

MESSAGES ON PRAYER

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1. INTIMATE COMMUNICATION MARK 1:35-39

If we had as many answers to prayer as we have books on prayer the battle would be won. Unfortunately it is easier to write a book on prayer than to pray effectively. It is easier to preach a sermon on prayer than to pray. It is easier to give a lecture on prayer than to pray. It is easier to do just about anything concerning prayer than to actually pray well and wisely.

The reason this is so is because we have not taken Christ as our guide to prayer, and have tried to follow men who claim to be experts, but who have made the matter of such complexity that it is too discouraging, and we lose our motivation. If we went into a library and found a dozen volumes on how to order a hamburger, we would

probably figure it is too complicated, and never bother to order one. So it is with prayer. There are books galore, and seminars, and special retreats, and so many people trying to teach us how to pray, that we automatically assume that it is in the same category with learning brain surgery and international law. So we lose hope, and just accept the role of being poor at prayer.

People who are good at saying prayers only confirm our despair. We say, come Lord Jesus be our guest, let this daily food be blest. They can give a lesson on Bible history, and give guidance to government leaders, and a challenge for world missions, all in a prayer of thanks for a hamburger. It makes the rest of us feel like we are not even really thankful for our hamburger, and also feeling like we just don't know how to pray.

The vast majority of Christians would list as one of the weaknesses of their Christian life, their prayer life. We do not spend enough time in prayer. We don't pray for enough people. We don't pray as fervently as we ought, or as persistently as we ought. There is hardly any aspect of prayer that we do as adequately as we ought. Christian guilt feelings about this make them easy targets of manipulation. They can be made to feel they need to go along with some prayer gimmicks to get back into God's favor. Maybe it's an all night prayer meeting, or some kind of prayer chain, or large group prayer service, as if the length of your prayers or the quantity of them is the key to God's reluctant heart.

All of this Jesus put into the category of paganism in Matt. 6, where He said the pagans think they will be heard because of their many words. Jesus taught that God already knows what we need, and so a short and simple prayer is all that is necessary. He never told His disciples to get a big crowd together, but said get alone in your own room and close the door. He didn't give them a manuscript of

hundreds of prayers when they asked Him to teach them to pray. He gave them a single prayer of about 50 words as an example.

My point is, the reason that prayer is so hard for Christians is because they have made it hard. The Bible doesn't. Jesus didn't. Christians have so complicated the simplicity of the Bible with pagan ideas, they have put a satisfying life of prayer beyond the reach of the average Christian. One Christian writer said she could visualize the millions of prayers hurtling toward God at mealtime, and so she decided to do her praying between meals when the prayer traffic was not so thick. She also got up early to get her prayer in before the heavy breakfast crowd. Of course, this is silly, but so is every aspect of prayer that implies God is not omniscient. Jesus said in Matt. 6:8, "Your father knows what you need before you ask Him."

If that is the case, then being eloquent is no big deal, for we do not have to persuade God. It is not as if we have to be intellectuals, and be able to speak with great logic to get through to God. Neither the quantity nor the quality of our prayers are the issue, for God already knows what we seek to communicate. This puts all God's children on the same level. So what if we can go on for a half hour with flowery words of oratory, and another can only say thank you Lord for today, give me guidance for tomorrow?

The Pharisee in the temple was no doubt better at prayer than the publican. If we took a vote among men after hearing them both pray, the Pharisee would win on both length and eloquence, but Jesus said the publican went away justified, not the Pharisee. "God be merciful to me a sinner," was his prayer, and on the cross the thief said, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." And the father of the demonized boy prayed, "Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief." When you look at the prayers that Jesus answered in his life, you can't help but be impressed with their brevity and simplicity. They are

little more than cries for help.

When the disciples were caught in the storm, and feared the ship was going down, they woke Jesus and their prayer was, "Lord, save us! We are going to drown." When Peter was going under his prayer was, "Lord, save me!" All these prayers were answered. Of course, they were emergency situations where eloquence and length are not only irrelevant, but potentially deadly. But what we want to see as we examine the prayer life of Jesus is that even the normal prayer life of the believer is to be simple and not complex. Our text reveals three simple truths about prayer that can make effective praying possible for all of us. First-

I. THE PRIORITY OF PRAYER.

Notice Mark 1:35 says Jesus got up to pray very early in the morning while it was still dark. Prayer was a priority in His day. It was the first thing on His list. Prayer was not reserved for some crisis, or great need out of the ordinary. Almost everybody prays when they come to their Gethsemane. When there is a terrible time ahead, or one faces problems that are overwhelming, then prayer becomes a priority. But for Jesus prayer was a priority when all was going well, and there was no great opposition, or huge obstacles to hurdle.

This text comes early in His ministry when people were delighted, and even His future enemies were not yet sniping at Him. Yet, Jesus made prayer a priority in His life-style. From this we need to see that prayer is not primary a tool for crisis. A hammer can be used to fight off an attacker, or to break through a wall to rescue someone from a fire. But this is not its usual function. It is usually used just to pound nails, to fix things, and to hang pictures. Prayer has its crisis value, but like all tools, prayer has its usual commonplace function as a tool of communication. We need to make prayer habitual and not

situational.

Look at your relationships to people, and what you will see is that some of them are based on habitual communication, and some on situational communication. I have people I relate to once a year because we communicate through Christmas cards. There may be a crisis that leads to more communication during the year, but basically this is it-crisis or Christmas. Some of these people were at one time very close friends or relatives. There was a lot of communication, but times change. They moved, or we moved, and new relationships developed, and the old ones got pushed to the back burner. They no longer have a place of priority.

The ones that have priority are those where there is habitual communication. You talk to these people on a regular basis. There does not have to be any crisis or occasion, you just open the lines of communication, and you relate to these people. Now the point is, the degree of intimacy you experience in any relationship is determined by the priority you give to communicating with them. What happens in life is that we lose intimacy with those we love because we let communication slip from a place of priority. Husbands and wives do this all the time. It does not make them cease to love each other. But it does mean they have lost their intimacy, and it can only be restored by renewed communication.

I had a friend many years ago who was a book fanatic just like me. Every time we got together we could go on endlessly about books, authors, and ideas. Talk, talk, talk. We were the best of friends. But he moved away, and then I moved, and we just lost touch with each other for many years. I still have fond memories, and would consider him a friend, but he has no priority in my life at all, for lack of communication has ended all the intimacy we had.

This happens with people, but it also happens with our relationship to God. We drift away from God. We do not necessarily love Him less or trust Him less, but we cease to put communication with Him on the front burner. It is no longer a top priority, and the result is we lose intimacy with God. There's no longer that closeness that we call fellowship.

Every relationship of life faces this same struggle of keeping intimacy alive. In every case the only way to do this is by means of communication. That is why prayer was a priority in the life of Jesus, and why it has to be in the life of every Christian. A growing relationship to God can only take place in a life where intimacy is developed. And intimacy can only be developed by communication. You cannot get close to people who will not talk to you, and God has the same problem. If we do not spend time with God our relationship with Him will cool.

We have had neighbors we only see out in their yards a few times a year as we go walking, but we get into a good conversation and share who we are, and what we are about, and when we go away from these talks, we feel we are closer to these relative strangers than we are to relatives that we never talk too. Communication is the key to every degree of intimacy. If God is going to be a priority relationship in our lives, we need to talk with Him. Forget the idea that prayer is bringing to God a shopping list. You can ask God for all you need in a few minutes, and you can intercede for all the needs you know in a few more minutes.

The reason we often get bored with prayer is because we have such a narrow view of it. Frank Laubach said, "If your prayers are boring to you, quite likely they are boring God too." Get out of your rut where you just list your needs. I can't imagine that Jesus got up before sunrise just to say, "God bless Peter and Andrew, and James

and John, and John the Baptist," and on and on through all His disciples. Jesus had a relationship to the Father. It was His most intimate relationship, for there was no one else that could understand Him and His mission. I imagine Jesus sharing with the Father, and telling of His problems, and seeking insights for solutions. I think we often forget that Jesus had to live a human life. He did not use miracle power to make all the bad things go away. He had to endure the limitations of His flesh, and cope with crowds, criticism, quarreling disciples, and a host of the same problems that plague us all. Jesus needed someone to talk to, and to think through strategy with, in order to sense the direction to go.

Thomas a Kempis says of prayer that it is, "Pondering a matter with reference to God." To think, to plan, to question, and wrestle with issues in God's presence, is all part of prayer. You are most intimate with those with whom you talk most. If prayer is not a priority than we have put God in a category like those to whom we write just once in awhile. He may be very important to us, and we acknowledge His love and influence, like we do good old uncle so and so, but we only communicate situationally and not habitually. The result is loss of intimacy.

We need to see this truth. You can love someone greatly, and yet lose intimacy with them. I have relatives and old friends I love dearly, but I have no intimacy with them, because I have little to no communication with them. This can happen with God as well. God never moves away, but we do. We let life change our priorities and let God be pushed to the side lines. We do not change our theology, and we love Him as much as ever, but we lose intimacy. This is a simple but vital issue in prayer. We need to make prayer a priority to maintain intimacy with God, as Jesus did. Secondly, look at-

II. THE PRIVACY OF PRAYER.

Notice, Jesus left the house and went out to a solitary place to pray. I am not aware of a single occasion when Jesus called for a public prayer meeting. He condemned the Pharisees who prayed in public to be seen, and He told His disciples to pray in secret in their closet. By both precept and practice, Jesus made it clear, prayer is primarily a private matter.

Again, we go back to intimacy. You can talk to someone you love in public, but you can never be as intimate as you can in private. When you are alone you can develop a deeper intimacy. This is even true with people you just meet. I counsel every once in awhile with people who are strangers. If we are in the presence of others, the conversation stays general, but when we come apart and are alone, we get to the real issues that are bothering them. Privacy and intimacy go hand in hand.

So it is with our relationship to God. It has to be private to be effective in developing intimacy. Jesus could not pray in public, "Father help me to figure out how to cool off these sons of thunder, James and John, and help me to teach Peter not to be so quick to judge and take foolish actions before he thinks things through." There were all kinds of issues that Jesus had to talk to the Father about in private. It is not that public prayer is not legitimate. It is, but it is not intimate. It is not that aspect of prayer that enables us to get closer to God.

Too often I think Christians worry about their ability to pray in public. I don't think the Bible gives any support to this kind of anxiety about public prayer. In 28 chapters of the book of Acts we do not have a single prayer of any apostle recorded. It is the public record of their deeds and not of their private devotions. We know they were men of prayer, but we do not have great examples of their prayers. Why not? Because prayer is a private matter between them and God.

Like their master, they did not do a lot of praying in public, but developed a private prayer life where they talked with, and shared intimately with their heavenly Father. We are told that they prayed, but not what they prayed. So it is with our Lord, and for most of the prayers of His life. They are private, and known only to God.

Don't worry about public prayer, for it is a minor issue compared to the importance of private prayer. This is where you develop intimacy with God. It is in private sharing with God we can unload our burdens, and tell God of the struggles we have with temptation, resentment, hostility, envy, or any other evil that plagues us. We can be one hundred per cent of who we really are, and still be loved in spite of it. A friend is one who knows you, and still loves you. God can be our greatest friend if we enter into the closet, and open ourselves to Him. Total exposure to God leads to the ultimate in intimacy. You can share with God things you can't share with anyone else. In the privacy of prayer we reach the level of infinite intimacy where we are totally known and totally loved. Thirdly, look at-

III. THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER.

Look closely at this text. Peter and the others found Jesus, and told Him, "everyone is looking for you!" The implication is, what are you doing off here praying in secret when the needs of the world are clamoring to be met? People need the Lord, was there song to the Lord. So come on they are saying, let's go meet the needs. But Jesus replies in verse 38, "Let's go somewhere else-to the nearby villages so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."

This response reveals a profound purpose that Jesus had in prayer. There was no end to the needs to be met. There was always more to do than anyone could do. He needed to get away from the crowds, and the constant needs they had, for the purpose of sensing God's

guidance.

In a world where nobody can do everything, we need to get alone with God in prayer to sense which things to let go, and which things to go for. Jesus needed this same guidance. Without prayer you just keep responding to the needs that present themselves. Jesus did not do that. He knew when to move on to give new people a chance to respond to His preaching, and feel the power of His healing ministry. The purpose of prayer was to stay in touch with God, and develop an intimacy that enabled Him to know the will of God for His life. Prayer is private, but it has a great public impact, for it enables you to know where God wants you to go to accomplish His purpose. People in villages all over Galilee experienced a public impact because of the private prayer of Jesus.

This clearly implies that Jesus did not just ask God for things. He listened and thought through the point of His being in history, and what was the wisest strategy to follow to fulfill that purpose. The purpose of prayer is to help us get the guidance of God that we need to fulfill His purpose.

We often think prayer is to get God to do our will. Do this for me, and after that do this and this and this. The whole idea of power in prayer which is so prevalent revolves around the idea of getting your will accomplished by the power of God. Prayer power can make you rich, popular, and healthy. All things can be wrought by prayer, and we are urged to get our hands in the grab bag of things available to us if we only pray right.

It is not that there is no truth in this, it is just that it is so perverted that it seems like a primary purpose of prayer is to figure out how to make God your servant. Whereas the prayer life of Jesus teaches us the purpose is to help us become more effective servants of God.

There is considerable difference in these two approaches. In the one we follow the Savior, and in the other we follow the self.

Jesus could have done anything and gone anywhere, and He would have touched people, but He did not come just to do His own thing. He came to do the will of the Father, and the Father wanted Him to cover the villages of Galilee. Jesus prayed in order to be sensitive to the leading of His Father. He had to get away from the voices calling Him for help to hear the Father's voice. The bottom line is, prayer is to help us know the will of God. In a world of clamoring voices, how can we do what is right and best? The only way we can even be close is to listen to God. We need to make listening to Him a priority so that we can get our other priorities of life in order.

If Jesus would have gone by the pressure of the events of life as they unfolded, He would have followed Peter and the other disciples to the people who were looking for Him. But Jesus had a more intimate awareness of God's will, and He thus, led Peter and the others to minister to people who were not looking for Him because they did not know He even existed. Because of prayer Jesus heard, not the voices, but the Voice of God that gave Him directions as to the purpose He was to pursue. Prayer helped Jesus stay on the track God laid out for Him, and not get sidetracked by pursuing the good at the expense of the best.

Jesus could have done all sorts of good without prayer, and so can we. We do not need God's guidance to do good. We are moral agents in the world, and can chose to do good in many ways. So the non-praying Christian can still do much good in this world for the kingdom of God, and to meet human need. Prayerlessness does not mean nothing gets done. It means there is a loss of intimacy, and what does not get done is the best. The good gets done, but not the best, because we are not in touch with God's will. We do not know His will

intimately enough to choose it. Jesus had an intimacy with the Father that enabled Him to do God's perfect will. He had that intimacy because He was a man of prayer. That is the purpose of prayer, and that is why it is to be a priority, and that is why it is to be private, for it all comes down to intimacy.

The person you talk to most, and the person you talk to most privately, and the person you talk to in order to know their will most completely, is the person with whom you have the greatest intimacy, and that person for Jesus was God. To live the best Christian life that we can we need to be like Jesus in practicing prayer as intimate communication.

2. PERSISTENCE IN PRAYER Based on Luke 18:1-8

A fisherman's experiment is described in a tract. It tells of how he caught a large black bass and instead of putting it in the frying pan he put it in a glass tank. Each morning he would bring a minnow to the tank and drop it in. The bass would make a dash for the minnow and soon finish him off for breakfast. After a number of days of this he placed a glass partition in the tank, and then dropped the minnow in the side opposite from the bass. The big fish made his usual lunge but bumped his nose against the glass. He did not give up easily, however, but kept ramming the glass over and over again. Finally the blows were too much and he ceased to try. After a few days of this separation the partition was removed. The minnow and the bass swam freely together. The minnow was now available for food but the bass made no attempt to get it. Frustration had conditioned it to accept failure, and it just gave up.

The same thing happens with people. When Lord Chamberlain was asked why so many people failed he responded, "Because they come to the point where they stop." Like the bass they get their nose bumped against obstacles so often that they just quit. They give up, lose heart, and do not have the courage to go on trying. This is a primary cause for the high casualty rate in the battle of light against darkness. Prayer is a basic weapon in this battle, and believers are often disappointed in prayer at sometime. You've prayed and prayed and it seems to do no good, and so you begin to wonder what is the use of it. Some even conclude that it is no use, and so, like the bass, they let their disappointments bring them to a state where they no longer try. Jalouddin Rumi, and Eastern poet describes the process:

**He prayed, but to his prayer no answer came,
And choked within him sank his ardor's flame.
No more he prayed, no more the knee he bent,
While round him darkened doubt and discontent.
I prayed he said but no one heard my prayer,
Long disappointment has induced despair.**

Jesus knew that this could happen even to his own disciples, and that is why He sought to prepare them for what was coming. He had just been telling them about the trials ahead for Himself, and the judgment to come. He told of the indifference of the people on the day of Noah, and again in Sodom before its destruction. He said that history will repeat itself and God's judgment will again fall on man. Meanwhile life for His followers will not be a bed of roses. That is why He tells them this parable. The unique thing about this parable is that its purpose of clearly stated so that none can miss it. There is no mystery at all, for as one has said, "The key hangs at the door." It was told to the end that his own should keep on praying an never lose heart. It is told to prevent Christians from becoming discouraged and giving up on prayer.

Jesus would not bother to tell such a parable and have it recorded for all generations if it did not deal with a very real and serious danger. You do not tell your children about the danger of playing with radium because you know they are not going to be playing with any, but you do warn them of the danger of fire because you know it is likely they will have the opportunity at some point. So also Jesus does not waste inspiration on the impossible or improbable, but deals only with the probable, likely and certain.

He knows that prayer will often seem like a fruitless weapon on the battlefield of life, and that His disciples may often feel like relegating it to the museum of religious relics, and seek more effective methods of combating the enemy. He knew this and that is why He told this parable. He wanted to stir them up to press on and not lose heart, and to stick to their guns and persist in prayer at all times, and under all circumstances. This is the stated purpose of the parable. How then does Jesus accomplish this end? He does so by following a simple but effective method of teaching involving three steps.

I. A CONTEMPORARY ILLUSTRATION.

In verse 2 Jesus draws a verbal picture of a typical situation in His day, which is not really much different than what we have today. Here was a public servant who had to be pressured into doing any serving of the public. He was self-sufficient intellectual who neither feared God nor regarded man. Practical atheism is nothing new. Jesus saw plenty of it in His day. He had no superficial view of man's nature. He recognized the reality of depravity and the existence of godless men in high places. Here was a man whose duty it was to administer justice, but he had not absolutes, for he feared not the God of all justice, and had no deep concern for the rights of men. He was motivated by neither conviction nor compassion, but only by his own pleasure. He is the last person to go to for mercy, and the last person who would go

out of his way to help a poor widow.

Jesus is purposely portraying a pessimistic picture to try and match the feelings that overwhelm a person in a very unfavorable situation when they desperately need help. If the man was a good judge there would be no problem, but Jesus wants a problem. He wants to portray a setting in life with a great obstacle to overcome to compare with what His disciples will often face. Some are bothered by the fact that Jesus would use such a godless man to illustrate a godly truth, and make him stand in parallel with God the Father. This is no problem, however, when we see that the contrast of this judge and God is the main emphasis. Pure yellow corn can come up from the dung heap uncontaminated by its source of growth, and so also can a precious truth grow out of an examination of a foul life, and be no less precious because of the corruption of its source.

In verse 3 Jesus introduces the persistent heroin who kept coming to this villain of a judge and asking him to protect her rights and do her justice against her adversary. She is not looking for revenge, but only justice. This had been a serious problem for centuries. A widow was at the mercy of those who would take advantage of her weakness and try to get possession of her property. Even the Pharisees had a hand in the legal plunder of getting widow's houses away from them. A widow needed professional help or she was sunk, and here is one who is not going to tolerate injustice, but demands that her rights be protected.

In verse 4 the judge is not impressed with her enthusiasm, and he refused to help her. She is equally unimpressed with his refusal, and she persistently pleads with him to help her. Her persistence compels him to reconsider, and verses 4 and 5 tell us how he reasoned within himself. He first of all protects himself from the charge of getting soft, or turning religious. He reaffirms his indifference to God or man. He

is consciously and deliberately godless, and he glories in it. He doesn't want anyone to get the impression that if he does good that it is because he has any principles of human rights or equally before God. A self-centered man needs no reason for his actions outside of himself, and that is what we see in verse 5.

He is getting tired of hearing her, so he decides the best way of getting rid of her pestering is to help her out. Nagging is not virtue, but one thing you can say for it is, it often gets the job done, as it did in this case. She gave this judge a clear impression that she would not cease until she got some results. He didn't care about her rights at all, but he did care about his own nervous system, and so he took her case. The illustration comes to a happy ending with the assumption that the widow was vindicated. Next we see-

II. A CLEAR APPLICATION.

In verse 6 Jesus says to listen to what that unjust judge said. Here is an evil man who cares not for God's plan or man's rights, and yet he helps out this widow and does her justice because she was persistent in her pleading. He was a godless man compelled to do God's will because of a persistent request. This is a truth you do not often consider. We would do well to do less complaining about public servants and follow the wisdom of this widow, and begin to put pressure on them to do what is right and just. Even a corrupt public servant will work for what is just if the public persistently demands it. If they do not, it is because people are indifferent, and this leaves them free to do as they please.

This unjust judge was not going to be going around looking for needy people to help, and we ought not to expect that such a man would. We ought not to expect any godless servant to be concerned about justice. Such persons only do justice when it is to their

advantage, and it is the Christians duty to make it advantageous for all public servants to do what is right. This is not what Jesus was getting at, however, but it is just a truth that grows out of this parable. Jesus is not dealing with politics but with prayer. But the fact is, a bad man will do good if good people demand it.

Jesus makes the application of the parable to the subject of persistence in prayer, and says, in effect, if even a godless judge will finally yield out of selfish motives to a persistent request for justice, can you question for a moment that God, the author of all justice and Father of all mercies, will not do justice for all of His elect who persist in crying to Him day and night? If a character like that will even do justice, it is an absolute certainty that God will. Life shows us that persistent persistence works in many realms.

Jesus says that the elect cry day and night, and, like the widow, they are not answered immediately. God delays as did the judge, but for different reasons. God lets injustice and oppression of His own continue even after they plead for justice. It is because of His long suffering, and not because of His indifference and lack of concern. He is not slack concerning His promise, but is long suffering and not willing that any shall perish. He will vindicate His elect, and all injustice will be judged. No evil will go unpunished, but the delay is due to the fact that God's plan includes mercy, even for the oppressor.

Jesus did not teach us to pray for our enemies, and then reveal God the Father to be one who seeks vengeance at the drop of a hat. If God did not show patience and bear with those who oppress His people, the Apostle Paul would have been struck dead on the Damascus Road rather than awakened to newness of life. Those Auca Indians who killed the 5 missionaries in Equador would have been cut down also instead of having the chance and hearing the Gospel and becoming children of God in Christ as they now are. Many of the

elect through the ages would be writhing in the flames of hell if God judged sinners immediately. Better to never be born than to be born into a sinful world where God stands impatient and ready to send judgment on every occasion of sin.

