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EFFECTIVE PRAYER 1

What is effective prayer?

Believers generally recognise that prayer is a very major aspect of Christian living and Christian service. If we want to live well for the Lord and contribute effectively to His work, we need to develop our prayer life well. However, Christians often have a vague idea about this subject. It is helpful for us to understand this subject more fully and accurately. In particular, I wish to address the issue of what is effective prayer and how we can develop an effective prayer life.

What does it mean to be able to pray well and what is effective prayer? There are those who are eloquent. They have a good command of the language and they are able to express themselves well in prayer. Their prayers sound good. Sometimes we hear someone pray loudly and with much emotion and we may think it is a "powerful" prayer. Are such prayers necessarily effective?

On the other hand, there are those who have a poor command of the language. They are not fluent. They are often at a loss for words. They do not seem to know how to pray or how to pray well. Do we then conclude that their prayers are poor? Should they feel restraint in expressing themselves in audible prayer in the presence of others? Do we feel put off when we hear such prayers?

What should we look for in prayer? What should we consider when we seek to understand the realities behind prayers?

Let us begin by looking at a parable of the Lord Jesus on this subject of prayer. It can help us see some fundamental prerequisites of effective prayer.

Prayer of the Pharisee and the tax collector

Luke 18:9-14

9 And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:

10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.'

12 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

13 "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'

14 "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The Pharisees were generally regarded as the religious leaders of the day. They were active in religious activities. They fasted, tithed, and prayed long prayers.

In the parable, the Pharisee was clearly more eloquent in his prayer than the tax collector. He expressed himself well and prayed longer than the tax collector. As a Pharisee, he would have undergone religious training and would have a better understanding of the religious issues of the day. He was able to use choice words and would be able to quote scriptural verses and pepper his prayer with scriptural terms. It is likely others would have regarded him as one who could pray well and he would have thought likewise.

In contrast, the tax collector would be regarded as someone sinful with a low status in society and in religious circles. His prayer was very brief and may be regarded as crude. He did not seem to know how to pray properly and was unable to express himself well. He did not say much other than the few words: "God, be merciful to me, the sinner".

And yet, if we ask which prayer is better, then the verdict of the infallible judge, the Lord Jesus Christ, is very clear.

Luke 18:14

"I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The prayer of the tax collector was effective. He cried out to God for mercy and God harkened to his prayer. The prayer of the Pharisee was not effective as it was rejected by the Lord. Whether or not a prayer sounds good is secondary. What matters is whether the prayer is effective. How do we develop an effective prayer life? What should we pay attention to?

Acceptable and unacceptable prayers

Let us consider why God rejects some prayers but accepts others.

Unacceptable prayers

a. Attitude of self-righteousness

When the Lord Jesus told this parable, He wanted to emphasise the condition of the heart, and specifically about the problem of self-righteousness.

Luke 18:9

And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:

The Pharisee was thanking God for his self-professed accomplishments. He was even contemptuous of others. He thanked God that he was not like the swindlers, the unjust, the adulterers, and certainly, not like this tax collector. Such thanksgiving is not true thanksgiving and such "impressive" accomplishments are not true accomplishments in God's sight. The Pharisee was projecting himself. His contempt for the tax collector arose from pride and a wrong spirit within. This kind of prayer is unacceptable to God.

We should not be praying to impress others; we should not concentrate on trying to sound good. If our lives and attitude are not right before God, no matter how hard we pray, even with words that sound right and good, the meaning and impact of the prayer and the degree to which it is acceptable before God will be affected. If our lives and attitude are significantly negative, then the whole prayer may be rejected by God.

If we want our prayers to be meaningful and acceptable to God, we must make sure that our lives and attitudes are right.

b. Iniquity in the heart

In Isaiah 1:10-17, we see God rejecting the prayers of the Israelites because of iniquities in their hearts.

Isaiah 1:10

Hear the word of the Lord,
You rulers of Sodom;
Give ear to the instruction of our God,
You people of Gomorrah.

The words here were addressed to the Israelites, who were compared to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by the Lord because of their evilness and wickedness.

