

## ***Wrong Motives Behind Unanswered Prayer • James 4:3***

Over a ten-day period I received more than a dozen phone calls from a man whose name I did not recognize. He gave his name but declined to give a number for me to call back. Every time he called I was out of the office, meeting with someone else or on another phone call.

Thursday I left instructions to interrupt me if necessary the next time he called so I could talk to him. When his call came through and I answered he began to read to me a script soliciting advertising in an annual periodical of an organization with which I was not familiar. I explained to him that the church does very little advertising and that was not my department but I would transfer his call to the business office. He said he preferred that I make a personal donation to his organization instead and recommended a \$35 gift for which he would send to me a silver sticker. Finally I convinced him to talk to our business administrator.

When I called him on the telephone intercom to explain I mistakenly forwarded the outside call directly to him instead. He got the caller without any explanation, but I didn't know where the call went. All 14 outside lines were lit and I didn't know which one was the caller. In order to get back to him I picked up every line and asked, returning each caller to hold. I never did find him again but now every call I put on hold automatically rang back to my desk.

It was a disaster. Although it certainly fit with the words I was studying at the time from James 4:3, "*When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*"

The man who called my office didn't get what he wanted and one of the reasons was that he didn't know how to ask. He didn't consider me as the giver; his only concerns were his needs and interests. The same thing often happens when

people pray. We burst into God's presence and don't get what we request. Here are four of God's helpful lessons for unanswered prayer.

Lesson number one is that prayer must be asked. This may seem obvious, although some of us miss the obvious. The previous line in James 4:2 says, "*You do not have, because you do not ask God.*" This is broader than asking God to give us what we want. It includes asking God to be involved in every part of our lives.

There is an expression that I often say to Charleen. You may not get it, but I'll try it on you anyway. I talk to her about virtually everything that goes on in my life — major decisions; daily trivia; ideas and dreams. And I say to her, "Nothing seems real to me until I talk to you about it." It is because she is such an important part of my life.

This is the idea with prayer. God is so important to the Christian's life that we should be talking to him about everything. Always ask for his opinions, his counsel, his will. It is as if nothing in our lives is real until we have first prayed to God about it. James is talking about this constant communication with God when he says in James 4:3, "*When you ask . . .*" The lesson is that prayer must be asked.

But there is a second lesson that grows out of that. It is the lesson that asking does not guarantee receiving. It's up to God whether or not he answers pray; it's not up to us. Many prayers go unanswered or declined because they are based on improper motives, but even prayers with very good motives aren't guaranteed. The night before he died Jesus prayed three times that his death be called off. God the Father said "no" three times. Just because something is asked is no guarantee it will be given.

This is an extremely important lesson for us to learn. Sometimes wonderful Christians get into

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difficult situations and pray as if this lesson were not true. They pray with fervency for God to heal their illness, to restore their prodigal child, to reverse their financial difficulties, to repair a broken relationship — and there is an assumption that the answer depends on the size of their faith. They assume they will get the answer they want if more people pray. Some even assume that if a prayer is louder or “harder” that will assure the right results.

We must remember that the decision to answer prayer is up to God. God is not a machine that will do what we ask because we have entered the exact formula onto the computer screen. God is a person. The final decision on our prayers is his, not ours. Faith is the confidence that he is wise and good and will do what is right and best, not that we will get the answer we want.

The third point of James 4:3 is that many prayers are not answered because they are asked with wrong motives—and motives matter. It’s true that sometimes motives don’t matter. For example, suppose you have a natural gas leak in your home. You invite me over to help. I really care about you and I really want to fix it for you. I start by lighting a match to determine where the leak is coming from. Your house blows up and you and I are seriously injured. Natural gas does not choose to explode or not explode based upon my motives or stupidity. In this case it doesn’t matter whether I am motivated by love or arson. The results are the same.

The place motives matter is in relationships. If your neighbor picks up your mail while you are away on vacation, you are happy or sad depending on the neighbor’s motives. If the motive was to help you, you are glad. If the motive was to read your mail you may file charges with the Postal Service. In relationships motive is extremely important.

Prayer is totally based on our relationship with God. Relationship means everything to God. God is far more concerned about the relationship we have with him than he is concerned about the subject matter of the prayer requests we present to him. He is a God of love, care, forgiveness and commitment. He delights when our relationship with him is good and he is deeply

disappointed when we are on bad terms with him.

God answers our prayers on the basis of our relationship not on the basis of our desire. I think we understand that because that is how we operate. Whether it’s a parent and child, an employer and employee, a husband and wife, co-workers, friends or lovers — whatever our relationship may be, we know that if the relationship is good we are much more likely to give what the other person asks. But, when we know that the relationship is bad and the person is being selfish, we are likely to say “no”.

Lesson number four focuses on a major reason for unanswered prayer. It is the wrong motive of selfish pleasure. In other words, praying for selfish gain really turns God off. It makes God feel used. Of course, selfish pleasure is the main reason many people pray. Some religions teach that this is the right way to pray. They say we should seek health and wealth and ask God for lots of it. They say the only reason we are sick is because we don’t ask God to make us well, the only reason we aren’t rich is because we never claim the prosperity God has for us and the only reason we are unhappy is because we don’t trust God to make us happy.

The appeal is understandable but the teaching is contrary to the Bible, it borders on being cultic and it sets up vulnerable people for great disappointments.

William Barclay, the great British Bible scholar, wrote, “The ultimate choice in life is between pleasing oneself and pleasing God.” In other words, lives set on selfishness and pleasure are basically unchristian. Luke 8:14 talks about the gospel of Jesus Christ as seed and explains, “*The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.*”

It is easy to live for worries, riches and pleasures instead of for God. Personal experience tells me I have a tendency to always want everything my way. I pray for God to make everything the way I want it to be. I become consumed with my desires and try to use God to accomplish what I want. I can easily think of God as my servant to do what will make me happy instead of me be-

ing the servant to make God happy.

Contrast that to a prayer meeting during World War II. It was the night before the Battle of Tawara. Fifteen soldiers aboard a ship gathered in a circle to pray with Chaplain Wyeth Willard. The chaplain reported that all fifteen prayed pretty much the same prayer as they went around the circle. It went like this:

Lord, tomorrow we are going to storm the beaches of Tawara. Our officers have told us this is going to be a bloody battle. Many of our number will be killed. If this has to be, Lord, let those of us who are Christians be killed and spare those who do not yet believe so that they will have more time to make their decision for Christ. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Now there is a prayer with high motives! They were not asking God for their pleasure but for the good of others. Those are the motives that get the attention of God.

Please don't misunderstand. It is not that God doesn't want good for us; he does. He has evidenced that 10,000 times. He proved that with the costliest price of all, his Son. He delights in every good and perfect gift he can give us. But he is also unhappy when our prayers primarily seek more when he has given so generously to us already.

Rather, God wants us to pray with our hearts fixed on him and not ourselves. In Matthew 6 Jesus explains that those who build their treasures on earth will experience corruption and

decay while those who seek God, God's kingdom and God's ways will get everything else we eventually need.

So what should a person do whose prayers have gone unanswered because of wrong motives?

The place to begin is with God. Quit trying to use him and just start loving him. Ask him to be the center of your life. Start asking God what he wants instead of telling him what

you want. Ask him what you can do to make him happy rather than pointing out what he can do to make you happy.

There is a fascinating transformation that will take place. You will discover a level of satisfaction, contentment and pleasure in the God-centered life that having all your selfish desires could never bring.

When you pray, receive—because you ask with right motives in order to give great pleasure to God!

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