

6 Reasons Why Some Prayers Are Never Answered

By Wayne Jackson

When the apostle Peter penned that first epistle which bears his name, it was directed to “the elect who are sojourners or the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1 Pet. 1:1). The basic design of this divine narrative is to encourage saints who are suffering persecution. In times of hardship, prayer—the blessed privilege of communicating with Almighty God—becomes precious indeed. It was in view of suffering and the power of prayer as a source of strength during the same, that Peter cautioned Christians to conduct their lives that their “prayers be not hindered” (1 Pet. 3:7). The term “hindered” translates the Greek word *enkopto* derived of two elements: *en* (in) and *kopto* (to strike or cut). It has an interesting background. The meaning hinder arose out of its military use. During a retreat the road might be cut into (i.e. broken up [sabotaged]), in order to delay the pursuing enemy (Brown, 220). Surely no child of God would want to sabotage his or her own prayers!

How to Avoid Hindering Your Prayers

As our prayers are aimed heavenward, we ought to determine to do all that is humanly possible to see that their path remains unobstructed. Let us give consideration to some possible hinderances to prayer.

Faithless Petitions Flounder

A lack of faith can certainly hinder one’s prayers. James declares that we must pray “in faith, nothing doubting” (Jas. 1:6). He describes the doubter as being like the restless sea. He has two minds—one of faith and the other of doubt. Hence, shall not receive his requests from the Lord. Elsewhere we read that true faith requires us to believe that God “is a rewarder of them that seek after him” (Heb. 11:6). In a world of doubt and confusion, how can we have confidence that God is truly listening and responding to our prayers. There are at least two reasons. First, since God is almighty (Gen. 17:1) and can do all things (Job 42:2) consistent with his nature and will, he is obviously able to answer prayer. Second, we should be so glad to have a God who is, at his very nature, a loving God (1 Jn. 4:8). He is, to put it in our crass colloquialism, loaded rich in mercy (Eph. 2:4). Because of his love and abundant mercy, he longs to answer his children’s requests in harmony with their genuine needs. Paul forcefully reasoned in Romans 8:32 that: [If God] spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things? But here’s an important thought to remember. The Lord answers prayer according to our eternal needs, not necessarily according to our

immediate or temporal wants. And so, he may answer, “No,” as in the case of Paul who petitioned for the removal of his thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:8, 9). Or God may delay an answer. Paul had repeatedly prayed that he might be enabled to visit the saints in Rome (Rom. 1:9, 10). But it wasn’t until several years later that his request was granted (Acts 28:15, 16). The point is this. Just because our prayers are not answered exactly when or how we want should never cause us to lose confidence in the heavenly Father. So one of the greatest things we can do to ensure our prayers are heard and answered is to fortify our faith in our God and to trust him to answer our prayers in the way that is best for us and those for whom we pray.

Ignorance Impedes Our Invocation

Another reason prayers may be weakened is because of our ignorance. The disciples once approached Christ as he was praying. They asked: “Lord, teach us to pray, even as John also taught his disciples” (Lk. 11:1). Doesn’t this reveal that there must be a correct way to pray that comes as a consequence of teaching? It is frequently the case that. Christians “know not how to pray” as they ought (Rom. 8:26). For instance, it may be that some saints do not know of God’s willingness to answer our prayers, hence, they have not because they ask not (Jas. 4:2; cf. Phil. 4:6). Ignorance concerning the purpose of prayer can hinder. For example, prayer should be according to God’s will in order to be heard (1 Jn. 5:24). But how can we pray effectively according to his will if we don’t know his will. Here’s an example. It is not proper to pray for miracles, since those signs served a unique place in the divine plan (Mk. 16:17-20; Heb.2:2-4) and thus, have been terminated (1 Cor. 13:8-13; Eph. 4:8-16). (See: What Does the Bible Say About Miracles?) And what about praying that God should save someone—someone we dearly love—but who remains in rebellion to the gospel plan of salvation (1 Jn. 5:16). The more we study and understand God’s will as revealed in his word, the more effectively we can pray.

