

TEACH US TO PRAY

Prayer is an important tool – the most powerful tool – in the life of every believer in Jesus Christ. Yet, oftentimes prayer is misunderstood or not used.

The Bible has much to teach us about the importance of prayer, the methods of prayer, the attitudes of prayer, and the results of prayer. This article will look at the basic foundations of prayer by studying the instructions Christ gave to us all in “The Lord’s Prayer”.

WHAT IS PRAYER?

In its simplest form, “prayer” can be defined as **communicating with God**. But there is much more to prayer, as we will soon discover. Jesus’ disciples were familiar with prayer. But their understanding was greatly expanded as they walked with Jesus. They witnessed Jesus in prayer often, and saw that prayer was a vital part of His ministry. They saw how His prayers were offered, and how they were answered. They realized that Jesus was not offering vain repetitions or going through outward religious exercises. Jesus was actually talking with God the Father. He was asking God to help and intervene in real-life problems. And powerful things happened in answer to Jesus’ prayers.

So the disciples asked Jesus, “**Lord, teach us to pray**” (Luke 11:1).

That is the same way each of us, as growing disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, should begin our study of prayer – **with a prayer!** Pause even now and pray something like this: “Lord, as I study the subject of prayer, will You enlarge my understanding and give me wisdom? Will You help me to see why You ask me to pray? Will You enable me to become a person who prays faithfully? Lord, teach me to pray!”

“CALL TO ME ...”

God is the One Who desires us to pray. He created mankind with the ability to talk to Him. Deep within every person is a need to reach out to God for help, guidance and comfort. Also within each person is the desire to worship, honor

and serve a Supreme Being. It is vitally important that these desires be directed to the right Source – to God Himself.

Many times we reach out to the wrong people or to things for guidance. We mistakenly honor or worship false gods, worldly systems or other people – even our own accomplishments. We must learn to direct our prayer and worship to the **only** One Who is worthy of our devotion – the One Who made us, God alone! It is God – and only God – Who is both **willing** and **able** to answer our prayers with complete wisdom, sovereignty and love.

Communication (or communion) with God is the key to why we were made. Our life will be incomplete without our prayers to God and God's responses back to us. We were designed for relationship with Him. We will never realize our full purpose, nor will we experience the fullness of God's presence, until we understand this – and then pray!

God invites us to come to Him in prayer. The Bible contains many, many verses of Scripture wherein God invites us to talk to Him, ask of Him, look to Him, and call upon Him. That is the basic form of prayer – talking with God. *“Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know”* (Jer. 33:3).

A PATTERN OF PRAYER

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, He gave them a “pattern” for prayer to follow. This familiar Prayer is commonly called, “The Lord's Prayer”.

“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. (Matt 6:9-13).

The Lord's Prayer is beautiful and powerful, and can be prayed just as Jesus prayed it. But you will notice that Jesus said to pray *“in this manner”*, which means to pray in a like fashion. This helps us to see that Jesus intended for His prayer to be more than just something that is repeated word for word.

As a matter of fact, Jesus taught the disciples **not** to just memorize and repeat the same prayers over and over (Matt 6:7). Jesus himself prayed many different types of prayers during His lifetime (Matt 26:36-42; John 17).

Jesus gave to His disciples this **example** of prayer (Luke 11:2-4) as a “pattern” – a way to teach us to pray that includes the most important principles of prayer. Let us examine these principles now.

ADOPTED BY GOD THE FATHER

The very first words in Jesus’ pattern for prayer are, “***Our Father***”.

God is your living, loving Heavenly Father. He is not some unknown deity, or a far-off, uncaring “force”. God is a definite Person, Who is both infinite in power and wisdom and yet so very personal.

Most importantly, God **loves** you. “...*the Father Himself loves you...*” (John 16:27). You were created by Him and for Him (Gen 1:27; Isa 43:1,7; Col 1:16). You exist for relationship with God.

Yet, because God is also perfectly holy and just, He cannot tolerate sin. We have all disobeyed (sinned) and it is sin that has separated us from a holy God (Rom 5:8-10; Eph 4:18; Col 1:21). From the time mankind first chose to rebel in the Garden of Eden, we have been separated from relationship with God.

But God loves each person so much that He sent Jesus to tell us about God’s great love. Jesus then demonstrated God’s love by dying in our place as the sacrifice for our sins – He took the punishment that should have been ours.

This made it possible for our sins to be forgiven, and for relationship with God our Father to be possible again. And this relationship with God is intended to last into eternity. “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life*” (John 3:16; read also Ephesians 2:1-10).

When you believe on Jesus Christ and receive Him as your Savior, you are welcomed into God’s family as his son or daughter (Rom 8:12-17; Gal 4:4-7). The Bible teaches us that “*old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new*” (2 Cor. 5:17). When you repent of your sins and receive Christ’s free gift of salvation, you are “*born again*” (John 3:3-7; 1 Pet 1:23).

You are a “*new creation*” (2 Cor 5:17). Your dead spirit comes alive and your sins are forgiven (Col 2:13,14). You are washed clean by the blood of Christ (Heb 9:14; 1 John 1:7; Rev 1:5), and can stand before God as forgiven and holy.

You can then know God as your Father. You can talk directly to Him. You become “child-like” in your trust of God your Father (Matt 18:2-4).

Christ’s work – when believed on and received – restores mankind back to relationship with God the Father. Christ’s work also opens the way for us to participate with God in His restored Kingdom purposes.

As Christians, we can join with our Heavenly Father in fellowship, reconciliation and a holy purpose for our lives. We can draw near to God with assurance of faith, and enter in to His presence (Heb 10:19-22).

FELLOWSHIP WITH THE FATHER

The concept of Fatherhood that Jesus introduced to His disciples was strange and new. God had seldom been revealed to the Jews in this loving and intimate term. He had been called the Father of the Nations, but He was not considered to be one’s **own** Father.

Jesus is the Son of God, and can call God His Father. Because of what Christ has sacrificed and accomplished for us, we too can know God as **our own** Heavenly Father (John 1:12; Gal 3:26; Gal 4:1-7).

However, it is possible that this loving Name for God – Father – may seem just as difficult or strange for you to grasp as it was for the Jews. Perhaps you never had a model of a loving earthly father. Or perhaps you never understood that you are a treasured child of God, and that Jesus gave His life in order for you to be restored to your rightful place – as a child of God who is in constant fellowship with His Heavenly Father.

But it is true! If you have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, you now have complete access to God. You are His child, and He is your Father in Heaven! For, “*you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God*” (Rom 8:15,16).

God loves you. Because you have been made righteous by Jesus' work (Rom 5:19), you can come before God's presence. He wants you to talk to Him; and He desires to make His will known to you.

It is true that God is the Sovereign Lord of all creation. He rules over all the universe, for all eternity. The Good News of the Gospel is that you can be forgiven of your sins and be restored to this Great and Sovereign God as His child! You can be part of God's family, and join with your spiritual brothers and sisters in worship, prayer and service to our Great Heavenly Father.

You can joyfully submit your life to God daily, trusting in His love for you. Through prayer and the study of God's Word, the Bible, you can receive God's help and instructions for how to be a faithful son or daughter. You can join in Your Father's Kingdom purposes, and be part of His plan to bring this Good News to every tribe, tongue and nation. You can **pray "my Father"** – and, with joy and confidence, receive His loving answers and invite your Father God's rule into every circumstance of your life.

ENTHRONED IN HEAVEN

Jesus taught His disciples another principle of prayer when He spoke, "*Our Father in heaven*" (Matt 6:9).

