

What Makes Prayer Acceptable

Prayer is a subject we all need to consider regularly. It is something most of us know we need, but many struggle to pray as often or as effectively as they ought. In the life of a Christian, we could spend considerable time dealing with this subject, but today, I just want to ask the question: What makes prayer acceptable?

I. What is prayer?

- a. Simply stated, **prayer is how we communicate with God.**
- b. **It is directly commanded** often which also describes how we are expected to pray. Luke 18:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Philippians 4:6, Romans 12:12 calls for us to continue steadfastly in prayer, etc.
- c. **It was a key factor in the lives of faithful examples in scripture** – Abraham, Moses, David, Hannah (mother of Samuel), Elijah, Daniel, Nehemiah, Paul, etc.
- d. **It was a frequent aspect of the life of Jesus.** Luke 5:16 – NKJV notes that He often withdrew into the wilderness to pray. This is remarkable, when we find Jesus, God with us (Immanuel), praying as often as He did. He serves as an indicator of just how important prayer ought to be to us. It was so impactful that His disciples asked Him to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1)
- e. It is what I describe as a **“spiritual indicator”**. The way you pray, has a bearing on how much God really means to you. **“7 days without prayer makes one weak!”** As you study scripture, including the above verses, you find it clearly taught that God WANTS us to pray to Him!

II. What makes prayer unacceptable?

- a. If there are conditions to acceptable prayer, that implies there are prayers that are unacceptable.
- b. **Refusing to obey** – Proverbs 28:9, *One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination.* How can we ask God to hear us when we refuse to submit to Him and follow Him? NOTE: This is not about God not being able to hear and understand what we say – God knows everything about everyone! This is about God will not answer favorably or even acknowledge one who is unwilling to submit to Him.
- c. **Unrepentant lives** – related to the previous point, if we have sin in our lives, and we refuse to change our behaviors, how can we expect God to hear us? Psalm 66:18, *If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord will not hear.* Isaiah 59:1-2, *Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, That it cannot save; Nor His ear heavy, That it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear.* NOTE Acts 3:19, *Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.*
- d. **Self-righteousness** – Luke 18:9-14 – the Pharisee and tax collector. The Pharisee was prideful and boastful. Jesus was clear that His prayer was NOT heard by God.
- e. **Outward show** – Matthew 6:5 – Jesus here spoke of how the corrupt leaders loved to be seen by men as they prayed.
- f. **Vain repetition** – Matthew 6:7 – this is a prayer offered without thought. “Going through the motions.” Jesus continued His condemnation of the religious leaders noting how they would offer “many words” prayers THINKING they would be heard. God was not impressed!
- g. **Refusing to forgive** – Matthew 6:14-15, 18:35– as He taught in the model prayer and on other occasions, God’s forgiveness is contingent on our willingness to forgive others (after the parable of the unforgiving servant). Also Matthew 5:23-24 – if I know my brother has something against me, I need to take care of it before I come before God offering “gifts” to Him.
- h. **Asking amiss** – James 4:3 – this is pursuing selfish desires and praying for the wrong things. Maybe my motives are wrong, or I am making selfish requests, or for trivial or worldly matters (such as that

your sports team will win), or worse - for opportunity to sin (e.g., Are you asking God to help you win the lottery?), etc.

- i. **When we doubt** – James 1:6-8 – as we shall see, our prayers need to be offered with faith. When we do not believe God is capable of answering our prayers (according to His will), He will not!
- j. **Being neglectful to your spouse** – 1 Peter 3:7. Peter gives the specific example of a husband and wife that are not treating each other respectfully and with godliness. Our goal ought to be to pray with and for one another.
- k. **The “sinner’s prayer”** – Many today advocate that all one needs to do to be saved is pray “the sinner’s prayer”. But you will NOT find that in the Bible. The reason God does not accept the sinner’s prayer is associated with many of the above conditions – a refusal to obey God, asking amiss. John 9:31 – God does not hear sinners? The healed man was a Jew under the LOM, and he had an understanding that God does NOT hear sinners. That is true, but it must be placed in its proper context -

