

FIVE CONDITIONS OF ANSWERED PRAYER

Prayer Can Change Your Life - Part 2

John 14:12-14; 1 John 5:13-15

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Prayer can change your life. Sometimes our prayers soar to the heavens. Other times, the words seem to gather in a little puddle at our feet. Why is that? Doesn't God promise to answer all our prayers? No. In fact the scriptures tell us that sometimes God completely ignores a person's prayers. Today we look at five conditions that are to be met if our prayers are to be answered. And since we want answers to our prayers, these are things we ought to know.

1. We Must Have an Honest Relationship with God. John 15:7 – *“If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, you can ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you.”* That's a beautiful promise, but every promise has a premise, or a condition. The promise is, *“I will give you whatever you ask in prayer [based on the premise that] you remain in Me.”* That is, “if we have a honest relationship.” But how do we remain in Christ? By allowing the words of Christ to remain in us. If we fill our minds with the Word of God, then we will be in Christ. We will abide in Him. God says that if we want Him to listen to us, we need to listen to Him. If I don't pay attention to God, why should God pay any attention to me? If I ignore His word, why should He pay attention to my words? We need to have an honest relationship with God.

How do we do that? We build that relationship by going through the Word of God. That's why Bible study and Sunday School are so important. Not just for children and youth, but for adults. Am I saying that if we don't study the Bible, our prayers won't be answered? No, I'm saying that our prayer life will be more effective if we understand scripture. The more we understand the Bible, the better our relationship with God will be. And the better the relationship, the more effective our prayers will be. So how can we evaluate our relationship to God? In 1 John we find some questions that can help us see just how honest our relationship with God is.

A. Do I Admit What I Have Done Wrong? Does unconfessed sin remain within us? It may be an activity, an attitude, a habit. When we go our own way, do our own thing, it breaks the connection between us and God. When we try to hide things from God that we know are wrong, then that honest relationship is broken. We are living as a fraud or hypocrite. We simultaneously try to live both for God and for ourselves, and that doesn't work. So the first thing I have to ask myself is if I'm really being honest with God, including admitting what I've done wrong.

Psalm 66:18 says that if I try to hide the sin that lies in my heart, the Lord will not hear. Isaiah 59:2 says our sin separates us from God. Proverbs 28:13 *“He who tries to conceal his sins cannot prosper but he who admits them, confesses them, forsakes them will have mercy.”* And in 1 John 1:8-9, *“If we claim to be without sin, we're just deceiving ourselves. The truth is not in us. However, if we confess our sins, He's faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”* What is confession? Confession is simply being honest with God. It's saying, “God, You're right. I was wrong. That jealousy or impatience was wrong. Please forgive me.” To have an honest relationship with God, we have to be honest with ourselves about our errors, our sins, and our mistakes. Do we honestly confess our sins?

B. Am I ignoring any of God's principles? When God tells me to do something, or when I know I'm holding on to something that God wants me to let go of, that breaks my connection with God. 1 John 3:21-22 *“Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us we have confidence before God and we receive from Him anything we ask [That's the promise. Then comes the premise.] because we obey His commands and do what pleases Him. This is His command: To believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and to love one another as He has commanded us.”*

That's all there is to it. Obey the commands of Jesus. Of course in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said that he did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament. And in his day, there were over 600 written laws and commands. If that's too many, we can go back to God's original 10. And if that's still too much, because

much, because we don't keep them, then we can go to the basic two that Jesus gave of loving God and showing that love by loving your neighbor as yourself. The only problem is, we don't do that either. Fortunately, what God seeks is an attitude of obedience, not perfection in action. We need to want to do what is right in God's sight. Again, God does not expect perfection, but an attitude of obedience. So the question is, "Am I doing things, acting in ways that I know are contrary to God's will for me in this time and place?"

C. Do I Really Want God's Will for My Life? 1 John 5:14-15 *"This is the assurance we have in approaching God that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us and if we know that He hears us, then whatever we ask, we know that we have what we've asked of Him."* When we ask according to God's will, we have confidence in prayer and we know that He's going to answer. But do we know God's will?