Jesus said that God will avenge them speedily-that is as fast as His infinite wisdom and mercy will allow. For that day God delayed until 70 A. D. before His wrath fell on the nation of Israel for its unbelief. Rome martyred and persecuted the saints even longer before it fell, and many nations since have persecuted believers, and God has not answered the prayers for help immediately. He delays because He operates also with eternities values in view. His elect are already saved, and if they are killed they lose only a few years of temporal life, but if their oppressors are killed they lose eternity. The judge delayed because he did not care, but God delays because He does care.

Persistence in prayer means that when God does not answer as we think He should, we seek to find a way of praying more consistent with His will. George Washington Carver told of how he prayed for God to show him the meaning of the universe, and God gave him the feeling that he was asking for things too great for his mind. So he changed his prayer and asked God to show him the meaning of the peanut so he could use it for good. God heard that prayer and enabled him to discover many useful products for the peanut. Persistence means that you never give up, but keep approaching God from a new angle when a certain prayer is not answered.

Praying is like any other area of life. If we do not persist in it, we will fail. If you only played tennis, or any sport, when you were great at it, and gave up when you did poorly, you would soon give up all sports. If you quit playing any instrument because you made mistakes, you would soon be through with all music. If you quit communicating with you children because they did not hear, or

misunderstood you, you would soon be reduced to permanent silence. We fail in prayer as we do in every other area of life, and we are often frustrated, but Jesus says that we are to never give up, but keep trying and keep learning. Persistence will make you a winner in the long run.

It was a cold February morning when a snail started up the trunk of a cherry tree. As he inched his way painfully upward a wise guy beetle stuck his head out of a crack and said, "Hey buddy, your wasting your strength. There ain't no cherries up there." The snail replied in confidence, "There will be when I get there." Persistence is a necessary ingredient in our relationship to God, both because of our slowness to get where we need to be, and because God has a respect for the freedom he has given to man. He will knock at the door, but He won't break it down. Our prayers are often a request that He break it down, and that is why they are not answered.

Jesus is saying to His disciples that they should never stop praying for God to act. They should persist in prayer and never give up, for He will certainly answer in His good time, and according to His will, and judgment will come, but they ought not to let the delay lead to discouragement. If a widow persists with a man who has no concern and eventually gets her answer, how much more can we persist with God who cares more than we can measure? Prayer will yet be the victorious weapon. Next we see that He asks-

III. A CHALLENGING QUESTION v. 8.

Jesus is saying that the question is really not, will God triumph; will He finally do justice and answer the prayer of His people, but will His people persist in prayer believing this? When that day comes for His return to judge and be glorified in the saints, will there be any who have endured to the end faithful and confident in God's plan? Or will

men be defeated by the delays of God, and give up in despair concluding that prayer is useless? Jesus implies here that it will be sometimes before He returns, and the test will be great for many. It will be likely that many will lose faith in prayer and cease to pray. Ungodliness will thrive, and injustice will fill the earth, and only those with unshakable faith will persist in prayer believing that God will yet answer.

Jesus does not answer the question because it is a question that only each disciple can answer for themselves. What about you? Can you answer and say, yes Lord, there will be faith on earth when you come, for I believe? Injustice may be all around me, and the evils of life overwhelm me, but with Job I will say, "Though He slay me yet will I trust Him." Can you say, "I am not so foolish Lord that I think the only hope in a sinking ship is to throw my life preserver away. I will persist in prayer and labor in patience knowing that however long the delay your justice will triumph."

**When the anchors that faith has cased
Are dragging in the gale,
I am quietly holding fast
To the things that cannot fail.
Author unknown**

When Jesus comes will there be faith on the earth if you are still here, or will He come and find you like so many have been before? Will you be disappointed and have lost your faith in prayer? Will you be conditioned like the bass by the frustrations of life, or will you stand fast and be persistent in prayer?

3. HELP! I CAN'T PRAY based on Rom. 8:26-7

One of the perplexing of all life's paradoxes is the fact that God often answers our prayers by refusing to answer our prayers. One of the greatest examples of this in history is that of Monica praying for her son Augustine. All night in a sea side chapel on the North African coast she pleaded with God to keep her son from sailing to Italy. She wanted her son to be a Christian, and she could not endure the thought of him going to licentious Italy with its manifold and alluring temptations.

"Please don't let him go," she pleaded, and while she prayed the ship set sail with Augustine on it. God in apparent cruelty had ignored her earnest plea. In Italy, however, Augustine heard the great preacher Ambrose, and was persuaded to become a Christian in the very spot from which his mother's prayers would have kept him. God denied her request that her prayer might be answered. Sometimes the only way God can bless us is to ignore our prayers.

Paul knew what he was saying when he said we know not how to pray as we ought. We can't depend upon prayer. We need to depend upon God. Prayer is not the answer, but God is. Prayer can even be a danger to the best in life. Prayer can be a curse because we are so pathetically poor at praying. We do not know what is best for ourselves, and the worst thing that can happen to us sometimes is to get what we pray for. The Jews in the wilderness were not thankful for their daily manna, and they complained for flesh. God granted them their desire, and the result was a plague that killed many of them. Psa. 106:15 says, "He gave them their request, but sent leanness unto their souls."

What these people most needed was a good case of unanswered prayer. What a blessing if God had only ignored their foolish desire, but he gave them their request to teach them a lesson that what is most wanted is not necessarily what is most wise. Thank God He does

not grant all foolish and dangerous requests. Thank God for unanswered prayer. What this world needs is more unanswered prayer which comes from the desires of men, and more answered prayers which come from the impulse of the Holy Spirit who prays always in accord with the will of God.

The point we want to make clear is that prayer, in and of itself, is not necessarily good. There is a negative side to prayer, and it is important that we become aware of this negative side. Awareness of the negative will keep us from relying on our own weakness, and guide us to rest in the positive strength of God's Spirit. In verses 26-27 Paul speaks of both the negative and positive of prayer. He speaks of the negative of self, and the positive of the Spirit, and we want to look at these two sides of prayer. First-

I. THE NEGATIVE SIDE CONCERNING THE SELF.

Anyone who pretends to be an expert at prayer is deceived, for Paul, the great Apostle of prayer, who urges us to pray without ceasing, includes himself when he says, "We do not know how to pray as we ought." Paul knew from personal experience that he did not know how to pray for what was best. He asked God 3 times to heal him and remove his thorn in the flesh, not knowing that it would have been a curse to him had God answered that prayer. Paul needed that problem to help him maintain his humility, and fight off pride. Paul learned that he knew only in part, and could never know for sure what was the best thing to pray for in the long run.

All Christians need to be aware of their limitations and weaknesses. It is presumptuous on our part to think we can tell God what is best for us. As long as we think we are wise enough, and self-sufficient enough to determine what is best, we will never cry out to God-Help! I can't pray! We need to recognize our need for help before we will

surrender to the help of the Holy Spirit. Blaise Pascal, the great French scientist and theologian, revealed what the Christian attitude should be when he prayed, "O Lord, I know that I know but one thing, and that is, that it is good to follow Thee, and evil to offend Thee! After that, I know not what is better or worse in anything; I know not what is more profitable for me, sickness or health, wealth of poverty, nor any other of the things of this world."

Ignorance is one of our major limitations when it comes to prayer. We don't know how to pray as we ought, says Paul. We just do not know. This is why it is hard for us to be bold before the throne of grace. You can't be bold and zealous when you are not sure. That is why we often pray, if it be possible, or if it be thy will. In our ignorance we may plead for what is a negative thing for our life. Lin Yutang tells of how prayer is what alienated him from Christianity.

A relative of his fervently prayed for God to give fine weather for a funeral. He began to think about this, and he wondered if God was really at the mercy of everyone's wish and whim concerning the weather. It disturbed him to think of a God becoming a servant of man's desires for fine weather. The self-centeredness of prayer led him to abandon it. Both he and his Christian relatives could have benefitted by an awareness of this text. If we are aware of the weaknesses of Christians, we will not let the folly of much of their self-centered prayers cause us to forsake prayer all together.

Many Christians are like little Willie. The pastor asked him if he said his prayers every night. Willie said, "No sir, not every night. Some nights I don't want anything." Without the help of the Holy Spirit the Christian is basically self-centered in his prayer life. It is legitimate to make self-centered requests of God, but much of such prayer will be ineffective because it will be based on our human ignorance. C. S. Lewis wrote, "The essence of request, as distinct from

compulsion, is that it may or may not be granted, and it an infinitely wise being listens to the requests of finite and foolish creatures, He will sometimes grant and sometimes refuse them."

This puts prayer on such a hit and miss level that it leads to discouragement, and to a tendency to forsake prayer completely. Many Christians goes through periods of forsaking prayer. As long as we continue to think of prayer as a method of getting God to do our will rather than being a means by which we become instruments of His will, we will be weak and disappointed with prayer. In our weakness, ignorance, and selfishness we even try and use prayer to help us escape the laws of God which declare that we must reap what we sow.

One of the reasons we are so poor at knowing how to pray is we don't know what we want. We are told we should want to read the Bible more, and so we pray for the Lord to help us read the Bible. But it is not a craving of our heart. It is not a deep desire, and so it is not a true prayer. Your real prayer is something like this: "Lord help me know the Bible without all the bother of reading and study, and the getting together with others to know it." In other words, our real prayer is trying to use prayer as magic. We are trying to use prayer as an escape the hard work it is to really understand God's Word.

Chester Warner said in 1939, "For religious leaders to call on men and women to pray for world peace today is comparable to a farmer praying for a harvest of a different nature from that of the seed he has sown." God does not bail us out of every jam. Even forgiveness of sin does not eliminate the often cruel consequences of sin. Criminal blunders cannot be undone by prayer. Prayer cannot change winter into sudden spring. God will not allow prayer to become a magic wand by which His universe of law and order is turned into a capricious servant of the desires of men. When we realize this, and

become aware of the limitations of prayer we can make one of two responses. We can let prayer slip out of our life as being ineffective and impractical, or we can cry out to God-help! I can't pray! If we follow this ladder alternative we will enter into the other aspect of prayer that Paul describes.

II. THE POSITIVE SIDE CONCERNING THE SPIRIT.

The good news is that men do not need to be alone in their weakness and ignorance. The Holy Spirit is also a helping Spirit. He helps us overcome all of the weaknesses that make prayer ineffective. He helps, but he does not do the job for us. He is not a substitute, but a helper. He becomes our link with divine reality and intelligence so that we can pray as we ought. C. H. Dodd defined prayer as, "..the Divine in us appealing to the Divine above us." This means the Christian has two intercessors-the Son in heaven, and the Spirit in our heart.

**Christ is our Advocate on high;
Thou art our Advocate within.
O plead the truth and make reply
To every argument of sin.**

We don't have time to compare the ministry of these two Advocates, but basically we can distinguish them by pointing out that the ministry of Christ is external, whereas that of the Holy Spirit is internal. The ministry of the Son is primarily concerned with sin. John says, "If any man sin we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." The Holy Spirit is concerned with helping the Christian in those areas which are called infirmities or weaknesses. Not all failure to comply with God's will is sin. If it is due to weakness or ignorance, it is considered a defect rather than a sin. Much poor Christian living is due, not to deliberate sin and defiance of God's will, but to ignorance and weaknesses of the Christian makeup. This is

where the Holy Spirit comes to the aid of the Christian. Without his help we could seldom do anything just right.

The gist of what Paul is saying is this: In spite of our ignorance and inadequacy in prayer we still receive the benefits of effective prayer if we cooperate with the Holy Spirit. The indwelling Spirit intercedes for us according to the will of God. The result is that God works in everything for good with those who love Him, even when they do not understand what is for the best. God is answering prayer for us that we don't even know about. Prayer plays a major role in our lives even when we don't receive our answers, and it is because we are constantly receiving answers to the intercession of the Spirit. That is why the prayer, "Not my will but Thine be done," is the supreme prayer.

The manner in which these prayers are expressed, says Paul, is through groans which cannot be uttered, or as the RSV says, "With sighs too deep for words." When Monica, the mother of Augustine, prayed for God to keep him from going to Italy, her groans and longing of her heart was for his salvation. Her words were ignored, but her prayer was heard. It was the prayer of the Holy Spirit, however, that was heard. We often confuse prayer with words. We can rattle off the words of the Lord's Prayer, and not even pray at all. Prayer is not words, it is the soul's sincere desire. It is that deep inner longing of the soul. It is the aspiration of the heart to climb higher in obedience to God. Any such deep feeling for a greater spiritual life is the intercession of the Holy Spirit within us. We cannot call God Father apart from the Holy Spirit, nor can we have any deep longing to live for the Father apart from the help of the Spirit.

Fenelon said, "The Holy Spirit is the soul of our soul." We need to keep it clear in our minds, however, that the Holy Spirit does not work independent of us, but directly through us. Augustine wrote, "The Divine Spirit does not groan or intercede in an by himself, as God, as a

person of the Trinity, but he intercedes by his influence upon us, and by leading us to aspirations which language cannot express." This means that if we never are eager to grow in grace, and never aspire to climb higher, and if we never groan with deep longing to be free from the limitations of our flesh and ignorance, we are quenching the Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us to want desperately what God wants to give us. We quench the Spirit when we are so busy clamoring for what we want that we never listen to the deep sighs within telling us what God wants us to want.

If we let the Holy Spirit help us, we can learn to pray with a sense of assurance that what we are asking God will be willing to grant. Paul says in Eph. 6:18, "Pray at all times in the Spirit." Jude in verse 20 also says, "Pray in the Holy Spirit." There are two kinds of prayers: Those in the Spirit, and those not in the Spirit. When we pray in the Spirit, we pray according to God's will, for the Spirit never prays anything that is not in accord with God's will. This means we must be enlightened by the Spirit of truth as to God's will in order to pray effectively. Even if we do not fully understand, Paul indicates in verse 27 that the Spirit knows us better than we know ourselves. When God searches our hearts He know the mind of the indwelling Spirit, and so knows us at a depth greater than we can even know.

If we learn nothing else from this text, we will be eternally benefitted if we just learn the importance of the Holy Spirit in our prayer life. This Infinite Indwelling Intercessor is the key to assurance of salvation, abundant life, and power in prayer. Charles Finney said to the Christians of his day, "I want you to have high ideas of the Holy Spirit, and to feel that nothing good will be done without his influence. No praying or preaching will be of any avail without him."

We are hung up on a false issue if we say I wish I could pray like so

and so. So and so, however eloquent, does not know how to pray as he ought anymore than the rest of us. Beautiful words and ease of flow have nothing to do with effective prayer. In fact, it is the wordless groanings of the Spirit that are most effective. The cry of an infant can be interpreted by the mother, and the sigh of the sick patient can be interpreted by the nurse. So the groans of the saints can be interpreted by their heavenly Father.

What this means is that true and effective prayer is really a matter of deep desire and longing. The Holy Spirit makes prayer very simple so that no one is left out. Back in verse 15 we see that the Spirit helps us address God as Abba Father. Abba is the first word a child would learn, just like papa or daddy in our culture. We address God in ultimate simplicity, and now Paul says our prayer content is also simple. It is simply a matter of deep desire for the fulfillment of His will. The only prayers that go unanswered are the prayers that the Holy Spirit does not inspire, and these we would not want answered, for they would be out of God's will.

In the light of our ignorance in not knowing how to pray as we ought, and in the light of the help which the Holy Spirit is willing to give if we surrender to Him, the best prayer we can pray is simply to cry out to God, help! I can't pray! May God open our eyes to see our need for help that we might open our mouth and call for help to the end that our hearts would be filled with the heavenly help of the Holy Spirit.

4. EMPOWERING OUR ACTIVITIES WITH PRAYER Based on Eph. 6:10-18

Bernie May, the United States Division Director of Wycliffe Bible

Translators, for many years tells of his conflict with other Christians in a major book publishing deal. Chet Bitterman was shot to death by a terrorist group in Columbia, because they wanted the Bible translation he was doing to be stopped. Steve Ester wrote the book Called To Die about this 20th century martyr. 40,000 copies were ordered from Zondervan. Everything was going great until Christians in Columbia saw the jacket that was to cover the book. They sent an urgent message to Bernie that the language made the book more exciting to American buyers, but it could provoke the terrorist down there to more violence. Murders and bombings could be the result.

Bernie got on the phone to Zondervan and said the wording had to be changed. The editor said it was impossible for the jackets were printed and scheduled to be bound the next day. An argument developed over rights. The editor insisted on his right to print the cover, and Bernie insisted on his right to protect the people who could be hurt. They were unable to resolve their differences, and so they agreed to let the president of Zondervan hear their problem and decide. That night Bernie could not sleep, for he hated conflict with other Christians. The next morning the president of Zondervan called and said he understood his problem and would scrap the jacket and start over. He thanked him and hung up, and sat there amazed. A major conflict had been settled.

The phone rang again. It was Cora Frederick a multiple sclerosis victim confined to a wheel chair. She said she woke at 5 A. M. and felt a need to pray for him. She had been praying intensely for hours, and then she felt a sense a praise that the crisis had passed. Bernie could hardly believe his ears. He told her of the impossible situation that had just been resolved. Cora laughed and said, "Before I came down with M S I never had time to pray. Now God has called me into this ministry of intercession. I'm just thankful I can have a place in the ministry." This true story illustrates so perfectly our theme, for we

see here the conflict between seeking the power of busyness and the power of prayer.

The Christian editor of a major Christian publishing company was seeking the power of busyness. He had a job to do to make money for his company, and he was not going to waste time and resources because of some supposed fear. His busyness blinded him to the more vital concerns of the lives and security of other Christians. Cora was in the same boat, and she was too busy to pray until her ability to be busy had been taken away. Then she had to learn of the power of prayer. God used her prayer power to do what busyness could not do, and the story had a happy ending.

This conflict between busyness and prayer power is one that every Christian faces.

Dr. James Denison, pastor of First Baptist Church of Midland, Texas wrote this prayer that deals with the conflict between busyness and prayer.

“Lord, forgive me-I’ve failed you again.

Some believers wouldn’t consider it a failure, but I know better.

It’s not prayerlessness, nor evil thoughts or vain imagination.

No, I’ve failed you in a much more subtle way.

I’ve become the ugliest of all things-a busy person.

It’s okay for a while. The long hours, the constant pressure-

Administration, decision-making, unrealistic expectations, relentless demands..

I loved what I was doing. I was committed, creative, energetic...

Like a quick-change artist I switched hats, changed roles,

Tried to be all things to all people.

There was not time for solitude or day dreaming.

Too many deadlines had to be met.

It was exciting and demanding.

**I was out to change the world.
But there was not rhythm in my life.
No balance between work and rest, worship and play.
Now I'm not just a busy man. I'm an angry man, too.
I'm tempted to resent the people I love and to dread
The responsibilities I'm committed to.
Forgive me, Lord, for working too hard and playing too little.
Let me become a child again, at least for a time each day.
Help me, Lord, for I am a busy person."**

Our culture equates busyness and success, and so Christians feel they need to be busy to be successful. The problem is that too much of a good thing becomes a bad thing. Jesus was busy and under enormous pressure to minister to the needs of the crowds that came to Him continually. He had a hard time getting away from the pressure, and was sometimes so totally exhausted that He fell asleep, even when in a boat in a dangerous storm. But Jesus fought for balance. He escaped to commune with His heavenly Father early in the morning. He made a time for the quiet and reflective side of life. There are 40 times in the Gospels where His prayer life is mentioned. The disciples knew He had a power in prayer that they did not have, and that is why they asked Him to teach them to pray.

Jesus rebuked Martha for being too one sided and just being busy, busy, busy. He commended Mary for her balance in learning to let go of the active side of life, and just quietly reflecting, listening, and growing in the inner life. The Christ like life is the balance life where the power of busyness is balanced out by the power of prayer. Busyness is what you can do for God, and that is good, but prayer gets you involved in what God can do for you, and that is better.

In our text Paul ends this marvelous letter to the Ephesians with a focus on the need to be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power.

We need the Lord's power because we are fighting battles of spiritual warfare, and the weapons of the flesh will not be effective. If all you have going for you is the busyness of the flesh, you will suffer many defeats and celebrate few victories, for your armory lacks the fire power needed to overcome the forces of evil. You need to put on the whole armor of God, and after Paul lists this armor he concluded in verse 18, "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

Then Paul goes on in the next two verses seeking for personal prayer support. "Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the Gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should." Paul, the great Apostle, every busy in reaching the world for Christ in these few verses reveals where his power lies. He is not filled with any illusion that his success is due to his busyness, but rather that every victory he has is due to the power of prayer.

Twice he prays that he will be fearless in his preaching the Gospel. It is clear that Paul had the same problem we all have, which is the fear of man. We do not witness for fear people will think we are some kind of religious fanatic. We fear to be rejected and ridiculed. We fear to be different. Paul had these fears also, and he needed the power of prayer to overcome them. Without the support of other Christians in prayer Paul felt he could not be what God called him to be. Paul was a busy man, but he was also a man of prayer. He recognized the source of his power was in prayer and not busyness. He knew this was true for all Christians, and that is why he urges them to be prayer warriors, for even all the armor of God will not be adequate for victory without prayer.

The armor does not make you independent of God so that you can win the battle on your own. It just makes you a more useful soldier of the cross if you are empowered by prayer. Calvin said on this verse, “Having put armor on the Ephesians, he now enjoins them to fight by prayer. This is the true method. To call upon God is the chief exercise of faith and hope, and it is in this way that we obtain from God every blessing.”

Prayer is like the wall switch. You flick it and power flows to produce light and energy for many uses. The power is there, but it will not do anything until there is a connection. So it is with the power of God. God is always present and His power is always available. There has to be a contact for it to flow, and prayer is that contact. That is why the Christian needs to pray without ceasing, for every step of life calls for power to be like Christ, and to be fulfilling God’s dream.

Note the emphasis of Paul in this verse on the word all. Pray on all occasions, and not just some, or even most, but all occasions, and with all kinds of prayers. Not just petition, but intercession, confession, adoration, and all kinds of requests. We are not to be specialists in prayer, but generalists, and using every form of prayer on all occasions. And also not just for some, but for all the saints. In other words, if we take these alls of Paul seriously, we are to be in a constant state of prayer at all times, and praying for everyone who comes into our awareness. We are to be prayer fanatics recognizing that all our busyness will not achieve a thing without the power of God. Paul says to pray always, and in every way you can think of, and for everyone you can think of.

Let’s be honest and recognize that this is not the way the majority of Christians operate, and this includes Christian leaders. We are just too busy for this kind of prayer life. Thomas Merton, a leading author

who has devoted his life to spiritual contemplation, laments the fact that Christians are more a part of the culture than a part of the kingdom of God. He writes, “Those who are caught in the machinery of power take no joy except in activity and change—the whirring of the machine! Whenever an occasion for action presents itself, they are compelled to act; they cannot help themselves. They are inexorably moved, like the machine of which they are a part. Prisoners in the world of objects, they have no choice but to submit to the demands of matter! They are pressed down and crushed by external forces, fashion, the market, events, and public opinion. Never in a whole lifetime do they recover their right mind! The active life! What a pity!”

This reality not only hurts our relationship to God, but it hurts the family. We don’t have time to talk to God; no time to talk to mates and children. Communication dies in the world of busyness, and the end result is a breakdown in all relationships, and everyone is the weaker for it. We get addicted to busyness. We learn to love the excitement in being in a hurry with many things to do and places to be. We are like people on drugs, and we can’t see how destructive this is to the relationships that mean the most to us. The balanced life with a focus on prayer and contemplation will not only enrich your relationship with God, but with all whom you love.

