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FRUITFULNESS: PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES OF PRAYER

by Dan Trygg

If prayer is such a vital resource for the Christian life, how can we go about making the best use of it? What are some of the Scriptural principles for an effective prayer life? In this, and the following chapter, allow me to share five general ingredients to a successful life of prayer:

1.) Ask. This is *the principle of action*. James 4:2 states the obvious, i.e., you will not experience answers to prayer without first asking for something. This may seem to be so elementary as to appear foolish to take the space to state it as a principle for prayer, but in practice this is where the unsuccessful prayer life often has its roots, i.e., it simply does not exist. The very fact that the Bible encourages and exhorts us so much to be praying implies that the tendency is to pray very little, or not at all (Matt. 7:7,8; Rom. 12:12; Col. 4:2; I Pet. 4:7; I Thess. 5:17; Eph. 6:18-20).

Moreover, **the action of asking is not a one-time affair. There is to be importunity in prayer, i.e., a continual, persevering asking until an answer is received.** The verbs in Mt. 7:7 are in the present tense, meaning a present, continuing action. Thus, the thrust of the verse, might be paraphrased as, “Ask, and keep on asking, seek, and keep on seeking, knock, and keep on knocking... For to him who is asking, ...seeking, ...knocking, it shall be [given].” In Lk. 11:1-13 and 18:1-8, Jesus teaches directly about this need to be persistently asking. This is not because God needs to be pushed, manipulated, or cajoled into action, but rather because it expresses the true heart of faith and worship toward Him. It is also helpful in sorting out what is really on our hearts, versus what is merely a passing fancy. Because we do not ask at all, or because we give up too soon (Lk.18:1-8; cf. Gal. 6:9), we keep ourselves from experiencing the blessing of answered prayer.

2.) Ask in faith. This is *the principle of attitude*. As mentioned above, the essence of true prayer is faith. “Prayer” without faith is only a ritual, i.e., something done because one *ought to* do it, though no results are necessarily expected. As James said regarding answered prayer for wisdom, “But let him ask *in faith* without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surfer of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that person expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded person, unstable in all his ways” (Jas. 1:6,7). Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6), and without faith one cannot expect anything from Him in answer to his or her petitions. **Faith is the confident expectation that the prayer will be answered.** Jesus’ comment was that faith was to be so assured, so confident in God’s interest and ability in answering our requests, that we are to believe that we have received what we asked for (Mk. 11:22-24). Then the prayer of faith lifts the heart out of the uncertainty and heaviness of anxiety onto the solid ground of thanksgiving and praise for the answer which is “on the way” (Dan. 9:23; 10:12,13), already granted and dispatched to us. The heart is unburdened and free.

Some would argue that there is a contradiction between this picture of faith in prayer and that of importunity in prayer. Obviously, there cannot be, since both teachings are from the lips of Jesus. In fact, **importunity**, far from being in tension with real faith, **is another aspect of what real faith is** (Lk. 18:8). Those who overemphasize the faith of Mk. 11:24 to the extreme of distortion, ...and the exclusion of importunity in prayer..., often express a somewhat flippant attitude. They say, “I only have to pray about it once. In fact, to pray about it again is to give room for doubt to invade the heart. This compromises faith, and effectiveness is lost.”

This position is in error in two major areas. First, it virtually ignores the validity of the passages on importunity as portions of God’s revealed truth. Secondly, what is usually emphasized is the strength of faith itself, rather than God as the *object* of our faith. Jesus’

admonition in Mk. 11 was not just to have faith, but to have faith *in God* (vs. 22). **Mountain-moving faith** (vs.23) **can be as small as a grain of mustard seed** (Mt. 17:19,20), **so it was not the size of faith that was lacking in the disciples, but the quality.** The Greek root which is translated as “littleness”, in compound with the word for faith, can be understood as describing faith which is “scarcely” or “barely” faith, i.e., not really fully-formed faith at all. This fits the contexts where the word is used much better (Cf. Mt. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; Lk.12:28). Thus, the “little faith” in Mt. 17, which is less than a mustard seed, is really not just a *weak* faith, but that which is not quite genuine faith. While the “little faith”, or the “barely faith”, cannot receive much, any genuine faith, even mustard-seed faith, can move mountains. **It is the quality, the reality, of the faith, not the size, that is the issue in Jesus’ teaching. The question He would ask is, “Where is your faith?”** (Mk. 4:40; 9:22-24), **not, “How strong is your faith?”.**

Furthermore, to see a contradiction between these two teachings on prayer is to fabricate a controversy which does not necessarily exist at all. If faith is a confident trust in God and His word of promise, there is nothing contradictory in someone, who has believed that he has received some answer to his intercession, returning to the throne of grace to take up his abiding place of dependence and confidence before God when he does not see the answer in his experience. **Importunity is not based upon doubt, but upon the trust and confidence that God can and will reward those who are seeking** (present, continual-tense verb) **Him.** Importunity is especially important in light of the other hindrances to prayer that may remain, even unknowingly (e.g., Dan. 10:10-13). Finally, we see importunity and struggle in Jesus’ prayer life (Lk. 6:12; Heb. 5:7-9; Mk. 14:32-39). Did He have faith in God? Without a doubt. That was the very reason He was there praying (Mk. 14:36)! The apostle Paul also practiced importunity in prayer (e.g., Col. 1:9). How dare we arrogantly say that once is enough! Are we better than they? No. **Asking in faith is asking with confidence and trust. It is taking up an attitude of dependence and expectation before God. Importunity is continuing in, or returning to, that attitude until we see God’s answer made manifest to us.**

FOR MEDITATION: Matthew 7:7.

“Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and the door shall be opened to you.”

Obedient Disciples or Intellectual Decisions?

“In the American decision-oriented culture, decisions for Christ often lead to conversion. But many people of other cultures are not conscious of making a decision. Decisions are made every day, but you only repent once and for all. It is a permanent change wrought for God. We’re born all over again.

“In Honduras we find that when we baptize repentant believers immediately, without giving them long doctrinal courses first, we can follow up the great majority and teach them obedience from the very beginning. They are saved to obey the Lord Jesus Christ in love, and we don’t put a large emphasis on doctrine. The doctrine comes! They will learn all their life. This is the error of the American missionary. He manufactures Christians through an intellectual process. He just blindly assumes that if they learn the right doctrine, and believe correctly, and have the right interpretation of Scripture, that this is the way that we make them into Christians. NO! That’s *not* the way we make disciples. It has little to do with the brain, but it has much to do with the heart and soul. Make obedient disciples. Then you will see churches multiply. If you just get intellectual decisions, they may believe right, they may know all the dispensations and the covenants, and they may know this and that, but what do you have? Are they multiplying churches? Are they fulfilling the Great Commission of Christ? Are they actually doing what Christ ordered?”

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