

Pray the Bible

Session #5: Obstacles to Prayer with Kevin P. Halloran

We've made it to the fifth and final session of this teaching module called *Pray the Bible*. We've deepened our understanding of the amazing gift God has given us in prayer and we've learned how the Bible can inform and shape our prayers. This last session will help us overcome five common obstacles we face in prayer.

These obstacles can greatly hinder our relationship with God and our spiritual growth. And I'm convinced that when God's perspective corrects our misconceptions, our hearts will enjoy a new freedom and joy in Him when we pray.

Obstacle #1: Guilt

Guilt keeps people from prayer in two main ways. One is guilt over past sin. Some think they need to clean themselves up before coming to God in prayer. The second way is feeling guilty about our prayer lives in particular.

But a proper understanding of the gospel helps us see how our guilt can be a motivator to pray, not an obstacle. After all, wasn't it the Lord Jesus who invites us to pray "forgive us our debts" in the Lord's Prayer? This means God not only expects us to pray for forgiveness, but that we can't be faithful Christians without it.

I love how Puritan Thomas Brooks says it,

"It is the devil's logic to argue thus: My sins are great, therefore I will not go to Christ...whereas the soul should reason thus: The greater my sins are, the more I stand in need of mercy, of pardon, and therefore I will go to Christ, who delights in mercy, who pardons sin for his own name's sake."

Have you ever fallen into the devil's logic? I know I have. But we have so much hope in the gospel. Hebrews 4:15–16 says:

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses, because He experienced temptation Himself. He gets it. He was victorious over sin, and He is strong enough to help us in our weakness. The logical conclusion of this is that we can draw near to the throne of grace "with confidence."

And, oh, how I love that this passage mentions our “time of need”! God knows we have needs and promises to meet them in Christ. Jesus knows your worst sins, the ones that bring you the most shame. And He has covered them in His blood.

So, if you feel guilty or ashamed of what you have done (or not done) in your life, *congratulations!* You are in a time of need and have a Savior who has mercy and grace for your need.

As we learn how to take our sins to the cross, we must do so with great humility and care. Don’t forget that Christ gave His very life for your sins. We don’t want a simple drive-thru confession that treats God’s grace in a cheap manner.

So, mourn over your sins. Examine yourself in light of Scripture. Ask God to help you hate your sin. But trust in God’s glorious promise that,

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

Obstacle #2: Legalism

I once heard another believer give a stirring talk on prayer. Everything was profoundly encouraging *until* he said the following: "If you don't spend at least two hours in prayer each day, how can you expect to live a godly life?"

That sentence startled me because we just don’t see that in the Bible. Yes, it’s good to spend time in prayer. Two hours even. And prayer *is* essential for sanctification. I know his statement was meant to encourage, but it may have wound up having the opposite effect in the long run, because it was legalistic.

Legalism is trying to earn God’s approval by our works, in this case our prayers or prayer life. Legalism often adds rules to our faith that God never gave us.

There are two main ways we can be legalistic about prayer: thinking too much about the ***quality*** and ***quantity*** of our prayers. Overemphasizing ***quality*** might subtly believe that we can cajole God with the right mix of external factors like eloquence, passion, intonation, or fist pumps and hand raises. (This might be especially evident in group prayer.) Overemphasizing the ***quantity*** of our prayers acts as if God is keeping a quota for the number of times we pray or a stopwatch to track the length of our prayers.

Thankfully, a glance at biblical teaching on prayer shows that God cares about our heart posture in prayer and the content of our prayers instead of more arbitrary measures like quantity or quality.

I’d like to give recovering legalists some encouragement as we think about what God wants and doesn’t want in terms of the ***quality*** and ***quantity*** of our prayers.

First, let's think about the *quality* of our prayers. There is nothing wrong with prayers that sound good or are emotional, assuming they're prayed with the right heart. In fact, this whole teaching module is trying to improve the quality of our prayers by making their content as biblical as they can be! But we must not think we can bribe God to answer our prayers based on their quality.

We can't forget that God is our Father. Think how ridiculous it would be for an earthly father to only pay attention to his children if they worded their requests juuuuuust right or with the right intonation.

I have young kids and sometimes when we'll have a gathering with other families, I'll hear a kid start crying in the other room. And all the parents' ears perk up and we ask ourselves two questions, first, *Is that my kid?* And second, *If it is my kid, what kind of cry is it?* Is it an overtired cry? A hungry cry? A "someone took my toy cry" or a they're-actually-in-physical-pain cry? There's a huge difference, and parents can tell quickly.

