

Hindrances to Prayer

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By H.A. Ironside

It is a lamentable fact that, although all Christians pray (for prayer is indeed the believer's "vital breath"), yet there are many who seldom record in actual experience a definite answer to the cry of their hearts. And because of this there is a tendency, as previously mentioned, to think of prayer as of value only because of its reflex action upon the souls of those who thus wait on God, rather than because of any possible answer.

It is important to bear in mind that there may be, and often are, certain hindrances on our part that cause God to withhold the gift we ask. To Israel He said, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1-2). And the Psalmist plainly declares, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Psalm 66:18). Are not solemn words like these often forgotten? Do we not come carelessly into the Lord's presence beseeching Him to undertake for us, only to get no answer from heaven because of our careless ways or unjudged sin?

Let me give a typical incident out of many that have come to my notice. A young lady who had, when converted, turned from the world and its follies, was afterwards persuaded by carnal friends to break down that wall of separation which at first had been reared between her and the frivolous society out of which grace had called her. To the grief of those who watched for her soul, she absented herself from the appointed gatherings of the Lord's people, and instead was found in the world's halls of refined pleasures, which nevertheless are enmity against God. To any who pleaded with her as to these things she had but one answer: She detested narrowness, and could see no harm in the things that godly saints shrank from as dishonoring to Christ.

Some months went by, and her loved father was stricken with a severe illness necessitating a serious operation from which he never rallied. His death was to her a great shock, but instead of turning her back to God it seemed rather to harden her against Him. Meeting her some months afterwards I sought to help if possible, but when I inquired as to her spiritual state she replies, "I am filled with doubt and uncertainty. Ever since my father died it has been a fight to keep from going into the darkness of infidelity. I cannot pray. I cannot read my Bible. I am miserable. When my father was taken to the hospital I was in great distress, but turning to my Bible my eye fell on the words, 'You shall ask what you will, and it shall be done to you.' It seemed like a direct message to me. I went into my room, and, claiming that promise, I prayed earnestly that my father might recover and be restored to us. I did not have a doubt that God would answer me. I trusted His word absolutely, and you know

the result! When word came of his death it seemed as though the light went out of my life. My confidence in prayer was shattered. My faith even in the Bible received a fearful blow. I have never been able to regain the confidence I once had, for it seems to me that God did not keep His word to me! I know that this is an awful confession to make, but that is how I feel.”

As I looked into the tear-stained, anguished face, my heart ached for her, and I prayed for just the right word to help. “Tell me,” I inquired, “what do you call a person who tries to cash a check that was made out to someone else, by endorsing it falsely?”

“Oh,” she answered, “that would be forgery. If one tried to cash a check not in his name he would be a forger.”

“Well, I fear that is your case,” I replied. “You tried to cash a check on the Bank of Heaven that was never intended for you. Look at John 15:7. Read the whole check. See to whom it is made out. ‘*If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, and it shall be done to you.*’ Were you abiding in Christ as you floated over the ballroom floor? Were His words abiding in you as you sat in the theater? Was it abiding in Him that kept you from the prayer meeting and took you to the opera instead? What right had you to try to cash that particular check?”

Startled, she saw the point and burst into almost hysterical weeping. “Oh,” she cried, “I see what you mean! You would tell me that my worldliness murdered by father. It is I who killed him by my ungodly ways! If I had only been living for God I could have prayed so that he would have been healed. I can never forgive myself!”

“Now you are going to the other extreme,” I replied. “If you had been abiding in Christ you would not have demanded of God what was clearly not His will. He saw that your dear father’s work was done. It was time for him to go home. You did not take this into account because you were out of touch with the Lord. The Word says, ‘If we ask anything *according to His will*, He hears us’ (1 John 5:14). The subject soul will say with his Lord, ‘Not my will, but Thine be done.’ You overlooked this, and so you have had a bitter lesson to learn.”

I am glad to say that before I left we knelt together and she contritely returned to the Lord, and was, I have every reason to believe, restored in soul.

But are there not many like her, who forget there are conditions that must be met if prayer is to be definitely answered. There are hindrances that must be recognized and dealt with, if we would come to God in the Spirit’s liberty, and in the assurance of faith.

We have already seen that iniquity in the heart or life precludes the possibility of the prayer of faith. But I desire to notice some very definite New Testament Scriptures indicating the exact nature of some of these hindrances.

