

HINDRANCES TO PRAYER

"Ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." James 4:2b-3.

In our previous studies of the theme "Learning To Pray" we have learned that prayer is the converse of the human soul with God; that the elements of prayer are adoration, praise, confession, thanksgiving, petition, dedication and intercession; and that we should pray because prayer is a precious privilege, a personal duty, pleases God and procures so many blessings from Him.

In learning to pray it is important to bear in mind that oftentimes there are hindrances to prevailing prayer which cause God to withhold the gifts which we desire and request. We are reminded of this by the words of William Cowper's well-known hymn, so often sung in prayer meetings in the Lord's churches. It says:

"What various hindrances we meet
In coming to the mercy seat!
Yet who that knows the worth of prayer,
But wishes to be often there?"

"Prayer makes the darkened cloud withdraw;
Prayer climbs the ladder Jacob saw;
Gives exercise to faith and love;
Brings every blessing from above.

"Restraining prayer, we cease to fight;
Prayer keeps the Christian's armour bright,
And Satan trembles when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees.

"Were half the breath that's vainly spent
To heaven in supplication sent,
Our cheerful song would oftener be,
Hear what the Lord has done for me."

Unfortunately there is a tendency to think of the hindrances to prevailing prayer as being external rather than internal. We quickly perceive hindrances to prayer in the people and circumstances surrounding us, but fail to see the greatest barriers to blessings from God which exist in our own hearts and lives. Most hindrances to prayer are strictly of our own making. For this reason the prayer of the Psalmist should become ours. "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24).

Now we shall study some of the hindrances to prayer; that is, the things that are in our hearts and lives which make it impossible for God to grant our requests. We know that God wants us to pray. We also know that Satan does all that he can to keep us from praying. He would rather have us to do anything else than to pray. What are some of the hindrances to prayer?

I. Neglect.

"Ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not" (James 4:2b). Prayer is often neglected. Do you sometimes wonder why you are unsuccessful in the things which you attempt? Has it ever dawned upon you that it is because you have struggled in your own strength and failed to pray? James tells us that we are deprived of blessings simply because we do not ask for them. How different things might be if we prayed more!

II. Indifference.

Lack of interest regarding spiritual needs is one of the hindrances to true prayer. A strong desire based on a sense of great need is necessary to effective praying.

III. Indolence.

If one travels in the Orient he observes many temples of prayer and worship. Outside some of the temples are ropes which are attached to bells. It is believed by those who worship there that when they pull the ropes and ring the bells that they awaken the gods. Some of the worshipers barely touch the ropes; others give the rope a slight pull. Evidently they do not take seriously the matter of praying to the gods. Others take hold of the ropes and pull and pull, as if they would never let go. Their tenacity is indicative of the earnestness of their desire that the gods should hear and bless them. Our prayer lives must be characterized by earnestness instead of laziness. Sometimes we ask God for things which we should do for ourselves. We are like the boy who asked his father to solve his problems in arithmetic while he played with his marbles on the floor. For example, we need not pray for humility. God's Word says, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (II Chronicles 7:14). "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up" (James 4:10). "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time" (I Peter 5:6).

IV. Inattentiveness.

Many times when we pray our thoughts wander. We try to fix our minds, but they do not stay controlled. This makes prayer difficult. We have been taught to gird up the loins of our minds, meaning to bind together the loose ends of our thinking. Our praying will be ineffective unless distractions are kept from the mind.

V. Idolatry.

What is an idol? An idol is that which a person loves more than he loves God. God should be the supreme object of our affections. All else must be subordinate to Him. Any person or thing that takes from God His rightful supremacy is an idol, whether it be a relative, a friend, possessions, business or service. Idolatry is a snare which forestalls many blessings. Therefore, we need to guard against it.

"The dearest idol ever known,
What'er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from Thy throne,
And worship only Thee."

