

**Tuesday, September 8, 2020**

**SERIES: GROWING AND GOING**

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**TITLE: The Secret to Effective Prayer Pt. 1**

After a family birthday party, two brothers began their bedtime routine. They took a bath, brushed their teeth. They went to their rooms, read a portion of the Bible, and then said their prayers. The older brother prayed, “Dear God, thank you for this day, the party we could have, and for all the yummy food.” The younger brother began to pray, “Dear God, thank you for this day. Thank you for letting our family come over, especially Grandma. Oh, and God, don’t forget next week is my birthday. So, God...” The young boy looked out the doorway, and began to yell, “Please, please, please get me that new Xbox for my birthday!” The older brother couldn’t figure out what was going on. He looked at his younger brother and said, “Dude! What is your problem? God isn’t deaf!” The younger brother got a grin on his face and said “No, He isn’t. But Grandma is!”

As funny as that joke is, it is so true for many of us who are just like that younger brother. We turn to God in prayer, but we don’t rest in His ability to answer it. We make sure we do what we can to get the job done, just in case He won’t come through. Prayer is one of the great benefits of being a child of God. We have a restored relationship with God. Therefore we are able to turn to Him in prayer – in conversation whenever we like. This is a divine privilege.

But I know for many of you today, prayer can also be a topic of confusion and frustration. At times, we don’t know how to pray. Sometimes we don’t know why we pray. Many times we wonder if prayer even works. Those are all common struggles and questions, but I believe they have biblical solutions. And that’s what we want to talk about today.

Today we’re continuing our series called “Growing & Going.” This is all about growing in our faith, and going out into the world to make disciples. And in our last message, we talked about being a people who are so rooted in Christ, that no matter what storms or windfalls come our way, we will stand firm. We also talked about why we should grow in knowledge of God’s Word, and how to grow in spiritual maturity.

Well today is all about prayer. One of the consistent comments I hear as a pastor is this: “I feel at times my prayers don’t do any good. My prayers aren’t effective.” This is a feeling we’ve all had. I’ve had it. And today you may feel this way as well. So we want to answer the question: **what are the ingredients for effective prayer?** What is needed to have a prayer life that makes a difference? There are 6 ingredients that will help you have effective prayer. And the first ingredient is this:

We need to **Pray as God's children**. If we are going to come to God in prayer, we need to be His spiritual children. We must be followers of Christ.

Often on Facebook, someone will post something like this: "I lost my job today. Prayers and positive thoughts welcome." I usually have two responses: First is this: "Why are you asking for positive thoughts? What does that even mean? What good will that do?" None! Positive thoughts have no power.

If you're a Christian, don't ever ask for positive thoughts. This is not a sentiment you want to promote if you're a Christian. Positive thoughts are as effective as Cupid's arrows, or hunting for leprechaun gold. It's like wishing on a star, or making a wish at 11:11. It's kind of cute to say, but it's not reflective of a Christian world-view.

The second thought is this: When asking for prayer, to whom are you asking? Who specifically are you asking prayer from? I realize when we put something out there on social media, it's a blanketed request, but when I need assistance, I want to ask the people who can help. What do I mean? With prayer, it is God's children who can help. "*Whoa, whoa, whoa, Nat!* Are you telling me that God doesn't hear the prayers of non-believers?"

I think this is a fair question, and I think the answer to that question is, yes. I do believe that God hears the prayers of everyone. Why? Because He is God. He is omnipotent – He is everywhere. He is omniscient. He knows everything. So does God hear all prayers? Yes.

**Perhaps the real question is, does He *answer* the prayers of unbelievers?** To this, it's harder to answer. Here's some of what we can find in Scripture about unanswered prayers:

- 1) James tells us that when we ask with wrong motives, God won't answer. (James 4:3)  
So this is for the believers, so when we come to God with wrong motives, He won't answer.
- 2) Psalms tell us that if you harbor wickedness in your heart, God won't answer. (Psalm 66:18)
- 3) The Prophet Isaiah said this, "**But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, And your sins have hidden *His* face from you so that He does not hear**" (Is. 59:2, ESV).
- 4) Jesus said something quite similar: "**We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does *His* will, He hears him**" (John 9:31, NASB). Verses like these probably provide the strongest answer to this question.
- 5) King Solomon told us if you reject hearing the law – God's Word, your prayers are offensive to God. (Prov. 28:9).
- 6) The Prophet Micah, said that those who hate good and love evil, they may cry out to God, but He will not answer them (Micah 3:4).

**So does God answer the prayers of the unbelievers? I think there is a strong case to say, generally, "no."** However, He is sovereign and can do what is consistent with His good and perfect nature. So generally no, but possibly and sometimes, yes. So the previous passages and others in the Bible share many reasons why God does not answer prayers, not just for unbelievers, but believers as well.

