**BIBLE TALK Radio Broadcast**

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**Boundaries of Prayer**

Prayer to God is a blessing. To be able to approach the Creator of the Universe and talk to Him is indeed a privilege. God has made that possible. God wants His people to pray to Him. To the church in Colosse Paul said, *“Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving.”* (Col. 4:2)  He said to the church in Philippi, *“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”* (Phil. 4:6)

Now, the view that many people have is that whoever prays to God will be heard by Him and God will respond to their prayers. It doesn’t matter who they are or what they have done, God will listen to them if they will pray to Him. But the Bible teaches that there are certain one’s to whom God will not listen. God does not hear certain prayers. The Bible talks about certain boundaries of prayer. Now, these boundaries are set by man. There are certain things that man does that makes it so God does not hear them. What are these boundaries of prayer? This is the focus of our lesson today.

First of all, there is the boundary set by man’s wrongdoing. When man disobeys God and is living in sin, his prayers are not heard by God. Look with me at several passages of scripture. Proverbs 28:9, *“One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, Even his prayer is an abomination.”* A man who refuses to hear and keep God’s commandments may pray to God, but in God’s eyes his prayer is an abomination. To the children of Israel the Lord said, *“But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear.”* (Isa. 59:2) Proverbs 15:29, *“The LORD is far from the wicked, But He hears the prayer of the righteous.”* It is clear from these passages that those who live in sin and refuse to repent will not be heard by God when they cry to the Lord, but the man who turns from his evil ways and seeks to do God’s will in his life, he will be heard.

Another boundary of prayer is the boundary set by self-righteousness. In Luke 18, beginning with verse 9 Jesus speaks a parable. It says, *“Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee in this parable is self-righteous. He did not see any sin in his life. He did not ask for God’s forgiveness because evidently in his mind he didn’t need it. He was righteous on his own merits. Did he have sin of which to be forgiven? Yes. He needed to be justified. He needed God’s mercy and God’s forgiveness just like the tax collector. A person who refuses to see the sins in his own life, and who believes he is righteous on his own, is one whom God will not justify. He may pray to God, but God does not appreciate or listen to his prayer. Each of us must realize he has sinned and each of us must understand that he is in need of God’s mercy and the sacrifice of Christ to be forgiven of his sins. When we do come to God through Christ with a penitent contrite heart, and with an obedient faith, He will then forgive us and listen to our prayers, but not before.

A third boundary of prayer is a boundary set by a failure to ask. The person who turns from his sins and comes to Jesus Christ and obeys his gospel is forgiven of his sins and enjoys fellowship with God. He has the privilege of praying to God. But sometimes we do not receive anything from God, because we do not ask. James says in James 4:2, *“...Yet you do not have because you do not ask.”* God wants us to pray. He wants us to ask. Jesus said in Matthew 7:7-8, *“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”* James 1:5 says, *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”* We cannot expect to receive anything of God without asking. Someone might be thinking, “Doesn’t God know what we need even before we ask? Why do we need to ask?” You see, prayer to God is an expression of our faith in God. Prayer is an expression of our dependence on God. God wants us to show our faith and dependence on Him by praying. In Luke 18:1 it says, *“Then He* [that is Jesus] *spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart.”* He then tells the parable of the persistent widow. He said, *“There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.' And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.'" Then the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?’”* Persistent prayer is an expression of faith. When the Lord comes will He really find faith? Will He really find people who show their dependence on God by continuing in prayer? God’s people many times do not receive because they do not have enough faith to ask.

Another boundary of prayer is a boundary set by doubt. Here is a Christian who prays, but he doesn’t believe that God will respond. He doubts whether God is even listening. We read earlier in James 1:5, *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”* But James goes on to say in verses 6-8, *“But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”* To receive from the Lord what we ask, we must ask in faith. Faith in the Lord means a firm reliance upon Him, unwavering trust in His promises. Hebrews 11:6 says, *“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”* Faith in God means we believe that He will fulfill His promises. Now, one who doubts is one who is torn by inner conflict. One moment he believes God will keep His promise, and at another moment He will not. One with such contradictory notions can never lean with confidence on God and on His gracious promises. And James says, “let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.”

Another boundary of prayer is a boundary set by selfishness. We read earlier in James 4:2 where James says, *“...Yet you do not have because you do not ask.”* James goes on to say in verse 3, *“You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.”* We learn here that if we ask of God with selfish motives, that is to satisfy selfish desires, then our petitions to God are fruitless. A person who prays for material wealth so he can enjoy the luxurious things of life is praying with selfish motives, and cannot expect to receive it from the Lord. Someone may be asking, “Does this mean that God will never hear and answer a prayer involving material or physical matters?” No. Paul prayed that a certain physical ailment depart from him (2 Cor. 12:7-8). John’s prayer for Gaius was *“that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.”* (3 John 2) James is not rebuking his readers for asking for physical or material wellbeing for themselves. Jesus even taught His disciples to pray, *“give us this day our daily bread.”* (Matt. 6:11) It is the motive in our prayer which determines whether such a prayer is proper or not. If we ask in order that we may consume the blessings upon our lusts, God will not hear. But, prayers which have as their aim the glory of God, the advancement of His cause, and the genuine wellbeing of His followers, will ascend to God and bring a blessing.

Another boundary of prayer is a boundary set by lack of forgiveness. In Matthew 6:12, in the model prayer Jesus taught His disciples to pray there is the request, *“forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors.”* And later Jesus says, *“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”* (vs. 14-15) Here is a person who has hurt me dearly. What he did brought great pain to me and my family. This one repents of his sin and he comes to me and asks for forgiveness. But I think, “I can’t forgive him, because what he did was so hurtful, and we are still feeling the pain of what he did. I can’t forgive him.” Well, if that is my response to him, then God will not hear my prayer when I ask Him for the forgiveness of my sins. When I refuse to forgive others, God will not hear when I ask Him to forgive me.

Another boundary of prayer is a boundary set by disharmony in the home. Peter says in 1 Peter 3:7, *“Husbands, likewise, dwell with them*[that is with your wives] *with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.”* Where there are strife and discord in the marriage, prayer is cut into and interrupted. Someone says, “What I do does not affect my relationship with God. God hears me no matter what.” This passage says that if I do not treat my wife properly, with understanding and with honor, then my relationship with God is not what it ought to be. My prayers are hindered.

And so, the idea that whoever and whenever one prays to God, God will hear him no matter what, is not a scriptural concept. We have seen today that there are boundaries of prayer, and these boundaries are set by us. Let us make sure that when we pray to God that we are the kind of person to whom God will listen.

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