

Chapter 9

November 10, 1996

I want to begin another sub-section of this series of studies in the biblical doctrine and practice of prayer. We just finished a series of studies on the “parts of prayer.” I want now to turn our attention to the *prerequisites* or what the Puritan Thomas Watson calls “the qualifications” of true prayer, the essential characteristics of any prayer that will be pleasing to God. The Bible gives us a number of those essential characteristics. [To give you an idea of where we are heading in this series, after we have in several Sunday evenings considered these characteristics, we have then to consider the question of “unanswered prayer;” the “return of prayers;” the differences between private and corporate prayer, the devil’s attack on the Christian’s life of prayer, the best means by which to learn the life of prayer, the Holy Spirit’s parallel intercession, etc. So we have much yet to consider, so great is this subject!]

So, let us begin with the characteristics of prayer that prevails with God.

First, it should be said that all of these characteristics that we will consider in coming weeks in one way or another are measures or expressions of *sincerity*. All of them are different ways in which a prayer is sincere, not hypocritical, or, in other words, are different ways in which a prayer is, in fact, “earnest and familiar talking with God.”

As C.S. Lewis put it:

“The prayer preceding all prayers is ‘May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to.’ Infinitely various are the levels from which we pray. Emotional intensity is in itself no proof of spiritual depth. If we pray in terror we shall pray earnestly; it only proves that terror is an earnest emotion. Only God himself can let the bucket down to the depths in us.”

Brownlow North, the Scottish lay evangelist, commenting on the Lord’s parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, and, in particular, on the prayer the Rich Man prayed when in hell, says, “Oh, what eager, longing, heartfelt prayers are the prayers that are offered up in hell. . . . Common as it is on earth, people in hell never commit the sin of praying for what they do not want.” [I have some questions re this use of the parable. Do people in hell pray to God? But the point is sound. The parable certainly illustrates an earnest prayer that lacks influence with God.]

Sincerity is the overarching characteristic of true prayer. But we kind find sincerity in various things, it can be fostered in various ways, it expresses itself in different ways, and all of them together are the most sincere and thus the most perfect prayer.

The fact is, the Bible does not say only that “we have not because we ask not.” It also says that we do not have because when we pray our prayers are defective in one way or another. James 4:3, e.g., reads: “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives. . . .” Isaiah, in his first chapter, tells his contemporaries that the prayers they regularly offer in the sanctuary and at worship are worthless because they pray without intending to obey the commandments of God. Etc.

In Thomas Watson’s discussion of “the qualifications” of true prayer in his Body of Divinity [pp. 240-242], first published in 1692, but reprinted by several publishers in recent years, there are seven such “qualifications” listed. Some of those he mentions amount to the same thing [e.g. “Prayer must be sincere,” “must have fixedness of mind,” and “must be fired with zeal and fervency” are three ways of saying much the same thing] and he omits others that seem to me to be clearly taught in the Bible [e.g. prayer must be “in the name of Christ,” etc]. My list, so far, has nine items on it.

1. Importunity
2. Spiritual, “in the spirit”

3. In Christ's name
4. According to God's will
5. With right motives
6. With faith
7. With delight in God
8. With proper bodily postures
9. With passion

I won't say yet that this is the final list, but that is the outline of this subsection of our study of prayer as we begin it: "The qualifications of true prayer."

Importunity or Perseverance

Read: Luke 18:1-8

The point of the Lord's parable is unmistakable, because he tells us what it is before he begins: "that we should always pray and not give up." But the gist of the little story is startling because it seems to equate God with a heartless and unjust judge who finally gives what is asked only to get a woman to stop pestering him. This is, of course, what gives the parable its "pop" and makes us sit up and take notice, and, as well, what makes such a clear and potent lesson.

Archbishop Trench, in his great work on the parables of the Lord, says about this parable and its comparison between God and an unjust judge, "None might have ventured on this comparison, it would have been overbold on the lips of any, save only of the Son of God." [p. 486]

The unstated assumption, of course, is a fortiori: if an unjust judge will reward the persistence of a petitioner, how much more a loving heavenly father! (That is, by the way, explicitly stated in a similar piece of teaching the Lord gives in Matthew 7:7-12: "If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him.")

In any case, this is hardly the only place where such importunity or perseverance in prayer is recommended or illustrated.

Luke 11:5-8: "Then [Jesus] said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, "Friend, lend

me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.” then the one inside answers, ”Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.” I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s boldness, he will get up and give him as much as he needs.”