So, if you want effective prayer, you should call upon your friends who know God. You need to be God's child. How do you become God's child?

Remember what Jesus said in John 14:

In John 14:6 (ESV) Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me." If you want a relationship with God, you need to come to Him through Jesus Christ.

## **DISCUSSION:**

N: Well, let's bring in my discussion partners, Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney. And let's talk about prayer. Chances are you've encountered someone and will encounter someone who is thinking to themselves, "Look, I pray. I pray a lot, but it's just not working. What am I doing wrong?" What would you say to that person today, if they're listening?

C: I would say that they just don't want to hear the answer. Sometimes it's "wait a minute". Sometimes it's "no". I'll be honest. It's hard. I've been told No, and that's hard. But then I see prayer work in ways, where you actually get to see it on this side. And Arnie Cole is a walking example of that. Circumstances in your life, Nat, where, you know, prayer has worked. I think that we just have to trust God sometimes.

N: Yeah. And that's, I think, where a lot of people are possibly at, is that they are asking, and God is giving an answer - It's just not the answer they want. And you know, there's that Garth Brooks song, *Unanswered Prayers*. And he's not a theologian obviously, but you know, he sings that line. You know, "Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers" and I can give an "Amen" every time I hear that line, because it's so true. God has the best plan in mind, and so often it doesn't fit into what we think is best. I mean, I'm sitting here right now in the studio, because God said No to a prayer that I gave, and prayed a lot about. And because God said No to one opportunity, He allowed this opportunity to develop. And I'm forever grateful for the opportunity to be here at Back to the Bible. So God knows what He's doing. The question is, do we trust Him? Arnie, what would you say to someone who is challenged with prayer as well?

A: You have to be careful too, and this is my listening, because maybe they're a nonbeliever. I don't know how to spell theologian, but I'm not one. But on the other hand, I think God listens to everybody's prayer, whether they're a believer or not, and all of that. For me, if I know someone's in a lot of trouble - maybe they're not a believer - you know, I'll just say, "You know, you've got to be really careful what you pray for, and who you're praying to. A lot of people are really praying to themselves". And if they ask, "Well, what do you mean?" I'll say, "You know, it's like, you're in a relationship - you're married. You're just talking to yourself. You're not really talking to or listening to what the other person has to say". And I'm sure if any of you has been in a relationship, you know, your spouse will say, "Oh, you're not listening to what I have to say". And God answers every single prayer. And it may not be exactly what you want, or thought in mind, but it's just - there is no unanswered prayer, but it may not be what you thought, how life should have been.

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Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.” I hope you understand what was just said. You don’t get to God through Islam. You don’t get to God through abandoning desire, which Buddhism teaches. You don’t get to God through worshipping a pantheon of gods via Hinduism. You don’t get to God through an imitation Jesus in Mormonism or Jehovah’s Witnesses. You get to Him through Jesus Christ alone.

What’s the result of this turning to Christ as Lord and Savior? John 1:12 (ESV) says, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” Jesus Christ frees us from our sin. He transforms us from being an enemy of God to being a child of God. Because of what Jesus Christ did on the cross, He has restored our relationship with God. Hebrews 4:14-16 says this,

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

We who have repented of our sins and received God’s gift of salvation, we have Christ who makes it possible to come to God boldly at all times. We can approach Him with confidence that He will hear His children. This is what Theologian R.C. Sproul had to say: “When {a} person has been adopted into God’s family, having expressed saving faith in the atonement of Christ and having submitted to His lordship; then and only then is one afforded the privilege of calling God his father.”

So again, does this mean, that God doesn’t hear the prayers of people who aren’t saved? Are the prayers of the Muslim or the agnostic not heard? Well, what did Jesus say in [John 9:31](#)?

“We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him.”

Also hear what the prophet Micah wrote: ([Micah 3:4](#)) “Then they will cry to the LORD, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have made their deeds evil.”

What can we discern from these passages and others found in the Bible? Does God “hear” the prayers of the unrepentant person who is far from God? Of course, He hears them. He is God. He is omniscient. He knows all. He is omnipresent. No scene is out of sight. No sound is out of range. He hears all. But is He inclined to answer the prayer of the unbeliever? The simple answer is no. He is under no obligation to answer the prayer of someone who has rejected Him and His gift of salvation. But does He answer their prayers? The simple answer is, if He chooses to, yes. But from what is found in Scripture, it would be the exception and not the norm.

This is why the first ingredient to effective prayer is to be God’s child. It’s a must. It’s essential. The **second ingredient** for effective prayer is to **Pray with humility**.