When we pray to God, it is good to remember that God is a personal Being. He is not a mystical force, but a distinct Person. He has a place of habitation, on His throne of sovereignty over all of creation (Ps 11:4; 47:8). His "view" of our life and world is far above ours; His thoughts are greater and grander than ours could ever be (Isa. 55:8,9).

God is not limited by time or physical space. He has always existed; and He always will exist. He is **eternal** (Ps 90:2; 93:2). He is all-powerful and exalted above creation, governments, and all other forces.

Though God has established the laws of nature, He is not limited by them. He can make the sun stand still (Josh 10:12-14) or cause the earth to give torrential rain for many days (Gen 7:17-24). **God is not part of creation; He is the Creator!** God created the physical universe by calling it into existence by His Word (John 1:1-3; Col 1:13-17). God is in the place of highest power, authority and glory. Nothing can compare to God.

God knows and sees everything, even our thoughts (Ps. 139:4; Heb 4:13). God is very great and vast, and yet He is also very near – choosing to allow His presence to dwell within us (1 Cor. 3:16).

It is a most challenging thing to try and understand how the Living God – the great and glorious Sovereign over all the universe – is also our very near Father Who wants to have relationship with us!

The same God:

- Who spoke to Abraham, *“I am Almighty God”* (Gen 17:1);
- Who proclaimed to Jeremiah, *“Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for Me?”* (Jer. 32:27);
- About Whom Jesus said, *“with God all things are possible”* (Matt 19:26); ... this is the very same God Who asks **you** today to talk to Him in prayer; and He desires to answer you and show you His ways!

HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME

The Lord’s pattern for prayer continues with, *“Hallowed be Your name”* (Matt 6:9).

God’s glory is supreme, above all our desires and needs. It is God our Father Whom we approach in prayer; but we are also approaching His throne as the Great King of the universe (1 Ki. 22:19; Ps. 11:4; 83:18; Isa. 66:1).

The throne of God is an actual place, where innumerable angelic hosts are offering continual worship: *“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!”* (Rev 4:8).

The word “hallowed” comes from the same Greek root word as “holy”. It means to be holy, set apart, sanctified or separate. Jesus was teaching us that God the Father’s name, and thus His Person, is not something common or unclean. God is not like all the other gods and things that men make to worship. God, our Heavenly Father, is truly the **only** Sovereign God Almighty – set far apart from all other imitations – Who alone is worthy of our praise, devotion, love, worship and obedience. Nothing and no one can compare to the God of the Bible!

GOD ALONE IS WORTHY

We must always be mindful that we are coming before the royal courts of Heaven when we pray. We must come before God with reverence and holy fear (Ps. 89:6-9).

The Bible teaches that we enter *“into His courts with praise”* (Ps. 100:4); thus, all prayer should begin with worship, humbly bowing our hearts before our King.

God is the Supreme Ruler over all creation (Ps. 89:11-13). Earthly rulers are but shadows in the light of His greatness. The Kingdom belongs to God; He is the only Monarch. God is the most powerful; His throne holds sway in all worlds. Heaven exalts Him, hell trembles before Him, and the whole earth gives Him glory, either willingly or unwillingly (Ps. 89:5; Luke 19:37-40).

So the first purpose of our prayers should be the worship and adoration of our God, Who alone is worthy.

In the feasts of the Old Testament, everything was brought in worship to God first. Then the offerings were sometimes given back to the worshipper for his own use. So, too, must we first worship our God, giving Him the glory and exaltation that He alone deserves. Then we can offer our requests, and allow Him to return back to us as He so desires.

Our worship does not **earn** anything from God. Nor is God like us in that He desires our praise to feel better about Himself. But worship from the creation to the Creator reminds us of just how great, powerful and all-loving God is – how **worthy** He is to receive our praise!

WELCOMING GOD’S PRESENCE

Worship also welcomes God’s presence, and creates an atmosphere that allows Him entrance. *“But You are holy, **enthroned** in the praises of Israel”* (Ps 22:3). In the King James translation, this same verse reads: *“But Thou art holy, O Thou that **inhabitest** the praises of Israel.”*

The original Hebrew word for “enthroned” and “inhabitest” is *yawshab*. It means to “sit down, settle or remain”. Though God is everywhere present,

these verses help us understand that praise invites God to come and dwell with us in a unique way.

When God's people truly worship the Lord, His Kingdom power and rule come and abide in that setting. Worship provides an entry point so that His Kingdom can "*come*" and His "*will be done*" in human circumstances.

There is no better way to approach the throne of God in prayer than to begin with worship, welcoming His presence and rule right where you are.

PRAYER GLORIFIES GOD

Our prayers can also be a form of worship. The very act of praying to God is a declaration that He exists. Prayers are the continual proclamation that "*the Lord, He is God*" (Deut. 7:9; Ps. 100:3).

When we ask for and receive special mercies, we declare that God is a living, active God, Who is near and Who hears us. When we ask for His blessing, we declare that He can provide. When we say as Jesus did, "*not my will, but Thine, be done*" (Luke 22:42 kjv), we exalt God's sovereignty and power.

When we ask for forgiveness, we proclaim that He is a God of grace.

When we humbly pray, it is a reminder that God is the Sovereign Lord, the Creator, the One Who gives life and sustains it, and the Giver of every good and perfect gift (Ps. 97; Ps 104; 1 Tim. 6:13; Jas. 1:17; Rev 4:11).

We can come before our loving Father, but it must be with reverence. We can be bold in the asking (Heb 4:16), but we must be respectful. We are as a worm (Job 25:6); He is the Everlasting God.

It is in prayer that we recognize our own unworthiness and how much we truly need God. As we draw near to God, we also learn of God's loving willingness to hear us and draw near to us (Jas 4:8). As we pray and God answers, we realize that our truest help and provisions come from Him alone. In Him – and only Him – is all that we need. That is even more reason to glorify Him – **hallowed** be the blessed name of our God!

YOUR KINGDOM COME

Jesus' pattern for prayer continues: "***Your kingdom come...***" (Matt 6:10).

The Bible clearly reveals that it is God's highest desire to establish His Kingdom rule in the affairs of mankind. And it should be the utmost desire of every true Christian to see God's Kingdom life and power come into every situation – even now!

That is one of the foremost reasons why we pray: we must invite God's Kingdom rule and power on earth, as it has already been accomplished in Heaven.

Many people mistakenly believe that God does whatever He wants regardless of our requests. But the Bible is clear that **man is responsible for INVITING God's order and rule – His presence, purpose and power – into this world.** God desires to move on our behalf; but He commands that we invite His work through prayer.

MAN'S LOST DOMINION

God created man and woman, and gave them the responsibility to rule over this earth as stewards (Gen 1:26-28). But mankind betrayed God's trust, and instead **made a choice** to rebel and disobey (Gen 3:1-7). As a result, mankind lost intimate fellowship with God, and forfeited the right and ability to rule as God intended (Gen 3:15-24).

And then, because man chose Satan's lies over the truth of God's Word, Satan was able to take the authority mankind had surrendered to him, so that now *"the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one"* (1 John 5:19).

Mankind has ever since been vulnerable to satanic deception. Our own sinful and rebellious choices have also contributed to the painful and confused mess our world has become. Death and destruction have invaded every part of life as we know it.

So much of the tragedy, pain and suffering in our world is **not** according to how God created and intended our world to function. It is a result of sin entering our world through man's chosen rebellion and disobedience (Rom 5:12; 8:18-22).

NEW KINGDOM LIFE

But God, in His great mercy and love, provided mankind with a redemptive choice. God sent Jesus, Who announced that man could be restored to God's Kingdom rule and purposes: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matt 4:17). It was time for a new kingdom rule to begin!

