

Conversing With God

Isaiah 66:1-4

In this pluralistic society, we have raised the attendance to man's laws over God's commands to an art form. Truly, "*one slaughters an ox, one kills a man; one sacrifices a lamb, one breaks a dog's neck; one offers a grain offering, one offers swine's blood; one offers incense, one praises an idol*" and we congratulate ourselves on our "tolerance". We keep making the same mistake that Cain did. We keep trying to give God what **we** want Him to want instead of giving Him what **He** wants.

Nothing we ever build, no matter how grand or beautiful, could ever contain the Lord whom the universe itself cannot contain. No building will draw Him. No single human sacrifice would ever suffice.

What God **wants** is a personal relationship with you. He doesn't want your stuff. He wants **you**. That implies that He wants (among other things) an intense prayer life. He wants to talk to you. He wants to hear from you.

We are told in several scriptural passages to try to learn what is pleasing to our Lord in all things.¹ I do not think it is any stretch to that that "all things" would include our prayer life.

I want to sell prayer to you today. I want you to understand how powerful it is and I want you to know how to get good at it.

First, let me share with you some of...

The benefits of prayer

1. It nourishes the new nature causing it to flourish and prosper.
2. It helps you get to know God and improve your knowledge of Him.
3. It is the way to a life of communion with God.
4. It peels the vanities of this world away from our hearts.
5. It focuses the mind on heaven.
6. It will empower us to resist sin.
7. It gives us discernment into the wiles of the Devil.
8. It is an antidote to the spiritual after effects of sin.
9. It is a duty that (when accomplished) strengthens and fortifies the will to doing what is right.
10. When attended to constantly and diligently it results in a sweet and pleasant spirit.

The Scriptures indicate that God does not regard or treat all prayers alike. When King Solomon asked God for wisdom to govern his people, God was so pleased with Solomon's request that He gave him unrivaled wisdom. In addition, He gave him riches, honor, and the promise of long life if he would be faithful.² Like Solomon, we would like God to be pleased with our prayers and respond to us just as positively.

James tells us that the prayer of faith will heal. He says that the intense prayer of the righteous is very powerful. Therefore, we must conclude that the faithless, milquetoast prayers of the willfully sinful are very weak and ineffective. There are conditions. Certain things are requisite for a powerful prayer life.

The conditions of prayer

1. **Humility and repentance**³

¹ 2 Corinthians 5:9; Colossians 1:10; 1 John 3:22

² 1 Kings 3:10-14

³ 2 Chronicles 7:14 (cp Isaiah 66:2-4; James 4:6); Luke 18:13; Jonah 3:10-4:2

Humility toward God includes recognizing our unworthiness before Him and turning away from things that displease Him. God is especially attentive to repentant prayers.

2. **According to God's will**⁴

Humility also means that we should not presume to command God in our prayers.

3. **Guided by the Scriptures**⁵

To aid us in knowing God's will, He graciously gave us His divinely revealed, inerrant and unfailingly useful Holy Scripture. "If His words remain in us"; that is, if we know His Word, rightly understand it, and are obedient to it; "we may ask whatever we wish and it will be given to us." Our prayers should be guided and inspired by knowledge of the Master's teachings.

4. **Obedience**⁶

Because God already told us in the Scriptures what was good, when we turn our ears away from listening to the Law, even our prayers are an abomination. If we tolerate sin in our hearts, the Lord will not hear us for rebellion is the same as witchcraft.⁷ A good saying to remember is "*When my conscience is not clear, the Lord will not hear.*"

5. **Submissiveness**⁸

We must not be like James and John who, upon apparently only half-listening to Jesus predict His oncoming torture, crucifixion and death, responded with, "Teacher, we want You to do something for us if we ask You."⁹

6. **Holiness**¹⁰

God is attentive to the righteous and His ears attend to their prayer, but His face is turned against those who practice wickedness.

7. **Abiding in Christ**

- a. By keeping His commands¹¹
- b. By obeying and pleasing Him¹²

8. **Forgiving spirit**¹³

If we forgive men for their transgressions, our heavenly Father will forgive us. However, if we do not forgive men, then our Father will not forgive our transgressions either.

All of my Ironworks students take heed. I want you to jot the following two sentences down and I want you to meditate on it a bit. Chew on it for a while and then let's talk about it soon. What I want you to write down is,

Forgiveness of others is a condition of forgiveness by God but it is not its ground. It is necessary but not sufficient to the matter.

9. **Selfless**¹⁴

By this I mean we should pray without trying to impress people or gain their praise. Our prayers should not be marked by forced eloquence or unnatural speech geared more for the human rather than divine ears.

10. **Natural**¹⁵

⁴ 1 John 5:14

⁵ John 15:7

⁶ Proverbs 28:9; Psalm 66:18 (cp Jeremiah 14:11; Lamentations 3:42, 44; Isaiah 59:1; 64:7-9, 12)

⁷ 1 Samuel 15:23

⁸ Matthew 26:39, 42 (cp John 6:38), 44

⁹ Mark 10:35

¹⁰ 1 Peter 3:12 (cp John 9:31; 1 John 3:22; Isaiah 64:5; Proverbs 15:8, 29; 64:18; Psalm 84:11)

¹¹ John 15:7, 10

¹² 1 John 3:22

¹³ Matthew 6:14

¹⁴ Matthew 6:5

Empty, mindless repetition is absent from natural prayer. God no more listens to 1,000 repetitions of the “Jesus prayer” (Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.) than you would.

