

Charles G. Finney:

"Ask, and it shall be given you." Matt. 7:7, 8

"Ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss, to consume it upon your lusts." James 4:3

These passages are chosen as the foundation of several discourses which I design to preach on the condition of prevailing prayer.

Before entering directly upon the consideration of those conditions, however, I deem it important to make several remarks upon the general subject of prayer and of answers to prayer. These will occupy our attention on the present occasion.

1. The Bible most unequivocally asserts that all that is properly called prayer is heard and answered. "Every one that asketh," that is, in the scriptural sense of the term, "receiveth, and he that seeketh, findeth." This declaration is perfectly explicit and to the point.

2. Prayer is not always answered according to the letter, but often only according to the spirit.

This is a very important distinction. It can be made plain by an example taken from scripture. Paul informs us that he was afflicted with a thorn in the flesh. He has not told us precisely what this was. He calls it his "temptation that was in the flesh," and evidently implies that it was a snare and a trouble to him, and a thing which might naturally injure his influence as an apostle. For this latter reason, probably, he was led to "beseech the Lord thrice that it might depart from him." This prayer was obviously acceptable to God, and was graciously answered--answered, however, you will observe, not in the letter of it, but only in its spirit. The letter of the prayer specified the removal of this thorn in the flesh; and in this view of his prayer it was not answered. The spirit of the prayer was doubtless that his influence might not be injured, and that his "temptation" from this evil thing, whatever it was, might not overpower him and draw him into sin. Thus far, and in these respects, his prayer was answered. The Lord assured him, saying, "My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness." This was a real answer to Paul's prayer, although it did not follow the particular way of doing it that Paul had named in his prayer. Paul had asked that certain desired results might be secured to him in a particular manner. The results sought constituted the spirit of the prayer; the specified manner constituted the letter. The Lord secured to him the results, and perhaps even more fully than Paul expected or specifically asked; but He did it, not in Paul's specified way, but in his own.

So it often happens when we pray. The ways of the Lord are so much wiser than our own, that he kindly and most benevolently declines to follow our way, and takes his own. The great end, however, which we seek, if our prayer is acceptable to Him, He will certainly secure, perhaps more perfectly in his own way than he could in ours.

If, therefore, we suppose that prayer must always be answered according to the letter, we shall find ourselves greatly mistaken. But the spirit of acceptable prayer God will always answer. If the letter and the spirit of prayer were in any case identical, the Lord would answer both; when they are not identical, he may answer only according to its spirit.

3. No person can be saved unless in such a state of mind as to offer acceptable prayer. No man can be justified before God at all, unless in such a state of mind as would be accepted in prayer. This is so plain as to need no proof--so plain as to preclude all doubt.

4. Many things are really answers to prayer which are not recognized as such by the suppliant, nor by observers.

This you will see may very easily happen in cases where the spirit and the letter of prayer are diverse from each other. An observer, of course, is not likely to notice any thing but the letter of another's prayer. Consequently, if his prayer is answered only in the spirit of it, and not in the letter at all, he will fail to recognize the answer. And the same thing may occur in respect to the suppliant himself. Unless he notices particularly the inner state of his own mind, he may not get definitely before his eye the real thing which constitutes the spirit of his own prayer. If his attention is chiefly turned towards the letter of it, he may receive an answer to its spirit, and may not notice it as a real answer to his prayer.

The acceptable prayer of any Christian may be quite a different thing from what others suppose it to be, and sometimes different from what himself supposes. In such cases, the answer will often fail to be recognized as an answer. Hence it is of vital importance that we should ourselves understand the real spirit of our own prayer.

All this applies yet more frequently in respect to others than to the suppliant himself. Usually they see only the letter of a prayer and not the spirit. Hence if the latter is answered and not the former, they will naturally suppose that the prayer is not answered, when really it is answered and in the best possible way. Skeptics often stand by tauntingly, and cry out, "You Christians are always praying; but your prayers are never answered." Yet God may be really answering their prayer in the spirit of it, and in the most effectual and glorious manner. I think I could name many instances in which, while skeptics were triumphing as if God did not hear prayer, He was really hearing it in regard to the true spirit of it, and in such a way as most signally to glorify Himself.

5. Much that is called prayer is not answered in any sense whatever, and is not real prayer. Much that goes under the name of prayer is offered merely for the form of it, with neither care nor expectation to be answered. Those who pray thus will not watch to see whether their prayers are answered in any sense whatever.

For example, there are some who pray as a matter of cold duty--only because they must, and not because they feel their need of some specific blessing. Hence their prayer is nothing but a form. Their heart is not set upon any particular object. They only care to do what they call a duty; they do not care with anxious heart for any object they may specify in their prayers. Hence the thing they really care for, is not the thing they pray for. In words they pray for this thing; in heart for quite another thing. And the evidence of this is in the fact that they never look after the thing they pray for in words. If they prayed in heart for any thing, they would certainly look to see whether the blessing asked for is given.