If you are praying for your mate and your children frequently, this is going to alter your behavior so that you do not neglect these relationships. Prayer empowers your activities. If you are praying for your children to have a happy home life experience, you are going to give up something else to see that they get your attention, and actions on their behalf. Pray on all occasions says Paul. When you come to church do you come praying for God to meet a need, or is it just another part of your busy life that you have to get through? Your prayer will empower your experience, or lack of prayer will

weaken your experience of worship.

Ann Ortlund in her book *Up With Worship* writes, “Christian, it’s up to you, when you come to church, to worship. Nobody can do it for you. All those helps-hymns, prayers, sermons-lead you to the water, but they can’t make you drink. You, personally, must lift your heart to God. How can I please you today, Father?”

Worship is not a passive thing that you wait to happen to you. It is active, and only you can do it. Pray that you will be empowered to worship. A prayerful spirit will enable you to worship even if the music is not to your taste, and the message does not fit your life at the moment. Prayer is the key to making every occasion one for fulfilling the will of God.

It is popular to say that prayer changes things, but that can be misleading. Prayer does not always change things at all, but it can change you, and this is the key to being what God wants you to be. Prayer will not change the fact that you live in a fallen world where the news will be filled with sin and folly of man. You won’t be able to pray that away, but you can by prayer make sure you are not a part of the bad news. Prayer will not change the fact that you have limited resources in time, talent, and treasure. But prayer can change how you use what you have so that it is used wisely for God’s glory. Prayer may not change the behavior of your neighbor, or your boss, or anyone else who is adding negative pressure to your life, but it can change how you respond to them, and this can be a great victory.

The point is, it is prayer that can always have a positive impact when you are open to interchange regardless of what external circumstances are. Paul does not pray that God will make the world of His listeners less harsh and critical, but that He will be bold in spite of what they will do. His prayer is for inner change in himself, and not for outer change in the world. He knows it is futile to pray that the

world will not be the world so that even a chicken-livered, yellow belly, wimp of a Christian can tell the world they are lost without a Savior. His prayer is that he would be a fearless proclaimer of the truth even though he be stoned for his audacity. Prayer may not change things, but it changes me is Paul's point, and that is why we never cease to pray on all occasions, for we need to be constantly adapting and changing ourselves.

The most important part of the present ministry of Jesus at the right hand of the Father is His intercession for us. He finished His work on earth with His death on the cross for all sin, and His resurrection to conquer death and liberate all people so that all can have eternal life. But His work is not done in heaven, for there He prays for His body the church to carry on His work on earth. Heb. 7:25 says, "Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them."

We all need saving more and more. We need to be saved from our sin, and the painful past and all of its consequences. We need to be saved from bondage to our comfort zones. We need to be saved from our prejudices. We need to be saved from our narrow vision that robs us of being world class Christians. We need saving from all the busyness that keeps us from God's best. How are we being so saved? By the prayers of our Great Intercessor the Lord Jesus we are saved. When we join our prayers to His the channel is open, and we can experience the flow of God's power to change our spirit and behavior to conform to that of Christ.

Prayer is how we are saved in the first place. We pray and ask God to save us, and for Christ to enter our lives as Lord and Savior. The sinner's prayer, "God be merciful to me a sinner," is the beginning of our walk with God. But that is just the beginning. We are then to continue to pray for wisdom, guidance, forgiveness,

protection, and as Paul says, on every occasion for everything under the sun, and for all the saints. Prayer is not to be a minor part of the Christian life-a mere, in the sentence of life that is not missed if omitted. It is to be the verb in the sentence of life that empowers the whole sentence, and which gives it movement and life. James 4:2, “You do not have because you do not ask God...” God wants to supply all our needs, but we stick with busyness rather than seek to meet our needs in prayer.

Heb. 4:16 says, “Let us come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” The power you need to meet every need is available if you make the contact, and you do this by the power of prayer. No wonder Paul is a prayer fanatic. He knows that all the busyness in the world will not make God’s dreams for us come true without the power of prayer. Pray on all occasions says Paul, and Dr. Ernest DeWitt Burton expanded on those words to say:

“Pray in the morning and in wakeful watches of the night; Pray on your knees in the silence of our own chamber, in the noisy solitude of the thronging streets where cross the crowded ways of life, and in the great congregation; pray in the language of the ages, in the language of childhood’s prayer, and in the spontaneous utterance of gratitude or desire; pray for ourselves, for our friends and companions, for the nations across the seas, and for the coming of God’s kingdom in all the earth.

“Pray for the possible and the impossible, and the possible impossible, for with God all things are possible. Pray, encouraged by the answer to our prayer and undiscouraged by petitions that in divine wisdom and grace are ungranted; pray undeterred by our inability to trace out a possible course

**of cause and effect between our desire and its fulfillment.
Pray, for all that in the consciousness of God's presence we
desire, but always most earnestly, pray that His will, not ours,
be done.**

**Obey the impulse to pray, and cultivate the habit of praying,
till every thought is touched with prayer and we live in the
atmosphere of prayer and in the consciousness of God."**

**There are thousands of books on prayer. It is one of the largest
sections you will find in any theological library. The Bible is loaded
with prayers and admonitions to pray. We are to pray without
ceasing, and yet the fact is, it is confessed by clergy and layman alike
to be an area of weakness in their Christian life. Dick Eastman called
his book on prayer-No Easy Road. Some poet put it-**

**There's no easy path to glory.
There's no easy road to fame.
Prayer, no matter how you view it,
Is no simple parlor game.
But it's prizes call for fighting,
For endurance and for grit;
For a rugged "I can do it"
And some "Don't know when to quit."**

**E. M. Bounds, whose books on prayer have been printed by the
millions writes, "Spiritual work is taxing work, and men are loath to
do it. Praying, true praying costs an out lay of serious attention and of
time, which flesh and blood do not relish." In comparison it is easy to
be busy, and to try and fulfill God's dream by the exercise of your own
energy. But this is in reality a barrier to God's best. Let us join the
disciples and make it our prayer, Lord teach us to pray that we might
empower our activities with prayer.**

5. THE PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING Based on Phil. 1:3-6

My earliest childhood memories of being in church are of the rope that I could ride. The thick rope hung down through the ceiling in the church entry way. I was so little that when the rope was pulled to ring the bell in the belfry, I could hang on to it and get a ride as it would pull me up off the floor, and then set me down again. It is a pleasant memory in my mind, and my earliest thoughts of being in church are memories of church being a fun place to be. This memory was brought back to my mind when I read this statement by Christmas Evans, the great Welsh preacher. He said, "Prayer is the rope up in the belfry; we pull it and it rings the bell up in heaven."

For the first time in my life this image linked prayer and fun. I had never given it a thought that prayer and fun could be compatible partners. After all, prayer is a solemn and serious business, and that is why we tell children to be quiet, and stop having fun and clowning around. Bow you head and close your eyes and knock off anything you are doing that could be construed as having fun. From this childhood lesson we move on to a life time of having it drilled into our brain that prayer is anything but fun. It is a chore; it is a challenge; it is such a burdensome labor that it is one of the hardest aspects of the Christian life to develop.

C. S. Lewis, one of the greatest Christians of the 20th century, describes the feelings of millions of Christians when it comes to prayer.

"...Prayer is irksome. And excuse to omit it is never unwelcome. When it is over, this casts a feeling of relief and holiday over the

rest of the day. We are reluctant to begin. We are delighted to finish. While we are at prayer but not while we are reading a novel or solving a cross-word puzzle, any trifle is enough to distract us....

The odd thing is that this reluctance to pray is not confined to periods of dryness. When yesterday's prayers are full of comfort and exaltation, today's will still be felt as, in some degree, a burden."

We could quote many others who feel the same, and all the evidence indicates the majority of Christians feel that prayer is a hard part of the Christian life. Seldom to never does anyone relate prayer and fun. I must confess I certainly never did until this past week when I saw, for the first time, that for Paul prayer was fun. It was a time to be joyful, and a time of happy memories, and thanksgiving to God for His abundant goodness and grace.

Let me show you what has been before my eyes for years, but which I never saw until the Holy Spirit opened my eyes to see. Now I want to be the instrument to illumine you on what is clearly revealed in God's Word, but is also hidden because Satan does not want God's people to discover that prayer can be fun. Look at the facts. Paul says in verse 4, "I always pray with joy." Then in chapter 4 Paul goes all out to make it clear that prayer is to be surrounded with positive joyful feelings, and the negative feelings of life are to be eliminated. Listen to 4:4-7, "Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again, rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Paul is clearly revealing a life of prayer full of joy and thanksgiving. Eliminate the negative and accentuate the positive. Prayer is to be a fun and enjoyable time, and not a time we dread as a duty we have to be dragged into. Paul lived the way he wrote for others to live, and he demonstrated these words in his own life. When he was in the prison there is Philippi, having been attacked, beaten, flogged, and locked in stocks in a cell, we read this of Paul's attitude in Acts 16:25, "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God..."

It was one of the most miserable days of his life, yet Paul is enjoying his prayer time, and he is singing hymns to God. In the midst of pain he is finding pleasure in prayer. He is singing songs of thanksgiving, and rejoicing in the Lord with the peace that passes understanding. Paul demonstrated the power of a thankful heart to overcome enormous negative circumstances. Prayer is not the dark garment of despair. Prayer is a bright garment of praise that will dress up the soul even on the dreariest of days.

It is not that there is never a time for lament and a pouring out of the poison in our soul to God. This is a legitimate aspect of prayer as well, but the dominant note of Paul in prayer is the high note of joyful thanksgiving. This enabled Paul to look any direction in his life and see reasons for being and optimistic Christian. We want to focus on each of the directions Paul could look: The past, the present, and the future, and see how his thankful spirit made prayer a fun time. First look at-

I. HIS THANKFULNESS FOR THE PAST. V. 3.

"I thank my God every time I remember you." Paul had fun in prayer because his prayer was full of gratitude for memories of the past. When Paul says later in this letter that he forgets what is behind,

he was not referring to his past blessings, but to the burdens he bore. His past was not all good at all. It was loaded with bad things like being falsely arrested, and kept in prison. He was treated like dirt, and humiliated. He had to suffer great injustice, but Paul says I forgot all that of my past, and I press on to the future, and the prize God has for me in Christ.

What Paul does not forget is all the good things and blessings he had in Philippi. We have a choice as to what we bring on to the screen of our mind from the computer-like data bank of our brain. Some Christians chose to remember the hurts, the failures, and the bad stuff of the past. That is why you have Christians who are neurotics of all kinds, and depressive type people. They have legitimate records of life's injustices, and damaging negatives. There is no question they have had some, and even many, raw deals, but they let these bad memories dominate their memory. The result is, they seldom feel joyful and thankful, for you cannot have these positive emotions when your focus is on pain. Imagine how depressed Paul would have felt if he would have written to the Philippians, "I can't help remembering how miserable it was to be in that damp moldy prison. I still wake up in the night remembering the stench of the other prisoners, and the unsanitary conditions of the jail. The injustice of it all still burns me to the core as I languish here in Rome incarcerated for doing good. It truly is a rotten world, and hell is too good for the scum who treat people like this." All of this would be authentic reality, but it was not the reality Paul chose to remember.

Paul was thankful for the past, not because it was free from evil and hurts, but because he forgot that bad stuff, and remembered instead the goodness of the Philippians, and the grace of God in his life. Everyone of us could look back and pick out bad things in our past. People who did us wrong, and events that were unfair are in everyone's past. Everyone has their own personal copy of, when bad

things happen to good people. Some feel it is their gift to be able to recall the negatives of life, and remember every terrible detail. Then they wonder why the Christian life is not making them happy, and why prayer is a laborious chore.

We need to see that the only way to be a happy Christian, who can even make prayer time a fun time, is to forget the bad past, and remember those things that fill our minds with a sense of gratitude. Precious memories for which we can thank God are the key to joyful praying. Tom Landry, the Christian coach for the Dallas Cowboys for many years said, "I suffer over a loss like everyone else, but its how soon you forget it and get going again that's important." If your thankometer needle gets stuck on the negatives of the past, it will not work, and you will be locked into a non-thankful mode letting life's burdens, rather than life's blessings, be the dominant influence in your life.

In the book Tiger Of The Snows by Tenzig Norgay, one of the two men, who on May 29, 1953 reached the top of Mt. Everest said, "What I felt was a great closeness to God and that was enough for me. In my deepest heart I thanked God." All the fears and frustrations, and the pain and struggle, were forgotten. All that mattered was the blessing. Only those who learned this can live like Paul with a perpetual thankful spirit.

Examine your memory bank, and ask yourself which memories do you tend to focus on in the past. If you find you tend to remember the negatives, you need to listen to Paul, and follow his instructions. He practiced what he preached, and that is why he is our guide to a thankful spirit for the past, and a fun time in prayer time. Listen to the focus he gives to the Philippians in 4:8, "...Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever if admirable-if anything is excellent or

praiseworthy, think about such things." If this is the kind of stuff you bring to the screen of your mind from your memory bank, you too will, like Paul, be a person full of thankfulness for the past. Next look at-

II. HIS THANKFULNESS FOR THE PRESENT.

The same principle applies here as to the past. Which present realities are you going to choose to focus on? The fact that you are in prison unjustly, or the fact that God is using this bad thing for the advancement of the Gospel? The fact that you are separated from your good friends in Philippi, or the fact that in spite of that separation they are still supporting you in prayer, and by means of gifts. In the end of this letter Paul is so grateful for their renewed financial support. He says he has learned to be content in both plenty and want, but he was thankful that they met his need, for even Paul found life easier when he had plenty rather than being in want.

Notice here in verses 4 and 5, the real source of his joy and thanksgiving and prayer was their partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now. Right now in the present moment Paul felt not alone, even though isolated in prison. He felt like a part of a body of people who cared for him. Paul was thankful for the present because of his partnership with people. Thanksgiving is a relational thing. If there are no people in your life adding to your joys and comforts, then you are living a deprived life. You have got to have relationships to be a thankful person. Paul was a million miles away from these people, but they were still partners, and that oneness gave him a joyful and thankful perspective on life.

Paul was thankful for their gifts, but more thankful that he had partners who cared enough to give gifts. In other words, Paul, like all of us, enjoyed physical comforts, and was not opposed to having some

cash in his pocket. But the real source of his gratitude was not the gifts, but the giving people. Sometimes we get so excited about good things that we forget they are relatively insignificant compared to good people. Paul had his priority on people, and not their possessions. We often forget that almost all of our blessings in life come to us through other people. If we are thankful for the blessings, but fail to see the value of the people they come through, we will be operating on a lower level of thanksgiving.

The Jews have a story that illustrates this lower level of thanks which ends up being a no thanks spirit. "Rabbi Jacobs, I need \$50.00 to get out of debt," sobbed Gottlieb. "I keep praying to God for help but He doesn't send it!"

"Don't lose faith," said the rabbi. "Keep praying."

After Gottlieb left his house, the rabbi felt sorry for him. "I don't make much money," he thought, "but that poor man needs it." I'll give him twenty-five dollars out of my own pocket."

A week later, the rabbi stopped Gottlieb, "Here, God sent this to you!"

Back in his home, Gottlieb bowed his head. "Thank you, Lord!" he said. "But next time you send money, don't send it through Rabbi Jacobs-that crook kept half of it."

Because he did not recognize God works through people to bless him, he had a bitter spirit rather than a thankful spirit. If you don't find yourself thanking God for other people often, you are taking the low road rather than the high road of thanksgiving.

In 4:6 Paul says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God." Paul has a high view of what the Christian is capable of doing. He feels the Christian can choose where to focus his mind. Life is full of things to be anxious about, but he says, you don't have to give them your attention. You can choose instead to focus on

things for which to be grateful. Easier said than done, but he did it, and so can we. Chuck Swindoll says, "Worry forces us to focus on the wrong things." If you are anxious, you are focused on the things that are wrong, or could go wrong. But if you are thankful, you are focused on the things that are right, or could go right. We all have a choice as to where we focus our minds, and which choice we make determines whether we are anxious or thankful Christians.

Paul says if we choose to focus on what is right so that we rejoice with thanksgiving, this will lead to a peace that guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. In other words, thanksgiving is like a spiritual body guard that protects our emotions and thoughts from being captured by the negative spirit that Satan would love to get us ensnared with. The Christian who is ever focusing on the negative that makes them frustrated and anxious is a Christian with no security system. They are sitting ducks for the devil to rob them of their joy in Jesus. A safe Christian is a thankful Christian. If you want to live dangerously, and risk losing your Christian testimony, just leave thanksgiving out of your life. It is the equivalent of a layoff notice to the Spirit of God. It is like saying, your services are no longer needed. I can take care of myself.

When you hear a Christian locked into the negatives of life, full of bitterness, frustration, and resentment, you know they have laid off the Holy Spirit, or as the Bible puts it, quenched the Spirit. They have lost the attitude of gratitude which enables them to see the present blessings of life in spite of the burdens. Paul looked right past the negatives all around him, and focused on the pleasant blessings of the support and partnership of the Philippians. He was not going to wait for all to turn out okay before he was thankful. He was thankful right now in the present, for the bad things of life cannot rob you of the good things of life, if that is where you focus. Next we see-

III. HIS THANKFULNESS FOR THE FUTURE.

Paul was thankful every direction he looked, because God is same yesterday, today, and forever, and He does not leave any good work unfinished. What He starts He completes, and the result will be a truly Christlike people to enjoy for all eternity. Paul writes in verse 6, "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Paul was joyfully thankful because never stops working in us, and through us. He never said the Philippians were perfect. They had their weaknesses and faults that he had to deal with. He never said he was perfect. In chapter 3 he says he was not complete, but keeps pressing on, for the best is always yet to be.

Nobody knows better than Paul how poorly Christians can reflect the light of Christ. He knew of their sin and follies, and all the ways they fell short of the glory of God. He never wore blinders, or rose colored glasses. He was as fully aware of Christians sins as any human being has ever been, but this was not his primary focus. He had to deal with sin in Christians often, but his confidence and thankful spirit thrived on his vision of the future. This is the perspective of all the Biblical writers. The hope and expectation of the Christian is a future where all in Christ will be what He is-the perfect example of what God had in mind when He made man in His image. When God completes His work in us, we will be like Jesus.

It is true, the vision of heaven that John saw in Revelation was filled with delights for all the senses. The golden streets, the jeweled walls, the glorious light and music that thrill the eyes and ears, plus the fruit for taste, and incense for smell entice all of the senses to anticipate the ultimate in pleasure. But the fact is, all of this would be meaningless without the people out of every tongue, tribe, and nation that praise the Lamb for ever and ever. The bottom line is never things, but

always people. Jesus lived for people, and he died for people. They were the treasure he came to seek and to save, and when this focus of God becomes our focus, as it was of Paul, we will be able to praise and thank God for the future.

The future in Christ is loaded with people who are like Jesus. They love and care and share, and make the future a paradise. The first paradise was no big deal without another person to relate to. Perfection, beauty, and abundance do not fill the bill. God made man so he cannot be complete without relationship. People and paradise are linked as necessities. If you could have the New Jerusalem all to yourself, you would be miserable, and soon realize it is nothing but glorified hell without other people. Someone once said that hell is other people, but the fact is hell is the lack of other people. Paul had a thankful spirit about the future because he knew he had a future filled with Christlike people.

Paul was thankful for the past because of these people, and their response to the Gospel. He was thankful for the present because these people were his partners in the Gospel. She was thankful for the future because these people would be with him as perfected saints. Lets face the reality of this. Much, if not most, of what we have to thank God for comes to us through other people. They are the primary tools of God to achieve His purpose in history.

Consider our American heritage from the Pilgrims. Governor Bradford of the Plymouth Colony wrote in his diary of a man he called, "A special instrument sent of God." He was referring to the incredible Indian named Squanto. His story, and how God used him to save the Pilgrims from certain destruction is one of the great providence's of history. Squanto was kidnaped and sold as a slave and taken to Spain. There he was trained in the Christian faith, and then sold to a merchant in England. He sent him with an expedition back to

America. He was back in his native land just six months before the Pilgrims arrived. Here was an Indian who knew English. He helped the Pilgrims communicate and form friendly relations with the Indians. He lives with them and taught them how to plant corn, and to fish, and to use them as fertilizer. It is not likely they could have survived without this gift of God. They thanked God often for this man.

An artist painted a picture of an old church with its time worn steeple. The bell is there and the rope hangs down to the earth. Beside the bell sits an owl suggesting that the bell had not been used for a long time. People are running by it as the street is full of hurrying people, but the motto under the picture says, "Why don't they ring?" Why don't we have fun in prayer by ringing the bell of heaven by thanksgiving to God for people in our past, present, and future? The opportunity to ring the bell of heaven by means of the joyful prayer of thanksgiving is ever available. May God help us to pull the rope, and add to the harmony of heaven, and the mirth on earth, with the prayer of thanksgiving.

6. THREE KEYS TO A BETTER PRAYER LIFE. Based on Col. 1:3

Dietrich Bonhoffer was a leader in the church of Germany at the time of Hitler's rise to power. He opposed Hitler and was imprisoned in 1943. He did not cease to influence people, however, even in prison. He inspired others by his courage. The guards were supposed to be his enemies, but they so respected him that they smuggled out his writings that have influenced millions since.

One of the men who was in prison with Bonhoffer was the English

officer Payne Best. He survived the war and wrote this account in a book. I want to share it with you because it represents the kind of example of Christlikeness that we see in the Apostle Paul, who wrote the letter of Colossians from his prison cell in Rome. Best wrote-- "Bonhoffer--was all humility and sweetness, he always seemed to me to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every smallest event in life--He was one of the very few men I have ever met to whom his God was real and close to him." Then after Best describes a service that Bonhoffer held for the prisoners on Sunday, April 8, 1945 he wrote, "He had hardly finished his last prayer when the door opened and two evil looking men in civilian clothes came in ;and said 'prisoner Bonhoffer, get ready to come with us.' Those words, come with us--for all the prisoners they had come to mean one thing only--the scaffold. We bade him good-bye--he drew me aside--this is the end, he said. For me the beginning of life. Next day, at Flossenburg, he was hanged."

This courageous optimism in the most negative of circumstances is one of the characteristics we see in the Apostle Paul. In his prison epistles we do not hear any whining or complaining, but only words of joy and thanksgiving. Paul had indeed learned to be content in every state of life. He too faced death at any time, yet he wanted to use his time to write and encourage others. His negative experience has led to positive results in the lives of millions through history.

George Jackson, in a tribute to Robertson Nicole, the editor of the British Weekly said, "He flung down a bunch of keys for me, and has set me to opening doors for myself on every side of me." This is what Paul has done for the Colossians and for the whole church of Christ. He has thrown down a bunch of keys that enable us to open doors to God's best on every side. As we focus on v.3, we can see that Paul has given us three keys to a better prayer life. The first key is--

I. THE PARTNERSHIP OF PRAYER.

Notice Paul says, "We always thank God." He does not say I thank God, but he included his partner Timothy. The idea of a prayer partner is very Biblical. Jesus said prayer is more powerful when two agree on what they desire from God. In Matt. 18:19-20 we read, "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

It seems as if God has designed prayer to be a promoter of unity, fellowship and brotherhood. He has promised to answer more effectively those prayers that come from a partnership. This is a key to a better prayer life, but it is often neglected. We have potential power in prayer that we seldom use. Cabeza deVaca tells of how he and his companion explorer went from Florida to the Pacific between 1528-1536. On one occasion they were lost and starving and in a state of despair when they were found by Indians. The Indians felt that since they were white men they should have the power to heal some of their sick. They were miserable themselves and now they were expected to heal others or die. He wrote, "We prayer for strength. We prayed on bended knees and in agony of hunger." Then they blessed the sick Indians, and to their amazement the ailing redmen said they were made well. DeVaca wrote, Being Europeans, we thought we had given away to doctors and priests our ability to heal. But here it was, still in our possession. It was ours after all; we were more than we thought we were."

