

Hindrances to Prayer

Psalm 66:18; I Peter 3:7

Over the course of my life I have enjoyed participating in a variety of sports. In High school it was cross country, track and basketball. I did play 1 year of baseball and in the summer played a year of fast-pitch softball. In college I ran intercollegiate cross country and track but also played intramural basketball and volleyball. After college I continued to run road races and play church softball and city league volleyball. Then the body just wore out.

While I have enjoyed watching a variety of sports, if I had to pick one that fascinates me the most, I would choose track and field. There is something about the different events from sprints, to relays to distance running along with the field events that gets my adrenaline, pardon the pun, running. Maybe it's because I enjoyed running so much. There is something about watching a well-run relay with smooth handoffs running at full speed. Or seeing a pole vaulter race down the runway, plant his pole in the box and see the arched bend in the pole that eventually vaults him upward and over a bar 20 feet high. My one attempt in a meet took me 9'6".

But if there is a single event that captivates me the most, it would have to be the steeple chase. It's essentially a 2-mile race on a track that includes hurdling 28 barriers. After the first lap, there are four barriers and one water jump per lap that the runner must hurdle over. The water jump has a hurdle immediately in front of a water pit. The trick is to time your leap so that your lead foot lands on top of the hurdle so you can push yourself as far past the water pit as possible. Sometimes it doesn't go quite as planned and the runner takes a nosedive into the water pit. The really good steeple chasers barely break stride going over each barrier.

It originated in Ireland and got its name when riders on horses raced around a course jumping fences, ditches and many other obstacles on the way to the Church's steeple as the finish line.

The author of Hebrews instructed readers to throw aside everything that easily besets us as we read in

the KJV, while the NIV tells us to throw off anything that hinders our progress in the Christian life. In other words, there are obstacles to our maturing as a believer we must put off to mature.

In the several weeks on our topic of prayer, I hope you have come to realize and believe that God answers prayer. **Otherwise, why pray? Why would He invite us to come boldly into His presence with our requests? Why would He taunt us with peace when we pray with thanksgiving to Him? Why would Jesus say that if we abide in Him and His Word abides in us, prayer would be answered if He wasn't going to or couldn't answer our prayers?**

So while we emphatically believe that God does answer prayer, Scripture reveals some barriers, some hindrances that are the very reason our prayers may go unanswered. It's my hope today that we can better assess our prayer lives to determine if any of these hindrances are the cause of our petitions remaining unanswered.

Now while I have two primary passages to consider, we will look at a number of hindrances to answered prayer. And if there is one overarching hindrance from which all the others stem it would be what we discover from **Psalm 66:18**. From this verse, we could look at it from two different points of view or, if you will, it is the same coin with two different sides. Let's call it a lack of repentance for sin.

I. A LACK OF REPENTANCE FOR SIN – Psalm 66:18

On the one hand, we could call it a love for sin. On the other hand, we could say it is unconfessed sin.

Sometimes the word **"if"** can be translated since or because, but that's not the case here. He's coming at this as a "what if" scenario. We know that to be the case by what he says in **verse 19 – "God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer."**

But his point in **verse 18** is well taken: **"If I regarded iniquity or if I had cherished sin in my life or my heart, the Lord would not hear me, would not have listened to me."**

That's why it's so important to heed what the psalmist would write when he invited God to be the spiritual surgeon who examines the heart in order to reveal any offensive or sinful way in him.

Psalm 139:23-24

Paul would essentially say the same thing when in the course of preparing one's heart for communion, he is exhorted to examine his heart before taking it.

I Corinthians 11:23-32

So the most obvious barrier to answered prayer is the presence of unconfessed sin in the heart of the one who is praying. Sin in the life of the believer that is not confessed becomes a barrier between the person praying and God so that He won't hear.

Isaiah 59:2 "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear."

The psalmist is saying that if we pray with unconfessed sin, our prayer is hypocritical. We are not being sincere with God. When he writes **"If I had regarded sin or cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened"** literally means He would not on any occasion hear us.

