

Spiritual Circuit Breakers
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It is easy to have faith when you are sick and ask for healing, and it comes. It is not difficult to believe in prayer when you are caught up in trouble and plead for guidance, and you receive it. Anyone can trust in God when having petitioned heaven for the protection of a loved one, you see that one come through unscathed.

But when you ask for healing and it does not come; when you pray for guidance and you do not get it; when you plead some cause and the heavens seem as brass, then it is not so easy to have faith. Then it is a bit more difficult to believe in the power of prayer. In fact, the temptation is to say, as one man said to me quite candidly, "John, I've quit praying. God obviously isn't listening."

His experience is not an isolated one. Perhaps you have prayed and had no answer. Perhaps you have decided not to pray anymore. You may have concluded that prayer, while apparently useful to others, has no value for you.

It's possible you do not know what to think? You want to believe. You want to be a person of faith. You want to hurl yourself on the mercies of God with utter abandon, but you are haunted by a lurking fear that it just won't work. That your prayers will not be heard. That God will let you down.

Because you fear the fragile bit of faith you *do* possess will die if dampened by further disappointment, leaving you with no faith at all, you have carefully tucked it under glass where it can be seen but not touched, admired but not tested. And you struggle on alone.

What a pity! The law of life is that we lose what we do not use, while that which we stretch grows strong. If you expose your faith to testing, it will toughen. If you exert it, it will come

alive. And, through this exercise of faith, prayer will become the force you want it to be instead of the farce it may have been.

If you are going to cooperate as much as possible with God in your prayer life, you must be sensitively aware of twelve ailments pointed out in Scripture which put that relationship in jeopardy. These sort themselves into two basic categories: those things which completely thwart your prayers by cutting off God's power and those which reduce the effectiveness of your prayers by placing limitations on God.

I call the first category “spiritual circuit breakers.” These are those ailments which sever the lines of communication between yourself and the heavenly Father so that for all practical purposes your prayers cannot get through.

Ailment One: A Sense of Unconfessed Sin

“If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened” (Psalm 66:18).

Please note the verse does not say you must be sinless to be heard. The weight of that word “cherish” is to “fondle,” “tolerate,” or “foster” sin. Moral and spiritual perfection are not prerequisites to power in prayer. If they were, no one could pray effectively. There is too much sin in the best of us. Furthermore, our worst failings are often unknown to us; they are exposed only as we draw close to Christ.

But when you *are* made aware of your sin and do nothing about it, when you have a sense of failing and refuse to confess it to God, *then* this sense of unconfessed sin acts like a circuit breaker. It disconnects you from the Source of power. And, though God wants to help you, he can't. You won't let him!

Isaiah makes this clear in chapter 59 of his great book: “Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made

a separation between you and your God” (Isaiah 59:1, 2). The problem, you see, is not topside. It is inside!

Peter applies this truth to a Christian husband who desires to see his unsaved wife converted, or who hopes to woo a Christian wife who has "carnaled out" back into fellowship with Christ.

“Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that your prayers may not be hindered” (Peter 3:7). His first and foremost concern should be *his* behavior, not hers. *His* relationship to Jesus, not hers. *His* concept of the servant's heart, not hers.

A principle emerges. The first thing that should concern you in your conversation with God is personal cleansing. Before you pray for a change in circumstances, you should pray for a change in character. When you do, when you actually confess your sin, “God is faithful and just, and will forgive those sins and cleanse [you] from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

In that moment of God-washed cleanness, new boldness and effectiveness in prayer will follow. God says so! “The prayer of a righteous man [that is, a man made right by the cleansing action of God's grace] has great power in its effects” (James 5:16). You may fail God again the same day. In fact, you may fail him before you are through praying. One of the most shattering discoveries of my own prayer life has been the fact that in the very midst of my conversation with God I can cut off communication by any one of a dozen different infantile or sub-Christian emotions and thoughts.

You may have experienced this problem too. But when the Holy Spirit waves the flag of warning, when you realize you are out of tune and the lines of communication are in jeopardy again, you can stop *where* you are and *as* you are and can say: “Father, I was wrong just then. I was way off base. Forgive me. Help me to be right.”

You may be thinking: “That's all well and good, but you don't understand. It wouldn't be so bad if I failed God and asked for forgiveness and then failed him again. My problem is that I ask

forgiveness and fail him again and again and again and again! I find myself doing the same things over and over and over until I just haven't the gall to ask God to forgive me any more. I feel I'm not worthy of his help." Of course, you aren't worthy. You never were. Who *is* ever worthy of what the heavenly Father has done and still wants to do? It is not a matter of being worthy. It is a matter of being willing. Willing to let God be what he wants to be: a very present help in trouble.

Many sensitive people are harder on themselves than God is. They are not ready to live with the fact of their humanness. But the Bible says: "[God] knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103:14).

