

## Prayer 404: Hinderances of Prayer

Series: School of Prayer

James 4:2b-3

July 31, 2022

Ok, well then, it's just me and you and the Scriptures to conclude our series. Today, we will look at the Hinderances of Prayer.

I want to draw you attention to James 4:2b-3 (NLT2):

*Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.<sup>1</sup>*

There are reasons why our prayers are not answered. Some of them are legitimate. Sometimes, we pray things that are out of the will of God. Praying that Michigan would lose every football game for the next decade is probably not within God's will, especially since the head coach came out on God's side regarding the abortion issue. No, there are times God says, "I'm not going to answer that," or maybe "I'm not going to answer that right now."

But that is not what we are talking about today. We are talking about the things we do that hinder our prayers from being answered. Often, it is our fault that our prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling and smack us back in the head.

There are 8 hinderances to prayer listed in Scripture.

### **First, Disobedience.**

This first one we understand quite easily. If a child has been bad, they don't get what they want. If a person has violated the law, they lose something – finances, reputation, freedom – to pay for their crime.

Likewise, when we disobey God, our prayers, no matter how worthy, are not answered.

Deuteronomy 1:45 reads:

*So I told you, but you would not listen. You rebelled against the LORD's command and in your arrogance you marched up into the hill country... You came back and wept before the LORD, but he paid no attention to your weeping and turned a deaf ear to you.<sup>2</sup>*

When we disobey God, we cannot expect our prayers to be answered. The problem here is that we don't want to admit we are in active disobedience. Just like the teenager that is mad at their parents because they can't do something because of a curfew violation, so too we misdirect our disobedient actions. We have this warped understanding of God of a cosmic Santa Claus that has no "naughty or nice" list, that He will do whatever we want.

God will not answer our prayer if we are being disobedient. So, if your prayers are not being answered, ask not whether there is a God, ask whether you are being obedient to Him.

### **A second hinderance to prayer is Unconfessed Sin.**

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<sup>1</sup> James 4:2b-3 (NLT2)

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 1:43, 45 (NIV)

David wrote in Psalm 66:18:

*If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.*<sup>3</sup>

This is like the first. If we have sinned against God, and we know we have, but not confessed it, then God will not answer our prayers. His holiness demands justice. His expectations on your and my life require punishment if we sin.

Now, what is sin? Sin is a knowing transgression of the law of God either by omission (not doing what we know the Lord wants us to do) or commission (doing something we know God says is wrong).

So, if we have unconfessed sin in our lives – prejudice; harbored resentment, even hatred; sexual sin – then God will not answer our prayers.

**A third hinderance to prayer is Indifference.**

Listen to what Solomon said in Proverbs 1:24-28:

*“I called you so often, but you wouldn’t come. I reached out to you, but you paid no attention. You ignored my advice and rejected the correction I offered. So I will laugh when you are in trouble! I will mock you when disaster overtakes you— when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster engulfs you like a cyclone, and anguish and distress overwhelm you. “When they cry for help, I will not answer. Though they anxiously search for me, they will not find me.”*<sup>4</sup>

So, indifference to God here is not listening to God’s call, not pay attention when He comes to us, not heeding His counsel. As such, when the storms of life come upon us, and we finally turn to God, He will ignore us because we ignored Him.

**A fourth hinderance to prayer is Neglect of Mercy.**

Our prayers will not be answered not only when we ignore God, but when we ignore others.

Proverbs 21:13 says:

*If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard.*<sup>5</sup>

This is your typical parallelism in Scripture. If you do this wrong, expect the same wrong to come upon you.

In this case, when we ignore the cries for help from the poor, the disadvantaged, the downtrodden, God will ignore us. This begs the question, “Whose cry rings out in the dead of night that we close and lock our doors to?” “Whose plight is before us and we choose to look away?” “Whom has God put within our sight so that we could help, and yet, we have closed our eyes?”

One day, the pastor of in inner city Chicago church, prayed, “Lord, let me see the world as You see it, and break my heart with the things that break Yours.” Do you know: he really meant that prayer, and the next day he found himself weeping so much, he had to ask God to stop.

I encourage you – trust the Lord on this one. If you find your heart a little calloused this morning about the needs of so many around us, then be honest with Him. Tell Him, “I’m sorry that I’m not sorry. Would you please soften my callous heart? Would You please break my heart with the things that break Yours?”

Neglecting mercy will hinder our prayers.

**A fifth hinderance to prayer is Despising the Law.**

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 66:18 (NLT2)

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 1:24-28 (NLT2)

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 21:13 (NRSV)

Again, from Proverbs, this time 28:9:

*If you refuse to obey what you have been taught, your prayers will not be heard.*<sup>6</sup>

The New Living Translation puts it this way:

*God detests the prayers of a person who ignores the law.*<sup>7</sup>

Once again, we have a disobedient act stopping our prayers. This time, it is knowingly violating Scripture.

