

COMMON MISTAKES IN PRAYER

By

Dr. E. Harold Henderson

Dr. E. Harold Henderson was for 25 years, from 1972 – 1997, the principal English language speaker on the LifeWord Broadcast, an international radio outreach of the Baptist Missionary Association of America. Dr. Henderson was the Writer of the Adult Sunday School Quarterly (Baptist Publishing House, Little Rock, AR) for 39 & ½ years. He authored four books and numerous religious periodicals.

© LifeWord Broadcast Ministries
Conway, Arkansas
Reprinted by permission

Prisoners Bible Crusade
2212 Stonecypher Road
Lucedale, MS 39452

CONTENTS

THE FAILURE TO PRAY	-----Page 1
INDEFINITE PETITIONS	-----Page 3
LACK OF SINCERITY	----- Page 5
THE WRONG SPIRIT	----- Page 7
UNCONFESSED SIN	----- Page 9

THE FAILURE TO PRAY

I would propose a question which you should answer deep in the secrets of your own heart. “What is the quality of your personal prayer life?” I realize that is a very personal question and some may think I have no business proposing it. But the Bible teaches that the vigor of your spiritual life will be a exact proportion to the place the Word of God and prayer to God holds in your daily experience. So I propose the question again, “What is the quality of your personal prayer life?”

Prayer is the very center of our religious life. It relates to what we believe and how we behave. It is based on our theology and related to our ethics. It indicates our concept of God and our personal relationship with God. Prayer is the way we meet God and commune with God. How a person prays indicates what is his relationship with God.

Jesus believed in prayer, practiced prayer, and taught men to pray. We cannot be a true disciple of Jesus unless we live a life of prayer.

God has recorded many promises to answer prayer. He will answer prayer for any Christian, at any time, for any thing. Since He has promised that in His inspired Word, let us have a meaningful prayer life.

But the truth is that great numbers who believe in Jesus Christ look upon prayer as a burden rather than a blessing, a problem rather than a pleasure. It is so viewed because of common mistakes which are made in praying. I propose to examine some of these "Common Mistakes in Prayer" and find the Bible remedy for them.

First, the most common mistake we make in prayer is this: We do not pray. Yes, the failure to pray is by far our most common mistake in prayer.

James 4:1-3 speaks to that subject, saying, "*>From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain; ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.*"

Do you catch the thrust of that statement? There are so many things God is willing and ready to give us if we but ask Him. There are so many victories, so many blessings, so many provisions, which are already out in the storehouse of heaven which we miss because we do not ask. What a wicked sin prayerlessness is!

Why do people fail to pray?

Since there is much that God would give in answer to prayer, but withhold if there is no prayer, why do people fail to pray?

Some people do not pray because they have no sense of need for God. You have known someone who prayed when in trouble but did not pray when things were well. That indicates that the sense of self-sufficiency is a reason people do not pray. Prayerlessness is, therefore, a form of idolatry for it places trust in self rather than in God.

Some people do not pray because they are living in sin. Psalm 53:4 asks the question, "*There is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee*" Isaiah 64:7. Hosea explained, "*Their heart is divided*" Hosea 10:2. That means "*the people had not prepared their hearts unto the God of their fathers*" II Chronicles 20:33. A backslidden heart will keep a person from prayer.

What is the remedy for a prayerless life?

It can be remedied. Even if you have not prayed in years, you can live a life filled with the blessings of prayer. Here is how you overcome the sin of a life of neglect of prayer.

Set a definite time each day when you meet God in prayer. It is best to set your appointment with God in the early morning hours, but whenever it is, set it. Then guard that time. Let nothing keep you from it. Consider it an appointment with God which you will not break.

Some people set three periods of prayer each day. It is based on the example of Daniel the prophet of God (Daniel 6:10), and the testimony of the Psalmist, "*Evening, morning and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: and he shall hear my voice*" Psalm 55:17. But there needs to be one special time when Bible reading and prayer are engaged so one can grow thereby.

Start today with your prayer time. Do not delay for some future time. Make a definite

commitment to God, as an act of spiritual sacrifice, that you will meet Him in Bible reading and prayer beginning this very day. If you delay, Satan will have a temporary if not permanent victory over you in the matter.

