

On Asking God

Prayer is the most profitable, and the most perplexing thing we do. It is doubtful that there is an earnest Christian in the world, that has not, at some time, been baffled as to what God is thinking, or doing, in regard to our petitions to Him. It is even more baffling, if we are involved in ministry to others. Why does God not respond to their needs, especially when the needs seem so desperate? It is hard to keep “covering” for God.

Prayer often seems such an erratic thing. God’s responses seem to have no pattern. Sometimes He seems to respond abundantly when we least expect it. And, sometimes, when we think that we have really prayed earnestly, and cleared away every supposed “hindrance” we can think of, He seems to be silent. For many, the prayer life sort of “sputters” along, like a faulty engine. We must examine this matter, and see if we can arrive at a more stable and consistent approach to prayer.

Much of the problem lies in false concepts of what prayer is all about. The text from John 14 is crucial to a proper understanding of prayer, and yet it is one of the most misunderstood texts in the Bible. *“And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it”* (John 14:13,14). This text seems to give a limitless scope to the petitioner. However the Greek text is not so emphatic. The word, “whatsoever,” should be translated, more properly, “the thing which you ask.” (In handling the Greek text, one must be careful not to put too much weight on “particles”). One is not trying to take away from the omnipotence of God, but rather to limit the scope of the promise, lest there be disappointment. The word, “anything,” is, itself, troublesome. As, for example, in the question—“Can God do anything?” We have a problem unless we recognize that He can *not* do anything that is contrary to His nature. Thus, obviously, in this text, “whatsoever,” or, “anything,” must be limited to what is according to God’s will and purpose. And, indeed, the rest of the passage does establish the bounds of the promise.

In My Name. . .

As an agent of Christ, one cannot forge checks. To ask in the name of Christ means to ask with the sense of His cooperation in the matter—a prayer directed by the Spirit. “How do we know?” We don’t always know, but we can assume that if the matter does not turn out as we want it, then we probably did not ask it as He wanted. But, “not to worry.” It is not possible for us human beings ever to completely eliminate the flesh from our actions, or petitions. The important thing is to realize this, and not to assume that there is something wrong with us, if we do not always get what we want. The flesh will be a constant source of distress for us, as long as we are on the earth. It is not likely that we will ever be completely in tune with Christ, until we are glorified. There will always be that “generation gap.” Paul said it, succinctly, *“The flesh has its desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are contrary to one another, so that ye do not do the things that ye will”* (Galatians 5:17). To the Philippians, he said, “We have no confidence in the flesh.” Paul was, himself,

constantly troubled by a “messenger of Satan”—“a thorn in the flesh.” It was not probably some one thing, but a spirit from Satan who could not possess Paul, but could buffet him in the flesh. So you see, we have, in Paul, an encouraging example.

There is much of the flesh, even in our religious attitudes and actions. Religious devotion, is, in fact, the essence of all religious groups, in one way or another. Often, the more bizarre the group, the more fanatical the sacrifices made for it. When we speak of the flesh, in connection with religious devotion, we mean, of course, expressions and feelings that originate in the mind, itself, rather than in the spirit. It is not always possible to tell the difference, but when the feelings fade, and the expressions falter, it is well to recognize this “flesh factor,” and not to put too much weight on how we feel about things, positively, or negatively.

But how, then, can we have any confidence in our praying, if we don't have the assurance that God is going to answer our prayers? Where does faith come in?

In the first place, obviously, we are not talking about whether or not God answers our prayers, but whether or not He answers them in the way that we would like. In the second place, as to faith, faith is not some fleshly feeling of confidence, that vacillates with the weather and the well-being. It is an energy flow from God to our spirits, that remains stable and functional, as God fulfills His purpose in our lives. If He wants to do something through His people, He does it, whether we always feel good about it or not. Consider the matter of the raising of Lazarus, for example. Mary and Martha and the mourners were certainly not exhibiting great feelings of confidence. In fact, quite the contrary. But Jesus raised Lazarus anyway, because it was His purpose to do so.

So, it is not a matter of “drumming” up feelings of confidence, but simply committing the matter to Christ, to do what he wants, and then accepting the results. If any of our praying depends upon our human efforts, or worthiness, we are all in trouble. But, in the third place, it is not a matter of confidence that God is going to do what we want Him to do, but rather that He will do what He wants to do. And what He wants to do, is not always disclosed to us ahead of time. Trying to outguess what God wants to do, is a pretty frustrating exercise. What most people call faith is really a matter of humans trying to outguess God, and supporting their guesses with trumped up feelings of fleshly confidence.

Stability and consistency in our prayer life is achieved by an attitude toward prayer that sees it as a flow of communion with God. It is not a matter of bringing a “shopping list” to Him, and presenting a credit card, or forged check. Merely saying “in the name of Christ,” does not give the request authorization. Nor is it even necessary to determine what His will is, ahead of time. We talk things over with Him, and leave the matter in His hands. We may have a sense of assurance in a certain matter, or we may not, but that is not our affair. Our peace comes not from knowing what He will do, but that He will do what is best.

But what about “hindrances to prayer?”

A word of caution—don't tie your requests to human perfection. If God has a problem with you, He will let you know. Don't let Satan draw you into "fishing trips," about your offenses. If you do, Satan will keep you in bondage forever. Satan can dream up endless allegations to keep the believer continually off balance. Don't give him a chance. Wait for God to initiate any charge. If He does, deal with it, and go on. Nor is it necessary to have all pieces in place. If we had to wait for all problems to be solved, we would never get to the business of praying, and, of course, that is just what Satan wants. The attitude is what counts—the heart of openness toward God.

Perhaps the most fundamental advice is—don't be anxious about "answers to prayer." Don't treat your time with God as a shopping trip. Talk to Him. Deal with whatever comes up. Discuss things with Him. Share your feelings, however negative. Share your doubts and fears, and desires. Make your requests to Him, and leave them. Express your gratitude, and disappointments. Above all, don't barter with God—so many pounds of piety and praise for so many pounds of benefits. This makes the marvelous privilege of communion with God, nothing but a sterile session of egotistic exploitation. If you need something, ask Him, but don't make "getting things from God" the essence of your prayer life. Think how you would feel if your children, or friends, practiced the fine art of "getting things from you."

Seen in the light of the above considerations, the promise before us, far from being limited, is rather liberated from the charge of celestial idealism, and brought down on the plains of practical realism. It removes from prayer, the onus of specialization—a prize for the exceeding pious—and makes it a viable hope for everyone.

So how then do we stabilize our prayer life?

We quit trying to extract things from God, and begin sharing with Him. We cease to demand from Him what we want, and yield instead, to what He wants. Only then will we begin, truly, to pray "in His name." And, only then, will we be confident and consistent in our communion with Him.

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