

Prayer Makes A Difference

Asking According to God's Will

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Today I am going to talk about something that is essential to our spiritual growth, to our salvation, and to our personal relationships with God and each other. It is something of great power. Its effect on the world itself can be of historical proportions. The world benefits from it, although they are unaware of its impact on them. The world needs it, the sick must have it, the church thrives on it, and ministers rely on it. It is perhaps one of the most neglected and improperly used tools in human life!

Sometimes, people tend to view praying to God as a hit and miss proposition. They think, "Maybe He is listening, or maybe He is not." They believe that maybe He cares what they have to say, but maybe He is not really interested. It may be that when some people pray, all they are doing is calling the Psychic Hotline:

Hello, welcome to the Psychic Hotline.

If you are obsessive-compulsive, please press 1 repeatedly.

If you are co-dependent, please ask someone to press 2.

If you have multiple personalities, please press 3, 4, 5, and 6.

If you are paranoid-delusional, we know who you are and what you want. Just stay on the line while we trace your call.

If you are schizophrenic, listen carefully and a little voice will tell you which number to press.

If you are manic-depressive, it does not matter which number you press. No one will answer.

We see there the attitude of the world toward God with regard to prayer. People seem to view prayer in a very complex way, as if God were only indirectly accessible. It is not all that difficult with the right attitude, but, of course, the world does not understand that. We have had much practice in prayer, which means that we do have many of the skills that are involved with it. Effective prayer requires that we are sincere, humble, and faithful, among other things; but those are certainly key elements.

The Bible has a great deal to tell us about prayer and how it should be made. It teaches us that prayer is essential and vital to us and exhorts us to pray often. Not only that, but if you read the lives of God's greatest saints in the long history of the church, you will find that they were men and women of prayer. It was a great characteristic of these individuals. The nearer people are to God, the more they pray to Him.

We see numerous incidents in scripture of what God has clearly done by way of answered prayer. The God who determines the end determines the means. If God, in His infinite wisdom, is

determined that He is going to bring certain things to pass as a result of and in answer to the prayers of His people, He will do it with kindness, love, and goodness, and there will be nothing negative about it. It is His way of bringing us into and causing us to share in His work.

When we read Paul's letter to the Philippians, we find that he explicitly tells them that God is doing this through their prayer, so that they can come in for a share of the glory and the rejoicing. Thus it was that Paul, who knew the mind and will of God and was so joyful in the hands of God, still pleaded with the Philippians to pray for him and for his release from prison. Paul, a man very close to God, needed the brethren. We sometimes forget that this is God's way of doing things. As He has decided to order and maintain the creation through various laws that He has designed into nature, so also has He decided to work in the spiritual realm through prayer.

Scripture is very clear that we are obligated to pray for others. We should pray for our unconverted family members and friends. Jesus said we should even pray for our enemies.

Matthew 5:44 But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.

Here we see that we are commanded, as the elect of God, to pray for those in the world, no matter what they have done to us and no matter what they may do to us. We are to pray especially for those in the church of God, our fellow brethren. Even when we may be annoyed or even disgusted with some of the foolish things that unconverted people do, we have to continue to develop compassion, and prayer is one of the ways to develop it. Jeremiah was able to express his compassionate attitude for those in his nation who violently lost their lives or the lives of their loved ones.

Jeremiah 9:1 Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!

We know that there is a time to mourn, to weep for the ills that are happening to this country and world because of sin. Also, Isaiah prophesied that in the last days, evil, crime, and injustice would be out of control. People would lack the courage to stand up for anyone else or to try to help people with their problems. As Isaiah described in Isaiah 59:16, God was astonished and displeased that there was no one willing to be an intercessor for the nation. There was no justice in the land. God does expect us to intercede on behalf of others by means of prayer.

However, it is also true that sometimes it serves no purpose to pray for people in the world. God told Jeremiah,

Jeremiah 7:16 Therefore do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them, nor make intercession to Me; for I will not hear you.

