

PRAYERFULNESS

Proof and Providence©

The Son of God Prays

Jesus set a powerful example of prayerfulness in His own life while He was on this earth. He also took opportunity to teach much on prayer and call His disciples to a life of prayer. In response to being asked by one of His disciples, “Lord, teach us to pray...,” Jesus gave them an example, or pattern, of prayer. This prayer is normally referred to as the “Lord’s Prayer” or the “Model Prayer.” (see Luke 11:1-4; Matthew 6:9-13)

Before being arrested, we find Jesus prostrate in heart-wrenching prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane¹ and while dying on the cross we find Jesus in agonizing prayer². Following His resurrection from the dead and His ascension into heaven, we learn that Jesus prays still. Today He sits at the right hand of the Father praying for His people!³ Truly “we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”⁴

Jesus has done it all! He lived a righteous life for us - perfectly obeying the law and never committing a single sin.⁵ This is something we could not do for ourselves.⁶ He died on the cross as a perfect sacrifice for our sins - completely without blemish.⁷ No one else

could offer himself as a sacrifice for the sins of another. Following His death on the cross, Jesus rose from the grave, conquering death for us.⁸ We now may have victory over death as a result.⁹ It's all true. Jesus lived a flawless life; Jesus died as a sinless sacrifice; Jesus bodily came back to life after dying. These are things which no one had ever done in the past or will ever do in the future. Jesus was undoubtedly the Son of God. John declared of Jesus: "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" and "I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God!"¹⁰

When the account of what Jesus has done to save repentant sinners is told, His death, burial, and resurrection are explained. This is true and necessary. This is the gospel. This is the message Jesus commanded His followers spread before He ascended into heaven.¹¹ Christ's work of salvation is complete...but, Christ continues to work on our behalf, unceasingly, to protect His labor of love. What He accomplished on the cross He protects!

We learn from Scripture that Jesus prays for His people - those for whom He has died; He prays for those who have repented of sin and embraced the forgiveness found in Christ. Jesus is at the right hand of the Father making constant intercession for His people.¹² Why? Why does He do this? Why is it necessary? If we sin, as Christians, Christ prays for us!¹³ Also, He prays so that our salvation is sure and cannot be lost if we've truly repented and turned to Christ.¹⁴ We have eternal security! Indeed, who can

“bring a charge against God’s elect” in the face of Christ’s personal prayer intervention on their behalf? No one! Jesus is doing everything necessary to assure His work in the lives of His people is protected. His salvation is a certainty and cannot be lost. If one embraces Christ, heaven is a certainty and cannot be forfeited.¹⁵ How can we be 100% certain of this? Because He prays.

The People Of God Pray

“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)

This passage, drawn from the teaching of Jesus Himself, consists of two conditions and a promise. If the two conditions are met, then the promise is certain. The first half of the verse contains the conditions and the second half of the verse contains the assurance of answered prayer. Let us look closely at this important teaching from Jesus on prayer.

Condition #1

“If you abide in Me”

What does it mean to “abide” with Jesus? This means to “identify” with Christ. We find our identity in Christ and apart from Him we are ineffective. It also indicates we “live” with Christ. The people with whom you live are those who are the closest to you. You know them the best and have a deep relationship

with them. To abide with Christ is to enjoy an intimate relationship with Him. To abide with Christ is to have a relationship which involves our trusting Him, yielding to Him, and becoming dead to ourselves and alive in Christ.¹⁶ Jesus said: “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself...neither can you unless you abide in Me” and “without Me you can do nothing”.¹⁷

The first condition for answered prayer is **YOU MUST BE A BELIEVER- A CHRISTIAN** and you must not forge out on your own apart from Christ. It is a serious error to make up your own plan and expect God to bless it. Many have decided what they wanted to do for the Lord and failed. Why? They failed and endured much heartache because they were out of God’s will for their lives. It is vital that each individual prayerfully seek God’s plan for him and not make up his own, no matter how noble or spiritual a work he may pursue apart from works “prepared by God beforehand” for him.¹⁸

Condition #2

“And My words abide in you”

The Christian must have familiarity with the Word of God- the Bible. Christ came as the Word in flesh¹⁹ and we must receive His message- the gospel. The second condition for answered prayer is **YOU MUST LIVE IN OBEDIENCE TO THE WORD**. As believers we have a renewed will and this affects our prayer life.²⁰

It must be understood that our prayers can be

hindered. Unconfessed sin in the life of a believer can hinder prayer.²¹ This is especially true in regard to our earthly relationships. We are told by Jesus to not come to Him if we know someone has something against us.