Most Christians make a big mistake in prayer. They constantly say, "God, is it Your will that I ask for this?" over every little item. The real issue is not "God, what is Your will regarding this specific circumstance?" The real issue is "Am I in God's will as a person?" If my life is in harmony with God, then my desires are going to be in harmony with God. St. Augustine said, "Love God and do what you please." That is, if we really love God with all our heart, we're not going to want to do what displeases God. So we don't have to constantly ask, "Is it Your will?" What we need to do is get our life in God's will, always trying to do what is right, so our desires are already in the will of God.

How do I know if I really want God's will for my life? How anxious am I to hear from God? How eagerly do I turn to God's Word? How quickly do I read and study God's Word? For that is the place where I will find God's Will. If I want it in my life, I will seek it there. So the first condition to have my prayers answered is to have an honest relationship with God, by confessing my sins and mistakes, by following God's principles, and by seeking to live within God's will.

2. We Must Have a Forgiving Attitude Toward Other People. *"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you've received it and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him so that your Father in heaven may forgive your sins."* Mark 11:24-25

Prayer is connected to forgiveness. Time and time again, when Jesus talks about prayer, He talks about forgiveness. Why? Because nothing will kill our prayers faster than resentment. When we hold a grudge, when we nurse resentments, when we allow bitterness to grow in our life, it kills our prayers. Maybe our prayers are not being answered because we're holding a grudge. Jesus tells us that when we come before God, and we remember that we are holding a grudge, or that someone has a problem with us, we are to stop right then and there, go out and find that person, get forgiveness and offer forgiveness, and then we can come back before the Lord. Why? Because we cannot say we love God and yet hate our brother. One of the primary reasons people never see answers to prayer is because they allow bitterness to spring up in their lives.

In the Living Bible, Hebrews 12:15 says, *"Watch out that no bitterness take root among you for as it springs up among you it causes deep trouble, hurting many in their spiritual lives."* Bitterness is a poison that will eat us alive. We can't have a lack of forgiveness in our hearts and have our prayers answered. Every week we pray the scariest line in all of scripture: *"Forgive us our trespasses, our sins, as we forgive the trespasses and sins of others."* We are saying we want forgiveness, but only to the extent that we are willing to offer forgiveness. Do we really want to pray that? But that is the premise to the promise. Bitterness and resentment will block our prayer.

In 1 Peter 3:7, Peter is talking about marriage. We all know that one of the easiest places to have resentment build up is in families. Family members hurt each other's feelings: husbands to wives; wives to husbands, parents to children, children to parents. Bitterness and resentment are a common experience in family relationships. Peter has given advice to women, and then in verse 7 he says the same thing to men, saying *"Husband's, in the same way*

“Husband’s, in the same way [just like he said to the wives] be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect.... so that nothing will hinder your prayers.”

Disharmony in the home will block God’s answers to our prayers. In fact, how we treat our spouse influences our prayer life. That’s pretty strong. But the scriptures teach that among the qualifications of a pastor is to have a happy, peaceful home life. Why? Because if there’s tension at home, the prayers of those church leaders will be totally ineffective. And with every pastor, every church leader I know, including me, tension at home has sometimes been a detriment to ministry in the church. To have prayers answered, we need to have a forgiving attitude.

3. We Must Be Willing to Share the Results. Give and it will be given unto you. It’s the principle of generosity, and the principle behind stewardship. The more we give, the more God will give us. If we expect God to bless our life, we must be willing to bless the lives of others in the same way that God has blessed us. It is how I end every service. Bless others because you have been blessed. Proverbs 21:13: *“If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.”* That’s a fact of life. If we pay no attention to the legitimate needs of others, God will not pay attention to us. So a pre-requisite for God’s blessings, is that we bless others. If we ignore those who are in obvious difficulty around us, what right do we have to expect God to bail us out?

We are expected to be a channel of God’s love and grace. I would not presume to ask God to bless my business if I were not willing to at least give back a portion of what He had blessed me with in a percentage, a tithe. You say, “I ask God for good health.” What are you going to do with that healthy body after you’ve got it? Are you going to spend all the effort and energy on yourself or are you willing to help others? One of the conditions for answered prayer is to be willing to help those less fortunate with the blessings that we have been given.

Understand that it is possible to pray for the right thing with the wrong motive. Jesus told us that we are to pray for our needs: *“Give us this day our daily bread.”* We can even pray for our desires. But behind our request needs to be a willingness to share our blessings with the people around us. God is not interested in simply satisfying our selfishness. We must be willing to share our blessings; to share the results of our prayers. If we want God to bless us, as individuals and as a church, we have to be willing to be a channel of blessing to others.