As members of God's church, we have to use wisdom in for what and for whom we are praying. We do not want our prayers to be in vain. The indication in Jeremiah 7 is that we should not pray for forgiveness for people who flagrantly break the Ten Commandments, thumb their noses at God, and then hypocritically ask for His blessing. The attitude of the people was so wrong that God would not spare the punishment that they so badly needed. However, unless God makes this evident, we should not assume it to be the case. We should assume the best of people and pray for them.

What does a true Christian do for this world? We restrain evil as far as we can and we believe that doing so is God's will. We pray to Him to have pity and mercy on the world, while remembering that because of the evil of the world, it is God's will to punish it. God's will is a very important aspect of prayer. We do not pray lightly on the assumption that, if we pray for God to hold His hand back from punishment, He will do what we ask—that would be praying in vain. The Old Testament has much to say about that. There was a time when God, in effect, said to His prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, "Stop praying for these people."

This does not mean that we should not pray for the world, but it does mean that we must pray intelligently and thoughtfully. It means that we pray in such a way that conforms to the will of God. We must see God's ultimate plan for the world; in other words, we must have vision. We do not pray as a member of a country but as a potential member of God's Kingdom, as a citizen of heaven. This gives us a very unique perspective on praying for others and for the world. This is the only way we can have a proper perspective. We are of God! We are not of the world in that sense, yet we ask God to have mercy and compassion for all people. Prayer is not an isolated and optional religious exercise; it is a vital factor, significant in determining our eternal destiny! Sometimes it is even significant in determining history.

The supreme purpose that God is working out here on earth is the expansion of His Family. He wants to create, from physical human beings, immortal members of His ruling Family. We must, by our own free choice, come to fully support God's way of doing things. We must want to think as God thinks, perceive as God perceives, and react as God reacts.

We must want, with all of our hearts, to be involved in whatever God is doing. These wants and desires in the proper area should direct our prayer in the proper way. This type of attitude is essential in order to maintain, throughout eternity, harmony and peace within the Family of God. This is not something that is just a temporary element or a tool to be used.

God has made us temporarily human. This existence is a testing ground on which our Creator can try us and know what is in our hearts, whether or not He can trust us to live by His rules and laws. *He must be sure*. He is looking at us, closely examining our actions and reactions and how we pray for others and intercede on others' behalf. God takes note of what we say when we are talking to Him. Of course, He knows our hearts and intents, and the Holy Spirit helps when we cannot adequately express ourselves.

Romans 8:26-27 Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit itself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

Still, as Jesus showed, the actual words we use are also important, and they should be meaningful, rather than vain repetitions. One of the obstacles to effective prayer is not often identified. It is the fact that we live in the age of devalued language. Words have never been so cheap, so frequently meaningless as they are now. All around us, language is misused in advertising, politics, entertainment, and even in casual conversation. Filthy words seem to be in every sentence of the world's mouth.

Because we have been disillusioned more than once by broken promises, exaggerations, shading of the truth, even outright lies, we have come to automatically doubt that words mean what their face value would indicate. We certainly have seen this in the political system of debate that we have had between the candidates for presidency. I still scratch my head at most of that for which they stand and in which they believe. They do not want us to know exactly what they believe. Maybe they do not know what they believe. This is one reason some have difficulty believing God's promises. It also could be one of the reasons some prayers are not as effective as they should be.

Remember that God really did not have to ask Adam and Eve a series of questions about what they had done. He already knew the answer. He did not have to ask Cain where Abel was. He did not have to come down to earth to verify how evil Sodom was. He did not have to allow Jacob to contend with Him all night. He wanted to. He still wants to hear from us what we have to say and see our thought processes and our reactions and the decisions that come from them.

God is working out His plan; He keeps it on schedule and on course. He intervenes when necessary in the affairs of humanity, and He allows us with whom He is dealing to determine many of the details of how His plan develops. Twice, through prayer, Moses directly influenced the course of history. Because of the rebellion of the children of Israel, God, on two separate occasions, proposed rejecting them all and bringing forth, through Moses, a new nation to inherit the promises made to Abraham. Had Moses not fervently prayed to God to change His mind, the implication is that God would have done exactly what He had proposed. God is not a Being who says things lightly or in vain.