This was not a political kingdom, or an outward, physical kingdom. The Kingdom of God is first and foremost a spiritual Kingdom – and it begins as it is welcomed into the heart (Luke 17:20,21).

Jesus demonstrated the new Kingdom life He was offering. Every miracle He performed, every need He met, every prayer He prayed – each of these showed that the power of God's rule was now available to mankind. Jesus demonstrated and taught what God is really like, so that we might respond rightly to God and join in His Kingdom purposes.

Jesus demonstrated God's great mercy, forgiveness and love. But he also confronted the demonic realm with strength and authority. In the final act of His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus smashed the power of hell (Col 2:15) and offered to us the same ability to strike down through prayer any satanic forces we encounter (Eph 3:10-12; 6:10-18). This spiritual Kingdom also involves spiritual warfare (prayer), to establish God's righteous order and rule.

ADVANCING GOD'S KINGDOM

We now see what God, through Christ, has made available to mankind: complete forgiveness; restoration of relationship with God; and His Kingdom rule released to us and through us.

When we accept Christ, we become part of God's Kingdom (John 3:3-5). As Kingdom "*ambassadors*" (2 Cor 5:20) it is our privilege and duty to also be Kingdom **advancers** – to share the Gospel of this Kingdom with the world around us (Matt 24:14; Acts 1:8). Jesus tells us that He gives us the keys to the Kingdom (Matt 16:19). Keys allow us both entry and authority. But will we use this responsibility to invite the rule of God into our midst?

The true cause of human misery is that men are living out of divine order. The world is in rebellion against God's sovereign rule. It is God's highest desire to

see the welcoming of God's Kingdom rule into **every** heart, and into the world at large, in order to fulfill His great plan of redemption.

The true answer to every need lifted in prayer is found in God, and His Kingdom life and power being released to us and through us!

KINGDOM INTERCESSION

Our prayers allow us to partner with God. We wait upon Him, discover His will, and pray according to what He desires to do to advance His Kingdom. The power is God's – but we are privileged with the responsibility of inviting His Kingdom power and rule into earth's realm through prayer.

God's full Kingdom will not be completely realized until Christ's glorious return (1 Cor. 15:20-28; Rev 11:15). But because of what Christ has already accomplished through His life, death and resurrection, the rule and power of the Kingdom of God has already been released in part wherever it is invited.

How much higher and grander our prayer life can become when our eyes are lifted beyond our own needs and we join with Christ in intercession for others and for His cause. The best eternal fruit will be reaped when we have persisted **in prayer**: for the progress of God's Kingdom; for the needs of His Church; for His ministers and servants; to bind and oppose the forces of hell; and for the evangelization of the world!

When Jesus declared on the Cross, "*it is finished*" (John 19:30), He was announcing that the grip of sin and the power of eternal death on mankind was forever broken (Heb 2:14-16). Jesus was also announcing the completion of His work from Heaven's side. Now, all that remains is for us on earth to choose to:

- receive Christ's work and be saved;
- submit to God, worship before His throne, and be transformed into Christ's image by His love and power; and,
- accept the responsibility to invite the rule of God into the circumstances of earth through daily prayer.

It is the Kingdom power of God through prayer that will loose the captives, restore sight to the blind, raise the dead, heal the diseased, and see salvation brought to multitudes.

Let us then rise up with faith and pray in earnest, “Thy Kingdom come, Lord!”

YOUR WILL BE DONE

Jesus’ prayer continues with “*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” (Matt 6:10).

This little statement, “*Your will be done*”, sometimes gives us cause to fear and tremble. We might be afraid of what that prayer might cost us!

It is true that we must come humbly and reverently before God with our petitions, willing to submit to His Lordship and receive His sovereign rule. But this is nothing to fear! We can instead have great confidence and rejoicing in God’s loving will.

There is no greater sense of peace than to lay aside our own desires, and come to the Father in prayer, seeking Him for His desires. When we know His will, we can ask accordingly, then rise up in the mighty promise: “*If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you*” (John 15:7; see also 1 John 5:14).

THE WILL OF GOD

But how do we know God’s will? The primary way is through the Bible. We can be sure we are not asking amiss (Jas 4:3) when we pray according to the promises of God’s holy Word.

We can also spend time in prayer and meditation, waiting upon God and asking the Holy Spirit to pray through us according to the will of God. We can pray in our spiritual language, especially when we do not know exactly how to pray in a given situation. As we allow the Lord to guide us in prayer, He will impress upon our minds what He wants us pray for (Rom 8:26,27).

Studying the Bible and spending time in God’s presence through prayer will teach us what pleases Him. As we cast our cares upon Him, we will know His peace (Phil 4:6,7; 1 Pet 5:7). The Bible teaches that the peace of God can be a guide to us (Rom 14:17; Col 3:15). If we are doing something that displeases God or violates His will, His peace will leave us and we will have inner turmoil. This can also help us to understand the will of God.

God can reveal His will to us in many ways. God can show us His will through godly counselors (Prov 19:20; 24:6). Sometimes God will use circumstances, the inner voice of the Holy Spirit, or even visions and dreams to reveal His will. But remember: Any true leading of God will **agree with the principles of Scripture!** God will not violate or change what He has already said or promised (Num 23:19,20; Ps 33:11; Jas 1:17).

It is important to remember to stay submitted to God, obey Him in all things, and daily put our trust in God through prayer. He will then direct us (Prov 3:5,6).

“GIVE US THIS DAY...”

Jesus continues teaching the disciples how to pray when He says: “*Give us this day our daily bread*” (Matt 6:11).

Jesus assures us that God loves us as our Father and desires to give us good things (Matt 7:11). He wants to provide for us such good things as: work to earn our food; strength and health to work and serve Him; wisdom; godly relationships; shelter; clothing – but He tells us to ask Him (Jas 4:2).

We must come to God in prayer, asking and seeking (Luke 11:5-13) in order to receive from Him. Even though God already knows what we need (Matt 6:8), He still wants us to talk to Him about our needs and desires and submit them to Him.

What a great privilege God has given us, to commune daily with Him and talk to Him about our needs. Our spiritual life is much more rich and fulfilling when we look to God for everything – and praise Him for every provision! Every good thing we have is from God (Jas 1:17).

We must remain simple and trusting in our prayer life. We do not need to ask for a storehouse of future provision; we are to ask for, and depend upon God for, the bread of today (Matt 6:25-34). The word *daily* is best translated as “necessary” or “sufficient”. God knows what is best for us; it may not be grand, but it will be His adequate provision, and as such it will come with His blessings!

We must be satisfied with what God gives us for today, and leave the needs of tomorrow in His wise and faithful hands (Matt 6:34; Phil 4:11; 1Tim 6:6-8,17; Heb 13:5).

Jesus reminded us, *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”* (Matt 4:4). Our temporal needs are to be balanced with our spiritual needs. We need more than just food and clothing. We must depend upon God’s nourishment and provision for our entire being – body, soul and spirit.

As we submit our day to the Lord and ask for His provision for that day, we can expect His grace, strength, provision, help, wisdom – all that we need! Thank you, Lord, that You are the All-Sufficient One – and You give us sufficient, daily bread (2 Cor 3:4,5).

FORGIVE OUR SINS

Another priority in prayer is forgiveness, both receiving it from God and extending it to others: *“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”* (Matt 6:12).

RECEIVING FORGIVENESS

In Jesus’ pattern for prayer, He included our personal need for regular, daily cleansing and forgiveness from God.

Some translations use the word “debts”; others use “trespasses” in this prayer. Both are accurate, for they represent two types of disobedience.