The fact is, all of us are more than we think we are. If we form partnerships in prayer we will have a key that will open many doors that otherwise might never open. When Jesus taught the disciples to pray, He made it clear he expected them to pray in partnership. He used only plurals. It was our Father, give us this daily bread, forgive us, and lead us not into temptation.

Every believer needs to develop some relationship with another believer where they feel like true partners in prayer. In prayer, the loner is a loser. We may pray much alone, but we need to know that there is someone else who is one with us in our praying. When Lavonne and I began to hold hands each night, and talk over requests, and agree on what we desire to bring before God, it lead to so many answers we stopped keeping track of them. We are convinced any couple would be enriched if they would begin this practice of partnership in prayer. Learn how to enjoy the we of prayer. In verse 9 Paul says again, "We have not ceased to pray for you." A we prayer is a better prayer than an I prayer, and so the more you pray in partnership the better prayer life you will have.

II. THE PERSISTENCE OF PRAYER.

Paul says, "We always give thanks." Always refers to the persistence of Paul's prayer. The modern language Bible puts it, "We constantly give thanks to God."

In verse 9 we see this emphasis again, "and from the day we heard of it we have not ceased to pray for you." Paul did not just say prayers, he prayed, and there is a world of difference. I can say a prayer in a matter of seconds, but to pray takes up a part of my consciousness, and becomes a real concern of my life. This kind of prayer does not cease, for it is a persistent factor in ones life. Paul wrote this letter as a part of his prayer concern. Prayer is not only asking God for His guidance, it is the listening and responding to His guidance. Paul's response in writing this letter is a part of the circle of prayer. It is Gods answering his prayer for them through him by writing to them the things they need to hear.

Persistence in prayer means there is some listening and follow-up. It is not just flashing a telegram to God, but a listening for an answer, and putting feet to your prayer by doing what you can to be a part of

the answer. This is another partnership in prayer, for it is a partnership with God. God does not want to work alone any more than we do. He wants to work with us and have us work with Him to achieve His purpose in history.

In verse 9 Paul says he has prayed for them to be filled with the knowledge of God's will. He asked God to do this for them, and then he wrote this letter to tell them the will of God and thus, he was an answer to his own prayer. He was a partner with God. Much unanswered prayer is due to our not persisting in prayer until we see how we can be partners with God in answering it. Persistence is a test of our sincerity. Much prayer is a matter of routine and can easily be superficial, but if you persist and thank God always for certain aspects of life you demonstrate a true and deep interest. By his persistent prayers Paul proves he really cares about the Colossian Christians.

Paul makes it clear that he expects them to also pray for him. In 4:2-3 he writes, "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message....." Paul wants their partnership in prayer too, and we thus can conclude that the number of people caring about a matter enough to persist in seeking God about it makes a difference with God.

Persistence is a principle that is necessary for success in any area of life. The more you use things the more they wear out and become useless, but the more you use the things of the spirit the more they develop and become more useful. Professor Phelps in his "Autobiography with Letters", tells of how he hated his first concert of classical music. He decided to keep on trying to enjoy it and the day came when the symphony became one of his greatest pleasures. The first time he read Browning he was not impressed, but he persisted in reading until he came to almost idolize the man's writings. If we keep at something and persist in seeking its value we can come to love and

value what we did not care about at all. This is the point of persistence in prayer. We give up too soon and lose the joy of answered prayer that would make it a greater pleasure rather than a chore. What do you pray for always?

III. THE POSITIVE OF PRAYER

The prominent part of Paul's prayer was thanksgiving. That is the positive aspect of prayer that is so easily neglected. Lack of thanks in our prayer is not a sign that we are not close to God, however, for this is a common lack toward those we care about. We seldom thank our mate or children for their acts of love and service on our behalf. We tend to take them for granted, and so it is with God. His goodness is so common that there is no end to the things we could thank Him for daily. But the commonplace is soon taken for granted and we forget to be grateful for the blessings all around us.

Paul had the amazing ability to be ever grateful for the commonplace. Paul would have made a marvelous husband. Imagine a wife who is thanked and praised every time she does an act of love and service. Thank you dear for making that meal, and for making the bed, and for cleaning the house, and for getting the kids off to school, and thanks for washing my shirt, and on and on it could go. Paul could be giving thanks without ceasing. It was not as if he had no problems to struggle with, for Paul had perpetual battles and needed plenty of help and encouragement, but he never neglected the positive aspect of prayer, which is thanksgiving.

Because prayer was positive for Paul, it was not a bore and a chore. He could hardly wait to thank God again for all His grace. Have you ever felt so grateful to someone you could not wait to see them and express your gratitude? You can't be satisfied until they know how much you appreciate them and their acts of love. Paul felt this way

toward God every day, and all day of every day.

Prayer is basically the desire to be in touch with God. That desire is stronger when you want to express your gratitude to Him. There is no bad way to pray for any prayer is better than no prayer, but there is a better way to pray and that is with a positive attitude of thanksgiving. Come to God thanking Him for what He has already done before you plead for Him to do more for you. The best reason God has to answer your prayer is because you are so grateful for His previous answers. Lack of thanks is the best reason to deny further blessings. Thanks is the one thing we can give to God to express how we feel about all He has given to us. God is to gain in this two way communication of prayer too, and the only way He can and be pleased is by our being positive in thanksgiving.

Paul was always a positive thinker and, no doubt, the reason he could be, in spite of all his trials, was because he was always looking for the things he could thank God for in his every day life. If we look for them they are everywhere in our lives too. If you will be positive in how you see God's blessings all around you, you will be positive in your prayer life by being ever thankful, and this in turn will make you more aware of your positive blessings.

The prayer here is all positive. Most of the time we spend in prayer we are praying for problems. It is almost embarrassing not to have a problem for then what are people to pray for in your life? Like the 8 year old boy who was in Sunday School and all the class was sharing prayer requests and as an 8 year old he had to come up with something significant, and so he asked for prayer that his father might give up drinking. He had a can of beer he got from somewhere that sat in the frig for 7 months. The word spread, and finally got back home. Now he had something to pray about. He began to pray he would

make it to nine.

This story illustrates the paradox that faces Christians. If your life is too good, you get little attention. You are not on anyone's prayer list. It is problems that get you on the list. The more problems you have and the more struggles with life and sin, the more attention you get. Get it altogether and you are ignored. The Christian who is always sinking in some quicksand who gets all the attention. The wheel that squeals gets the oil.

The longest letters of Paul are to those churches with the most problems, and most sinful behavior. It is a universal principle. It is the sick who get the attention of the doctor. It is those in trouble who get the attention of the lawyer. It is those with car problems who get the attention of the mechanic.

Yet, in spite of this, the goal of the Christian is to press on to perfection and have such a positive life that there is no need to be on the prayer list for many problems. We all need to be on the list for the positive, however, and be lifted up in the way Paul does for the Colossians.

7. SPONTANEOUS PRAYER Based on I Thess. 5:12-28

George Buttrick in his large book simply called Prayer tells of why the Acoma Indians in Colorado chose to live on the mesa. The rock gave them safety. The Apaches on the South and the Navajos on the North made them sitting ducks down on the plains, and so they headed for the rocks. A narrow path up the steep rock-staircase made it impossible for an enemy to get to them. A few men could defend against an army, and so they felt secure on the rocks.

The rocks provided natural cisterns to store water, and soil carried up to the rocks was kept cool, and so the flowers bloomed in splendor. They had security and beauty. They could watch the drifting clouds above ever changing, and the shifting sands of the desert below were being blown by the wind into new eddies. Earth and sky in ceaseless change, but they stood on the solid rock that did not change.

Buttrick says this is the longing of all men to have a solid place on which to stand and live. They long for permanence in a world of change, and that is what prayer is all about. Prayer is about connection with the Rock, and with the God who is permanent and changeless. Prayer is about security and stability in a world where there is so little solid ground. Prayer is our link to the Permanent. He quotes Henry Francis Lytes famous hymn Abide With Me.

**Abide with me: fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide!
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.**

**Swift to its close ebbs out of life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changes not, abide with me!**

This prayer for the permanent presence of the Rock in our lives is based on the conviction that there is no solid ground in this world on which to live and stand. Prayer is saying that I must reach out to a world beyond this one or be forever trapped in the shifting sands of time. Prayer is the conviction that there is another realm above time, which is the realm of eternity, and it is determined to get in touch with that higher realm which is permanent. So prayer is not just the kid's

stuff of gimme, gimme, gimme. It is the stuff of deep philosophy and theology, for it deals with the essential issues of the meaning of life and the purpose for our existence. Prayer is so amazingly simple, and yet so awesomely profound that both children and scholars deal with it everyday. It is to be a perpetual part of every believer's life.

Any day that we do not pray we disobey for Jesus expects that we will give thanks for our daily bread as we make our other petitions. The Lord's Prayer is quite short, and so Jesus does not imply that we must all become mystics who spend many hours in prayer. But the fact is, he does expect that His followers will be people that maintain daily contact with the heavenly Father. Jesus had His quiet time, and often we are told He got up early and went off to the hills to pray alone. But prayer for Jesus was not limited to any time or place. He was ready at any time to pray. For Him prayer was just including God in His daily activities.

In Luke 10:21 Jesus, just all of the sudden, stops in the context of a busy day to acknowledge God. It says, "At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure." We think of prayer so often as being limited to some formal setting, and we miss the joy of Jesus in just spontaneously saying, "Thank you Lord," when we feel something positive about life.

Spontaneous prayer is much more meaningful and real than planned prayer. Planned prayer is usually locked into formulas, and we repeat the same requests over and over. This kind of prayer gets dull, and it is seen as a duty rather than a joy. If you want to improve your prayer life, do not assume you have to add more to your formal times of prayer. Instead, add the spontaneous prayer that we see in

the life of Jesus. He had His formal times, and He said grace before He ate, but the informal times are what most of us need to develop to add new life to our prayer life. This kind of prayer is developed by practicing a perpendicular perspective. This means learning to see how heaven relates to earth, or how God is involved in the things we experience all around us.

Our horizontal or humanistic perspective causes us to see only the physical reality, and we miss the reality of the unseen. We miss the things all about us that should lead us to praise God. For example, I read of three men who stood gazing at Niagara Falls. One was a mechanical engineer, and he said, "What a waste of power. I could turn the wheels of industry with all that wasted power." The second man was an artist, and he was positive. He saw great beauty and he longed to reproduce it on canvas. The third man was a man with perpendicular perspective, and he said, "What a great God is ours!" All three could have been Christians with equal commitment to Christ, but the first two were weaker in their prayer skills because they did not see in power and beauty a reason to praise God first of all.

Start practicing your perpendicular perspective. Set a goal of seeing reasons to praise God for seven things in your daily life. If you only get two, that is better than missing them all. This will help you see prayer as more enjoyable, and not just as a duty that you have to do. This kind of prayer is also a form of witnessing. When you see God's hand in life, and you thank Him and praise Him, you display a spirit that is seen by those around you, and this is a witness. Jesus used prayer this way at the tomb of Lazarus. John 11:41-42 reveals Jesus again in a spontaneous prayer: "Then Jesus looked up and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." Here is Jesus using prayer as a tool

for witnessing. Prayer is offered to God, but you limit prayers value if you think it is only for God. Prayer is for people to hear also. Jesus prayed so people could hear Him thanking God, for He wanted His relationship to God to be known so that people could see and believe He was from God.

Public prayer is for men to hear. Public prayer communicates the faith of the one praying to other people who are listening. It can communicate knowledge, wisdom, joy, and a host of other values. Most of us do not have many occasions to witness by prayer, and Jesus is not revealed to be doing this often either, but we need to be aware of the potential of prayer to touch men. When I see people praying in a restaurant before they eat I experience their witness of faith. Verse 45 shows that the prayer of Jesus was answered. It says, "Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in Him." Back up your prayer with a life that impresses people with your faith, and you have the potential of winning them to Christ.

In Jesus we see also that prayer is a tool of self-persuasion. Counseling is 90% listening to other people. People talk about their problems and trials and in so doing they get them out of their sub-conscious into their consciousness, and they deal with them. The counselor may say little, but they go away helped, for they come to some decision about how to deal with what is disturbing them. Prayer is counseling with God. All He may do is listen, but as we pour out our needs, frustrations, and desires, we come to see the way we need to respond and deal with them. Jesus did this in Gethsemane. In Matt. 26:39 we read, "Going a little further, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, my Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will but as you will."

Jesus wrestled with God in prayer, and we do not hear God saying

a word, but Jesus came to His own conclusion as He prayed: "I will surrender to your will Father whatever it is. If the cross is the only way, then so be it, thy will be done." Jesus had counseled with God in prayer and came away committed to the cross. Prayer is not just asking God for something, or praising Him for something already received. It is a decision making process where we talk out the options and come to some conclusion to which we make a commitment. Jesus was single and so He could not talk it over with a mate. But He needed a second opinion, as we all do in times of stress, when the decision is of enormous consequences. We all need to talk things through with someone, and this is a good and valid purpose in prayer, as we talk things over with God. The Psalms are loaded with prayer counseling, where there is honest sharing of emotions that help one come to some wise conclusion.

Jesus needed prayer as a counseling tool, and we all need to learn to use prayer in this way. All our fears, emotions, doubts and hang-ups can be worked out if we expose our total being to God, and face the reality of our problems squarely as Jesus did. The failure of Christians to be honest with God in prayer is the reason you have thousands of Christian Psychiatrists working every day to help Christians cope with all of their hidden sins and neurotic feelings. Jesus did not need a counselor because He knew how to be honest in prayer. Until we learn this we will need the aid of man, it is not all bad, but it is a sign of inadequate prayer skills, which can be learned.

Prayer for Jesus was also a tool for practicing what He taught. Jesus said in the Sermon On The Mount that we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. He did this on the cross when He prayed, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." In prayer we can do many things that are hard to do, for in prayer we can be open and honest with God. You cannot be very Christ-like if you go up to someone you do not like, and who has been

treating you like dirt, and say, "I know you are just a blundering idiot stumbling through your pathetic life, but I want you to know I forgive you." It is better if you deal with this issue in prayer. Struggle before God to forgive them, and then just treat them as forgiven. There are just too many ways to make a good thing go bad if you deal with people. But if you deal with God in prayer you can get it all worked out in your mind and not spoil a good thing.

Many of the Psalms are prayers we say to God to get anger and hostility off our chest so we don't blurt them out to people and start a war when the goal is to achieve peace. If you are offended by some of the harsh language of the Psalms, remember that they represent the dark inner emotions being released before God in prayer so that they are not released before men in damaging ways. Jesus had to deal with His emotions and find release, and He did so in prayer. The only group of sinners He verbally lashed out at with severe language was the Scribes and Pharisees. It was because they were so evil with their legalism, and they cared more about rules than about people. The only people Jesus ever hurt were people who were hurting other people. It is legitimate to cry out against injustice and oppression. But much of the anger of life is due to personal conflict, and things that may hurt us, but which are not a problem for the world. These need to be dealt with in prayer so that they do not become problems blown all out of proportion.

Because Christians did not do what Jesus did in prayer on the cross, and because they did not get rid of their desire for revenge against the Jews who killed Him, they started persecuting the Jews in the Middle Ages for being Christ-killers. They wrote one of the most disgraceful chapters in Christian history. Christians killed and enslaved thousands of Jews for a sin that Jesus forgave on the cross. This is why there is a day of judgment for Christians, for Jesus cannot let such rebellion go unjudged, for that would be a violation of His own

law of love. Christians make their biggest mistakes by not using prayer as a tool of emotional release. Instead, they take matters into their own hands, and they proceed to do what is clearly not the will of God.

Could Jesus have been perfect without prayer? I doubt it. I think we think it was easy to be the Son of God living in the world in the flesh, and being able to avoid all of the folly of human nature. But I think that this thinking is wrong. If it was a snap, why was Jesus always praying, and why does the Bible tell us that Jesus really understands our battles and our weaknesses? It is because He has been there, and He knows the pressure and the danger of yielding to it. Heb. 4:15 says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who is tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin."

He knows because He fought the same battles we fight. He won all of them, and that is the difference, and prayer was one of His key weapons for victory. That is why the next verse says, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." In other words, let us do what Jesus did. He prayed to God and by means of prayer he was able to remain sinless in a sinful world. We may not be able to be sinless, but we can follow His example and find the grace we need to be victorious over the enemy. Without prayer we give the enemy and advantage over us. Every time we fail to be like Christ it is because of our failure to use prayer as the tool it was meant to be. We go off on our own without checking in with our Counselor, and the result is that we blow it.

Jesus of all people did not need to pray, we would think, for He was perfect. But we fail to see that the reason He was perfect was because He prayed without ceasing. He took everything to God and

was able to face all of life with the right attitude. We also need to use prayer, as He did, as a tool for release and for guidance. Pray without ceasing, and do not limit your prayer to when you rise, or when you go to bed. We need to learn spontaneously as we go about our daily life. We need to be aware of our needs and take them to God at those moments of awareness. Thank God at those moments of awareness when you think of things to be thankful for. Don't let your mind be idol, but praise God frequently as you go through your daily routine.

I have read the experts in this area of prayer, and they tell of how difficult it is learn. It is a wonderful habit to develop, but it is far from easy to pray without ceasing, and to be ready at any point to spontaneously praise God or intercede for others. It is a life changing habit, but it will never happen unless you discipline yourself and make a commitment to consciously develop the ability to escape the domination of your mind by the things of time. To be able to escape into eternity and pray at any time is a powerful weapon in the spiritual life. But it will not happen without practice anymore than playing an instrument will come without practice. You can only spontaneously go to a piano and play music if you have first of all disciplined yourself to practice. So it is with spontaneous prayer. You will have to work at it to develop the ability to pray without ceasing, and be ready at any moment to go to the Lord in prayer. May God help us to be motivated to develop this marvelous skill of spontaneous prayer.

8. PATRIOTIC IN PRAYER Based on I Tim. 2:1-8

Paul was a man of authority who respected the authority of others. In Acts 23 it is recorded that he was struck on the mouth, and he began to rebuke the one who did it. Those who were near by asked,

"Would you revile God's high priest?" Paul answered, "I did not know brethren that he was the high priest; for it is written, you shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people." Paul was patriotic, and we do not find him anywhere trying to stir up opposition to those in authority. He loved his own people and their government. He was a leader in it as a Pharisee, and he also had a high respect for the Roman government. It's laws of protection for its citizens saved him on several occasions.

In his letters he encourages believers to be the best possible citizens, and to obey their rulers. We want to examine his advice to Timothy along this line and see if can gain a new vision of how we can be more patriotic, and have it be a spiritual exercise. Patriotism is not good in itself, for one might be devoted to a very evil government and be a party to its evil by being so devoted. Christian patriotism, as brought out in this passage, is always good, even if one is a Christian under an evil government. It consists in a devotion to that government's highest well being by praying for its leaders. It is being patriotic in prayer that has been characteristic of the church in its relationship to the state.

In verse 1 Paul says that one of the first duties of believers is to pray for all men. When our daughter was very young she began to pray in her own words, and one of her most common prayers was, "Make everybody grow up and be good." This seems a little too comprehensive to be meaningful, and yet the attitude behind it is basic, for that is what Paul is saying in this passage. Prayer is to be comprehensive and all-inclusive. There is the concept of universality that runs all through this passage. We have words like all men, all in authority, and ransom for all. Prayer is to be universal and for all men.

Paul breaks prayer down into 4different categories. First you

have supplications, which refers to a request for God's aid in fulfilling a specific need, which is keenly felt. Then you have prayers, which is more general, and is a requesting for those needs, which are always present, such as the need for wisdom and guidance. If I desperately need to know what to do in a specific situation, it is supplication. If I simply ask God to guide me in His will, it is prayer. The urgency of the need seems to be the main distinction. Then you have intercessions. This is a pleading for others, and it seems to imply that you are fulfilling a role, which they cannot do for themselves. Finally you have thanksgiving, which is an expression of gratitude for blessings already received. Paul feels this is a vital part of the prayer life, and we need to make sure we do not forget it by including it in all of our prayers.

Paul says that all these kinds of prayer are to be offered for all men. It is obvious that we cannot be praying for everybody. We would need the infinite mind of God for this. We cannot take this literally, and yet we dare not dismiss the universality of Paul's intention. He did not expect Timothy and the Christians he shepherded to pray for all those living on the earth, but he certainly meant that all people are included as objects of prayer, and objects of God's love and concern. It is a paradox, but I take it both literally and not literally at the same time. If you take it literally to mean all people then that includes the dead, and so this has been a proof text for prayers for the dead. It is obvious to the unbiased reader that Paul had no such thing in mind. So I do not take Paul's language as that inclusive, but I do take it to include all living people.

All people are to be prayed for, and none are to be excluded. Even evil men are to be prayed for. Many evil men become godly men because people have prayed for them. The leaders who oppose all that is Christian are to be prayed for. They may repent and become Christians, but even if they do not they can make decisions that effect

everyone, and they can make those that are of benefit to everyone. We need to remember that the man on the throne when Paul wrote this was none other than Nero, who was the most anti-Christian leader we can imagine. But Paul is urging Christians to pray for him, and Paul prayed for this man who would soon order the taking of his own life.

The value of this is to see how we must broaden our vision, and how our obligation as Christians goes beyond our own family, church, denomination and nation. We are to be universal in our concern. The cross breaks down all barriers of rank and race. We need never ask, should I pray for such and such a person, for even if they be an enemy of God they fall within the believers prayer life.

In verse 2 Paul gets more specific and connects prayer with the state. Separation of church and state does not mean the church has no concern for the state, or no influence on the state. The church has been the basic stabilizing factor in the state in many instances. This has been the case in America. Presidents all through our history have asked for the prayers of the people in order to have the guidance of God.

Back in 311 A. D. the Emperor Galerius asked for the prayers of Christians. The power of prayer in the history of politics has been amazing. In Ezra 6:10 Darius appeals to the Jews to offer sacrifice and to pray for him and his sons. Here was a pagan ruler requesting the prayers of God's people, and this is good in the sight of God to do so. God not only hears the prayers of unbelievers, but He also hears and answers the prayers of believers for unbelievers. On one occasion the Jews were even asked to pray for their pagan rulers in captivity. In Jer. 29:7 we read, "Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

If all goes well with those who rule, then people will be free to pursue the things of God and develop resources for spreading the Gospel. America would not be what it is today as the center of Christian forces going out into all the world if our government had been opposed to Christianity. I do not doubt for a minute that the prayers of millions of God's people have been a primary cause for our nation being what it is. On the other hand, failure on the part of Christians to pray for all rulers may well be why America is becoming paganized. Only eternity will reveal to what extent neglect of being patriotic in prayer has been the cause of the decay of our nation. Being patriotic in prayer is a unique role that Christians play in politics.