III. What makes prayer acceptable?

- a. Consider the antithesis of some our previous points – we are willing to forgive others and thus God will forgive us, willing to obey Him, self-righteousness, etc.
- b. **We approach God with reverence** – we need to show God due honor if we desire that He hear our prayers and be with us. Matthew 6:9, Leviticus 10:3 – after the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, *And Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the Lord spoke, saying: ‘By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; And before all the people I must be glorified.’”* Psalm 89:7, *God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, And to be held in reverence by all those around Him.* Hebrews 12:28, 29 – we serve Him acceptably with reverence and godly fear.
- c. **We must ask in faith** – James 1:6. God wants our prayers to be more than empty words and requests. He wants us trust Him, believe Him and believe IN Him. Hebrews 11:6 notes without faith, we cannot please Him. The whole foundation of living the Christian life is faith. That is what we BEGIN with! Hebrews 10:23 notes that we hold fast our confession of hope without wavering.
- d. **With humility** – Luke 18:9-14 – the tax collector. Jesus contrasts 2 men who went to the temple to pray. The “tax collector” knew who God was and who he was. He knew his place! James 4:6 – God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. Matthew 6:5-6 – go to your closet and pray. We have no RIGHT to go to God with arrogant demands.
- e. **According to His will** – 1 John 5:14-15. Another important element to understand in our prayers is that God is in control. He will accomplish His purpose! As Christians, if our goal is to serve Him (Romans 12:1-2, Galatians 2:20, etc.), then what we pray for ought to be according to His will. Jesus also taught this in Matthew 6:10 – the model prayer. This was even the prayer of Jesus in the garden – Matthew 26:39, 42.
- f. **When we are truly repentant and confess our sins** – 1 John 1:7-9 describes how when we sin, we must confess our sins. Thus, we need to go to God in prayer for forgiveness as believers. BUT it must also be accompanied by genuine repentance. John noted that it is when we confess our sins that God is faithful and just to forgive. Acts 8:22 as Peter spoke with Simon the sorcerer, he was told to repent and pray. That is demonstrated in the prayer of David as recorded in Psalm 51:1-4ff.
- g. **When we are living righteous lives** – 1 Peter 3:12, quoting from Psalm 34:15, we read, *For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their prayers; But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.* James 5:16 notes that *the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.* 1 Timothy 2:8 – Paul’s desire was *that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.* God’s people are His special people zealous for good works – Titus 2:14. A continual theme in this study is how prayer is a privilege for those who are genuinely striving to serve Him. That is why the effectiveness of our prayers is related to how we are serving God.
- h. **With sincerity** – our prayers need to be thoughtful and genuine. James 5:16 – the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man... Psalm 145:18, *The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, To all who call upon Him in truth.* We are not approaching God with ulterior motives. They need to come from our

- hearts. David, on one occasion prayed to God, *Vindicate me, O Lord, For I have walked in my integrity. I have also trusted in the Lord; I shall not slip. Examine me, O Lord, and prove me; Try my mind and my heart. For Your lovingkindness is before my eyes, And I have walked in Your truth.* Psalm 26:1-3. It is a psalm where David appeals to his righteous life. We know he was not perfect but know where his heart was. Jeremiah 17:10, *I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give every man according to his ways, According to the fruit of his doings.* We may lie to ourselves as we utter words in prayer, but God knows your heart. He knows your REAL motives.
- i. **With importunity** – the word means, with urgency or pleadings. In other words, we approach God knowing that we genuinely need Him and His help. We know He is our sustainer. We are not uttering words flippantly (careless, reckless or thoughtless) or muttered in rote (without thought). When we approach God, there is reasoning behind our prayers and petitions. Luke 18:1-8 – the parable of the woman and the unjust judge. Paul’s thorn in the flesh – 2 Corinthians 12:7-8 – he pleaded 3 times. Jesus in the garden – Luke 22:41-44 – being in agony, Matthew 26:44 – 3x He prayed. Hebrews 5:7 – notes of Jesus, *who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear.* When we have a need, we OUGHT to go to Him. 1 Peter 5:7 notes that with humility we are casting all our cares on Him, *“for He cares for you.”*
 - j. Finally, **we pray in the name of the Lord** – with proper authority – Ephesians 5:20, we pray “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Ephesians 2:18 notes that *“through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.”* John 14:13, *“whatever you ask in My name, that I will do...”* 1 John 2:1 reminds us that Jesus is our advocate to the Father when we sin.

These are some things to consider when we contemplate the subject of prayer. As we can see, HOW we pray is important. Let us resolve that not only are we going to pray often, but also that we are living and praying so that He will hear those prayers. What about you? Are your prayers acceptable to God?