The word the NIV renders “boldness” means “persistence” as the NIV margin indicates. The standard Greek lexicon or dictionary for the Greek NT gives two meanings for the word: “persistence” and “impudence” or, literally, “shamelessness.” That is, the man in the Lord’s little parable will not take “no” for an answer and he has no shame in continuing to pester and bother his friend until he gives him what he needs. As Alexander Whyte sees it, the man kept knocking until the dogs started barking and threatened to wake up the whole neighborhood!

Isa. 62:6-7: “I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night. You who call on the Lord, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth.”

There it is again, the startling idea of “wearing the Lord out!”

Matt. 15:21-28. Here we have not a parable but an encounter between the Lord and a Canaanite woman who pleads with him to heal her demon-possessed daughter. And, we are surprised that he not only does not rise up immediately to help her, he doesn’t even answer this woman in her anguish! But she kept on crying for help and when she couldn’t get Jesus to pay attention to her, she went and pestered his disciples. They ask him to intervene and she comes to him once more and pleads with him for help, and, *he makes it worse*, telling her that “It is not right to take the children’s bread [he means the Jews, to whom he has been sent] and toss it to their dogs!” This is as bad as the unjust judge! She comes back at him again, “Yes, Lord, but even he dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Finally he relents and grants her request on behalf of her daughter.

G.B. Shaw said of this episode, “This was a time when Jesus was not a Christian.” To which the late John Gerstner tartly replied, “Jesus Christ was not a Christian, he makes people Christians.”

Samuel Rutherford is certainly right to say,

“It is said he answered her not a word; but it is not said, he heard not one word; these two differ much. . . his not answering is an answer, and speaks thus, ‘Pray on, go on, and cry; for the Lord holdeth his door fast bolted, not to keep out, but that you may knock and knock.’”

All that is true, as we will say again later, but what we have to notice is the striking way in which the Lord commends perseverance in prayer to us, with these situations that seem to call into question his tenderness, his compassion, his readiness to hear and answer.

And the Bible gives us many more illustrations of the same perseverance being practiced in prayer and rewarded by the Lord.

We can think of Jacob wrestling with the Lord through the night and telling him that he would not let him go until he had his blessing; or Abraham pleading, almost haggling, not to put too fine a point on it, with God regarding the sparing of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Or, think of Hannah who prayed through many years; and so Luke 1:13 implies of Zechariah and Elizabeth — your prayers have been heard and she will have a child (but she was old by then!). These women were heard for the persistence of their prayers. Had they given up sooner, they would not have been heard.

You see, there are many things that are appointed for our lives, that are from God, that is, that yet are to be resisted. God sends us illness but not that we should passively allow the sickness to have its way with us — no we are to pray for healing and to seek the help of doctors; God will send us death in time, but not that we should meekly surrender to the first threat of it; God sends us troubles and difficulties of every kind and expects us to put up a resistance to them, though always in keeping with his law. For there is much for us in that resistance, much learning including the gaining knowledge of ourselves, much exercising of our faith and of our spiritual powers, much opportunity for God to demonstrate his love and wisdom to us.

Let me suggest a few purposes that are served by God's requiring us to pray continually and repeatedly for what he need, reasons why he does not give us what he intends to give us when first we ask for it.

I. First, persevering prayer is the demonstration of any real sense of need.

In that way it is the exercise of the true spirit of prayer and thus of faith.

“It is night. It is midnight. The night is dark. All the lights are out, and everybody is in bed. ‘Friend! lend me three loaves! For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him!’ He knocks again. ‘Friend! lend me three loaves!’ He waits awhile and then he knocks again. ‘Friend, friend! I must have three loaves!’ ‘Trouble me not: the door is now shut; I cannot rise and give thee!’ He is dumb, for a time. He stands still. He turns to go home. *But he cannot go home. He dare not go home. He comes back.* He knocks again. ‘Friend!’ he cries, till the dogs bark at him. He puts his ear to the door. There is a sound inside, and then the light of a candle shines through the hole of the door. The bars of the door are drawn back, and he gets not three loaves only but as many as he needs.” [Lord Teach us to Pray, p. 169]

That is how Alexander Whyte imagines it happened in the story Jesus told. And you see his point.

The man begging bread doesn't want to trouble his friend in the middle of the night, but he is still more unwilling to go home to his friend who has come from a distance and tell him that he must go without food. When the balance is drawn, he must have the food and so he continues to knock even after having been first refused.

A Christian never really knows — he cannot trust what he tells himself necessarily — never really knows whether he really wants something until he has been once refused. Does he lose interest and go on to something else — we often do! Or does he pray on because he cannot take “no” for an answer.