If that's true of human parents for their children, how much more does God know the cries and petitions of His children. Remember, Jesus taught that God knows what we need before we even ask! And He warns against heaping up 'many words' or 'empty phrases' to earn God's attention. God hears us because we are His children, not because we are so awesome in prayer.

Now let's think about the *quantity* of our prayers. The Bible offers no time length prescriptions or quotas for our prayers—you *have to pray X times a day for X number of minutes for it to "count" in God's eyes*. If it did, we would probably care more about watching a clock and checking off boxes to fulfill our spiritual duties than seeking God.

God wants us to pray in faith, with the right hearts, for the right things. And while God calls us to pray continually, this doesn't mean we can't eat, sleep, talk to family and friends, and live a normal life. Jesus Himself didn't spend every waking moment in prayer, but He continually prayed throughout His life.

One thing that has encouraged me is the brevity of many of the prayers of Scripture. They're so short!

- If you time yourself praying the Lord's Prayer verbatim, it takes about twenty seconds.
- Paul's prayers range from a few seconds long to about seventy-five seconds to pray.
- Jesus' prayer on the cross "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" is about three seconds long.
- Nehemiah 2 records that in the middle of an important conversation Nehemiah "[prayed] to the God of heaven" (Neh. 2:4)—and while we don't know the content of this prayer, we do know that God answered it and did great things in the nation of Israel because of it.

Praise God that He doesn't give harsh quotas for the length or frequency of our prayers!

It's also worth mentioning that a good deal of biblical commands to pray come with a promise of the amazing results that prayer can have. This means that these commands to pray are not *to burden us*, but rather *to inspire us*. Here are just three examples:

1. Matthew 7:7–8 – We are commanded to ask, seek, and knock. But here are the promises: “For everyone who asks *receives*, and the one who seeks *finds*, and to the one who knocks *it will be opened*.”
2. Jeremiah 33:3 – “Call to me”—that’s the command, and here’s the promise— “and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.”
3. Philippians 4:6–7 – “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God”—that’s the command, here’s the promise— “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

So, don’t let a legalistic mindset make you focus on your own actions or efforts in prayer. Set your eyes on our gracious Father.

Obstacle #3: Doubting if God Hears Us

Have you ever felt like God was giving you the silent treatment? You pray repeatedly for things and yet it seems like God isn’t listening. Maybe you understand that God cares for you but struggle because you haven’t received the answer you were looking for.

This is especially painful when you cry out repeatedly for deliverance from a trial, healing for a loved one, or provision in a time of need. When this happens, doubt and discouragement can quickly creep in, causing you to conclude, “I don’t think God is listening to me, so I won’t pray.” But that creates a vicious cycle, because not praying is the only way to guarantee that He won’t hear you!

Sadly, some people even walk away from faith in Jesus when they don’t hear back from God according to their expectations. But faith is exactly what you and I need to get through these frustrating times of silence. We may not know what exactly is going on, but we can keep praying in confidence.

Before we see why, let’s quickly look at a few biblical reasons why God may not receive our prayers. (Note: This is different from God not hearing us.) Scripture gives us several truths as to what may disqualify our prayers in God’s sight:

1. The first way to disqualify our prayers is a **lack of Faith**. The book of James reminds us that we need to pray in faith, with no doubting, “*for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways*” (James 1:6–7).
2. The second is **by embracing sin**. The psalmist writes, “*If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened*” (Psalm 66:18). Our sin might make God reject our prayers. There’s a reason why James 5:16 says, “*the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working*.” We are not saved by our righteousness, but our righteousness matters in our walk with God and His response to our prayers.
3. The third is related to the last, **treating others wrongly**. 1 Peter 3:7 calls husbands to live with their wives in an understanding way and honoring them as the weaker vessel so that their prayers may not be hindered. Jesus shares in the gospels that before approaching

God to worship, we should reconcile with anyone who has something against us. Treating others wrongly can hinder our prayers.

4. The fourth hindrance to prayer also relates to our sin, specifically **the sin of pride**. Jesus shared a whole parable in Luke 18 contrasting the prayers of a tax collector and a Pharisee. Tax collectors were the moral outcasts of society—the bad guys, while many considered the Pharisees as the “good guys” who really loved God (...or so they thought). The punchline of Jesus’ parable came as a shock to his hearers. God accepted the socially unacceptable tax collector’s prayer while rejecting the Pharisee’s prayer. The reason? The tax collector prayed in humility while the Pharisee prayed in self-righteous pride.

So, if we feel like God is giving us the silent treatment, we should first examine our hearts. How have we lacked faith or entered into sin?