The word regard in this verse as we have already seen from the NIV means to cherish or love. It also means to recognize, be unwilling to confess and forsake the known sin in that person's life, to look forward to. It means that we are approving of what God has condemned. To put it another way, we willingly overlook it or cover it up. According to **Proverbs 28:13**, concealing sin is something that invites trouble. **"He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy."**

Charles Spurgeon writes this provoking thought about **Psalm 66:18**: **"If, having seen it to be there, I continue to gaze upon it without aversion...can I desire Him to accept me while I willfully cling to any evil way? Nothing hinders prayer like iniquity harbored in the heart...If you refuse to hear God's commands, He will surely refuse to hear you...For God to accept our devotions, while we are delighting in sin, would be to make Himself the**

God of hypocrites."

The psalmist is saying that if I have a bold unwillingness to confess my sin and forsake it, if I willingly harbor it, give it a home in my heart, if I love that sin and won't give it up, the Lord will not hear my prayer.

Proverbs 15:29 "The Lord is far from the wicked but He hears the prayer of the righteous."

Proverbs 28:9 "If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable."

John 9:31 "We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does His will."

If I see iniquity in my heart, if I indulge it and am unwilling to confess it or forsake it, I have cherished it in my heart and God won't hear me.

In their commentary on **Psalm 66:18**, Walvoord and Zuck state **"The point is clear: God's people, when in need, should purify their hearts and pray to Him. Then He will answer and not withhold His loyal love."**

If we are to have our prayers heard and answered, the call for repentance is clear. We cannot walk in sin (darkness), but must confess it to God who is ready to forgive.

I John 1:5-10

James 4:7-8 "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and He will come near to you. Wash (cleanse) your hands you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."

A lack of repentance can hinder our prayers, so can a lack of response to the Spirit.

II. A LACK OF RESPONSE TO THE SPIRIT

Galatians 5:16-17

This is when we choose to live after the flesh and not after the Spirit. We willfully choose to sin in utter disregard for God's Spirit leading us in doing what is right. It is disobedience.

Paul sees this struggle clearly and wonders aloud how he/we can overcome the pull of the flesh to do what is right and in the final analysis gives us the winning shot, if you will, to be victorious.

Romans 7:21-25

Frank Sinatra sang about this spirit of independence when he did things his way. He was the captain of his own fate, the master of his life. Proverbs tells us there is a way that seems right to a man but it ends in death. This person chooses to live by his rules, do his own thing, follow God in the non-essentials, but he decides how to live in everything else.

Choosing not to respond to the Spirit is a hindrance. Another is what we'll call a lack of right servitude. It's when we allow idols to occupy the heart.

III.A LACK OF RIGHT SERVITUDE

We allow other things to take the place of God on the throne of our heart. These idols are not carved out of wood or stone or precious metals or figures bejeweled with dazzling gems like diamonds and rubies and emeralds. Ezekiel writes about a different kind of idol.

Ezekiel 14:3 “Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of Me at all?”

If someone has an idol in the heart, why should God list to that person's request?

These idols are anything in our life that we put above God or that replace Him as first in our lives.

It could be our career.

It could be our possessions.

It could be our family relationships.

It could be our hobbies.

It could even be a ministry we are involved in.

Jesus said we can only serve one master. He condemned the church at Ephesus because they had left their first love (**Revelation 2:4**). We must ask ourselves if there is anything that replaces God as king of our heart. If we are not willing to give it up, then it is an idol and it will hinder your prayers. We can maintain an outward appearance of worshipping

God, do all the things we should do – sing, pray, read the Bible – but still have a heart that worships other things besides God. God says He is a jealous God and won't share His affection with anything or anyone else. We are told to love God with our whole being – heart, soul, mind, strength.

Now there is nothing wrong with having a career, owning things, establishing good family relationships, or even having hobbies, but when they take ownership of the heart, we are guilty of wrong servitude and we have idols of the heart.

One day Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a test. **Who was the real God? Was it Jehovah or was it Baal?** The people of Israel had been following a false god for too long.

I Kings 18:18-21

Verse 21 shows us where the heart of the people was at. **“The people said nothing.”** Theirs was an ambivalence, an indifference, an apathy toward God because their hearts favored idols.

So he set up a test. The rules are explained in **verses 22-24**. The prophets of Baal would get a bull and Elijah would get a bull. Both would prepare an altar, cut up the bull and place it on their respective altar as a sacrifice, but they couldn't set it on fire. They had to call on their god/God to set the sacrifice on fire. Elijah stated that the god/God who answered with fire would be God.