A “trespass” is a willful disobedience to a rule or standard God has already set in His Word. When we choose to step past the boundaries of God’s order, we “trespass” into unlawful territory. This is sin. Walking in God’s grace does NOT mean we can do whatever we want without regard (Rom 6:1,2; Heb 10:26-29). Sin is sin, and must be dealt with every time it is chosen.

A “debt” relates to our failures in a situation, when we should have behaved differently than we did. This is also sin. The Bible describes it this way: *“Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin”* (Jas 4:17 nas).

We sin by choosing to do the wrong thing; we can also sin by ***not doing*** what we know is the right thing!

We may not have committed a vile sin or a willful rebellion that needs to be confessed. However, we may have a place in our life that falls far short of God's standard for holiness. Sometimes we are blind to an area of sin or compromise in our life. We need to come to God in prayer and ask Him to shine the light of His truth into our hearts. Even a judgmental attitude or an impatient, angry word are enough to warrant repentance and a cleansing touch from God.

The Bible remedy for both types of sin is clear: *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9). Our forgiveness is assured when we repent to God (Ps 103:12; Mic 7:19; Heb 10:17). We must deal with our sin **daily** in prayer, to keep our walk with God open and pure.

People who are sensitive to the Holy Spirit and growing as Christians will always be aware that they need more of God's holiness and less of their own selfish ways. The pure in heart are the ones to whom God promises to reveal Himself (Matt 5:8).

FORGIVING OTHERS

We must also take time in prayer to forgive others who have wronged us. A soul filled with bitterness cannot approach God in true communion. An embittered heart is also like an infectious disease that can poison others – even an entire church! (Heb 12:15).

The Bible makes very clear that because we have been shown great grace and forgiveness from God, we have no right to withhold the same kind of extravagant forgiveness toward others (Matt 18:21-35). If we want to be forgiven, we must also be forgiving (Matt 6:14,15; Mark 11:25,26). If we will show mercy, we will receive mercy (Matt 5:7).

Forgiveness is a vital key to effective prayer and a godly Christian life. Let us make confession and forgiveness a daily part of our prayer!

[For more about forgiveness and its important role in prayer, please read "Obstacles To Effective Prayer – Obstacle 2" on page **13**. Also, read "How Do I Forgive?" on pages **13-14** for instructions about forgiving others.]

STRENGTH AGAINST TEMPTATION

Jesus' pattern for petition continues, *"do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one"* (Matt 6:13).

The Bible teaches us that God will never lead us into temptation. *"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death"* (Jas 1:13-15).

If God does not lead us into temptation, then what does Jesus intend when He encourages us to pray in this manner? Because we live in a broken, sin-filled world, temptation will come to all believers. Though God does **not** tempt us, He promises to **use** the trials and temptations we face in this life to shape our character (Rom 8:28,29). He will even reward those who remain faithful to God in the face of temptation (Jas 1:2-4; 12-14).

Jesus does teach us to pray for help and strength to **resist** temptation when it comes, to not *"enter into temptation"* (Matt 26:41; Luke 22:40,46). **Each time we overcome temptation, we are strengthened to resist temptation in the future.** We can pray that we will not fall when temptation strikes, and that we will *"be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man"* (Eph 3:16) in order to resist temptation.

Our times of prayer and Bible study strengthen us. They also sensitize us to more easily recognize the circumstances that might lead us astray. When we are familiar with the truth of God's Word, we can counter the devil's lies and temptations (Matt 4:3-10).

GRACE TO HELP

It is important to remember that **being tempted is not a sin** – it becomes sin only when we give in to the temptation and participate in sinful thoughts or behaviors. If we resist the temptation, we will not be drawn into sin.

If we have given in to temptation and sinned, we must quickly come to God in repentant prayer. Yet it is at those times when ***we might feel too ashamed to***

come to God in prayer. Satan may whisper to our hearts that we are too defiled or unworthy to approach God's throne.

But God's throne is one of **grace**: *“Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need”* (Heb 4:16). It is when we have failed the Lord that we are most in need of His mercy. It is upon His footstool of forgiveness that we must cast ourselves. He is the One Who has spoken, *“pray without ceasing”* (1 Thess 5:17) – which means coming to God in prayer even when we have sinned.

DIVINE ENABLEMENT

God is our Strength and Defender against the wiles of the devil and his evil attacks. Jesus has already stripped all authority from the devil (Col 2:15). When we submit our lives to God and resist the devil, the devil must flee from us (Jas 4:7).

We can call upon the Lord with confidence – knowing that when we cry, “deliver us from the evil one”, God has all the authority and power to do it (2 Pet 2:9). *“And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom”* (2 Tim 4:18).

The Lord has even **chosen to share His authority with us** (Matt 16:19; 28:18-20; Mark 13:33,34; Luke 10:19), so that we can use this authority in prayer.

Through prayer, we can expect:

- victory over sin (Rom 6:4-23; 2 Cor 5:17);
- help in times of affliction (Isa 53:5; 1 Pet 2:24);
- triumph over sorrows (2 Cor 2:3-5; 4:16-18);
- grace [“divine enablement”] in trials (2 Cor 12:9); and
- assurance that God will work His highest good and purpose in every situation as we yield ourselves to Him (Rom 8:28).

STRENGTH, DELIVERANCE AND VICTORY

When evil rises against us and temptations do come, we have the assurance that, as we pray, the Lord knows how to deliver us from temptations (Heb 2:18; 2 Pet 2:9). There is NO temptation that we will face from which God cannot help us to escape (1 Cor 10:13). So our prayer can be confidently raised, “Father, as I face evil and temptation, help me to resist it and to be led in Your strength, deliverance and victory!” Hallelujah!

THE KINGDOM, POWER AND GLORY

The Lord’s Prayer, according to most early manuscripts, actually ends with “*deliver us from the evil one*”. But later translations often include the closing words, “*For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen*” (Matt 6:13).

These words encourage us to end our prayers with praise to God, giving to Him our believing confidence that He is able! We can bring all our petitions before God’s throne in prayer, then declare that our faith and trust for all that we need is in Him alone.

Our greatest resource is God’s greatness. We can have confidence that the Great God of the Bible, our loving Heavenly Father, will meet our needs, give us the ultimate victory, answer in His perfect timing, and fulfill His purposes.

God gives us power, but only He is All-Powerful. He shares His wisdom with us, but only He is All-Knowing. And He alone deserves **all** the glory!

We can humbly conclude our prayers, then, with this praise-filled declaration: “Lord, to you belongs all Kingdom power and authority. Let everything be for Your Kingdom’s sake, according to Your power, and for Your glory. So let it be done!”

PRAYER: A PRECIOUS TREASURE

Prayer is the responsibility of every believer, something God has commanded that we do. But prayer is not to be a burdensome duty; rather, it is our great joy and privilege to be welcomed into God’s presence every day!

Prayer is also not an assignment for just a select few. Though only some can preach, or provide leadership, or give gold and silver – **ALL** can contribute in prayer! From the oldest to the youngest; from the babe in Christ to the mature

saint; from a bed of affliction or from a place of strength – **every believer in Jesus Christ can pray!** This is the Church’s most precious and valuable treasure: to invite God’s presence, provision and Kingdom rule into our lives and into every need and situation!

“Blessed are You, LORD God of Israel, our Father, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, is the greatness, the power and the glory, the victory and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and in earth is Yours; Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and You are exalted as head over all. Both riches and honor come from You, and You reign over all. In Your hand is power and might; in Your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. Now therefore, our God, we thank You and praise Your glorious name!” (1 Chr 29:10-13). Amen and amen!

OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE PRAYER

All of us want to pray effectively. We want the scriptural assurance that God hears us and that He does answer our prayers – even if it is not the answer we were expecting (Ps 34:17; Isa 30:19).

But at times it may seem that our prayers are not being heard or answered by God.

The Bible makes clear that there are reasons for unheard or unanswered prayers. Let us now examine what the Scriptures teach us about common obstacles to prayer.

1. The greatest obstacle to effective prayer is sin.

“If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear” (Ps 66:18). This scripture was penned by David, a man who certainly was not perfect. David did, at times, sin before the Lord. But he also acknowledged his sin, repented, and then did his best to live on in obedience before God.

GOD WILL NOT REWARD REBELLION

God **can** choose to hear and answer the prayer of a sinner; otherwise, how could an unsaved sinner ask for salvation? God hears mankind’s cries for

salvation, and always grants mercy and salvation when one repents of sin and believes on the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 10:13). **But this is different than praying to God once you have given your life to the Lord in salvation.**

Once we are saved, we enter into God's family. We become children of God (John 1:12; Gal 3:26). God is our Father, and He has given us rules for how we are to conduct ourselves as part of His family. These rules are found in the Word of God. When we obey the Lord and His commands (rules), there comes the possibility of many blessings and comforts that are part of being in His family.

But in order to receive God's blessings and answers, we must come to Him in childlike simplicity (Matt 18:2-4) and obedience to His Word. If we want God to hear us in prayer and answer us, then we must come to Him honestly and with a trusting heart. We cannot be living in rebellion against Him or in constant sin and still expect Him to hear us.

An example of the Lord's response to His children when they called out to Him while in rebellion is found in Judges 10:13,14: *"Yet you have forsaken Me and served other gods. Therefore, I will deliver you no more. Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress"*. God was merciful toward their failures for a season. But when the children of Israel continued on in their sin, rebellion, and idolatry, God would no longer answer them or deliver them.

God will never reward or encourage our rebellion against Him. He will not provide for us if we use that provision to follow earthly pleasures or carnal passions. God will not give His power to the proud, or a life of ease to the slothful. He will not answer prayers that are selfish or wicked: *"You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures"* (Jas 4:3). God hears and answers prayers that are in alignment with His will (John 14:13; 15:16; 16:23-26).

The Bible is clear that we cannot expect God to hear and answer our prayers when we are deliberately sinning against Him, pursuing evil, or are unrepentant for our actions. *"Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear"* (Isa 59:1,2).

God was willing to let Israel be defeated at Ai (Joshua 7) and eventually go into captivity to Babylon (2 Chronicles 36) rather than countenance willful sin. God is serious about our obedience. Our willful disobedience to God and His Word carries grave consequences, not the least of which is **His ear being closed to our prayers**.

When we pray, we are approaching a holy God. Because that is true, we should come humbly and honestly before His holy presence, aware that He knows everything that is in our heart. If we are “*regarding iniquity*” (by hiding or holding on to sin, or asking with an ungodly motive), He will not hear us.

GOD HEARS THE REPENTANT

This does not mean we have to live perfect lives in order for God to hear us in prayer. None of us is without sin in this life (Ps 53:1-3; Rom 3:23; 1 John 1:8). We will stumble and fail on occasion. God has compassion on those who are trying their best to live as true Christ-followers, but who might occasionally stumble into sin and then repent. However, that is very different than those who love and pursue sin without repentance, or those who obey only some of God’s Word and yet willfully ignore the rest.

“For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil” (1 Pet 3:12).

WE HAVE AN ADVOCATE

As Christians, we do occasionally stumble and fail. We might choose to sin and even sometimes rebel against God and His Word. Then how can we ever be effective in prayer? How will God ever hear us?

Even Jesus’ own disciples – who walked with Jesus and were taught by Him for years – struggled with failure and wrong attitudes. On the very night before Jesus was to die on the cross, the prideful and selfish concern of the disciples was who among them was the greatest! (Luke 22:24).

Jesus had taught his disciples about love and humility; yet they acted carnal and proud. Jesus told His disciples that they would be known by their love for each other (John 13:35; 1 John 3:1-18); yet they could not even show love enough to watch with Him one hour (Matt 26:40-41). Jesus prayed for loving

unity; yet that night they united only in fear and abandoning Christ (Matt 26:56).

Jesus' disciples seemed deaf and blind to all that Jesus had taught them. But it was to these very men that Jesus said, "...*He who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do...*" (John 14:12). Jesus – fully aware of their (and our) immaturity, selfishness and envy – still prayed His highest prayer on that night: that Believers would be one (John 17:11). Jesus even prayed that they would become a dwelling place for the Godhead! (John 14:16,17,23).

How could Jesus possibly say and pray these things about mere humans like us? It is because of Jesus' great love and grace! He was about to "...*go to the Father*" where He would ever live to "*make intercession*" for us (Heb 7:25; 1 John 2:1). "*Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever*" (Heb 13:8), Who knows our weaknesses and failures, is praying for us and committed to perfecting us (1 Pet 5:10)!

Jesus knows we are frail. He knows that even the most sincere commitment to Him will never result in sinless perfection in this life. Our flesh is weak (Matt 26:41).

Jesus knew that Peter would soon fail (Luke 22:32-34); yet He prayed for Peter that his faith would continue and he would become a strength to his brothers (v.32). That same Jesus is praying right now for your faith and strength – even if you have failed!

*Jesus Christ is devoted to us in prayer. He promises to never leave us or forsake us (Matt 28:20). Our occasional failings do not disqualify us from God's purposes. **If we repent** and turn from our sin, the same Lord Who requires our obedience is also our Great Deliverer, Redeemer and Intercessor Who forgives us!*

We have a Great Advocate before the Father, Whoever lives to make intercession for us (Heb 7:25; 1 John 2:1). When we stumble or fail in sin, we can repent and be forgiven, and be restored in Christ's righteousness to again approach God's throne with boldness! He will not reject us or close His ears to our cries when we come humbly, with repentance, to His throne of grace. (See Hebrews 4:16; 1 John 1:9.) That is the confidence we can have in prayer, even when we have failed in sin. Praise the Lord for His great love and faithfulness!

BE QUICK TO REPENT!

Willful pursuit of sin or rebellion against the Lord frequently results in unanswered prayers or the failure to receive the fullness of God's blessing. But God, Who searches our hearts, will be faithful to help us "*search out and examine our ways*" (Lam 3:40) and lay open our hearts before Him in repentance.

Let us be quick to come first to God in repentance and turn away from known sin, lifting our hearts to God. As we confess, He is faithful to forgive us and to cleanse us (Ps 32:5; 1 John 1:9). Let us, like David, cry out for both right standing with God and a pure, undefiled relationship with Him (read Psalms 1-19).

Let us be willing to pray, "*Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting*" (Ps 139:23,24).

The launching points for a bold and effective prayer life are:

- our obedience to God; and
- our understanding of the great love and forgiveness of Christ, Our Advocate. "*And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight*" (1John 3:22).

2. Another obstacle to effective prayer is unforgiveness or strife.

Jesus taught His disciples, "*And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him...*" (Mark 11:25). Jesus emphasized the importance of love and unity in relationships when He prayed for the Church (John 17:20,21).

Paul also strongly exhorted believers about loving and forgiving one another: "*And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you*" (Eph 4:32; also read Ephesians 4:1-6 and Colossians 3:12-15).

Critical to the effective prayer life is love – the love of God ruling in our hearts and motivating our prayers. However, this pure motivation of love can be challenged by tensions or trials in relationships with others.

