

Chapter 13

December 8, 1996

We are now considering the “characteristics” or “qualifications” of prayer, of prayer that is rightly prayed and that avails with God. We have mentioned so far that prayer must be a) importunate or persevering; b) in the Spirit; c) in the name of Christ; and d) according to God’s will.

You will see immediately from that list that the dialectical method of the Bible’s teaching is at work here. This is so important and comes so near to what Christian maturity is and means: holding together in thought and life the opposite poles of any biblical truth or practice. How can prayer be persevering if you don’t know that what you are asking is according to God’s will, etc. But that is exactly what kind of thing the Bible requires of us in so many ways: persevering prayer that also and always says to God “not my will but thine be done” is like earnest evangelism that fully acknowledges the sovereignty of God or the love of an enemy whose life and behavior you must deplore and find disgusting. Both acts are right and necessary, the difficulty is doing them at the same time; both states of mind are essential, the trick is to maintain them together. The juvenile Christian mind latches on one or the other, the mature holds fast to both, whether or not he or she is able always to see how they may be reconciled. The mature Christian lives with the tension as an essential reality of Christian experience and faithfulness.

Now, tonight, we add another of the characteristics of true prayer mentioned in the Bible, viz. prayer that is with faith or with expectation.

Read: Mark 11:22-24

“Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” [Matt. 21:21-22 is the parallel: “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”]

Here is the other pole from that we considered last Lord’s Day evening, “But not my will but thine be done, O Father,” as the Lord prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Now, you are perhaps aware that there is a school of interpretation, popular, for example, on Christian television, that takes the Lord here to mean that anyone who wants God to answer his prayer must believe that he is going to answer it — name it and claim it is the way this attitude in prayer is often described —; if he has any uncertainty on that score he corrupts and forfeits the prayer. If he asks for what he thinks God may or may not give him, he ensures that he will not receive what he asked for. I even heard one such preacher argue from this text that one should never ask God for anything twice because to ask for it a second time is tantamount to a violation of this principle in Mark 11. If you *knew* you were going to get it, you wouldn’t have to ask again. To ask a second time is virtually to admit that you weren’t sure the first time you asked.

Well, *that* is not right. Jesus’ teaching makes it clear that we are both to be persevering in prayer and at times to ask for what we are not at all sure God can or will give us. He prayed such prayers himself. But, what then are we to do with the Lord’s statement?

The statement in Mark 11:24 is called forth by the astonishment of the disciples that the Lord’s prayer, the day before, that a fig tree might never bear fruit again (v. 14), had been so speedily answered. The very next day the tree was withered. Clearly the Lord is intending to draw from that fact a lesson concerning *the efficacy of prayer and the believer’s confidence* in that efficacy. To that end, in a manner characteristic of the Lord’s manner of speaking, that point is put with characteristic force and without any qualifications, even those qualifications that he himself makes elsewhere (“whatever

you ask *in my name*"). The extravagance or hyperbole here is further indicated by the nature of the specific request that is used as an illustration: the ordering of a mountain to throw itself into the sea. But the hyperbole is intended to create an effect, viz. the extraordinary power of prayer and its effect in bringing great things to pass in and through us.

So, for us, reading this text, the task is clearly not to bring in all the qualifications that we might find from other texts and to figure out in what ways this statement is not true. It is a true statement, of course, to say that the promise only applies *if the things being asked for are right and worthy of God's accomplishment*. But, we betray the Bible's dialectical approach to teaching if we spend our time here talking about what other things must be true if this promise is to be fulfilled. Our duty is to take with full seriousness the condition the Lord does see fit to mention, viz.:

“... does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen...”

And what is being described in those words, clearly, is that true trust and confidence in God that knows him to be a heavenly Father who is always ready and willing to respond to his children when they appeal to him. It is not that you know or act as if you know that what you have asked for will definitely be given to you. For that means that the prayer is according to the *strength* of your faith, when Jesus elsewhere says that if you have faith the size of a grain of mustard seed, you can say to this mountain... No, he is speaking of the fundamental trust and confidence of the soul, which he describes in typically extravagant terms. From God's side the same point is made this way:

Isa. 65:24: “Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear.”

It is coming to God with this confidence about him that Jesus is describing. And that is confirmed by a similar statement in James 1:6-8 regarding a man praying for “wisdom.”

“But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the

wind. That man should not think that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.”

