

PRAYER THAT PREVAILS

(John 15:7)

“If ye abide in Me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.”

Can there be any question that Jesus Christ expected — and received — answers to His prayers? None whatsoever. And in all of His recorded teachings, He leads us to believe that we (also) shall be able to obtain, through prayer, what otherwise would not be ours.

However, we have only to compare the promises of Jesus and the experience of Christians as seen consistently in their biographies or personal confessions, to discover a wide difference between *His assurances* with regard to prayer and *their actual experiences* in prayer. These variations are often so wide that Christians lower their expectations concerning answers to prayer, and finally pray only in a mediocre manner, governed more by unbelief than by faith.

In a recent “Peanuts” cartoon, Lucy said to Linus, “If you hold your hands upside down, you get the opposite of what you pray for.” Many Christians must feel that they pray with their hands in the upside-down position! They have become so accustomed to disappointment in prayer that an unmistakable answer to prayer would shock them. All of us must confess a large measure of shame at this point. We have asked so many things which we have never received; we have sought so much without finding; we have knocked repeatedly, but the door has remained tightly closed. We have excused our failure by rationalizing that our prayer was probably not according to God’s will, or that God withheld the answer to give something else, even something better. We forget that *if we prayed as we should, we would necessarily and inevitably ask what is according to His will*. If we “delight ourselves in the Lord, He will give us the desires of our hearts,” because our desires are conditioned and determined by our delight in Him. He can trust that kind of prayer — and will favorably answer it. But we tend to evade the plain words of Christ, “Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do.”

We have only to selectively read the life stories of the great devotional saints (actually, *just Christians*) of history to see that they had discovered a great secret with regard to prayer and its answer, a secret which apparently has eluded many of us. A great library of prayers, intercessions, and supplications stands recorded in heaven, but some are answered, and some are not. What determines the difference? Why are some answered, and the prayers of some Christians answered *with regularity*, while the opposite is true of others?

We will turn for the answers to these questions to Christ’s “legacy of love,” the instructions He gave in His last lengthy interview, or “teaching session,” with His disciples before the great redeeming events of His Death and Resurrection. These instructions are recorded in John thirteen through sixteen. In this crucial passage, Jesus gave the fullest instructions about prevailing prayer which He ever expressed. We will focus on John fifteen, though we will range around that chapter in a wider circle, gathering *the prerequisites of prevailing prayer* which are stated by Jesus Himself. In this passage, Jesus teaches that any prayer which is to prevail with God and receive His favor and His answer, must pass five crucial (this word is based on the Latin word for “cross,” and means “as serious as the cross”) tests. It will be seen that these five tests could be regarded as only different shades of the same attitude. However, each is important for the testing of our prayers. Before we examine them, let me also add that these are not mere tests (a word which suggests only discipline and severity to some people); these are touchstones of delight to the surrendered and devoted heart.

I. SEEK THE GLORY OF GOD ALONE

First, if my prayers are to be favorably heard, and answered, I must be a person who *seeks the glory of God alone*. Jesus stated it as His own sole motive, “That the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13). The one and only purpose of Christ on earth was to glorify the Father, and at the close of His life here He was conscious that He had perfectly fulfilled this purpose. “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him.” And this earthly satisfaction was perfectly consistent with, and an extension of, His eternal being. Each of the three Persons in the Holy Trinity has always been (and remains) devoted to upholding and displaying the moral beauty of the Other Two. The Father glorifies the Son and exalts the Spirit. The Son glorifies the Father and exalts the Spirit. And the Holy Spirit glorifies the Son and exalts the Father. This devotion for The Others is total and equal in Each Member of the Godhead at all times. Having completed His work of redemption and having sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, Christ still pursues His cherished purpose of making His Father known, love, adored, and glorified. Thus, no prayer can hope to succeed with Him, with His Father, or with the Holy Spirit, which is out of harmony with this sublime and selfless intent.

Any prayer you offer to God should be consciously submitted to this standard — can I be confident in the Presence of Christ that my request will promote the glory of the Father? Marshall the evidence, present the reasons, and establish the grounds for your prayer. If your claim can be satisfactorily made “to the glory of God the Father,” your prayer is already granted. But you may be sure that it is impossible to seek the glory of God consistently if selfish desires and aims dominate your life. Prayer is submitting to God and His glory, *not subverting God to yourself and your glory*. The glory of God and the glory of self can no more co-exist in the same person than light and darkness in the same space. The glory of God can only triumph in a man at the expense of self, and the glory of self can only triumph there at God’s expense. Surely no one can truly *pray* for God’s glory unless he is *living* for God’s glory. The Christian who can state his motive in Paul’s words, “That Christ may be glorified in my body, whether by life or by death,” will touch the tenderest spot in Christ’s glorified nature, and will awaken all of His mighty power in answer to his prayers. Christian, should we not (you and I) make a repentance-and-faith adjustment of our lives to the glory of God at this moment, so that God can show His promised answers to our prayers?

