

Constant Prayer

By Paul R. Blake

“Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church... he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying” (Acts 12:5, 12).

We often limit our prayers in public to general thanksgiving and non-specific requests, and sometimes this practice carries over into our private prayers. In truth, we do not need to be so limited, even in our public prayers; specificity is acceptable, even desirable, to God. I feel confident that the Acts Twelve congregation at Jerusalem that spent the night in prayer on Peter’s behalf did not speak in generalities or make non-specific requests. In the prayers recorded in both Old and New Testaments, we often see manifested how specific, focused and direct prayer can be.

We often believe that we must cover every matter in every prayer that was addressed by Jesus when He taught the disciples how to pray. While this certainly permitted in scripture, it is not mandated by Bible examples of prayer; in fact, apart from the prayer Jesus used in teaching the disciples, all of the other prayers in the Old and New Testaments consider the matters at hand. We instinctively recognize this application in prayers that focus on a specific part of worship: closing prayers, communion prayers for blessing, prayers for the restoration of a penitent disciple. There exists no scriptural reason preventing us from specificity in our prayers for the sick, the lost, offerings of thanksgiving, petitions for civil leaders, requests for material blessings and undertakings, etc.

In addition, some tend to believe that prayers that are not spontaneous are somehow less acceptable. I find that amusingly ironic because so many who lead public prayer frequently use memorized petitions. When I offer prayers for the sick, I use the bulletin to remember all of the disciples and family members who are ill. I have often observed conscientious brethren using a note to help them recall all of the matters that need to be addressed in prayer. Does our practice justify this? It is certainly in keeping with the apparent practices of the New Testament writers who wrote down a number of prayer requests in their inspired letters. If it is wrong to use a written reminder, it is wrong to use any reminder. What text will one use to defend the argument that using a written list of reminders makes a prayer less acceptable than using memorization?

We often ask the elders, or the evangelist, or the whole congregation to pray for us, because we know the good that comes of it. If it is true (as we occasionally think) that because the righteous get sick and recover at the same rate as the unrighteous and therefore prayer is ineffective, then why do we desire the prayers of others on our behalf? If prayer is a superstitious throwback to our pagan ancestors huddling around a campfire at night and chanting to keep away the imagined gods of darkness, then why ask others to pray for us. More to the point, why pray at all? “Who is the Almighty, that we should serve Him? And what profit do we have if we pray to Him?” (Job 21:15). “I cry out to You, but You do not answer me” (Job 30:20).

First, prayer is a manifestation of our faith. “Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (James 2:18) is not limited to obedience to the Gospel, but eminently applies to all of our responses to the instructions of our Father. Praying is an active expression of our faith, our belief that God is, that God has spoken, that God loves us, and that God will hear and answer our prayers in a manner that will benefit us the most. Our prayers are proof of our faith. It is not enough to believe the principles listed above; we must act in such a way that demonstrates our conviction that they are true. One can believe that baptism will wash away his sins, even if his five senses cannot discern it happening, even if it seems to him that

the act of baptism is a strange way to accomplish it. He is baptized to manifest his conviction that baptism will save him (1Peter 3:21; Acts 22:16, 2:38; Mark 16:16).

In the same manner, prayer manifests our faith that God will take care of us. We will not satisfy the Divine imperative until we actually express our petitions, pleas, thanksgiving, and praise with conviction. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting..." (James 1:5-6ff). "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray... Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him... And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:13-16ff). When we pray, we prove our faith.

It is a further manifestation of our faith that we do not allow God's answer (or apparent absence of an answer) to deter us from continuing the practice of prayer. Paul admonished the Romans to "continue steadfastly in prayer" (Rom. 12:12). The key to this level of faith and continuing in prayer regardless of the answer is found in the words of Jesus, who was as intensely focused and convicted as one could possibly be in prayer. He was praying in the Garden for deliverance from the impending crucifixion. He qualified His petition with "not as I will, but as You will" (Matt. 26:39). I have a brother that ends his prayers with: "Knowing that as Thou are of a mind, so will all things be." This spirit will lead to stronger faith resulting in steadfast, fervent prayer.

Whether consciously or instinctively, we know the good of prayer. While we may not fully understand prayer and God's answers to it, we must be diligent in it anyway. So, you feel the strength of your conviction in prayer is weak. Rejoice! You have just discovered a new petition to bring to God in prayer. Consider the exchange between Jesus and a father with a sick child. "If You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." Jesus said to him, 'If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!'" (Mark 9:22-24). Believe, and ask the Lord to help you grow in faith.

The apostle Paul knew he needed more than the help of God. For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us, ***you also helping together in prayer for us...***" (2Cor. 1:8-11ff). We need more than the help God has promised; we need your prayers to plead His promises. We need to pray.

In the next article, we will consider two more reasons to pray: that God wants to hear from His children, and that we receive blessings in response to our prayers in far greater proportion than our expectations in our prayers.

A Moments Wisdom

- The root of discontent is self-love; the more the self is indulged, the more it demands.
- Drink injures a man externally, internally, and eternally.
- Don't just envy another's good fortune; imitate the hard work that helped him earn it.
- A good example is the best sermon.
- We reform others unconsciously when we act uprightly.
- Sunny days alone soon create a desert.
- Half a fact equals a whole lie.