

When God Doesn't Respond

12 Scriptural Reasons God May Not Be Answering Your Prayers

By Bill Elliff



When my high school friend invited me to work with him on his car, I was happy to join him. One problem: I knew nothing about cars! He told me to start taking the engine apart and we would put it back together later. I did, he did—and for the next six months the engine parts lay in his yard. We actually worked hard, but our work was worse than useless. It merely created a junkyard on a really nice street!

Many believers today are getting desperate. Seeing the moral and spiritual free fall in the world around us and the declining condition of the church in our land drives us to cry out to God. We need Him. We need His manifest presence. We need revival in the church and spiritual awakening among the unbelieving. We need our nation to be restored to its Kingdom calling as a mighty, gospel-sending station to the world. According to Scripture, the precursor to any great movement of

God is always humble, repentant prayer. We thank God that people across the country are praying in record numbers.

But wouldn't it be tragic to discover that our prayers are not effective? Wouldn't it be heartbreaking to learn that some things in our lives prevent our prayers from accomplishing what is so desperately needed? Wouldn't it be devastating to find out that all our hard work in prayer is doing nothing to advance the Kingdom?

What if we are simply littering heaven's yard with unusable prayers?

Evaluating Our Prayer Lives

While Scripture contains hundreds of positive promises regarding answered prayer, God also outlines many things that will hinder our prayers. No one prays perfectly, and God is not playing with us. He does not make intercession so unattainable that only the super-spiritual can be effective. He understands our weakness. But He is also very clear about those things that can hinder our prayers.

Are we willing to evaluate the effectiveness of our prayer lives? It may help to walk through the following questions, step-by-step, with an honest heart. And when God shows us areas of need, we can turn to Him in repentance and take the necessary steps to adjust our lives to encounter Him afresh in prayer.

1. Are we simply praying? You do not have because you do not ask God (James 4:2).

Many people do not see prayers answered because they do not pray. They talk about prayer, teach and preach about prayer, and tell people "I'm praying for you!" But it is often

hypocrisy. If you do not see God's activity in and through your life, it may be because you have not taken the steps to become a man or woman who is simply praying.

2. Are we praying simply? "When you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (Matt. 6:7-8, NASB).

God is not impressed by flowery words or fine oratory. He loves sincere, simple hearts. He knows our needs and is not waiting for us to petition Him with perfect elocution. He longs for His children to climb up in His lap and enjoy Him.

One of the most liberating moments in prayer is to realize you can come to Him in sincerity, honesty, and simplicity—speaking to Him as friend to friend or child to loving Father.

3. Are we entering in? "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matt. 6:6).

"Hurry is the death of prayer," said Samuel Chadwick. Many have not learned how to enter into God's presence. If we had the opportunity to enter physically into His presence, we would not pop in, read a laundry list of requests, and pop out. We would quiet our souls. His magnificence would humble us. We would worship and adore Him. We can enter into the closet of prayer anywhere—in a room with a few friends or a congregation of thousands. But only when we enter in, shut the door, and turn our gaze to the Father, will we position ourselves to hear from Him. And only as we hear from Him are we able to pray Spirit-initiated prayers.

4. Are we praying Spirit-initiated prayers? Jesus said, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me. And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him . . . I speak the things which I have seen with My Father” (John 8:28–29, 38, NASB).

Effective prayer is a loop that begins in heaven, travels through our hearts and minds, and then returns to heaven. Jesus always did and said what His Father was initiating. The activity did not begin with the Man, Jesus, but with the Father to the Man and through the Man. In this way, Jesus was constantly doing His Father’s will, and His prayers were perfectly aligned and stunningly effective. To be heard, listen first! Find out what the Spirit is saying and then pray in alignment with Him. God always answers prayers that He initiates!

5. Are we aligning our motives with God’s? You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God (James 4:3–4). Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:10).