II. SUBMIT YOUR PRAYERS TO THE STANDARD OF CHRIST’S CHARACTER

Second, if my prayers are to be favorably heard, and answered, then I must *submit my prayers to the standard of Christ’s character*. Jesus said, “Whatsoever ye shall ask *in My name*, that will I do.” Throughout the Bible, a person’s *name* stands for that person’s *nature*. So Jesus said, You must ask *in My nature*. That is, when we pray, it must not be the self-nature that dictates the prayer, but the Christ-nature within the believer. But what are the distinguishing marks of the Christ-nature? The Christ-nature excludes boasting and practices humility. The Christ-nature is pure, peaceable, and loving. The Christ-nature is not swayed by the glare of the world. In short, the Christ-nature is full of Gethsemane, Calvary, Pentecost and Olivet. It is full of self-surrender, of the death-stance of the cross, of the breath of the Holy Spirit, and of the heavenly life of the Ascension.

Believer, get alone with God just now. Pour out your deepest heart to Him in prayer. Let the Christ-nature, which is in you by the Holy Spirit, speak to Christ Himself on the Throne of the universe. Thus, your heart becomes the prayer chapel for a dialogue between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This kind of prayer starts at the Throne of God as He governs your life, descends to you through a particular need (or *sense* of need), cycles through your heart as its prayer chapel, receives an answer, and then returns to God in the form of praise. Thus, the river of the water of life has

descended from the Throne of God in the Eternal City, flowed right through your heart, and returned right back to its source. Its “outbound” course has sought the low point of your human need, and its “inbound” course has sought the high point of God’s glory. It began with God’s glory and ends with God’s glory, and when it can find a matching point on earth, it will seek that point. It began with Christ’s nature and it will end with Christ’s nature, and when it can find a person who seeks consistency with His nature, it will hear and answer the prayer that is prayed according to the standard of that nature. This is what is meant by praying “in Christ’s name.”

If our prayers are to prevail with God and in behalf of men, we must get quiet enough before God to let the Christ-nature speak. We must be quiet and submissive enough that He can create our petitions at His throne and countersign them in our hearts, thus endorsing His own purposes by means of our answered prayers. If this litmus test were properly applied to our prayers, surely many of the petitions we now offer so idly would never leave our lips. We would rise far above our usual petty praying, and would occupy the heavenlies with Him, both in person and in purpose. Many a prayer of mine has been like a frail little boat, leaving the shore of my unschooled heart, only to be dashed to pieces on the steadfast rock of God’s purpose. If I would only learn to pray according to the nature of Christ within me, that nature would *become* the rock to which my prayers would anchor. The name of Christ must be predominant in my conversation, and the nature of Christ must be predominant in my character, if I am to be effective in prayer. I must know the meaning of, and practice the discipline of, praying in submission to the standard of Christ’s character.

III. STAY IN UNHINDERED UNION WITH HIM

Third, if my prayers are to be favorably heard, and answered, then I must *stay in unhindered union with Christ*. He said, “If ye abide in Me, . . . ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you” (John 15:7). The day you were saved, you were transplanted out of Adam as your representative man, and into Christ. You are now “in Christ,” having been placed there by a miracle of the Holy Spirit at the moment of your trust in Jesus Christ. You entered into union with Christ at that moment, and that union is forever. However, its conscious enjoyment and practical usefulness will be real only as you “keep all channels open” between you and Christ. This is called “abiding in Christ.”

You see, your arm may be in your body, and yet be dislocated and useless. If I were to board a train in Memphis, Tennessee, today, intending to go all the way to St. Louis, Missouri, all that would be necessary for me to arrive at my destination would be to resist the temptation to get off the train at any of the stations along the way. It would be necessary for me to remain on the train until I arrive at my chosen destination. That’s the word — *remain*. Stay put. This is the meaning of the word, “abide.” To abide in Christ is to *keep the contact intact* between me and Jesus. Like the rider on the train, the faithful Christian must be careful to resist every temptation or suggestion to depart from full communion with Him by any act (even the tiniest act) of disobedience or unbelief.

While you are abiding in Christ in daily fellowship and moment-by-moment communion, it will not be hard for you to pray accurately and confidently, because Jesus has promised to abide in you as you abide in Him. The very Life of Christ in the moving Presence of the Holy Spirit will work in you, producing in you desires and petitions similar to those which He ceaselessly presents to His Father. Throughout this age, Jesus has been asking of God the Father. This perpetual communion is the constant attitude of the Son toward the Father. He cannot ask what the Father will not give. So we may be sure of success when we get into the current of His prayer. Abide in Him so that He may freely abide in you, not only in the activities and routines of your daily life, but in the intercessions and supplications of the specific time of prayer as well. Your delight in Him will increase with communion, and your

communion will increase with that delight. As the relationship remains unhindered, you may “ask what ye will, and it will be done unto you.”

