

THREE GUIDELINES FOR PRAYER

7²⁴[Jesus] left that place and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. There he entered into a house, but did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵Immediately a woman, whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, and who had heard about [Jesus], came and fell down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by race. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷But he said to her, First let the children be fed; for it is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the [little] dogs. ²⁸But she answered and said to him, But, Lord; even the [little] dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs. ²⁹Then he said to her, For [giving] this answer, you may go your way [in peace]; the demon has gone out of your daughter. ³⁰She left and went to her house; there she found the child lying on the bed, and the demon was gone. (Mk. 7:24-30)

See attached Appendix for the parallel passage of Matthew 15:21-28

Introduction

How many times have you had this happen to you? You call the department store to make a mail order purchase or to check up on your credit card status. After a few rings a cheery voice answers on the other end of the line, "All our representatives are busy right now, please hold and the first available representative will help you." Before you can even open your mouth to respond, you find yourself listening to soothing music, sometimes interspersed with commercials. Every few minutes that cheery voice interrupts the music to assure you that your call is important to them and that the first available representative will be happy to help you as soon as they are available. Sometimes, when that first available representative actually does become available, he inadvertently pushes the wrong button and disconnects you. Then, after fifteen minutes of music and repeated pleas to "please hold the line," there comes the hum of a disconnected phone line.

Can you identify with this? You're not the only one. The Syro-Phoenician woman could identify with this, too: the Lord Jesus kept her "on hold," and the disciples kept trying to "disconnect" her. What can we learn from her experience with prayer? As we study this account, let us consider Three Guidelines for Prayer.

I. Guideline #1: Appeal to the LORD's Covenant Mercy (Matt. 15:22,27)

Following His confrontation with the Pharisees over the subject of tradition, the Lord Jesus leaves the nation of Israel, crossing the border into the Gentile regions of Tyre and Sidon. Here in this Gentile region He is approached by a Gentile woman, pleading on behalf of her little daughter who is demon-possessed.

Note carefully the description of this woman. She is "*a Canaanite woman*" (Matt. 15:22;) she is a part of the heathen peoples, a member of the unclean Gentiles whom the Jews were careful to avoid for fear of spiritual contamination. As was

noted in Mark 7:3-4a, the Jews even went so far as to wash their hands after they had been in contact with the Gentiles in the marketplace:

Now the Pharisees, and all the Jews, observing the tradition of the elders, do not eat unless they have first performed a ceremonial hand washing. ⁴And [when they come] from the market-place, they do not eat until they have first bathed themselves. (Mk. 7:3-4a)

Take note of the way she approaches the Lord Jesus. She pleads for mercy: *“A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, ‘O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is grievously tormented by a demon’”* (Matt. 15:22.) Note, too, that she appeals to Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, the long-expected Son of David. She requests that even she, a Gentile, might receive the Savior’s blessing and the benefit of His saving work:

But she came and bowed down before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶Then he replied, “It is not fitting to take the children’s [a reference to Israel] bread and throw it to the [little] dogs [a reference to the Gentiles].” ²⁷But she said, “But, Lord, even the [little] dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” (Matthew 15:25-27)

When we approach the Lord in prayer, we must appeal to His covenant mercy. We dare not approach the Lord on the basis of personal merit—as the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable futilely sought to do,

The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. (Lk. 18:11-12)

The Greek may also be translated, *“the Pharisee ... prayed with himself,”* or, *“prayed to himself.”* In other words, the Lord did not respond to his self-righteous prayer. In prayer we must come in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting in His merit: *“Christ also died for sins once for all, the Righteous One for the unrighteous ones, so that he might bring us to God”* (1 Pet. 3:18.)

We must not approach the Lord on the basis of our supposed merit; nor must we fear to approach the Lord due to our own lack of personal merit. We must come before the LORD in the name of Jesus, trusting in His atoning sacrifice and righteousness:

... since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. ¹⁶Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Heb. 4:14-16)

II. Guideline #2: Persist in Prayer, even though the LORD Does Not Provide an Immediate Answer (Matt. 15:23-27)

This Canaanite woman makes a heartfelt plea on behalf of her daughter who was *"grievously tormented by a demon."* But Jesus initially ignored her: *"He did not say a word to her"* (Matt. 15:23a.) Nevertheless, rather than turn away in despair, she persisted—so much so that the disciples requested Jesus to send her away, because she was continuing to cry out after Him (Matt. 15:23b.)

Jesus finally addresses her, but only with these discouraging words: *"I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"* (Matt. 15:24.) But rather than accept that as a final answer, she pleads, *"Lord, help me!"* Jesus replies that it is not fitting to take the children's food and feed it to the pet dogs (Matt. 15:25-26.) But she continues to persist—she protests that the dogs eat of the crumbs that fall from the table (Matt. 15:27.) Now the Lord Jesus compliments her faith and finally grants her request.

When we approach the Lord in prayer, we need to persist when He does not provide an immediate answer. For one thing, we need to recognize the reality of spiritual warfare and the fact that the devil is permitted at times to hinder the immediate answer to prayer, as was the case with Daniel's prayer:

Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. ¹³But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me for twenty-one days. (Dan. 10:12-13a)

The LORD assures Daniel that his prayer has been heard and will be answered, although the devil, operating in the Persian court, has been permitted to restrain the answer to prayer for a period of time symbolically designated as *"twenty-one days."*

Furthermore, we need to recognize the preventive dimension of prayer. Even though we may not at times witness positive results, our prayers may be preventing evil from occurring and restraining its influence, as did the prayer of Moses on behalf of Joshua and the armies of Israel: *"As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning"* (Ex. 17:11.) Moses, holding up his hands, was the posture of prayer, which prayer restrained the enemies of God's people and enabled Israel to gain the victory.