Suppose a man had petitioned for some appointment to office, and had sent on his application to the President or to the appointing power. Probably his heart is greatly set on attaining it. If so you will see him watching the mail for the reply to his communication. Every day you may see him at the office ready to seize his letter at the earliest possible moment. But if on the other hand, he applied only for form's sake; and cares nothing about the office, or does not at all expect it, you will see him about other business or pleasure, which he does care for.

The latter case rarely occurs in human affairs, but in religious things nothing is more common. Multitudes are engaged from time to time in what they call praying; their object being often only to appease their consciences--not to obtain any desired blessing. Of course the quiet of their conscience is the only thing they really seek by prayer, and it would be absurd in them to look after any other answer than this. They are not wont to be guilty of this absurdity.

Of course those who pray thus are not disappointed if they are not heard. It would be so in case of petitions addressed to men; it is so naturally when petitions are addressed to God.

A real Christian sometimes asks in the letter of prayer for what he finds God cannot give. In such a case he can be satisfied only with the consideration that God always exercises his own infinite wisdom and his not less infinite love. One great thing that lay nearest his heart if he was in the true spirit of prayer will be granted, namely, that God may be honored in the exercise of his own wisdom and love. This God will surely do. So far forth, therefore, the spirit of his prayer will be granted.

It deserves special notice that those who pray as a matter of form only, and with no heart set upon the blessing named in the prayer, never enquire for the reasons why they are not answered. Their minds are entirely at ease on this point, because they feel no solicitude about the answer at all. They did not pray for the sake of an answer. Hence they will never trouble themselves to enquire why the answer to the words of their prayer fails of being given.

How many of you who hear me, may see in this the real reason why you so rarely look after any answer to your prayers; or the reason why you care so little about it, if your mind should chance to advert to it at all?

Again, when our petitions are not answered either in letter or in their spirit, it is because we have not fulfilled the revealed conditions of acceptable prayer. Many persons seem to overlook the fact that there are conditions of acceptable prayer revealed in the Bible. But this is a fact by far too important to be ever wisely overlooked. It surely becomes every Christian to know not only that there are conditions, but also what they are.

Let us, then, fully understand that if our prayers are not answered, it is because we have failed of fulfilling the revealed conditions. This must be the reason why our prayers are not answered, for God has assured us in his word that all real prayer is always answered.

Nothing can be more important than that we should thoroughly understand the conditions of prevailing prayer. If we fail thus to understand them, we shall very probably fail to fulfill them, and of course fail to offer prevailing prayer. Alas, how ruinous a failure must this be to any soul!

There are those, I am aware, who do not expect to influence God by their prayers; they expect to produce effects upon themselves only. They hope by means of prayer to bring themselves to a better state of mind, and this is all they expect to gain by means of prayer.

To all such I have two things to say:

(1.) It may be that an individual not in a right state of mind may be benefited by giving himself to prayer. If the prayer is offered with sincerity and solemnity--with a real feeling of want, as it is sometimes in the case of a convicted sinner, it may have a very happy effect upon his own state of mind. When such a man gives himself up to confession and supplication, and spreads out his case before the Lord, it is usually a most important step towards his real conversion. It helps to bring the character and claims of God distinctly before his mind, and has a natural tendency to make his own soul realize more deeply its guilt, its need of pardon, and its duty of submission and of faith in Christ.

But if any person should suppose that a case of this sort involves all that is included in prevailing prayer, he mistakes greatly. In prevailing prayer, a child of God comes before him with real faith in his promises and asks for things agreeable to his will, assured of being heard according to the true intent of the promises; and thus coming to God he prevails with him, and really influences God to do what otherwise he would not do by any means. That is, prayer truly secures from God the bestowment of the blessing sought. Nothing less than this corresponds either with the promises of scripture, or with its recorded facts in respect to the answers made to prevailing prayer.

(2.) God is unchangeably in the attitude of answering prayer. This is true for the same reason that He is unchangeably in the attitude of being complacent in holiness whenever he sees it. The reason in both cases, lies in his infinitely benevolent nature. Because he is infinitely good, therefore and for no other reason is it that He is evermore in the attitude of answering suitable prayer, and of being complacent towards all real holiness. As in the latter case, whenever a moral change takes place in a sinner of such a nature that God can love him, his infinite love gushes forth instantaneously and without bounds; so in the former case, as soon as any suppliant places himself in such an attitude that God can wisely answer his prayer, then instantly the ear of Jehovah inclines to his petition, and the answer is freely given.

To illustrate this point, suppose that for a season some obstacle interposes to obstruct the sunbeams from the rosebush at your door; it fades and it looks sickly. But take away the obstacle, and instantly the sunbeams fall in their reviving power upon the rose. So sin casts its dark shadow upon the soul, and obstructs the sunbeams of Jehovah's smiles. But take away the obstacle--the sin--and the smiles fall in of course, and in their full blaze on that penitent and morally changed heart. The sun of Jehovah's face shines always; shines in its own nature; and its beams fall on all objects which are not cast into some deep shade by interposing sin and unbelief. On all objects not thus shaded, its glorious beams forever fall in all their sweetness and beauty.

