

Series: Basic Prayer

Title: Lesson 4 - Hindrances to Prayer

I recently saw a funny, viral video in which teenagers attempted to use a rotary phone. For what seemed like an eternity, they tried to figure out how to make a call. The customary dial tone on the other end of the line startled them. After numerous attempts, one young man finally gave up and walked away.

If you remember the world of rotary phones and landlines, you are likely familiar with some things that are lost on modern society. Do you remember the dreaded busy signal? Before the days of call waiting, a loud beeping sound was heard when one called a person who was on another phone call. Those who received a busy signal were left to wait. Their only recourse was to repeatedly call until they got through.

When it comes to the topic of prayer, it can sometimes feel like our prayers are met with a busy signal. Our intercessions and supplications don't always seem to get through to God. An older generation of believers used to speak of "the heavens being like brass." The metaphor was intended to describe difficulties and hardness in prayer. If you aim to become a person of prayer, you will eventually experience such things.

How can we avoid such distress? Is there anything we can do to make our prayers more energetic and effective? When we study Scripture, we find there are several hindrances to healthy praying. Let's examine them. By being aware of such realities, we can guard ourselves from the dreaded spiritual state in which it feels like the heavens are brass, like we are getting a busy signal from God.

LACK OF KNOW-HOW

When I first learned to drive, learning was doubly difficult for me. I not only had to get acclimated to the rules of the road and how to control a car, but I also had to learn how to drive a manual transmission. The car available for practice was a five speed.

The first several attempts at driving were horrific. I sputtered and stalled more times than I can count. Taking off from red lights and stop signs was usually accompanied by the sounds of screeching tires. My dad and I had more than one argument as he struggled to retain patience with my ineptitude.

In time, I began to get the hang of things. Tips and advice from my dad and others helped. I learned the feel of a clutch. My timing got better. Months of patient learning paid off.

We all know what it is like to learn a new skill or habit. Most are familiar with the strain and struggle of awkwardly trying to assimilate a new ability into one's life. School, work, hobbies, and home-improvement projects have forced all of us to get out of our comfort zones from time to time.

All of this has an application to our prayer lives. Why is it that we understand the need to learn in the physical realm, but we sometimes dismiss the need to learn in the spiritual realm? By nature, none of us are automatically strong in things like Bible study, Christian service, evangelism, and prayer. Spiritual disciplines require growth in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18).

This leads us to one of the foremost hindrances to prayer. Many people don't pray because they don't know how to pray. They've never been taught. They've never

learned about the subject from God's Word. They remain ignorant of the nature, means, methods, focus, and priorities associated with Christian prayer.

Pray about Prayer

If you feel you are one who doesn't know how to pray, don't beat yourself up. The disciples experienced the same struggle. When they heard Jesus pray on one occasion, they were struck by the otherworldly nature of His intercession. Wanting to pray like Him, one disciple approached and made a request — "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John also taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1).

It could be argued that the disciples did not yet fully grasp the messianic implications of Jesus' ministry at the time of the aforementioned request. Regardless, they did know there was something mighty and marvelous about Jesus. In addition, they had heard of the way in which John the Baptist taught his followers to pray. Consequently, they wanted to learn from Jesus.

There is a lesson for us in the disciple's request — if we don't know how to pray, we should ask the Lord to teach us. The Bible says, "You do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2). Many don't know how to pray because they've never done what the disciples did. They've never asked the Lord to teach them.

It is interesting to note the way in which Jesus replied to His disciple's request. Luke 11:2-4 contains His response. It provides what we now call "The Lord's Prayer." Most are familiar with Matthew's version of the prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) and many can recite its words from memory. It is perhaps the most famous prayer in human history. Did you know the origin of that prayer? Jesus gave it in response to a disciple's appeal for Jesus to teach him how to pray.

When it comes to prayerlessness, lack of know-how is not a sufficient excuse. Those who don't know what to say should simply ask Jesus for help. If you don't know how to pray, begin by asking God to teach you. Your prayers may be short to start, but they will grow in time. As He heard the request of one of His first disciples, Jesus will hear your entreaty as well. Tell the Lord you need help. Ask Him to strengthen your prayer life.

Principles and Precepts for Prayer

If you struggle with lack of know-how, you can also consult God's Word. In the Bible, you have a treasure trove of heavenly wisdom for prayer. You are not left to your own wisdom or thoughts. God has left you with a book that can serve as a lamp for your feet and light for your path (Psalm 119:105).