Then, too, we may need to re-examine our requests to be sure that they are in line with the will of God as it is revealed in the Scriptures. Such is necessary if we desire for our prayers to be answered. The Apostle James admonishes, *"You do not have, because you do not ask God. ³When you ask, you do not receive, because*

you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (Jas. 4:2b-3.)

Finally, we must be assured that the Lord’s promise that the coming of His kingdom, which should be our number one priority in prayer (Matthew 6:9-10), shall surely be fulfilled (Revelation 11:15),

This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. (Matt. 6:9-10)

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.” (Rev. 11:15;) this is the vision the Lord Jesus granted to John with regard to the final and ultimate coming of the kingdom of God at the end of this present age.

III. Guideline #3: Accept the LORD’s Sovereign Will (Matt. 15:23-26)

Having witnessed the compassion of the Lord Jesus in previous incidents of healing, His response to this woman appears to be very much out of character. At first He simply ignores her. When He does address her, He does so with a very discouraging response: *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”* He even addresses this woman in harsh and demeaning terms; declaring to her, *“It is not fitting for the children’s bread to be given to the [little] dogs.”*

Why does the Lord deal with this poor, desperate, Gentile woman in this manner?

The answer has to do with God’s sovereign timetable: the way He has chosen to carry out His plan of salvation. There were already clear indications that the gospel was intended for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. At one point in His ministry, the Lord Jesus declared, *“I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven”* (Matt. 8:11.) Again, He informs His disciples, *“I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd”* (Jn. 10:16.) At the time of His presentation at the temple shortly after His birth, Simeon declares that the Savior will be *“a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel”* (Lk. 2:32.)

Certainly, time for the worldwide ministry of the gospel would eventually come. Just prior to His ascension the Lord Jesus issued the great commission: *“go and make disciples of all nations”* (Matt. 28:19.) But it would come at the Lord’s appointed time—after the Lord’s work of atonement was accomplished upon the cross of Calvary. Until that time there existed a spiritual wall of separation

between the Jews and the Gentiles that could only be torn down by the cross of Christ:

[Christ] is our peace, [he is] the one who made the two [Jew and Gentile] [become] one and who destroyed the dividing wall [that served as] a barrier. With his flesh [he destroyed] the [source of] enmity ¹⁵by abolishing the law [that consisted] of commandments in [the form of] regulations [here “the law” is referring to the entire Old Testament law that served to separate the Jew from the Gentile with its various regulations]. [He did so] in order that in himself he might create the two into one new man, [thereby] making peace; ¹⁶and that he might reconcile the two—in one body—unto God by the cross, having put the enmity to death by it. (Eph. 2:14-16)

When we approach the Lord in prayer, we must be willing to accept His sovereign will. We must be willing to allow the Lord to bring us through sanctifying trials, rather than futilely pleading to avoid them. Consider the testimony of the Apostle Paul with regard to prayer for deliverance from trial:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given to me a thorn [or, a stake] in my flesh, a messenger from Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:7-10)

In the garden of Gethsemane, as He faced the cross, our Lord Jesus requested deliverance, if it were possible, but willingly submitted Himself to His Father’s will: *“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me; yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matt. 26:39.)*

We must be willing to wait for God’s appointed time of fulfillment, rather than always expecting to receive the immediate fulfillment of our every request. Consider here the case of the martyrs as they pleaded for justice, only to be told that they must wait until the divinely appointed time:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. ¹⁰They called out in a loud voice, How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood? ¹¹Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed. (Rev. 6:9-11)

We must be willing to accept God's decision to administer judgment, rather than granting prolonged longsuffering or further extensions of mercy, if He so sees fit to do. When Samuel mourned for Saul, the LORD informed him that the time of longsuffering had expired with regard to King Saul and the time of judgment had come: *"Jehovah said to Samuel, 'How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel?'"* (1 Sam. 16:1a.)

Conclusion

There are times when our prayer life seems to resemble our telephone calls that get put on hold, or even disconnected. At such times we are well able to sympathize with the Syro-Phoenician woman. But rather than become discouraged or even wrongfully become disillusioned with prayer, let us remember these three guidelines with regard to prayer: 1) When you approach the LORD in prayer, appeal to His covenant mercy; 2) Persist in prayer, even when the LORD does not provide an immediate answer; and 3) Accept the LORD's sovereign will, rather than futilely praying in opposition to that will.

Appendix: The Text of Matthew 15:21-28

15 ²¹Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²²A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is grievously tormented by a demon. ²³But he did not say a word to her. His disciples came and begged him, Send her away, for she keeps crying out and following us. ²⁴Then he responded [to her] and said, I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ²⁵But she came and bowed down before him, saying, Lord, help me. ²⁶Then he replied, It is not fitting to take the children's bread and throw it to the [little] dogs. ²⁷But she said, But, Lord, even the [little] dogs eat of the crumbs that fall from their masters' table. ²⁸Then Jesus responded and said to her, O woman, great is your faith. Your desire is granted. And her daughter was healed at that [very] hour. (Matt. 15:21-28)