

PRAYER BLOCKERS

Prayer is about relationship and last week we focussed on God's side while this week focusses more on our side of the prayer equation.

This week is all about the things that get in the way of us praying. About not knowing where to start. About not knowing what to say. About when we feel bad about ourselves. About when God seems a million miles away. About when the pain just seems too great to pray. There can be a lot of hurdles that get in the way of us praying

For everyone who has ever prayed, there comes an obvious question. I prayed and nothing happened. I prayed and saw no change. As we start this week I want to look at 9 reasons we find in the Bible for why our prayers might not be answered. The Bible makes clear there are some reasons why our prayers are blocked that are in our court.

1. We don't have because we don't ask God in the first place. James 4:2

This sounds really obvious but James says we don't have because we don't ask. The context is a deep covetousness for what other people have. This does not mean God gives us everything we desire but actually we are to bring our needs, desires before God asking for his provision. This verse suggests that actually there is more blessings we could have from God but we have never asked God. Instead we have tried to scheme our way into getting those things by ourselves. But it also suggests that many of these desires are from our own selfish lusts, rather than from God. It might be we are asking for one thing while our true deeper need is for something else. But we are to bring everything to God.

2. Our motives are wrong James 4:3

The reality is that much of our prayer life centres around our own wellbeing. The fact is that God is far more interested in our character than our comfort. God knows what we need, and he knows what is best for us. God will say No, if it is not in our best interests. God wants us to

become more like Jesus. And granting our every whim and wish will not help us become more like Jesus. Prayer is not dictating to God what we want him to do. It is cooperating with God, so that He can accomplish what he wants to do. So, we are to ask God for what we want, because that is recognizing God is the source of everything. But sometimes what we ask for is for wrong motives and God will say no.

It is not wrong to ask for things that are for us or that bring pleasure. But sometimes what we are seeking is something that is taking the place of God in our lives. But the confidence is that we can come to Him and know he will give us whatever is best for us.

3. Praying to Impress. Matthew 6:5

These are Jesus words and he was talking about the spiritual leaders of the day, who loved to pray publicly. They wanted to be seen to be spiritual. They wanted people to notice them, and think highly of them. These verses don't mean we are not to pray with others. But Jesus is talking about our heart motive. Prayer is for an audience of One. God

4. Asking for something outside God's will. 1 John 5:14-15

God can't give us anything that is against his Word. If answering our prayer will cause harm to us or others then he is not going to grant it. God is a good father and knows what is best for us. I am sure we can all think of times when we have prayed for something, and then in hindsight realized that it was not a good idea. It seemed good at the time, but looking back we are pleased that God did not respond.

5. Unconfessed Sin Ps 66:18 Isaiah 59:1-2 1 John 3:21-22

God is gracious. He does not, not listen because we are sinful. If that were the case, none of us would have any hope. But when there is something we know is sinful in our lives, and that

we are not dealing with it, then God often withholds from answering that prayer. He is waiting for us to come with a prayer of confession. From God's perspective the most important thing is our relationship with him. If sin is acting as a barrier between us and God, then above all else God wants to see that resolved. God desires that intimacy be restored before we worry about anything else. Nothing else matters, and so God withholds his hand until that is worked through. It is worked through when we come humbly in confession

6. Ignoring God Proverbs 15:29 | 1 Peter 3:12

Many times, people ignore God for weeks and months or years and then some crisis happens in their life, and they desperately start praying. So God is a convenient sort of last resort when things have gone wrong. But when things are sweet, they just ignore God. Now, if we are honest we have all done this in the past. When do we pray the most: in a crisis. When are we likely to pray the least – when things are going well.

7. Neglecting the Poor . Proverbs 14:31 | 21:13, 19:17

God so identifies with the poor that if we ignore the cries of the poor, God says we are ignoring him. This is not just something in the Old Testament. Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats powerfully illustrates this. "Whatever you did for the least of these you did for me."