Meet God in private. Public prayers may be said to be seen of men, but if private prayers are not sincere they are nothing at all. Jesus said the hypocrites pray in public to be seen of men, but it is not to be so of the people of God. He said, *“But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly”* Matthew 6:6. There is no value in the words of prayer if they do not express the true sentiments of an earnest heart. To meet God in private is to meet Him in truth. Public prayers are important in public worship, but you need to meet God every day and not just when the church assembles on Sunday to worship.

Consider your prayer time a privilege, not a duty. You are most highly honored to meet with God Himself! He takes time to meet with you. You are privileged to meet with Him. If you consider it important to keep your appointments with people, it is so much more important to keep your appointment with God.

Are those suggestions helpful to you? They will be only if you heed them and act upon them. The truth is that we do not need to be informed about the importance of prayer. We need to be stirred to personally engage in prayer. This study will be important and profitable to you only if you put the principle into practice by establishing a regular habit of prayer.

There is so much God is waiting to give you, to do for you, if you will ask him. Remember that solemn word from the Apostle James, *“You have not because you ask not”* James 4:2.

“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” Matthew 7:7,8.

“Father, forgive us for being so negligent in the ministry of prayer. We confess our prayerlessness to you as a sin. We pledge ourselves to become faithful in a daily communion and waiting upon you in prayer and meditation. Thank you for every prayer promise you have made, and thank you for being faithful to perform each of them. We anticipate with joy the privilege of meeting you daily in prayer. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

INDEFINITE PETITIONS

I grew up on a farm and attended a small church in our rural community. A few things stand out in my mind as I think of those experiences. I remember the corner of the one-room church building where my class of boys met for Sunday school. I remember the gas lamps that were used to light the building. I remember baptismal services held in the lake located by the cotton gin. And I remember the prayers of a dear old brother in the congregation.

The brother must have lived close to the Lord because it sounded to me that he was accustomed to tailing to the Lord. It showed in the way he prayed. But there was one expression which he used in almost every prayer. I remember it as if I could hear him say it again.

“And, Lord, bless every one we should pray for, from the rivers unto the ends of the earth.” That was the oft-repeated petition. The thing that impressed me was that I wondered, in my childish thoughts, to which rivers he referred and where were those “ends of the earth” to

which he referred.

As I became older, I learned that there are statements somewhat like that in the Bible but they are not appropriate petitions for prayer. I learned, also, that the dear brother was doing something which is very common among Christians when they pray. He was praying with general petitions.

Indefinite petition is one of the common mistakes of prayer. How often have you heard someone pray, "Lord, save all the lost." Or you have heard, "Bless all who are in need." Or, "Comfort those who are in sorrow." That kind of petition may arise from an honest and earnest heart, but is not the best way to pray.

Sin of indefinite prayer.

What is wrong with generalized requests, indefinite petitions, asking blessings on all in general but no one in particular?

Indefinite petition reveals a lack of burden or heart-deep desire before God. It indicates there is no particular and special wish in the heart. If you go into a restaurant to eat, you do not say to the waiter, "Bring me some food." You are specific. You say, "I would like to have this steak, or that fish, or a salad, or soup." You are specific because you know what foods you prefer.

Why do we become so indefinite when we pray? It is because we are not concerned deeply and sincerely about a particular need or person. If my child became ill, I would not call my family physician and say, "Doctor, I hope you will be able to help those who are sick." No, I would say, "Doctor, my son is ill. His symptoms are such and such. Can you prescribe medicine for him or should I meet you at the hospital?" You see, I would be specific and definite because I am concerned about his welfare. Indefinite praying indicates a lack of concern.

Indefinite petition indicates we do not know the will of God. If you can not ask God for specific answer to specific needs, it indicates you so not know what God would do in that situation.

I hear people pray, "If it be your will, save the lost." What do we mean by such a prayer? The Bible clearly says it is not God's will that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (II Peter 3:9). Do not add "it be your will" to a matter where the Bible clearly expresses the will of God.

Indefinite petition indicates that we are spiritually immature. We have not grown up to maturity in prayer if we are continually indefinite in what we ask of God.

