



# ***Bible & Life***

## ***Bible Teaching Newsletter***

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### ***Prayer and Selfishness***

By Lehman Strauss (1911-1997)

*“Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts [pleasures]”—(James 4:3)*

We are all naturally and basically selfish. We must honestly admit that even our prayers are selfish. It is possible that some of the good things we do are motivated by a selfish spirit. We will do well to examine our motives periodically and especially in regard to praying. James tells us that one reason for our spiritual poverty and powerlessness in prayer is a wrong motive. It is not necessarily the thing for which we are asking that is wrong, but rather the reason we ask for it.

#### ***Praying with Selfish Motives***

A member in a church where I was pastor expressed a concern for the salvation of her husband. She had gone to several members of the church, asking them to pray for his salvation—a legitimate request supported by 1 Timothy 2:1-4.

One day I asked her why she wanted her husband to get saved. She answered, “Because we would be so much happier in our married life. We could share the same interests, and life for me in the home would be much easier.”

I am not critical of that woman for wanting those things. A home is doubly blessed when husband and wife walk together in the Lord. But to pray for her husband’s salvation for the reasons she gave was selfishness on her part.

How different our prayer life would be if only we were genuinely unselfish! And when the Holy Spirit succeeds in teaching us this lesson, our prayer life will be free from a major hindrance.

Our Lord said: *“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”* (Matthew 6:21).

If we are carnal and desire material things merely to gratify the desires of the flesh, we cut the lifeline of prayer. It seems from James 4:3 that those to whom James was writing might have placed more value on material things than on spiritual things. They were putting last things first and first things last, thereby preventing their prayers from being answered. To “pray amiss” means to pray with the wrong intent. What folly it is to bother God for our desires, rather than asking for that which is His desire for us.

The psalmist said, *“Delight thyself also in the Lord; and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart”* (Psalm 37:4).

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Now do not make the mistake of attaching the wrong meaning to that verse. It does not mean that God will give us all those things we desire. I have thanked God more than once that He did not give me the desires of my heart.

When my mother sustained an injury which resulted ultimately in her death, it was my desire that she live. But apparently my desire was not God's desire. I did a lot of soul searching then, discovering that my desire was for my mother's recovery first. But it was God's time to take her to Himself. My desire was natural, human, and therefore selfish. I failed to put God's desire first and my desire last.

Now, as I look back on that experience, I can see my mistake. It was not wrong to desire life for my mother rather than death, but my motive was selfish, without any consideration for God's will. Therefore He did not give me that for which I prayed.

### **Hiding Selfish Desires**

Have you ever tried to hide your selfish behavior behind a verse in the Bible? Many Christians do this, you know. Take for example, Matthew 7:7, a frequently quoted prayer verse:

*"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."*

The majority of Christians will tell you that this is a verse that does not work for them. They are correct; however, there is a reason why it will not work. No verse in the Bible is intended to stand by itself—that is, it must be studied in its context. Now, if we fail to note that Matthew 7:7 follows Matthew 6:33, and that the two verses are contextually related, we can get into difficulty. Jesus had just said:

*"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you"* (Matthew 6:33).

If we obey the exhortation in Matthew 6:33, we will pray only for those things which concern God's kingdom and God's glory. The self-seeking person fails to put God's glory first; therefore when he asks, his request is not granted, and then he wants to charge God with not keeping His promise.

I am thinking of the man who came to Jesus with the request, "Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me" (Luke 12:13).

Now, there is a selfish request, if there ever was one. That fellow did not have God's glory at heart. He was a self-seeker; his request was a selfish one. The thing for which he asked could have been legitimate, but it was not motivated by a desire to glorify God. We know the man asked amiss, because Jesus did not grant him his request. Instead He rebuked the man when He replied:

*"Take heed, and beware of covetousness; for a man's life consisteth not in the things which he possesseth"* (Luke 12:15).

This man's request was motivated by a covetous spirit. The true purpose of prayer is not to obtain the things we want from God but rather to make us content with the things He wants us to have.

I know Christian businessmen who have prayed that God would make them successful and prosperous. A prayer like that could be right and wrong, depending upon the person's motive. Suppose prosperity should come to the man who prays for it. What will he do with the money after he gets it? Will he spend it on himself and his family for pleasure, luxuries, and material goods?

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To pray from a heart that is set on things, merely to gratify the desire of the flesh, is senseless.