And, first, let me instance *a condemning heart*. In 1 John 3:20-22 we are told, “If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence before God; and whatsoever we ask we receive of Him, because we keep his commandments and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.” The entire passage from verse 14 to the end of the chapter, is most illuminating, and shows us that he who would pray in confidence when his own need arises must ever walk in love and consideration for others, and minister to their need as he has opportunity. Otherwise how can he go to God with an uncondemning heart when in distress himself? It is written, “Whoso stops his ears at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself but shall not be heard” (Proverbs 21:13). If, therefore, I desire mercies of the Lord for myself, let me see to it that I show mercy to others; otherwise my own heart will condemn me, and I cannot pray in the Holy Spirit. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” Harshness of spirit, indifference to the need others—whether spiritual or temporal—will effectually hinder my prayer getting through to the ear of God.

The principle is of wide application. Whatever condemns me in my own conscience hinders prayer. Till it is judged pleading and wrestling are in vain. Let me first search and try my ways and see if I am allowing anything in my life that is grieving the Spirit. If so, I cannot pray as I should, for God has not promised to hear the cry of one whose own heart condemns him. But if all is judged, the line is clear, and I can pray with assurance. Then I shall know beyond a doubt that I have to do with the living God who hears prayer.

Depths of God’s Mercy and Love

Could we command our very sinful past
To move before our eyes in great review,
Not yet we’d know God’s mercy—all so vast;
Nor ever thus find power to start anew.

Instead, we look upon our blessed Lord,
And see the agony which He passed through:
Doomed to the cross, reviled by the horde
Of enemies of God, and of Him too!

We measure thus the mercy of our God,
Not by *our* thoughts of our iniquity,
But by the depths of love thus told abroad
For which we’ll praise Him through eternity.

—G. S. Adolfson

In the second place let us note another decided hindrance to effectual prayer: *An Unforgiving Spirit* Our Lord's instruction on this important subject must not be relegated to a past dispensation. In Mark 11:23-26 he sets forth in no uncertain language the folly of expecting God to hear and answer prayer if wrath and bitterness are cherished in the heart.

The disciples had expressed their wonder at the drying up of the barren fig-tree. He uses the occasion to enforce a lesson of faith. He who does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says shall come to pass, can remove mountains of difficulties, and He adds, "Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (verse 24). What a promise is this! What possibilities it suggests as to the life of faith and prayer!

But our Lord does not leave so great a pledge unqualified. Not everyone can so pray. There may be that which will hinder faith, and make prayer impotent. So He immediately tells them, "And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses." Elsewhere also, He taught them to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive everyone that is indebted to us." Here, He emphasizes this aspect of forgiveness—one that is often forgotten.

It is sometimes said that this is law, while in Ephesians 4:32 we have grace: "Be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake (or, in Christ) hath forgiven you." But the two passages are in fullest agreement; they simply present two sides of the truth. If born of God, I have been forgiven: therefore I should forgive. But, as a failing child, I daily need forgiveness myself, therefore it is incumbent on me to forgive my brother. If I cherish resentment and withhold forgiveness, I cannot pray with assurance. God has never promised to answer the prayer of one who has an unforgiving spirit.

This is undoubtedly the cause of many disappointments along this line. He who would receive from the God of all grace must keep his heart with all diligence—guarding it against malice and harshness when he has been offended or wronged in any way.

"For years," said a brother recently, "I prayed for the conversion of an erring son, but all the time he seemed to go from bad to worse. During those years I had a bitter feeling in my heart toward a brother who, I felt, had grievously wronged me. I insisted on reparation which he refused to make. Feeling my cause was just, I held this against him, and would not overlook it. At last I realized that this thing was hindering prayer. I judged it before God, and freely forgave. Oh the liberty as I then turned to God about my son! Soon I heard with joy of his conversion. Though far from home, he was brought

under the power of the gospel and led to Christ.” This brother felt that God had been waiting on him, ere answering the pleading of his heart. How many times have saints made similar confessions. An unforgiving spirit explains why thousands of petitions go apparently unheeded.

