

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

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PART II

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In Part I of this teaching we explored why we should pray, how we should pray, and how we can accomplish God's purposes as we pray. In Part II we are continuing this study on prayer.

Pray With the Mind of Christ

One way we can be sure our prayers are pleasing to Jesus Christ, and will be answered, is to seek and then to pray the mind of Christ in any situation. It is extremely important to have the mind of Christ as we pray. How do we perceive the mind of Christ? By hearing from Him. God is more willing to speak to us than we are to slow down and listen to Him. Listening is a most important and often overlooked element of prayer. Most of the time we devise a plan or solution to a problem then ask God in prayer to accomplish it. It would work much better if we spent time in His presence learning His plan. Once we begin to implement God's plan in any set of circumstances He *must* bless it for it's His plan.

In addition to waiting on the Lord and listening, I believe it is much easier to know the mind of Christ as we become more sanctified in Him. The more our lives reflect God's holiness as a lifestyle, the more pleasing our prayers are to God. This whole process is our becoming sanctified and mature in Christ.

Paul gives us solid direction in this area:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. **Then** you will be able to test and approve what God's will is -- his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Rom 12:2 NIV, emphasis added).

Paul is saying that if we are conformed to the world, we will not know the mind of the Lord. But, if we continually immerse ourselves in His Word and in prayer, we will renew our minds. It is then that we will have the mind of Christ and thus be more effective in our prayer direction.

We have a wonderful example of this principle in the Book of Daniel. Much of Daniel 9 is devoted to Daniel's powerful prayer to the Lord on behalf of Israel. He asks God to forgive both him and all of Israel for their sins and for turning away from God.

Then an extraordinary event occurs. While Daniel is praying, the angel Gabriel appears to him:

"While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making my request to the LORD my God for his holy hill--while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice. He instructed me and said to me, **"Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed."** (Dan 9:20-23 NIV, emphasis added).

There is no question that Daniel prayed the mind of the Lord into this situation. Earlier in chapter 9 we note that

Daniel understood that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years based on "the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet." Daniel, using Jeremiah's words as a foundation, prayed into the Lord's mercy and eternal plan for Israel in his request. As with Daniel, our own seeking and praying the mind of the Lord is a sure way to see our requests come to pass.

The Prayer of a Righteous Man Is Powerful and Effective

To continue our focus on this extraordinary passage we also see that Gabriel actually told Daniel that his prayer was answered as soon as he began to pray because he (Daniel) was highly esteemed in the heavenly realm! In chapter 10, while Daniel was having another vision, the angel told him again that he was highly esteemed:

A hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. He said, "Daniel, you who are highly esteemed, consider carefully the words I am about to speak to you, and stand up, for I have now been sent to you." (v 10-13 NIV).

An examination of Daniel's life shows that he was totally committed to God. As the angel affirmed, he had set his mind as a youth to gain understanding and to humble himself before God. Daniel was truly a righteous man. His entire life was dedicated to his sanctification before the Lord and his commitment to be God's trusted servant. No wonder he was highly esteemed by the Lord. And no wonder the Lord was disposed to grant Daniel's requests.

The Book of Acts gives another excellent example of a righteous man having his prayers answered. That man is Cornelius, the centurion. During Cornelius' vision an angel said, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a remembrance before God." (Acts 10:4 NIV). Again, later in that same chapter we read, "Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor.'" (Acts 10:31 NIV). Here the angel affirms that God is answering his prayers, at least in part, because he behaved properly toward the poor. Thus his righteous acts are very much a part of the reason God granted his wishes.

Note the Apostle Peter's directions to husbands in 1 Peter:

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, **so that nothing will hinder your prayers.** (1 Pet 3:7 NIV, emphasis added).

Now this verse is very interesting, isn't it? Peter is saying that if husbands do not treat their wives properly, that is, if they do not act in a righteous manner towards their wives, then their prayers will be hindered. Again, we see how the righteous life adds great credence to our prayer requests.

Conversely, I believe that if we are in a habit of sin in some aspect of our life, we are definitely not as likely to

have our prayers answered. Again, there is ample Scriptural support for this principle:

The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him. The LORD detests the way of the wicked but he loves those who pursue righteousness....The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous. (Pro 15:8-9,29 NIV).

If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable. (Pro 28:9 NIV).

When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong...(Isa 1:15-16 NIV).

Thus, just as Scripture makes plain that our holiness pleases God, so does a sinful lifestyle offend Him and hinder the offender's prayers from being answered.

We Must Make Room For God's Sovereignty

Let me say that in no way do I believe that, if God doesn't answer our prayers the way we want, then we are in sin or have failed somehow. Certainly, we are to examine ourselves regularly and see if there is anything in our lives which is displeasing to the Lord. But once we have done that, then we are to leave the results with God.