Clearly, James here is not speaking of a person like Jesus in the Garden who is willing to subject his will to that of his Father and who asks for things with an appropriate modesty (“But not my will. . .”). He is speaking of someone who is not really committed to the life of faith, who considers dependence upon God only half of the picture and who comes to God in prayer with his face pointing two ways, in other words, a hypocrite, whose words spoken to God are not a true reflection of the commitment, the confidence, the trust of his heart. He doesn’t really believe, he prays to cover his bases, not because he knows his heavenly father delights to show mercy to his children when they are in need.

But, now, how can we fulfill this condition? How ought we to pray so as to fulfill it? How can we practice what Christ has taught us here about prayer and seek to make this confidence in God more and more the living quality of our prayers?

Well, I thought I could answer that question best by simply summarizing for you the argument of one of the greatest works on prayer ever written, Thomas Goodwin’s The Return of Prayers.

The main point or thesis of this little book is that God’s people are diligently to observe the answers to their prayers; that part of what it means to pray with faith and expectation is to look carefully to see what becomes of the prayer after it is offered. To fail to do this is to betray the fact that we prayed with no great confidence in God’s willingness to hear and answer, no real expectation that he would answer our prayers. To pray that way, in fact, Goodwin argues, is to take God’s name in vain, which is another way of saying what the double-minded man in James 1 does.

But, the greatest reason we are to take notice of the return or the answer of our prayers is, in Goodwin’s words, because, as God’s Word teaches us, “When you have put up a faithful prayer, God is made our debtor by promise, and we are to take notice of his payment, and give him an acknowledgment of the receipt of it; he loseth of his glory else.” [p. 362] That is, to look for the answer is only to take seriously what God has said about his willingness to hear and answer and the promises he has made to prayer.

By praying and watching for the answer, God's people, because God *is* faithful *and does answer his people's prayers*, will be encouraged to pray still more, to pray with still greater confidence, and to gain more and more from God's hand by their prayers.

I wish I had time to read the whole of Goodwin's short work, but I must content myself with just a few points from it.

It is a remarkably spiritual book, a book that could only have been written by an expert in the life and the experience of prayer. The central core of Goodwin's study is his answer to the question, how do we know that our prayers *have* been heard by God.

If you ask for a particular job and you get it, well then your prayer was heard. Though Goodwin, very astutely in my judgment, observes that even in such cases we often do not take care to note the connection between our prayers and our blessings.

“And yet because although we have the very things we did ask and desire, such is the jealousy and infidelity of our hearts, that we often discern not nor acknowledge that it was our prayers that obtained them from God; but we are apt, when once we have them, either to look but to things below and the second causes of them, though before we did earnestly seek them of God, or else still distrustfully to question whether or no it was at our prayers that he granted them, or out of common providence.” [p. 384]

But Goodwin wants none of that. He wants us to be observers of God's ways with us each day and the way in which our prayers come back down from heaven. And they do, he argues, whether or not the very thing we ask for has been given to us.

How may we know, he asks in the first place, that our prayers and not something else got us the blessing we asked for if we have got it?

1. God often answers our prayers in such a way as to make it clearer to us that what he have we have been given by his own hand.
 - (a) When he carries a thing through many difficulties [p. 384] [Florence's job in Scotland; she was an American; we had no idea

where to look or how; she had no work experience; we were completely mistaken about the amount of income we would need; etc.]

- (b) When he facilitates all means to accomplish the thing which was prayed for. [We went to Gilc. South; we met right away a pianist; he knew of an opening for a violinist; he got Florence the interview].
- (c) When he doth it suddenly, and accomplisheth the thing thou has long prayed for, ere thou art aware of it [385] [We had hardly settled in before she got the job and was at work!, never looked for work!]
- (d) When God grants the thing with an overplus above what we did ask, and casteth many other mercies in, together with that which we long prayed for. [She got a good job; doing the one thing she had prepared herself to do and would enjoy doing; she made good friends; she had the most interesting experience of Scottish culture; and she made considerably more money than we thought she could but not much more than we actually needed!] Hannah asked for one child, God gave her Samuel and then three more sons and two daughters!
- (e) When God grants the prayer in the most timely way, either at the very time you have been praying (Peter knocked on the door of Mary's house when they were still praying for him in prison!) or when it is the most fitting and acceptable time for the blessing to be granted. [In our case a wonderful beginning to three years in Scotland; a demonstration of the Lord's presence to us and pledge of his goodness while we were so far away from home; and so speedily as almost to say to us that he wanted us to be amazed so that we wouldn't forget the lesson!—And, in the 3 years we were there, there was not another opening for a violin teacher!] [386-387]
- (f) If the thing granted serves to draw your heart nearer to God.
- (g) If it promotes a holy thankfulness. "Prayer and thanks are like the double motion of the lungs; the air that is sucked in by prayer is breathed forth again by thanks." [p. 390]
- (h) If the mercy received doth encourage you to go to God for other things and to pray more confidently and fervently. Psalm 116:2:

“Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.”

