

Things that Hinder Prayer

By Al Felder

“Pray without ceasing.” (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

Although this is a relatively short passage of scripture, this verse from the New Testament stresses to us the importance of prayer in the life of a Christian. It is through prayer that we talk to God. The Bible teaches us that God hears and answers the prayers of his people. The scriptures give us instructions as to how we are to pray, and what the content of our prayer should be. We are commanded to pray for each other. Certainly, prayer is a great blessing from God that each of us should want to use to its fullest.

Yes, the Bible teaches that prayer is a great blessing that God gives his people, but there are some things that the Bible teaches can hinder our ability to pray unto God. As we study the scriptures we will find that there are some things that will cause God not to hear, and answer our prayers. If we allow these things in our life, they could place us in a position of being unable to pray for someone or ourselves in a time of need. It is very important, therefore, that we understand those things that can hinder our prayers.

First, being outside of Christ can hinder prayer. Over the centuries many false doctrines have been taught on what one must do to be saved. These false doctrines have led to many false beliefs. One of those many false doctrines is that anyone can pray to God at any time.

The New Testament places great emphasis upon the necessity of being “in Christ” in order to pray unto God. The phrase “in Christ” appears 89 times in 88 different verses in the New Testament. It is only “in Christ” that we can have forgiveness of sins. *“In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.”* (Colossians 1:14) Every spiritual blessing is “in Christ.” *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.”* What many people often fail to realize about this verse is that these blessings are only for those “in Christ.” In other words, if a person is outside of Christ he or she is unable to receive these blessings.

If a person is not “in Christ,” then he or she is obviously outside of Christ and in a lost state. Anyone who has reached the age of accountability, and who has not responded to God’s grace through faith by obeying the Gospel remains outside of Christ and is lost. There is only one way taught in the Bible that one can be “in Christ.” *“For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”* (Galatians 3:27) *“Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death.”* (Romans 6:3) The scriptures could not be clearer. A person must be “in Christ” in order to be in a saved state, and receive God’s spiritual blessings. The only way that the Bible teaches this can be accomplished is by being baptized into Christ.

Until a person obeys the Gospel of Christ and is baptized into Christ, he or she is outside of Christ and a sinner. *“Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshiper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth.”* (John 9:31) *“The Lord is far from the wicked: but he heareth the prayer of the righteous.”* (Psalm 15:29) God does not hear or answer the prayers of those who are outside of Christ.

Despite the Bible’s plain and clear teachings on this matter, there are many who believe and teach that a sinner can come unto God in prayer and ask Jesus to come into his or her heart whereby the individual is saved. There is absolutely no New Testament example of a person asking for, and receiving salvation this way. *“Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”* (John 14:6) You see, it is impossible to approach the Father outside of Christ. *“Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus.”* (Hebrews 10:19) This verse is discussing one’s ability to pray unto God through Jesus.

The temple is alluded to in this verse. It was there that the golden altar was located before the curtain separating the holy place from the most holy place. The most holy place represented the very throne room of God. It was upon this altar that the Levite priests would offer incense unto God. The things in the temple also represented heavenly things. *“And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne.”* (Revelation 8:3) In heaven, there is a golden altar before the throne of God where incense is offered with the prayers of God’s people. It is only by the blood of Christ that we may enter the throne room of God, and the scriptures teach that we enter God’s throne room through prayer. Prayer is a spiritual blessing given to those who are “in Christ.”

Second, a lack of faith can hinder our prayer. Faith is a crucial element in any aspect of our service to God. *“But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”* (Hebrews 11:6) No matter what we do in service unto God, it must be done in faith or it will not be pleasing unto Him.

A prayer that is uttered with a lack of faith is displeasing to God. *“⁶But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. ⁷For let not that man thinketh that he should receive anything of the Lord.”* (James 1:6, 7) God does not answer prayers that are offered without faith.

Someone may ask, “What is faith?” *“So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* (Romans 10:17) Faith is taking God at His word. It is trusting that He will do what He has said He will do in His word. *“Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us.”* (Ephesians 3:20) By faith we know that God is able to answer our petitions.

There are some things that we must clear up as to what it means to pray in faith. Praying in faith does not mean that we can ask God for whatever our heart desires, and He will give it to us as long as we have enough faith. Our prayers must be according to God's will. *"¹⁴And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us: ¹⁵And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him."* (1 John 5:14, 15) First and foremost, this means that we must pray according to the instructions that God has given us in His word. As we have already covered, one must be "in Christ" before he or she is able to pray unto God.

Praying according to God's will would also include praying for those things that are right. *"Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that you may consume it upon your lists."* (James 4:3) To ask amiss means to be influenced by low, mean, or selfish considerations. In other words, our motives come into question here.

We cannot ask God for something in prayer so that our lusts may be fulfilled. When a petition is conceived in greed, and expressed hypocritically, God always turns a deaf ear. To pray according to God's will means that our prayers are focused on glorifying Him, advancing His cause, and concerned with the welfare of His people. Prayers such as this, which are aligned with the teachings of God's word, will ascend to His throne of grace and bring blessings.

