

There Are Reasons for Praying

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PART 3

“He who prays fervently knows not whether he prays or not, for he is not thinking of the prayer which he makes, but of God, to whom he makes it.”

- Frances de Sales

Why do we pray? Historically prayer has been tied to the difficulties of daily living. The ancients prayed to God in order to appease Him so that He would keep His blessings coming. Certain prayers were developed for specific occasions in order to have the intervention of God. Calamities reminded the people to pray.

The Old Testament root meaning for prayer was connected with slashing oneself as an act of worship. Therefore, in order to escape the judgment of God there must be a response of interceding worship; hence, the concept of seeking to appease God in order to mitigate any judgment. The ancient concepts of prayer at times bordered on magic and mysticism.

Is it any different today? Why do we pray? This earthly turmoil prompts us to turn to heaven for relief. From sickness to fear, from strained relationships to job pressures, from economic woes to upcoming exams, we pray for release and solution, and why not? We all want to be comfortable.

However, we may be shocked to learn that Jesus’ intentions for prayer are a significant departure from some of the historical reasons for praying and discovering the reality of answered prayer.

In His final discourse with His disciples, Jesus wanted to assure them He was not disbanding them because of His “going to the Father” (John 14:12-14). Rather, He was expecting them to continue His work with the promise that if they prayed asking anything in His name that He would do it. I believe that this statement of our Lord points us to the true reasons for praying.

¹² I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. ¹⁴ You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it (John 14:12-14).

Reason 1: We pray in response to the initiative of God.

We might like to boast that praying begins with our desire to commune with God, but God is the initiator of prayer. It is only possible because of the nature of God. He seeks to establish a relationship with people, and it is only because of this Holy desire that we even have the possibility to pray.

God’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and fulfilled in the New Covenant of Jesus Christ, is the immovable foundation of prayer. The Scriptures teach that God seeks fellowship with humankind and is steadfastly attentive to the needs of His people. For instance, He responded to the cries of the children of Israel in Egypt with miraculous events and ultimately with complete

deliverance. Time after time He bid His people to remember His activity on their behalf in order to have fellowship with them. "I will be your God," He said, "if you will be my people." It is always within the covenant relationship between God and His people that prayer has its significance.

Recorded in John 14:12-14 is another reminder to the disciples of the initiative of God. His ministry was drawing quickly to a close, and He informs them that it is good that He is "going to the Father" for the Holy Spirit will be coming upon them (John 14:15f). His crucifixion would span the gap between God and humankind and forgiveness of sin will be won. His Resurrection would secure the inheritance of eternal life, and His Ascension ("going to the Father") would announce a new age of divine work in the world; namely, Christ sending His Spirit to empower the faithful.

All of this is the intentional plan of God. So, when they prayed, "asking anything in His name," they were praying according to and in response to that covenant initiative realized in Him. Our praying to God is a lifelong response to His nature. This is the essence of answered prayer. Without the heart of God, we could not have the voice of prayer. His covenant of grace gives us the capacity to pray, and when we work and pray with His agenda our aim, we will experience Christ's effectual work in answered prayer.

However, those outside the covenant do not have the promise of prayer and its benefits. They are separated from God, and thus, separated from the promises of God. These words of Christ and the promise inherent in them have no meaning for them. That is why the Bible calls them "lost." As they try, as they will, in their lostness their praying is fruitless, except that prayer of repentance and confession.

We as disciples of Christ, therefore, must be careful when we encourage people without Christ to pray about their difficulties and their needs. There is no answer for them. There are no promises for them. The only effective prayer of promise for someone outside the covenant of God is the prayer of confession and repentance of sin. God responds to that prayer with forgiveness because they responded to His initiative of grace.

Reason 2: We pray in order to glorify God.

The concept of "ask anything in my name and I will do it" has been grossly misunderstood. It appears as a kind of "spiritual blank check," allowing us to ask for anything and He will accomplish it for us. Since the earliest days of the Christian movement, believers have affirmed praying always "in the name of Jesus." By doing this, many have surmised without much thought, they will receive what they are praying for. It has become a type of formula and still today, out of custom probably more than anything else, we close our prayers with, "In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen".