Either way would not have impeded the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan, but Moses' prayers did determine the course that fulfillment took. Prayer does make a difference!

We see that prayer made a difference in Jesus' life. Jesus commands us to pray that He will provide people to do His work. In Luke 10:2, Jesus said, "The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest." God would not ask us to do something in vain; therefore, those prayers that are offered up for more workers for His work are answered. Whether or not or in what numbers laborers are sent out to do God's work must therefore depend, at least partly, on prayers or the lack of them.

God will accomplish His work of preaching the message preparing the world for the second coming of Jesus Christ, even if He has to cause the very rocks of the earth to cry the message out loud. God does not need us, but He does want us to be part of His Family. He gives us the opportunity and privilege of participating in what He is doing.

The apostle Paul tells us to pray for **all**. It is not enough for us to pray for just our brethren.

I Timothy 2:1-2 Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.

Whether or not, or to what degree, God's work has peaceful conditions in which to function also depends, at least in part, on how diligently we pray.

Let me ask you a rhetorical question: Why should we pray for fellow Christians, when they themselves have contact with God? James admonishes us to pray one for another. It should be a

mutual thing. That is, members of God's church should be so concerned for one another that prayers are offered up continually on behalf of each other.

James 5:16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

Prayer does matter; it does have an impact on our lives, and we should be praying for one another on a regular basis. Especially those who have done injury to someone else and those who are injured by someone else should pray for one other. James does not refer primarily to the prayers of the ministers of the church, as in the verses 14 and 15—although they are certainly included—but he refers to praying for one another as a duty appropriate for all Christians.

The apostle Paul wrote that he prayed for other Christians and that he did so without ceasing. In turn, he asked, "Brethren, pray for us." Praying for each other is a Christian duty, and praying for the ministry is a Christian duty, as well! I make the huge assumption, and I believe it to be true, that most of you prayed for the sermon today. That is how sermons become effective in their hearing.

There was obviously a special place in the apostle Paul's heart for the Philippian members. Paul often thought of them. Though they were out of sight, they were certainly not out of his mind. He was separated from them by distance, yet they were in his prayers without ceasing. At the very mention of them, he became grateful for them; it was always a pleasure for him to hear of the welfare of his distant friends. Even though Paul was ill-treated at Philippi by the unconverted inhabitants of the city, and it was there that he was scourged and put into the stocks, he remembered the church members with joy. At first, he saw little of the fruit of his labor, but still he remembered Philippi with joy. He looked upon his sufferings for Christ as his credit, his comfort, his crown, and was joyful every time someone mentioned Philippi, where he had suffered. The reason for this was that his joy was activated by the brethren there. This joy caused him to pray all the more fervently for them, to be excited for them, and to long to be with them.

One of the main ways he remembered them was in prayer. Paul said in his letter to the Philippians that he "always in every prayer" for them requested that God would develop His character in them. Paul often prayed for his friends—for all of his friends—but especially for the Philippians.

Philippians 1:3-4 I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy.

Here we get a glimpse of what Paul included in his prayers. Thanksgiving must have a part in every prayer. For whatever we are joyful, by whatever we are comforted, we should thank God for it because God must receive the glory for it. Paul thanked God, as well as made requests, with joy. True joy is the heart of thankful praise, and thankful praise is the overt expression of true joy.

In both our prayers and our thanksgiving, we must see God as "our God." This intimate relationship encourages us in prayer and increases our joy in praise, because we see mercy coming from the hand of *our* God. We should thank *our* God for others' gifts and usefulness, because we receive benefit from them. We must make sure that God receives the glory for them. The credit must go where credit is due.

Philippians 1:9-11 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that

you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

God is interested in developing unity and teamwork in the future members of His Family. He wants us to stop being self-absorbed and be concerned for the well being of others. He wants us to have the same character that He has, and one of the tools that He expects every Christian to use in building that character is prayer for one another. We would not be told to pray if it were not important for our eternal salvation.