Isaiah 1:11-13

11 "What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?"
Says the Lord.

"I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
And the fat of fed cattle;
And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats.
12 "When you come to appear before Me,
Who requires of you this trampling of My courts?
13 "Bring your worthless offerings no longer,
Incense is an abomination to Me.
New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—
I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly.

The people offered sacrifices and various things that appeared good and pleasing to God. These sacrifices were in accordance with the commandments of God. But God said: "What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?" "I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats". What is the reason? He said in verse 13: "I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly". Iniquity and solemn assembly do not go together despite offerings of sacrifices.

Isaiah 1:14-15

14 "I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts,
They have become a burden to Me;
I am weary of bearing them.
15 "So when you spread out your hands in prayer,
I will hide My eyes from you;
Yes, even though you multiply prayers,
I will not listen...

It does not mean God will hear our prayers because we spend much time in prayer or come to Him in frequent prayer. He told the Israelites whose lives were displeasing to Him: "even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen" (v. 15).

Isaiah 1:15-17

15...Your hands are covered with blood.
16 "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight.
Cease to do evil,
17 Learn to do good;
Seek justice,
Reprove the ruthless,
Defend the orphan,
Plead for the widow.

In order to be acceptable before God, we must "wash" ourselves to make ourselves clean. It does not mean that our lives must be perfect and there can be no wrongdoing. But it does mean that our hearts have been washed by the blood of the Lamb and the basic direction of our lives is to cease to do evil, learn to do what is

good, to seek justice, to have a correct spirit and attitude of heart. Our lives should be set in the direction of what is pleasing to God.

Acceptable prayers

Let us consider the attitude of heart and spirit that make prayers acceptable to God.

a. Spirit of contriteness

Let us pay attention to the tax collector's posture. He was standing some distance away, unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, and was beating his breast and asking God for mercy. He recognised he was a sinner and we can see that his prayer was straight from his heart. He was repentant, sincere, and there was no trace of self-righteousness in his posture towards God. He was asking God to be merciful to him and this was meaningful and acceptable to God.

The tax collector did not trust in his own righteousness, but recognised he was a sinful man. And so the Lord Jesus said in verse 14: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified". This shows that the Lord heard him. The Lord was merciful to him and his sins were forgiven.

For our prayers to be acceptable to God, it is crucial for us to adopt the posture of a spirit of contriteness, sincerity and honesty.

In Isaiah 66:1-2, the Lord declared His Majesty:

Isaiah 66:1-2

1 Thus says the Lord,

"Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool.

Where then is a house you could build for Me?

And where is a place that I may rest?

2 "For My hand made all these things,

Thus all these things came into being," declares the Lord.

"But to this one I will look,

To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.

Heaven is God's throne and the earth is His footstool. There is no house that can really accommodate God. His hands made all the things of this world and all these things came into being by the Creator God. Yet He is near to the humble and contrite in spirit. When He says: "To this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite in spirit", He is not referring to "looking" of the physical kind, but to being conscious of and concerned about the welfare and the cries of the humble.

b. Reverence for God

The expression "trembles at My word" in Isaiah 66:2 communicates to us a sense of reverence for God. This is the attitude of one who has a contrite spirit, one whose

heart is open to God, and has proper regard for His word. Such a spirit is linked to a heart that is set on turning away from evil, on obeying God, and on seeking to do what is pleasing to Him.

When we consider the Lord Jesus' acceptance of the tax collector's prayer and the words in Isaiah 66:2, we can see that we do not need special qualifications, skill, or training in order to pray in a manner that is acceptable to God. The primary issue is the condition of our heart – it must be right before God. There must be a strong sense of our unworthiness before God and deep gratitude to Him for His grace towards us. Contriteness of spirit is an inward state of the heart and we can choose to adopt this posture and attitude of heart. Let us ask the Lord to help us learn how to be truly contrite before Him.

Meaning of effective prayer

I will now consider with you more fully what effective prayer means. We need to go beyond the tax collector's kind of prayer. The tax collector cried out "God, be merciful to me, the sinner". In one sense there is effectiveness in his prayer, but that is not all there is to effective prayer.

