

31. Let's talk about our prayer

May 29, 2016

A couple of Fridays ago, my alarm went off and I barely opened my eyes. Before I even got out of the bed, the Holy Spirit spoke to my heart that I should extend the teaching about prayer more than what we learned last week.

I have a set of pop quiz to ask you about your prayer life. You don't need to answer them loudly, but answer them to yourself – honestly:

Q1) Are you satisfied with your prayer life?

Q2) When you pray, are you confident that the Lord is listening to your prayer? And after you finish your prayer, do you believe that the Lord is capable to do what you asked for?

Q3) When somebody asks you to pray for them, do you always remember to pray for them?

Q4) When you pray, do you only want to be seen and heard by God, because you are not concerned about impressing others with your prayers?

If you are like me, you are not exactly happy with your prayer life. Actually, it is much to be desired, because you feel that something is lacking, something is hindering, and something is not quite right with your prayer life.

Though the Bible clearly teaches us how we should pray to the Lord; why we should pray to Him; what kind of things in our life would hinder our prayers, somehow we come up with our own faulty concept of theology regarding prayer. It is my hope and prayer that what we are going to learn from the Lord will clear up those things so that we can get closer to Him in our prayers.

A. WHAT IS PRAYER?

Some of you may know a children's book "Five Children and It" by Edith Nesbit. In this book, brothers and sisters on a summer holiday discover an ancient sand fairy who grants them one wish each day. But every wish brings the children more trouble than happiness because they can't foresee the results of getting everything they ask for. Getting every prayer request granted would be quite a disaster for us, don't you think?

1 Kings 3:5 At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask! What shall I give you?"

The Lord God appeared to Solomon, the successor to king David's throne in his dream at the beginning of his reign and offered him a carte blanche – anything he wanted. Wisely Solomon chose wisdom. Now if the same offer is given to you from the Lord, what would you ask for? For me, with all the things I could ask for, honestly, I would choose to be just like Jesus. I am not saying that I want to replace Him, but just being like Him in obedience to the Father; just being like Him in doing the will of Him who made me and allows me to exist; just being like Him who is the Author and Finisher of my faith and life. We cannot do any of that without diligent and consistent prayer in our life.

Prayer is so simple that the smallest child can pray, but it is so great that the mightiest man of God cannot say that he truly has mastered prayer. Prayer needs to be an earnest conversation with God, not a formula. It's not the words we pray that matter, it's the condition of our heart.

Prayer is a privilege and an obligation of the Christian where we communicate with the Lord. It is how we convey our confession, requests, intercessions, thanksgiving, etc. to our Holy God. We are commanded to pray, not suggested.

B. WHAT DOES PRAYER REQUIRE?

If people were asked what prayer requires, you may get many external requirements, such as, quiet and secluded location and time, special clothing, etc. It would be nice if you can manage those things. The true requirements of prayer have to do with our internal and spiritual parts more than the external.

I am listing a few here:

1) Faith: George Mueller, a great man of faith and prayer, was once asked what was the most important part of prayer. He replied: "The 15 minutes after I have said, 'Amen.'" As I mentioned before, there is no power in our prayer in itself, but the One who listens to ours has. Prayer is making deliberate contact with God in word or thought. It needs to be the voice of our faith as the bridge between sheer panic and serene peace.

If we don't have faith in the One who listens to our prayers and responds, we shouldn't even waste our time and effort in prayer. When we pray, we have to pray with our eyes on God, not on the difficulties.

James 1:6-8 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

By the way, when you pray, please DO NOT pray to the virgin Mary, some saints, or angels. Because they are not God and they can not do anything for you. When you pray, you pray to the Father in heaven in the name of Jesus through the Holy Spirit, no one else.

2) Humility: The highest form of prayer comes from the depths of a humble heart. We cannot and should not think that we can order our God to do what we want. Instead of trying to twist His arm with your prayer, put yourself in His hands. True prayer is always offered knowing how weak we are in ourselves, and how much we need the power of God.

3) Honesty: Whether our prayer is a public prayer or private one, it must be honest without an ounce of pretense. How can we even think that we can conceal anything from the all-knowing God? Sin must be confessed; mistake must be admitted; blame must be stopped.

