

THREE GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE PRAYER

11 ¹²The next day, when they came from Bethany, [Jesus] was hungry. ¹³Seeing in the distance a fig tree with leaves, he came to it, hoping that he might find some fruit on it. But when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves; for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴Then he said to it, May no man eat any fruit from you ever again. Now his disciples heard this ... ²⁰And as they passed by [the next] morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. ²¹Peter, remembering [what had happened], said to him, Rabbi, look, the fig tree that you cursed has withered away. ²²In response, Jesus said to them, Have faith in God. ²³I tell you the truth, Whoever shall say to this mountain, May you be picked up and thrown into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that what he says will happen; it will be done for him. ²⁴Therefore I say to you, Whatever things you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received them, and you shall have them. ²⁵And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against any one, forgive [them]; so that your Father who is in heaven may also forgive your trespasses. (Mk. 11:12-14, 20-25)

14 ¹³And whatever you shall ask in my name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified by the Son. ¹⁴If you shall ask anything in my name, that will I do. ¹⁵If you love me, you will keep my commandments. (Jn. 14:13-15)

Introduction

In the Gospel of Mark there is recorded the account of Jesus cursing the fig tree:

The next day, when they came from Bethany, [Jesus] was hungry. ¹³Seeing in the distance a fig tree with leaves, he came to it, hoping that he might find some fruit on it. But when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves; for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴Then he said to it, May no man eat any fruit from you ever again. Now his disciples heard this. (Mk. 11:12-14)

The next morning, passing along that same way, Peter calls Jesus' attention to the tree that He had cursed the day before: "*Rabbi, look, the fig tree you cursed has withered away*" (Mk. 11:21.)

Jesus then proceeds to use this as an occasion to teach His disciples about faith and about prayer. He exhorts them to have unlimited faith in God who has unlimited power (vs. 22-23.) He exhorts them to engage in bold and confident prayer (vs. 24).

It should be noted that this teaching contained in Mark 11 occurred at about the same time as the teaching recorded in John 14, and it seems that they relate to each other as follows: Our Lord's remarks recorded in Mark 11:22-24 were an initial and vivid introduction to His teaching on prayer, designed to arouse the disciples' interest and capture their attention. John 14:13-15 provides a further elaboration and clarification of our Lord's teaching on prayer.

In John 14:13 the Lord Jesus gives to His disciples a great promise: *“Whatever you shall ask in my name, that will I do.”* But we must appreciate the fact that He also provides some specific guidelines to govern our prayer life; guidelines to be followed if the promise is to be realized. If we would have an effective prayer life, we must abide by the guidelines Jesus provides.

I. We Must Approach the Father in Jesus’ Name (Jn. 14:13-14)

The great qualification the Lord Jesus repeats throughout His teaching on prayer is this: for prayer to be effective, we must approach the Father in Jesus’ name.

For one thing, to pray in Jesus’ name means to approach the throne of God on the basis of Jesus’ authority and Jesus’ merit, this is especially evident in such a passage as John 16:23-24, *“I tell you the truth, if you shall ask the Father in my name for anything, he will give it to you. ²⁴Up to now you have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you shall receive, so that your joy may be complete.”*

Jesus alone possesses access to the Father, and He alone can provide us with such access, as He declares to Mary at the empty tomb: *“Jesus said to her ... go to my brothers, and say to them, **I ascend to my Father and your Father, and my God and your God**”* (Jn. 20:17.) We should also bear in mind Jesus’ testimony to the effect that He possesses access to the Father, and the exclusive right to grant that access to whom He wills: *“Jesus said to him, **I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, except by me**”* (Jn. 14:6.)

Furthermore, Jesus alone has the approval of the Father. After Jesus came up out of the waters of baptism, there came the Father’s voice out of heaven, announcing, *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”* (Matt. 3:17.) Consider the testimony of Martha, *“I know that, whatever you shall ask of God, God will give you”* (Jn. 11:22.) Consider, too, Jesus’ own testimony: *“Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you heard me; ⁴²and I knew that you always hear me’”* (Jn. 11:41b-42a.)