However, the clear teaching of Jesus is that the Heavenly Father will respond to need expressed by the prayer of faith, particularly when the petitioner seeks primarily the kingdom of God. Only those lives intent on bringing glory to God in all situations and in every effort of their living are able to claim this promise. The reason for praying expectantly in "the name of Jesus" is to bring glory to God. He did not wish this to become a formula or magical charm. He needed for it to be a guarantee and a limitation. He would grant only the petitions that could be presented consistently with His character.¹ This concept is quite a departure from the prayer norms of Christ's day and even of today.

¹ Merrell C. Tenney, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9 (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan), 1981.

Jesus is taking His disciples to a new level of understanding the place of prayer in their lives. It would be beyond crying to God for help in crisis, beyond seeking to divert His anger, and beyond asking the Heavenly Father to continue His good blessings.

The Lord tells them that to pray is to do and to do is to pray. "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name."

Faith and faithfulness were never meant to be solely intellectual but completely participatory. Following Christ has never been a matter of "sit back and watch" but "get out there and do".

Notice again what Christ said. "Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing" (John 14:12). To respond to the initiative of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is to become involved in the cause of Christ, and that cause according to the text, is to glorify God; "so that the Son may bring glory to the Father."

Christ spoke of and lived out the love of God. He refused to live by the demands of what others said was the proper religious life, but freed Himself and others up to live according to the freedom God intended. He was not a God of legal codes, demanding obedience to religious laws but was a God who invited those who would to accept His Son as the offering for their sinfulness. He offered eternal life. His was a lifestyle that shouted peace, kindness, love, and faith. He gave people hope and encouraged them with the truth about God, and so should we.

These things are ours to do. Salvation itself is a matter of sharing in God's own life, and that life is very active.

As Paul will say later, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

"Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these..."

What are these "greater things"?

Christ's greatest work in the context of this passage had not yet been accomplished; namely, His sacrifice through crucifixion, His resurrection and ascension. Up to this moment, His ministry had lasted approximately three years and He had only about 500 followers. Given the amount of work, it was not much of a return. However, following the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and the coming of His Spirit upon His followers, the disciples in one day experienced over 5,000 people confessing Jesus Christ as the Messiah and their Savior.

Jesus' ministry was confined to Galilee and Judea, but after the coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples swept across the earth like the conquerors they were, winning masses for the Master, far more than He ever gained Himself. And they all tell us that it was not they who did it: that the inspiration, the power, and the endurance that made it possible all came from Jesus Christ. If He had merely died on Calvary, if He had not gone to his Father, had not remembered them, and planned for them, and stood by them, and supplied all their need, all the achievements historians credited to them would have been utterly impossible.² They became the demonstration of the powerful spiritual realities that Jesus had introduced.

² Gossip, Arthur J., *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII (New York: Abingdon Press), 1952.

Their “greater works” were not separated from Him. The disciples were irrevocably united with Him, and they would be able to experience the greater works because of their praying to Him. He coached them to pray in His name. In other words, they were to pray with His concern that the work He had been doing would continue glorifying God. It is only what we ask for “in Christ’s name,” and what we can pray “for his sake,” that will advance His cause, that in this passage is so certainly guaranteed to us.

The problem is that our search for joy, comfort, and pleasure is far stronger than our desire to bring glory to Christ. Far too often heaven is assaulted with prayers that are so riddled with self it is idolatrous. C. S. Lewis wrote, “It is quite useless knocking at the door of heaven for earthly comfort; it’s not the type of comfort they supply there.” Our praying is either tainted by self-gratification or has fallen into prayerlessness. Prayer that is based solely upon self can never be answered.

What can we do about this? We must first begin with a confession that bringing glory to Christ has not been our aim. Our other passions have dismissed our desire to live in the likeness of the Son of God. We must stop long enough to really look at our life and allow the Holy Spirit to show us how deficient we truly are. Then, we must look to Jesus. “Do all to the glory of Christ” and “ask all to the glory of Christ”.