We must always remember that God is sovereign and He sees the whole. We see only the part. When our prayers are not answered according to our wishes, I believe it means that God has a better way which we do not fully understand. And we could have no better example to follow in Scripture than the total surrender by Jesus to the will of His Father. Let us reexamine the verses in Matthew 26 in which Jesus prayed to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. We know that three times our Savior asked that the cup of suffering be taken from Him. And yet, all three times, Jesus affirmed that His Father's will be done.

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."...He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."...So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. (Mt 26:39,42,44 NIV).

If Jesus, the Precious Lamb who was without sin, could ask that God's will be done, even in the face of the horrible imminent death by crucifixion facing Him, can we do any less with our prayer requests?

We must always remember,

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isa 55:8-9 NIV).

I am convinced that there are many things we encounter here on earth that we will not fully understand until we get to heaven. To this end, we must pray the best we know how and then leave the final outcome in God's sovereign hands.

We Must Believe

Once we have determined that our requests are legitimate in the kingdom, and that they are God-pleasing, then we come to the next step: WE MUST BELIEVE. This is not necessarily an easy thing to do. It is here that God often separates the timid from the bold. Why? Because:

1. Circumstances Will Oppose Our Belief

Circumstances will most always deny faith. They may well scream, "IMPOSSIBLE!" to our requests and God's provision. But we must remember that it is only the natural world that contains circumstances. Circumstances cannot oppose God's provision. His provision comes from the supernatural world. Nothing in the natural world can prevent God's purposes and will from the supernatural world from reaching us. This is a principle that we must never forget.

2. Satan Will Oppose Our Belief

Satanic forces will do everything possible to foster disbelief. Often, after unburdening yourself in prayer for a genuine kingdom need, a peace from God settles over you. But not too many hours or days pass before thoughts come into your mind like, "You're not going to receive anything." Or, "God's not going to say, 'Yes' to you. Why don't you just be realistic and make other plans? God isn't going to help you." Where did those thoughts come from? Straight from the pit of hell! Sometimes the message is very subtle. Often Satan will send a messenger, one of "Job's friends" to "encourage" you in your Christian faith walk. Satan often uses a friend or relative to bear his "bad news" to you. We must be alert to these tactics of the enemy and fight them at every turn.

We Must Do Our Part

During or after the time we are making our requests known to God, we must begin to act and move as if God has already answered our prayers. In other words, we must do our part. Remember the story in Part I of this article of the Nigerian evangelist who was asking the Lord for a used bullhorn to assist him in his preaching? He told Carolyn that he bought no extra foods, not even soft drinks, and walked everywhere he went, not spending money on bus fare. He was saving every cent he could to purchase the bullhorn. Yes, he believed the Lord would supply the bullhorn, but he was doing his part too.

When there was opposition to the rebuilding of the protective wall around Jerusalem, Nehemiah wrote, "But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat." (Neh 4:9 NIV). Now there is a classic example of prayer combined with appropriate action.

Once the king of Israel was going to battle and ran out of water in the desert. He inquired of Elisha who told him, "This is what the LORD says: Make this valley full of ditches...." (II Kings 3:16 NIV). In obedience they dug the valley full of ditches. They never saw a rain cloud nor felt the

wind, yet the Lord filled the ditches with water - after they did their part!

The point is this: once we have made our petitions known to the Lord, we are to do every responsible thing we know to do to help it come to pass. The king asked for water from the Lord, then he dug ditches believing that water was coming. In a very real sense that is moving in faith. The Lord wants us to act on the belief that He will answer our requests.

We see Paul's instruction to Philemon as another example of this principle. He instructed Philemon as follows: "And one more thing: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers." (Phm 1:22 NIV).

All too often we are our own worst enemy. Someone said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us!" Our own humanness, laziness, and disbelief are often the worst enemies we have when it comes to believing and receiving from God.

We cannot be like a man I heard of who was out of work. A friend stopped by one day to visit. Seeing the unemployed man lying on his sofa watching TV, he asked, "Well, have you found a job?" "No." The man replied, "No one has telephoned me yet." If we are to receive anything from the Lord, we must be *active*! We cannot passively wait for God to do both our part and His. I believe this is what the Lord was saying in Matthew when he said:

"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it." (Matt 11:12 NIV).

Putting this statement into today's language, Jesus is saying, "If you want to be a player in the kingdom of God, you must be active! The passive, half-hearted will be left behind." We must be **forceful** and **bold**. We must **act in faith** believing that God will answer our Christ-minded prayers.

Beware of Our Own Will and Flesh

I have just made the point that we need to act in faith to receive. But some people have such forceful personalities that by sheer force *they cause* things to happen. I have seen buildings built and projects fully completed by human scheming and effort - all without the hand of the Lord. Yet, these things were done "in the name of Jesus." This is not what I mean by acting in faith. This is known biblically as "the arm of the flesh". The psalmist penned these words:

Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. (Ps 20:7 NIV).

