complain and murmur as if it was God's fault! He even said that by this defeat of Israel, the Canaanites would hear of it and destroy Israel. The only saving factor in this prayer of Joshua was what he said at the end. He asked what would then happen to God’s great Name. At least he was still concerned for the honour of God’s great Name. Joshua needed to remember two truths that God guaranteed him --

- Everywhere that Joshua set his foot would be his to conquer and possess;
- Sin was the only reason death came upon the people of Israel.

The Rebuke and Sanctification – “**10** And the LORD said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face? **11** Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put *it* even among their own stuff. **12** Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, *but* turned *their* backs before their enemies, because they were accursed: neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you. **13** Up, sanctify the people, and say, Sanctify yourselves against to morrow: for thus saith the LORD God of Israel, *There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel: thou canst not stand before thine enemies, until ye take away the accursed thing from among you.*” [Emphasis added] – The LORD’s reply was to stop praying and to sanctify the people. There was sin inside the camp of Israel! Joshua’s prayer to the LORD ought to have been based upon this truth and not murmuring to stay in Transjordan! Therefore, the LORD told Joshua to get up, stop praying and clean house! There was sin in the camp! As long as there was sin in the camp, the LORD would not protect His people. They would surely be defeated by their enemies.

Joshua was told of the sin that someone in Israel had stolen from the LORD. Someone took something in the city of Jericho even after the LORD had said categorically that everything inside Jericho was under “*cherem*”, which means it was put under a curse! Sanctification means to put sin away and be spiritually clean once more! We know from the rest of Joshua chapter 7 that it was Achan and his family who stole from the LORD. They were all stoned to death and burned! Today, pastors hide behind prayers and do not take disciplinary actions because of the unpopular nature of church discipline. Friends and relatives are involved. The fear of not being re-elected could be another sinful reason. Be that as it may, there is no excuse to justify hiding behind prayer and not do what is right. Prayer accompanied by righteous action is the biblical thing to do always!

PRAYING AMISS -- **James 4:1-3**, “From whence *come* wars and fightings among you? *come* they not hence, *even* of your lusts (“*he-do-ne*”-from which the English word “hedonistic” originates) that war in your members? **2** Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. **3** Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume *it* upon your lusts.” – Human beings including believers do not stop having desires until they die. As long as the body lives, the desires continue. This is how God made man. After salvation, the desires are supposed to be under control. The believer’s desires should be for things godly and clean. Believers must stop desiring for things that are sinful. The word “lust” in verse 1 is the Greek word “*he-do-ne*” which means “sensual desire.” This refers to the desires of the five senses. Carnal things that once gripped sinful man’s heart continue to tempt and seduce the believer’s heart. That is why believers fight among themselves for these things. They go to court for more. They even take their own father or mother to court to get more. They might argue that they are doing it for their children or for their own retirement, but such “conscience soothing” reasons will not stand up in God’s court of law on the Day of Judgement. There is no justification for carnality especially for the believer who bears on his body the image of Christ. When a believer is carnal, he is witnessing that Christ is carnal!

James followed up by saying that believers lust but they do not get. They kill and desire to have but they do not obtain. They fight and war but do not have because they do not ask. The word

“lust” in verse 2 is the Greek word “*epi-thu-me-o*” which means “to set the heart upon.” He longs for carnal things by his desire but even when he gets more, the longing does not seem to be satiated. The desire for more and more goes on. Some might even kill (not actually kill a person but to be angry without a just cause like envy) to own more and more but they do not get them. Some even fight and war (like taking each other to court) for more property and more wealth but they do not have, i.e. they do not really own the things they fight for. The emptiness in the soul can never be satisfied by materialism and yet men fight for it, including professing believers. The bane of materialism is captured by the words in verse 2. These professing believers even pray for material things but God will not give it to them. They ask amiss (i.e. for evil purposes). The evil purpose is to waste it on their lusts (i.e. “*he-do-ne*”).

When the motive for prayer is carnal, the LORD will not answer. These carnal desires are for all things of the world. Our homes, cars, ambitions, jobs, children, spouses, etc. are all part of the carnal motives that must not be the basis for our prayers. For example, a mother cannot pray for her son to do well in exams in order to get scholarship. She ought to pray that her son will be drawn closer to the LORD through his trust in God during the exam. If the results are not good or he failed, then she must accept this because through the failure God has decided to humble her son to draw him closer to God. The spiritual well-being is of paramount priority in all that we pray for. The more we know God’s Word, the more we will be able to pray according to God’s will.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Two very “important” wealthy families in the church are at odds and this is known to the whole church. The pastor does not want to lose either family and so he does not want to take sides. He asks the BOE to pray and does not do anything. The pastor says to let God decide. Is this the right decision to make?
2. Two grown-up children in a Christian home have stopped coming to church. Their parents have been urging them to come back to church. The children pay them lip service but have not returned. The parents are resigned to the fact that they can only pray. There is nothing more they can do for their children. They want this to be private and do not want to put this matter in the church prayer bulletin for fear of shame. Is this the right thing to do?
3. A set of newly converted parents desire strongly that their child get into one of the elite primary schools in Singapore. This had been their desire even before they became Christians and they have not given up this desire. They pray that God will open doors to let their child into the school of their choice. They fast and pray for this to happen because their Christian friend told them to do so. Are they praying correctly? Explain.
4. A husband is not a believer and his wife has been praying fervently for his salvation. Then he falls sick. She prays for his recovery from the illness. Is she praying correctly?
5. A set of Christian parents want their child to become a successful specialist in the field of medicine. They have been praying this prayer for more than a decade that their child will become a specialist. In the meantime they push their child to study hard and use their money to “open” the right doors for their child to enter into universities that will bring this desire into a reality. Have they been praying correctly?