It is not wrong for us to pray for our own needs. Scripture instructs us to "let our requests be made known to God."

Philippians 4:6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.

Paul indicates that when we make our requests known to God, we must do it with thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is a major factor, or element, in prayer. Obviously, if no one else is praying for a Christian in need, certainly God will hear the prayers of the needy and answer them. I am not saying that God cannot save someone who has not been prayed for. However, scriptures about intercession show that God likes to supply the answers as a result of the prayers of another concerned and sincere person. Through these prayers, He sees concern for others, rather than for only the self. Paul encourages us to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). The law of Christ is the universal law of love. The law of love drives Christ's mind; it is the same mind we must have if we want to be in God's Kingdom. It is the same mind we must have for our prayers to be effective.

Epaphras was a faithful minister of God's church who looked out for the interests of others. When the apostle Paul wrote to the brethren in the city of Colosse, he said that Epaphras was always laboring fervently for them in prayers so that they could stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.

Colossians 4:12-13 Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis.

Epaphras' great zeal drove him to pray for others, that they may be perfect and complete and that they may live their lives according to the will of God. He worked long and hard praying for others, that they could overcome and grow to perfection. Did the prayers of Epaphras really make any difference in whether the brethren overcame and grew to perfection? Did Paul mean to imply that they could not "stand perfect and complete in all the will of God" without Epaphras' diligent prayers? If they could, what good was all the effort Epaphras put into it? What is the purpose served by intercessory prayer?

Our prayer life not only reveals to God how deeply we want Him to be involved in our lives and how deeply we want to be involved in what He is doing, but prayer also shows how interested we are in other people. Can God have anyone in His Kingdom who is not genuinely interested in people? God wants to see a spontaneous and universal expression of outgoing concern in all members of His church. That is the only way to guarantee peace and harmony. Love for our neighbor is the essence of God's law, and it should be the essence of our prayer.

One of the greatest gifts we can give to others when we are close to God is to pray for them. God loves it when people pray for each other. If God will hear the prayers of an individual, praying for his own needs, how much more will He hear the prayers of someone praying on behalf of someone else—especially someone in need? God especially enjoys hearing and answering the prayers of one person for the needs of another. The apostle Paul would not have petitioned the saints to pray for him if it did not make any difference.

Hebrews 13:18 Pray for us; for we are confident that we have a good conscience, in all things desiring to live honorably.

Paul felt that the prayers of the brethren for him were very, very important.

When you have a specific request from God, have you ever thought to pray that the identical request be granted to someone else who needs it? In doing so, we get our mind off ourselves and on the welfare of others. That is what happened with Job. Job eventually got his mind off himself and focused on God, and then he was able to help his friends. Because Job had spoken according to God's will what is right, God used Job as an intercessor for His friends. Job's friends were forgiven through His prayers.

Job 42:7-8 And so it was, after the LORD had spoken these words to Job, that the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has. Now therefore, take for yourselves seven bulls and seven rams, go to My servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and My servant Job shall pray for you. For I will accept him, lest I deal with you according to your folly; because you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has."

We see there a great qualification for having answered prayer when we pray for others: We have to be right with God. We have to be obedient to Him—submissive, humble, and faithful.

God wants to hear prayers of intercession. It was through the prayers of Abraham that Abimelech was forgiven. In Jesus' early childhood, there was an elderly woman named Anna who did not depart from the Temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. We can be sure that most of that prayer and fasting was not to seek Anna's own needs and desires. There were probably many people in the area who, over the years, went to Anna when they had a problem. They asked her to pray for them because God heard and answered her prayers, and everyone knew it. Everyone desired to have her help in that way. Prayer makes a difference! It changes things! There is no doubt about that; we have God's promise that such is the case.