There are some who suppose that if they do not know what Scripture requires, they shall not be accountable for their transgressions; and therefore, will avoid everything that has the possibility to enlighten them. They will not read the Bible, lest they should know the will of God. But this will result in nothing, for we are to discover our Master's will, then do it.

God does not listen to our prayers if we intend to go back to our sin as soon as we get off our knees. When we forsake our sin and follow Him, however, He willingly listens—no matter how bad our sin has been. What closes His ears is not the depth of our sin but our secret intention to do it again. God hears our intentions as clearly as He hears our words.<sup>8</sup>

**A sixth hinderance to prayer is Stubbornness.**

This one is a significant threat to the long-time church goer.

Zechariah 7:11-13 reads:

*Your ancestors refused to listen to this message. They stubbornly turned away and put their fingers in their ears to keep from hearing. They made their hearts as hard as stone, so they could not hear the instructions or the messages that the LORD of Heaven's Armies had sent them by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. That is why the LORD of Heaven's Armies was so angry with them. "Since they refused to listen when I called to them, I would not listen when they called to me," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.*<sup>9</sup>

Who loves chocolate here? Imagine if when you were offered chocolate for the first time, you said, "No." Then, each time that dark sweetness was offered to you, you again refused. How silly would that be?

If you have been going to church for a long time, then you have heard what God requires of us: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.<sup>10</sup> You have heard it over and over again. You've heard it so much that you've become numb, hardened to it.

This is especially true in regards to when the Gospel is presented. We hear once again that we are all sinners, that the wage, the cost of sin is death, and only by accepting God's free gift of grace through believing in Christ can we have eternal life. We've heard that so many times, but if you do not act upon that, your stubbornness will keep you from heaven.

One of the most frightening statements of Jesus is from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:

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<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 28:9 (NCV)

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 28:9 (NLT2)

<sup>8</sup> Life Application Study Bible, Proverbs 28:9

<sup>9</sup> Zechariah 7:11-13 (NLT2)

<sup>10</sup> See Micah 6:8

*“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”<sup>11</sup>*

I think many people who go to church every week will miss heaven because they were too stubborn to submit their will to God’s will.

**The seventh hinderance to prayer is Instability.**

What do I mean by this? Well, listen to what James says:

*But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.<sup>12</sup>*

Our prayer will not be answered if we waver. If we put a prayer request on the altar and say, “Lord, take care of this situation,” then pick it back up and fret or worry or even try to work it out on our own, God cannot answer it. Why? Because you’ve taken it back. He can’t do anything about it because you’ve not given it to Him.

The instability of your faith keeps your prayers from being answered.

**The final hinderance to prayer comes from our opening Scripture, and it is Self-indulgence.**

Let me read James 4:3 again:

*And even when you ask, you don’t get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.<sup>13</sup>*

There is nothing wrong with wanting a pleasurable life. God gives us good gifts that He wants us to enjoy.<sup>14</sup>

But the Greek grammar here indicates that prayer is being squandered.<sup>15</sup> It means we are wasting our prayer on things that are temporary, irrelevant in the grand scheme of God’s will for humanity. What does your prayer for a nice sportscar, win the lottery, or own an airplane, do to save the world?

Praying for pleasure often involves seeking pleasure at others’ expense or at the expense of obeying God. Pleasure that keeps us from pleasing God is sinful; pleasure from God’s rich bounty is good.

My friends, we have only spent four weeks learning about prayer. Prayer is such a vast and multifaceted subject that we instantly recognize the impossibility of even lightly touching on all its aspects in a single series. There are still a whole host of important philosophical questions. Why is prayer necessary? How does prayer work; that is, how can a finite human being enter into dialogue with the infinite Creator of the universe? How can an immaterial reality like prayer affect the material world?

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 7:21 (ESV)

<sup>12</sup> James 1:6-7 (NLT2)

<sup>13</sup> James 4:3 (NLT2)

<sup>14</sup> See Ephesians 4:7; 1 Timothy 4:4,5; James 1:17

<sup>15</sup> “Purpose clause with hina and the first aorist subjunctive of dapanāō, old verb from dapanē, cost (Luke 14:28 only in N.T.), to squander (Luke 15:14). God does not hear prayers like this.” Word Pictures in the New Testament, James 4:3

But one thing I do know. Real prayer is something we learn. The disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray."<sup>16</sup> They had prayed all their lives, and yet something about the quality and quantity of Jesus' praying caused them to see how little they knew about prayer. If their praying was to make any difference on the human scene, there were some things they needed to learn.<sup>17</sup>

It is liberating to me to understand that prayer involves a learning process. You and I are set free to question, to experiment, even to fail, for we know we are learning this thing called prayer.

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The Bible pray-ers prayed as if their prayers could and would make an objective difference.<sup>18</sup> So should yours.

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<sup>16</sup> Luke 11:1

<sup>17</sup> Foster, Richard J.. Celebration of Discipline, Special Anniversary Edition (p. 36). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

<sup>18</sup> Foster, Richard J.. Celebration of Discipline, Special Anniversary Edition (p. 35). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.