

# **A Closer Walk With God**

## **Prayer in the Life of the Disciple of Christ Part One**

### **The Principles of Prayer**

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

- I. In our series of lessons entitled "A Closer Walk With God," I want to turn our attention now to one of the most important aspects of having a close walk with God – prayer.
  - A. More specifically, I want us to take a close look at "Prayer in the Life of the Disciple of Jesus Christ."
    1. In fact, since this subject is so important to all of us as followers of Jesus Christ, I want to initially focus on two critical aspects of prayer in two separate lessons.
      - a. In this lesson, I want to take a close look at "The Principles of Prayer."
      - b. And then, in our next lesson – which will be several weeks from now – I want to look at "The Practice of Prayer" in the life of everyone who calls themselves a disciple of Christ.
- II. Without question, prayer is one of the greatest blessings we enjoy as Christians because it's the only way we can speak to God.

- A. And there are a number of reasons why we need to be speaking to God, including:
1. Finding forgiveness of sins (**1 John 1:9**).
  2. Finding peace during times of fear and anxiety (**Philippians 4:6-7**).
  3. Finding help for others in their time of need (**1 Thessalonians 5:25**).
  4. And many, many more.
- B. It's no wonder then, that Paul frequently exhorted Christians to be diligent in our prayers.
1. *"Praying always with all prayer and supplication. . ."* (**Ephesians 6:18**).
  2. *"Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving"* (**Colossians 4:2**).
  3. *"Pray without ceasing"* (**1 Thessalonians 5:17**).
- C. Yet Jesus knew that His disciples would sometimes become slack in their prayers.
1. **Luke 18:1** – *Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart. . .* – and the parable that followed is the one we know as "The Parable of the Persistent Widow."
  2. Therefore, it is out of a similar concern – that we should always pray and not lose heart – that I'm going to spend this lesson and the next one on the subject of prayer.

**Body:**

- I. To begin our examination of the "Principles of Prayer," let's start by looking at some of the characteristics of prayers God finds acceptable.
  - A. Obviously, an acceptable prayer must be offered in faith.
    1. Jesus said: **Matthew 21-22** – *"And all things, whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."*
    2. This simply means we must have faith that God hears our prayers, and faith in His ability to answer those prayers – otherwise our prayer simply won't be answered.
      - a. **James 1:5-8** – *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. 6 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. 7 For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*
    3. If we have problems praying with that kind of faith and confidence, then there is only one way to increase our faith – spend time reading and meditating on the Word of God.
      - a. **Romans 10:17** – *So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*

- B. An acceptable prayer must also be offered in the spirit of humility.
1. Jesus gave the classic example of the right and wrong kind of humility in His "Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector."
    - a. Notice the contrast between these two men: **Luke 18:9-14** –  
*Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 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. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' 13 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!' 14 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."*
    - b. **Psalm 34:18** – *The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit.*
    - c. **James 4:6** – *God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*
  2. The Lord has always been very outspoken about pride:
    - a. **Psalm 34:18** – *The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit.*
    - b. **James 4:6** – *God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*

- C. Acceptable prayers must also be offered in harmony with God's will.
1. How many of our prayers go unanswered simply because we were more concerned about getting our way rather than giving the Lord to answer our prayers in His way?
    - a. **1 John 5:14-15** – *Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.*  
*15 And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.*
  2. Of course, in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus provided the classic example of praying that the Father's will be done: **Luke 22:42** – *"Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done."*
- D. To be acceptable to God, prayers must be offered by those who are righteous before God.
1. Peter tells us: **1 Peter 3:12** – "For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."
  2. And James adds: **James 5:16** – *The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*
  3. Obviously, God isn't going to answer the prayers of those who persist in sin.