You have all probably grown to love someone to the point that you feel a special sentiment toward him or her. We commonly call this feeling a close friendship. With this type of relationship, we very much want to do something for that person that would help him or to give him something he needs. Maybe neither distance nor time nor finances will allow you to carry out that overwhelming desire to do something for him. What can we do for him if we are so limited? You already know the answer. We can cause an outpouring of physical and spiritual blessings to rain down upon that person by praying for him. Of course, that has to be according to God's will. We cannot pray for a friend of ours to get a boat so that we can go on the lake and water ski with him.

Proverbs 3:27 Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in the power of your hand to do so.

Each and every one of us has it in the power of our hands to do good to someone else through the power of prayer. It is in the power of your hand with God's help to do it through intercessory prayer.

Moses pronounced a wonderful blessing upon the unconverted house of Israel, God's physical people. If this is so, then surely God can be asked to place a similar blessing upon a member of spiritually converted Israel, the church of God. Listen to the priceless blessing God instructed Moses to pronounce through Aaron upon the Israelites.

Numbers 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 lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.

This is the type of prayer that we can pray for one another in God's church. This command to Moses and the Aaronic priesthood to ask for God's priceless blessing on the physical Israelites is a type of one of the ways we should be asking God to bless His church. Peace is important because the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace. Peace is something that we should ask God to provide for each and every one of us. Intercessory prayer can be offered for the church as a whole as this prayer was for Israel. We must always be aware of the necessity to intercede for God's work. Paul asked the Colossian Christians to pray for the work of God. He said, "Praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ" (Colossians 4:3). The brethren, by their prayers, can increase the effectiveness of the ministry. By prayers of intercession for the work and the church, we can help turn many to righteousness.

The principle of praying for others works both ways. If you have a need, instead of just praying about it yourself, ask some of the brethren to pray about it. Sometimes the answer comes very quickly when there are many faithful brethren praying.

Intercessory prayer can be offered especially for those whose needs we know, those who are going through trials, those who are sick, those who need to be comforted by God.

Ephesians 6:17-18 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.

There is another element that is part of the preparation for prayer: watching. We should be watching, as it says here, for opportunities to pray for others. It is a matter of being aware of the needs of others. This verse is part of the section dealing with the armor of God found in verses 10-19. Parts of that armor, such as the shield, the helmet, and the breastplate, are basically for defense; they protect against the attacks of the enemy. However, the armor that Paul describes is not for defense only. Using the "sword of the Spirit" (in verse 17) and prayer (in verse 18), we are to go on the offensive against—to attack—the powers of darkness. Paul told the Corinthian congregation, "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds" (II Corinthians 10:4).

Nothing can be done spiritually by our own power. Of and by our own strength, we are not capable of pulling down strongholds, nor are we capable of blessing, healing, or granting any spiritual gift. Even Jesus, as a human, affirmed, "I can of myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me." That is from where the power of prayer comes: doing the will of God and praying according to His will. Jesus Christ kept in close personal contact with His Father in heaven. As a result, Jesus' life was filled with love, faith, and power from God. His frequent and fervent prayers made possible His and others' victory over sin and death.

Jesus' disciples were aware that their Teacher knew how to draw close to the eternal God and call upon His help in every situation. So one of them asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. Jesus' instructions are preserved for us in Matthew 6 and Luke 11.

Matthew 6:9-13 In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

It is always a thrill when the sermonette and the sermon tie together so well. The sermonette on forgiveness tied in with prayer, because one of the major elements, if not *the* major element, in answered prayer is that we ask for forgiveness for our debtors as God forgives our debts.

Jesus did not call this the "Lord's Prayer" as many do today, or in any way encourage His disciples to memorize this specific prayer and repeat it when they prayed. He had just forbidden them to do that. Jesus was simply outlining the correct approach to God in prayer and the basic things we should ask for. Jesus came to reveal the Father to humanity and He always addressed the Father in His prayers. This Father-child relationship is also open to all of us. Such a private relationship with our heavenly Father should be as real and intimate as the physical relationships we ideally should have with our human fathers or children. With God's Holy Spirit, it is on an even higher plane.