Now most of us would not deliberately set out to insult God. But this says we insult God by how we treat the poor.

Now I am not saying we all have to be like Mother Teresa before our prayers will be answered. But if we want to look at things that might hinder our prayers, this is one of them.

8. Neglecting God's Word. John 15:7

God equates our attitude towards his Word with our attitude towards Him. They are intrinsically linked. As we fill our minds and hearts with the Word of God we are remaining in Christ. It is the Word of God that shapes our hearts, our minds,

our attitudes. As we fill ourselves with God's word, then we will know the heart of God and so be asking in line with his heart.

9. Dishonouring our spouse / broken relationships 1 Peter 3:1, 7

These verses have caused lots of controversy. To understand them we have to start with the context. Women had no rights in Roman or Jewish law. They were chattels of men and had no freedom to act in their own right at all. It would have been totally unheard of that a wife could worship a different God than her husband. So, in accepting Christianity, women were putting their lives at risk. Paul is encouraging them not to unnecessarily risk themselves any more by deliberately disobeying their husbands in other areas. This was not going to help them or Christianity. So what Paul says to women is not actually, in this context, controversial. It seems so to us, but not to them.

What is controversial, and totally counter culture is his instructions to men. That men should treat their wives as equals, and with kindness and understanding sounds normal to us, but was totally unheard of at that time. So, it was men he was asking to change.

If we are extrapolating this verse to our context today, it is really saying how we treat others, not just our spouses, but people in general, will impact our prayer life. There is a link between the horizontal and the vertical. If we are being arrogant, bullying, abusive, rude and judgemental towards other people who are made in the image of God, who are loved by God, who for those who are Christians, are our brothers and sisters, then this will hinder our prayers.

This is why Jesus said. If you are coming to present your gift at the altar, then remember that someone has something against you, leave gift and go and deal with the broken relationship first. Note that it is not if you hold something against someone, but that they hold something against you. That is, you have wronged them in some way. Matthew 5:23-24

This is why Jesus says at the end of the Lord's prayer. If you don't forgive those who sin against you, your Father in heaven will not forgive you. So, if we are harbouring resentment and anger towards someone, this hinders God's ability to answer our prayer for forgiveness. Matthew 6:14-15

So, this principle is wider than just with our spouse. The principle is that broken relationships that we have caused, hinder our prayers.

The danger in looking at these roadblocks is we think. "Well, I haven't got a hope." But God is gracious. We are made right with God by Jesus Christ and he welcomes us into his presence. But equally we need to be aware that actually our actions can hinder our prayers. Prayer is relational. We cannot expect in a relationship that our actions will not have impact. Prayer is not a magic formula. His word says these things can act as a block. We can use these 9 as a checklist. Not to bring condemnation. But if God is quickening one of these to us, it is so that we confess our sin and put it right.

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SMALL GROUP REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

1. Do something fun to see how much of the two Bible verses your group can remember. Why are both these verses so essential as a foundation for prayer?
2. What is one thing that God impressed upon you this week from the devotions? (Week 1 or week 2, depending when your group meets.)
3. This week is about things that hinder us from praying. What do you think the biggest hindrance is for you? Do others have any suggestions of ways to overcome the hindrance? Are there any false beliefs behind the hindrance?
4. Sunday's sermon looks at 9 things that can hinder our prayers. Is there one that God highlighted to you, as something to address?
5. Do you think that sometimes we struggle to take responsibility for our part in our relationship with God? Who are we tempted to blame?
6. Discuss the idea that prayer is at the heart of our relationship with God. What does Christianity become without relationship/prayer at its core? Do we sometimes treat prayer like magic if we say the right words it will work?

Consider ending your group time by having communion with the theme of confession around the 9 prayer blockers. "Confess your sins to one another and pray for each other so that you may be healed" James 5:16

Choose one of the prayer cards that come with your journal to help you pray for an area. Choose a different one from last week.