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“Preaching grace in the Dispensation of grace”

A Bible Study

Richard Jordan, Editor, President of Grace School of the Bible

888-535-2300 GracelImpact.org

Unanswered Prayer:

ITS CAUSE AND CURE

BY RICHARD JORDAN

Prayer is one of the most asked about subjects in the Christian life. Instinctively we know about it, yet experientially we face question after question: If God knows all my needs, why should I pray? Can I change God’s mind or my circumstances through prayer? Is it enough to pray only once or should I pray persistently for the same thing? How can I be sure God hears my prayers? How does God answer my prayers--and why does *He not* answer them?

We pray. We know we should. But questions like these haunt our minds. We pray about our fears, anxieties, problems, joys, wishes, dreams--yet often it seems the heavens are brass; God is silent, and it seems “no one cares for *me*.” Prayer becomes confusing, a burden and a cruel mockery.

THE BASIC PROBLEM

The fundamental fallacy in the prayer arena comes from a failure to rightly divide the Word of Truth--the claiming of prayer promises that *have nothing do with the dispensation in which we live*, but belong rather to a program which God Himself has interrupted and is temporarily holding in abeyance.

For those who fail to recognize the distinctive ministry and message committed to the Apostle Paul, the topic of prayer poses a difficult and perplexing uncertainty. Consider the prayer promises made during our Lord’s earthly ministry:

"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you;

"For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened" (Matt. 7:7, 8).

"Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven"(Matt. 18:19).

"And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Matt.21:22).

"And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

"If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it"(John 14:13, 14).

Wonderful promises, indeed!! But who among us does not know the disappointment, confusion and heartache of claiming one of these promises and having it seemingly fail. That's why we develop theological "gimmicks" to explain away the seeming failures. The fact is that these promises do not work for us because *they do not apply to our dispensation*.

For even a casual Bible student nothing could be clearer than the fact that our Lord came as "*a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God to confirm the promises made unto [Israel's] fathers*"(Rom. 15: 8). He proclaimed the "gospel of the kingdom" long promised to Israel and declared:

"...I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24).

This is why, in His first great commission to the Twelve, He commanded them:

"...Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not:

"But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt.10:5,6).

These verses need to be faced honestly so they have their full impact: the simple fact is that the prayer promises made by our Lord during His earthly ministry have *nothing to do with the dispensation of grace or the Body of Christ*.

The record is clear that the nation Israel rejected her Messiah both in His incarnation (Matt.- John) as well as in His resurrection ministry through the Apostles and "Little Flock" in early Acts. It was only then that He raised up a *new* apostle-Paul-and sent him forth to usher in a *new* dispensation-the dispensation of grace (Eph. 3:1-9, Rom. 16:25, Col.1:24-26, I Tim. 2:4-7).

We simply cannot go back to the so-called Four Gospels or the early Acts period to find instructions for living in the current dispensation of grace. In vain these records will be searched for instructions for the Body of Christ.

This is the explanation for the many seeming failures of the Kingdom prayer promises. In that program these promises function perfectly. To remove them from where God has placed them, to "rob Peter" of his program to "pay Paul" with coinage he cannot use, is a blunder without equal where the subject of prayer is concerned.

WHAT PRAYER IS NOT

Prayer is a vital part of every believer's life. Too many of us, however, view prayer as a performance--as a ritual to make us more spiritual or as a means of getting what we want. To turn prayer into a means of manipulating God to be more favorably disposed toward us is to not only miss the purpose of prayer altogether but also to thwart the grace of God to us in Christ. We need to understand just what prayer is *not*.

For many sincere believers prayer is *a way to relieve guilt*. Through "keeping short accounts with God" by constantly confessing their sins and asking for forgiveness they hope to have Him forgive their sins. Rather than relieving the guilt of past failures, however, this in fact demonstrates a sad *misunderstanding* of the finished work of Christ --the very *basis* on which we pray.

Consider just one verse:

"In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:7).

Both redemption and forgiveness are found in Christ. In order to be redeemed, must we ask God to redeem us every day? No! Then why would we ask Him to forgive us daily?

The truth is that God's *only* answer to the guilt of sin is the cross-work of Christ. It is our faith resting in the facts of what Christ has accomplished for us at Calvary that settles the sin question and removes the burden of guilt from our shoulders (Rom.4:6-8, col. 2:13; 3:13, etc.).