The early church took Paul seriously. They made prayers for their leaders and pagan governments a major aspect of church life. Here is the prayer of Clement of Rome for the Emperor of Rome. This is found in his first letter to the church of Corinth, which was written in about 90 A. D. when the horrors of persecution were fresh in the mind of everyone.

"Thou, Lord and Master, hast given our rulers and governors the power of sovereignty through Thine excellent and unspeakable might, that we, knowing the glory and honor which thou hast given them, may submit ourselves unto them, in nothing resisting Thy will. Grant unto them, therefore, O Lord, health, peace, concord, stability, that they may administer the government which Thou hast given them without failure.... Do Thou, Lord, direct their counsel according to that which is good and well-pleasing in Thy sight, that, administering the power which Thou hast given them in peace and gentleness with godliness, they may obtain Thy favor. O Thou, who alone are able to do these things, and things far more exceeding good than these for us. We praise Thee

through the High Priest and Guardian of our souls, Jesus Christ, through whom be the glory and majesty unto Thee both now and for all generations, for ever and ever. Amen!"

Here is patriotism in prayer in the first century, and the church continued this attitude, for it combines loyalty to one's government and God. God is supreme, but in no way does that make one less loyal to his government. Instead, it gives him a greater concern for his government to be the best. Theophilus of Antioch wrote, "The honor that I give the Emperor is all the greater, because I will not worship him, but I will pray for him. I will worship no one but the true and real God, for I know that the Emperor was appointed by Him. Those give real honor to the Emperor who are well-disposed to him, who obey him, and who pray for him."

Justin Martyr in his Apology wrote, "We worship God alone, but in all other things we gladly serve you, acknowledging kings and rulers of men, and praying that they may be found to have pure reason with kingly power." Tertullian wrote, "The Christian is the enemy of no man, least of all the Emperor, for we know that, since he has been appointed by God, it is necessary that we should love him, and reverence him, and honor him, and desire his safety, together with that of the whole Roman Empire." These are the attitudes of men who were persecuted by those very leaders they prayed for. These quotes from the early church fathers reveal that Christians took Paul seriously and practiced his advice. They prayed for all in authority even though those in authority often despised them, and sometimes sought to destroy them.

Their motive was just what Paul refers to here, for they wanted peace so that they might live a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness. The church is not to stir up trouble, but to seek to maintain peace so that it is free to witness to the saving power of Christ. Christians are to

be the best citizens possible, and this calls for loyalty to the government as long as it is not directly opposing what is the clear will of God for His people.

In verse 3 Paul says this is good and acceptable in the sight of God. He desires all of His people to be patriotic in prayer. They can survive and thrive under any government if there is freedom from restraint. Calvin is very strong in his words on this passage, for he says, "When we despise those whom God would have honored, it is as much as if we should despise Him." We may not always know who we ought to vote for, but we always know who we are to pray for. Paul makes it clear that we are to pray for all in authority. This means that Democrats who are Christians are to be praying for Republican leaders, and Republicans who are Christians are to be praying for Democrat leaders. Christians are to be praying for all, even their political enemies. This could make a major difference in the degree of peace we have in our nation, and that is the point of Paul in being patriotic in prayer.

This is not to say that there is to be no criticism of leaders. To say my country right or wrong is like saying my water pure or putrid. The critic may be more of a patriot than the silent citizen who does not protest what is folly. If we truly love our country we will be always seeking ways to improve it and make it better, and this will mean that criticism of what is lacking is valid. God has worked through many unbelievers to bring forth good for the whole nation, and that is why we keep on praying even for those who we disagree with in many ways. The worst leaders may still make decisions that are for the good of the people as a whole.

Paul is saying that no Christian can stay out of politics. If you are obligated to pray for politicians then you are involved on the highest level. The only way to stay out of politics is to stay out of the will of

God on this issue of prayer for your leaders. It is a patriotic duty to pray, and it is a Christian duty to pray. This is more important than voting. In Paul's day nobody got a vote. They lived under a dictator, but it was still their duty to pray for him. It is one of the ways the Christians in any nation can help bring about change that is a blessing to the people. History is filled with examples of how customs that were harmful to the people were changed by the influence of the minority of Christians who prayed for change. Since both godly and ungodly leaders are involved in making change possible it is a perpetual duty of Christians to be praying for all leaders and thereby be patriotic in prayer.

9. ASKING GOD based on James 1:5-8

Two brothers came to the U.S. from Europe in 1845 to make their fortune. The older brother had a trade for he knew how to make sauerkraut, and so he took a wagon train west to California to raise cabbages. The younger brother went to school to study metallurgy. Several years passed, and the younger brother went to visit his older brother. As the older brother was showing him around the cabbage fields he noticed he was not paying any attention to what he was explaining, and he protested, "You really don't care about my work do you?" The younger brother picked up a stone and said, "Do you know what this is? It is quartz, and that yellow spot is gold. You have been raising cabbages on a gold field." It turned out to be one of the greatest gold strikes ever in Eldorado County.

Raising cabbages on a gold field is what every person does when they fail to fulfill the potential of what they possess. In the realm of prayer almost every child of God is raising cabbages on a gold field. We are playing marbles with pearls and do not begin to fulfill the potential of prayer. It has always been so, and James in 4:2 says, "You

do not have, because you do not ask." Only that angel who is the accountant of heaven could ever know how many blessings God's people never receive because they never ask. Someone told the story of a man who was being shown the glories of heaven, and his angelic guide showed him a vast storage area of beautiful gifts God wanted to give His children on earth, but they never asked. The story is fiction, but the truth of it is fact.

In the next verse James says to the Christians, "When you do ask you don't receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions." To ask for a wrong motive is just as fruitless as not asking at all. A 7 year old boy was told by his mother that he could not go to the Sunday School picnic because of his disobedience. By the next morning she had softened, as mother usually do, and she told him he could go after all. He took the news so quietly that she asked him, "What's the matter, don't you want to go?" He sighed and said, "Its too late now Mom. I've already prayed for rain." He saw prayer as a way to get even with others. Prayer was a means by which we get God to do our will.

If only children had this immature concept of prayer, it would not be so bad, but the fact is, many Christian adults are also immature amateurs when it comes to prayer. We all miss its potential, and spend our lives raising cabbages on this gold field of spiritual riches. Prayer is the most universal aspect of man's religious nature. Man is such a praying creature that even an atheist has a hard time to keep from praying in certain situations. Like the girl in Russian who was taking a test to qualify for a job in the Soviet government. One of the questions was, What is the inscription of the Sarmian Wall? She answered, "Religion is the opiate of the people." She was not sure, however, and so obsessed with a desire to know that she went the 7 miles out of the way to check. When she saw the exact words she had given, she was so relieved that she sighed, "Thank God." It is sometimes hard for

unbelievers to escape all prayer.

Charles Steinmetz, the great scientist, was asked what field for future research holds the greatest promise, and he replied instantly, "Prayer, find out about prayer." That is what we intend to do, because James very quickly in his letter gets to this subject of prayer. He knows you cannot get far in any direction spiritually without prayer. She knew that the Apostles of his divine brother and Lord never asked Him to teach them to preach or teach, but did ask, "Lord, teach is to pray." James was such a man of prayer that he was known as camel knees, because he spent so much time on them in prayer. He will help us see how important and practical prayer is for effective Christian living. The first thing he makes clear is,

I. THE REASON FOR PRAYER v. 5

The reason we pray is because we have a need. James says that if you feel you lack wisdom, ask God. Prayer is first of all a confession of our own inadequacy.

**Say, what is prayer, when it is prayer indeed?
The mighty utterance of a mighty need.
The man is praying who doth press with might
Out of his darkness into God's own light.**

Saying prayers and praying are not the same thing. Many times we say prayers because it is the appropriate thing to do, but to really pray is to feel a need that only God can satisfy.

If you are facing trials and lack the wisdom to see how they can make you a better Christian, you know you have a need. You can petition God and ask in all sincerity, "Lord, give me wisdom. I don't see any good. I cannot find any value in what I have to endure. Give

me the wisdom to see it." The greater we feel the need, the greater the fervency of our prayer. Those who feel no need do not pray with any sense of urgency. Need is the basis for earnest prayer, for recognition of need is the reason we pray at all. We just do not ask for what we do not need, or for what we do not recognize as a need.

What we are saying is that there are different degrees of earnestness in praying. The degree varies with the sense of need. This was true even in the experience of our Lord. Certainly Jesus never prayed a superficial prayer, but He did pray with varying degrees of need, even as we do. In His hour of greatest need in the Garden of Gethsemane, Luke tells us in Luke 22:44 that when he went to pray the second time, "...being in agony he prayed more earnestly, and His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground." Never on this planet was a need ever felt more deeply, and never was prayer ever offered in greater earnest. Jesus establishes this truth by His life and teaching: The greater the reality of one's need, the greater the reality of prayer.

In His parable on the Prodigal Son He pictures the Prodigal feeding the pigs, and coming to a full awareness of his need. "How many hired servants of my father have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father." When he felt his need deeply enough, he went to the source where his need could be met. When he felt self-sufficient he left his father, but need brought him back, and need is what brings men back to God.

Lincoln faced the burden of a great nation being torn apart at the seams, and he felt an intensity of need as few men ever have, and he wrote, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day." Here is intense and earnest prayer based on need felt so deeply that

only God could meet it.

We are all in a civil war, but because we do not feel it deeply, we do not pray earnestly about it. It is the war within ourselves to live for the flesh, and the things of the world, or to live for the spirit, and the things of Christ. He came to seek and to save the lost, but because we do not feel deeply that the lost are really lost, we do not have intense prayer for their salvation, and we do not witness to them earnestly.

Consciously or unconsciously we feel that there is always time, or that there will be a second chance, and there is nothing to worry about. By this subtle trick Satan takes most of the army of the Lord out of the battle, and slows down the conquering march of the kingdom to a crawl. Until we really feel strongly the need of getting lost people saved, we will not pray seriously for that to happen, nor will we pray for the wisdom to know how to communicate the Gospel to them.

Prayer is the link between supply and demand. Need reaches out for resources to satisfy it. This has very practical consequences in our prayer life. It means that our real prayer life is in our desires.

"Prayer is the soul's sincere desire." I might say a prayer which goes, "Lord give me a deeper understanding of your Word," but if my real desire is to get more money, and my greatest need I feel is the lack of cash, then all day long by my life I am praying, "Lord give me more money." Your real prayer is for what you really feel you have a need. You can ask for wisdom in 10 prayers a day, but if you do not feel any need for it, you will not receive it, for God knows that is not your real prayer. We can learn to ask for all kinds of things that sound good, but if they do not meet a need, it is not truly prayer.

The reason behind all true prayer is a sense of need. If any lack wisdom let him ask of God says James. He knows all do lack it, but if Christians do not feel this lack, and sense a need for it, there is no point in asking. Only what you really need is what you really ask for, for

need is the reason you pray. After giving us the reason for prayer James next reveals-

II. THE REQUIREMENT OF PRAYER. v. 6

Recognizing a need is essential, but in itself it is not enough to get the need met by prayer. James says you must ask in faith with no doubting. God requires faith before he meets a need. If you do not believe God can give you the wisdom you lack to enable you to rejoice in life's trials, then you just as well save your breath. God gets personally involved in the laws of prayer, and they are not like natural laws. A man can cast seed into the ground, and whether he believes they can grow or not they will come forth and bear fruit. Prayer is not so impersonal. In prayer you are dealing with nature's Lord, and you cannot just send request to heaven and expect them to be answered regardless of your personal faith. "He that comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarded of them that diligently seek Him." If you lack such assurance, God will not grant your request.

James is a practical man, and he is not interested in prayer that doesn't work, and so in this first reference to prayer, and in his last one in 5:15 he makes it clear that faith is the requirement for effective prayer. In that final reference he says it is the prayer of faith that will save the sick. Prayer without faith is not practical because it just doesn't work. The motto says, "Prayer changes things." But to be fully accurate it should say that the prayer of faith changes things. Without this requirement being meet prayer changes nothing. James is only echoing his Lord and brother, for Jesus said in Matt. 21:22, "And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith." Remove the requirement of faith, and prayer holds no promise.

Faith involves confidence in your need being legitimate. In other words, if you sense a need, you must believe that God can and will

satisfy that need before it does any good to pray. To pray without such confidence is to fail to meet God's requirement, and such praying will be ineffective. You might just as well go out and try to sell a product that you have no confidence in as to try and get God to meet your need without faith. If you said to a prospective customer, "I would like to sell you this vacuum cleaner, but I not sure it works better than others. I'm not even sure it works, because I didn't want to try it at home since we just got new carpet. A lot of people say its not a bad little machine. Would you want one?" Your answer is clearly going to be no! Without faith in your product you will not please man, and without faith in your prayer you will not please God.

God is more discerning than any man, but even men will not give a positive response to a faithless request. God will not reward the negative. A perfect, or mature faith is a faith that says that my need is legitimate, and that my God is adequate, and He will supply what my need demands. The doubter, on the other hand, is tossed about like a wave in the wind. He is not certain what he needs, and shifts his conviction back and forth every day. He is not convinced God would meet his need even if he was certain, and so he fails to meet God's requirement for prayer. The result leads to our third point.

III. THE REJECTION OF PRAYER. v. 7-8

If you read a hundred books on prayer, probably 90 of them will each that prayer is always answered. It is fantastic the lengths to which Christians will go to try and prove what is clearly contrary to the plain teaching of the Word of God. James tells it like it is. He says that if we pray, not in faith, but with doubt and double-mindedness, we will not receive anything of the Lord. Some will try and get around this by saying God always answers prayer, but sometimes the answer is no. It is a clever face-saving trick to prevent the Christian from blaming himself for his faithlessness. He can throw the responsibility

back on God and say, "Well God said no that time."

The fact is, God does say no sometimes. He did to Paul's request to be healed of his thorn in the flesh, but what is dishonest is to put all unanswered prayer in this category, and fail to see that believers are often themselves responsible for the lack of an answer. There is such a thing as prayer that is rejected. God refuses to listen and respond to it at all. He does not say no, for He ignores it because it is unworthy. For example, if a believe has sinned in his life, but still wants God's blessing, he is double minded. He wants to serve 2 masters, and Scripture says his prayer will not even be heard. This was true in the Old Testament, and it is true in the New Testament, and it is true today. In Isa. 59:1-2 we read, "Behold the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, or His ear dull that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you so that He does not hear." The prophet is not telling them that God is saying no to their prayer. He is telling them that God is not even listening. Their prayer is not being answered at all.

David understood this, and in Ps. 66:18-20 he wrote, "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me!" David knew that God did reject prayer, and there are many reasons all of which revolve around man's double-mindedness. If you do not practice the golden rule, you will have many prayers rejected. If you do not forgive others your prayer for forgiveness will not be heard. If you do not meet others needs when you are able, your needs will not be met when you cry out to God. Peter even says that not living together properly as husband and wife can lead to prayers being unanswered.

Those who try and escape this clear teaching of James, and other Scriptures, will fail to realize their own responsibility, and, therefore, never correct their lives and press on to perfection. They will remain immature Christians. A. W. Tozer, that great prophet of the Christian And Missionary Alliance denomination, hit hard at the evils of teaching that God always answers prayer. In one of his editorials he wrote, "The God-always-answers-prayer sophistry leaves the praying man without discipline. By the exercise of this bit of smooth casuistry he ignores the necessity to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world, and actually takes God's flat refusal to answer his prayer as the very answer itself. Of course such a man will not grow in holiness; he will never learn how to wrestle and wait; he will never know correction; he will not hear the voice of God calling him forward; he will never arrive at the place where he is morally and spiritually fit to have his prayers answered. His wrong philosophy has ruined him."

James is too practical and realistic to let Christians think prayers are always answered. If we listen to James we will see that effective prayer with our lives. We must shape up and follow Christ, for it is out of obedience that faith and confidence grow, and this is the requirement for answered prayer. Effective praying is simply the result of effective Christian living. A good prayer life is the practical result of a life of commitment to Christ. Our greatest need is to live in obedience, and we know God will hear our prayer for wisdom to do so. The answer to this prayer is the key to answers to all other legitimate prayers. It all begins by asking God.

10. CHRISTIAN CONFESSION Based on I John 1:8-9

The one thing all people have in common is guilt. Ever since Adam and Eve hid from God, because they were afraid, out of a sense of guilt,

man has had to bear the burden, and suffer the effects of guilt, and these effects are enormous. Modern psychiatry is discovering that guilt is enemy number one of good mental health. It is the destructive force behind dozens of different kinds of mental illness. It is the basic cause for the anxiety and fear that makes millions live in dread and depression. It is the cause for the ineffectiveness of many Christian lives. It disarms the believer of the whole armor of God. It cuts at the root of the tree of life. It poisons the springs of living water, and it sends a corrupting worm into the fruit of the Spirit.

Everyone who has done something he does not want known has guilt. This of course means that just as all are sinners, so all are guilty. The more we learn about the guilt of man, the more we realize it is a major factor in all of human life. One doctor treating one hundred cases of arthritis and colitis found that a hidden sense of guilt played a role in 68% of these patients. Flanders Dunbar in the book *Psychiatry In The Medical Specialties* reports that, "It has been found that at least 65% of patients are suffering from illness syndromes initiated or seriously complicated by psychological factors." Conclusions like this are being reached in one study after another, and the result is that men are beginning to see that man's ultimate problem is sin. It is sin and its effects that are the greatest plague in the world. And guilt is sins major effect.

Rowe expresses the minds of millions when he writes, "Guilt is the source of sorrow! 'Tis the fiend, the avenging fiend, that follows us behind, with whips and stings." There is no escape from the facts. Modern psychiatry has confirmed what the Bible says: "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." All are caught in the web of guilt. But thank God the facts do not stop there. John knew almost 2000 years ago that this was man's major problem, but he did not just analyze it and diagnose it, but he gave a prescription authorized by the Great Physician Himself. John had to have an answer for the problem

of guilt in order to ever bring his readers to his established goal of fullness of joy, and fellowship with the God of light. Guilt is just the opposite of this, and no amount of truth could ever lead to that goal that did not first show a man how to be relieved of guilt. That is why John begins with the matter of sin and forgiveness, for all Christian maturity begins with clear understanding of this basic issue. John shows us three basic steps from guilt to God.

I. CONSCIOUSNESS OF SIN-V 8.

John says that if we try and live on the hypocritical level of non-admission to guilt and sin, then we are self-deceived. The truth is not in us, and in such a state we cannot be forgiven. Such a person, and they are not rare, suppresses his guilt and tries to give the impression that there is nothing wrong in their lives. Meanwhile, though they have succeeded in hiding their guilt from their consciousness, it is invading their whole being like a poison, and will reveal itself in either a psychological or physical problem, or both.

Many unbelievers do not respond to Christ just because they refuse to admit they are guilty. They are hiding their guilt, and they are saying we do not need a Savior, for we are not so bad. The natural man is fighting for survival, and does not let himself be conscious that he is a mass of guilt in need of cleansing, for to do so he knows must lead to repentance and death for the old man. The same is true for the Christian who lets the old man revive and live again in his body. He hides his guilt because to admit it is so painful, and his old man does not want to die. This is why guilt so often leads to mental illness. It is an escape. It allows the sinner to say he is sick rather than guilty. This sounds foolish, but this is just how hard man struggles against admitting he is a guilty sinner.

This may sound like a harsh and cruel judgment on mental patients,

but the facts being discovered by competent men are reversing the idea that there is nothing to be ashamed of in mental illness. It could well be that such illness is, as Dr. David Bellgum calls it, "An involuntary confession of guilt." Unconfessed and unforgiven sin acts like a cancer of the soul. It effects the total person in body, soul, and spirit. O. Hobart Mowrer in his book *The Crisis In Psychiatry And Religion* comes right out and says that neurotics and psychotics are not sick so much as they are sinners caught and condemned by their own conscience. Dr. Bellgum says this applies also to many with physical problems, for he says physical "symptoms are often the amplified voice of conscience." In other words, you might suppress it, but one way or another guilt is going to show itself.

The saying was never more true than when applied to this area of life, that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Let us not jump to the conclusion that all mental problems reveal suppress guilt. There are many other causes; some uncontrollable which result in brain damage, and for which the person is not responsible. There are many exceptions to what we have stated, but there are many cases in which it is true, and it shows that the church has the only answer to man's greatest problem-sin. People do not need to be psychoanalyzed, they need to be saved. They need to stop lying to themselves and admit they are guilty sinners, for it is only then that they will be conscious of their need for forgiveness. This is the first step on the road to recovery.

To make it clear that we are not only dealing here with non-believers, let us consider some actual examples of Christians who fell into the category of those who refuse to admit guilt. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, and said it was for this very thing that many of them were weak and sickly, and some had even died. In I Cor. 11 he explains that the reason was, they had been guilty of unworthy participation in the Lord's Supper. They were observing this remembrance of His death for sin, but were refusing to do so with a

consciousness of their sin. In lightness and carelessness, and with no sense of guilt for their heathenish attitude, they remembered the sacred event of Christ's death. The result was hardness of heart. They sought no forgiveness, for they were not conscious of sin, and the result was all kinds of symptoms in body and mind, and in some cases leading even to death. These early Christians were experiencing the consequences of repressed guilt and unconfessed sin.

All of the facts support the statement that holiness is the best way to health, just as sin is the surest way to sickness. Even the pagan philosopher Seneca observed that guilt always punishes even if the law does not. He said, "Let wickedness escape as it may at the bar, it never fails of doing justice upon itself, for every guilty person is his own hangman." Plautus said, "Nothing is more wretched than the mind of a man conscious of guilt." It is true and it is painful, yet, as John says, and as science supports, to be conscious of guilt and to admit your sin is the only way you can be ready to take the next step to the wholeness for which all men seek. Admit your guilt and then take the next step.

II. CONFESSION OF SIN. V.9.

This verse is tree with so many branches, on each of which hangs so much fruit, that we cannot begin to taste all of its riches in one message. James Edwin Orr said, "Clear teaching concerning the confessing of sins by Christians is one of the most neglected doctrines of today." Here is a concept given by inspiration of God to aid people against the most destructive force in the world, and yet it is ignored as if it were incidental. The result is, all things have not become as new as they ought in the lives of believers, because they have not availed themselves of God's provision. Christians have needlessly borne mountains of guilt when they might have had it dissolved and cleansed through the blood of Christ. Continuous and consistent confession of

sin is a must for a Christian who truly desires to attain the fullness of the stature of Christ. If your aim is any lower than that, that too is a sin needing to be confessed and forgiven.

Many are uninhibited when it comes to the confession of the sins of others, but John is writing to Christian people who need to confess their own sins. Confession is no part of the life of the unbeliever. No doubt many deceive themselves into thinking they can gain God's forgiveness, but John clearly states that only those who walk in the light have fellowship with God, and only they are cleansed by the blood of Christ. Confession is of no value unless one is a believer walking in the light. Sin is a blockade as long as we walk in darkness, but if we walk in the light and confess our sin it becomes a bridge back into fellowship with God, for he loves the sinner and waits in hope that they will confess and come back to Him.

The story is told of how Satan approached God with the complaint that He forgives His children over and over again, but He never forgave him, and God replies to him, "You never asked." This illustrates the truth that confession is an essential condition of forgiveness, but it does not go far enough, for even if Satan did ask, it would be to no avail unless he cease to be the prince of darkness, and began to walk in the light.

