

Putting the Brakes on God's Power
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Roland Hayes, the singer, quotes his untutored but sage grandfather as saying the trouble with many prayers is “no suction!” I doubt if the most learned theologian could improve upon that diagnosis, for the picturesque speech of this plain man illuminates still a third set of reasons for unanswered prayers.

Ailment Seven: A Lack of Faith

Light on this factor is found in the book of James: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God ... and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that [he] will receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:5-7).

One of the perennial dreams of the scientific mind has been to harness the restless energy of the sea. If only the power of the breaking waves could be converted into electricity, what fabulous things could be accomplished! Limitless power would be available. Thus far, however, all attempts have met with frustration and failure. The surface of the sea is too undependable. The waves cannot be counted on. One moment they are carried forward by the wind. The next they are driven back. And if your faith is like the waves, says James, if you trust in God, but with reservations, there is little likelihood you will receive much from him.

This principle is in total harmony with the teachings of Jesus. Our Lord repeatedly declared that faith is a basic ingredient in effective prayer: “According to your faith be it done to you” (Matt. 9:29). “If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed ... nothing will be impossible to you” (Matt.17:20). “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:50). “If you have faith, and never doubt ... it will be done” (Matt. 21:21). Five different times the Gospel writers record Jesus as saying: “Your faith has made you well” (Matt. 9:22; Mk. 5:34, 10:52; Lk. 8:48, 17:19).

So important is faith that Jesus said to Peter: "I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail" (Lk. 22:32). Jesus did not pray that Peter would be good, or brave, or clever, or wise. He prayed that Peter would have a faith which could not fail, which would endure in spite of every adversity.

Is it possible your prayers are not answered because you do not expect an answer? Is it possible you come to God with your petitions, lay your concerns before him and then, picking them up, start worrying again over the very things about which you prayed barely moments before? Is it possible you do not expect anything to happen as a result of your prayers? And you get exactly what you expect!

Do you remember the story of Peter, who had been tossed into prison? It is found in Acts 12. His fellow Christians in Jerusalem decided to pray for his release. While they were still in prayer, God miraculously delivered him.

With the help of the Bible narrative we can visualize the dramatic events which followed. Peter, elated, ran over to the prayer meeting to offer himself as a personal demonstration of the power of prayer. He knocked on the door, but the people were so busy praying for his release they had no time to answer.

He continued rapping until a little girl by the name of Rhoda got up off her knees and tiptoed over to the door to quiet whoever was creating this disturbance. When she saw it was Peter, she became so excited she left him standing outside, ran back to the prayer meeting, and cried, "Stop praying! Peter's here! God has answered us!"

One dour old Christian looked up and said, "Shhh! We are praying:" And her mother added, "Hush, child, don't be silly. This is serious business. Get down on your knees and help us pray for Peter's release." "But, Mommy," Rhoda replied, "Peter is at the door!"

All the while poor old Peter was rapping his knuckles raw. Finally, in exasperation, the people stopped praying to see who was creating all the disturbance. When they opened the door and saw Peter, they were “astonished.” This is the Bible's decorous way of saying they just about fainted!

Is it possible you, too, have prayed with the same limited measure of expectancy - not really believing anything would happen? Would you, too, be “astonished” if your prayers actually got things done? Well, this lack of faith puts a brake on God's power and may result in unanswered prayers.

If you want to make prayer a force instead of a farce in your life, hunt for the question marks in your heart. When you find them, dig them out by the roots. If, here and there, you find a particularly pesky one that refuses to yield, take a positive approach by praying with another earnest but honest seeker: “I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

Ailment Eight: A Lack of Persistence

A second brake on God's power which limits the effectiveness of your prayers is a lack of persistence. A lot of people pray the way they duck for apples. Their prayers are perfunctory and casual. They lack the staying quality which stubbornly insists upon being heard and persists until an answer is received. Their prayers have “no suction!”

Persistence in prayer does not mean praying loud or long. The duration and decibels of prayer are not signs of its sincerity. An earnest layman had the unfortunate habit of shouting when he prayed in public. After one occasion when his prayer had almost caused the rafters to shake, a little girl leaned over to her father and whispered, “Daddy, do you think if he lived nearer to God he wouldn't have to yell so loud?” A wise observation.

Someone has suggested it is not the geometry of your prayers, how long they are; or the arithmetic of your prayers, how many they are; or the rhetorical expression of your prayers, how beautiful they are; or the logical exposition of your prayers, how argumentative they are (and I

might add, or the volume of your prayers, how loud they are); it is a fervency of spirit which gets the job done. God's written word agrees: "The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects" (James 5: 16).

The importance of persistence in prayer is repeatedly emphasized in the Bible. A classic illustration is the tenacity of the Israelites who marched around Jericho repeatedly in obedience to God's direction. Five times, ten times, twelve times they circled the mighty rampart, but not even a crack appeared. Still they persisted. On the thirteenth time there was a shout, a trumpet blast, and the walls came tumbling down. Persistence, in keeping with God's promise, was the key. What was true then is true now.

If you need further confirmation, listen to what Jesus himself has said: "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matt. 7:7).

There is a note of insistence in these words. Jesus implies that if you have asked and not received, or sought and not found, you should boldly approach the gate of God's goodness and knock - and keep on knocking - until the door swings wide and you actually possess that which God has promised.