For a fuller treatment of this subject, we have to consider two factors:

- (1) Prayer that is acceptable to God
- (2) The quality and impact of the prayer

1. Prayer that is acceptable to God

For the prayer to be effective, it must first of all be acceptable to God. And for it to be acceptable to God, we must have a right spirit within. If not, the effectiveness of the prayer will be hindered despite expressions of words that may sound right. The wrong spirit within us will affect the meaning and the quality of the prayer and the degree to which it will be acceptable before God. If the attitude of the person praying is seriously negative, then the whole prayer can be totally unacceptable to God and be rejected by Him.

2. The quality and impact of the prayer

The second aspect is the quality of the prayer, its impact on the spiritual realm and the attainment of the objective of the prayer. To what degree does the prayer release God's power in accomplishing His will and His purposes? Important factors in effective prayer include the person's spiritual health and maturity, to what degree he understands the realities in the spiritual realm, how God looks at the situation, what God is concerned about, and how that person exercises his spirit in persevering prayer. Spiritual discernment and wisdom are important in effective prayer.

I will elaborate by giving some examples of the quality and impact of prayer on various major aspects of our outworking and spiritual service.

a. Spiritual warfare

An indication of effectiveness of prayer in spiritual warfare is its impact on the forces of darkness. In the Book of Acts, the apostle Paul, in the name of Jesus, commanded a spirit of divination in a slave girl to come out of her and it came out immediately (Acts 16:16-18). However, there are different degrees of complexity and severity of spiritual bondage, and the power of the evil spirits we are confronting in spiritual warfare in different contexts differs.

When we pray for someone under spiritual attack or oppressed by the powers of darkness, what impact does the prayer have on the powers of darkness? To what degree does our prayer restrain the powers of darkness from attacking and working in that person?

To be effective in spiritual warfare, we need to understand how the powers of darkness operate, what they are seeking to do in that situation, how to pray for the one under attack, and where relevant and feasible, how to help the person exercise himself to counter the attacks of the forces of darkness.

In spiritual warfare, it is not just about praying for deliverance from the powers of darkness. We need to also understand what important issues to pray for so that the person undergoing the spiritual attack can benefit significantly. For example, it is very helpful for the person to know the grounds he has given for the powers of darkness to work in his life and what he needs to put right in his life. It is good if the person can be helped to understand how he can cooperate with God, learn from Him and be strengthened through the situation. In this way, he can participate in his own deliverance including taking his stand to reject the working of the forces of darkness in his life and participating in prayer for his deliverance. The goal is deliverance from bondage to the evil one and also to learn much from and emerge stronger and more committed to the Lord in the process.

To evaluate the quality and impact of prayer, we will need to understand what ought to be the goal of the prayer and then to what degree the goal has been attained through the prayer.

b. Specific requests

Some specific requests are simple, straightforward and involve easy issues. When we pray, the Lord answers our prayer, there is not much complication. But some prayer requests involve major issues which are important and complex.

In a major issue, it is not enough to just pray once and consider it resolved. We may pray for a long time and it is still not resolved. That does not mean that the prayer is not effective. It may be a difficult issue. And as many people pray, things may be moving towards the attainment of the objective of the prayer. However, not every

prayer will contribute to the same degree. How effective a prayer is depends on the person's understanding of the issues involved and how he actually prays such that spiritual power is being channelled towards attaining the objective of the prayer. This power is of course not our own power. It is the power of the Holy Spirit released to accomplish the objective as God's people pray. God has so constituted reality that what we pray about, how we pray, how we understand issues, will have a bearing on the outcome of things. We must therefore learn to exercise our responsibility well.

c. Lives of people

In our prayer for people, our goal ought to be their well-being and their eternal welfare. We may have the potential to pray with significant impact on the spiritual realm, but if we do not know how to go about it, we will not be effective in helping the person we are praying for. If we do not know the person and the issues that matter in his life, we can end up praying in the wrong areas, in the wrong direction, or in areas that are not so needful.