Jesus enjoys this access to the Father and has the Father’s approval—He enjoys this authority with the Father—because of His righteousness. Compare the words of the blind beggar, *“We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will”* (Jn. 9:31,) with the testimony of Jesus, *“The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him”* (Jn. 8:29.) In Psalm 24:3, the Psalmist asks the question, *“**Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?**”* He goes on to answer that question by declaring, *“He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false”* (Psl. 24:4.) Compare the words of the Psalmist (Psalm 24:3-4) with the testimony of Jesus spoken to Mary as He stood before her at the empty tomb: *“**Jesus said to her, ‘Do not touch me; for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, I ascend to my Father and your Father, and my God and your God’**”* (Jn. 20:17.)

James declares, *“the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective”* (Jas. 5:16b)—and Jesus is the one truly righteous man. The writer of Hebrews alludes to Isaiah 61:1,3 and informs us that this passage of O.T. Scripture is referring to Jesus: *“You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions”* (Heb. 1:9.)

The access sinful men have to God as their Creator is but a faint and transitory shadow of the access that the holy Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, has to God His Father. By way of illustration, the owner of a baseball team might say to the public at large, “As an act of generosity, I will allow you access to the stadium bleachers on certain days of the regular season.” But to his son and his son’s friends, he says, “I will give you access to my personal skybox at any time, including the World Series!”

Our Lord Jesus Christ is graciously inviting us to participate in His wonderful access to the Father when He invites us to pray in His name—this access to the Father, one that is profound, intimate, and eternal.

If we desire to have an effective prayer life, we must approach the Father in Jesus’ name: coming on the basis of Jesus’ acceptance and authority with God the Father, an acceptance that is due to His perfect obedience.

II. We Must Pray in Harmony with Jesus’ Will (Jn. 14:13)

The great qualification—praying in Jesus’ name—also has a second meaning; namely, it means to offer up prayer that is in harmony with Jesus’ own mind and will. This meaning is dominant in such passages as John 14:13-14 and John 15:7:

And whatever you shall ask in my name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified by the Son. ¹⁴If you shall ask anything in my name, that will I do. (Jn. 14:13-14)

If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. (Jn. 15:7)

In John 14:13 it is implied that prayer offered in Jesus’ name will be answered because such prayer will cause the Father to be glorified, and the Father is glorified by means of that which is in accordance with His will and that which reflects His holy character. Note that in John 15:7 the promise of effective prayer is closely attached to the requirement that we remain in Christ and that His word remain in us—as we adhere to this requirement our prayers will inevitably be shaped by the mind and will of Christ.

We should also take note of such a passage Psalm 37:4, *“Delight in Jehovah; and he will give you the desires of your heart.”* As the famous nineteenth-century British preacher Charles Spurgeon commented, “Men who delight in God desire

or ask for nothing but what will please God ... their will is subdued to God's will, and now they may have what they will." Note, too, Psalm 145:18-19, "*The LORD is near to all those who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth. ¹⁹He will fulfill the desire of those who fear him; he also will hear their cry and will save them.*" Note: To fear the LORD is to live in a relationship with Him that is characterized by reverence and righteousness.

To be effective, our prayers must be in accordance with the mind and the will of Christ. The major themes of Christ's will and Christ's heart are revealed to us in the model prayer He has provided for us, the Lord's Prayer:

This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us today our daily bread. ¹²Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. (Matt. 6:9-13)

Do our prayers exhibit a holy reverence and worship of God, and is such worship the pre-eminent aspect of our prayer life? Do we pray that God's name be recognized and honored as holy in our lives? in our family? in His church? in the world?

In our prayers do we give first priority to the coming of God's kingdom and the doing of God's will, even though that may mean the putting to death of our own will? It should be noted that the only other place in the gospels where the phrase, "*your will be done,*" occurs is in Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Facing the prospect of the cross, our Lord prays, "*My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done*" (Matt. 26:42.)