Jesus said that our Father is in heaven. When we address the Father in our private prayers, we have to realize that we are having a personal audience with the supreme Ruler of the universe. As we begin our prayers, we should not only address and think of God as our Father but also honor and praise His name and His office as Creator and Ruler, as well as His character of unselfish love, great goodness, and generosity.

God's name, and all for which it stands, is to be held in absolute reverence. Our deep respect and awe for our heavenly Father should be total and absolute. Addressing God in an attitude of praise, worship, and adoration focuses our attention on the greatness of the Being to whom we are praying: We are praying to the great Power of all the universe.

Praying "Your Kingdom come" is asking for and looking forward to the time when God's government will be established on this earth, through the return of Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords. Praying this way shows that we earnestly desire the time when real and lasting peace will be ushered in and all humanity will know and follow God's way. We should be praying for peace now and that God will bring peace to this world. We should ask God to help us to understand and do His will. We need to ask God to help us study and understand the foundation of all knowledge: the

inspired written Word of God. This reveals what we are, why we were born, and how to achieve His awesome purpose for our lives.

We also need God's help, inspiration, and guidance in expressing His love, joy, and peace. We need to ask Him to help us to be longsuffering, kind, and good to one another, and to help us to have faith, gentleness, and self-control. The things that we can ask for are unlimited. God stands behind and backs up His will, His laws, and His promises to those who serve Him. We can have absolute confidence that our prayers are heard.

We can confidently ask God to supply our physical daily needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter, as long as we are seeking first the Kingdom of God and keeping His commandments. In our personal requests, we can detail our needs and ask God to guide us to do our part. God knows of these needs even before we ask Him, but He wants to hear it from us. He wants to hear how we phrase our requests and how often we include other people in our requests. God has not promised to automatically provide what we do not ask for. He wants us to never forget that He is the ultimate provider of everything that we have.

In prayer, it helps us to remember who our Provider is. In addition to physical food, we need spiritual nourishment. This is obtained by studying the Bible daily to learn the mind of Jesus Christ. We should ask God every day for the spiritual understanding of His words of eternal life and the strength to live by them.

All of us sin occasionally by breaking at least the spirit of God's commandments in one way or another. We need to recognize and repent of our sins, then ask our loving and merciful Father to forgive us. Remember to ask that "our" and not "my" sins be forgiven, as Christ instructed in that sample prayer. We should learn to be concerned for other people by having godly love and compassion for them as well. I am not saying that it is wrong to say, "God please forgive me"; I am saying that it is wrong to not remember to ask God to also forgive others.

Remember that God will forgive us only if we are willing to forgive others. If we cannot first rid ourselves of feelings of bitterness, resentfulness, or hatred toward others, then we must ask God to clean up our minds by replacing the spirit of hate with His Spirit of love, so that our prayers will not be hindered. God will not listen to someone who is hateful.

Jesus also advises us to ask God to bring us not into sore trial but to deliver us from Satan and his demons. We know that God tempts no one, but He does sometimes permit us to fall into various trials and troubles of our own or Satan's devising in order to test us, to make us stronger, and to improve our character. We should pray daily and earnestly that God would not allow us to be brought into any severe trial or temptation, as He promises in I Corinthians 10:13. We should also ask that He would give us spiritual help to recognize sinful thoughts and temptations, to reject them, and to do His will.

All of our requests should be made in Jesus Christ's name. We can rightfully ask the Father for things "in Jesus' name" when we know that it is His will, that Jesus Christ's authority stands behind our requests.

Jesus' outline for prayer begins with praise and adoration of our heavenly Father. This reminds us once again to whom we are praying and of the character and office of the true God who rules over His vast creation. Jesus closes His example prayer showing that we are to affirm the content of our prayer—show that we really mean it—by concluding with "amen," or "so be it."

Jesus chose us to be privileged members of the Family of God. He chose us so that whatever we ask in His name the Father will give to us. Some have mistakenly thought that as Christians we receive everything for which we pray, but *prayer must be according to God's will*.