When someone asks for prayer support, and the prayer requests are in the right areas, the prayer can be meaningful, helpful, and effective for the person's development. Sometimes, the person may ask for prayer support for various things or we may pray for provision for things which he may or may not ask. But are these things really helpful for the person? If we do not know, or if we misunderstand the situation, we may pray in directions that are not really helpful for the person. This would significantly affect the effectiveness of the prayer for the person.

To be effective in prayer, we therefore need to have an accurate understanding of the person and his needs. Understanding of a person and his needs will include an accurate perception of the issues to pray about. We need to know the areas that are crucial to this person. There are some general aspects that we can pray for that is important for every believer, for example, his relationship with God and his knowledge of the truth. But if we have an accurate perception of the areas of needs that are really important to the person at that point in time, we can then pray specifically for those areas. Then the power that is released can be channelled to those specific areas.

Prayer is a lively subject. There is a lot of potential in prayer because God's infinite power can be released through prayer. It is important to learn from the Lord where and how He wants us to channel His power and how we can nurture our prayer life.

d. God's work

The Lord's work encompasses the whole world. The quality and impact of our prayer for the Lord's work is the positive difference it makes in the spiritual realm and in the advancement of God's kingdom. The positive contribution of our prayer for a country includes overcoming the forces of darkness at work in that country and the release of God's power and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the people. It includes preparing the hearts of non-believers and drawing them into God's kingdom and the nurturing of the spiritual lives of believers.

It is important for us to understand the major areas of needs in the country related to the Lord's work. Various issues may be urgent or important. What are the emphases, the priorities that we should concentrate upon? How can we pray according to God's will for that country? How can we pray such that the power of God is released in the correct areas? All these will have a bearing on the effectiveness of our contribution. And this is true at both the personal level and the congregational level. We must look to the Lord for wisdom, guidance and enabling.

e. Worship and fellowship with God

When we talk about the effectiveness of prayer, we should not just think from the angle of prayer requests and accomplishing something. We have to also consider our worship of God and our fellowship with Him. By worship and fellowship, I am referring to expressing our praise and adoration of God, our appreciation of Him and our desire to grow in oneness with Him.

The first thing to take note of is that our worship and fellowship must be acceptable to God. Our heart condition must be right. We must have a contrite spirit and a correct posture towards God.

Even when our prayers are acceptable to God, the quality of worship and fellowship with God can vary in quality from person to person, and at different times for the same person. True worship of God magnifies His name, exalts the Lord and glorifies Him and has a positive impact on the spiritual realm. True worship and fellowship with God in prayer also enhances our oneness with the Lord. How can we come before God in worship and in fellowship, in such a way that it can really contribute to a deeper oneness with Him?

How our prayer comes through to God has to do with the kind of spirit we have and what flows forth from our heart. We may cry out to God to purify us and express deep commitment to Him, but what is actually the reality within? To what degree have we recognised and resolved the areas in our lives that are displeasing to Him? What is the degree of our love for Him and appreciation of Him? To what degree have we appreciated the love and goodness of God and other issues that would help us towards a deeper response?

This does not mean that we do not have weaknesses in our hearts. All of us have failures and weaknesses. We must face them properly and honestly. If we do not, the effectiveness of our prayer will be hindered.

Factors affecting the quality and impact of prayers

All of us who are concerned about our prayer life want to improve the effectiveness of our prayer. What then are the main factors that contribute to an effective prayer life? I will consider three factors with you:

1. Quality of life

A major aspect has to do with our quality of life, that is, our spiritual maturity and spiritual health. Spiritual health is not the same as spiritual maturity. There are different levels of spiritual maturity. A young believer may not be spiritually mature, but he can be spiritually healthy. Being spiritually healthy does have a bearing on the effectiveness of our prayer. When we are spiritually more mature, our effectiveness increases. When a spiritually healthy and mature person prays, the Holy Spirit is pleased to work through the prayer and releases the life and power of God. It is therefore important for us to maintain spiritual health at all times and strive earnestly to make progress in spiritual maturity.

Spiritual maturity and health is related to the second major factor: knowledge and understanding.