James says this ([James 4:6](#)), “But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Pride results in thinking you are on par with God. Pride results in thinking your ability in the flesh is enough for this world. Pride is the lie that you deserve God's grace. Pride is a false sense of security and power. Well, God has no tolerance for your pride. He has no tolerance for my pride. Pride is what got Satan cast out of Heaven. Pride is the root of what got Adam and Eve kicked out of Eden. You can't have pride and approach the throne of grace, because pride says, "I don't need you God. I can do it. And I will do it *my way*." Pride says, "I want a new Xbox, so I'll yell it, so I can manipulate others to meet my need, because if it's meant to be, it's up to me!"

Humility is total dependence upon God. Humility is required for effective prayer. This is why in Luke 18, Jesus pointed out that the Pharisee had a dead faith and ineffective prayer. He did this because the Pharisee boasted about his religious actions. He was so confused with his own spiritual ability, that he turned to God as courtesy, but not out of necessity.

If you want effective prayer, remind yourself, yes, you are God's child, but you are still human. You can accomplish nothing of eternal value without God. You can't expect your prayer to God to be effective, if you are propping yourself up against someone else. You can't expect your prayer to be effective, if you are praying out of duty or obligation, while secretly crafting a way to get your prayer answered. That is pride, and that hinders your prayers.

Isaiah 66:2 confirms this. Isaiah writes, "[These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word.](#)" God looks with favor only upon those who are contrite and humble, and if we are not humble before Him, we cannot rightly expect Him to hear or answer our prayers. Let us all cultivate humility in His presence.

If you want effective prayer, you need to pray with humility. The **next ingredient** for effective prayer is to **Pray according to God's will**.

Don't you just hate this one? I mean, doesn't God remember, it's *about me*. It's about *what I want*. It's about *my* happiness. It's about *my* comfort. If we pray according to God's will, we will have to possibly change our life and our lifestyle. We don't want to live God's will - we want our cozy, comfortable life.

So often, we pray out of selfish reasons and selfish motives. So how *should* we pray? [James said this, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures."](#) (James 4:3, NASB) If you want your prayers to fall flat, pray with wrong motives.

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N: Let's bring in Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney, and we're going to flip up the routine on its head. And they have some questions for me on the topic of prayer.

C: I have one. Well, I'm asking it, because I think that a lot of people have this question, and I trust God, and I pray it doesn't stop me from praying, but why do we pray, if God is just going to do what He wants to anyway?

N: Yeah, I mean, this is kind of a cop out answer, but I think it's the truth - It's a mystery. It is a mystery. God is sovereign, right? God is in control of all things. He permits certain things. He

makes certain things happen, but He also is a good Father. And we know that He does hear His children, and His ear is inclined to His children who are in accordance with His will, who are obedient. And so He does want to know what is on our hearts and what we desire. But I think part of it also is in our own posture - we talked about how praying in God's will - how much are we submitting our lives to His will? You know, I mean, earlier we talked about - or I brought up - my notion of, I was praying for a certain job, and the answer was No. And I could be mad at God - I was a little angry at God - that I didn't get the job, but I also prayed consistently, that "God, if this is not what you want, then I will trust you. And I want you to move me to the right place." So when I got the No, I said, "Well, God - You clearly did not understand what I was saying - And you're not listening to me. And I trust you-ish, but we need to figure this out." And so, over time, God softened my heart. And I began to realize that His will truly is best. And it got me to the place where I am today. So how does it work? I don't know. I don't know. I don't know, because God's ways are not our ways. Right? [Right.] But God has invited us in, to make an appeal. We are to be like the widow knocking and knocking. And when God says Yes, in the way that we have described or prescribed, then God is doing what is absolutely best for us. When He says, Wait, He's doing what's best for us. And when he says, No, He's doing what's best for us. But does it move God? Yeah. The Bible is clear. It does. How does that work? I don't know.

C: So you would say prayer then could change your circumstance. Maybe not God's mind, but maybe it would change your circumstances.

N: Well, I think that is for sure - it does change, and it does change our perspective on it. God can't change His mind, in the sense that God doesn't change. Right? God doesn't change. The Bible's clear on that. So it's not like we can persuade Him, in the sense like, "Well, God was not going to give me that job, but now He did, because I petitioned so much." So that didn't change. But rather I think it is our perspective - how we got to that point.

A: You know, it's always baffled me, *Pray without ceasing*. If you combine Cara's question: Why pray, because God already knows the answer, and He's answered it; and then you combine that other concept, *pray without ceasing* - How do you factor those two things in? I mean, is *pray without ceasing* just like a state of being? It's like hanging out with your spouse, someone you have a relationship and you don't have to yell at them. It's just - you're always in communion?

