

# WHEN IT IS NOT RIGHT TO PRAY

## Bob Marcaurelle

Jesus told us we should always pray (Lk. 18:1) and Paul said, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Th. 5:17). The paradox of this is that sometimes God prohibits prayer and tells us prayer is improper. In our text God said to Moses, "That is enough! Say no more to me about it" (Dt. 3:26). Today, let's look at this and other examples when God says prayer is improper.

### I. WHEN IT'S TIME TO ACT (Ex. 14:15)

The scene is the Egypt side of the Red Sea. Moses and his three million slaves have left Egypt. Pharaoh, after letting them go, has a change of heart and comes out with his army in hot pursuit. The Israelites, between an army and an ocean, blame Moses. They cry out, "Is it because there are no graveyards in Egypt that you have brought us out to die in this wilderness?" (Ex. 14:11). As Pharaoh drew near, God said to Moses, "Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. Lift up your rod and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it." (14:15,16). In other words, don't pray, go forward in obedience and faith.

God's people are always substituting prayer for action. We do not have to pray about whether or not we are to witness to someone. We have a mandate to witness to anyone and everyone. We may pray about the HOW and about the OPPORTUNE TIME, but not about the act itself. I have heard super spiritual saints tell me the Lord hadn't "led" them to witness to certain people. Yes, He had. All they had to do was read Matt. 28:18-20. It's not nice to hate, but I have a real problem not hating child abusers. Early in my ministry I told God He would have to get someone else to love them and witness to them. That was not my "ministry." Well, God has placed two such people in my life, during the past thirty years. Forced by my job to go to them, I went like Jonah went to Nineveh, with a lot of bitterness and nothing that resembled love. I am here to tell you that God gave me love for both of these individuals and it was my privilege to help one of them die and I fully expect to see him in heaven, fully forgiven and fully delivered.

Also, it is not right to pray over whether or not to tithe, to give one tenth of your income to the work of God through the local church. I have heard people say God led them to give part of their tithe to people like Billy Graham and part to the church. I do not believe it, because God will not lead you against what He has revealed in His word. And he taught Israel to bring its tithes to the Temple

storehouse (Mal. 3:10) to be distributed by the priests. And in the New Testament we are told that the church is to put aside offerings to help God's people (1 Cor. 16:2). Thank God for Billy Graham, the American Cancer Society, American Leprosy Missions, St. Jude's Hospital, etc. Help them! Support them! But don't disobey God's Word and steal from God's church to do it. Let that be your offering above your tithe to the church.

There are other areas - qualified young men, called to preach, free to pursue an education, don't need to pray about going to seminary, they need only to pray where they should go. People of God don't need to pray about whether or not to attend church, but where to attend. To pray when action is called for is improper. It is also improper. . .

## **II. WHEN GOD SAYS NO (Deut. 3:23-26)**

Jesus Christ puts great value on persistence in prayer. He used the present tense and said, "KEEP ON asking and you will receive KEEP ON seeking and you will find. . ." (Matt. 7:7). Two of His parables picture this. One is the pesky neighbor who kept on yelling in the middle of the night until his neighbor gave him some food. Then, drawing a parallel, Jesus said, "KEEP ON ASKING" (Lk. 11:9). The other pictured a pesky widow who kept badgering a crooked judge until he gave her justice in court. Jesus drew this parallel, "Now will God not also judge in favor of His own people who cry to Him day and night for help?" (Lk. 18:7).

The message is clear - KEEP ON PRAYING! But we must remember - both of these requests, for bread and for justice - were right, legitimate requests. When we are praying for something we know is God's will, like praying for patience or love for a certain person, we must pray until the answer comes. But when we are praying for something WE WANT but God reveals it is not what HE WANTS, we must stop praying.

That was the case with Moses and with Paul. The background of our text was the sin of Moses (Nu. 20). Angry with the people for their unbelief when water gave out, he struck the rock when God told him only to speak to it. Because of this disobedience, God told him he would die before Israel entered Canaan and he would never set foot in it. He kept asking God to change his mind until God said, "Moses, speak no more to me of this matter" (Deut. 3:26).

We may find the same thing in Paul's prayer about his painful "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12). Paul said, "Three times I talked with the Lord about this and

asked Him to take it away but His answer was, "My grace is all you need." (2 Cor. 12:8-9). Early in my ministry I agreed with those commentators who said the number "three" meant "over and over and over again," or countless times. Now I believe "three" meant "three." This was a serious problem with Paul and I believe he had three serious times or periods or sea-sons of prayer about it. God somehow let him know the third time that the decision was final and in essence said, "Paul, speak no more to me about this. Don't pray for relief but for understanding about why I won't remove it." I had the same experience with my being a minister of the gospel. My first twenty years in the ministry I went through several deep periods of discouragement and depression. On three separate occasions, years apart, I begged God to take me out of the ministry. The third time, through a close brush with death on the highway, God let me know in no uncertain terms that the matter was closed and I was to speak to Him no more about it. I've been depressed since then and have thought about quitting, but I have never again brought it to the Lord. Prayer is improper also. . .