Hence all real prayer moves God, not merely by benefiting the suppliant through its reflex action, but really and in fact inducing Him to grant the blessing sought. The notion that the whole benefit of prayer is its reflex influence upon the suppliant, and not the obtaining of any blessing asked for, is both vain and preposterous. You might as well suppose that all the good you get by removing obstacles that cut off the sunbeams, is the physical exercise attending the effort. You might as well deny that the sunbeams will actually reach every object as soon as you take away that which throws them into the shade.

God does truly hear and answer prayer, even as an earthly parent hears the petition of a dutiful child, and shapes his course to meet the petition. To deny this involves the denial of the very nature of God. It is equivalent to denying that God is benevolent. It seems most obviously to deny that God fulfills his promises; for nothing can be more plain than the fact that God promises to be influenced by prayer so as to bestow blessings to the suppliant which are given to none others, and on no other condition. If God is pure and good, then it must needs follow that--the obstacle of sin being removed in the case of a fallen being--the divine love must flow out towards him as it did not and could not before. God remains forever the same, just as the sun

forever shines; and then his love meets every object that lies open to his beams, just as the sun's rays cheer every thing not shaded by positive obstructions.

Again, God may hear the mere cry of distress and speedily send help. He "hears the young ravens when they cry," and the young lion too when they roar and seek their meat from God. The storm-tossed mariners also, "at their wit's end, cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their distress." His benevolence leads him to do all this, wherever he can without detriment to the interests of his government. Yet this case seems not to come under the promises made to believing prayer. These cases of distress often occur in the experience of wicked men. Yet sometimes God seems obviously to hear their cry. He has wise reasons for doing so; probably often his object is to open their eyes to see their own Father, and to touch their hearts with a sense of their ingratitude in their rebellion against such a God.

But be the reason what it may, the fact cannot be disputed. Cases not unfrequently occur, in which persons not pious are afflicted by the dangerous illness of near friends or relatives, and lift their imploring cry of distress to the Lord and He hears them. It is even said in scripture that Christ heard the prayer of devils when they "besought him much that he would not send them away out of the country," and said, "Send us into the swine, that we may enter into them."

Manifestly the Lord often hears this kind of prayer, whenever no special reason exists for refusing to hear it. Yet this is far from being that peculiar kind of prayer to which the special promises of hearing and answering prayer are made.

It is however both interesting and instructive to see how often the Lord does hear even such prayer as these cries of distress. When the cattle moan in the fields because there is no water, and because the grass is withered, there is One on high who listens to their moans. Why should he not? Has he not a compassionate heart? Does not his ear bend under the quick impulse of spontaneous affection, when any of his creatures cry unto him as to their Father, and when no great moral considerations forbid his showing favor?

It is striking to see how much the parental character of the great Jehovah is developed in the course of his providence by his hearing this kind of prayer. A great multitude of facts are exhibited both in the Bible and in history, which set this subject in a strong light. I once knew a wicked man who under deep affliction from the dangerous illness of his child, set himself to pray that God would spare and restore the dear one; and God appeared to answer his prayer in a most remarkable manner.

Those of you who have read the "Bank of Faith," know that Mr. Huntington, before his conversion, in many instances seemed to experience the same kind of signal answers to his prayers. Another anecdote was told me the past winter which I should relate more freely if it were not somewhat amusing and laughable as well as instructive. A wicked man who had perhaps never prayed since he was a child, was out with a hunting party, on the confines of Iowa, hunting wild buffalo. Mounted on trained horses, lasso in hand, they came up to a herd of buffalo, and this man encountered a fierce buffalo bull. The animal rushed upon him, and at his first push unhorsed him; but quick as thought in his fall, the man seized his own horse's neck, swung upon the under side of the neck, and there held on in the utmost peril of his life; his horse being at full gallop, pursued by a ferocious wild bull. To break his hold and fall, was almost certain death, and he was every moment in the utmost danger of falling under the flying feet of his rushing horse. In this predicament he bethought himself of prayer; but the only words he could think of, were,

"Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep."

Perhaps he had never heard much other prayer than this. This lay embalmed among the recollections of his childhood days. Yet even this prayer the Lord in his infinite mercy seemed to hear and answer by rescuing the man unhurt from this perilous condition. The case affords us a striking exemplification not only of the fact that God hears the cry of mere distress, sometimes even when made by wicked men, but also of another fact, namely, that the spirit of a prayer may be a very different thing from its letter. In this case, the letter and the spirit had no very close resemblance. The spirit of the prayer was for deliverance from imminent peril. This the Lord seems to have heard.

But it should be continually borne in mind, that these are not the prayers which God has pledged himself by promise to hear and answer. The latter are evermore the believing prayers of his own children.

Our great enquiry now has respect to this class of prayers, namely, those which God has solemnly promised to

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answer. Attached to the promises made respecting this class of prayers are certain conditions. These being fulfilled, God holds himself bound to answer the prayer according to the letter and spirit both, if they both correspond; or if they do not correspond, then He will answer according to the spirit of the prayer. This is evermore the meaning of his promise. His promise to answer prayer on certain conditions is a pledge at least to meet it in its true spirit, and do or give what the spirit of the prayer implies.

It now becomes us to enquire most diligently and most earnestly for the conditions of prevailing prayer. This point I shall enter upon in my next discourse.