A third hindrance to effectual prayer is *Selfishness*. James 4:3: “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it on your lusts.” Selfishness is in the way. God loves us too well to grant every request of our selfish hearts. Yet how often do we forget this. Perhaps we read in the previous verse, “Ye have not, because ye ask not,” and immediately conclude that we may ask what we will, and that God is bound to give; but we have already seen that promises such as these are subject to conditions. If we delight ourselves in the Lord, He declares He will “give us the desires of our hearts” (Psalm 37:4). But it is plain that he who thus finds his delight in the Lord will not ask selfishly for the gratification of carnal desires. If God does answer such prayers it is in judgment, as we shall see later on. Here the important thing to realize is that no promise is attached to the prayer of selfishness.

Suppose, for instance, I desired great wealth. Why not come to God and ask for a million dollars? If I did, would I receive it? Certainly not. God loves me too much to entrust me with any such fabulous sum unless the circumstances be most exceptional. But if I ask for His glory, a million is nothing to Him. George Muller asked and received over five million’s in fifty years to feed and shelter thousands of orphan children. God honored his faith, and gave the means as required.

And in a lesser way, many of His servants can tell to His praise and glory how they have come to Him about financial and other needs *in order to carry on the work committed to them*, and He has answered most graciously, and demonstrated in marvelous ways that He is indeed the living God. But what He thus gives is a sacred trust to be administered for Him, not to be consumed on our own lusts.

Therefore when we pray for temporal things it is well that we search ourselves, examine our motives in the light of His word, that we be not found asking selfishly, but for His glory. And, be it remembered, it is in accordance with His will that we trust Him for food and raiment, and pray to Him to supply the necessaries of life. *This* is not the prayer of selfishness, but of childlike confidence. It was Christ Himself who said “Pray...Give us this day our daily bread.” And we have the same privilege still, for, “In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving:” we are encouraged to “let our requests be made known unto God.”

Fourthly, *wrong family relationships* hinder prayer. Read 1 Peter 3:1-7. Note the concluding verse of this section in which wives and husbands are being instructed as to their duties toward each other. “Likewise, husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honor unto the wife as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life *that your prayers be not hindered.*” When wife and husband are one in heart, one in purpose, each occupying the place divinely assigned in

the home, loving and honoring one another, with what boldness, what holy confidence, can they kneel together before God in prayer, counting on His unfailing grace for their households and every interest of their hearts. But where is it otherwise, how difficult it is to pray. And if strife and discord rule, prayer together is an impossibility. Formal prayers may yet be uttered by the lips while kneeling at the family altar, but definite answers there will not be.

Surrounded by a growing family, it is well that parents carefully consider whether their own behavior towards one another, publicly and privately, is such as to help or hinder prayer. For what can be more important than that those who, under God, are responsible for their little ones, should ever live in an atmosphere of trustful prayer, counting on God for the salvation of their households, and so living before them that the impressionable hearts of boys and girls will recognize the practical power of godliness.

One last hindrance I would notice is mentioned in James 1: 6, 7: “*Let him ask in faith nothing wavering.* For he who wavers is like a wave of the sea driven by the wind and tossed; for let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord” Wavering is really unbelief, and unbelief is the very opposite to faith, and therefore a prime hindrance to prayer.

But wavering is generally a symptom of something deeper. He who wavers may well examine himself and see whether he has not a condemning heart, an unforgiving spirit, a selfish motive, or whether there is not some definite thing in his life whereby his prayer is hindered. It is absolutely impossible to offer the prayer of faith if any of these things are present. Faith and holiness are too intimately linked to be separated. God reveals His will to one who walks before Him, and thus he is enabled to “ask in faith, nothing wavering.” Where there is no such assurance it is well to take the word of the prophet: “Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord.” “Then shall we know if we follow on to know the Lord: (Hosea 6:3). And so we shall enter into His mind and understand His will, in order that we may pray in accordance with His word, and so without hindrance.

Heaven’s Cure for Earth’s Care

“Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus”
Philippians 4: 6-7

Many a burden, many a labor,
Many a fretting care,
Busy footsteps coming, going,
Little time for prayer.

Duties waiting on my threshold
Will not be denied,
Others, coming round the corner,
Crowding to their side.

How shall I their number master?
How shall I get through?
How keep calm amid the tumult?
Lord, what shall I do?

Give Thy strength to meet my weakness;
Give a heart at rest;
Give a childlike, trustful spirit,
Leaning on Thy breast.

Thou canst still the wildest conflict,
Bid the billows cease;
Thou canst fill earth's busiest moment
With Thy perfect peace.

—Anonymous