



THE PRIVILEGE OF PRAYER

QUEST LESSON D-11

The Problem: What is prayer? Why are our prayers not always answered? Are there conditions for answered prayer?

Prayer is speaking to God as to a friend. It is communion with the supreme Ruler of the universe. It is telling the Lord what is on your mind and entering into earnest conversation with Him about it. It involves listening for His answer, which sometimes comes through His word, sometimes through the direct conviction of the Holy Spirit, sometimes through another human being, and sometimes through the events which the Lord allows to occur. Prayer is not designed to convince God that He should love us but to draw us into closer fellowship with Him so that we can appreciate His love.

Since prayer is a conversation with the Lord, our closest Friend, no place is inappropriate as a place of prayer. Daniel prayed three times a day on his knees (Daniel 6:10), but there can be no doubt that his mind was so continually focused on God that he could mentally speak to Him at any time in the midst of his busy program at the courts of Babylon and Medo-Persia. Because of his constant prayer life, Daniel had the blessing and protection of heaven (See Daniel 6:20-22).

But why are our prayers not always answered? The fact is that they are always answered! Sometimes God denies us what we ask because it is not best for us. Sometimes he says "Wait a while." Other times He gives us just what we prayed for. God never refuses to give us anything that is for our best good to receive. We can't see all the dangers and difficulties confronting us as God can. No parent who really loves his child will give him everything he asks. Wise parents know better than that! Just so, our God knows what is best for us and answers our prayers by providing for our needs in the best possible way.

In his Confessions, Augustine tells how at Carthage he embarked on a ship for Rome against the earnest prayers and pleas of his godly mother Monica. Augustine deceived her. He said that he was only going on board the ship to say farewell to a friend. He urged his mother to wait for him at St. Cyprian's chapel. But that night, while his mother was praying in the chapel, beseeching God to keep him from going, Augustine set sail for Rome.

Monica must have thought that God had refused to answer her prayer. But she was wrong. The trip to Italy was to be the means of Augustine's conversion. While he was there he found Christ, and Monica's prayers were dramatically answered.

God sometimes delays in answering our prayers for the salvation of a loved one, not because He does not want to save them now, but because He cannot force the person's will. His Spirit will always convict as we pray, but the loved one can resist and make the wrong choice. The devil controls the wills of his subjects. God allows us choice because He wants the willing service of loving believers.

There are many reasons why answers to our prayers may be delayed. With our limited human vision, we cannot know all the reasons. But Jesus taught us to pray and believe. He did not have it in mind that prayer should always involve asking for things we want. His earnest desire is that we come to know Him as a personal Friend and Savior.

Are there conditions to answered prayer? Indeed there are! That is what this study is all about. We will briefly consider nine of them.

Objectives

There are at least nine conditions to answered prayer:

First, we must ask.

Second, we must pray from our hearts.

Third, faith is essential.

Fourth, we must be willing to obey Christ's will.

Fifth, we must be willing to forgive others.

Sixth, we are to persevere in prayer.

Seventh, we are to pray in Christ's name.

Eighth, we should give praise.

Ninth, we must pray in secret.

I. We Must Ask

God wants us to be so aware of our needs and of His ability and willingness to supply them that we will take the time to ask.

The Word

1. What did Jesus say about the importance of asking God for the things we want? Matthew 7:7-11; (compare Luke 11:9-13).
2. Under what circumstances will we be given the things for which we ask? Matthew 21:22; 1 John 5:14-15.
3. When are we most likely to ask according to God's will? John 15:7.
4. How many of our needs does God promise to supply? Philippians 4:19; Romans 8:32.

Explanation: Since God is so ready to supply our needs and guide us through the rough experiences of life, it is amazing that we pray so little. There are remarkable blessings available to those who have sufficient trust in God to ask for them. If we neglect to pray, evil demons surround us, prompting us to sin and bringing darkness and discouragement.

God does not promise to give us whatever we ask for. If you ask for a million dollars or a palace for a home, you most probably will not get what you want. "If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (1 John 5:14). But how can we know whether we are asking according to His will? Jesus answered that very simply. "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (John 15:7). The point is that the person in whose heart Christ is living by the Holy Spirit will not pray selfishly. He won't expect God to make him a millionaire. His concern will be service for Christ and for humanity.

Christ always gives us the spiritual strength we ask for. He provides our temporal needs according to what is best for us at the time. We can have confidence in the promise, "My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

Relevance: Do you regularly ask the Lord for the spiritual blessings you know He wants you to have: love in your heart, forgiveness for sin, victory over evil, wisdom to know how to handle situations that arise in your daily life? "Ask, and it shall be given you" (Matthew 7:7).