Impurity Inhibits Intercession

If prayer is to reach the throne of grace, the supplicant must strive with deadly seriousness to conform his life to the holy will of the Lord God. The Bible is replete with instructions to this end. Isaiah warned Israel of old that Jehovah would not hear them because of their sins (Isa. 59:2). The Savior solemnly taught that we must abide in him and allow his words to abide in us if we would have our petitions fully answered (Jn. 15:7). Peter declared that “the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears unto their supplication” (1 Pet.3:12). Yes, the prayers of the righteous person avails much (Jas. 5:6). But the requests of those who deliberately turn away from hearing the Creator’s will are abominable in his sight (Prov. 28:9).

Can we look in the mirror and ask this serious question? How many Christians lead week-day lives of reckless abandon, only to offer impenitent and impious prayers on Sunday morn? Or how many thrust the Almighty to some remote corner of their lives only to summon him in panic when death or disaster invades their home? We need to learn the lesson that David knew so well — Jehovah will be near to those whose hearts are broken on account of their sins, and who develop a contrite spirit (Psa. 34:18).

It is not suggested, of course, that the child of God must be perfect in order to have his prayers heard. None of us has reached permanent perfection—not even Paul (1 Cor. 9:26, 27; Phil. 3:12). We are all still struggling in our many weaknesses. But we may be sure of one thing. Unless we are truly serious about living the Christian life; unless we are earnestly seeking to grow daily; unless our minds are being renewed and our existence transformed (Rom. 12:2), our prayers will shrivel and die upon our tongues! So let us bow on our knees in prayer and present our lives in humble submission to his will. May our lives reflect the words we whisper in his ear.

Pride Prohibits Prayer

No one is qualified to approach the great God of the universe with a spirit of smugness. He is the Lord, God Almighty Gen. 17:1).

We are but dust (Gen. 3:19). He is Creator. We, the created (Psa. 100:3). He is holy (Psa. 9:9), yet we are sinners (Rom. 3:9, 10). Accordingly, prayer must ever be characterized by a spirit of lowliness. This lesson is taught in one of the Lord's parables. Two men went up to the temple to pray (Lk. 18:9ff). One was a Pharisee and the other was a publican. The Pharisees were the strictest sect of Judaism (Acts 26:5). To put it bluntly, they were religious show-offs (Mt. 6:1-17). The common people of Palestine revered them—which seems to be the purpose of their religion. By way of contrast, the publicans (tax collectors for the Roman government) were despised. They were put in the same category as Gentiles, prostitutes and sinners (Mt. 18:17; 21:31-33; 9:10). When the Pharisee arrived at the temple, he struck a pose and eulogized himself. "I thank thee, that I am not as the rest of men." He viewed himself as a self-made man, and he adored his creator! In stark relief, however, the publican contritely sought the Lord's mercy as a sinner. He was justified rather than the other. The lesson of the parable is this. Arrogance can negate prayer. Humility will bless it. This word may be added. While we are to pray with truly humble hearts, a balanced view acknowledges that, due to the work of our great high priest, Jesus, we may draw near "with boldness unto the throne of

grace” (Heb.4:16). Humble confidence is the divine ideal attitude for effective prayer.

Lethargic Prayer Life

A key word connected with powerful prayer is perseverance. In response to the disciples’ request that he teach them to pray, Christ gave the story of the friend at midnight. The purpose of this parable was to encourage the faithful to keep on patiently praying. The man in the story had an unexpected midnight visitor. Because he had no food to set before his guest, he went to a neighbor’s, who had already gone to bed. The man asked his neighbor for three loaves of bread. The neighbor, however, would not be troubled. But the man continued to knock. Finally, because of such persistence, the neighbor arose and gave him what he needed (Lk. 11:5ff). This narrative isn’t teaching us God is wearied by our prayers. But it is a study in contrasts. In the parable, the one making the request was but only a friend. We are God’s children. The request came at an inconvenient midnight hour, but with God, there is no night (Psa. 74:16) The man’s needs were small and were answered—grudgingly. Our needs are great, yet are answered lovingly and generously (Jas. 1:5). The thrust of the parable is this. “Ask and ye shall receive, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you.” Each of these imperatives is in the Greek present tense. Literally, therefore, keep on asking seeking, and knocking*. The story of the unjust judge teaches a similar lesson (cf. Lk. 18:1ff). Perhaps we sometimes rob ourselves of many good things simply because we lack the confident determination persevere in prayer! God may be testing our resolve by withholding from us for a season”