This is what Jonathan Edwards meant when he wrote that it is “true prayer, it is importunate, persevering and agonizing prayer *that deciphers the hypocrite.*” [In Whyte, Lord Teach us to Pray, p. 50]

The Lord wants us to come to him for things of great importance to us. We need to pray that way. It is essential to the life of prayer for it to have in it a *real* hunger and a sense of real need. In order that it do so, he does not give us what we want the first time we ask for it, or, in many cases he does not. *There must be occasions, many of them, in our lives in which we are crying out to God for what we really, genuinely need and want, and for what he alone can give us.* Those are the truest moments and that the truest exercise of faith in our lives. Without them our faith may hardly ever be exercised, really exercised, and, for all we know, we may not have real faith at all. It has never been proved genuine by persevering prayer.

II. Second, persevering prayer is one of our life's truest opportunities for practicing submission to God.

Parents and teachers often give to children problems for which they already know the answer. Our desire is not that we find out the answer, but that they wrestle, grapple with the question and have their reward at the end. We sometimes, we often if we are wise, give them a reward even if they have not got the right answer but strove with might and main to find that answer. That is how character is formed, how the lessons of life are learned.

And in the Christian life, submitting to God, which is expressed by prayer, is one of the truest, most essential characteristics of true and living faith. Faith is looking to God and not to ourselves. Faith reckons with the will of God and not with our own will. Faith believes that God knows best. But if we look momentarily to God but then at length to ourselves, how is that faith, how is that submission, true submission to God, how is it not rather the mere pretense of submission, appearance of submission?

Faith, true faith, is that conviction that realizes that we are always in God's hands and not in our own and that seeks the active and personal sense and practice of that fact. Faith believes, faith knows that it is better to be in God's hands, even if he will not yet give his assent to our request, than to be in our own hands. And so faith returns to God, over and over again. It does not do, what we so often do, viz. ask God for something and then quickly do whatever we think we might accomplish for ourselves. Faith rather asks and continues to ask. It is willing, of course, for God to refuse — that is submission — but it *wants God to refuse*. It wants its coming to God not to be a pretense but a real practice of submission. And so it prays on, always, over and over again, leaving the matter in God's hands, for him to decide,

and not taking the matter back into its own hands. Do you see the point?

David, praying for the life of his child, even after God had told him the child would die, *was truly submitting to God*, because he was actively, subjectively, confessing and avowing and practicing the fact that the issue was in God's hands and not in his. Had he simply taken God's first word and prayed no more, it might well have been not true, willing submission, but indifference, or simple discouragement, or a defeated resignation to a divine will and a divine rule he did not honor in his heart.

This is very important. This, I believe, touches many of us where we live every day. We pray for this or that — deeply important to us, something we want — but we do not persevere in that prayer because at the deepest level of our beings we do not want the issue to be left to God. We want to be free to manipulate and plan and work and figure. And our lack of persevering prayer is the truest sign that we do not want to leave this matter with God and we do not want his word, his rule to have the final say.

III. Finally, persevering prayer is, always in the Bible, an important means of deepening the personal relationship between God and our souls.

On God's side, this kind of importunate prayer is to our heavenly Father the true filial spirit, the true expression of loving and loyal children to their father. As Richard Sibbes put it: "... God's manner is to keep many blessings from his children until they have begged them, as delighting to hear his children speak." [Grosart's Memoir, vol. I, p. lxxxviii] Or, as Rutherford put it, prayer is to God, worship, to us it is too often just a servant sent on some necessary business. [Trial and Triumph, p. 115] When we pray once or twice and not again for what is presumably important to us, we are confessing that we do not really depend upon or trust or even really love our heavenly Father.

And, on our side, the rewarding of persevering prayer is one of the chief ways in which we are rewarded by our Father for our loyalty and one of the chief ways in which our joy is increased in his blessing. And you parents sometimes do the same: make your children wait because the longer they wait the greater their joy.

You don't let them have their Christmas presents until the day, clamor though they may, because you know that delay makes the pleasure sweeter

still. A child can't understand that very well, but wise men and women should have no trouble and so should have no difficulty understanding why their heavenly father makes them wait as often as he does.

Remember this, in conclusion. When we pray in true faith, that is God's work in us. So when God yields to the prayer of faith, prayed faithfully and repeatedly over time, he is yielding to himself who inspired and enabled that prayer. Which is to say simply that God has his reasons, good and true and loving reasons, for making us pray on and on, even sometimes to exhaustion. He has made this perseverance an important part of the Bible's teaching about prayer and, especially, about the Savior's own teaching about prayer. Does this not suggest that importunity, perseverance is one of the ways in which prayer becomes most personal, most sincere, most what prayer really is: earnest and familiar talking with God?