But there are still other times when we don’t know what God is doing. It feels like we go straight to God’s voicemail, and He never gets back to us. How are we to think in such a time?

Well, there is a crucial difference between God rejecting our prayers, for the aforementioned reasons, and God not answering our prayers. As I said in the second session, I’m convinced there is no such thing as an unanswered prayer for a Christian. God is our perfect Father, and we are His beloved children. What earthly father would reject the pleading of his child? Not a good one. But what earthly father always immediately answers his child’s request in exactly the way that the child wants? One who is either shortsighted, lazy, or both. But our heavenly Father is good and is not shortsighted or lazy. He always has greater purposes than simply being a magic genie who will grant our wishes. God always answers our prayers, but often doesn’t do so in the timing we want or the ways we prefer. His answers may come as a “Yes,” or a “No,” or a “Wait.”

The waiting is often the hardest part. I can usually deal with a no. But waiting for answers can be painful. *Will my loved one ever follow Christ? Will healing ever come? Will I ever get the new job that I need so badly?* Even if we must wait years, confidence in the love and sovereignty of God will provide fertile ground for persevering prayers.

You’re not alone if you feel distant from God and unanswered. “How long, O Lord!” is a repeated cry of the Psalmists and the Prophets. Jesus Himself pled in the garden of Gethsemane for the cross to not be necessary. The apostle Paul pled three times for his thorn to be removed. But God’s grace and matchless wisdom was sufficient for them in their trials and will be for us in our own. God may take us through the valley of the shadow of death, but we don’t need to fear any evil for our Good Shepherd will be with us.

In fact, if God always answered us in exactly the way and timing we expect, prayer would be less relational and more mechanical. We’d become proud and entitled children, and God’s automatic answers would make us *less* holy!

When you wait for God’s reply, rejoice! He knows better than us and always looks for His glory and our eternal good.

Obstacle #4: Misunderstandings about God’s Sovereignty

The reasoning behind this misconception goes like this: *God sovereignly rules over all things and has His plans and purposes in mind for the universe. Why would our prayers do anything to change His plans and purposes?*

Well, God's sovereignty and human responsibility is a big topic. But I'm convinced this is an easy obstacle to overcome as it relates to prayer. Let's look at three propositions that can help us.

Proposition #1: God sovereignly governs the world.

Ephesians 1:11 says, "*God works all things according to the counsel of his will.*" He is sovereign over every molecule and every event of the universe. Nothing happens without His notice, and all that happens only happens because God allows it.

Proposition #2: God calls us to pray.

We've looked at many of these commands in our time together. It would be strange indeed if God commanded us to pray if prayers didn't accomplish anything. *Doesn't the Bible say that "the prayer of the righteous person has great power as it is working?"*

For God to command prayer if it were worthless and powerless would seem an awful lot like Lucy from the Peanuts cartoons pulling back the football right when Charlie Brown goes to kick it. Praise God that He isn't like that.

This last proposition is how we reconcile these first two truths:

Proposition #3: God has determined to sovereignly use our prayers for His purposes.

To think that God's sovereignty makes prayer unnecessary or unfruitful fails to acknowledge God is sovereign even over our prayers, and that God has decided in all His great wisdom to use the prayers of imperfect people as a means to carry out His purposes in the world.

On this topic of God's sovereignty and prayer we can often overanalyze the inner workings of prayer and God's response. Scripture doesn't answer every question about the mind and heart of God as it relates to prayer, and in the absence of having the full knowledge that only God has, we must trust God to hear us and work in His way through our prayers.

My contention is that rather than letting God's sovereignty hinder our prayers, we need to let His sovereignty fuel our prayers.

Think about it. Why would we pray to God if He wasn't sovereign? If God didn't have the power to work in us, others, and the world, would He be worthy of our worship or worth praying to?

If the God who created the entire universe by speaking and holds the world together by the word of His power hears our prayers and promises to work out His purposes, why would we not pray outrageously big prayers on a regular basis?

I love a story that Dr. Phil Ryken tells. As a member of a church in Scotland, Ryken observed that fellow church members thanked God for answering their prayers to help Eastern European

countries escape Communism and the Soviet empire when the Iron Curtain fell. These church members really thought that their prayers helped in these global events.

Ryken commented that he almost told some that the situation was more complicated than they thought. After all, there were issues of the global economy, the relationships between nations, the threat of nuclear weapons, and the serious defects of communism. He was going to tell them that their prayers alone were not enough to bring down the Berlin Wall.

But he didn't. He knew that such thinking was not correct and that God does use the prayers of His children to change the history of the world.

