

No conscientious Christian would deny that there are difficulties attending the activity of prayer. These difficulties hinder progress in prayer, occasion frustration, and weaken believers. The resulting deficiency becomes especially apparent when fellowship with the Lord is not maintained in a consistent and sustained manner.

The Practice of Prayer

The Scriptures make it clear that the Christian is to be given to a life of prayer (Luke 18:1; Ephesians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; and Luke 18:7). But constancy in prayer is not always maintained. It can and will be hindered.

Among the causes that hinder the practice of prayer are those distractions the Christian must contend with when getting before the Lord. The telephone may ring, the doorbell may sound, or someone in the house may call for attention. One may remember a task that has been overlooked that needs to be attended to. An article of interest in a newspaper or magazine may catch the eye and invite consideration. While innocuous in themselves, these things may deter and distract the Christian from doing what he knows to be his duty—engaging in the practice of prayer.

Hindrances to the practice of prayer may also come through wandering thoughts. It is not unusual for a Christian to discover, even as he engages in prayer, that his mind is quickly flooded with matters other than those about which he desires to talk to the Lord. A matter of business, a difficulty in the home, an incident that brought about some discord with a fellow believer—these, and a multitude of other matters, have the

HINDRANCES *in Prayer*



undesirable effect of diverting the mind from a definite, purposeful seeking of the Lord.

At times the exercise of prayer may be impeded by a listless spirit. There may be no satisfactory reason for the failure to pray other than that we don't feel like engaging in it. We should not be surprised by this. Prayer is a thoroughly spiritual exercise. Earnest and regular prayer is not something that the flesh wants to pursue. It will allow us to do many other worthy things so long as we do not give ourselves to heartfelt prayer.

Very often the Christian's prayer life is halted by discouragement. Because there is not the desired response from God to the petitions voiced, the petitioner loses heart, ceases to pray, and leaves aside the practice of praying.

One of the most common reasons alleged for the arrest of the practice of prayer is the "busyness" of the individual. The Christian complains that there is not enough time available in his hectic schedule for engaging in prayer; therefore, daily, consistent prayer ceases.

In seeking to counteract these hindrances to the practice of prayer, the Christian would do well to seek out a private place and to set a time each day when he may be apart from the distractions that surround him. A prayer list will be a great asset to him in combating wandering thoughts, and it will ensure that actual requests are brought to the Lord. As the flesh fights against the call to prayer, let the believer seek the Lord's help to mortify this carnal impulse (Romans 8:12–13).

The Christian should also remember that the Lord's delays are not denials. Think much upon the circumstances of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12:7; 17:21; Romans 4:19–21; Hebrews 11:11). Some twenty-four years passed before there was an indication that God's word was about to be fulfilled to Abraham! Consider the Lord's teaching on prayer from Luke 18:1–8. Think also of the significance of the words spoken to Zacharias in Luke 1:13–20: God has a set time for the fulfilling of His word.

As for the notion that the believer is too busy to pray, he must take a hard look at his daily schedule and determine to prioritise his tasks. The earnest Christian will make sure that adequate time is apportioned to the vital

matter of maintaining communion with his Father in heaven.

The Productivity of Prayer

It is evident from the Scriptures that God promises to answer the prayers of His people. This is clear from the assurances found in Matthew 7:7. The Christian is to expect that God will answer prayer. Great things may be wrought in answer to prayer. God says that He will do "great and mighty things" (Jeremiah 33:3). This ought not to surprise us since "He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20). There are occasions, however, when God does not answer as we hope, and we do not receive what He is able to give. The reason for this lies with us. There is something in us that hinders the fruitful and productive exercise of prayer.

Scripture gives general reasons that answers to our prayers may be withheld. These may be grouped in two categories, each one having to do with relationships.

In our relationship with God, a number of things may be obstacles to success in prayer. If there is sin in our lives (accepted or approved of by us) then God will be displeased and will refuse to hear us when we pray: "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Psalm 66:18; cf. Isaiah 59:1–2; Ezekiel 14:3).

Furthermore, the success of prayer is obstructed when we ask something from the Lord with an impure motive: "Ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (James 4:3). The petition itself may be proper, but our motive in presenting it may not be so.

Our praying may also be hindered because of problems in our relationships with one another. We will find that our praying will fail to have the answer we sought if we disregard the needs of the poor when it is in our power to assist them. While Proverbs 21:13 may primarily mean that one who has no regard for the poor will find in his own time of poverty that there will be none to come to his aid, there is undoubtedly another application. The Lord Himself will not answer him when he prays for relief from his material lack. The important words of Psalm 41:1–3 ought to be seriously considered by every Christian.

An improper relationship between husbands and wives (especially when the greater responsibility lies with the husband) adversely affects the fruitfulness and power of prayer. Scripture is clear on this matter in 1 Peter 3:1–7 because when Peter instructs husbands to treat their wives properly he gives as the reason, "that your prayers be not hindered." Both husbands and wives, however, must look well to themselves and to the well-being of each other if they desire effective prayer lives.

Not only should there be a good relationship between husband and wife but between Christians generally. The absence of a forgiving spirit is a further reason for answers to prayer being withheld. It is a matter for thanksgiving that the sins of the Christian are forgiven by the Lord in answer to prayer (1 John 1:9). But his prayer will not be heard—even when he is concerned about his sin—if he harbours bitterness and an unforgiving spirit in his heart towards another believer. Christ is adamant about this (Mark 11:25). Christians are to manifest a forgiving spirit to one another. We are ever to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace and to be kind and tender-hearted, forgiving one another as the Lord has forgiven us (See Ephesians 4:3, 32).

The liberty to address almighty God is a tremendous privilege extended to us. May we give ourselves to the constant practice of prayer, and may we witness the productivity of it that God by His grace and power will reveal. ■



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