Prayer should never be motivated by guilt. When we pray "*In the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ*" (Eph. 5:20) we are doing far more than simply tacking a phrase to the end of our prayers. This is actually an expression of a vital understanding: that we have no righteousness of our own by which we can approach God but that Jesus Christ has given us His righteousness--and this is the source of our confidence in speaking to our heavenly Father; this is the *basis* of our prayer.

Prayer is also often used as *a way to get financial or material gain*. Surprisingly even grace believers can be found clinging to this idea.

A passage we all could take more to heart is I Tim.6:6-8.

"But godliness with contentment is great gain.

"For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.

"And having food and raiment let us be therewith content."

Read those verses again, will you, and ask yourself: Am I truly content with what I have while I am asking for more material things at the same time? Can material things bring contentment?

Another underlying motive for many people's prayer life is the desire to *gain God's favor and blessing* by their prayers. By using just the right formulas, by employing certain words, by their "*much speaking*" (Matt. 6:7) they hope to have God accept and bless them with otherwise unattainable benefits. Such *performance-based-acceptance* is, of course, the very antithesis of grace--of being "*blessed with all spiritual blessings*" in Christ and made "*complete in Him*." It serves only to reduce

prayer to a formula for approaching God and gaining His favor rather than intimate communication resulting from our personal relation with Him through Christ Jesus.

Often prayer is seen as a mechanism to either *find or change God's mind*. People try to get God's permission and agreement to do what they want to do--buy this house, sell that car, take a certain position, attend a particular event, etc. --praying fervently that God would reveal His will for them in such matters. But we must ask: Hasn't He *already revealed His will* for us in His Word? Hasn't He already equipped us with the capacity for--and challenge of--applying His revealed will to the details of our lives?

If, as II Tim. 3:16, 17 indicate, the Scripture completely equips "*unto all good works*," are our feelings, impressions and circumstances really means by which we are to receive revelation from God?

WHAT PRAYER IS

When we understand what prayer really *is* it becomes one of our greatest spiritual assets. So let's think about what prayer in the dispensation of grace is all about.

As children of God we have a personal relationship with Him through Christ. Because of His finished work at Calvary we can approach our heavenly Father, being assured of His unconditional love and acceptance of us "*in Christ*." This is the *basis* for our prayer.

In the most basic terms, prayer is simply talking to God. *Webster's 1828 Dictionary* defines prayer as "*to pour forth sound or word's*" and uses Lam. 2:19's "*pour out thine heart*" as an illustration.

Prayer, then, is pouring out our heart's concerns to God. It is our intelligent, personal communion with our heavenly Father; the means by which we experience an intimate, personal fellowship with Him. To view prayer as a means of getting what we want--be it relief from guilt, winning acceptance, getting material or financial gain, etc.--is to fail to genuinely pray.

Consider Paul's instructions in Phil. 4:6,7 about this:

"*Be careful for nothing*:" Our focus is *not* to be on the cares of this life--circumstances, possessions, feelings and the like. We are to be looking "not at the

things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen" (II Cor. 4:18, cf. Col. 3:1-3).

"But in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God." We are invited to enjoy the intimacy of fellowship with God as we express to Him the matters of our heart.

When we remember that He knows our every thought we realize we never need to ask, "Should I pray about this?" Rather, the path of faith is to commune with our heavenly Father over every detail of our life.

In the dispensation of grace the will of God is executed through the Word of God working in the inner man of the believer. The first issue, therefore, in prayer is *communion with God over what His Word says and how it applies to the various situations we face*. Conscious that He hears and knows our every thought, we thus *talk with Him*.

It is through this pattern of "Pauline Prayer" that we are able to work through matters of discernment regarding the application of God's Word in each area of our life. When we thus pray--when we thus pour out our hearts to God--there is *always* an answer:

"And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." This "tranquilizing" effect of prayer enables us to always be sufficient for all things.

The bottom line to prayer in the present dispensation is this: God loves you. You are His child. Talk to Him. Tell Him what's on your heart, how you feel--He knows it already! Tell Him about your gratitude for what He has done in your life. What He wants most from you is *YOU!* He wants you to grow to know Him, so listen to His Word and appreciate the reality of His Word actively working in your life thus allowing Him to live through you.

The door into God's presence has been opened to us through the person of Jesus Christ. Don't rob yourself of the opportunity to go boldly to the throne of grace. In His presence you always have a hearing!