Is it not true that "*God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise*"? (1 Corinthians 1:27). And is it not true that when you compare God's children with the world rulers and conquering powers we are "*more than conquerors through Him who loved us*"?

Let's also not forget that Paul commands us to pray "for kings and for all who are in authority" (1 Timothy 2:2). Why would God command this if He had no plans to use these prayers to change the world?

God is "mighty to do much more abundantly than we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20). Do you pray as if this were true? No, God is not always going to answer us in the way we want or at the time we want. But when we pray in faith, everything is possible, not because we are so wise or powerful, but because our sovereign God is.

Obstacle #5: Wrong Motivations

This point is different than having mixed motives in our prayers themselves and rather focuses on the reason we want to grow in prayer all together.

What is your motivation for prayer?

Ok, you know and I know that the answer is the glory of God. Perhaps you've known that for ages. But is that always the motivation of your heart?

I wish I could say I have always had perfect motives, but the truth is I haven't. Sometimes in discouragement, I've lacked any motive to take prayer seriously, and sometimes in a busy season my life is consumed by other things. Or perhaps I've been more concerned with pleasing people, whether it be a family member, pastor, or a fellow church member. Maybe you drift into legalistic thinking and think God's mad at you if you haven't had your quiet time. Or perhaps you're fighting legalism, but the pendulum has swung too far and now you think practicing any spiritual discipline is legalistic.

None of these bad motives will fuel a faithful prayer life over the long haul. They won't lead you to joy in God. So, what does lead to persevering prayer over the long haul?

Let me suggest, it is simply remembering Who God is and what He has done. In 1 Corinthians 15:10, the apostle Paul shares with us what drove him forward in his gospel work, and we can apply what he says to prayer:

“By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”

Do you see his point? Paul recognized God’s grace in his life, and it became his great motivator to work hard for Christ and His kingdom.

The truth is, we each have one short life to live. Each day that passes is one less day we have to invest in the kingdom of God through prayer. My charge to you is to work hard in prayer remembering all that God has done for you, confident of all that He can do through you.

Keep in mind that working hard in prayer doesn’t often happen without saying “no” to other activities. Working hard in prayer might require some intentional organization and planning, because if you’re like me you’re too scattered brained to keep everything straight in your mind. Working hard in prayer is not just an individual activity, it’s something that is best done as a church body.

As you think about all that we’ve covered in this module, ask God how He wants to you to work hard in prayer for the sake of the gospel.

Let me close this module with a story.

Stephen Lungu was known by the nickname “The Billy Graham of Africa.” And he has an amazing testimony. He grew up on the streets of Zimbabwe. As a homeless teenager, he attended an evangelistic event in a large tent, but not to hear about the Lord. He was a gang leader who came with fellow gang members to bomb the event. They wanted to kill as many Christians as possible.

But as Lungu and his crew waited outside the meeting to begin the attack, something told him to go inside and listen. So, he did. And instead of shedding innocent blood that night, he put down his petrol bombs and had the shed blood of Jesus Christ cover all his sins. He was born again.

Over the next several decades he would serve with various evangelistic ministries all around the world and no doubt encouraged tens of thousands to put their faith in Jesus.

One day about thirty years after his conversion, he was the guest preacher in a church in his home country. He shared his testimony as he had a thousand times before. He couldn’t help but be distracted by two little old ladies who were whispering to each other and flipping through a Bible as he spoke. Having years of experience as a speaker, Lungu ignored them and determined to keep the service going.

Then as his testimony progressed and he shared about his conversion, these two older ladies began waving their hands to get his attention and holding the Bible in the air, and soon began to

call out to Lungu, “Come here, come here!” Frustrated, he said. “I am preaching right now, sisters. I will talk with you later.”

“No, now. We must tell you something!” one of the ladies said while the other waved her Bible. “You were the answer to our prayer!”

Perplexed, Lungu walked over to them. They gave Lungu the Bible and pointed to a well-worn page in the back.

On that page read “May 14, 1962”, the night of Lungu’s conversion. Next to the date was the simple prayer: “Lord Jesus, will you save one gang leader tonight?”

Shocked, Lungu responded, “But, I never saw you that night.” The ladies replied, “We weren’t there. We knew about the evangelistic meetings and were praying.”

It took them 30 years to learn how God had answered their prayer. And the fruit of their prayer continues today as thousands of people now know Jesus through Stephen Lungu’s ministry.

This story is really a glimpse into what we will experience in heaven. We don’t know exactly how or when God is using our prayers on this earth, but one day we will see what God has done, and we will worship Him forever.

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