VI. Pride.

"Surely God will not hear vanity, neither will the Almighty regard it" (Job 35:13). Men must humble themselves before God. They cannot come into God's presence with a strut and expect God to hear and answer. "The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit" (Psalm 34:18). Pride is a very dull student in the school of experience, but it is a great hindrance to prevailing prayer. Pride is hateful in the sight of God. It is God Who gives us all things "richly to enjoy." "What hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (I Corinthians 4:7). Do not let pride ruin your prayer life.

VII. Stinginess.

If we stop our ears to the cry of the needy, when they appeal to us for help, He will refuse to help us when we cry unto Him. He said, "Whoso stoppeth his ears at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself, but shall not be heard" (Proverbs 21:13). "Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again" (Luke 6:38). Here God tells us distinctly that He measures out His benefactions to us in exactly the same measure that we measure out our benefactions to others. If we stop our ears at the cry of the needy when it is in our power to help, we should not be surprised when we are treated in a similar manner. No miser is ever mighty in prayer. Nobody who is mighty in prayer is ever miserly. Lack of liberality is evidence of a lack of spiritual power. If we get from God, we must give to others.

VIII. Debts.

If men expect their prayers to be answered, they must be honest enough to pay their just debts. As long as there is a debt you can pay and you do not do what God requires about such, every prayer you offer God stinks with dishonesty. When Zaccheus was converted, he said, "Lord, if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold" (Luke 19:8).

IX. Defective Family Relationships.

God distinctly says that a wrong treatment of a wife by a husband, or of a husband by a wife, hinders prayer. It simply makes it impossible for God to hear and answer the prayers of the guilty party.

"Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered" (I Peter 3:7).

Many times the reason for unanswered prayer is the defective relationship existing between husband and wife, parent and child, brothers and sisters. Family life has an important bearing on the prayer life.

X. An Unforgiving Spirit.

An unforgiving spirit makes it impossible for God to answer prayers. In the Sermon on the Mount our Lord said, "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15). "And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have aught against any; that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses" (Mark 11:25-26). "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen" (I John 4:20).

How little and trifling the sins others have committed against us in comparison with the terrible way we have treated God! If anybody harbors an unforgiving spirit, he is wasting the time that he spends in prayer. He cannot have any power in prayer until he eliminates the bitterness from his heart. An unforgiving spirit is an insurmountable barrier to blessing.

A person cannot be right with God who is wrong with his brother. Neither can an unforgiving person be in fellowship with a forgiving God. One cannot help but admire Booker T. Washington who said, "I will not let any man reduce my soul to the level of hatred." God deals with our prayers according to the spirit we show in our daily lives toward others.

XI. An Utterior Motive.

"Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (James 4:3). A selfish purpose makes it impossible for God to answer our prayers. Our supreme motive in our prayers should not be our personal gratification, but that God may get glory to Himself. Whatever we ask of God in prayer should be for the purpose that God may be glorified in giving it. If we pray selfishly, we do not pray submissively. A selfish person can only be puny in prayer. Since selfishness is making self the center, no selfish person can expect to be mighty in prayer.

XII. Unworthy Living.

In many instances God does not answer prayer because the iniquities of His children have destroyed their fellowship with Him. In Isaiah 59:1-2 we read "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear."

"If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Psalm 66:18). John R. Mott asked, "Has God ever been known to hear a prayer from a heart in which any form of iniquity was deliberately

fostered or fondled or tolerated?" God will not answer our prayers so long as there is controversy between us and Him. Sin in the life renders prayer ineffective. God refused to answer David's prayer for his sick child because he had committed an abominable sin. He had stolen another's wife, destroyed his home and had him put to death. Before God would hear and answer his prayers David had to confess his sins and repent for them. We would do well to pray with the Psalmist, "Cleanse thou me from secret faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me" (Psalm 19:12-13).

XIII. Unbelief.

Many a blessing is forfeited because of unbelief. There are people who doubt before they pray, while they pray and after they pray that their prayers will have any effect on the matter concerning which they make their requests. "And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Matthew 21:22). "Without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Hebrews 11:6). "Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24). When we pray we must ask in faith. Some have not because they ask not. Others have not because they believe not when they pray.