Forgiveness Without Limits

“How many times should we forgive someone who sins against us?” Jesus gave Peter a surprising answer to that question: “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to **seventy times seven**” (Matt 18:22).

Our Lord was not giving a mathematical or legalistic limitation on forgiveness. Rather, Jesus was teaching Peter that forgiveness should be without a set limit – just like God’s forgiveness toward us.

The Lord then told a parable to illustrate the great forgiveness of a perfect and holy God, and what that requires of us in forgiving others. Take a moment and read that parable in Matthew 18:23-35.

It is clear we must forgive others. But what is forgiveness? How do we actually forgive someone? By forgiving the way the Bible teaches, we can be free of the pain and injury someone has caused us and be healed of that pain by our loving Heavenly Father.

Forgiveness Is A Choice

Forgiveness is **not** a feeling or emotion.

Forgiveness **is a choice** you consciously make. You make a decision to forgive someone, regardless of how you feel about them or what they did.

Forgiveness means **letting go** of a wrong and the subsequent pain caused by another. It includes refusing to either seek revenge or correct or confront someone who has hurt you.

Forgiveness is an act involving our will, heart and mind. How, then, do we best forgive someone?

Putting Forgiveness Into Practice

When dealing with spiritual matters like forgiveness, the Christ-follower always needs:

- Sincerity of heart
- A humble, open and teachable attitude
- A genuine desire to see God's priorities for love, unity, reconciliation and righteousness in our relationships become a reality.

The above conditions are necessary and important elements of forgiveness. The following seven guidelines can be used as effective and fruitful steps toward forgiveness:

1. **Ask God to reveal what is in your own heart.** Jeremiah makes it clear that we cannot always trust our own feelings or perceptions (Jer 17:9). Most often, we think our attitudes are right and justified; we need the Lord to show us what is truly in our own heart (Prov 21:2). If we have pettiness, self-righteousness, judgment, anger or bitterness in our hearts, they will block what God wants to do and poison our attitudes toward others. The first step of forgiveness is asking the Holy Spirit to reveal any wrong attitude, deep wound or bitter judgment we might have as a result of being offended by someone (Ps 44:21; 139:23,24).
2. **Repent of the sin in your heart.** If you have any judgment, anger, resentment or bitterness in your heart toward someone who has offended or hurt you, you must repent of those attitudes. Bitterness is a deadly spiritual "disease" that can defile you and others, and hinder the work of God (Heb 12:15). Repent and ask the Lord to forgive you and cleanse you of unrighteous attitudes toward those who have hurt you (Eph 4:30-32; 1 John 1:9). Otherwise, you will not be able to be sincere in your forgiveness of the person who has offended you.
3. **Make the choice to forgive.** Forgiveness is not a feeling; forgiveness is a choice of your will. Only you can choose to forgive the person who has hurt or offended you (Mark 11:25,26). No one else can make that decision for you. You must choose to forgive, and to "let go" of the person and the act they committed that offended you. Sometimes an offense can be great; ask the Lord for the grace and strength to forgive.
4. **Take time to pray.** The best way to forgive someone is to take time alone with God in prayer. Speak your words of forgiveness out loud to the Lord. You can say something like this: "Father God, I choose to forgive [say the name of the person] for what they did/said [specifically name the act they did or the thing they said]." If it is more than one thing, name each offense. Then take time to ask the Lord if there is any other point of hurt or offense

to forgive them for, and then do that. It is not necessary to tell the person you have forgiven them, unless they come to you and ask for your forgiveness.

5. **Pray for the offender.** After you have forgiven someone, take time to pray for them. Raise your hands and offer the person up to God for Him to deal with. Decide to let go of your desire to “get back” at them, and release them to God. Then ask the Lord to bless them, according to what the Bible teaches (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27,28; Jas 1:19,20; 1 Pet 3:8,9).
6. **Ask the Lord for healing.** Freshly submit your life to God, and ask Him to heal and deliver you from the effects of the offense. God is a Redeemer, and He can take even the worst offenses and use them for good – to shape your life and to further His purposes – if you will allow His work in your heart (Rom 8:28; 2 Cor 3:18; Jas 1:2-4).
7. **Resist the devil.** Satan will attempt to bring the offense back to your mind, or to again stir up your memory or emotions with negative thoughts. You must take up your authority as a believer in Christ and bind up the work of the devil (Matt 16:19). Refuse to entertain any thoughts of unforgiveness again. Resist the work of the devil, and he will flee from you (Jas 4:7,8). There will be those who will offend us by their words or their behavior; and we, at times, will stumble and offend others. But one of the foundation stones of the Christian faith is God’s forgiveness of all of our sins through Christ. We, then, as true Christ-followers, must do no less and choose to forgive those who have wronged us. It is by His grace and power that we can; it is by our choice and desire that we must!

As Jesus taught us to pray: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matt 6:12).

THE LIES THAT SEPARATE

The most important relationship for Christians is their relationship with God. Our prayers to God must be open and pure. But difficult circumstances may tempt us to hide from God, to blame Him, or to become bitter in our heart toward Him. How can we come humbly and boldly to God in prayer if we are angry or resentful toward Him? If we feel that God has “wronged” us or not done what we think is best, we must face these attitudes in our heart and confess them to God.

The Bible assures us that God is loving, holy, righteous and just in ALL His ways. If we think that God is other than these things, we are believing something that is not true of God.

We must choose to search out the Scriptures and find out Who God truly is, then believe God's Word about Him: *"God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"* (Num 23:19).

JOINED IN MARRIAGE, UNITED IN PRAYER

The next most important relationship we have is with our spouse. Husbands and wives need to behave with great wisdom. If we are not giving much effort to unity with and understanding for our spouse, the Bible tells us that our prayers will be hindered (1 Pet 3:7). Anything that hinders our prayers is wrong, and demands immediate change.

A husband and wife know each other very well. They know each other's struggles, trials and victories. They can pray individually for each other with wisdom and understanding. **Praying for your spouse is one of the most important things you can ever do for them.**

A married couple should come together in prayer as joint heirs of grace (Rom 8:16,17). Unified prayer is one of the greatest privileges and responsibilities of the marriage union. There is great power in unified prayer, even unto ushering in the presence of God (Matt 18:19,20). Thus, **any** behavior, habit, attitude or temper that hinders the marriage union – thus hindering unified prayer – is sinful and must be dealt with.

BLOCKING THE BLESSING OF PRAYER

After our relationship with God and with our spouse, we must also learn to live without strife and separation in our relationships with others. Difficult people will inevitably cross our path in this life. Yet this can be a marvelous tool that God will use to shape our character – if we will allow ourselves to be transformed.

Jesus taught us one way to be "perfected" more into the image of God, and it was directly related to how we respond to difficult people (read Matthew 5:38-48).

When we have a disagreement with another person, we might be tempted to remain angry, hold on to prejudice toward them, or harbor a desire for revenge. We might speak against our brother, or repeat gossip about him. We might be suspicious, critical or judgmental and give our minds to evil thoughts. We might justify our actions because we feel “wronged” by them. These sinful attitudes break our God-ordered unity with others; they also obstruct our intimacy with God Himself and the blessings God would give us.

Jesus clearly illustrated the right and wrong attitudes in prayer when telling a parable about two Jewish men. *“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”* (Luke 18:10-14).

We may be frustrated with unanswered prayers or the lack of response from God. Yet at the same time, we may have wrong attitudes toward others. But what can be done to remove these obstacles to effective prayer?

HAVING THE MIND OF CHRIST

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bond servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Phil 2:5-8).

The Bible instructs us to let the mind of Christ be worked into our nature. We are to be continually transformed into His image (Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18). This requires that our carnal, fleshly thoughts, attitudes and motives be continually changed and refined.