It is important to see this truth, for those who do not see the whole picture abuse this promise and stretch it beyond what it was meant to cover. To think that one can confess, and yet have no sense of guilt about continuing in the same pattern of life is to be deceived. It is of interest to note that some Catholics are perfectly aware of this danger in their own practice of compulsory confession. In a questionnaire sent out to priests asking what kinds of persons failed to gain anything from the confession, one answered in a way that made clear he was aware of all the things that Protestants criticize about the confessional. Here is

what he wrote:

"The insincere-those who really are not in earnest about breaking a habit of sin. The uneducated who consider the powers of the confessional as magical. A 'bad confession.' They are either so attached to the pleasure or advantages deriving from the sin that they do not really intend to stop the sin or the habit, or they are presumptuous of God's help, thinking God will change them without their effort or cooperation."

Not only will the Catholic confessional not be effective for those people, but neither will the personal and secret confession to God alone. No confession will cleanse the sinner who refuses to walk in the light. Confession implies a change in walk, and not merely a change in talk.

A basic maxim to be followed in confession is this: "Let the circle of the offense committed be the circle of the confession made." That is, if the sin is secret, it is to be confessed secretly to God alone. If the sin is private, that is, against a particular person, you are to confess to that person as well as God. That is called private confession as distinct from public confession. Public confession is to be made when the offense is against the whole church, or a large segment of it. In other words, confession is to always be made to those who have been offended, for they alone can forgive. This is why we do not practice what is called auricular confession by the Catholic church. Auricular means, told in the ear, and refers to telling the priest one's sins. A party not involved in the offense can not be involved in the forgiveness. We feel that no party who is not offended can honestly be a party to the forgiveness. We do not deny that it can be effective in relieving guilt, but we feel there is a better and more Biblical way that exalts Christ rather than man. That is by direct confession to God through

Christ, who is our High Priest, and who daily intercedes for us.

All of this is not to say, however, that God does not use men as instruments of conveying his message of forgiveness. All of the reformers such as Luther and Calvin rejected auricular confession, but still retained what they called private confession to the pastor. They simply recognized that in exceptional cases a child of God gets burdened with guilt, and cannot sense the forgiveness of God. Such a person can gain victory by confessing to a pastor, and by receiving his assurance, as God's ambassador, that He has been truly forgiven. This is more a matter of counseling than confession.

John R.W. Stott, the well known English pastor and author, has written a book on confession. In it he rejects auricular confession, but retains the concept of private confession. He stresses, however, it is exceptional and not to be habitual. The normal pattern for believers is to confess to God alone, or to the persons offended. This would be the position and practice of most, if not all evangelicals. The important thing to see is that the normal Christian life is to be one in which there is a consciousness of sin whenever we have departed from God's will, and an immediate confession of it to Him since He is ever present. These two steps are essential for Christian maturity. The third step that John mentions is-

III. CLEANSING FROM SIN.

This is God's step in the process. There is nothing we can do to cleanse our life once we have stained it. God does not ask us to do this. If we confess, He is faithful and just to forgive. This is the step He promises to take if we take the others, and the result will be fullness of joy and fellowship with the Father and the Son. Cleanliness is not next to godliness, it is godliness, for this is the final goal of Christian confession.

11. SEEKING GOD'S FACE Based on II Chron. 7:11-22

I heard a pastor tell of his experience on a plane. The stewardess was explaining that the parents were to be sure and put on their oxygen mask before they put them on their children. This seemed so selfish, and there was a natural resistance to the idea. It went against the grain of a mother's instinct to keep her child in danger. The stewardess explained that if the parent delays and passes out the child will be helpless to come to their aid, but if the child passes out there is no danger because the parents have protected themselves and will be able to come to the rescue of the child. The point is, there are situations where the most loving thing you can do for another is to take care of yourself first.

If you haven't prepared yourself by learning to swim, you will not be able to rescue someone who is drowning. If you haven't developed self-esteem by learning to love yourself, you will have a hard time loving others as you ought. There are many illustrations of how a self-centered focus is the key to being prepared for meeting other people's needs. The doctor, the lawyer, teacher, pastor, or any other professional person who does not develop their own knowledge and skills are not going to be very helpful to the people they serve. The selfish person is not the person who devotes a great deal of their time and energy to their own preparation. The selfish person is one who does not bother to develop themselves and work toward self-excellence because they don't care about other people enough to be prepared to meet their needs.

It is people who care about others who strive for excellence that they might be an instrument to be used for others. Jesus spent 30

years in preparation before He began His public ministry of serving and teaching. God's requirements for us to be prepared for revival are really quite self-centered. The first and last are clearly focused on the self. Humble yourselves and turn from your sin. We would much prefer to humble somebody else and crusade against their sin, but God demands that we deal with ourselves first. Even when we pray, which seems God-centered, we saw in our last message that a major part of prayer is to struggle with the self to be prepared to receive what God wants to give. Even answered prayer, when you are not ready, can be a problem. Like the 5 year old boy who let out with a whistle while the pastor was praying. His mother was so embarrassed, but the little guy explained later that he had been praying that God would help him to learn to whistle, and that's when God answered his prayer.

F. W. Robertson, the great English preacher, told of the time he was taken with 9 other boys to be disciplined by the master of the school. He prayed to escape the shame of it all, and to his surprise the master excused him, and he was not flogged with the others. He says it was the most harmful answer to prayer he ever had, for it led him to think of prayer as a magic charm. He fancied that he had a secret weapon he could whip out to get him through any jam. It made him proud and not humble. It did not change his behavior, for why sin less when by prayer you can escape the consequences?

This illustrates the really self-centered use of prayer. But this does not mean proper prayer, which is acceptable to God, is not also focused on the self. Robertson came to see the folly of his ways, and he learned to pray for himself to be an instrument prepared to be useful for God's purpose. Prayer is not just asking God for what He can do for us, but it is asking God to help us be prepared to do for Him what He wills. Paul's first prayer to Christ was, "Lord, what will you have me to do?" Prayer has a self focus, and so that leaves only one of the 4 requirements with what seems to be a totally God-focused perspective,

and that is the one we want to examine. The third requirement, and the third big if is, "If my people will seek my face."

The first thing I want to observe about this is that it is also a perpetual preparation. Psa. 105:4 says, "Look to the Lord and His strength, seek His face always." David says in Psa. 27:8-9, "Your face, Lord, I will seek. Do not hide your face from me." The implication is that God's face is not always easy to find, for it is often hidden. Numerous are the texts which described the frustration of God hiding His face so that it cannot be found. Psa. 30:7 says, "O Lord, when you favored me, you made my mountain stand firm, but when you hid your face I was dismayed."

The heart of depression is when God's face is hidden, and the heart of joy is when God's face is shining upon you. God Himself told Moses how to bless the people of Israel by saying this benediction over them, as recorded in Num. 6:24-26: "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace." In a very real sense the goal of the believer's life is to see the face of God. To have His face shine on you is another way of being saved in the Old Testament. Psa. 31:16 says, "Let your face shine on your servant. Save me in your unfailing love." All of God's blessings are summed up in His face shining on you. Psa. 67:1 says, "May God be gracious to us and bless us, and make His face shine upon us." One could answer the question, what is the purpose of life by responding: To seek the face of God.

Man began his conscious existence in the presence of God face to face. God talked with and walked with Adam and Eve. The fall led, not only to Adam and Eve hiding from God, it led to God hiding His face from man. The sense of God's absence is the primary consequence of sin. If man does not find a way to get back into the presence of God to see His face, then man is lost forever. The

everlasting absence of God's face is hell. On the other hand, if man can get back into the presence of God, that is what salvation is, and that is what heaven is. It is the everlasting presence of God. Jesus died on the cross that we might have the right to enter God's presence and see Him face to face.

In the last chapter of the Bible where the blessings of eternity are described, we read in Rev. 22:4, "They will see His face." Man has reached his highest destiny when he is face to face with God.

For God to require us to seek His face for revival makes sense, for seeking His face is the key to everything. It is the key to every gift and blessing of which you can conceive. What this means is that this, one of the 4 requirements that seems so God-focused, is in reality also a very self-focused activity, just like the rest. In fact, being humble, praying, and turning from sin are all directly involved in seeking God's face. Psa. 24 makes it clear that self-preparation is vital to the success of seeking God's face. Verses 2 thru 6 say, "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart; who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God his Savior. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob." Seeking the face of God covers just about everything you can imagine doing to prepare yourself for coming into God's presence.

If I read a book with no thought of how the content of the book relates to God's plan and purpose in life, then I read it for myself alone. If, however, I am conscious of the presence of God, and in the awareness of His presence seek to wrestle with the ideas of the book, and strive to get the mind of God, and know His application of them, then I am seeking the face of God as I read. God consciousness and God awareness is what we are talking about here. We can go for hours

and never even think of God and the relevance of His presence in our lives. That does not mean we are being bad or out of His will. It just means that we are not seeking His face, and by not seeking His face we are not being open to revival, nor any of the other blessings He may be desiring to give us.

Seeking God's face is another way of saying that we are practicing the presence of God. This is not limited to prayer and times of meditation. We are to seek God's face in the marketplace, on the job, and in our going in and coming out, and in all of our social activities. We are to do everything we do in the consciousness of God's presence. This is hard, and it is terribly hard, and that is why it is another big if. This explains why revival is so rare. None of the 4 requirements is easy. Just to fulfill these 4 things takes a life of commitment far greater than most Christians ever reach.

I remember Frank Laubach, who tried to be conscious of God at least once every minute. That was really seeking the face of God. He worked at it hard, but he still failed. I don't know of anyone else who has even tried. Fortunately, God gives us a break here, and He does not demand that any of these 4 requirements be absolute. He does not demand that we be as humble as can be; that we pray as persistently as possible; turn from sin so absolutely as to be perfect, or that we seek His face every minute or second before He will bless us. He just demands that we be a people who are working on our consciousness of His presence.

This is the key to being available to God to accomplish His will. When we go through life conscious only of ourselves and our own will we will miss opportunities to do the will of God. They will stare us in the face and we will not see them, for we are not seeking the face of God. If we were seeking His face, we would see that which God wants us to see. All of these requirements are tied together, for the only way

to get to the place where we will seek God's face is to first of all humble ourselves, pray that God will help us to keep self off the throne, and Christ on the throne.

Luis Palou, the Billy Graham of Latin America, had to be humbled by God before he could be used. But he also had to become aware of the presence of God before he could be used. He tells of his own burning bush experience when Major Ian Thomas was preaching on Moses at the burning bush. He said, "Any old bush will do, as long as God is in the bush." That is what Moses needed to learn. He made excuses to God for why he could not go back to Pharaoh. Moses needed to learn that the power of God to get His will done is not in the beauty of the bush, or the eloquence of the bush, but in God's presence in the bush. God said to Moses, "I will be with you." It is God's presence that is the key. When Palou realized this, he too was available, and God used him mightily. It was not his gifts that God needed, but his awareness of God's presence. When he sought the face of God the blessings of God were poured out through him.

The presence of God is the sunlight that brings forth the flowers and fruitfulness in our lives. The fruits of the Spirit are just that. They are the fruits of the Spirit, and not just the fruits of your labor and effort. You don't produce the fruit. The Spirit does, and He does it when you allow His presence to dominate your consciousness. The Prodigal was a great and foolish sinner, but what he had going for him was his awareness of his father's presence. He longed to be back home restored to that presence. The elder brother was already there, but he did not treasure that presence. He missed what he already had, but the Prodigal gained what he had lost. It all revolved around the value they placed on the father's presence.

The shepherd goes after his sheep, but there is another side we seldom see. The sheep are expected to seek the shepherd. The father

didn't go after the Prodigal. That son had to come home to his father on his own. God asks His people to seek His face, and to pursue His presence. It is our responsibility and obligation. God says that He is not always going to come after you. You have to come home on your own and seek His face. Even when we do, however, we sometimes feel He is hidden, and we cannot find Him. We cry out with Job, "Oh that I might know where I might find Him!" Sometimes it is the sheep looking for the shepherd, and it is the shepherd that seems to be lost. We are often like the fish and the birds in this poem, and we are looking for and longing for that which is ever present.

Oh where is the sea, the fishes cried,
As they swam the crystal clearness through.
We have heard of old of the ocean's tide,
And we long to look on the water's blue.
The wise ones speak of the infinite sea,
Oh who can tell us if such there be?

The lark flew up on the morning bright,
And sang and balanced on sunny wings,
And this was its song: I see the light,
I look on the world of beautiful things,
But flying and searching everywhere
In vain have I sought to find the air.

Can it be that fish feel the absence of water, and birds feel the absence of air? Why not? Man feels the absence of God even though it is in Him that we live and move and have our being. Jesus said, "Low I am with you always." And, "I will never leave you or forsake you." But the fact is, we can go through life and often be more aware of His absence than of His presence. Sometimes we see through a glass darkly, and sometimes we do not see at all. We are like the young man in the Old Testament who could not see the vast host of God all around

him. All he could see was the enemy. So we are often more problem conscious and enemy conscious than we are conscious of the presence of God. An unknown poet wrote,

I gaze aloof at the vaulted roof
Where time and space are warp and woof,
Which the King of kings, like a curtain, flings
O'er the dreadfulness of eternal things;
I should lightly hold this tissued fold
But if I could see, as indeed they be
The glories that encircle me
This marvelous curtain of blue and gold,
For soon the whole, like a parched scroll
Shall before my amazed eyes unroll,
And without a screen, at one burst be seen
The Presence in which I have always been.

We do not have to wear our shoes out looking for a holy place, for where you are, you can take your shoes off, for the place you stand on is holy ground, and from there you can see the face of God. "Earth is crammed with heaven, and every common bush aflame with God." Jacob experienced the presence of God in the wilderness, and Jacob's ladder, with angels ascending and descending, is a symbol of the constant contact of heaven with earth. Where you seek God He can be found, for He is ever present. The problem is not His absence, but our lack of consciousness of His presence.

Back in 1952 a jeweler on 49th street in New York lost a one and a half caret diamond, which he was mounting. It was very expensive and he had to pay the company 60 dollars a week because he was responsible for losing it. About half a year later a telephone repairman found the diamond instead the telephone on his desk. Somehow it had shot from the vice on his bench into the tiny hole

where the cable went into the phone. There it lay for months right in his presence, but hidden. Deity is ever close like that diamond, yet he is often hidden, and we sense his absence more than his presence. We are like the little boy who prayed one Sunday after going to church with his parents: "Dear Lord, we had a good time in church. I wish you could have been there."

Adults are a little more sophisticated in their ignorance. They know God is everywhere, but they still think they have to go somewhere to seek His face. They have to go to the Holy Land and walk where Jesus walked. They have to go to a crusade or a rally of some kind. They are constantly hoping for some high to bring them into the presence of God. They ignore the good news of the New Testament that God has come to dwell, not just with man, but within them so that we are the dwelling place of God. We are the dwelling of deity, the guest house of God, the sanctuary of the Spirit, the tabernacle of the Trinity, and the house of Him whom the world cannot hold. You don't have to go anywhere to seek the face of God. You need only to work at making Him subjectively present by seeking His face within.

The whole idea of revival is to get restored to an awareness of God's presence. When Israel lost the sense of God's presence they began to worship other gods. Whenever a Christian loses the sense of God's presence he will begin to backslide, and other values besides the will of God will begin to dominate his life. The constant call to get into the Word of God is to help prevent the loss of the sense of God's presence. We are urged to pray without ceasing so that we do not lose that sense. The life of faith is a constant struggle to keep aware of the presence of God. Spurgeon said, "This we should pray for continually-the presence of God in the midst of His people." This is seeking God's face. This is prayer that wants more than something God can give-it wants God Himself. It is a longing for the peace and

power of His presence. The solution to every human problem begins with the awareness of God's presence.

It is seeking God's face that enables us to fulfill the last requirement of turning from our sin. The presence of God is the only power that can make sin unappealing. We can feel free to speed, and even enjoy it, but when we see the presence of a patrol car the pleasure fades and the desire to speed vanishes. We long for nothing better than that the car will quickly return to the speed limit. Such is the power of presence. The students can be throwing erasers and paper planes, and doing all sorts of things not proper, but when the teacher enters the room her presence stifles all of these rule-breaking urges. Young people have many temptations to indulge their appetites, but the presence of chaperons helps them keep their drives under control. Alone they fall, but in the presence of others they are able to stand. Adults need it as well. Man a mate would not have taken the steps that led to their sin had they kept their partner present with them. The presence of a mate or a friend will protect you from many a temptation.

If all of these lesser presences can have such a power to protect us from sin and folly, how much more can the presence of God do so? We can't always guarantee the presence of others, but God is ever present, and so if we seek His face we have a built in safety belt that will keep us from being thrown out of the will of God when we are confronted with a head on temptation to do so. In Lloyd Douglas's novel The Robe Justus is explaining to Marcellus that Jesus is alive and ever with us. He says, "It keeps you honest...you have no temptation to cheat anyone, or lie to anyone, or hurt anyone-when Jesus is standing beside you." Marcellus is not a Christian and he says, "I'm afraid I should feel very uncomfortable being perpetually watched by some invisible presence." Justus replies, "Not if that Presence helped you to defend yourself against yourself, Marcellus. It is a great satisfaction to have

someone standing by to keep you at your best."

That is what seeking God's face is all about. It is so living in the presence of God that you can be your best. Practicing the presence of God is the key to excellence in all that we do. Practicing the absence of God is the cause of all our mediocrity and failure in the Christian life. It is the wise who keep God before their eyes, for this consciousness of God's presence will help win more battles than all the sermons you will ever hear, and all the books you will ever read. So many of the negative things we do are hard to practice when you are conscious of God's presence. In the light of His face you feel a reverence and a fear that keeps you at your best.

D. L. Moody said that everything is changed in the presence of God, and that is why it is the key to revival. His prayer was, "May He empty us of self and fill us with His presence." To be in love is to long to be in the presence of the one you love. To be revived is to long for the presence of God. The reason we know we are not in a revival is that we can be perfectly comfortable in the absence of God. We do not miss Him when we lose a consciousness of His presence. Many years ago Walter Rauschenbusch wrote,

**In the castle of my soul
Is a little postern gate,
Whereat, when I enter,
I am in the presence of God.
In a moment, in the turning of a thought
This is a fact.
When I enter into God
All life has meaning,
Without asking I know,
My desires are even now fulfilled.
My fear is gone**

**In the great quiet of God.
My troubles are but pebbles on the road,
My joys are like the everlasting hills.
So it is when my soul steps through the postern gate
Into the presence of God.
Big things become small, and small things become great.**

This is what revival is all about, and this is what the victorious life is all about. May God help us to be more than just impressed with this truth. May His Spirit never let us rest until we include in our lives the conscious practice of seeking God's face.

12. THE PERPETUAL PREPARATION OF PRAYER

Based on II Chron. 7:11-22

Dr. R. G. Lee told of a preacher who use to open his Bible and put his finger down, and whatever it pointed to would be his text for the message. He told this brother that he needed more preparation for his sermons. The proof was the message that he preached on Naaman the leper. He put his finger on that text one day and thought it said Naaman the leaper, and so he took off on the theme and said that when a job needs to be done God does not need a setter or a stander, but he needs a leaper-one who will leap to it. What God needs in our day is a mighty host of leapers, and not crawlers or strollers, but leapers like Naaman. On and on he went lauding the leapers.

Even though the brother had a good point, it had nothing to do with the text, and we must agree that he needed to devote more time in preparation. The other side of the coin is the man who spends so much time in preparation that he gets to bogged down to do what he is preparing for. Like the boy who got so far back to get a running jump over the stream that by the time he got to the stream he was too tired

to jump. Someone wrote,

**I completed my preparation
But, alas, I found with chagrin
I had worked so hard getting ready
That I was too tired to begin.**

The beauty of God's plan of preparation for a revival is that the preparation is itself a part of the revival. You can't overdue it and get too humble or too prayerful. There is no way to over prepare for a revival, for these preparations are to be perpetual. This becomes a process by which we are continually revived. Yesterday's humility will not keep me revived if I am proud today. Yesterday's prayer will not make me alive to the Spirit if today I am self-centered and prayer-less. Revival is not just a goal, it is a process, and this process is itself very pleasing to God, and a fulfillment of His purpose in our lives.

These 4 requirements that God gives us to fulfill before He responds with forgiveness and healing ought not to be seen as mere stepping-stones to something better. These preparation steps are not left behind, but they become a part of the ultimate goal of being in a right relationship with God, and being what He wants us to be. They are like the ABC's. They are not just preparation for reading, and so once you learn to read you can forget them. They are a part of the goal forever, and they become so intertwined with the goal that the means and the goal become one. You can't ever say that once you know how to read, you can forget the alphabet. Nor can you ever say that once we re revived we can forget these preparations for revival. Just as the alphabet plays a perpetual role in reading, so these requirements are perpetual in the life of the believer.

No one but the most blind would ever think that once we are revived we can then go back to being proud and prayer-less. These

preparations for revival are themselves the essence of revival, and so the key to revival is revival itself. If you humble yourself, pray, seek God's face, and turn from your sin, you are revived. These preparations are more than mere preliminaries that we can dispense with once we get to the main event. They are perpetual preparations that keep the main even alive. Man's biggest failures in the history of revival are due to his neglect of this truth that these preparations must be perpetual.

All of these preparations are perpetual, but prayer is the one most often emphasized. Pray without ceasing is a command. There could be a verse that says humble yourself without ceasing, seek God's face without ceasing, and turn from you sin without ceasing, but there isn't. It is prayer that is uniquely stressed as the perpetual preparation. That is why we are deceived if we think we are doing something significant by having a prayer week. This is like having a health week in which we take a couple of vitamins on Sunday and talk about health, and then take another vitamin on Wednesday and say more about health, and then wrap it up for the year. Anybody who would expect to be healthy on the basis of such a week needs more than vitamins can supply. Health care is perpetual. You do not just get there, for you have to stay there and maintain it, and that is why there is no end for caring for your health. That is why there is no end to praying. You don't just get it done in a week, or even a year, and even a lifetime. You just don't get it done, for prayer is to be perpetual.

This makes prayer another big if. If it is hard to be humble, as we saw in a previous message, so it is hard to be persistent in prayer. Part of the problem is our limited understanding of the purpose of prayer. My understanding has been expanded, and hopefully yours will be as we focus on the purpose of prayer. Grasping its purpose will better enable us to practice it as perpetual preparation for revival.

I. THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER.

According to Young's Analytical Concordance the Hebrew word here for pray is Palal, and it is used 74 times in the Old Testament for pray. It actually means to pray habitually. In other words, one does not say I have already fulfilled this requirement because I prayed last week, last year, or last decade. Practically everybody has jumped this hurdle if all it means is that at some point you have prayed. This Hebrew word not only refers to habitual prayer, but it also has a second meaning that helps us see what the purpose of prayer really is. This word refers to self-judgment. To pray means to confess something about yourself.

If I go to my neighbor and say, "Can you please help me get my car out of the snow-bank, or help me get it started," I am by that request saying that I need help. I need somebody, for I am not sufficient to handle all of life by myself. My request is a confession that I see myself as dependent. Prayers purpose is to do just that very thing to us in our relationship to God. Independent self-sufficient people do not pray, for they do not need anyone or anything. Only dependent people pray, for they are aware that they cannot give life meaning without God. One of the primary purposes of prayer is to keep us perpetually fulfilling the first requirement, which is to humble ourselves. Prayer is itself and act of humility, and the person who will pray without ceasing will not be filled with pride. Every sin we commit could be prevented by prayer, and that is why praying without ceasing is one of the keys to revival.