IV. SIFT YOUR PRAYERS THROUGH HIS WORDS

Fourth, if my prayers are to be favorably heard, and answered, I must *sift my prayers through the sieve of His words*. My life and prayers must be monitored by the Word of God. Jesus said, “If my words abide in you, . . . ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you” (John 15:7). Christ’s words may be compared to a jury of wise and serious persons, sitting in the court of eternal reality to try my prayers before they pass on into the Father’s presence. If His Word pronounces an unfavorable verdict on my prayers, they will not be answered. But if His Word gives approval to my prayers, they will be answered. Hearing His Word quickens me to ask on the basis of revelation. It was when Jesus *mentioned* the Living Water that the Samaritan woman said, “Give me *this* water.” Her request was prompted and conditioned by His revelation.

Suppose that I pray a prayer that is earth-born and earth-bound, “of the earth, and earthy,” and stained with selfishness. As the prayer approaches the throne of God, this verse stands like a sentinel at the throne: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,” and the prayer is turned away. I am surprised and ashamed by my own spiritual vagrancy, and I discard that prayer as unworthy of Christ’s blessing.

Suppose I pray a prayer that is marred by criticism and unkindness towards another human being, even toward another Christian. That prayer is stopped in its tracks by this solemn word of Jesus: “Love your neighbor as yourself,” or a broader word, “Love your enemies, and pray for them that despitefully use you,” and the unworthy prayer hastens away from the holy Throne.

Or suppose I pray a prayer that is tainted by a heart of murmuring and complaint because of the weight of the Christ’s cross and the restraint of Christ’s yoke. The sentinel of the Word touches me with the sword-point of this notable declaration of Jesus: “In the world ye shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world,” and I pull back, aware that the mixture of complaint with communion cannot be allowed in the Throne-chamber of heaven. Like the accusers of the woman taken in the act of adultery (John 8:1-11), prayers like these are inwardly convicted of unfitness, and go forth from the Master’s Presence, ashamed and unanswered.

I attended a meeting some time ago in which the moderator opened the meeting by saying, “As we begin, I want to ask the preacher to say a little prayer.” Friends, *there is no such thing as a “little prayer”! If it reaches God, it has a magnitude beyond description; if it doesn’t reach God, it isn’t a prayer at all.*

The words of Christ forbid unsuitable prayer, but that ministry is negative and will only produce a sterile blank if it does not lead to a correction. *The words of Christ should also stir the heart with enlarging desires* for the possession of those good things which Christ has promised to them that love Him. Then prayer becomes a dialogue between the Master who says, “Seek ye my face,” and the sensitive spiritual disciple who responds, “Thy face, Lord, will I seek” (Psalm 27:8). As you sift your prayers through the sieve of His words, His words will slowly condition your life so that your prayers will agree with Him — and He will agree with your prayers.

V. SERVE OTHERS IN LOVE, EXPECTING DIVINE FRUIT TO RESULT

Finally, if my prayers are to be favorably heard, and answered, then I must *serve others in love, expecting Divine fruit to result from the service*. Jesus said, “I appointed you that you should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: *that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, He may give it you*” (John 15:16). In other words, answers to prayer will depend very largely (much more than we think) on our ministry to others. You see, it is the sign of a maturing Christian that the focus of his attention and action is increasingly on others, and not merely on himself. I saw a desk motto which read, “*No turtle ever moves forward as long as he is enclosed within his shell.*” No Christian should expect to have his prayers answered as long as he remains imprisoned in the shell of self.

A Christian came upon a fellow believer from behind and startled him. The startled one exclaimed, “You almost made me jump out of my skin!” The other replied, “That just might be a good thing!” Lillian Smith, in her book, *The Killers of a Dream*, says that there are two journeys every believer must make. One, into himself, should lead him to accept, confess, and surrender what he finds there. The other, into the world, should lead him to regard it as the workshop of his service for Christ. Paul Tournier said essentially the same thing when he wrote, “Every Christian needs two conversions: one out of the world and one back into it.” The Christian simply must move beyond personal piety to a consuming concern for other people all over the world. We live in a consumer society, and tragically, the church has often been turned into a consumer community, but *where is the Christian who is willing to be consumed* — for the glory of God and the good of others?

“Only two philosophies occupy life’s shelf;
Either live *for God and others*, or you will live *for self*.”