II. We Must Pray From The Heart

Sincerity is a vital part of genuine prayer. To hunger for the spiritual power that God has for you is to ensure that your prayer will come from the heart.

The Word

5. Who are filled with Christ's love and power when they ask? Isaiah 44:3; Matthew 5:6.
6. What attitude of humble penitence does God invite us to adopt? Joel 2:12-14.

Explanation: If we feel no need, we cannot ask from the heart. It is those who hunger and thirst for righteousness who will be filled. And it is the soul that reaches out after the Lord with true sorrow for sin and a deep craving for spiritual renewal whom the Lord answers. To ask for material blessings when our hearts are not right with God is to treat the Lord as a benefactor in whom we have little trust and for whom we have no genuine love. When our hearts are surrendered to Christ, we will pray sincerely for the blessings that we believe He wants us to have.

Relevance: Is your heart open to the influence of the Holy Spirit? Do you sincerely wish to serve Christ because you love Him, not just because you want the temporal advantages He can bestow?

III. Faith Is Essential

To ask in prayer while at the same time not believing that God will answer is to predetermine the outcome. The Bible teaches that the Lord will only hear the prayer of faith.

The Word

7. What must be the attitude of the person who comes to the Lord in prayer? Hebrews 11:6.
8. How much will the unbelieving person receive from God? James 1:5-7.

Explanation: We can have the confident assurance that the Lord will always give us the spiritual blessings that we need to serve him. There is absolutely no need for doubt when we ask for such power. Most of our problems in regard to answered prayer occur when we ask for material benefits that we think we should have. As pointed out above, we cannot expect God to give us every temporal advantage we seek. He knows what is best for everyone of us. If we could see as clearly as He does and know the end from the beginning as He does, we would have no doubt that what He ordains for us is exactly what we need. Believe him; faith is essential to answered prayer.

Relevance: What greater blessings could we desire than the righteousness of Christ, wisdom to live His way, power to overcome all sin, love for the unlovable. We can have faith that God will grant us these blessings when we ask. And we can have faith that He will supply our material needs as He sees fit. Trust Him; He loves you infinitely!

IV. We Must Be Willing To Obey Him

We do not earn God's blessings by our obedience to His law. Only the merits of Christ can recommend us to Him. But obedience is the result of faith. If we are unwilling to do His will, we cannot expect our prayers to be answered. The Bible teaches that, when His law is ruling in our hearts because the Holy Spirit is living there, we can have confidence that our prayers will be answered.

The Word

9. What can we be sure of receiving if our hearts are free from guilt? 1 John 3:21-22; John 14:21.
10. If iniquity rules in the heart, and the individual is unwilling to obey God's law, how does the Lord regard His prayer? Psalm 66:18; Proverbs 28:9.

Explanation: Holding on to known sin is a sure way to keep yourself separated from Christ. He cannot answer your prayers when you do this. Judas made that terrible mistake, and it destroyed him for eternity. Christ died so that "the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:4). We can have the most wonderful answers to our prayers if we allow the Holy Spirit to bring us that experience.

Relevance: Have you put away all known sin? Have you invited Jesus to rule in your life by the Holy Spirit? Then you can have confidence that He hears and answers your prayers.

V. We Must Be Willing To Forgive Others

To ask Jesus to forgive us while we are cherishing an unforgiving spirit toward someone else is a tragic contradiction. He cannot forgive our sins under those conditions because our unforgiving spirit drives His spirit away from us. Christ cannot rule in our lives if hatred or resentment is cherished there.

The Word

11. What did the Lord teach us to say in His special prayer? Matthew 6:12.
12. How did Jesus illustrate the results of an unforgiving spirit? Matthew 18:21-35.

Explanation: Jesus taught that if we repudiate our repentance, God will repudiate His forgiveness. The king in the Matthew 18 parable withdrew his forgiveness of his servant's debt when he learned of that servant's unwillingness to forgive his fellow servant. Jesus drew the lesson: "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses" (Matthew 18:35). Unwillingness to forgive another person is cherishing sin in our hearts, and the Bible says, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Psalm 66:18). Consider the many serious sins for which we want God's forgiveness. Then consider, by contrast, the relative insignificance of the wrongs other people have done to us. To expect God to wipe out our large debt of guilt while we refuse to forget a much smaller debt of someone else is really quite unfair and unreasonable.

Relevance: Have you forgiven others for the wrongs they have committed against you? You may feel quite bitter, but Jesus will give you a forgiving heart if you ask Him.

VI. We Should Preserve In Prayer

To pray for a very brief period once in a while is not evidence of love for Christ. If a loving husband did not communicate often with his wife, she would wonder if he truly loved her. The Bible counsel is that we live in an atmosphere of prayer.