- (i) Lastly, things obtained by prayer have few thorns in them, the curse is taken out. The reason is, for what comes in by prayer comes as a blessing, and so no sorrow is added to it. [p. 391] A wonderful thought, I have not thought of for some time, but I imagine it is almost always true and the more I think of my own experience, the more I believe it is true!

I could dip into my journal at almost any point and soon come across instances of the same evidence that God had heard and answered my prayers!

- 2. Then he asks a second question: how may we know that our prayers got the blessing from God if others were praying for the same blessing? How do we know our prayers had anything to do with the granting of the thing many were asking for?

- (a) By some circumstance. [pp. 372-373] God caused Simeon to go to the temple at just the right time to see the Christ child! And often there is something that indicates that God wanted you to know that he had heard your prayer.
- (b) By filling your heart with much joy in the accomplishment of what you prayed for.
- (c) By causing you to be thankful for the answer when it comes.

I could elaborate these points at greater length but we must hurry on.

- 3. Finally, how may we know that our prayers have been heard if we have not got or not got yet the very thing we have asked God for?
 - (a) Can we see mercy in the fact that we have not yet been given a thing. David’s prayers for Absalom were not heard but it is hard to imagine how Absalom’s deliverance would not have caused untold misery for David and all Israel. Or does the denial, or just the waiting long for a blessing from God, soften and humble your heart and put you to examining your ways for fear that the Lord has not heard you because of iniquity in your heart (Ps. 66:18).

- (b) Has the blessing that you sought from God been turned into a greater blessing of some other kind. Abraham's prayers for Ishmael were granted the more wonderfully in the birth of Isaac to Sarah. David's prayers for the life of his son born to Bathsheba were answered in the life of Solomon, Bathsheba's next son.
- (c) See if God has not granted you the main end or purpose of your prayer, even if he has not given you that which you asked from him. When Christ says that those who give up houses and lands for his sake shall have a 100x as many houses and lands in this world, he means the moral and spiritual equivalent of such things — no apostle ended up a real estate mogul! Moses prayed to go into the promised land, but God gave him to see it and then, buried Moses with his own hand, the greatest single honor given to a mere man in the history of time.
- (d) If God gives you a heart to acknowledge his holiness in all his dealings with you, if he gives you contentment in his denial, if you can be thankful to God that he has ordered this, even if it is a denial of your request, and if you can still pray to God for other things, all of this too is evidence your prayer was heard even though the particular blessing sought has not been given.

Now, just to give you a taste of Goodwin's almost mystical conception of the life of prayer, I want to add a few of his observations regarding his contention that Christians can sometimes know that God does not intend to answer a prayer.

1. "If we have prayed long for those whom God intends not mercy unto, he will in the end cast them out of our prayers and hearts, and take our hearts off from praying for them." [p. 370] "... therefore when he means not to hear, he lays the key of prayer out of the way, so desirous is he to give answers to every prayer." (So, e.g. he tells Jeremiah not to pray for Judah's renewal in faith because he did not intend to answer that prayer.)

Now, obviously, this applies only to the life of a man of real prayer — not a slackard who does not pray for someone because he scarcely prays for anything at all. So George Muller prayed for some of his friends all of his life and several were saved before and several after his death.

God did not take away the spirit of prayer from him in regard to that petition.

2. God will give us satisfaction in other things or other people that we thought we could have only in those for which or for whom we prayed. [p. 371] Now that has happened to me. I've prayed for one family to come to the church or not to move away and have found the Lord took them but gave us another family as good or better.
3. And, finally, this intriguing thought, that prayers we pray for things that God will not grant, come back upon us and do us good, God rewarding us with himself, with sanctification, with peace or joy, because he cannot give us the thing we have asked for.

Think about such things. Remember the point: if we are to pray with faith and expectation we must look to the issue of our prayers and see what happens when and because we pray; take note of God's answers in all these different ways. And when we do, Goodwin says, God's faithfulness being what it is, we will find that prayer does much more than we have often thought or imagined, even our own paltry prayer is powerful to cast mountains into the sea!