The New Testament lays down certain specific laws about prayer. The first specific law is that prayer must be the prayer of faith. When we offer prayer in faith, we exercise confidence in God. We are to have an unwavering confidence in Him, a belief that He will do what is best, and we are to cheerfully relinquish control of the situation into His hands. This is not to say that we give up our responsibility to perform the works that make our faith alive. The prayer of faith is to accompany our effort to find solutions. However, we must realize that all human effort is ineffectual without the blessing of God. Our actions, along with the prayer of faith, must be according to God's will.

James 5:15 And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

When it is a formality, merely the routine and conventional repetition of a form of words, it cannot be answered. When prayer is hopeless, it cannot be effective. There is little use in praying to be changed if we do not believe it possible that we can change. To pray with power, we must have an invincible belief in the all-sufficient love of God. Doubting is a major hindrance to prayer.

The second specific law is that prayer must be in the name of Christ. The apostle John says that to pray in His name is a condition of prayer.

John 14:14 If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.

We cannot pray for things of which we know that Jesus would disapprove. We cannot pray that we receive something forbidden by the Word of God. We cannot pray that some personal objective or desire be granted to us, if that objective would hurt someone else if accomplished. We cannot pray in the name of Him who is love for vengeance on our enemies.

The apostle John says that remaining in Christ is a condition of prayer. If we abide in Him and His words abide in us, we will ask what we will in His name and it will be done for us (John 15:7). The closer we live to Christ, the more we will pray properly; and the more we pray properly, the greater the answer we receive.

The third specific law is that prayer must be according to the will of God. The principle of prayer is that to be answered it must be in accordance with the will of God, not necessarily just what we want. When we pray we must first realize that we never know better than God. *The essence of prayer is that we say and understand and believe that God's will is what will be done*. Thus, we should say, "Your will be done!" or, "if it is God's will," or, "God willing." Jesus Himself, in the moment of His greatest agony and crisis prayed, "Your will be done." This was an example for us. The apostle John wrote that we should have confidence and compassion in praying for one another. He emphasizes that it must be according to God's will.

I John 5:14-16 Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. If anyone sees his

brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.

It is interesting to note that He hears us but that it does not say that He is going to do it for sure. If someone else has committed a sin not leading to death and we pray for that person, God is able to help that person to repent of that sin and to be forgiven. As John said here, we have a great part that we can play in helping someone to be forgiven of his sins that are not according to death.

Here we see an important principle of prayer: God listens to our prayers. The word John uses for *confidence* in verse 14 originally meant "freedom of speech," the freedom to speak boldly. Later, it came to indicate a kind of confidence. We can ask God according to His will in confidence, knowing that He will answer our prayer, but it will be according to His will and it will be the best possible answer that anyone could receive. With God, we have freedom of speech within the broad guidelines of His standard of righteousness. He is always listening, more ready to hear than we are to pray. *We never have to force our way into His presence or compel Him to pay attention.*

He says that obedience is a condition of prayer. We receive whatever we ask because we keep His commandments (I John 3:22). This also is the will of God, that we keep His commandments.

Effective prayer should not just be as a request for the things we desire. We should pray that God would send us the things that we need and that are good for us and that we would be able to accept the things He wills.

Colossians 1:9-11 For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy.

It is God's will that we grow in grace and knowledge. It is God's will that we build character. It is God's will that we suffer together with Christ. I know that many of us think of that as the negative side of God's will being done in our lives, but it always has a positive result.

I Thessalonians 5:16-18 Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

The way to rejoice forever is to pray without ceasing. We rejoice more if we pray more; we should pray often, without tiredness or apathy. The meaning is not that we should do nothing but pray, but that there should be nothing else that hinders prayer at its proper time. Prayer will promote and produce good results and not obstruct good works.

When we set aside time for prayer, it should be at a time when we can truly contemplate, be sincere, and have faith in God. We need to meditate on those things for which we are asking God. It should not be a time of distraction. We cannot pray if the television is on, unless it is an emergency, of course. God will accept any prayer that is in the right attitude during an emergency.