When you read God's Word you receive a smorgasbord of examples from the lives of others. The saints of Scripture can you show you how to pray as you read about the various seasons, struggles, and setbacks of their lives. It is for good reason that Paul said, "For whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction, so that we may have hope through endurance and through the encouragement from the Scriptures" (Romans 15:4). Read about the way people like Enoch, Abraham, Hannah, and Daniel prayed. You will be blessed and you will receive heavenly insight to help you.

In addition to providing examples of prayer, Scripture gives straightforward instruction on the subject. Remember that "All Scripture is inspired by God, and is

profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). When you study Scripture, you find direct teaching from Jesus (Matthew 6:9-13) and others (Philippians 4:6-7) concerning how prayer works.

The Bible also helps us in another way. It provides us with prayers we can pray. If you don't know what to say when you pray, start by praying some of the prayers found in the Bible. Some shirk away from implementing such a practice, feeling it is too formalistic. Such fear is unnecessary.

Reciting Scriptural prayers doesn't have to be dull and dry. The heart is what matters. As long as you are sincerely praying from your soul to the Lord, it doesn't matter if you recite a biblical prayer. In fact, praying a biblical prayer in sincerity is likely more powerful than praying an impromptu prayer from the heart. Why? Biblical prayers are in direct alignment with God's will, so long as they are prayed with the right motive and applied in the correct manner. Consequently, you can rest assured that God will answer when you pray biblical prayers (John 14:13-14).

We will say more about praying the prayers of the Bible later in this study. For now, be aware that such prayers are a good starting place if you are new to prayer. If you feel you don't know how to pray, start by using prayers like the ones found in Psalm 51:1-19; Matthew 6:9-13; and Philippians 1:9-11.

BUSYNESS

Perhaps busyness is the number one excuse for why people don't pray. Ask any friend, colleague, or acquaintance how they are doing, and you will often hear the reply, "I'm so busy." It seems busyness has become the new national pastime in America. Most families are caught in a never-ending spin cycle of chores, hobbies, work, and extracurricular pursuit. Living at a breakneck speed that is devoid of margins, most have little time for spiritual realities. Stopping and slowing down to talk to God seems impossible, a luxury for those who have nothing better to do.

I once had a Christian mentor who encouraged me in this regard. After we had a discussion on prayer, he inquired about my commitment to the discipline. I shrugged him off, not wanting to confess to my prayerless lifestyle. When he pressed further, I blamed my bad prayer life on busyness. He responded that prayer was something that had to be scheduled into my daily routine. To help me grasp the nature of the discipline, he said, something like, "Patrick, prayer can be thought of like a jogging and exercise routine. You have to make it happen. Without a commitment to make it a part of your daily life, you probably won't pray."

To grow in my commitment to prayer, I had to die to my excuses. I had to accept that a hectic schedule was not an adequate excuse. One who is too busy to pray is simply too busy. Through my experiences, a couple of biblical realities helped me move from clutter and chaos to consecrated times with God.

Priorities

I think Matthew 6:33 was the first verse I memorized. It was also the text for one of the first lessons I ever taught from God's Word. The verse resonated with me early in my Christian journey because of the way in which it promoted proper life priorities. In the verse, Jesus said, "But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you." The words of Matthew 6:33 are found within

Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. It is perhaps not a coincidence that they came right after His instructions regarding the Lord's Prayer.

Jesus' focus in Matthew 6 was on how His disciples might have a true, pure, and genuine spiritual life. After describing how not to pray (Matthew 6:1-8) and how to pray (Matthew 6:9-15), he instructed His disciples concerning the proper methods for fasting (Matthew 6:16-18). He then talked about how money and material things can stifle spiritual advancement (Matthew 6:19-24). His discussion on that subject led Him to warn His disciples about living lives centered on food and clothing. He said, "So don't worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'" (Matthew 6:31).

It was in the context of talking about such things that Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33). Do you see the connection? Our Lord meant to reveal that the pursuits and pressures of life have a way of negatively impacting our spiritual life. If we don't make kingdom things a priority, they won't be a reality in our lives.