God knows the stuff of which you are made. He knows the ease with which you slip into temptation. Therefore he has gone out of his way to make help available when you need it. To provide forgiveness when you fall. Don't think that asking for forgiveness is a matter of gall. It is a matter of God's boundless and all-sufficient grace. The wonderful good news of the gospel is this: "[The Son] in whom we have redemption, *the forgiveness of sins*" (Colossians 1:14).

This means there is nowhere you can go, there is nothing you can do, there is no pathway of sin into which you can wander, that will place you outside the boundaries of God's all-sufficient grace. Forgiveness is always available, if you want it.

A widow from the slums of New York was invited by a kindly benefactor to spend the weekend at an oceanside cottage. This woman had enjoyed few luxuries. In fact, she often was happy to have just the necessities of life. As she stood by the surging sea that afternoon, overwhelmed by the vast expanse of water, a tear slipped out of the corner of her eye and meandered down her cheek. When her friend asked why she was crying, she replied, "Because it's so wonderful to see something there is enough of."

There's enough of God's grace for you. There's enough of God's love for you. There's enough of God's pardon for you. There's enough of God's power for you. And, if you will receive it,

“the sin that doth so easily beset you” (Heb. 12:1) will be removed by the sometimes caustic but always cleansing agent of confession. And your prayers - when they are the fervent effectual prayers of a person made right by the boundless grace of God - will be characterized by power.

Norman Vincent Peale tells of a boyhood incident. He got hold of a big, black cigar, headed into a back alley where no one would see him, and lit it. It didn't taste good, but it made him feel very grown up until he saw his father coming. Norman quickly put the cigar behind his back and tried to be as casual as possible.

They exchanged pleasantries for a moment. Then, trying to divert his father's attention in any way possible, Norman spied a billboard advertising the circus. “Can I go, Dad?” he pleaded. “Can I go to the circus? Please, Dad?” His father's reply was one Norman never forgot. It is one we ought to remember too. “Son,” he answered quietly but firmly, “one of the first lessons you need to learn about life is this: Never make a petition while at the same time trying to hide a smoldering disobedience behind your back.”

It is not God who stops your prayer. His arm is not shortened. His ear is not dull. It is your sin that has gotten in the way! And, if you want to have communion with him, you must cleanse your heart of the smoldering disobediences you are trying to hide. You must not cherish (that is, you must not fondle or nurture) sin in your heart. A sense of unconfessed sin is a hindrance to prayer.

Ailment Two: An Unforgiving Spirit

Alongside a sense of unconfessed sin you can place the second spiritual circuit breaker: an unforgiving spirit.

Art Linkletter has a book entitled *Kids Say the Darndest Things*. And they do! A little boy who had not gone to Sunday school very often was asked by his parents to say a prayer as he went to bed. The youngster formed a prayer based on what he thought he had heard in Sunday school. It came out like this: “Father, forgive us our trash baskets, as we forgive those who put their trash

in our baskets!”

You may smile at the little boy's slip, but when it comes down to the heart of the matter, he wasn't far off. Folks do go around putting trash in your basket. They say the darndest things - just as kids do - but often they are meaner and more vicious. Even so, you cannot hold bitterness in your heart. You have to forgive them even though they may not want to be forgiven. If you don't, the heat in your heart will activate that second spiritual circuit breaker. The power of your prayers will be instantly cut off. You will be plunged into personal darkness again.

It is easier to talk about forgiving than it is to forgive. Perhaps the hardest thing about forgiveness is that you often find yourself having to forgive the same people for the same thing over and over again. It seems as if the same people keep putting their trash in your basket! But there is a great principle which applies here, one which I have already mentioned. It is the gracious forgiveness of God, forgiveness so all-sufficient that no matter how often you sin against him - even in the same way, on the same day - it still applies. His forgiveness toward you is boundless, and so must yours be toward others.

Have you ever noticed how often Jesus put forgiveness and prayer together? If you want the surprise of your life, read the Gospels and see how often and in how many ways Jesus coupled these two. The forgiveness he talked about is not only that which you should desire for yourself. It is the forgiveness you should also be prepared to focus on others.

Do you recall the incident recorded in the 18th chapter of Matthew in which Jesus is talking alone with the disciples? Peter remembers the many references Jesus has made to prayer and forgiveness going together. Based on these, he makes his contribution to the conversation. “Lord,” he asks, “how often should I forgive my brother when he fails me? Seven times?”

How very much like Peter! So boisterous and impetuous. So full of the wrong kind of pride. So sure he has arrived spiritually! He is willing to forgive seven times. More than double the three times required by Hebrew law!

But the Lord smiles at Peter's immaturity, even as he must smile at ours. "Peter," he answers, "forgiveness is not a limited thing. You are not to forgive seven times. You are to forgive seventy times seven." Seventy times seven comes to four hundred ninety. You are to forgive others four hundred ninety times for the same thing! More, if necessary! Jesus was trying to teach Peter (and you) that forgiveness is not a matter of mathematics. It is not a matter of keeping tabs on people. It is not an act but an attitude. Not a spurt but a spirit.