### **Examine Your Motives in Prayer**

Check up on yourself the next time you ask God for something. Examine the motive for that prayer request, and see if you are seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. You might discover that you are praying amiss. Surely, you do not want selfishness to rob you of answers to your prayers.

A mother prayed amiss for her two sons—a prayer Christ could not answer. Salome, the mother of James and John, desired a place for both her children in Christ's future kingdom.

*"Then came to Him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping Him, and desiring a certain thing of Him. And He said unto her, 'What wilt thou?' She saith unto Him, 'Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left, in thy kingdom'" (Matthew 20:20-21).*

No doubt Salome believed she had some warrant for her petition. Moreover, she must have been sincere, because she came "worshipping Him," but her request was denied. Jesus said unto her, "Ye know not what ye ask" (Matthew 20:22). Let us be careful how we pray. Sincerity and a spirit of worship are insufficient to make up a valid petition.

And right here, self-examination is very important, lest we offer a prayer of pretense. The scribes and Pharisees were quite hypocritical in their prayers, but Jesus knew their hearts and motives. He pronounced a woe upon them for trying to fake it in their prayers. (See Matthew 23:14, Mark 12:40, Luke 20:47). It makes sense to examine our motives before we ask anything from God.

### **Prayer: Sense and Nonsense**

For almost half a century I have been listening to my own prayers and the prayers of others, and I am convinced that our prayers contain more nonsense than sense. For one thing, some of the prayers both amaze and amuse me. If some of the brethren who prayed were really talking to God, I cannot see how our heavenly Father could have been favorably impressed with their ability to hold an intelligent conversation. If one brother preaches the way he prayed, God pity his congregation. His words were dull, lifeless, at times theological and academic, but mostly incoherent. He sounded like a walking ghost. I thought to myself, *"It must be a frustrating experience for God to listen to millions of prayers that say nothing, ask for nothing, and expect nothing."*

A tragic plane crash resulted in the death of all persons aboard. I was at a conference in northern Pennsylvania at the time. The conference director called on a man to pray. Apparently he wanted to pray for the families who survived those who died in the crash. He said,

*"Lord, bless the plane crash out there in—out there in—out there in— Well Lord, you know where it is; You must have read it in the morning newspaper."*

Sense or nonsense? Let Paul tell us why many of our prayers contain so little sense. He wrote, "We know not what we should pray for as we ought" (Romans 8:26). Do you believe that statement? Will you admit it is

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***"It dawned on my recently that those men and women in the Bible who were mighty prayer warriors never read a book on prayer nor attended a seminar on prayer. They just prayed...They did not say, 'Lord, teach us how to pray.' A great many people know how to pray, but they do not pray. Lord, teach us to pray."***

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true in your own experience? The text says we have an "infirmity." The King James Version says *infirmities*, but the word is singular in the original, and should read *infirmity*.

In the midst of turmoil, trials, and sufferings in this life, we are placed in a position of disadvantage which sometimes render us ignorant when it comes time to pray. Under such circumstances, Paul himself prayed ignorantly, three times, for the removal of his thorn in the flesh. God had to say to him, "You are not praying right." We all have a weakness when it comes to the matter of praying, whether this weakness is in the thing we request, in the phrase of the request, or in the motive. "We know not what we should pray for as we ought" (Romans 8:26).

Many churches today are marked by a well-organized, heavily staffed, and adequately financed impotency. This manifested weakness lies in the fact that too many church leaders have cut themselves off from the source of power; they are out of touch with God. The need of the hour is a fresh touch from Heaven, and I believe this touch can come to every believer in Christ who wants it and will seek it. When we confess our sins and cease to grieve and quench Him, a new divine enablement will possess and empower us.

### Final Thought

It dawned on me recently that those men and women in the Bible who were mighty prayer warriors never read a book on prayer nor attended a seminar on prayer. They just prayed. Recently I read the passage on prayer in Luke 11. Our Lord had just finished praying to the Father. The disciples were close by listening. No doubt they had watched and heard Him pray on other occasions. They knew the value and importance of prayer, so they came to Him with the request, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). The late Dr. G. Campbell Morgan emphasized the importance of their simple request. He suggested that we lose its meaning by adding to the disciples' words. They did not say, "Lord, teach us *how* to pray." A great many people know *how* to pray, but they do not pray. Lord, teach us *to* pray.

### Compiled from:

Lehman Strauss, *Sense and Non-Sense About Prayer*, (Chicago, IL: Moody 1974)