What does all of this mean for us and our prayer lives? Plain and simple, it means we must make prayer a priority. If we don't make room for it in our lives, it probably won't happen. We have to cultivate a spirit of personal responsibility. We must be strategic in making sure the demands of life don't squeeze prayer out. Everyone is busy, but those who want to pray prioritize their time properly. One has rightly said, "Yes, life is busy, but people accomplish what is most important to them."¹

Time Management

Closely related to priorities is the issue of time management. Prioritizing involves deciding what you will do with the minutes and hours God gives you. Time management involves making sure you effectively and efficiently use those minutes and hours in the pursuit of your priorities. God's Word encourages us in this regard. Long before the advent of day-timers, productivity apps, and Franklin Covey seminars, the Bible promoted stewardship of time. In Ephesians 5:15-16, we read, "Pay careful attention, then, to how you walk—not as unwise people but as wise—making the most of the time, because the days are evil."

Time management is especially applicable to prayer. The authors of Scripture were intentional to mention the ways in which prayerful people in both the Old and New Testament were sensitive to time. Consider the words of David in Psalm 55:17, the practice of Daniel in Daniel 6:10, and the example of Jesus in Mark 1:35. If you want to be strong in prayer, you must wage war on the breakneck busyness of our culture. To do so, you need clear priorities and skillful management of your time.

SIN

¹ Saxton, David W. *God's Battle Plan For The Mind*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 118,.

The puritan Thomas Watson said, "Indeed if prayer does not make a man leave sin, sin will make him leave prayer."² Indwelling sin is most likely one of the foremost hindrances to prayer. Many are so full of the spirit of this world that they have little desire for time with the Lord. The passions and promptings of the flesh have stopped up the arteries of their spiritual hearts, blocking the free flow of zeal for God.

Jesus seemed to remark on these realities in His Sermon on the Mount. He said, "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. So if the light within you is darkness, how deep is that darkness" (Matthew 6:22-23). Though our Lord's words are often regarded as a separate discourse on the dangers of materialism, it is worth remembering that they were uttered immediately after His instructions on prayer and fasting (Matthew 6:1-18). The context of Matthew 6:19-24 seems to indicate that the condition of the human heart is a determining factor on the state of one's prayer life. If one has eyes that are set on sin, self, pride, possessions, money, and material things, one will be unlikely to pray.

"Why Doesn't God Answer My Prayers?"

James warned of the way in which sin stifles prayer. He said, "You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and don't receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:2-3). When selfishness and sin are bound up in the human heart, prayers will surely fizzle and fail. There is no way around the Lord's spiritual realities. Sin sabotages prayer.

David was in tune with such realities. He feared indwelling sin, because he knew it was like a wet blanket on even the hottest of spiritual fires. He said, "If I had been aware of malice in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. However, God has listened; he has paid attention to the sound of my prayer" (Psalm 66:18-19).

One should be careful to not think David's words in a legalistic way. One does not earn a hearing with God through righteous behavior, nor does God close His ears to the prayers of the sinful out of a moody desire for vengeance.

The point of Scripture is simple. Sin stifles prayer. It does so for two primary reasons. First, the sinful normally don't pray because their hearts are set on sin. Second, even when sinners do pray, they pray for the wrong types of things. Consequently, God does not answer their prayers, because He only answers prayers that are in alignment with His will.

"Which Comes First?"

If sin is thwarting prayer, how can one enact change? Many freeze in despair when it comes to these matters. They feel stuck in sin, and they don't see a way out.

It seems there is sometimes confusion concerning the age old question that has often been applied to the chicken and the egg — "Which comes first?" To get right with God when sin is present, one must first pray. One cannot earn God's favor through good behavior. The stains and strain of sin can only be erased by Christ. The

² Watson, Thomas. *The Doctrine Of Repentance*. (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2016), 68.

Bible says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

If sin is hindering your prayer life, pursue godly repentance. Sin stifles prayer, but prayer can cleanse sin. When your heart and mind are clean of the effects of indwelling sin, prayer will begin to freely flow once again.

STRAINED RELATIONSHIPS

The story has often been told of the proverbial man who comes home after a bad day at work. Because of pressures and problems in the office, the man is irritable to all who cross his path. Rude to his wife and antagonistic toward his children, the man kicks the dog on the way to the supper table. Though the story was intended to express a common occurrence in a bygone era in which men were the primary breadwinners and rough treatment of household pets was more acceptable, it carries a nugget of truth for people of all generations and cultures — stress in one domain of life can carry over into other areas of life.