N: Well, yeah, I think that for sure is true. We are to be in constant communion with God. So put our petitions before Him and do so continually. The problem is, most of us don't do it that way. We don't go through life praying without ceasing. What do we do? Play Xbox, read books, do whatever hobby it is, live life, work a job. Oh, it's time to eat: "Heavenly Father. Thank you for this food. Thank you for the great day. Amen." Boom. Off we go. Okay. That's not praying without ceasing. So it's in that constant communion relationship with Him - putting our petitions before Him; putting our thanks before Him; giving our adoration to Him and even our confession. You've heard that, you know - do the ACTS Prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. If you did that throughout your day, you really could pray without ceasing. So yeah, I think we need to be in that constant communication with Him. I don't know how natural it is for most people, because honestly, I get tired of talking to my spouse. I get tired

of talking to everybody. But what a great opportunity we have, to have the God who created everything, whose ear is always inclined to His children, to hear. Answer? That's a different thing.

A: Do you think there's power in praying Scripture? Remember that book, *The Prayer of Jabez*, [by Bruce Wilkinson with David Kopp] that was so popular? Do you think God hears prayer - is more likely to hear your prayer - if you pray Scripture?

N: Well, the Bible says James 4:3, the motives really matter. So a lot of people pray Scripture as a good luck charm - I think that's honestly a big part of it. People will use - that book was a great example - people wanted blessing, and so they picked up the book, and they prayed it. And a lot of people got really frustrated, and said, "Look, I did the A,B,C - Where's my money-ey?" Well, that's not how it works. Again, it's our heart. It's our posture. What are we really trying to get out of it? A lot of people do pray Scripture with the right motives, and the right heart, and they should. I pray Scripture. And when my reasoning is wrong, and my motives are wrong, and I'm treating it like a good luck charm - guess what? It's probably not going to come true. I talked about this in the message today, that I can pray for wealth, and say, "God, if you just blessed me with all this, I'm going to give it away." But I already got everything purchased - the car, the house, the vacations and the Pokemon cards, or whatever it is you're into. So the motive's all wrong. And so, yeah, pray without ceasing. Talk to God, tell Him exactly what you need, exactly what you want, but above all, we have to pray with the right motives, and we have to be willing to bow to His will.

A: I've got one more question, Pastor Nat. One more question [Oh my goodness.]. So on with that - as a new believer, I was working in the Middle East with these crazy missionaries that worked in these closed countries. And there was a group that actually yelled in their prayers. It was like a shouting match. It kind of scared me as a new believer - it's like, "Whoa". But the group - very sincere people in dangerous situations; it was during Saddam Hussein's time - but they yelled. They didn't scream - but just yelled their requests. It was probably an hour prayer service. It seemed like all day, but I'm sure it wasn't. Do you think that makes a difference?

N: The loudness of our prayer? [Yeah]. No, I don't. I think it goes back to the heart. I don't care if I'm praying in my mind, or saying it, or yelling it. I mean, again, as you said - around the world, you've experienced different prayer meetings. When I go to Mexico and teach at the Bible College down there, It's the weirdest thing - I'll be honest - for me, it's the weirdest thing - because we're so used to one person at a time, you know, "Heavenly Father, dot, dot, dot. Okay. Popcorn, you're next - Popcorn, you're next." But down there, you've got a room full of 50 people, and they're all going at the same time - and I don't even speak Spanish, so I don't know what's happening - but they are passionate. They're sweating, [Yeah] they're dancing. [Yep]. And I'm like, well, maybe I'll try it. And so I kind of, you know, I'm like, "All right", and I'll yell a little bit. [We've got to get video of that.] It's out there somewhere. But no, I don't think so. And I think that's - honestly - as I think about that question, where we're all, again, looking for that silver bullet in prayer. You know, we've been in those prayer groups, and prayer meetings, where someone's praying, and you're like, "Ah, dang it. That's a good prayer. I want that. I'm going to do that next time." It's not about them, and what they said, or how they said it. Again,

it's all about the heart. One Bible teacher I've gotten to know over the years, studied under quite a bit - and it's funny - I went to lunch one time with this person, and the prayer was "I'm like, Oh man, this is going to be so good. The prayer is just going to rock my world." And it was, "God, thanks for this time and for the food. Amen." And I'm like, "What the heck? That's as good as it gets from this famed Bible teacher - That's it?" But again, it wasn't about standing up, sitting down, yelling, quiet, whatever else, but it was the heart. "Hey, thank you for this time. And thank you for this food. Amen." I'm like, "You know what? That's pretty cool." So again, I think we need to quit worrying about the silver bullets, and posture of our physicality, and the tone. It all comes down to the motive and submitting to God's will.