- a. Of course, we're all sinners: **Romans 3:23** – . . . *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. . .*
  - b. But there is a difference between those who recognize their sin and repent of it, versus those who turns away from God and deliberately persist in sin.
  - c. This is why Solomon wrote: **Proverbs 28:9** – *One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination.*
  - d. This was the reason God was no longer hearing the prayers of the people of Israel in Isaiah's day: **Isaiah 59:1-2** – *"Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. 2 But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear."*
- E. Acceptable prayers must also be offered with thanksgiving.
- 1. We have so much to be thankful for. But how many times to we actually thank God for all He has already done for us?
  - 2. Perhaps this is why we read such passages as:
    - a. **Ephesians 5:20** – . . . *giving thanks always for all things to God the Father. . .*

- b. **Philippians 4:6** – *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.*
  - c. **1 Thessalonians 5:18** – . . .*in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God. . .*
3. Do we honestly believe God will help us with our present burdens if we don't take time to thank Him for past blessings? The answer should be obvious.
- F. Also acceptable prayers must be offered with persistence.
- 1. Jesus illustrated this aspect of prayer through two parables:
    - a. The parable of the persistent friend (Luke 11:5-10).
    - b. The parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8).
  - 2. But keep in mind, there is a difference between being persistent in our prayers verses being repetitious in our prayers.
    - a. Paul is a good example of being persistent in prayer:

**2 Corinthians 12:7-8** – *And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.*
    - b. But repetitious prayers have always been condemned by God. They are prayers that are either more like chants (repeating

the same words over and over), or prayers that use the same old worn out words and phrases all the time with no real thought behind what we're saying.

- c. Jesus condemned the prayers of the Pharisees for this very reason: **Matthew 6:7** – *And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.*

G. Acceptable prayers must also be offered in the name of Jesus.

1. We're told:

- a. **Ephesians 5:20** – *Giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
- b. **Colossians 3:17** – *And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*

2. However, this doesn't mean that we must end our prayers by quickly saying "in Jesus name I pray" – although there is absolutely nothing wrong with that, as long as it's not one of those vain repetitions.

3. Praying in the name of Jesus Christ is more something we do than it is something we say. We pray to God through Jesus because:

- a. We understand Jesus is the only way we can approach God (John 14:6).

- b. We understand Jesus is our "high priest" who intercedes for us according to the will of God (Hebrews 7:24-25; John 14:13).
  4. Even if we don't say we're praying in the name of Jesus Christ, we better make sure we're doing it.
- II. Those are some of the conditions that make prayer acceptable to God. But what does the Lord want us to understand about obstacles to prayer? There are actually many such obstacles!
- A. One of the biggest obstacles to prayer is unconfessed sin.
    1. **Psalm 66:18** – *"If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear."*
    2. If we're not in fellowship with God because of a stubborn refusal to confess and repent of some sin – or iniquity – in our heart, then we make it impossible for God to hear us.
  - B. But close behind that obstacle to prayer is the obstacle of improper treatment of others.
    1. How we treat others has a direct bearing on whether God will hear our prayers!
      - a. For example, how one treats the poor: **Psalms 41:1-3** – *Blessed is he who considers the poor; the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble. 2 The Lord will preserve him and keep him*

*alive, and he will be blessed on the earth; You will not deliver him to the will of his enemies. 3 The Lord will strengthen him on his bed of illness; You will sustain him on his sickbed.*

- b. Also how one treats his friends: **Matthew 5:23-24** –  
*"Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."*
  - c. And for certain, how husbands treat their wives: **1 Peter 3:7** –  
*Husbands, likewise, dwell with them 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.*
2. If there is some relationship that we need to correct, then we need to correct it before we go to God in prayer – that is if we expect Him to hear and respond to that prayer.

III. So far, we've talked about acceptable prayers, and the things that can hinder prayers, but let's conclude this lesson by talking about the ways God actually answers prayers.

- A. The manner in which God answers prayers can cause us some concern if we don't understand this all-important principle.