One can almost see the Master as he focuses those penetrating eyes on Peter, hoping the disciple will get the point. Hoping he will stop counting, or maybe lose count, when people put their trash in his basket. Hoping Peter will forgive them without limit. That he will react to them with a love that is not weak, but meek. A love that does not tire of being gracious. A love that starts forgiving and gets the habit! Not only is the heart made right by this attitude; it is also made light. Having extended forgiveness to others, you are more ready to receive it yourself. Somehow you sense that the lines of communication have been restored. Now you can ask what you will, confident you will be heard.

Ailment Three: An Unsurrendered Will

A third circuit breaker is an unsurrendered will: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly" (James 4:3).

Succeeding pages will deal more fully with what it means to "ask wrongly," but in the context of our present discussion this expression means to pray with the wrong motive or purpose. To ask for the right thing for the wrong reason.

For instance, you may pray that your husband might become a Christian, but only because life would be so much easier for you if he weren't so belligerent and hateful. You may pray for the guidance of your daughter, but only so that you won't have to toss around in bed wondering where she is when she stays out a little late. You may pray for a better and more challenging job, but only to get a larger income and buy more and more of the things you need less and less.

The prayers themselves are not necessarily wrong. The problem is the motive. The purpose behind them. It is a wonderful thing to pray for the conversion of a husband. Or for the will of God for your children. Or for more challenging work. But God cannot honor a selfish motive. If he did, he would destroy character.

When your children come to you with selfish petitions, you are not likely to grant these. You want to build their character. You want your children to know they cannot surrender to every selfish whim which strikes their fancy. God does not want you to become a character-weakling either. So, whenever an unsundered will is expressed in a false motive, the circuit breaker goes into action. The power is cut off. The prayer does not “get through.”

In intercessory prayer the problem is multiplied. Here not only is *your* will involved, but that of the person for whom you are praying. (In praying for some great cause like world peace, the wills of millions of people enter the picture.) Even though *your* will is fully yielded to God's desire that all should reach repentance (2 Peter 3:9), an unsundered will on the part of the person (or persons) for whom you are praying can neutralize your prayer and cause it to go unanswered.

This fact is terribly frustrating, especially if you are interceding for a loved one such as a child or spouse. But in no other situation are you so apt to draw so near to the heart of God. He, too, pauses before the royalty of human will. Wisely and lovingly, he elects not to violate it. A poet has said: “In many ways He will be good and kind but God will never force the human mind.” Here is a mystery of major magnitude. However, it remains a fact. The only thing capable of thwarting God's willingness to bless is your unwillingness to be blessed.

This is not to say you should cease praying for others. God's time and way do not always coincide with your own (Isaiah 55:8, 9). Nor will you ever sufficiently understand the modus operandi of intercessory prayer to say *with precision* how heavily perseverance weighs in obtaining an answer, but it cannot be lightly dismissed.

“In Jesus’ Name, Amen”

Having acknowledged the complications that can arise when praying for others, do not forget the role your own will plays in personal prayer. Penetrate the meaning of this sentence: “This I ask in Jesus' name, Amen.” You may have said these words many times. But have you ever stopped to grasp what they mean?

To pray something “in Jesus' name” is to say, “I want Jesus to sponsor this prayer. I want him to stand up and speak for it. To put his weight behind it.” But if that is what you’re asking, you must be certain your petition is compatible with His life and example.

To pray “in Jesus' name” is to say in substance, “Lord, this is how it looks to me. From my limited point of view I think it ought to come out this way. But I don’t know everything. If part of my prayer is wrong, then hear and answer only that part of it which is right. That part which is in keeping with your spirit and your name.”

To pray “In Jesus' name” is to pray with one eye open. It is to keep one eye focused on your prayer itself. Examining it. Measuring it. Weighing it to make certain what you ask is in keeping with the character of the One in whose name you ask it.

To pray “in Jesus' name” is to stop giving orders. It is to turn command and authority over to him. It is to accept the simple fact that the purpose of prayer is not to change life to suit you, but to change you to suit life.

CORRECTIVES**For Ailment One - A Sense of Unconfessed Sin**

Good news: Forgiveness is possible! The thoughts, words, deeds and feelings which have raised havoc with your prayer life can be removed by the often caustic but always cleansing agent of confession (1 John 1:9). When you are clean clear through, *your* prayers - the effectual, fervent prayers of a person made right by the goodness of God - will be characterized by power.

For Ailment Two - An Unforgiving Spirit

Search to see if the heat of hate or hostility has activated a circuit breaker and cut off the power. If so, restore the connection by praying: “Renew a right spirit within me.” Pray these words often. Learn to forgive as you have been forgiven - boundlessly.

For Ailment Three - An Unsurrendered Will

If God is saying “no” to you it may be that somewhere, somehow, you (or those for whom you pray) are saying “no” to him. Stop giving orders. Let God take command. Do not fear his will. Seek it. It is your highest good. Pray for wisdom that you may be in his will and not block his way.