4. We Must Believe That God Will Answer. James 1:6-7 *“but when you ask, you must believe and not doubt because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord. He’s a double-minded man unstable in all he does.”* We cannot doubt that God will answer. There’s only one kind of prayer that God answers: the prayer of faith. Mark 9:29 says, *“According to your faith, it will be done unto you.”* What are you expecting God to do in your life? Hebrews 11:6 says, *“Without faith it is impossible to please God.”* We can’t please God without faith. It’s the number one condition We have to have faith. But what is faith? Is faith believing that God can do it, no matter what “it” is? No. Not really. That’s hope, and hope is important. But true faith is believing that God will do it. Not just that He can, but that He will. That’s faith.

I believe that a major problem for our society is a lack of dreams and a lack of vision of what can be. And because we don’t see the possibilities we focus on the problems. Because we don’t see, because we don’t dream, we can’t imagine the reality of theological principles coming to life. We run to material things, things we can play with. Why? Because we see so little in our lives of power and true strength, that we expect or settle for little real power, or real importance in our life. But the Bible says “According to your faith” not according to your ability; not according to your education; not according to how good a person you are, but *“According to your faith, it will be done unto you.”* A condition to having our prayers answered, is that we believe God will answer.

5. We Must Pray in Jesus' Name. John 14:13-14 *"And I will do whatever you ask in My name so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask Me for anything in My name and I will do it."* John 16:24 says the same thing. *"You've not asked anything in My name. Ask and you will receive and your joy will be complete."* What is so special about the name of Jesus? Isn't it just a signal that the prayer is about to end, like the CB-er shouting, "That a ten-four, good buddy." Others think that "in Jesus' name" is a mystical password, the secret word that gives us immediate access to God. But what does it mean to pray "in Jesus' name"?

Jesus is the bridge between God and humanity. God came to us in the form of a man named Jesus, who we call the Christ. The Bible says there is only one mediator, one bridge, and Jesus told us, *"I am the Way. No one comes to the Father except through Me."* He is the bridge to God. It's like going into a strange bank and trying to cash a check. They won't do it because they don't know you. But if you know the manager, or even a large depositor with the bank, you can cash that check on the authority of that person. Now when we stand before God, there is no better credit reference than Jesus. Where we may be spiritually bankrupt, His account is full, and it gives Him plenty of pull. So when I come to God and pray, "In Jesus' name" I'm saying, "God, I realize that You don't have any reason to answer me, but I'm coming in Jesus' name, because of what He's done. And now I live in Him and with Him. Now I am here in the name of Jesus."

Must I end every prayer "In Jesus' name"? No. The words aren't necessary as long as the attitude is there. There is nothing wrong with saying it every time, as long as it reminds us why we have the right to pray. Of course, we don't have to remind God, but sometimes we have to remind ourselves. With some prayers it might be better to start by saying, "I'm praying to You because I first accepted Jesus when He came to me." It is not necessary to add it on at the end of a prayer, and the fear is that we come to treat the phrase like these are the magic words to get what we want, when it really needs to be a reminder that we do not come to the Father on our own merit, but based on the grace that Jesus has given us. We pray in Jesus's name.

These, then, are the conditions to have our prayers answered. If we hold grudges or nurse resentments; if we refuse to admit our mistakes and sins; if we go to God without any expectation that the Lord will act; if we refuse to share the blessings we have already been given, or the blessings we are about to get; if we fail to seek God's will in our life; if we pray on our own authority, believing that we do not need the grace and endorsement of Jesus, our prayer life will be pitiful. Because we haven't met the conditions that the Lord gives us. But what if we do?

If we have an open, honest relationship with God; if we live with a forgiving attitude; if we have a generous spirit and a willingness to share the blessings we receive; if we will believe not only that God can answer, but that God will answer; and if we come before the Lord in the grace of Jesus, in the name of Jesus, we can see miracles happen in our midst. We can change hearts and minds. We can change ourselves, our church, our world. We can make a difference in this time and place. But don't take my word for it. Test the word of God. See for yourself, that in your life, you may know it is true. In your life may it be so. Amen.