

## WHY PRAY?

### 1. Bad reasons to pray.

a.) To satisfy selfish interests:

"O Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz!  
My friends all own Porsches. I must make amends!  
I've tried to be good, get no help from my friends.  
O Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz!"

I'm sure my readers will accept this is not quite the way we should be praying, but it is amazing how much prayer is like this. We pray for some possession, or for success at work or at school, for good weather on a holiday or a wedding, that the speed camera we've just gone through over the limit wasn't working, or that Mrs. X didn't hear the unflattering remark we made about her at the Coffee Morning etc. etc. Who *hasn't* prayed a prayer like that! We might occasionally pray these kinds of prayers, but these are not the kinds of prayers God wants us to pray. This is a bad reason for prayer.

b.) To force God to do things. Very frequently when one hears Christians talking about prayer - and especially 24/7 prayer, one will hear somebody say that "prayer moves God's hand". This appears to suggest that a person praying, or *even better*, a whole group of people praying, can get God to change his mind, can alter God's priorities, and can persuade (or even *force*) God to do something he did not want to do before. Nobody puts things quite like that, of course, but it is the logical implication of all talk of "moving God's hand".

The problem with this is either a) We have a view of God as somebody who does not really want to do us good, and that we have to work very hard at persuading him to do so, or b) that human beings are claiming that they know the right way forward for the church and/or the world better than God does. If God has determined that x cause is a priority and y cause is not, then presumably he has good reasons for doing so, and should not change course even if 10,000 people pray 24/7 for him to do so.

What is happening here is that, because prayer sometimes changes things and wonderful things happen in response to prayer, we come to believe that if we pray hard enough, God *must* answer. I confess, for this reason, to being uncomfortable with the song:

"If you believe and I believe and we together pray,  
The Holy Spirit *must* come down and set God's people free."

I know the song was written in the heat of the struggle against the Smith regime in Rhodesia, and that there was no good reason why God *shouldn't* answer the people's prayer in that situation. But I object in principle to anyone saying God *must* do anything. He is sovereign, and he is only *bound* to do something if he has bound himself to do it. Suggesting that if a number of us get together and pray hard we can *force* God to do something he had not already decided to do is very close to magic and bears no relation to the teaching of the Bible.

c.) To encourage God to "perform". Shortly after I arrived in Penistone four years ago, a local Pentecostal church held a healing crusade. They invited a visiting healing evangelist from Australia to take the meetings, whose first name was Tim. For weeks before the crusade, adverts appeared on buses and in the local paper saying: "Tim the Miracle Hunter. Will he find a miracle in Sheffield". Well, of course he did, because he made sure of it!

People are often very naive when it comes to healing evangelists. Very frequently these evangelists will show the cameraman a room full of abandoned walking sticks and surgical collars, or will refer to the fact that they have such a room back home. Now I have had need to use crutches and walking sticks, when I broke my thigh bone at the age of 16.. I remember hobbling up to the doctor's consulting room with the aid of a stick and walking out perfectly normally. No miracle had been performed. But the doctor had told me to use the stick until he told me not to, and I did not have the confidence to try to walk normally until he had given the say-so. At any given time there will be a number of people who are walking about on crutches or with a stick only because they are still waiting for the appointment at which the doctor will tell them they can manage without. Many more suffer from conditions such as arthritis which are better on some days than others. And people with arthritis are often advised to use sticks or to wear surgical collars. On their better days, or in their better periods, these people may well be able to manage without these aids. Some indeed put them aside for a while. But they usually take them up again. All it needs is an arthritis sufferer to feel sufficiently emboldened in a healing meeting to throw away their stick or collar, and the cry will go up "It's a miracle!" Whereas, in fact, it is no more than a normal medical phenomenon.