11. **Tenacious**¹⁶

Meaningful repetition on the other hand is good! We are to pray without ceasing. We are to be devoted to the ministry and discipline of prayer.

12. **Unified**¹⁷

Pray after finding agreement with other believers. Live without competition, schism, or a party spirit. Seek the good of the whole body rather than elevation of the self or one’s agenda to the detriment of Christ’s Bride.

13. **Out of real need**¹⁸

Pray, “Give me what I need today.” Don’t worry about the future. Don’t worry about what you will eat or drink or how you’ll clothe yourself because your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.” Show God you trust Him to handle those things for you.

14. **Unselfish**¹⁹

We ask and do not receive because we ask with wrong motives, so that we may spend it on our pleasures. This needs to be contrasted with: “Ask whatever you will...” When we get truly saved and then begin to consistently discipline our minds and bodies to the Way, we can pray whatever we want – but what we’ll find our “wanter” has changed. Our first desire will become the will God because with experience the saint discovers that God’s will is always good, pleasing and perfect.²⁰

15. **Faith**²¹

The disciples came to Jesus privately and asked why they had failed to cast out a demon and He said to them, “*Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it shall move, and nothing shall be impossible to you.*”

We might have expected Jesus to say, “You have too little faith, and you need to have a lot of it.” That would probably have been very discouraging to the disciples. Instead, what He said was, in principle, “You have too little, but you only need a little more, because very little is required to have your prayers answered.” Faith is not measured by volume or weight, but if it were, the amount you need would be comparable to a single mustard seed. We may struggle to find even that much confident expectation in God, but finding it should not be considered impossible because Jesus gave us that hope.

We are to ask in faith without any doubting for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. That kind of prayer will receive no answer from the Lord because it comes from a double-minded, unstable spirit. We must expect to receive an answer (in contrast to Acts 12:5, 14). We may not get the answer we want or even expect, but we must trust our heavenly Father to always answer.

16. **Effective/Earnest**²²

¹⁵ Matthew 6:7

¹⁶ Matthew 26:39, 42, 44; Isaiah 62:6-7; Luke 18:1-7; 11:5-10; Acts 2:42; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; Romans 1:9 (e.g. Acts 12:5); 12:2

¹⁷ Matthew 18:18-20 cp Acts 1:14; 1 Peter 3:7

¹⁸ Matthew 6:11, 31-33

¹⁹ James 4:3 (cp Matthew 6:33; Luke 12:15; Matthew 20:20

²⁰ Romans 12:2

²¹ Matthew 17:19 cf Mark 11:24; Matthew 21:22 cp James 1:6

²² James 5:16

The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. Effective means that we heed the conditions necessary for success with God. Earnest reflects the Hebrew concept of *kavanah* which is intense mental concentration or emotional devotion in the utterance of a prayer or during the performance of a mitzvah; a state of mind requisite for prayer or meditation. Consider Colossians 3:15-17 which says peace and gratitude should control our hearts and that our single-minded focus should be on the supremacy of the Lord Jesus.

17. **Directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit**²³

Exactly what it means, “to pray in the Spirit”, is not explained as clearly as I might like it to be in the Bible. Generally, I believe it involves being sensitive and open to the promptings of the Ruach’ ha Kodesh. The problem I have struggled with is that I often find it difficult to distinguish between my own thoughts, imaginings, hopes, and preferences and the leading of the Spirit. I have from time to time been convinced that I knew the will of God on one matter or another, but it is not as consistent as I would like. This is partly due to my sin nature and partly due to my thick headedness. Often, the Spirit has simply determined that I just don’t need to know.

Clearly, large helpings of humility, self-restraint, and self-examination are called for. These should be thoroughly mixed with a disciplined study of and adherence to the Spirit-inspired Word of God.

18. **Childlike**²⁴

Jesus said, “When you pray, say ‘Father’”. We are to have a confident expectation in God based on the firm foundation of a familial relationship. As God’s children, we can expect Him to be generous and loving toward us.

19. **In Jesus’ name**²⁵

Like “taking God’s name in vain” this means far more than a perfunctory addition of Jesus’ name at the end of our prayer like it was a period at the end of a sentence, the way we let everyone else know we are done praying.

Jesus’ name represents His person – who He is. Consequently, asking in His name means asking with due regard for who He is; with respect for what we know about His character and purposes. When we ask for something in Jesus’ name, what we are really saying is “Father, Jesus wants the thing that I am asking you for. This is good for Jesus.” We must not make this claim lightly or dishonestly.

Study Questions:

1. What is necessary on our part to develop a relationship with God?
2. What does it mean to “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17)?
3. How does God show that He is concerned about us?
4. What will be the results in our lives of meeting with God in prayer?
5. Why is faith essential when praying (Matthew 21:22)?
6. What does it mean to “ask in Jesus’ name” (John 16:24)?
7. Should we pray if we don’t meet the right conditions?
8. Do you have a “prayer list”? Do you find it helpful?
9. What is the main reason for spending time daily with God in Bible reading and prayer?
10. What can keep us from this vital habit and what can we do about it?

²³ Jude 1:20

²⁴ Luke 11:2; Matthew 6:9

²⁵ John 14:13; 16:23-24