With regard to material things, do we limit your prayers to requesting the necessities of life? Do we recognize the wisdom in such a prayer and its relationship to the honor and glory of God? The wise man of Proverbs makes a very similar petition to the LORD as is found in the Lord's Prayer:

... give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. ⁹Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, Who is Jehovah? Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God. (Prov. 30:8b-9)

With regard to our moral life, are we honest with God—acknowledging our sins and requesting forgiveness based upon Christ's atoning sacrifice at Calvary? Do we personally acknowledge the truth of the Apostle John's teaching? *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* (1 Jn. 1:8-9)

With regard to our personal well-being, do we give priority to the spiritual dimension of our life, requesting deliverance from the snares and the clutches of the devil? Do we live with the awareness of the spiritual conflict of which the Apostle Peter speaks? *“Be [spiritually] sober. Be alert. Your adversary, the devil, like a roaring lion, is prowling around, looking for someone to devour”* (1 Pet. 5:8.) Do we faithfully seek to put into practice the admonition of the Apostle James? *“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Come near to God and he will come near to you”* (Jas. 4:7-8a.)

If we desire to have an effective prayer life, we must pray in harmony with the mind and the heart of Jesus.

III. We Must Seek to Live in Compliance with Jesus’ Commandments (Jn. 14:15)

Take careful note of the close proximity of John 14:13-14, *“And whatever you shall ask in my name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified by the Son. ¹⁴If you shall ask anything in my name, that will I do,”* to John 14:15, *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”* Effective prayer can only be practiced by those who love Christ and seek to keep His commandments. For our prayer life to be effective, not only must we seek to bring our prayers into accordance with our Lord’s model prayer, we must also seek to bring our lives into accordance with our Lord’s righteous life.

In reliance upon the Holy Spirit and the grace He imparts, we must seek to imitate the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. The endeavor of the Apostle Paul must also be our personal endeavor: *“I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man”* (Acts 24:16.)

Are there specific known sins in our lives that are hindering our prayers and preventing us from having an effective prayer life? The Psalmist acknowledges, *“If I had cherished sin in my heart, the LORD would not have listened”* (Psl. 66:18.) Therefore, he requests the LORD to search his heart, so that he might be purged of any such sin: *“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. ²⁴See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”* (Psl. 139:23-24.)

Do we harbor an unforgiving spirit against anyone, if so, this will not only hinder our prayer life, it will jeopardize our whole relationship with God. Let us take very seriously the words of our Lord Jesus as recorded in Mark 11:25, *“whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against any one, forgive them; so that your Father who is in heaven may also forgive your trespasses.”* Following the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus predicates our own forgiveness on our willingness to forgive others: *“if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins”* (Matt. 6:14-15.) If we have been the recipients of God’s

grace, we must also be the dispensers of that grace. A failure to dispense such grace to others may well be the indication that we have never been the recipients of that grace ourselves, for there is no evidence that it is present in our lives and overflowing from a spiritually transformed heart.

With regard to effective prayer and the role played by obedience, and especially a gracious spirit, the Apostle Peter speaks a special word to husbands: *“may the husbands live with their wives in an understanding way: showing respect to the wife as a weaker partner and as a co-heir of the grace of life. [Conduct yourselves in this way] so that your prayers are not hindered”* (1 Pet. 3:7.) Husbands, are you honoring your wives, are you seeking to attend to their needs? This is essential if you are to have an effective prayer life.

If we desire to have an effective prayer life, we must seek to live in compliance with Jesus’ commandments.

Conclusion

So much more could be said on the subject of prayer, for instance, the need for perseverance in prayer, or the role of God’s sovereign timing as He accomplishes His purposes in His set time.

But suffice it to say, based upon this present passage of Scripture, the more we become like Jesus, the more we will pray like Jesus, and the more we pray like Jesus, the more we will be able to say, “Father, I thank You that You have heard me, for Jesus’ sake.”