Again, one hears people pray "Lord, do a great work in our time, or in our town". But one sometimes wonders: is this because they want to see people won to Christ? Or because they want to see a spectacular event up close? Is it a desire for God's kingdom to be extended? Or a curious interest in special effects? Many religious people pray with this motive. It is tantamount to regarding God as a performing seal, and it is the temptation Jesus resisted when he rejected the Devil's attempt to persuade him to jump off the temple roof. Jesus resisted the temptation: so should we. This is a very bad reason for prayer.

d) To make a show of piety. Decades ago every church used to have a prayer meeting. In these meetings people prayed long, florid, and pious prayers in a strange language. No-one was ever prayed for by name, they were "our brother" or "our sister". No-one was ever sick: they were "racked on a bed of pain". The longest and most pious prayers were often made by the people who ruled the church with a rod of iron, and who were capable of some very unChristlike behaviour in Church meetings and in business. Such prayers bounce back off the ceiling. God never hears them. And good Christian people are rarely fooled, either. This is a very bad reason for prayer.

e) To control others. Ministers and preachers from the pulpit, or from the chair at meetings, or anybody in a time of open prayer, can use prayer as a way of putting their point of view across in a way that cannot be easily argued

against. One *could* make a counter-prayer, but most people would feel too intimidated. A show of piety is here allied to a claim to divine inspiration and emotional blackmail in an attempt to force a view or course of action on a congregation. If the person making the prayer is a semi-detached maverick, they are shunned and soon leave. But if they are a powerful, well-connected person, especially if they are the minister, they are soon in absolute control. This is also fundamentally contrary to God's will and is a very bad reason to pray.

## 2. Good reasons to pray

a) To focus on God. The reason these other reasons to pray are *bad* reasons is that in every case the focus is on the *self*. What can God do for *me*? How can I show myself to best advantage and get my own way? Any prayer that is focussed on oneself is not *true* prayer. True prayer focusses on *God*. On his majesty and power; on his love and justice; on his faithfulness and compassion. When we pray, we take our minds *off* ourselves, *our* worries, needs, wants, situation, strivings, and we concentrate instead on *God*. Our situation, our wants, our problems, are all put into perspective, and we draw near to God. Very often it is the change of focus and perspective that helps us to see things in a more helpful light and helps to sort out our problem. Sometimes the problem is no more than a false sense of perspective and focussing on God sorts that out directly. Focussing on God is a very good reason for prayer.

b) To enter into a close relationship with God. Jesus says, "Remain in me and I in you...if a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit" (John 15: 4-5). Jesus calls us into the same kind of relationship he has with the Father. In fact, he draws us into his relationship with the Father. If we have a friend, we keep that relationship going though meeting with that person and talking to them. So we keep our relationship with God going (remain in him) by meeting with him and talking with him in prayer. God wants us to be his friends, not his servants. Praying so we can enter into a relationship of friendship with God, and so we can stay in that relationship is a very good reason for prayer.

c) To become more like Jesus. As we grow closer to a person, we want to do the things that please the other person and not to do the things that displease them. Same with God. The closer we draw to God in prayer and in personal relationship, the more we become the kind of people he wants us to be. Jesus says, "Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes...you are already made clean" (John 15: 3). As we come into God's presence, we become aware of our faults and failings, and our rebellion. This leads us to confess and turn from our wrongdoing, and to find forgiveness and peace.

d) To align ourselves with God's will. Jesus says: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." Great promise! Ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you! But note the context: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you." If we remain in a personal rel. with God, growing closer and closer to him, and if we allow Jesus' "words" (i.e. his teaching) to be the guiding principle which shapes and control our lives. *Then* our wills will be aligned with God's will. *Then* we will know what God wants us to do because we want what he wants. *Then* of course he will do whatever we ask, because we will only ask what is in accordance with his will. This is an ideal future state, of course, but it is the direction in which we should be heading and the further we have advanced the more nearly our prayers will be answered because they will approximate more and more to the will of God.

e) To receive God's resources. Jesus says, "No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." (John 15: 4) We cannot do it by ourselves. We need God's help. But before God can give his help, we must admit our need. In prayer we confess our weakness and admit our need, and then it is that God gives us his strength and resources. It is when we accept that we cannot live for God or work for him in our own strength that he pours out the power of His Holy Spirit upon us. When we focus on God's power, it shows up our weakness and we seek his help; when we focus on his love, our lack of love is shown and he pours his love into our hearts; when we focus on his majesty, it shows up our lack of faith and the vision of God's strength, power, and love increases our faith and makes our hope more certain.

## CONCLUSION

I pray that we will all draw near to God in prayer - not to satisfy our selfish interest, or to force God to do things, or to encourage Him to perform, nor to make a show of piety or to control others; but to focus on God, to enter into and remain in a close relationship with God, to become more like Jesus, to align ourselves with God's will, so that we may receive his resources and live and work to the praise and glory of His Holy Name. AMEN.