## **I. WHEN WE MUST DEAL WITH SIN (Josh. 7:10-12)**

When Joshua led the troops of Israel against the little town of Ai, they were routed and sent running away in defeat. Joshua and the leaders of Israel, tore their clothes and fell on their faces before the Lord and Joshua prayed but we read, The Lord said to Joshua, Get up! Why do you lie on the ground like this? Israel has sinned. I will not remain with you any more unless you destroy the things you were ordered not to take." (Josh. 7:10-11,12). The problem was, an Israelite soldier named Achan had stolen a wedge of gold during the battle against Jericho, violating the Lord's command, and God would not listen to their prayers, until he was punished and the sin was removed.

This same principle runs all through the Word of God. We do not have to be perfect to pray. Our Lord's pattern prayer tells us to pray, "Forgive us our sins." (Matt. 6:12). We never go before the Lord without having something in our hearts or lives that shouldn't be there. But we are not to go, proud of our sins, in love with our sins, and stubbornly refusing to let go of our sins. If we do, God says, "Stop praying. Deal with your sin and then pray." The Psalmist said, "If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear me" (Ps. 66:18). The "Good News Bible" translates that, "If I had ignored my sins, the Lord would not have listened to me." Prov. 28:9 says, "If you turn a deaf ear to the Law of God, your prayers are detestable to Him." Jesus said, "If you are about to offer your gift at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your

gift there in front of the altar, and go and make peace with your brother. . ." (Matt. 5:23-24).

Very few of us have powerful, deeply personal prayer lives. When was the last time you jumped for spiritual joy because God had touched you with an answered prayer? How long has it been since you had such a precious time with the Lord that you hated to stop praying because you felt like you could reach out and touch His face? How many have NEVER had such an experience? We look for deep, dark reasons, but the answer might well be simple disobedience. You say, "I'm not a bad person." Sure you aren't. Neither was Moses. He put up with more from the Jews than you or I would have. But when he struck that rock God would not let him enter Canaan. Little sins can clog the prayer line just as a grain of sand can clog the motor of a new car. The Bible says, "Disobedience is like the sin of witchcraft." (1 Sam. 15:23)

Geoffrey King makes the frightening statement, "It may be, until some of us put away sin in our life, God will never hear our prayers again." We go to God neglecting church attendance, stealing His tithe, refusing to witness, gossiping, listening to unholy music, harboring ill feelings, etc., etc., and God says, "Stop praying until you are willing to put away the sins you know are in your life." When we do get right we will know the joy of fellowship with God and power in prayer. Listen to the aged Apostle John,

"Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and we receive from Him anything we ask, because we obey His commands and do what pleases Him." (1 Jn. 5:21)

#### **IV. WHEN SOMEONE IS TOO FAR GONE INTO SIN (Jer. 7:16, 1 Jn. 5:16)**

The strangest examples of prohibited prayer are those cases where God tells some of His servants to stop praying for others because they are too far gone into sin. He did this several times to Jeremiah. In Jer. 7:16 God says, "Do not pray for these people. . . Do not intercede. . .for I will not listen to you." God says through John the Apostle, "If anyone sees a brother committing a sin that does not lead to death, he shall ask God and He will give him life. . . There is a sin leading to death and I DO NOT SAY THAT HE SHOULD ASK ABOUT THIS." (1 Jn. 5:16).

We find hints of this all through scripture. Jesus tells us not to cast pearls before swine (Mt. 7:6). Jesus had nothing to say to Herod after he beheaded John

the Baptizer (Mk. 6; Lk. 23). Paul said, "Warn a divisive person twice and then have nothing more to do with him" (Tit. 3:10). In Hosea we read, "Ephraim is joined to her idols, leave her alone." (Nos. 4:17). And the sad verdict on people in hell is, "He who is filthy, let him go on being filthy." (Rev. 22:11).

Friends, it's a terrible thing when someone gets beyond the reach of mercy and beyond the power of prayer. I do not understand these strange verses but I tremble before them. God has never led me to cease praying for someone. I leave those orders to men like Jeremiah. I remember how George Mueller prayed for all his lost family members and friends and had two of them saved at his funeral and several more after his death. I keep hoping when all hope seems gone. But deep in my heart sometimes I see men and women who seem to have despised God so much that they have sealed their fate.

With this in mind, I appeal to you, accept Christ before it is everlastingly too late. It is wrong to pray about accepting Christ when you ought to accept Christ. I grew up praying and some of my most remarkable answered prayers came in my teen years. But in my early twenties I knew I was not a Christian. I came face to face with a choice for or against Christ. Thank God, I said "Yes!" to Jesus. Had I said "No!" I would have cut off all fellowship with God. I realized that all my answered prayers before then could be explained by Romans 2:4, "Surely you know the goodness of God was to lead you to repentance." God had given me blessings because He wanted to give me salvation in His Son, the greatest blessing of all. That's not something to pray ABOUT, that's something to pray for. The dying thief did and he went to heaven (Lk. 23:40-43). I love what the grand old hymn says about this "sinner's prayer": "There is a fountain filled with blood/Drawn from Emanuel's veins/ And sinners plunged beneath that flood/Lose all their guilty stains/THE DYING THIEF rejoiced to see/That fountain in His day/And there may I tho vile as he/ Wash all my sins away