Third, disobedience can hinder prayer. *"And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and we do those things that are pleasing in his sight."* (1 John 3:22) We cannot live our lives any way that we wish, and still expect God to answer our prayers. It doesn't work that way. We must be doing the best that we can to obey God.

Any sin can hinder our prayers. If there is some work of the flesh in our life that we have made a habit, it will hinder our prayers unto God. There are, however, two sins specifically mentioned in the Bible that we would like to discuss.

The way that a husband treats his wife can hinder his prayers. *Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honor unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered."* (1 Peter 3:7) If we as husbands mistreat our wives, it will hinder our ability to pray.

The Bible says that we are to dwell with our wives according to knowledge. This means that we, as husbands, are to know the needs of our wives in order to insure their physical and spiritual wellbeing. The Bible also teaches that husbands are to honor their wives as "weaker vessels." This does not mean that the woman is inferior to the man, or of lesser value. The idea behind the phrase "weaker vessel" implies that the woman is of great value, therefore, she should be treated special. A man's wife is to be someone who is very precious to him. He is willing to do whatever is necessary for the spiritual welfare of his wife in the way that Jesus gave His life for the Church.

A woman's covering is also mentioned as having a direct effect on her prayers. *"Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?"* (1 Corinthians 11:13) Sisters, if you allow yourself to be uncovered you are hindering your prayers.

What is the covering? *"⁵But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. ⁶For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered."* (1 Corinthians 11:5, 6) The words uncovered and covered do not name the actual covering. The word uncovered is an adjective, and describes that state in which woman's head is not to be. The word covered is a verb that tells the woman what she must do, cover her head. We must read further in order to know what constitutes the covering. *"But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering."* (1 Corinthians 11:15) The Bible clearly states that a woman's hair is her covering.

How does a woman become uncovered? Notice verse 6 again. In this verse the woman has done something causing her to be uncovered. Since she is uncovered, the scriptures teach that she might as well be shorn (have her hair cut close), or shaven (to have the head shaved).

There is nothing specifically mentioned between the stages of a woman being covered, or having her head shorn. Yet, the Bible makes it clear that the woman can do something short of being shorn or shaven to cause herself to be uncovered. The key once again can be found in verse 15. There the Bible says that a woman is to have "long hair." In the original Greek this phrase is a verb that means to let the hair grow.¹ Anything done to prevent the hair from growing naturally (cutting, plucking, etc.) causes a woman's head to be uncovered.

These or any other sins can have an effect upon the Christian's ability to pray. This does not mean that we must be perfect in order for God to hear our prayers. *"⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: ⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."* (1 John 1:6, 7) These verse are talking about continual action. We cannot commit sin continually and expect God to hear our prayers. To live in such a way is to walk in darkness.

Another matter that must be addressed is a Christian's ability to pray unto God and ask forgiveness for sins. Some mistakenly believe that a Christian must confess their fault to another Christian and have that person pray for them in order to be forgiven. This is another false doctrine concerning prayer taught by the world.

According to the Bible, every Christian is a priest. *"But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him*

¹ Vine, W. E. 1996. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Nashville, TN : Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996. p. 287.

who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9) There is no separate priesthood today such as there was under the Law of Moses. Under the New Covenant every member of the body of Christ is a priest. As such, each member is able to go unto God in order to ask for forgiveness.

As we previously discussed, those who are “in Christ” are able to go to God in prayer. When we come before His throne of grace we are able to ask forgiveness for our sins. *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* (1 John 1:9) This is God’s plan for those who are “in Christ.” The Bible does not teach that one Christian must pray for another so that he or she may be forgiven.

Finally, failure to forgive others will hinder our prayers. *“But if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”* (Matthew 6:15) In order for God to forgive us, we must be willing to forgive others.

In Matthew 18, Peter asked Jesus how often he should be willing to forgive someone. Jesus’ response implied that he should always be willing to forgive. Then, Jesus told a parable about a king who forgave his servant of a large debt. That same servant, however, was unwilling to forgive someone of a lesser debt.

The response of the king to his servant is recorded in the Bible.

“³²Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: ³³Shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee? ³⁴And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.” (Matthew 18:32-34)

Once you look at the details of this parable you will find that the debt the servant owed his king was much greater than the debt his fellow servant owed him. In fact, the difference in the amount was so great that it was not even comparable. The same is true with our debt towards God. No one will ever offend us, mistreat us, or sin against us as much as we have against God. He is willing to forgive us of a great debt we can never pay, yet we are often unwilling to forgive others. The Bible states that God will not forgive us if we do not forgive.

In closing, how is it with you? Are you able to pray to God knowing that there is nothing hindering your prayers? Are you “in Christ?” If not, then why not become a Christian? If you are an erring child of God, make things right with God, so you can once again pray with confidence.