This helps us see prayer from a different perspective. We tend to think that prayer is to change God, and this makes prayer so mysterious that it leaves us unable to grasp the why of it. Why in the world does God need us to pray, or want us to pray, so that He can do His will? It does not make sense when you try to figure it out, and this

leads people to give up praying. This is a major problem with prayer in our day. And it has been one for me as well as most of the pastors that I know, or I have read about. After all, how long does it take to ask God for what you need? You can even thank Him and praise Him for all His marvelous gifts in just a short time.

I am sure that most who read of the old prayer warriors of the past wonder what they prayed for, for hours. Did they take the name of all the people they knew before the Lord? I suppose we could all pray for hours if we had a long enough list, but the modern Christian does not see this as being a very efficient way of praying. We could cover all the missionaries of the world in one sentence, and all the people that we know in another sentence. We can ask God to bless everybody in a matter of seconds. This reasoning makes sense if the purpose of prayer is just to ask God for something. But the Hebrew word for praying implies there is also a self-oriented purpose in praying.

In other words, true prayer is also a self-judgment. It says something about how you feel about yourself. Our text does not say what we should ask God for. It just says to pray. If I asked you to pray, you would immediately ask for what? It is because our first concept of prayer is to ask God for something. We are to ask God for forgiveness, healing, and for revival. We have to want what He wants to give, and so to pray covers asking, but what about the purpose of confessing to God that you need Him, and that you are dependent upon Him for forgiveness and healing? It is a self-judgment. This helps us see prayer in a new light. It only takes a few minutes to ask God for what you need, but it may take much longer to conquer your pride before God, and to break through your sense of self-sufficiency.

The purpose of prayer is not to change God, or even to motivate God. It is to make you a fit instrument for God to use. It only takes a

few seconds to ask God to fill you with His Spirit, but it may take hours to empty yourself of your pride, and all sorts of other idols so that He can fill you. Those old saints who prayed for hours were making a self-judgment. They were saying, "Lord, I am so unfit and unable, and so full of self that I need to struggle before you for hours to get myself dependant enough upon you that I can be an instrument of the Holy Spirit. The problem is not a reluctant God who refuses to budge. The problem is the reluctant heart, which refuses to surrender and be a channel of God's Spirit. The first purpose of prayer is to unclog that channel.

The question is, does God want us to pray? Of course He does. His desire that we pray is seen everywhere in the Bible. God has a strong desire for us to pray. If prayer is the soul's sincere desire, then we can say it is God's prayer that we pray, for it is certainly His sincere desire. When it dawned on me that God wants us to pray so badly that it is as if it were His prayer, I asked myself the absurd question, does God pray? It seems so strange to even think it. I asked several people and they all were surprised at the very suggestion, and they answered no. So did I until I pursued this question in God's Word. I have read all kinds of books on the question about God answering prayer, but nothing on the question whether He prays or not.

It was easy to discover that God the Son prayed. Jesus was a man of prayer. The record is clear, but more fascinating is the fact that Jesus, who is now at the right hand of the Father, ever lives to make intercession for us. In the fullness of His restored glory, and not just in His lowly humanity, Jesus still prays. It did not take long to discover again that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groaning that cannot be uttered, but what about God the Father? Many studies on prayer point out that it is universal. Men everywhere pray, and always have, and so it seems their prayer is part of what it means to be made in the

image of God. Man is a creature of prayer because he is the extension of his Creator.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son the father represents God, and in 15:28 we see him going out from the party to plead with his elder son. The father longs for him to cease his complaining and come in to join the celebration. If this represents what God the Father does to His rebel children, then we must conclude that God the Father prays to us. This sounds startling at first, but remember there are two radically different kinds of prayer. There is the offering of adoration, confusion and thanksgiving, and this can only be appropriate for man in relation to God. But we need to ask, what about prayer as entreaty, imploring, craving, longing, and requesting? Prayer in the Bible is primarily asking and receiving, and this is a two way street that God travels just as we do.

The Bible is filled with the longings and desires of God the Father for His children, and it is loaded with His requests of them. Children are always asking the father for help, guidance, and gifts, but does the father never ask the children for anything? Of course he does. The 4 requirements in our text are what God wants from man. It is His prayer that they will obey. In Deut. 5:29 we read, "Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever." That is God's prayer. In Hosea 11:8 God pleads with His children: "How can I give you up Ephraim-how can I hand you over, Israel?" He goes on pleading, and then says, "My heart is changed within me, all my compassion is aroused."

God is pleading and asking, but just like David who was pleading and asking God in the Psalms, God is also not receiving. So God has one of the same major problems we have in life, and that is the problem of unanswered prayer. His problem is far more profound

than ours. There are all sorts of good reasons why an all-wise infinite God would not grant all of the requests of finite and fallible me, but where is one good reason why finite men will not answer the all-wise requests of an infinite loving God? This is a God-size mystery, and the Bible reveals that God does indeed wrestle with this issue.

Man is forever asking why God does not answer his prayers. He is totally blind to the pattern of prayer we see God operating under. He does not ask, have I humbled myself, prayed, sought His face, or turned from my sin? All of this is ignore with the same response as you get if you ignore other rules. Try lifting the receiver of a pay phone and dialing a number you desire to reach. When nothing happens do you get angry and cry out against the phone company? It is not likely, for you have their rules you need to follow right in front of you. You must first answer their request and drop in a coin before they will grant yours. In most of life we see the two way street, and we abide by the rules of the game, but in prayer we demand a short cut. We want to get through and get our needs met regardless of how we respond to God's request.

This short cut mentality is one of the reasons revival is rare. Christians have the false idea that revival is the way to be holy in a hurry, and without much bother and struggle. This is not so, for Christians have just as much responsibility in revival, and they have to work hard to be holy. They have to labor to do God's will, and love people, as well as know His Word. Revival is not quick fix that lets everybody off the hook of hard work and responsibility. If that is your dream, wake up, for you are living in a fantasy world. Man is always responsible, and prayer is a part of that responsibility. The first thing that prayer is, is obedience to God. Why pray? It is because God wants us to. And why does He want us to pray? Because prayer changes us and makes us prepared to receive His answers. Our praying is God's answer to His prayer, which is that we will pray.

God does not want us to pray in order to change Him. God does not need changing. He tells us here that even before judgment comes that He is ready to forgive, heal, and give revival. Revival is never delayed or withheld because God is not prepared and ready to respond in grace. He is ready even before the fall. It is folly for us to get the idea that God has to be begged and pleaded with to do what is good, loving, and right. Heaven is always ready for a revival. The angels are always prepared to rejoice over every sinner who repents. It is earth that is not prepared. It is man who is not ready, and that is why God demands that we pray. Prayer is our perpetual preparation for revival. Samuel Shoemaker said, "I do not believe that prayer ever changes God or His will of love: It can't make Him more concerned than He was already without our prayers.... It only makes us more receptive to the things He wants to give us." Centuries before Augustine asked, "How can God grant you what you do not yourself desire to receive?" The first purpose of prayer then is to get you prepared to receive what God wants to give.

There are two types of prayer. There is the proud prayer that comes seeking what I want, and then there is the humble prayer that comes seeking what God wants. Jesus portrayed them in His parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. The Pharisee in his proud prayer wanted to thank God for being the marvelous person that he was, and not at all like the rest of men, but the humble prayer of the Publican was, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Which prayer prepared the heart for God's grace in forgiveness and healing? The humble prayer is the obvious answer. So we see that prayer does not so much change God as it changes the one who is praying. It makes them ready to receive what God wants to give.

Robert Cunningham said, "He who approaches God for anything must approach with empty hands." This is why prayer takes time. It is not because God is reluctant, but because we have our hands to full

to receive His grace. We are not prepared to receive, for we come in pride with all kinds of stuff we think makes us capable of handling life on our own. The battle of prayer is to get so honest with God that we can see our pride even in our prayers, and see that we just want to use God to get our will done. We need to prayer sometimes, "O God, my earth desires are full of snares; forgive and do not answer all my prayers."

It is a strange idea, but it seems to me that our first purpose in prayer should be, not to get our prayers answered, but to answer God's. We do this by being changed in prayer so tat we conform to God's will and do not plead for our own will. Jesus is the great example of this struggle. He prayed, "Let this cup pass from me." That was the true desire of His heart, but as He wrestled in prayer He went beyond this stage of merely asking God for what He desired to seeking to be what God desired. The end of His prayer struggle came when Jesus said, "Not my will but thine be done." Asking took only seconds, but surrendering took time-consuming struggle.

Jesus had humbled Himself and surrendered His will to the will of God. I don't know how long it took Jesus to come to this conclusion, but it was a while. How much longer would it take any of us to get to that point? His request was simple and swiftly uttered, "Let this cup pass from me." This was a minor prayer if there ever was one. It would take only a couple of seconds. The petition part of His prayer was a snap, and that is where we often end our prayer. That is why we have such speedy and efficient prayer lives. Jesus went on into the hard part of prayer, and into that part where we have to struggle with pride and self, and strive to wrestle the self to the mat, and surrender to God's will. This takes time, and that is why we tend to skip that part, and the result is we do not fulfill God's requirement. Petition is legitimate, but it is not the prayer that changes us and makes us ready to receive God's best. This is not the prayer that God asks of us, for

He wants humble prayer, and the prayer that seeks to make us an answer to God's prayer.

We need to see God's purpose in prayer and not just what we want it to be for us. This is contrary to our usual view of prayer, but God says that His purpose is fulfilled when we first focus on ourselves. Prayer is self-preparation, for only when we are prepared ourselves are we ready to receive what God wants to give. R. A. Torrey said, "The chief purpose of prayer is that God may be gloried in the answer." For God to be glorified, it is we who must be changed. It is we who must wrestle with pride and become humble. It is we who must seek God's face. It is we who must turn from our sin. All of this is a part of the purpose of prayer, and it is in praying that we struggle to make these changes. Prayer is much more than merely asking God for things. It is a perpetual preparation of our hearts. It is a constant answering of God's prayer, which is making us ready to receive what He wants to give.

13. UNANSWERED PRAYER Based on Matt. 6:1-14

The story is told of a Russian scientist who was found guilty of a crime against the state. He was sentenced to a prison in the middle of a desert. His cell mate was another scientist. He was determined to escape, and he urged his cell mate to join him, but he refused. After much planning he did finally escape, but the heat of the desert was unbearable, and the lack of food and water plus in the inability to locate another human being almost drove him mad. He was forced to return to the prison. He reported his terrible ordeal to his cell mate, and he responded, "Yes, I know. I escaped and failed for the same reason." The scientist was beside himself with frustration and said, "Why in heaven's name didn't you tell me what it was like out there?"

His cell mate replied, "I didn't want to be a negative thinker."

For lack of negative thinkers, that is people who will tell it like it is, even when what is is not what we want it to be, there are masses of people who, if they do not die in the desert of despair, survive with weakened faith, and scars on their soul. The more I study, the more I realize how absolutely vital it is that we listen to our Lord. He told it like it was, and like it is, and like it shall ever be. Jesus tells us in all honesty that there is a desert out there. He warns us of the dangers, and does not shy away from being a negative thinker.

"Be careful," he warns as he opens this chapter. There are all kinds of ways you can lose out and damage your relationship to God. The paradox is that all of the areas of danger are good things. They are things like giving, prayer, and fasting. You can do all these good things in such a wrong way that they drive you from God rather than draw you near to Him. This is not a pleasant reality for Jesus to lay on us, but thank God for one who tells us of the dangers, and gives warning so we can avoid them.

Most godly men will not give us such warnings, for they are fearful of being negative thinkers. Jesus makes it clear that it is the truth that sets us free, and truth covers a lot of territory, and it includes the dark side as well as the light side. Only the whole truth will make us free. S. D. Gordon was right when he said, "It is always bad to have the truth hid from our eyes." This means that if there is a negative side to an issue, it is bad not to think about it and be a negative thinker. I want to focus on the negative truth Jesus tells us about prayer. There are many books on prayer that will not tell you what Jesus tells you, because they do not want to be negative thinkers. They hope by avoiding the negative they will protect you from that side of reality. But what they do is force you to learn about the negative the hard way, and risk permanent damage to your faith.

Jesus will not do this, and that is why we must listen to Him, and test all others by the light of His Word. You will have to read far and wide on prayer to find anyone who comes close to Jesus in telling the negative side of prayer. I see three major reasons why prayer is not answered in the teaching of Jesus in verses 5 through 14.

1. First is the matter of motivation. You can pray for the wrong reason, and when you do your prayer never reaches heaven at all. It is a bird without wings.

2. There is the matter of misconception. You think that quantity is what impressed God, and so by vain repetition you hope to storm the gates of heaven. Jesus says forget it, for prayer is not magic, and God is no machine.

3. There is the matter of missing mutuality. If you do not have the same spirit as God does in forgiving others, do not expect Him to answer your prayer for forgiveness. God's love is like electricity; it will not flow in where it cannot flow out. You can't receive what you will not give. Jesus promises us that if we refuse to forgive our prayer for forgiveness will not be answered.

So Jesus tells it like it is in the world of prayer, and in so doing He complicates things, and forces us to wrestle with the conditions for answered prayer. What happens when we do not want to wrestle with such things, and take the short cut of teaching very positively that God answers all prayers? Such positive teaching may induce faith in those whose life is smooth sailing, but injures faith in those whose voyage is across stormy seas. The only real question is this: Is it true? Does God answer all prayers? Let's look at how this teaching has affected the lives of those who have believed it.

1. A young girl tore her new geography book just before school ended for the day. She put it in her desk and went home feeling bad about it. She remembered her teacher had taught her that God would do

anything for her. So she prayed that He would fix the book so that it was not torn anymore. She prayed with persistence, and with faith. She eagerly went to school the next day expecting the book to be as good as new. It was a great disappointment to find the page was still torn. Her faith was thrown for a loop, and she struggled with many questions. Was she a bad girl? Didn't God like her? Was she rejected by God? How many millions of children go through terrible times of self-rejection because they are taught that God will answer all their prayers?

2. Somerset Maugham in *Of Human Bondage* has the character Philip praying that his club foot would be healed so he could play sports. With no doubts in his mind he prays fervently, but in the morning he comes limping to the breakfast table. Now he is not only defective of body, but damaged in spirit.

3. Mark Twain's greatest objection to Christianity was the teaching of children that God answers all their prayers. He writes of how Huckleberry Finn had such a teacher, and of how he experimented with prayer. He once got a line he said, but no hooks, and it warnt any good without hooks. He prayed 3 or 4 times for the hooks, but couldn't make it work. Huck said he went into the woods and had a long think about it. If prayer can get anything, why don't deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson the teacher fat up? He concluded, "No, says I to myself, there ain't nothin to it."

4. R. F. Horton gives this testimony: "I remember as a child putting God to the test. I placed a bright farthing in a drawer, and then knelt down and prayed for God to transmute it into a half-sovereign. With trembling eagerness I opened the drawer, and found that the copper was copper still. That was my dawn of skepticism in prayer." If pennies could be prayed into dollars, all Christians would be faithful in prayer, and even eager for all night prayer meetings. This childish dream does not last long, of course, because one is quickly disillusioned about prayer as magic. This fairy tale level of prayer, however, is still

often imposed on children and adults by those who do not want to be negative thinkers.

5. A study of the Civil War reveals that the South had as many godly leaders as the North, and the prayers for victory were as sincere and fervent as those in the North. Many godly Christians had their faith shaken when the South lost the war they had bathed in prayer. God refused to give victory, even to His own, when they fought for a cause which was not His will.

6. Madue Royden tells of the British soldier who came home from World War I, and his family rejoiced as they told him how they had prayed for him, and knew that he would come home. He protested, "Don't talk like that. I can't bear it." He had seen dozens of his comrades killed who were equally prayed for, and some he had watched die while he prayed with passion for them.

Illustrations of unanswered prayer are endless, and you need look no further than your own life, for any body who is into prayer at all has experienced unanswered, as well as answered prayer. Unanswered prayer is most dangerous when you don't believe it exists, and you twist and turn reality to fit your notion that all prayers are answered. Like Miss Marshall and her aunt Miss Marsh who prayed for Captain Hedley Vicors to be spared as he fought in the Crimean War. He was shot and killed, but they refused to believe their prayer was unanswered. They rationalized and said that we prayed for life for him, and God gave him life forever and ever.

This kind of mind trick may work for some, but the fact is, they prayed he would not die, and not that he would live forever in heaven starting then. They made the opposite of what they prayed for to be the answer to their prayer. Those with this gift can, of course, always hold fast to their faith that all prayers are answered. But if you define answer to mean getting what you asked for, the fact is that many prayers are not answered. I do not like it anymore than you do, but I

prefer to face this reality rather than to pretend that whatever comes is an answer. With this view there is no distinction between an answer and no answer. It is popular to say that all prayer is answered either yes, no, or wait. This is a clever way to include unanswered prayer in answered prayer. It is saying that since God always has some response to our prayer, even if it is total rejection, it is still an answered prayer. It fools a lot of people, for I hear this quote quite often. The motive for it is good, for it is designed to comfort, and some people do get comfort out of the idea, or it would not be so popular. The problem is too many people get to thinking about how no is an answer. It is like trying to comfort someone who sent out a thousand surveys and only got 47 back, by saying their was a 100% response. Some said yes and sent them back; some said no and threw them away, and some said I will wait and throw it away later. Do you really think that this Pollyanna perspective will convince him that it was a perfect success because every survey got a response?

It is true, however, that sometimes a non answered prayer is the best answer. This was written by an unknown Confederate soldier. "I asked God for strength, that I might achieve: I was made weak that I might obey. I asked for health that I might do greater things: I was given infirmity that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy: I was given poverty that I might be wise. I asked for power that I might have the praise of men: I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life: I was given life that I might enjoy all things. I received nothing that I asked for, but all I had hoped for." God gave him what was best for him, but the fact is, his prayers were unanswered. He got God's will for him and not what he prayed for, and so God in His wisdom will not answer our prayers because they are not the best for us. So our trust is to be in God and not in prayer.

There are many illustrations that come out of the Civil War, for

both sides had many thousands of prayer warriors. Equally godly people were praying for victory for their side. The Confederate troops prayed on their knees with all the fervency that men can pray with before the battle of Sharpsburg. General Gordon was confident with such earnest prayer they would win and press on the Washington within a week. The next day the battle went against them and they were so discouraged with God. But years later General Gordon admitted it was a blessing for the country that they were defeated that day, for had they won and defeated the Union our nation would be among the weaker nations of the world. In other words, God could not answer their prayers for victory, because it was contrary to His purpose in history. We need to keep this in mind when we pray. The very non-answer could be our greatest blessing.

A false view of prayer that makes it the object of one's faith is a subtle form of idolatry. It is surprising, but a false view of prayer is the door to atheism for many. Faith Baldwin tells of the girl whose fiancée was killed as a pilot, and she said, "I went to church everyday and prayed. I prayed every night and almost every waking hour. But he was killed. I shall never pray again, nor enter a church." Prayer changes things alright, and sometimes for the worst when it is exalted to the level of magic, or as the key to one's faith. It becomes a subtle form of blackmail where you, in effect, say to God, "You either answer my prayer, or I cancel you off my list. I don't want anything to do with a God who does not do things my way."

Job said, "Though he slay me yet will I trust Him." Now that is faith in God. Faith in prayer says, "God, if you let me down, I will forsake you." It is the ultimate in presumption, for in essence it is saying, "God, you do my will, or you are fired." Man just loves to be in control of God. There are only three possibilities.

1. God answers all prayer.

- 2. God answers no prayer.**
- 3. God answers some prayers, and does not answer some prayers.**

The first two are the only two that people want to believe because that gives them control. If God answers all prayer, then God is the servant of man, and all we have to do is manipulate God through prayer. We have the secret formula, and He is in our hands. The unbeliever and atheist goes for number two, for if God answers no prayer, He is of no use, and so for all practical purposes does not exist, and man is in control.

The third alternative people shy away from because if that one is true, we don't have any control over God. He is free to chose to answer or not, and we do not like God having that kind of freedom. It takes Him out of our hands altogether, and it leaves us at His mercy. Like it or not, that is the way it is. God is free, and in His sovereign freedom He can, He does, and He will chose not to answer prayers for any number of reasons. Here are some-

- 1. Because of hypocrisy to be seen of men. Jesus said false motives will lead to unanswered prayer. Matt. 6:5**
- 2. Because of double mindedness. James says, "Let not that man think he will receive anything from the Lord." James 1:7. James 4:3 makes it clear that wrong motives will lead to unanswered prayer. He writes, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." It is just common sense that if you are on the wrong road you will not get to where you want to be. Speed will not help, nor will sincerity benefit the cause. If you are going the wrong way, nothing will help but turning around and going the right way. Not even prayer will make a difference. God will not answer even good prayers when the one asking is going the wrong way. This is praying so as to use God for your genie to get your will done. It is saying, not Thy will, but mine be**

done.

3. Because you refuse to be reconciled with a brother. Matt. 5:23-24

4. Because you refuse to forgive another. Matt. 6:14-15

5. Because of a thousand and one ways by which we refuse to listen to the Word of God. We become stubborn in disobedience, and like a rebellious child who does not get his way. Prov. 28:9 says, "If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law even his prayers are detestable." Prayer does not always change things, for if the one praying does not change, the prayer changes nothing. Prov. 20:28-9 says, "Then they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me. Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord." A good example is Saul who was totally out of God's will seeking the Lord, and we read in I Sam. 28:6, "He inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets." God sometimes refused to respond at all. In Mic. 3:4 we read, "Then they will cry out to the Lord, but he will not answer them. At that time he will hide his face from them because of the evil they have done." God makes the principle very easy to grasp in Zech. 7:13 where he says to His people who refused to listen to His laws for treating people in loving kindness, "When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen, says the Lord Almighty."

6. Some requests are just plain contrary to His will. Sometimes they are like the man before the firing squad who was asked for his last request, and he asked for a bullet proof vest. It was, of course, refused. And so it is with many things we ask that have no place in God's plan. You cannot expect prayer to take the place of work and study. You cannot pray to get good grades and not put forth the effort to know the subjects. You cannot pray for your house to get painted and not do it, or hire it done.

7. Prov. 21:13 says very clearly, "If a man shuts his ear to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered." Prayer is conditional in so many ways. It is not automatic at all. Many times God had to say to Israel that their sins had separated them from Him,

and He would not even hear their prayers.

8. In I Sam. 8:18 God says to the people who have refused to let His Lordship be sufficient, and who have demanded a king like the nations surrounding them had, that he would grant them a king, but that that the king would become a burden rather than a blessing. Then He adds, "When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the Lord will not answer you in that day." Here is a promise, not to answer their prayer, but a promise to not answer their prayer. I don't think this has ever been anybody's favorite verse, but it is a fact, and God has promised unanswered prayer to be a fact of life. It is not just possible, it is guaranteed. We reap what we sow, and very often we cannot undo our choices by prayer. God in mercy often brings good out of evil, but the fact is, He also often lets us reap the evil of our choices. Even this may be good for us in the long run, but it is not an answer to our prayers.