We are to first seek to be reconciled to the other person. [Note that Jesus does not say “if you have something against your brother”, but He says “if your brother has something against you.”]²² Also, strife between a husband and wife can cause your prayers to be hindered.²³

I have a large family but not a large house. Our breakfast area was very small with our meals being eaten in a little confined area around a small table. Mealtime became more and more stressful as our family grew. We were cramped and one person had to get up in order to let another pass in order to get more potatoes. We argued and complained about this situation. Well, as a believer who studies the Bible, I decided we should pray for God to give us a larger dining room. For weeks we prayed over this matter. Unfortunately, the bickering and strife continued at mealtime. I determined we would stop praying for additional space because we were not thankful for the small space we had. How could we ask God for something greater than what we already had since we had not shown ourselves faithful in the smaller?²⁴ We confessed our sin. We stopped praying for more room and concentrated on being thankful for what we already had.

In a very short time we received the money we needed to enclose our carport. Also, a relative offered us a very large dining room table with eight chairs, a buffet, and china cabinet to put in the new room. These items, unknown to me, had been stored for some time by the relative. I felt confident that God withheld the blessing of the room and the furnishings until we showed ourselves faithful with what we already possessed. Our prayers had been hindered. So often, we as believers are not receiving the blessings God has for us, and the answered prayers, because we do not pray aright.

The Promise

“You will ask what you desire and it shall be done for you”

It is expected and understood that believers “will pray”. Saul [later known as Paul] became a believer as the result of his dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Soon we find him fasting and praying. In fact he is identified by Jesus, to the skeptical Ananias, with the words, “...behold, he is praying”.²⁵ Saul’s prayerfulness was a *proof* of his conversion.

Not only is it certain that believers will practice prayer, but Christians are given “liberty” in prayer. Jesus said, you will ask “what you desire”. Wow! Does this mean I can ask for whatever I want and get it? It is very important to understand what Jesus is saying here when He speaks of our desires. David tells us to

“Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.”²⁶ I used to think that this meant if I took delight in the Lord, He’d give me whatever I desired. A close study brought me to a much different conclusion. David is saying here that one who delights himself in the Lord will be given the proper desires. We do not naturally have the right desires, but He will give us godly desires. This happens when we delight ourselves in the Lord.

Also, we are told by Paul that we do not know what to pray for but we must be led by God’s Holy Spirit.²⁷ Here again, we must be reminded that, apart from God, we cannot pray aright. We are weak in ourselves and need help from God in praying properly.

The promise is IT SHALL BE DONE. In other words, we can pray believing²⁸ our prayers will be answered. Our Father is not impersonal in His dealings with us but is very personal. Jesus finishes by adding that prayers will be answered “for you”. The certain promise is made that answers will be given to our prayers if we are seeking to be fruitful for Christ. Answered prayers are very important to believers. They encourage us and strengthen our faith. We need to see answers to our prayers and we will.

Improper and Proper Prayers

There are some issues that need to be addressed in regard to understanding all that has been said. Someone might ask: “If I am a Christian and study the Word of God, couldn’t I just pray for \$1,000,000

for myself and get it?” The answer is, “No.” Praying for \$1,000,000 in order to live a life of pleasure, ease, and comfort is selfish. This would be the prayer of an unregenerate person, not the prayer of one who has a renewed will. If the Lord impressed an individual to take on a certain project or begin a ministry which required \$1,000,000 to accomplish the task, then it would be legitimate to pray for the money for that purpose.

Following the death of a loved one, someone who prayed for weeks for the sick person’s recovery might be heard to say: “God did not answer my prayers!” There are several things to consider about this statement. Did the person praying meet the two conditions stated in John 15:7? Was the person praying selfishly, wishing to hold on to the relationship for their own benefit or security? Did God have a higher purpose in ending the person’s life than physical healing would have accomplished? Was the person praying with a sincere desire to seek God’s will in this matter or to have their own desires met?

I’ve heard an interesting and important question asked concerning the prayers of unbelievers. The query has been offered: “Does God hear the prayers of sinners?” In light of what’s been explained about prayer, based on Jesus’ teaching in John 17:5, there is an answer. The answer does require some explanation though.

First, God certainly hears the words spoken by an unbeliever since He is God and hears everything.²⁹

Second, the first real prayer a person raises to God is a prayer of repentance. A convicted sinner's first prayer will be, and must be, a prayer of confession and repentance of sin.³⁰ Only after this first prayer can a life of prayerfulness follow and develop. Third, an unbeliever (one who has an unregenerate will and one who has not come to repentance) simply does not have the ability to pray. He does not abide in Christ and is powerless to engage in prayer. An unbeliever can say words but he cannot say a "real prayer."