Paul wrote to the Galatian church about **Christ being formed in them** (Gal 4:19). This happens in several ways:

- When we receive Christ as our Savior, He enters into our life and begins to work His nature within us as we submit our will to His. This is a work He does within us as we abide in Him daily.
- He has given us the Scriptures to follow and obey. Every time we choose obedience and reject sin, we are becoming more like Christ!
- He has given us the Holy Spirit to convict us of sin (John 16:8; Rom 8:12-15) and to help empower us to choose righteousness.

What a glorious gift, to be made more and more into the image of our dear and loving Savior!

BECAUSE GOD LOVED US

Part of the work of transformation in our life is choosing to forgive those who have wronged us.

Jesus Christ as God saw the world in its sinful and rebellious state. He saw every wicked ruler, the destruction of centuries of wars, abortions, witchcraft and idolatry, false religions, child abuse, sexual immorality... all of sin and its consequences.

And yet, Jesus came into the world – not to condemn it, but that the world through Him might be saved (John 3:16,17). He chose to take upon Himself the penalties for ALL the sin of mankind through the ages. What perfect love; what great forgiveness!

This is the same mind (*attitude, thought, motive*) we are to have toward others if we are Christ-followers (1 John 4:10,11). Jesus has forgiven us so much – how can we stand in judgment against another or not forgive them? God has shown us great mercy and compassion; He has extended His forgiveness to us while we were sinners and still His enemies (Rom 5:6,8,10). How can we do less toward others, even our own enemies?

How can we come to God in prayer and expect His loving answer, when we are not willing to love our brother or sister in Christ?

Take a few minutes and read Matthew 18:21-35. Look carefully at what Jesus taught His disciples about having unloving and unforgiving attitudes, and the severe consequences.

BE RECONCILED TO OTHERS

Jesus taught us just what to do with unforgiveness and strife, those obstacles to effective prayer: *“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift”* (Matt 5:23,24). *“And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses”* (Mark 11:25).

It is clear that we are to quickly forgive and be reconciled with others in love, so that we may rightly approach the altar of prayer. We are to take responsibility for our actions. When we have hurt someone else or caused them pain, we must go to them and ask for their forgiveness. Or if they have hurt us, we need to choose to forgive them.

Do whatever you can to be reconciled. If a person rejects your efforts for reconciliation, forgive them – and keep praying for God to bring unity between you.

If you are wronged – forgive! If someone slanders you – forgive! If you are mistreated or abused – forgive! Forgiveness does not mean pretending a hardship did not happen or that you were not genuinely hurt. Forgiveness is choosing to let the event and the person go – giving them up to God in prayer for Him to deal with. You are choosing to let go of revenge, bitterness, anger, or offense that can accompany unforgiveness – and to instead let the love and mind of Christ rule and reign in you!

God does not remember our sins when they are forgiven (Jer 31:34; Mic 7:19). He has the power to erase sin and some of its effects. When we choose to forgive others, we can also pray and ask the Lord to heal even our most painful memories by His grace and power. He is willing; He is able!

The Bible emphasizes one thing that should always characterize the true Christ-follower: **true love for one another** (John 13:35; 1 Pet 4:8,9; 1 John 4:7-12). This kind of love is worked into our lives when we yield our own selfish and carnal minds to the transforming work of God through the Holy Spirit. With Christ’s grace, **we can forgive others** and pray to God without hindrance.

3. A third obstacle to effective prayer is wrong desires

“You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures” (Jas 4:3).

Many times in prayer, the things we ask of God are not necessarily bad. But the reasons we want them may be wrong. We are asking for something for the wrong reason, or *“asking amiss”*. This usually means we are asking for something with a selfish motive, or without thought or care for others, or for what God sees as best.

God is a loving Father. He will never give His children things that are carnal or harmful. Granting selfish requests would only make us more selfish, separating us from God and preventing His highest purpose from being fulfilled through us.

Would you give a child everything he asked for? Does a child always know what is good or what is harmful? In the same way, our Heavenly Father may not answer every request, if He sees that it is not the most loving thing for us.

We do not always ask of God with pure desires. Are we seeking God’s forgiveness just to escape our feelings of guilt? Do we desire healing so that we can pursue our own pleasures? Do we want financial provision for our own selfish gain or because we don’t want to depend fully on the Lord?

It is not wrong to seek forgiveness, healing or provision. But what is our motive? ***Would what we ask for improve our walk with God, or take us away from Him?***

Simon the Sorcerer asked for the power of the Holy Spirit. That seems like a good request. But, unfortunately, Simon wanted this power for an unholy and selfish motive (Acts 8:18-23). He wanted it for his own gain and glory.

We are “but flesh”, so it is difficult to always pray with completely pure motives. We are warned, *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked...”* (Jer 17:9,10).

But God promises to reveal to us what is in our hearts that might hinder our walk with Him (Phil 3:15). Jesus taught us in His model of prayer: *“Your Kingdom come. Your will be done”* (Matt 6:10). We must want the will of God above all else. Our life, our heart, our desires, our spirit must be freshly

consecrated to God each day (Deut 6:5). He is the Sovereign Lord, our faithful and trustworthy Father. We can ask for His help that we might pray according to His will – and He will assist us.

If our heart is consumed with God and our will is yielded to His, we can better pray according to the Lord's desires. *“Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness. Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass”* (Ps 37:3-5). When our trust and delight is in the Lord, He will give us the right desires to pray for and He will bring the fulfillment.

There may be times when we are not sure how to pray according to God's will. We are not always able to discern what is best in every situation. At these times, we can pray in the spirit (with our spiritual language), trusting the Holy Spirit to lead us and help us to pray.

“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 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” (Rom 8:26,27).

4. **Doubt is also an obstacle to effective prayer.**

Throughout the Bible, faith (the opposite of doubt) in God is necessary to effective prayer. Jesus declared this guiding principle, *“According to your faith let it be to you”* (Matt 9:29). The Bible teaches, *“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him”* (Heb 11:6).

The Holy Spirit speaks by the Apostle James: *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. 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. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord”* (Jas 1:5-7).

We must have faith in God, and not doubt, if we expect to be heard in prayer and answered. But what does it mean to have faith and not doubt?

TRUE FAITH IN GOD

Let us suppose that a son does not believe his father is truthful. The boy doubts that his father loves him, and does not trust that his father will take care of him. So the son asks his father for a large amount of money so that he can set up his own bank account. This boy has decided he'd rather take care of himself. How is a father to respond to such an expression of deep distrust?

How much **more** unfounded it would be for us to make this kind of request of our all-loving, perfect heavenly Father! And yet many times, that is the type of request we bring to God in prayer.

Belief in God and His Son, Jesus Christ, is much more than just acknowledging their existence. True faith in God and His Son means a complete belief in **who they are**: their character as pure; their nature as love; their words as absolutely true; their salvation as sure; their love as certain; and more!

Our faith in God should not be based on what we **think** He might be like. Our faith should be based solely on the truth of Who God actually is! We can learn the truth about Who God is from the Bible, which is filled with revelations and truths about God.

For example, if our earthly father was harsh and cruel, we may be afraid to trust our heavenly Father. We may be afraid to admit our failures to God for fear of His punishment. But the Bible assures us that God is loving and trustworthy (Deut 32:4; 1 John 4:8). He is merciful toward those who repent, and He quickly forgives (Ps 86:5; 103:1-5). God loves His children and has only good gifts for them (Matt 7:9-11).

FAITH IS ABOUT WHO WE BELIEVE IN!