9. In I Peter 3:7 we read, "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers." Peter makes it clear that we can hinder our prayers by behavior that is not pleasing to God. Many prayers are likely not answered because of bad relationships and negative behavior between mates.

10. Jesus said if two agree on anything their prayer will be answered, but James and John asked for seats at His right and left hand, but Jesus said it was not for Him to give, and so the request was refused. Prayer that is asking for what is out of God's will cannot be answered by the very nature of it. They also asked if they should pray for fire to come down from heaven to destroy the Samaritans, but Jesus told them they had the wrong spirit. Here were two Apostles who knew the experience of unanswered prayer because they had a spirit that was not of God.

11. Reginald White has an example even of the unanswered prayer of Jesus. He writes, "Jesus prayed for Peter, before the great denial, in

view of the denial, about the denial-but Peter still denied. Even the Lord's intercession could not evade the crucial test, or prevent the shameful fall." The point is God cannot answer prayer by rejecting the very freedom he made man to have in His image. He will not change the basic structure of man's nature in answer to prayer. If prayer could do this, all people would be long ago saved, and nothing bad or foolish would ever again be chosen by God's people.

John R. Rice traveled across America, and he reported that the number one prayer in churches is for unsaved husbands. Why is this prayer so often unanswered? He says because it was a sin for those Christian girls to marry them in the first place, and if God just fixed it up every time what is the point of forbidding it? But God cannot violate their will and force them to be saved. Prayer will not give anyone power over another person's will.

12. James 5:15 says, "And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up." Again, by the very nature of reality as it is, this prayer cannot be answered always, for then no one would ever die, and we would have eternal life now by prayer. This prayer will always be unanswered at some point, and nobody can expect it to always work.

13. Prayer will not be answered when it is contrary to the laws of nature, usually. I say usually, for that is what a miracle is, something contrary to the laws of nature, and miracles do happen, but the fact is, they are rare compared to the regular operation of those laws. The little boy who prayed, "Lord, please let the vitamins be in pie and cake instead of spinach," will not likely see his prayer answered. Nor the one who prayed, "Lord, please let Detroit be the capital of Illinois." God will not make 2 plus 2 equal 5 just because it is not to your advantage that it is 4.

Jesus is not anti-prayer anymore than He is anti-giving or anti-fasting, or anti-anything that is done for the glory of God and the good of man. But Jesus deals honestly with the negative side of these

things, for the only way you can avoid pitfalls and disillusionment is to know the truth. The truth is that there is more unanswered prayer in this world than we can imagine. The billions of prayers said by rote, prayer wheels, or other methods of vain repetition, plus numerous Christian prayers based on ignorance and a false foundation, go unanswered every day. Fortunately, many of life's blessings do not depend on prayer at all. God sends His rain on the just and the unjust alike, and both good and evil enjoy the energy of warmth and light from the sun. Even those who never pray at all experience a multitude of God's blessings.

We can be thankful that God does not let everything depend upon the prayers of man. He permits prayer to influence His providential plan in nature, but it is primary objective and independent of the subjective wills of men. Every weekend of the spring and summer some bride and groom, and some sports lovers, are praying for sun, and at the same time there are farmers who are praying for rain. If God permitted prayer to control the weather, a majority on one side or another would create havoc. I'll leave that realm of reality in the hands of God, but even in the areas of life where God invites the input of our prayers, there are many reasons why they are not effective, and why they go unanswered. Don't feel bad if you have unanswered prayer. You join the great company of the heroes of history. They were great persons of prayer, and they changed the course of history by their faithful prayers, but they also experienced the frustration of unanswered prayer.

Jesus, of course, is at the top of the list. The perfect Son of God, whose prayers were always ideal, and yet He had to hear God's no. "Let this cup pass from me," he prayed, but He had to drink it to the last drop. He was ready to surrender, and He added, "Not my will but Thine be done," but His will was not to drink it, and He did not get His will, for there was no other way. Jesus also prayed for Jerusalem, but

they rejected Him anyway, and His prayer was not answered. He said, "I would, but you would not." Jesus did not always get His way, and that is why He wept and experienced sorrow to the depths. He knew the frustration and the agony of unanswered prayer. God cannot meet every desire, for many call for the cooperation of man, and if man will not cooperate, God cannot do it alone because it would violate the free will of man.

Paul knew plenty of this burden, and one personal problem stands out. Three times he prayed for the removal of his thorn in the flesh, and all he got in return was a no. Moses pleaded with God to let him enter the promised land, but God refused to hear him, and he was not permitted to enter. David pleaded with God to let his child live, but the child died. Sometimes God's no makes perfectly good sense. When Elijah pleaded with God to take his life, we can see why God refused that request. If God took home to heaven everyone of His children who cried out in depression for escape, the rapture would be a continuous process, rather than an event at the end of history. If you give the issue some concentrated study, much unanswered prayer makes good sense.

In the first place, life would be a nightmare of uncertainty if God let the universe be controlled by the prayers of His people, rather than by natural law. The legend of King Midas illustrates this. He prayed that all he touched would turn to gold, and he was just delighted as he began to touch things and increase his fortune. But then he touched his daughter, and he lost a treasure that gold could not buy as she became a statue of gold. Thank God He does not grant every whim and wish of His people. Once when He did it and granted Israelites their wish for meat, they got with their miracle of the quail a plague that killed them by the thousands. God granted their wish, but sent leanness to their souls. In the light of this we should often thank God for unanswered prayers. Shakespeare was right when he wrote, "We, ignorant of

ourselves, beg often our own harms, which the wise powers deny us for our good; so find we profit by losing of our prayers."

Longfellow was right when he said, "What discord we should bring into the universe if all our prayers were answered! Then we should govern the world and not God. And do you think we should govern it better? It gives me pain to hear the long, wearisome petitions of men asking for they know not what." Many a Christian can give testimony to the blessings of unanswered prayer. One couple pleaded with God for a certain home. They didn't get it. Later they learned that the buyer was greatly disappointed because he found much dry rot in it. We do not always know the good reasons why God does not answer our prayers, but often we can find that good reason. Unanswered prayer is a challenge to self-examination. Let's look at a couple of known reasons why God does not answer prayer and see how this reality should motivate us to self-examination.

1. We already looked at I Peter 3:7 where prayer may be hindered by a husband not treating his wife properly. This is very logical, for God certainly is not going to be a partner in making marriage the opposite of what He intended it to be. He will not reward behavior that is contrary to His will, and there is no way to calculate how many prayers go unanswered because of such behavior. The implication would be that any abuse of another person will hinder your prayers from being answered.

2. If God answered all prayers He would be far less discriminating and rational than our earthly fathers. They do refuse our requests quite often because they are selfish and uncaring. They refuse many of our requests because they are caring of us. They know that much of what we desire is either dangerous for us, or not appropriate at the time. They know some of the things we request our just plain stupid, and it would be nothing short of evil to grant the petition.

Is our heavenly Father less concerned about such matters? No way! He too refuses to grant the enormous number of immature prayers His children pester Him with daily. He would be irresponsible if He allowed the world to be run by the whims of His children. We respect parents who do not let their children turn their home and life into chaos, but who discipline them and say no. So we ought to expect as much from our Father in heaven. This means we need to examine our requests and ask ourselves if we are being selfish and unreasonable to even expect such prayers to be answered.

Is there any value in all of this negative thinking about the reality of unanswered prayer? Yes there is! It sets us free from those things that hurt us worse than the truth that many of our prayers will not be answered. For example:

1. It sets us free from the illusion that we have a formula for controlling God. This is a dangerous illusion, and leads to much disillusionment. This view that all prayer is answered leads many to give up prayer altogether. The woman who played Olivia Walton, the mother on the Waltons T.V. show, told of how she was taught by a priest that all prayer was answered. She got so excited she began to pray for a bicycle. When she got shoes instead the disappointment was so great she struggled the rest of her life with doubts. She could have been spared all of that by being told that maybe, or maybe not, her prayer would be answered for a bike. The simple truth would have set her free and given her a realistic view of prayer.

It could have saved Bob Ringer, the author of Looking Out For No. 1, and Winning Through Intimidation, a loss of faith in prayer. He wrote of his teen experience. "I prayed for some things that were pretty important to me and nothing happened. So I just gave up the whole idea. Sort of outgrew it, I guess." This is what false teaching on prayer leads to in many lives.

2. It sets us free from a false dependence on God. People who expect God to take care of everything lack initiative to take the responsibility to work out their own problems. You cannot just pray for weeds to go away, you have to get out there and pull and spray. God will not let you get by with praying about things that you can do yourself. Your chances of getting a toothache taken care of by prayer is quite remote. You can go to the dentist and use the means available to take care of it. Just as the bank will not cash all checks until certain conditions are met, so God will not answer many prayers because you have not met the conditions. If you use the means available to solve a problem and it does not work, then it is appropriate to seek God's answer in prayer. But to expect God to hand you an answer when you do not even try to use the means He has made available through the wisdom and labors of men is presumptuous. The church was established to meet many of the needs of the body, and we need to take advantage of that, and not expect God to do directly what He does through the body of Christ.

3. It sets us free from the practice of Christian voodoo. We do not stick pins in dolls to try to influence people, but we do try to do the same thing, and get control over others through prayer. We would like to manipulate the lives of others by prayer, and we would if it would work. But God does not allow prayer to be like magic. He will not allow us to force people to make the right decisions through our prayers. They have to make the right choices themselves. It is legitimate to pray that they will make the wise choices, and to follow the prayer up with what influence we might have, but we cannot expect that prayer alone will make people choose wisely. When you pray for others to do what is best, be prepared for many unanswered prayers, for God does not rob people of their free will in answer to anyone's prayers.

We must constantly fight the battle for balance, and not be caught up with the extremes that say all prayer is answered, or no prayer is answered. Both extremes are false, and so we need to live in the middle

where we know some prayers are answered and others are not. The Bible portrays all the great prayer warriors as suffering the agony of unanswered prayer, but never do they give up on prayer because of their disappointment. The batter that gets 3 or 4 hits out of 10 is a hero. He misses more than he hits, but he does not give up and quit. So men ought always to pray and not faint the Bible says, for those who are persistent in prayer will have far more answers than those who give up and cease to pray. Partial success always beats total failure in anybody's book. Only those who persist in prayer will taste the fruit of victory along with the agony of defeat. The absence of answers ought never to keep us from the abundance of answers that will surely come to those who do not faint and give up.

A realistic view of prayer makes us put our trust in God and not in prayer. Those who preach that prayer is always answered almost idolize prayer. It is not prayer that saves us, loves us, gives us guidance and wisdom, and seeks the best for us in all ways. It is God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who is to be the place where we put our faith and hope, and not prayer. Prayer is just the means by which we communicate with God. The love and power are in God and not prayer. When we grasp this we will not be ready to abandon God when He does not answer all our prayers. We may never know all the reasons why, but we can trust Him and keep on trusting Him no matter how many unanswered prayers we have to endure. That is what faith in God is all about.

If we go to the great faith chapter of Heb. 11 we see many prayers that were answered, but a whole host of them that were not. After a long list of great victories we come to the last part of the chapter and get a list of prayers that were not answered. Many of God's children were tortured, beaten and put in prison. They were stoned and butchered and put to death. They were terribly persecuted and abused and lived a life that was very miserable. They prayed a thousand

prayers that were never answered, but they are commended because they remained faithful to God, and they never gave up because they never received the promise. They knew that God would make it up to them ultimately. This is faith in God, and not faith in prayer, and that kind of faith is what enables people to endure and press on even when prayer is not answered.

14. THE PLEASURE OF PRAYER Based on Psalm 84:8

One of life's greatest pleasures is the pleasure of answered prayer. But the pleasure of one can be the pain of another. Dick Van Dyke tells some funny stories about children and answers to prayer. Five year old Mark gave a loud whistle in the middle of the pastors sermon. His grandmother was so embarrassed. She scolded him good, and asked why on earth he would do such a thing? He said, "I've been praying for a long time that God would teach me to whistle, and this morning He did." It was a pleasure to him, but a pain for others.

Another little guy felt the pleasure of prayer when he prayed for a storm, and sure enough, the fierce wind began to bend the oak trees in his yard. He was full of glee at being a weather-maker. But as the day wore on, and the branches of the tree kept knocking against his bedroom window, he became bored with it all. He ran downstairs and asked, "How long is one prayer good for?" He was afraid that he had ruined the weather for good, and his pleasure had turned to pain.

Prayer is filled with mysteries, not just for children, but for theologians, and the most mature of Christians. If there are no mysteries for you, you obviously do not pray very much. There are probably more books on prayer than any other subject, because it is

complex, and there are dozens of different aspects that authors seek to explore. It you have some puzzling problems with prayer, don't feel alone. The puzzles run through the Psalms, and all through history.

The cry of why is often heard. Why in the world does God not hear my prayer and answer? Sometimes prayer even makes God angry. We assume that prayer is always good, but not so. It is sometimes offensive to God. In Psa. 80:4 we read, "O Lord God Almighty, how long will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?" Whoever heard of praying that God would forgive us for our prayers? The implication is, believer's can use prayer as a gimmick to get God to help us achieve very self-centered goals that may have nothing to do with His plan for our lives.

We can be life children in the toy store saying, "I want this mom, get me this one dad, it's only twenty dollars." Like kids trying to get all they can out of their parents, so we often come to God pleading for one toy after another until prayer becomes a nuisance. How often have you heard a mother scream, "This is the last time I ever bring you shopping. If you don't stop that whining because you can't have everything you want, you won't get anything." The poet Longfellow had good reasons for his sharp comment on prayer. He said, "What discord should we bring into the world if our prayers were all answered! Then we should govern the world, and not God. And do you think we should govern it better? It gives me only pain when I hear the long, wearisome petitions of men asking for what they know not."

Keep in mind that some of the old time preachers in early America use to pray in the pulpit for anywhere from a half an hour to two hours. It would be easy in that length of time to pray some stupid things. But we can still be foolish in a lot less time by asking God for what we do not understand. The disciples were praying that Jesus

would not let Himself be taken captive, and be taken to the cross. They were praying that the whole mission of Christ would be aborted, and the plan of salvation be averted. They felt this was the best thing, but they were totally blind to the will of God. Fortunately for them, us, and the whole world, God does not answer all prayer. One of the first lessons we need to learn about prayer is, don't let unanswered prayer stop you from praying.

It did not stop the author of Psa. 84. His prayer to be able to worship God in the beauty of His house in Jerusalem was not yet answered. He looked with envy on the birds who could be there when he was still far off in exile. It was not fair that birds could be there and not him. Things are not always to his liking. Even if he gets there he has to pass through the valley of Baca, a dry barren desert. Life is just one challenge after another, but this pilgrim does not give up and throw in the towel. He pleads for God to hear his prayer in verse 8. To stop praying because all your prayers are not answered would be like canceling Christmas because you didn't get what you hoped for last Christmas.

Nobody hated unanswered prayer more than C. S. Lewis. He wrote, "Every war, every famine or plague, almost every death-bed, is the monument to a petition that was not granted." He wrote a whole book on how angry it made him when his wife died fairly young, and was not healed. But he also had balance, and he knew a lot of what he had asked for was not wise. He wrote, "If God had granted all the silly prayers I've made in my life, where would I be now?"

Lewis was one of the greatest Christians of the 20th century. He influenced Christians all over the world because he went through the valley of Baca and made it a place of springs. That is, he experienced the dry desert of unanswered prayer, but he did not say, "I quit" and walk away. He got through his grief and kept praying, and God led

him to the great pleasure of widespread influence.

Do you remember when James and John prayed for fire to fall from heaven on their enemies? God ignored their zealous plea, but they did not say, okay, if God will not do what we fell is right, He can find someone else to do His will. They learned from their unanswered prayer, and went on to become lovers of these very enemies, and many were brought into the Kingdom of God. P. T, Forsyth wrote, "We shall come one day to a heaven where we shall gratefully know that God's great refusals were sometimes the true answers to our truest prayer." Often we do not have to wait for heaven, but can see it in time that our will was not the best.

When we do think our will is right, and consistent with the will of God, we should be persistently pleading for God to hear and answer our prayer. This is one of the most frequent prayers in the Psalms, the prayer that God would hear our prayer.

Psa. 4:1 Have mercy upon me and hear my prayer.

Psa. 17:1 Give ear unto my prayer.

Psa. 39:12 Hear my prayer O God.

Psa. 54:2 Hear my prayer O God.

Psa. 55:1 Give ear to my prayer O God.

Psa. 61:1 Hear my cry O God.

Psa. 84:8 Hear my prayer O Lord God Almighty listen to me O God of Jacob.

I have to admit, it was quite a surprise to see all the prayers for God to listen. I do not know if that is a very frequent prayer in most of our lives. I know it is not in mine. It is because I assume God does listen to my prayers, and I assume most other Christians assume the same thing. But the Psalms do not assume any such thing. They assume just the opposite, that prayer may be a mere self-centered conversation

unless you get the attention of God. And so before they pray, they pray that the channel of prayer is open, and they are being heard. In other words, they do not just pick up the phone and start talking. Instead, they dial a number and get someone on the other end to be listening first. The Psalmist wants to make sure God is listening before they pray, and so their first prayer is that God would pick up the phone on His end and listen to their petition.

This is a new concept to me, and likely to most Christians. But because it is so frequent in the Psalms, it is wise for us to at least consider the possibility that getting God's attention may be an important part of prayer. Maybe our assumption that God just automatically listens to every prayer we utter is not valid, and some preparation in the prayer setting is appropriate. There is certainly more pleasure in any communication when you know someone is listening. Prayer would obviously be more meaningful if you knew God was listening.

Because God is all knowing we assume He is always listening. But some use this assumption to conclude there is no need to pray at all. If God already knows what you need, and what you are going ask, there is no need to bother to ask. At some point we have to stop depending on the omniscience of God, and recognize He demands our cooperation. He wants us to ask, to seek, to knock. He wants us to seek His attention for this enhances the relationship. You know your child needs help too, but you enjoy it when a child come and says, "Dad, I need your help to learn to ride my bike." "Mom, I need your help to make these cookies right." You know their need, but you like to be asked, for that is part of the pleasure of a relationship-the feeling of being needed.

God wants our love or He would not have made the first commandment that we love Him with our whole being. He likes to be told He is loved. That is what praise is, and prayer is acknowledging

that He is needed. P. T. Forsyth said, "Love loves to be told what it already knows. It wants to be asked for what it longs to give." If you doubt this, ask your wife.

God is a person and not a machine. He has feelings and longs to be loved as a person, and treated like a person. I have to confess that sometimes I treat God like a machine. I rattle off a routine prayer, and when I am done I realize how mechanical it was, and so I then talk to God. I've already said amen and ended the prayer, and then I talk to God as a person. I ask for forgiveness for being so mechanical. I have no doubt this is one of God's greatest problems with His children. He feels like a cash machine that people can use to get what they want. Their only interested in knowing the right formula to get the desired response. Their highest goal in prayer is to get what is wanted rather than to develop a relationship with God.

The greatest pleasure in prayer is to know that God is pleased with our lives. In verse 9 the Psalmist asked that God would look with favor on him. In verse 11 he says the Lord bestows favor and honor and withholds no good thing from those whose walk is blameless. For him, the greatest pleasure in prayer is in the assurance that God is pleased with him. David Nedham was just beginning his teaching career at Multnomah School Of The Bible. He was feeling unsure of himself and one night when the family was in bed he went out to walk and talk with God. He felt insecure and uncertain, and wanted some sign from God that God was pleased with his teaching. Listen to his testimony:

If only He would clear the air! It would be so simple for Him to speak. "Just a few words, Lord."

I stopped walking. I listened.

"Father, I won't talk at all--I'll simply wait, just in case You have something to say."

There was no answer. Nothing but the ever-present hum of

the city. Though I'm not quite sure just what I had expected to happen that night, I remember turning home with a heavy heart. Was God pleased with my service? I really didn't know.

The next morning I found attached to my office door not just one or two, but a dozen individual notes from my students. As I read them I began to cry. For each note was an expression of thanks to God for things I had shared with them in class the day before. That never happened before or since!

Could it be that my God had personalized Himself through them? The assurance of that fact flooded my spirit in an instant.

He is a Person. He has chosen to need us, not simply for service, but to love and be loved. To share a closeness of relationship that will take an eternity to fulfill. Yet He has also chosen us (just like those dozen students) from time to time to be His personal voice to someone who needs that word from God.

What a wonderful privilege! May we be sensitive and available.

He learned that the greatest pleasure of prayer was not just some mechanical answer, like cash coming out of a machine, but it was in relationship where love is communicated. The psalmist is not crying out for gifts, but for the Giver. He longs for the knowledge that God is pleased with him. This is what children need from parents. This is what mates need from each other. This is what students need from teachers. This is what employees need from management. The great need of everyone is the need for approval and the assurance that they are loved, and their life is pleasing to others. Fulfill this need and you are giving a far greater pleasure than you give by any other gift. A gift does not necessarily communicate love at all. It can be just fulfilling an

obligation. Real love is communicated by conveying favor.

This is the highest level of pleasure in prayer as well. When we can by prayer sense the favor of God and His approval of us we have reached the pinnacle of the pleasure of prayer. George Meredith said, "He who rises from his prayer a better man, his prayer is answered." That can seem superficial, but so is two plus two equals four. It is nevertheless true. The goal of prayer is first of all a relationship to God, and secondly it is a means by which we get gifts and guidance. Kenneth Wilson said, "The beginning of the power of prayer is not Lord give something to me, it is rather Lord give me to something." The goal of prayer is to gain the favor of God by being led to choose for your life style all the pleasures of the Psalmist we have been considering in this series: The pleasure of praise, passion, pain, perfection, power, and purpose.

Ronald Hutchcraft, the Director of Youth For Christ, used football as an analogy of how we are to use prayer to arrive at this goal. The quarterback, just as soon as he gets possession of the ball has a half-ton of linemen coming after him. The only way to get rid of this pressure is to get rid of the ball. Thus, he learns the happy art of the hand-off, giving the pigskin to the halfback or fullback. He says this is what daily prayer for the Christian is all about. It is about casting all your care upon Him, knowing He cares for you. It is handing off the pressures of life to God. You don't hang on to the ball, but pass it on to God. It is letting go and letting God take the pressure that He can handle, and you can't. This is what Paul was saying in Phil. 4:6-7."Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God, and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Paul is saying one of the major goals of prayer is to be changed in

your own spirit. It is to go from an anxious person to a person of peace as you trust in God. The pleasure of prayer is that by means of it we become more Christlike, for in prayer we develop the spirit and perspective of Christ. We cannot ask God to care about something and not develop a caring attitude ourselves. You cannot pray for the salvation of a person and then not be concerned about that person. Your prayer for any goal in life, if it is sincere, will get you motivated to move toward that goal by your own actions.

It is by prayer that we develop the praise, the passion, and the power to make progress toward goals pleasing to God. God gets pleasure from our prayer just because it is our choice to build the relationship. Elizabeth Elliot said, "Prayer is like incense. It costs a great deal. It doesn't seem to accomplish much (as we mortals assess things). It soon dissipates, but God likes the small." We are urged to pray without ceasing, because God gets pleasure in our prayer, and when we please God, we have His favor, and this is one of life's greatest pleasures. The pleasure of prayer is a two way street, for it has the potential for pleasing both God and man. Therefore, it is a duty and a delight to develop the pleasure of prayer.