Prayers in the Bible were positive and definite. Gideon asked that his fleece be dry with the grass wet, or wet with the grass dry (Judges 6:36-39) Joshua asked God to make the sun stand still (Joshua 10:12). Jesus spoke of a son asking bread or fish of his father (Luke 11:11). Bible prayers are specific prayers. We follow Bible examples when we ask God for specific things and trust Him to give them.

Suggestions for definite prayer

How can a Christian be definite in his prayers? Consider these suggestions.

The Christian must search the scriptures to find the will of God expressed in them. That will give him definite direction for his prayers. He can see what other people of God have asked for, what petitions God granted, what principles are set forth to guide his own prayers, and that will enable him to pray for specific things with the full confidence of faith. There is no

substitute for the prayer which is based on Holy Scripture. Try it.

The Christian must pray from his heart, not just from a sense of duty. A prayer from the heart will always be definite. We are concerned about specific persons, definite problems, and clearly defined needs. He who prays according to the promptings of his spirit will be specific in his petitions.

One danger of using a pray list is that items may be included in it which are not of heart-deep concern. I use a prayer list in personal devotions, but I take care to keep it free from any subject which is not of real concern to me. It is wise to “weed out” any objects of prayer for which you cannot be definite before God. Pray from your heart, and your prayers will be specific and clear.

The Christian should ask the Holy Spirit to show him what to pray for and how to pray right. The Bible promises that as one of the blessed ministries of the Spirit in the child of God.

“Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” Romans 8:26.

Our problem in prayer is two-fold. (1) We do not know the subjects for which we should pray. (2) We do not know the manner in which we should pray. But the Holy Spirit of God, who lives permanently in every child of God, helps by showing us both what and how to pray.

Dear Christian, be definite and give God an opportunity to manifest His mighty power and great willingness to answer prayer. Ask God for definite things. Expect definite answers to your petitions. You will find it to be as Jesus promised, *“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.

Consider His gracious promise of answered prayer: *“Ask, and it shall be given YOU; seek, and YE shall find; know, 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...If ye...know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?”* Matthew 6:7,11.

Be done, then with indefinite and generalized petitions which ask for all and yet ask for none. Be specific with God. Tell Him all that you desire and expect Him to answer (Mark 11:24).

“Father, you are so gracious to hear and answer prayer. We have experienced answered prayer before, and so are encouraged to ask again. Forgive us when we fail to pray, or when we ask amiss. Teach us to pray that we may have the answer to needs and may see the glory come to your name through answered prayer. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.”

LACK OF SINCERITY

May I confide in you a fault which I have found in my personal prayer life? God has convicted me that there are times when I have prayed insincere prayers. I prayed because it was my duty to pray and my heart was not in it.

I remember one time recently. I was in a public worship service. I had permitted my mind to wander to other matters when suddenly I realized the person in charge of the meeting

had called on me to lead a public prayer. Under the circumstances, I should have said, "I'm sorry, Brother, but my attention has not been on spiritual things and I am not in a spirit of prayer." That would have been too embarrassing, of course, so I "said" a prayer. I suppose the congregation was satisfied (at least, no one indicated otherwise), but I know in my heart that I had not truly communed with God. And I felt convicted that I should come before the Lord without preparing my heart for such a holy fellowship.

That leads me to suggest a third mistake which is commonly made in prayer. It is that we sometimes pray in a less-than-sincere spirit. That is to say, our prayers are formal. They are words of the mouth rather than sentiments of the heart. As such, they are largely meaningless.

Picture two actors on the stage. The story they are presenting has them set as enemies. One expresses his hatred for the other, even threatening to kill the other as he speaks hard words against him. How the truth may be the two men are the closest of friends. Neither would do any sort of harm to the other in real life. That indicates the difference between words that are spoken with the mouth and desires that reside in the heart.

The same principle applies to prayer. To say the words of a prayer is quite different from having a spirit of prayer. Lack of sincerity, I say, is one of the common mistakes many people make in prayer. Note some specific examples of insincere prayers.

Prayers designed to impress people.

Insincere prayers are commonly spoken to impress people about us. They are for public display, not for communion with God. Worse than that they