1. Years ago, I remember a wonderful lesson by the late brother Homer Hailey where he said there are three ways God answers prayers: "Yes," "no," and "wait awhile."
- B. Others have suggested that there may actually be four ways God answer prayers.
1. For example, we know there are times when God essentially says, "Request granted!"
    - a. God may answer "yes," and grant the petitions we ask of Him.
    - b. We can certainly increase the possibilities that God will answer our prayers with a "yes" if we are trying to do His will in our lives: **1 John 3:22** – *And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.*
  2. But then there are times when God essentially says, "Request granted, but not yet."
    - a. It doesn't mean He has not answered our prayer. It simply means He will answer it in His own time and in His own way.
    - b. Solomon said: **Ecclesiastes 3:1** – *"To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven."* – including answers to prayers, I might add.
    - c. So when we think God is saying "No," it may be that He is simply saying "Yes, but not right now."

3. And then there are times when God surprises us by essentially saying, "Request granted, but not the way you expected."
  - a. This simply means there are times when God actually says "Yes" to our prayers, but answers them in a completely different way than we anticipated.
  - b. What a surprise that can be!
    - (1). For example, we might ask God for strength and perseverance, and He answers that prayer by giving us trials – which, in turn, develop the very strength and perseverance we prayed for initially.
  - b. We just need to be careful that we are not dictating to God how, when and where to answer our prayers – and that's a real temptation for all of us.
4. And then, there are those times when we pray fervently, in faith, from a pure heart, with thanksgiving, and in accordance with His will, and God essentially says, "Request denied."
  - a. These are the most challenging responses to prayers – and if we're not careful, it can cause our faith to be weakened.
  - b. Even though we may not understand why God didn't answer our prayer the way we were hoping, we can still trust in Him fully.

- c. Tucked away in the little Old Testament book of Habakkuk, we find one of the most beautiful prayers of faith: **Habakkuk 3:17-18** – *"Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls — 18 Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation."*

## CONCLUSION

- I. The ability to pray to God and receive answers to those prayers is truly one of the greatest blessings we can have as children of God and disciples of Christ!
- A. Hopefully, understanding and applying the principles we've discussed in this lesson will increase the possibilities of success in having your prayers answered,
1. Our next lesson – which will be after our upcoming Gospel Meeting with brother Connie Adams in June – will deal with "The Practice of prayer."
  2. And at that time, we'll talk about when, with whom, how, and what our prayers should be.
- B. But in the meantime, let me leave you with some questions to stimulate your thinking:

1. Do you find it easy or difficult to pray?
  - a. If you have difficulty praying, have you ever thought about why you have problems?
  - b. Could it be there are things in your life you need to fix first?
2. Do you believe in the power of God to answer prayer?
  - a. I mean do you really and truly believe God can answer prayers?
  - b. Sadly, far too many have lost confidence in their prayers being answered simply because they don't understand all the ways God actually answers prayers.
3. Should you be disappointed when it appears that God has answered your prayer with a "No"?
  - a. You shouldn't. Because you never know how blessed you may be that God did not give you the very thing you were requesting – no matter how badly you think you might have needed it.
  - b. Sometimes our prayers are simply selfish in nature, and when God says "No" there is a reason.
  - c. We just need to trust that we will learn the reason someday in the future – maybe even in heaven.
4. Are you spending time every day devoted to prayer?
  - a. I certainly hope you are. How else can you talk with God.

- b. I can't tell you how wonderful it is when my cell phone rings and I see it's one of my daughter's calling.
  - c. We love to hear from those we love – and it is no different with God. He loves to hear from us as well.
- II. It really doesn't matter how much, or how effectively you've prayed in the past as long as you take advantage of the present and future.
- A. My prayer for you is that you draw closer to God by starting to increase the amount of quality time you spend alone with your God.
    - 1. You will grow closer to Him, and grow deeper in faith.
  - B. But I also have another prayer for you all – and that is that you leave here today with a renewed determination to have "A Closer Walk With God."
    - 1. That can only be accomplished if you are:
      - a. Truly a disciple of Christ by having been baptized into Christ for the remission of your sins, and added by the Lord to His church.
      - b. Or a faithful disciple of Christ in your daily walk with God.
    - 2. However, if this isn't true in your case, you can leave here being a true disciple of Christ, or by being restored as a faithful disciple of Christ.

3. And even if you simply need prayers for some other need in your life, now is the time to let that be known.