Now the question can be answered. If by "sinners" we are referring to "unbelievers," then the answer is clearly: "No, God does not hear the prayers of sinners."³¹ He hears words but He hears no prayers. Prayers are spoken only by obedient Christians. [Zealous Christians desiring to see the unconverted quickly won to Christ should be warned here. Christians should be cautioned in leading people in reciting or having them read a "sinner's prayer." This practice may easily cause people to think that they are Christians because they said a formula prayer. Reciting a prayer does not save, but a heart already stirred for Christ will move a person to beg (pray) for forgiveness of sin.]

The Bible gives us examples of the kinds of things which are legitimate for Christians to bring before our Father in prayer. For example, it is appropriate to pray for encouragement³² when one is going through a time of stress or uncertainty. In the ministry which I head in Mississippi, at one time my assistant and I were

going through a time of much discouragement. We determined to pray about this matter together. We prayed on Monday. We prayed together on Tuesday. We entered into prayer on Wednesday. In the mail on Wednesday we received a handwritten envelope from Hammonton, NJ. We'd never heard of this place! Inside the envelope was a letter written entirely in Spanish. Since I am unable to read Spanish, I put the letter aside wondering what it said.

The next day a friend who is fluent in Spanish read the letter to me. The writer told of how he had passed through our little city on the bus and picked up literature we'd placed at the terminal. After reading the material he'd come to Christ and wished to inform us of his conversion. Of course we were thrilled! Jose closed his letter by saying, "Steadfastly continue going on with the work you are doing in the Lord because this is not in vain..."

That same Thursday, my assistant's (Greg's) daughter brought a note from her teacher. The note was to express thanks for a devotional booklet she'd received. The kind lady ended her note saying she wanted to "send us encouragement". After praying for three days, we'd received a letter from another part of the country and a letter from just a few blocks away to send us encouragement!

[At this point it might be appropriate to add a comment about knowing God's will. One of the ways in which we ascertain God's will for our lives is through the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

God sovereignly orchestrates situations. This is, theologically, referred to as His “*providence*”. We prayed for encouragement in the work in which we are involved. Our Father sent confirmation of our efforts and motivated us to continue on since we were shown to be in His will where we are serving.]

A biblical, Christian concern of which we are expected to pray much involves salvation for the lost and evangelism.³³ Christians should be especially concerned over the conversion of their children³⁴ and other relations. Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China, is a striking example of conversion as a direct answer to the prayers of his mother (and sister). Hudson Taylor, in his later years, explained how he had become a Christian at the age of seventeen:

“On a day I can never forget,...my dear mother being absent from home, I had a holiday, and in the afternoon looked through my father’s library to find some book with which to while away the unoccupied hours. Nothing attracted me, I turned over a basket of pamphlets and selected from amongst them a Gospel tract that looked interesting...

I sat down to read the book in an utterly unconcerned state of mind, believing indeed at the time that if there were any salvation it was not for me...

Little did I know at the time what was going on in the heart of my dear mother, seventy or eighty miles away. She rose from the dinner

table that afternoon with an intense yearning for the conversion of her boy; and feeling that, absent from home and having more leisure than she could otherwise secure, a special opportunity was afforded her of pleading with God on my behalf. She went to her room and turned the key in the door resolving not to leave the spot until her prayers were answered. Hour after hour that dear mother pleaded, until at length she could pray no longer, but was constrained to praise God for that which His Spirit taught her had already been accomplished, the conversion of her only son.

I in the meantime had been led in the way I have mentioned to take up this little tract, and while reading it was struck with the phrase: 'The finished work of Christ.' ...

'What was finished?' ...

Then came the further thought, 'If the whole work was finished and the whole debt paid, what is there left for me to do?'

And with this dawned the joyful conviction, as light was flashed into my soul by the Holy Spirit, that there was nothing in the world to be done but fall down on one's knees and accepting this Saviour and His salvation praise Him forevermore. ...

Thus while my dear mother was praising God on her knees in her chamber, I was praising Him in the old warehouse to which I

had gone alone to read at my leisure this little book.

Several days elapsed ere I ventured to make my beloved sister the confidante of my joy, and then only after she had promised not to tell anyone of my soul-secret. When Mother returned a fortnight later I was the first to meet her at the door and to tell her I had such glad news to give. I can almost feel that dear mother's arms round my neck as she pressed me to her heart and said:

'I know, my boy. I have been rejoicing for a fortnight in the glad tidings you have to tell.'