Recently, I read the challenging life-story of William Wilberforce, the little hunchbacked Englishman who led the fight to free the slaves throughout the British Empire. The drama of the story is greatly heightened when we realize that slavery was at the very foundation of the economy of England at the time. When the struggle was most intense, and Wilberforce was showing physical signs of his part in the battle, a friend asked him, “William, how is it with your soul?” Wilberforce, who was spurred on by his marvelous Christian faith, replied, “I forgot that I had a soul.” He meant that he had become so absorbed in ministering to others that he had forgotten himself. What a picture of Jesus’ statement, “He who would save his life shall lose it, but whoever would lose his life for my sake and the Gospel’s, shall save it.” To be a healthy human being, according to Jesus, is to exist “between give and take” (or perhaps the proper order is “take and give”). However, we must be sure that the *taking* is a *reception of God’s resources*, and the *giving* is a *transmission of those resources to others*, producing Biblical “fruit.”

A wise Christian will hold himself accountable with this question: Do I live in a house of mirrors (always seeing and pampering myself), or in a house of windows (seeing others and ministering to them)? Many of us need to immediately replace our mirrors with windows. We need to balance the “outside-in” living of constant intake, with a suitable “inside-out” ministry of *equally constant output*. We need to focus on giving until giving matches getting in our lives. We need to change to the mentality of service instead of selfishness, to contribution and not mere acquisition.

“Self is the only prison that can ever bind the soul,
Love is the only angel who can bid the gates unroll;
And when he comes to call thee, arise and follow fast;
His way may lie through darkness, but it leads to life at last.”

Many years ago, when Albert Schweitzer visited America, his journey took him to the city of

Chicago. He was greeted there by a committee of prominent Chicago citizens, as well as by a great crowd of reporters at the railroad station. Schweitzer suddenly dismissed himself, pressed through the crowd, and helped a struggling little old lady with her baggage. When he returned to his welcoming crowd, he said wryly, "Sorry to keep you waiting, gentlemen, but I was just having my daily fun." A reporter later wrote, "That was the first time I ever saw a sermon walking." Whether that would qualify as "fruit unto God" is surely debatable, but the action and the attitude were unquestionably right. We must serve — for Christ's sake and for the sake of others — *and we must get far enough in that service that it becomes the greatest fun of our lives.*

Let me repeat this last test: According to Jesus, answers to prayer depend very largely on our ministry to others. If we are prompted by desire for our own comfort, peace, enjoyment, or advantage, we will have a poor chance of receiving answers from Him in prayer. If, on the other hand, our prayers are connected with our fruit-bearing (that is, prayer is for the purpose of bearing "fruit unto God," and the "fruit unto God" is thus merely the extension of our prayers), the golden sceptre will be extended to us, as King Ahasuerus extended it to Queen Esther, saying, "*What is your request? Even to the half of the kingdom it shall be granted.*"

When pastor Wallace Bassett was in the central American nation of Panama, he visited the Panama Canal. "Imagine my surprise," he later said, "when I was told that I could lift one of the great ships that pass through the canal." "How am I to do that?" I asked. "Just press this button," was the reply. When Dr. Bassett pressed the specified button, the great canal lock closed and filled with water, lifting the ship in it to the next level. Dr. Bassett remarked, "What a picture of prayer! Prayer is the Divinely-given means for weak believers like myself to elevate Heaven's great causes among men, and to lift life's great and crushing loads." In light of the vast needs, opportunities and responsibilities of today, could any believer make a more strategic contribution than to join with other believers in concentrated prayer?

What is the conclusion of the matter? Simply this: the temple of prayer is guarded from the intrusion of the unprepared footstep by several crucial tests. At the very door, we are challenged by the watchword: *Seek the glory of God alone.* If our lives do not harmonize with God's glory, we are allowed to go no further. Then, the key that unlocks the door is *engraved with the name of Jesus. Submit your prayers to the standard of Christ's character.* The locked door to the Audience-chamber will only open to the hand in which His nature is pulsating. Then, we must *stay in obedient union with Him.* We must abide in Him and He in us if His to plead in and through us. Then, His words must monitor and monopolize our lives if our prayers are to be answered. And finally, we must *serve others in love, expecting Divine fruit to result from the service.* It is as we serve our Master according to His orders that we can count absolutely on His answer to our prayers.

As we accept and apply and act upon the mandates given by these "tests," we can expect that prayer will become ever more engrossing and rewarding. We will discover the door of the prayer closet to be the little door that opens to The Largest Life. May God help us to keep the hinges of that door well-oiled and the Throne-room well-visited! Go into the Holy of Holies, spread His Book open before the Mercy Seat and between you and Him, wait until the Shekinah ("Presence") Light shines upon its sacred page, and when you have had an audience with the King and caught His pulsebeat, rise to go out and serve in His name. Surprising fruit will be the result.

SPIRITUAL LIFE MINISTRIES
Herb Hodges, Preacher/Teacher
3562 Marconi Cove, Memphis, Tn. 38118

901 362 1622
E-mail: herbslm@mindspring.com