



Fixing a broken prayer life

BY KEN HORN

Prayer. It is the Christian's lifeline to Jesus. It is the highest privilege granted the believer.

Yet, too often, it seems as if it just doesn't work.

So what's the deal? Why does it seem prayer doesn't work for many of us the way it works for others?

There are indeed a number of things that become barriers to an effective prayer life. They fit into three categories: things that keep us from praying, things that keep us from getting answers and things that keep us from recognizing answers. Let's look at some of the possible problems and the ways to fix them.

THINGS THAT KEEP US FROM PRAYING

Prayer can't work if believers don't pray. "You do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2, NKJV). There are several things that keep our prayer lives short . . . or nonexistent.

Love for the things of the world

Many Christians give massive amounts of time to pursuit of worldly things. Love for these things drives people to spend more time with them than with the things of God, and even to think about these things while in God's house.

Genuine delight in the Lord is a key to answered prayer. "Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4).

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Substitution . . . even with good things

Many Christians have a “spiritual sweet tooth,” in the words of St. John of the Cross, a 16th-century Christian. By this he meant that many believers spend more time reading about or listening about serving God than actually doing it.

One can read too many Christian books, listen to too many sermons, and watch too much Christian television . . . if those things have become a substitute for actually spending time with God. We must not be content to live off the experiences of others.

Misplaced priorities

Lots of people don't pray because they feel they just don't have the time. Believers appeal to their busy schedules as reasons for not giving even a small amount of time to God.

People find time for things that are important to them. Make prayer a priority and you will pray more.

Distractions

Prayer is a magnet. Just as soon as we determine to pray, every distraction imaginable is attracted to us. Call it “distraction attraction.”

When Satan sees your prayer life beginning to grow, he wants to do anything he can to distract you from it. Fight distraction by minimizing what you can

externally and asking for God's help in dealing with the internal ones.

Reluctance to pray with others

Many Christians routinely miss opportunities to strengthen their prayer life by praying with others.

Consider the power of united prayer, as described by Jesus: “If two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:19,20).

THINGS THAT KEEP US FROM GETTING ANSWERS

The Bible has clearly listed several of these.

Unconfessed sin

“One sin allowed in a life wrecks our usefulness, stifles our joy, and robs prayer of its power.” So says Dick Eastman in his book *No Easy Road*.

Scripture agrees. Psalm 66:18 (KJV) addresses this when the Psalmist says, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.”

Many fear there is some sin they have forgotten to mention specifically that God will forever hold over their heads. But the word “regard” in the Hebrew means to “see” or “look at” by direct volition. It is a sin of which one is aware.

First John 1:9 has the solution: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (NKJV).

A poor husband-wife relationship

First Peter 3:7 indicates that

when a husband and wife are not getting along, their prayers are hindered. Ephesians 4:26 says, “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (NIV).

Florence and Percy Arrowsmith broke a world record when they celebrated their 80th wedding anniversary in 2005. Florence, 100, told the BBC their secret was, you must “never be afraid to say ‘sorry’ ” and “You must never go to sleep bad friends.” (Percy, 105, said his secret to marital bliss was two words: “Yes, dear.”)

The old saying is true: “The family that prays together stays together.”

An unforgiving spirit

I sat with an unsaved man in a hospital waiting room as his wife, a member of the church I pastored, was having major surgery. His heart was tender and he was open to the gospel. Tony* was ready to commit his life to Jesus. But first, he said, he had one question. “Do I have to forgive everyone to become a Christian?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, sharing some Scriptures with him.

“Then I can't be a Christian,” he told me. “There are some people I can't forgive. I'll have to go to hell.”

Tragic words. But unforgiveness can also creep into Christian lives.

Unforgiveness becomes a barrier to answered prayer (Mark 11:25,26). If you have unforgiveness in your heart, drop everything and make it right. (See Matthew 5:23,24.)

A proud spirit

Luke 18:10-14 recounts the story of two men. One was a Pharisee who prayed, “God, I thank You that I am not like other men — extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector” (v. 11, NKJV). The other, a tax collector, cried with his head down, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” (v. 13).

“I tell you,” Jesus said in verse 14, “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.”

Proud prayers are worse than no prayers. “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time,” 1 Peter 5:6 enjoins. Humility eventually is rewarded. But remember God's “due time” for answered prayer.

Doubt

“Whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them” (Mark 11:24). Doubt and faith cannot coexist, according to James 1:6-8.

But only a little faith is required. The Gospels record a time when the disciples could not cast a demon out of a man's son (Matthew 17:14-21; Mark 9:17-29; Luke 9:38-43). They were called “faithless” because they had given up (Matthew 17:17). But the father wouldn't give up.

The disciples didn't even have mustard-seed size faith (Matthew 17:20). But the father did. Still he

cried, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). It was enough, and Jesus answered by delivering his son.

What you may think is doubt or unbelief may simply be little faith. A mustard seed is very small. Don't count little faith as unbelief. You don't need great faith — just a little faith in a great God. The small step of faith tests the bridge, but the strength of the bridge gets the traveler across.

Lack of intensity

After chiding the disciples for unbelief, Jesus added, “However, this kind [of demon] does not go out except by prayer and fasting” (Matthew 17:21). James 5:16 says, “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” God is looking for serious prayer, and some cases require spiritual warfare, which sometimes includes fasting.

Weymouth translates the verse this way: “The heartfelt supplication of a righteous man exerts a mighty influence.” God wants you to put your heart into your prayer.

THINGS THAT KEEP US FROM RECOGNIZING ANSWERS

It has been said that God answers prayer in four ways: (1) “No, not yet”; (2) “No, I love you too much”; (3) “Yes, I thought you'd never ask”; and (4) “Yes, and here's more.”

Sometimes we don't recognize the answer because we have been asking amiss (James 4:3) or

expecting amiss (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

Be prepared for God to answer contrary to your wishes as He did with the apostle Paul regarding his thorn in the flesh.

The answer is found in James 4:15: “Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.’ ” Seek the Lord's will first. When you have a strong sense of His will in your life you can pray with confidence.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Take an inventory of your prayer life, using the list above. With God's help, correct those areas that need work.

Pray in the authority of Christ's name, which can only be done if you are praying according to His will. “And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it” (John 14:13,14).

Most of all, get wrapped up in Jesus. John 15:7 summarizes what that means to one's prayer life: “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.”

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