Unforgiving Attitudes Overthrow Prayer

One of the most utterly devastating things that the Christian can do to hinder, indeed, to virtually cancel the effect of his prayers is to harbor a surly, unforgiving attitude toward others he feels have sinned against him (whether is real or imagined). Christ taught the disciples to pray: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” In conclusion he warned: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Mt. 6:12, 15). Judgment is without mercy to him that shows no mercy (Jas. 2:13). Peter once asked the Lord: “How oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? until seven times?” The Jewish rabbis felt that three times to forgive was quite sufficient (cf. Barclay, 213). Likely, Peter assumed he was being generous, but the Lord cautioned that forgiveness was to be extended seventy times seven (i.e., limitless!).

Then in order to illustrate the gravity of having an unforgiving spirit, Jesus told the parable of the unmerciful servant. A king made a reckoning with his

servants. Among them was found a fellow who owed the enormous debt of 10,000 talents. (perhaps some \$20,000,000). When called to account, he acknowledged that he could not pay, but he promised, if given time, to clear the debt. This rash promise indicated his lack of appreciation of the enormity of his indebtedness. A laboring man's daily wages were only a denarius (Mt. 20:2)—perhaps thirty cents in today's money (2018). So the debt could scarcely have been liquidated in less than two hundred thousand years!) Amazingly, his Lord forgave the debt anyway! Then, in a truly shocking turn of events, that forgiven man went and found a fellow-servant who owed him the trifling sum of 100 denarii (about \$30). He demanded payment. When his debtor confessed that he was unable to pay, the unmerciful wretch had him cast into prison. When the king heard of this reprehensible conduct, he commanded that the servant be cast into prison himself until he should pay all, which would be never (see Mt. 18:23ff). In this divine narrative, the king represents God. The first servant and his vast debt is you and me and the fact that our sins have put us head-over-heels in debt to God. It is debt that we can never pay off by acts of human merit. It must be a matter of forgiveness. The second indebtedness calls attention to the trespasses others commit against us. How astounding it is that we, who have been given Heaven's saving grace are sometimes so unwilling to forgive others. The Lord warns that we cannot receive his forgiveness unless we are willing, from the heart, to forgive each other. Yes, improper actions and attitudes toward others can surely sabotage prayer. Marred or broken relationships—social, domestic, or spiritual—can hinder effectual prayers. Christ once said: So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift (Mt. 5:23, 24). If you know that someone has a legitimate grievance against you, how can you sincerely approach God in prayer? Uncorrected problems with brethren are extremely detrimental. One is reminded of the stubborn elder brother, who, because he was envious of his prodigal (though penitent) brother, refused brotherly association. In doing so, he deprived himself of Fatherly communion (Lk. 15:28)! Peter certainly stressed that discordant home relationships could hinder prayers (1 Pet. 3:7). Where domestic wrangling and bitterness prevail, prayer can never be effective. Listen. We cannot pray to God while harboring ugly thoughts toward others

The Sabotage of Selfish Prayers

Finally, some short-circuit their prayers due to their own selfishness.

James says: "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may spend it in your pleasures" (Jas. 4:3). The word for pleasures is hedone. Here it suggests the desire of one who is so wrapped up in the physical world that he has little interest in fulfilling his true purpose on earth (cf. Isa.43:7; Eccl. 12:13). Though "religious," the individual here considered prays only out of a base spirit of selfishness. Perhaps we need to analyze the motivation behind our prayers. When we petition for material things, is it that we might use them to the glory of God or that we might be more comfortable? That the prayers of many members of the church to this end are selfish prayers is clearly evinced by the fact that most of their possessions are employed to accommodate themselves, while only a pittance is offered to the Lord. But if our petitions are directed to the end that we may effectively serve our Savior, God can open the windows of heaven and pour out blessings in abundance (Mal. 3:10; Prov. 3:9, 10; Lk. 6:38).