The Word

13. What statements in the following verses invite us to pray often?
 - a. Romans 12:12
 - b. Colossians 4:2
 - c. 1 Peter 4:7
 - d. Ephesians 6: *
 - e. 1 Thessalonians 5:7

Explanation: It is not possible to be on our knees in prayer all the time. In fact, if we were we would soon lose the subject matter of prayer. Jesus prayed much but lived His life between the mountain and the multitude. He was much involved in working for people, teaching, healing, and counseling. Even so, he was always in close union with His Father. It is this union with God that Paul is referring to when he instructs, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). We cannot be verbally communicating with the Lord all the time; but we can live as in His presence, conscious of His abiding grace, and able to turn to Him at a moment's notice by mentally seeking His aid. Jesus wants to be our ever-present Companion.

Relevance: Do you pray often on your knees and live constantly in the presence of the Lord? Do you pray as you walk the streets or carry on your business activities day by day? Christ is always with you as a communicating Friend if you choose to have it so.

VII. We Must Pray In Christ's Name

Our approach to God can only be in the merits of Christ. His death earned us the right to "come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:10).

The Word

14. What instruction did Jesus give in regard to praying in His name? John 14:13-14.

Explanation: Praying in Christ's name implies that we accept His sacrifice on the cross as for us and that we acknowledge His righteousness as our only recommendation to God. Praying in His name involves more than just mentioning His name at the beginning and end of the prayer. It means that we engage in prayer in His spirit and with His attitude of mind. We seek the Father through the intercessory ministry of Jesus and know that we are accepted because of His work for us.

Relevance: If you know Christ as your Savior from sin, you are able to pray in His name. When you belong to Christ, and He dwells in your heart by the Holy Spirit, you are able to approach the throne of grace "with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Hebrews 10:22).

VIII. We Should Give Praise

Faith is praise! Love for self will motivate us to ask always for the things we want. Love for God will motivate us to praise Him for His manifold blessings.

The Word

15. What did the Psalmist urge people to do? Psalm 107: *

16. How often should we give praise to God for His goodness to us? Hebrews 13:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:18.

Explanation: As we read the Scriptures, we gain the impression that God loves to be appreciated and thanked for the infinite work of mercy He has done on our behalf. Our God is a gentle, sensitive being who craves the love and acceptance of the creatures He has made. To thank Him for His wonderful blessings is to express trust in Him as a loving Father. To praise Him even when things go wrong is to exercise faith in His willingness to help us out of our troubles. Praise is an exercise in positive thinking that reacts upon ourselves in blessing. It strengthens our faith and takes away our doubts and fears.

Relevance: Do you praise the Lord every time you pray? Do you praise Him in the dark when it seems that everything is against you? Try it! You will be surprised at the blessing you receive.

IX. We Must Pray In Secret

Family prayer and church prayer are very important, but there is no substitute for private devotional life. As we come to Jesus every morning, committing our lives to Him for that day, and asking for His grace to cope with the circumstances of life, we are greatly strengthened. Take time for morning devotions, listen to the Lord speaking through His Word, and communicate directly with Him in prayer.

The Word

17. What did Jesus teach regarding the importance of private prayer? Matthew 6:5-6.

18. Give a few instances of Jesus' private prayer life. Mark 1:35; 6:46; Luke 6:12.

Explanation: Jesus practiced what He preached. He spent much time in prayer. Since He was so actively engaged in teaching the people and relieving their sicknesses, it was vital for Him to gain daily supplies of power from His Father. Jesus' secret of victory over sin was His prayer life. The source of His remarkable spiritual magnetism was His prayer

experience. Without constant communion with the Father, Jesus would never have been able to meet the daily demands upon Him and could never have withstood the brutal attacks of the evil one.

Relevance: When you are alone with God in prayer, you are able to pour out your soul as you can to no human being. This experience is the breath of the soul. Christ breathes upon you His Holy Spirit and you come forth strengthened for the battle of everyday existence. You can tell the Lord your wants, your joys, and your fears. You can praise Him for blessings past and present and thank Him in advance for what you know He will do for you. The Lord treats you as though you were the only one for whom Christ died. He bends low to listen and takes an immediate interest in all your interests and needs. He loves you as His own child and will hold you so close to His heart that no power on earth or in hell will be able to separate you from His merciful care.

Will you join us in committing yourself to this kind of daily prayer experience?

Review Questions

1. True or False
 - a. God wants us to ask for His blessings.
 - b. Faith is essential to answered prayer.
 - c. Christ will give us anything we ask for.
 - d. We should always pray on our knees.
2. Discuss: If prayer was the secret of Jesus' victory over sin, why can't we have the same victory for the same reason? (See Revelation 3:21).

Further Study: Ellen G. White, Steps to Christ, Chapter 11.