God gives no promise to bless our plans and our will, only His. In fact, He specifically reminds us that He will not hear and answer prayers that are selfish. Prayer is not aligning God with what we want, but spending time in His presence to align us with His will and plan.

6. Are we praying to be seen by men? “When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full” (Matt. 6:5).

When we pray to impress others, only they will hear us. Becoming overly conscious of those around us can drown out our consciousness of the One to whom we are praying. Self-exalting prayers are not prayers at all. They are merely expressions of a proud heart.

7. Are we harboring known sin? If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened (Psalm 66:18).

Everyone who prays is sinful and fights an ongoing battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. But there is a difference between fighting against sin and harboring sin . . . God knows our struggle. He was tempted in all points like us, therefore we can “approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb. 4:16). But often God will withhold His presence and His provision to get our attention so that we will deal with the sins that are destroying us and those around us.

8. Are we right with those around us? “If you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering” (Matt. 5:23–24, NASB).

The Father is aggressively concerned about the unity of His family. When His children are not right with each other, He

uses every means to bring them back into right relationship. He wants us to be in perfect unity with Him and with one another. Of all the things Jesus could have prayed for in His final, high priestly prayer, this is what He requested of the Father (John 17:21). He knows we cannot hear Him and find His will if we are withholding forgiveness from others.

9. Are we treating our mates with respect and honor? Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers (1 Peter 3:7).

Our homes are our first church. They are the proving grounds, the laboratory for the things of God, so He wants us to first learn how to walk rightly with our families. God warns us that a dishonoring relationship with our spouse can destroy our effectiveness in prayer. This verse means exactly what it says. If I were to callously dishonor a friend's child, he would have a hard time listening to any request I would make of him. The same is true of God.

10. Are we praying with a proud, unbroken heart? "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' "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, a sinner!' "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" (Luke 18:10–14).

God hates pride—lifting ourselves up above Him. In fact, Scripture says He “resists the proud” (James 4:6, NKJV). This is a resistance we cannot afford to experience. A proud, judgmental, unbroken heart will skew prayer. How great it would be if our first prayer became, “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

11. Are we listening to and gladly responding to God’s Word? He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, even his prayer is an abomination (Prov. 28:9, NASB).

The Bible is not a collection of man’s thoughts about God. It is God speaking! Since prayer needs to be God-initiated to be effective, how can we pray such prayers if we are unwilling to listen and respond to His Word? It is arrogant to believe we can ignore what He is saying and then expect Him to pay attention to what we are saying. God longs for us to be effective in intercession for His Kingdom’s sake. He knows this is best accomplished as we listen and respond to His Word.

12. Are we giving up in prayer? [Jesus] was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart (Luke 18:1).

The parable Jesus shared in Luke 18 calls us to enduring prayer. George Mueller prayed all his life for the salvation of two of his boyhood friends. When asked if he had stopped praying for them, he replied that he could not give up because God had assured him of the answer. One of his friends was saved at Mueller’s funeral, the other six months after his death. The timing of God’s answers must be left in the hands of a Sovereign God who does all things perfectly. He knows what He’s doing.

Peeling Back Layers of Hindrance

Several years ago I found myself in a very dry time—bland Bible study and hindered prayers. Worst of all, my love for Christ had grown cold. As the New Year began, I felt God calling me to spend an extended time in fasting, simply to lay aside everything that was clouding my heart so I could hear Him.

The first days of fasting usually just make me mad as I miss my food! But this time, as the days continued, I found my heart softening. The Lord peeled back layers of sin and showed me ways I had been disregarding Him. He began to speak to me in new ways through His Word. He placed fresh, heaven-sent prayers into my soul. I fell in love with Him all over again. Not long after this time, God answered one of the great prayers of my heart and sent a mighty work of revival to the church I pastor. That revival lasted five weeks, three to four hours every night. I do not pretend that my solitary prayers, once rightly aligned, brought revival. But I know that He prepared my heart for what He was about to accomplish. And I know He was graciously initiating and answering prayer afresh in my life.

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