



ISSUE

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Faithful Sayings

BULLETIN
OF THE
OLSEN PARK
CHURCH OF
CHRIST

Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

9:30 AM

10:30 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Patrick Ledbetter

Brady McAlister

Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Ben Hight

Blake McAlister

Walker McNear

Sam Nunn

Lance Purcell

Justin Smiley

Trevor Yontz

Evangelists:

Austin Byers

Kyle Pope

Why Do We Pray?

By Kyle Pope

Critics of faith often appeal to prayer as a reason to reject the validity of faith altogether. The reasoning is: If we can't prove that there is some measurable benefit to prayer it must mean—(1) there is no God, (2) there is a God, but He doesn't care whether we pray to Him or not, or (3) there is a God, but He is cruel and unwilling to come to the aid of those who believe in Him. If Christians cite examples they believe demonstrate answers to prayer, the same critics argue: (1) it is just coincidence, (2) how can we know it would not have happened even without prayer?, or (3) those of conflicting world religions all make similar claims, so there is no God and prayer has no value. Let's consider some biblical teachings about prayer that address these charges.

These arguments conceive of prayer only in terms of requests to be granted—not communication as a part of an ongoing relationship. The critic asks, "Why do we need to pray if God already knows everything?" It is true that God, "**knows the things you have need of before you ask Him**" (Matt. 6:8, NKJV), but the Bible makes it clear that making requests for these needs (and expressing gratitude for blessings previously granted) are ways of acknowledging the power and glory of God on an ongoing basis. The model prayer Jesus offers in the Sermon on the Mount shows that in prayer we are to request what we need ("**give us this day our daily bread**"—Matt. 6:11), but also that we are to acknowledge our recognition of God's status, power, and grandeur over us ("**hallowed be Your name**"—Matt. 6:10). This element of prayer has a daily effect on

our mindset and view of our lives, but it cannot be quantified and measured in visible ways. It moves us to see life in a different way. It reminds us we did not create ourselves, nor do we have the slightest power to sustain the processes of God's creation that provide our sustenance. The critic fails to see that recognition of our status and inferiority before an all-powerful God provides a continual benefit to our worldview that affects innumerable aspects of our life and interactions with daily events.

The primary benefit of prayer has nothing to do with our material condition, but with our spiritual condition—the forgiveness of sins. It is a request (“**forgive us our debts**”—Matt. 6:12), and it is a necessary condition for forgiveness to be granted (cf. 1 John 1:9; Acts 8:22), but it

cannot be measured by any material calculation. Someone might ask, “Is it a sin not to pray?” If we must ask for sin to be forgiven, then failure to pray is both a sin of omission (Jas. 4:17) and an action which neglects the means by which God grants forgiveness—so sin remains on our account. The critic who asks for some visible, measurable demonstration of answers to prayer overlooks this fundamental element of prayer and its immeasurable value.

It is also clear that God's willingness to grant requests is always conditioned upon whether the request falls within God's will. John wrote, “**Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us**” (1 John 5:14). This means a few things. First, our requests cannot be things that violate God's revealed will. James demonstrates this when he speaks of those “**You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures**” (Jas. 4:3). John demonstrates it when he teaches that we cannot expect that God will grant prayers offered for those who commit “**sin leading to death**” (1 John 5:16). *Sin to death* is sin that one has committed for which he or she has not repented. To pray that God would forgive such sin is a prayer that is not “**according to His will.**”

If God does not grant prayers contrary to His will, it also means that things that are not granted may in some way be contrary to God's providential will for us in life. The smallest things that happen in life only occur by God's allowance. **Jesus asked, “Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will”** (Matt. 10:29). That doesn't mean that God directly kills sparrows—“**time and chance**



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happen to them all" (Eccl. 9:10). Yet, our very life continues, or comes to an end by the allowance of God's providential will. James taught that we, **"ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that'"** (Jas. 4:15).

God is in a position to know what is and is not best for each of us. I might pray that I could inherit \$1,000,000, but God might know that this would not be best for me. Perhaps I would misuse this wealth. Perhaps it would cause me to become worldly and sinful in my attitudes and behavior. If so, by not granting that request God actually would be showing His care for me in ways that I might not see at the time. The critic would look at this as a case of neglect, cruelty, or indifference, but that ignores God's knowledge of things that we cannot know. If God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to bear (1 Cor. 10:13), is it possible that times our prayers are not answered as we thought best, God was actually shielding us from temptation?

So why do people the world over claim that God has answered their prayers? First, we would agree with the critic that not everything people attribute directly to prayer is actually an answer to prayer. God, **"makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust"** (Matt. 5:45). He gives to all, **"fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness"** (Acts 14:17). So, although He does good to all that doesn't mean that all are in the right relationship with Him, blessings of life are just coincidence, God has no role in such things, or that receiving those blessings is a direct answer to prayer. We can never really know where God's care ends and natural laws begin. James said that God is the source of **"Every good gift and every perfect gift"** (Jas. 1:17).

Beyond this, we must recognize that the Bible teaches that sin changes the degree to which God hears prayer. God told Isaiah, **"Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you,**

so that He will not hear" (Isa. 59:1-2). We should note that this doesn't mean God **"cannot hear"** such prayer. Peter wrote, **"For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil"** (1 Pet. 3:12). What does it mean that God's eyes are **"on the righteous"** and His ears are **"open"** to them? What does it mean for Him to be **"against"** those who do wrong? This doesn't mean He doesn't see or hear them—the wise man said, **"The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good"** (Prov. 15:3). He sees and hears everything, but to hear the sound is not the same as hearing within the special relationship the Christian has with God. A parent may hear other children cry, but it is not the same as hearing the cry of his or her own children.

Those outside of Christ cannot pray with the assurance of their prayers being heard as God promises to hear the prayers of children of God (1 John 5:14). The false doctrine of the "sinner's prayer" is incompatible with Scripture. Only when one is in Christ, does Jesus act as our Advocate to grant forgiveness to those

who ask for it (1 John 2:1-2). However, it is an overstatement to argue that God never hears or can in anyway respond to the prayers of those outside of Christ. Cornelius's prayers did not save him, but God responded to them in a way that was beneficial to him, even though he was not yet in Christ (Acts 10:4). So, the critic's appeal to the prayers of non-Christians is not a valid criticism. The claims of non-Christians do not discredit the value of prayer for the child of God, whether their prayers actually affected God's general blessings upon them or not.

Finally, the critic fails to recognize that prayer is one side of the communication that is necessary to a healthy relationship with our Creator, just as communication is necessary to any healthy relationship. Husbands and

wives want their spouse to talk to them. The relationship grows weak when this doesn't happen. Parents and children want ongoing communication—not just when we want something, need allowance money, chores done, or without thanksgiving for what has already been done. What is true for human relationships is true in our relationship with God.

In prayer we pour out our cares to God (1 Pet. 5:7). This is to be done **"in everything"** with **"thanksgiving,"** in the promise that it can bring us **"peace"** which **"surpasses understanding"** (Phil. 4:6-7). Few would question the emotional benefits that come from talking to others about problems, concerns, and anxiety. How much more benefit comes when the One to whom we express these things is our Creator? Sadly, critics who view prayer in this way have never come to see faith in Christ in terms of a relationship with One who **"cares for"** us (1 Pet. 5:7) more than anyone ever has. Prayer is the privilege we are granted as a result of being in a saved relationship with our Creator and Savior. What a glorious blessing we have that, at all times we can be assured He hears us (1 John 5:15). These are the reasons we pray.



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