4) Without ceasing: Apostle Paul put it, to "pray without ceasing" in 1 Thessalonians 5. You may wonder, "Do I have to pray non-stop 24/7? Close my eyes and get on my knees all day?" Of course not. It means to make prayer as natural to us as our regular breathing. Unless we are sick, we rarely think about our breathing. If we have to remember to breathe, we would be all dead long ago, because we would forget. We just do it. Likewise with prayer, it should be the natural habit of our lives, the "atmosphere" in which we constantly live. Besides, our persistent prayers demonstrate faith in Him. That is what our God is really after.

C. HINDRANCES TO OUR PRAYER

James 4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Why are there times when we pray, yet our prayers don't seem to go any higher than the ceiling? What can stop our prayers from being answered in the affirmative? There are several reasons our prayers may be hindered.

1) Selfishness: We can pray the most beautiful prayers conceivable, but if our hearts are in the wrong place, and if we are motivated by selfishness, then God will not hear us. So, what is our motive? It can have everything to do with how our prayers are answered.

James 4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

2) Idols in our lives: God is telling us that when we have idols in our lives, He will not hear our prayers.

Ezekiel 14:3 "Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and put before them that which causes them to stumble into iniquity. Should I let Myself be inquired of at all by them?"

3) Unforgiveness: Are you nursing a grudge against someone in your life right now? If so, you need to deal with it so that your prayers will not be hindered.

Mark 11:25 "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."

Selfishness, idolatry, and unforgiveness – they can mean the difference between answered and unanswered prayer.

D. WHAT THE DEVIL DOESN'T WANT YOU TO KNOW

Hebrews 4:15-16 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The devil doesn't want you to know this, but the truth is that you can approach the throne of God any time – 24 hours a day. The devil wants us to believe that approaching God in prayer is based upon a point system. He wants us to think, "If I have been a good Christian, I can approach God. But if I have sinned, God will never hear my voice."

Christians can approach God any time, because our relationship with the Almighty is not based on what we have done for Him. It is based on what Jesus did for us. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross applies to us when we are down as well as when we are up. In the process of life, we will confess our sins and ask God to forgive us. But all the while, we possess access to go boldly to the throne of God.

Nevertheless the devil is there telling us we are not good enough to pray to God. No doubt that's what he whispered into Adam's ear after he sinned against the Lord. "Hide when the Lord comes," he probably said. And when the Lord came into the garden, there was Adam hiding from God when he should have been seeking Him for forgiveness.

The next time you fall into sin, turn to God and go to church for help. All too often we think, "I can't go to church now. Church is for godly people." We need to remember that church is a hospital for Jesus-believing-sinners. So when the devil says you are not worthy, don't hide from God. Run to God and receive help from Him and His people.

E. PRAYER IN SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Ephesians 6:12-18 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. 14 Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, 15 and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; 16 above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. 17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; 18 praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints

Prayer is frequently represented in Scripture under the figure of spiritual warfare. In that spiritual warfare, three personalities are involved, not two. Between God on the one hand and the devil on the other, stands the praying man. Though weak in himself, he occupies a strategic role in the deathless struggle between the dragon and the Lamb. Though the power and authority that the praying man wields, are not his own from the beginning, but are delegated to him by the victorious Christ to whom he is united by faith.

Listen, no one is a more firm believer in the power of prayer than the devil himself, not that he practices, but that he suffers from it. Though our prayer may be awkward and feeble, but since the power of prayer is in the One who hears it and not in the one who says it, our prayers do make a difference in our spiritual world.

I like what St. Augustine said, "Pray as though everything depended on God, and work as though everything depended on you." Prayer is not an escape from responsibility; it is our response to God's ability. True prayer energizes us for service and battle.

F. THE HOLY SPIRIT PRAYS FOR US

Romans 8:26 Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us.

Have you ever been deeply concerned about something or someone, but you didn't know what to pray? "What can I say," you wonder. "I don't know how to articulate this." But did you know that sometimes some of the best prayers are the shortest and the simplest? It may be nothing more than a grunt or a groan. But God understands that prayer. Whether you have a beautiful prayer to pray or whether you don't know what to say, present it to God, and the Holy Spirit will help you. According to Romans 8:26, the Holy Spirit helps us to pray.

Remember all that God has done for you and all that He is doing for you. He saved you. His Holy Spirit indwells you. He assures you. He teaches you. And He helps you to pray. So let's yield to Him. Let's open up our hearts to the work that He wants to do in our lives.

G. APPLICATIONS

- 1) Work without prayer is atheism. But prayer without work is presumption.
- 2) When we pray, we have to pray with our eyes on God, not on the difficulties.
- 3) If you only pray when you're in trouble, it is no wonder that you are in trouble.