The fourth specific law is that prayer must be selfless; it must never be selfish. Whenever we try to turn prayer into something to enable us to realize our own objectives and to satisfy our own desires, it will be ineffective because it is not genuine, selfless prayer.

Philippians 2:3-4 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

If we have that attitude in prayer, then we are on the right track. We see there some excellent advice on the essentials of an effective prayer. We must not allow ourselves to be selfish, and we cannot let our care and attention to be **totally** absorbed by our own interests. This means that we have to demonstrate a kind interest in the happiness of others. This real concern for the welfare of others comes from a righteous character that has God's gift of love within us. It must be a naturally occurring love within us as a result of the indwelling of Jesus Christ and the power of His Holy Spirit.

This does not mean that there is to be any meddling in the affairs of others or that we are to have the character of busybodies in other people's matters. Here are three scriptures that are very clear, telling us not to be busybodies:

II Thessalonians 3:11 For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies.

I Timothy 5:13 And besides they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house, and not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not.

I Peter 4:15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters.

It means that we are to regard with kindness the welfare of others, and to strive to be caring. It is the duty of every human being to do this. No one is at liberty to live for himself or to disregard the needs of others. The object of this rule is to break up the narrow spirit of selfishness and to produce a benevolent regard for the happiness of others.

We are not to take that literally for every case, because it would simply mean that if you can mobilize enough people to pray for anything, you will get it. That just is not the case, because it has to be according to God's will, and it has to benefit others. What it does mean is that when one prays, he should not think entirely of his own needs or desires. Applied simply, I might pray for sunshine so I can work in my yard, while the farmer nearby might pray for rain for his crops. Prayer can be contradictory. That is why we must always think of others when we are praying, to make sure that even asking for good things is not conflicting with someone else.

One of the greatest mistakes in prayer is to pray as if nobody but us matters. As potential firstfruits of the Kingdom of God, we can and must take everything to God in prayer. However, when we have done so, we must accept the answer that God, in His perfect wisdom and perfect love, sends us. I know that sometimes we do not like the answers that we get, but then we are saying that we do not like how God is dealing with us. We have to be very careful that we accept what God has decided on our behalf.

We owe our lives to our spiritual intercessor, Jesus Christ. At the same time, and in the final analysis, how many people will have received blessings, help, and maybe even owed their salvation in part to someone who has been a physical intercessor for them? This is one of the ways we show that we have the love of God in us. "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." (John 15:13). We should lay down our prayer life for our friends!

God is forming a Family that will rule the universe as one solidly united team in which every member looks out for the welfare of every other member. We must develop this attitude at this time, and God is here to help us. We must develop this love in prayer, within our human families, and within God's physical church, here and now. If we expect to be in God's Kingdom, we must really concentrate on having effective prayer. Do we dare to presume that God would want us in His unified, loving family if we are still self-absorbed, if we cannot even take the time to pray for our own family members, if we cannot even take the time to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ?

Solomon saw the value of teamwork, and expressed it very well in Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one be warm alone? Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

These verses clearly express the principle involved in bearing one another's burdens, and it is also a fundamental and foundational principle to the proper attitude in prayer. A survey of scripture reveals that we can pray that our brothers and sisters in Christ receive many things, such as wisdom; hope; spiritual understanding; revelation; increased knowledge of God's will; love; abundant strength; healing; Christ living within us; more of the Holy Spirit; freedom from sin; the full fruits of righteousness, sincerity, patience, longsuffering, joyfulness, and the ability to walk worthy of God, among other virtues. The list of prayer items is unlimited in what we can intercede on another's behalf; but, as we heard in the sermonette, asking forgiveness for others is a major factor that Christ felt it necessary to emphasize. In short, we can pray for God to bestow on others anything praiseworthy, anything good.

We will end with the words of the apostle Paul, who took the position of kneeling, symbolizing submissiveness, solemnity, and reverence:

Ephesians 3:14-21 For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

What a fitting prayer that Paul offered up to that congregation.