2. Knowledge and understanding

A person may be reasonably healthy, but he may be lacking in the knowledge of God and His ways. He may also be lacking in his knowledge of the spiritual realm and spiritual reality, of the powers of darkness and spiritual warfare. When we understand God and His ways and how the powers of darkness operate, we will be able to pray more effectively. We will be better equipped to know how to counter the wiles and attacks of the evil one and channel our prayers in the right direction.

It is possible for us to pray over issues we do not have much understanding of. For example, for people we do not know or for countries which we have little knowledge of. There is still meaning in praying for them.

But if we are to develop our prayer life, we must go beyond just praying in general terms, like: "Lord, I commit this person to you and I pray that You will undertake for him". If we are really concerned, then understanding what the person is going through can be very helpful, especially if we know the person is going through struggles and we are in a position to pray significantly.

It is helpful to have a general understanding of man and how God has created man, the world we are living in, the forces of darkness at work, what God has provided for us and His intentions for us in Christ. The other is a specific understanding of the person we are praying for, his particular context and needs.

The Lord allows us to go through many situations of life: our work context, family and friends. We may meet people who are unkind to us, who give us a hard time. Let us not view such situations as just problems and difficulties to get out of the sooner the better. Let us view them as opportunities for us to gain deeper insight into people and their behaviour. Although the behaviour of people varies a lot, yet because man is created in the image of God, there are many things that are similar in the constitution of man. When we look to the Lord to understand people in the different

contexts that God has placed us, we can grow in our understanding of man and become more accurate in our perception of the meaning of their conduct, even people whom we do not know well.

We do not just look at the external conduct, but we should also try to understand the underlying issues. But we must be careful not to jump to conclusions. We can learn from our past experiences, including from the times when we make wrong conclusions or form wrong impressions.

The way we understand people should not be the world's ways of understanding people and the human point of view, but in fellowship with God and what He has revealed in the Scriptures. This will help us to perceive people the way God perceives them. So when people go through struggles, we can understand what they are going through and how to really help them.

At the very heart of God's eternal purpose is His love and concern for mankind. So, if we want to contribute to God's work, then we cannot afford to ignore or to take lightly this major issue of understanding man. The Lord provides opportunities for us to learn from the various contexts He places us in and we can gradually grow in our understanding of people. We will then be more and more able to understand how to pray for people because we will have a more accurate perception of their needs and the important issues involved in each context. To be effective in prayer, we need to understand the priorities and the areas and issues to emphasise in our prayer.

A sound knowledge of God, of the spiritual realm and of man will help us to know how to pray with wisdom and understanding. We will be better equipped to know what to pray for, how to pray, what to concentrate upon, so that there will be more direct impact on the right areas.

Though God is unlimited in His power, the way we pray has a bearing on the way the Lord works. This is because God wants us to have a meaningful part in the fulfilment of His purposes. This is an important point in helping us understand the meaning and power of prayer. That is why not all prayers are equally effective.

It is important to establish the objectives of our prayers. Knowledge of God and His ways, what God is concerned about, our knowledge of the person and our knowledge of the issues involved will help us formulate the objectives of our prayer in that context, and then we pray accordingly.

3. Degree of spiritual exertion

Effectiveness of prayer is also related to the amount of spiritual exertion exercised by the person praying. We may have spiritual maturity and knowledge, but we may not exert ourselves spiritually in prayer over that particular matter. I do not mean that we should exert ourselves as much as possible, over any and every issue. That is not

wise because our spiritual strength and energy are limited. We have to regulate our spiritual exertion.

We need to be wise to know the areas that are of importance – what are the issues we should exert more spiritual energy on, and to what degree we are able to do so without detriment to our own lives. As we exercise ourselves spiritually in an appropriate manner, we will grow stronger, not weaker. We will not be drained and will not end up having problems in our spiritual life.

Not only do we need to exert spiritually, we also need to be persevering because some issues require much prayer over long periods. Do we care sufficiently to pray over these things? Do we persevere over areas that are important to the Lord? Do we have the spiritual stamina to do so? All these will contribute to the effectiveness of our prayer life.

In the next message, we will continue to consider this subject of effectiveness in prayer.

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