"Prayer," said Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "is like a rope on a bell. When tugged, the great bell rings in the ears of God. Some scarcely stir the bell, for they pray so languidly; others give but an occasional pinch at the rope. But he who wins with heaven is the man who grasps the rope boldly and pulls continually with all his might."

This persistence is not aimed at getting God to change his mind. God's mind does not need changing. His will for you is always good. He is always more ready to give than you are to receive. Prayer does not change God's mind. Prayer changes things. The things in your life which are out of focus. The things which put a brake on God's power. The things which make it impossible for him to bless you as he wants to.

But more than that, persistence in prayer purifies your longings and clarifies your thinking, so they more closely conform to the spirit of the most perfect prayer of all, that of Jesus before his betrayal: “Nevertheless not my will, but thine be done” (Luke 22:42). To ask rashly is foolish. To seek selfishly is dangerous. To knock flippantly is audacious. But when in dogged faith you persistently pray that God's will may be your own, the sheer daring of prayer becomes glorious. All God has is yours - exceedingly abundant above all you can ask or think.

Ailment Nine: A Lack of Action

Alongside a lack of faith and a lack of persistence you must also recognize that a lack of action can be a brake upon God's power.

A college dean tells of attending a boxing match with a friend who is a Catholic priest. As the fighters entered the ring, one of them crossed himself. The dean turned to the priest and asked, “Father, will that help?” “It will if he can fight!” the priest replied. Prayer is no substitute for work. And one reason God may not answer some of your prayers is because he wants *you* to answer them.

There is no sense in begging God for that which you can make possible under your own power. Florence Nightingale, that remarkable woman who was years ahead of her time in many ways, emphasized this thought in a question: “What is the use of praying to be delivered from ‘plague and pestilence’ [the prayer book phrase] so long as the common sewers are allowed to flow into the Thames? If God sends a visitation of cholera, which is the preferable reading of his mind - that he sends it in order that men might pray to him for relief from it, or in order that they should themselves be driven to remove the predisposing causes?”

The answer is obvious. More than that, it is thoroughly Christian. And what can be said of a dreadful epidemic can also be said of the other evils in this world: war, lust, alcoholism, slums, economic injustice, and the like.

There comes a time when you must stop praying and start working. If your prayers are genuine - more than pious platitudes and timeworn shibboleths - then, having prayed in church on Sunday, you should go out from church to do on Monday what you can to help God answer those prayers. Ponder the insights that have come to James through the Holy Spirit: "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?" (James 2:14-16).

Christianity is much more than "pie in the sky by and by." It is both a personal and a *practical* relationship with God. It is related to the individual and social need of *now*. As James points out, a man who is hungry is not looking for prayers or a pat on the back. He needs something to eat. It is an effrontery to pray, "Lord, take care of this brother," when you have food you might give him.

There is no such thing as a prayer in which you have nothing to do. If you do nothing, you are not praying! The moment comes when to remain on your knees is an insult to God. What is needed is to get up and get going.

Such was God's instruction to the Israelites when in their flight from Egypt they came to the Red Sea. The water was in front of them. The Egyptian army was behind them. They did not know what to do. So Moses drew apart to pray. Do you know what God said to him?

"Why do you stand here talking to me? Don't talk to me.

Talk to the people. Tell them to go forward!"

The time for praying had passed. The time for action had come. Until the Israelites were prepared to act, God was not in a position to fulfill his promise.

Is that the way it is with you sometimes? The truth is that often you yourself hold the answer to your prayers. In those instances your great need is not faith *and* works, but faith *that* works. If you will work as though everything depends upon you, while praying as though everything

depends upon God, you will have the joy and thrill of being part of the answer to your own prayers.

A poor man was injured one day while trying to repair the roof of his modest home. He would be unable to work for quite a while. He had a large family and on his meager income had been unable to save any money. The future looked grave. Some of his friends decided they should pray for him.

The news went out and a group of people met at church. They presented God with the needs of this man. They prayed that his family might have food and his children might be cared for. In the midst of one particularly pious prayer there came a rapping at the door. Someone got up, walked quietly to the door, opened it, and saw a young farm boy. The lad whispered, "Dad couldn't come to the prayer meeting tonight, so he sent his prayers in a wagon." Down at the curb was a buckboard full of potatoes, beans, canned goods, and fruit.

True prayer always loads its compassion in a wagon. It always puts feet on its petitions and hands on its supplications. It realizes that often your best prayer is what you do when you are not praying. It comes eyeball to eyeball with the basic fact that prayer is not a device for getting your will done through God, but a deep down desire that God's will may be done through you.

CORRECTIVES

For Ailment Seven - A Lack of Faith

Hunt for the question marks in your heart. When you find them, dig them out by the roots. If, here and there, you find a particularly pesky one that refuses to yield, take a positive approach by praying: "I believe you, Lord. Help me to believe you more!"

For Ailment Eight - A Lack of Persistence

If your prayers have "no suction," try tenacity - not to change God's way of thinking - but to clarify your own. Then approach the Throne of Grace with boldness. Knock and keep on knocking till the answer comes.

For Ailment Nine - A Lack of Action

There is no such thing as a prayer in which you have nothing to do. If you do nothing, you are not praying. Put feet on your petitions and hands on your supplications. You hold the answer yourself to many of your prayers. Remember: *Your most effective prayers may be what you do when you aren't praying.*