A Relational Reality

What does the aforementioned story have to do with our prayer lives? Well, it illustrates another potential hindrance to prayer. When our relationships with others aren't right, our relationship with God will suffer. Stress and strain with other people can sabotage our fellowship with God.

Jesus remarked on these realities in His instruction associated with the Lord's Prayer. After sharing the content of that prayer, He said, "...if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your offenses" (Matthew 6:14-15). Jesus' words should not be regarded as some sort of tit-for-tat spiritual system for punishing those who don't forgive others. The Lord desires for His people to practice forgiveness, but it is not to His intent to be a passive-aggressive grouch who purposely shuts His ears to those who don't forgive others.

Our Lord's words in Matthew 6:14-15 were intended to express a universal spiritual reality. When we foster bitterness and resentment in our hearts, we render ourselves spiritually incapable of connecting with the Lord. If we are mad at others, we won't have a state of the soul that is desirous of prayer. It is for this reason that Jesus' teaching on prayer contained a focus on forgiveness.

Our Lord remarked on these realities elsewhere in His Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:23-24, He said, "So if you are offering your gift on the altar, and there you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." Stress and strain in our relationships with others will inevitably silence our prayers. It is hard to genuinely talk with the Lord when we are wayward with others.

We know this is true in other domains of life. Don't we? Have you ever had a conflict with another that jaded your entire outlook on life. Being at odds with another can sour our sleep, wreck our weekend, and ruin our other relationships.

I know this to be true from personal experiences. There have been times in which a hurt toward another has rested heavy on my heart. Though I tried to manage

my emotions, others noticed. More than once, my wife has sensed trouble and asked, "Honey, is everything alright?" Rancor in one relationship can spoil another.

The same is true in a spiritual sense. If you aren't right with others, it's hard to be right with God. Peter remarked on these realities. He told the men amongst his readership, "Husbands, in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with a weaker partner, showing them honor as coheirs of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered" (1 Peter 3:7). Sometimes it is necessary to mend relationships, to clear the air with others so that our souls aren't constrained in prayer.

The Trinity and The Great Commandment

Why do things work this way? For what reason do our relationships with others have a bearing on our relationship with God? To answer such questions, it is necessary to travel back to the first pages of the Bible. At the beginning of time, God created man and woman in His image (Genesis 1:26-27). As His image bearers, Adam and Eve experienced a unique relational capacity. Just as God existed in a Trinity and enjoyed perfect fellowship between the three persons of the Godhead, humankind was made to live in a trinity of relationships.

Jesus remarked on these realities in John 17:21. Praying for us, He said, "May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me." For all of eternity, there has been perfect love and camaraderie between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. The Lord has made man and woman to enjoy a similar type of fellowship.

You can envision the unity of the Trinity as being represented by a triangle. Each point of that triangle could be thought of as one of the three persons of the Godhead. The Father, Son, and Spirit exist in a triangle of a relationship, if you will. Men and women are made to enjoy a similar relational construct.

Whereas the individual members of the Trinity constitute the divine triangle of relationships, the human relational construct contains three different persons at each point of the triangle — God, others, and self.

Jesus promoted the fact that we are made for a relationship with God and others within His Great Commandment. He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39). God's intent for humankind cannot be undone or reversed. Every man, woman, boy, and girl has been made to be a relational being. Each is hardwired and finely tuned for a relationship with God and relationships with others.

What does all of this mean for prayer? Just as there is an interdependent nature within the relationship between the members of the Trinity, humans are made to depend on God and others. Human relationships inevitably have an impact on one's spiritual relationship with the Lord. God's laws cannot be reversed. One has rightly said, "Made in the image of this God, we are created to delight in harmonious relationship, to love God, to love each other. Thus Jesus taught that the first and greatest commandment in the law is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and

with all your soul and with all your mind, and the second is to love your neighbor as yourself...That is what we are created for.”³

Exercise vigilance in your relationship with others. If you get sideways with people, you will suffer spiritual. Anger and angst in your heart will stifle your zeal for prayer. Keep a close watch on your heart. Realize God designed you to relate to Him and to relate to others. When relationships with people get off, prayer will be hindered.

³ Reeves, Michael. *Delighting In The Trinity*. (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 65.