'Why,' I asked in surprise, 'has Amelia broken her promise? She said she would tell no one.'

My dear mother assured me that it was not from any human source she had learned the tidings... You will agree with me that it would be strange indeed if I were not a believer in the power of prayer.

Nor was this all. Some time after, I picked up a pocket-book exactly like my own, and thinking it was mine, opened it. The lines that caught my eye were an entry in a little diary belonging to my sister, to the effect that she would give herself daily to prayer until God should answer in the conversion of her brother. One month later the Lord was pleased to turn me from darkness to light.

Brought up in such a circle and saved under such circumstances, it was perhaps natural that from the commencement of my Christian life I was led to feel that the promises were very real, and that prayer was in sober matter of fact transacting business with God, whether on one's behalf or on the behalf of those for whom one sought His blessing."³⁵

REFERENCES*

1. Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46
2. Matthew 27:45-46; Mark 15:33-34; Luke 23:34-46
3. Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25
4. I John 2:1
5. Hebrews 4:15; 2 Corinthians 5:21
6. I John 1:8-9
7. I Peter 1:19
8. Matthew 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-8
9. I Corinthians 15:54-58
10. John 1:29, 34
11. Mark 16:15-16; Matthew 28:16-20
12. Romans 8:32-34; Hebrews 7:24-25
13. I John 2:1
14. John 10:27-30
15. Romans 8:29-30
16. Romans 8:10-13; Galatians 2:20
17. John 15:4-6
18. Ephesians 2:10
19. John 1:1, 14
20. I John 5:14 21
21. Psalm 66:17-18; Isaiah 59:2
22. Matthew 5:23-24
23. I Peter 3:7

24. Matthew 25:21,23
25. Acts 9:11
26. Psalm 37:4
27. Romans 8:26-27
28. Matthew 21:22
29. Psalm 139:7-12
30. Luke 18:9-14
31. John 9:31; Isaiah 59:1-2
32. Colossians 2:1-3
33. Romans 10 (for example)
34. Malachi 2:15; Acts 2:39
35. Taken from Hudson Taylor The Growth Of A Soul, Dr. & Mrs. Howard Taylor, 1996, pp. 66-68.

*All quotations cited in the text are from the New King James Version of the Bible.

EXPLANATION

The purpose of this booklet is two-fold. The first is to present the gospel as a completed work of salvation which is followed by Christ's essential work of prayer "for the believer". Jesus lived a perfect life, died on the cross as a sinless sacrifice, was buried, rose again from the grave, ascended into heaven...and presently sits at the right hand of the Father praying for His people. Jesus is not only the author of our faith (which is necessary for salvation), but He is the "finisher" of our faith as He sits praying at the right hand of the Father (see Hebrews 12:2).

The second purpose is to develop from Scripture the importance and necessity of prayer in the life of a believer. Being a Pharisee, undoubtedly Saul (later Paul) was a devoutly religious man who practiced what was considered prayer. Remarkably, upon his signal conversion to faith in Christ, Paul is identified by the Lord by the words "...behold, he is praying." It is as if he had never prayed before! In actuality, he never had.

Godly prayer is a proof of real conversion. This being the case, what is considered godly, or Christian, prayer? This question is answered, I believe, quite well by Jesus in John 15:7. This is why the verse has been highlighted and verses related to this teaching have been cited. Prayer is a deep, deep subject which would require much time to address adequately. The purpose here is to give some general biblical guidelines, not to speak to every aspect of prayerfulness in the life of a believer.

There is another question which should be considered. It was briefly touched on in the preceding material as well. Why can an obedient believer pray with confidence? We know God expects us to pray. We know God hears our prayers. We know the Bible tells us to pray and not doubt (see Matthew 21:21-22)...but why can we have confidence in our prayerfulness? We can have confidence because of God's providence. God is in control of the affairs of men and orchestrates (arranges) those affairs. [There is no luck or chance.]

While my brother and I were praying for encouragement, our Father was stirring the hearts of a Hispanic man in New Jersey and a local woman schoolteacher to write us notes. When my family and I prayed and confessed our sin of complaining to our Father, He then opened up the door for us to receive money from one source and furnishings from another. While Hudson Taylor's mother was praying for his conversion, the Lord directed him to just the right tract to accomplish the salvation for which Hudson's mother prayed. God's timing is perfect and He has only our good in mind as we humble ourselves in prayer. (see Romans 8:26-28)

—Robert Smith