"Chariots" and "horses" were the most modern weapons of that day. They were weapons made by man, not by the Lord. Today the psalmist would say, "Some trust in fund-raising schemes and personality power but we trust in the LORD our God." Though God may use well man to supply our request, the *source* of the supply must always be the Lord, not our own strength or determined will.

Beware of the "Formula"

I have always been hesitant to either speak or write on the subject of answered prayer because I fear some will try to reduce the teaching to a formula. Let me hasten to say that there is no formula. Our God is a sovereign God. We can and

should learn true biblical principles and doctrines, but God does not work according to our formulas. If there is a "formula" that works, it lies in our pleasing the Lord with a lifestyle of holiness and depending on Him totally for all we need or desire. The psalmist displayed the proper attitude when he wrote, "May the words of my mouth and meditations of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer." (Ps 19:14 NIV).

Beware the Trap of "Claiming" Something Just Because You Want It

Finally, the last caution in this section deals with the error of claiming something just because you want it so much or because you, in your own mind and spirit, perceive it to be the best outcome of some situation. Remember, our ways are not His ways. I call this trap "easy believeism."

There is a popular teaching today that says, "If you want something from God, 'claim it'." Usually this teaching is based upon what I believe is a misunderstanding of the following verses.

"If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." (Mt 21:22 NIV).

"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." (Mk 11:24 NIV).

Yes, this "doctrine" does have human appeal, doesn't it? And it often works for Christians who are in the "my little children" stage of growth as described by the Apostle John in I Jn 2:12-14. But once we reach the "young man" and "father" stage of growth, such childish demands are no longer honored by God. Indeed, a spiritual father knows it would be foolish to make such demands...young men soon learn better too.

Remember there is a great difference between standing on a *revelation* or specific word to you from God and "claiming" something just because you want it or perceive you "need" it. As we mature in Christ, we should be leaving such childish things behind.

Pray in the Spirit

No teaching on prayer would be complete without a reference to praying in the Spirit. By praying in the Spirit I mean using our heavenly language of tongues which we receive as part of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. I do not have space for a complete analysis of the use (and misuse) of tongues. I will simply cite the following verses:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. (Rom 8:28 NIV).

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. (Eph 6:18 NIV).

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my

spirit, but I will also sing with my mind...I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. (I Cor 14:14-18 NIV).

There is no doubt from these verses that we are to use our prayer language daily as part of our prayer life. If any of us are not doing this, we are depriving ourselves of a powerful prayer tool.

Pray With and Develop a Thankful Heart

The Apostle Paul gave us wonderful and true guidance in prayer in Philippians, chapter 4. He said:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:4-7 NIV).

Did you notice that Paul specifically tells us to make our requests known to God **with thanksgiving**? It is only then that we will have that peace of God which transcends all understanding. And it is that peace which will ultimately guard our hearts and minds concerning those things about which we pray. Having a thankful heart is foundational to our prayer life.

Frankly, I think all of us lack a truly thankful heart. It is just worse in some of us than in others. This condition often stands as a large, immovable block stopping the Lord from answering our prayers. Israel continually displayed an unthankful attitude. After spending more than 400 years in Egyptian captivity, after seeing God bring plague after plague on Egypt to force their release, after seeing the Red Sea part before their very eyes, they came to the first water hole in the desert and murmured and complained because the water didn't taste good! That's ingratitude in its barest form!

Of course, it's easier to see the lack of a thankful heart in others than in ourselves. In fact, it's very difficult to see it in ourselves. Often we who enjoy good health murmur and complain to the Lord because of a lack of finances or something else. While there are others who would exchange all they owned to be able to see, to walk, to be free from pain,

and so on.

I have traveled in many countries, some with great wealth and some with scarcely the means to sustain human life. Guess where I usually find the most thankful Christians? Yes, in nations that have very little. Isn't that surprising?

Hearing the testimony and prayers of Christians who are less fortunate often reminds me of my own ingratitude. Once I listened with a pricked conscience to a brother very poor by the world's standards. He hadn't much more than the clothes on his body. Yet he joyfully thanked the Lord for all the blessings the Lord had given him.

I believe the Lord is much more inclined to bless those with a thankful heart. Wouldn't you be more inclined to give to one who is thankful than to one who is continually murmuring and complaining about all that you have not yet done for him?

Besides God's blessings, there is another enormous benefit to those with a thankful heart. I have also noticed that it is those with the most thankful hearts who are the happiest! Each of us are so much more happy when we are grateful and thankful for what we receive from the Lord. It is to our own benefit, as well as to please the Lord, that we should have thankful hearts.

Lord, teach us to pray in a more pleasing way. Teach us to turn to you in all things, to wait on you and to seek a Christ-mindedness in our prayers. And most of all, help us to lift all prayers and petitions to you with thanksgiving in our hearts. And finally Lord, we affirm in all things, as your beloved Son prayed, not our will, but may your will be done. Amen.

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