True faith is not an issue of *quantity*; it is not about how much faith we have, or how great our own faith is. Jesus taught us that even very small faith can accomplish great things (Matt 17:20).

We do not have to strive and work up “great faith”. We just need to remember **how great God is**, and put our faith **in Him!**

Faith is not about how hard we try to believe. It is about **Who we believe in!** Jesus said it simply but powerfully: *“Have faith **in God**”* (Mark 11:22).

Do you know that every Christian has faith? The Bible says, *“God has dealt to each one a measure of faith”* (Rom 12:3). God imparts to us faith; we cannot produce faith for ourselves. Faith is already given to us; but we must choose to receive faith and to properly use it.

We properly use our faith by putting it where it belongs – **in the Lord!** We can choose to wrongly put our faith in ourselves, in other people, in money, in circumstances, or in many other things. **OR** we can choose to put our faith in the True and Living God!

HOLDING FAST TO OUR FAITH

Just as we must receive and properly use our faith, we must also choose to refuse doubt. If we listen to doubts about God, they can “smother” our faith, like a wet blanket placed over a fire.

Satan’s first weapon against mankind was sowing doubt about God’s words: *“Has God indeed said...”* (Gen 3:1). These doubts soon turned to outright lies about what God had truly said (Gen 3:4,5).

Satan still tries to make us doubt God today. We must be especially on our guard when an answer to prayer appears delayed, or has not come in the way we expected. At such times, Satan and his minions will attack, to play on our worries and fears. They may try to erode our confidence and trust in God and His promises. They may whisper that we are alone, or forsaken, or unloved, or unworthy to receive... all manner of evil words that are contrary to the promises of the Word of God!

So Abraham *“did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform”* (Rom 4:20,21). Christ has said, *“Whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says...”* (Mark 11:23,24).

We, too, must hold fast to our faith in God, without wavering. We must reject the tool of Satan – doubt of God – and instead place our faith in the living God

and all of Who He is in His greatness, glory, power and love! For truly, *“He who promised is faithful”!* (Heb 10:23).

SEEKING HIS STRENGTH

Has some difficult trial or painful circumstance caused you to doubt God and Who He truly is? What do you do if you are tempted to doubt God? If you have doubted God, is all lost? Have you missed your chance for God’s blessing?

The Bible tells the story in Mark Chapter 9 of a man who was struggling with doubt. This man’s son was mute and demon-possessed, and the man wondered if Jesus could help them. *“But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us”* (Mark 9:22).

Jesus replied, *“If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes”* (v.23).

Jesus confronted the man’s doubt. The man did not act “religious” or pretend he had great faith. He was truthful with Jesus, just as we need to be truthful with God in prayer. God sees our heart, and we are not fooling Him by pretending we believe when we do not.

The Bible tells us this man was humble and broken before Jesus, weeping. He cried out that he wanted to believe, but he needed Christ to help him overcome the part of him that was struggling to fully believe (v.24). Though the man’s faith was uncertain, he cried to the Lord for help; **that in itself was an act of faith in Jesus**, and Jesus responded!

Jesus responded with great love and tenderness. He did not rebuke the man for not having enough faith. No! Instead, he healed and delivered the man’s son!

If a difficult trial gives us a moment of doubt in God, we must, like that man, come humbly and with brokenness before the Lord. We must acknowledge when we believe only in part; then ask for the Lord’s help to again believe in full. The Lord will respond, and help us. Remember, Jesus said, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness”* (2 Cor 12:9). When our faith is weak, He will help to strengthen us!

Faith is a choice we make to believe that God is Who He says He is. Praying in faith means coming to God, believing that God exists – and that He loves us, hears us and answers us, and has only our best in mind. Our faith is not in our faith; our faith is **in GOD** and **His** faithfulness!

5. Another obstacle to effective prayer is a fleshly control.

We may very well discern the heart of God on a matter, and pray to the Lord in a right way. But the answer may be delayed or troubled if we then try to take matters into our own hands and “help” God with the outcome!

Abraham brought much heartache and trouble upon his own household and upon the generations of Israelites to come by trying to fulfill God’s promise in his own way with Hagar (read Genesis 16).

Later in the Book of Genesis, we read about Jacob “the deceiver”. Jacob desired the blessing, and may have asked God for it. But instead of waiting on God’s answer, Jacob took matters into his own hands. His rash and deceptive methods of getting that blessing caused him years of delay and sorrow (Gen 27-33).

We can see another illustration of this truth today. A wife may pray in earnest for her husband’s salvation. But if she tries to force him to change with her own methods, she may well become an obstacle to his repentance.

It is critical to remember that when we ask God for something, we must not try to control the outcome with our own efforts. We must be patient and sensitive to His desires. We must ask, and then trust Him to answer in His perfect time and in His perfect way.

PRAYER AND OBEDIENCE

There are times, however, when we have prayed, and God will **direct us to do something which He requires to bring the answer.**

There are many instances in the Bible – in both the Old and New Testaments – when there were very specific instructions or directions as to how to receive the Lord’s answer to prayer. One example is when Naaman was required to go and dip himself in the Jordan river seven times to be healed (2 Ki 5:10-14). There was nothing special about the river (vs.10,12). But there was something

significant about Naaman's willingness to obey that helped him to recognize the One True God Who alone holds all power (v.15).

God places a high value on obedience. When we pray, **our own will must be subject to His**. We must be willing to do whatever God asks of us.

But how will we know if God is requiring a specific step of obedience as part of His answer to prayer? Many times, it will already be written in the Word of God. There are thousands of verses in Scripture that begin with "*if you will...*", followed with "*then I will...*". God has already made His pathways known to us in many instances (for example, read Leviticus 26 or Deuteronomy 28).

At other times, we may "hear" within our heart the Lord prompting us to take a certain action after we have prayed. This will ALWAYS be in agreement with the Word of God. God will never contradict Himself, and say something different than what He has already revealed through His Word.

At these times we must step carefully and submit our direction to God, patiently allowing His peace and provision to lead us. We can also submit our situation to godly counselors and ask for their help.

There may be times when we pray, and it seems that God is asking us simply to wait for Him and do nothing. That can be the hardest thing of all!

WAIT UPON THE LORD

The most important thing to remember is that we are to remain humble and submitted to God in all matters of prayer. We are never to try and force situations or people to change by our own strength or impatience. We should be willing to wait upon the Lord, and trust His timing for the answer. We must also be willing to obey if God asks us to take an action as part of His answer.

PARTNERSHIP WITH GOD

There may be times when we have prayed earnestly for a person, and yet we have not seen any change. We may be tempted to think our prayers are not making a difference.

Be assured that God does respond to prayer. However, God will never violate a person's free will or force them to do what He desires. He has not created

people to be puppets or robots. We are created with the ability to make choices.

So, although you may be praying for someone according to the will of God, the person you are praying for may still choose to reject God and His attempts to draw them to Himself.

For example, you may be praying every day for someone to get saved. You know this is the will of God, for *“The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance”* (2 Pet 3:9).

As you pray, God **will go into action** to draw the person to Himself. But the person can still choose to reject God and His love, or to reject the laborers God directs to their path. However, **keep praying for them!**

CONCLUSION

God has made it clear in His Word that He desires us to come to Him regularly in prayer. He has also given us clear warnings about the things that can block the effectiveness of our prayers: sin, unforgiveness, ungodly motives, doubt, and fleshly actions.

But praise God! His Word provides clear and abundant guidelines for identifying and overcoming these obstacles – that God may use our prayers for His glory, for the good of His people, and for the advance of His Kingdom.

“The prayer of the upright is His delight” (Prov 15:8).