Notice that even at this point the people were still wavering: **“What you say is good.”**

Forging another god in their hearts had erased the command given by God to Moses: (**Exodus 20:2-6**) **“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing love to a**

thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

What place does God hold in your heart? If God is not first because you have erected something else above Him, He will not hear your prayers.

How about a lack of remitting sin?

IV. A LACK OF REMITTING SIN

Mark 11:25

Matthew 18:15

To put it another way, if we are unwilling to forgive someone, if we harbor resentment, bitterness, anger, and ill-will toward others – if we are unforgiving, our prayers won't go answered.

Ephesians 4:31-32

Colossians 3:8, 12-14

We are commanded to forgive others, just as God has forgiven us in Christ Jesus. When we refuse to forgive others, bitterness begins to take deep root and it chokes out our prayers. **How can we expect God to pour out answers to our prayers if we harbor resentment toward others?**

The need to forgive others is illustrated for us in **Matthew 18:21-35**. Right after Jesus spoke about going to someone for their sin against us in order to be reconciled, Peter asked Jesus how many times it was appropriate to forgive others when they sin against us. He put a number to it. Is seven times enough? Jesus then told a story. A king wanted to settle accounts with his servants. A man was brought in who owed more money than he could ever possibly pay back. The servant pleaded with the king to have mercy because he had a family. Out of pity for the servant the king forgave his debt.

Later in the day, just after having received mercy from the king, the servant ran into someone who owed him a few dollars. He demanded that it be paid back in full and when the man couldn't, the servant had the guy thrown in prison to pay it off. When the king heard about what had happened, he summoned his servant and condemned him telling him that he should have shown as much mercy on his fellow as had been shown to him.

The point Jesus was making is that no matter how many times we are wronged and no matter how big the offense, we need to forgive that many times and in the same way. There is no limit to the number of times we forgive. We owe a debt to God that is beyond measure, one we are incapable of ever paying on our own and He forgave it through Christ's atoning work on the cross. His expectation then is for us to forgive others just as we have been forgiven. Refusing to do so, hinders our prayers.

Give some thought this week to your relationships and make sure you have forgiven others when they have wronged you.

A spouse who has hurt you.

An ex-spouse who left you.

A boss or co-worker who gave a false report about you.

A neighbor who spread rumors about you.

The list of offenses can be long. **Are we forgiving?**

We can only forgive through the grace of God. If we won't, prayer will be hindered.

How about a lack of resoluteness for supplications?

V. A LACK OF RESOLUTENESS FOR SUPPLICATIONS

By that I mean, we give up praying about something. We give up either because we don't think God will answer or we don't know if God heard. This can also include doubting God.

God has invited us to come boldly to Him with our requests. That doesn't mean arrogantly coming to Him or even with an entitlement attitude where we think we deserve something. Because we are in a new relationship with God as His children, we can bring our requests to Him as a child would ask his father. But that doesn't mean He will automatically grant us what we ask. **Is it His will? Is it for our good? Is it for His glory?**

Praying without doubt means praying with the belief in and understanding of God's character, His nature, and His motives. We are told in **Hebrews 11:6** that we must believe God exists and that He rewards those who seek Him with such faith. If we

doubt His character and purpose when we pray to Him, it's like we are insulting Him. We must believe that if it's His will for us, He not only has the power to answer that need, but that He has a specific purpose for us through that need either to give it to us or to withhold it from us if it is not His will or in our best interest. Remember that God always has in mind what's best for us.

James 1:5-8 “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.”

In our first message on prayer, we considered from **Luke 18:1** that we are to always pray and not faint, not give up, keep at it. As Jesus returned from His own prayer vigil in the garden the night of His betrayal, He found His three disciples fast asleep. He asked them why they couldn't keep watch and pray with Him for just one hour (**Matthew 26:40**). **Does He ask us the same question? Do we lack resoluteness in prayer? How committed are we at praying for the items that are on our prayer list?** Again, God rewards those who diligently seek Him, and I believe that includes seeking Him in prayer. It implies effort and effort includes time and we are told to keep at it till an answer comes from the Lord. Don't be guilty of having a lack of resoluteness for supplications. Continue in a spirit of prayer as Paul reminds us to pray without ceasing in his letter to the Thessalonians (**I Thess. 5:17**).

How about a lack of right scope?

VI. A LACK OF RIGHT SCOPE

In other words, we ask with the wrong intentions, the wrong motives.

James 4:3

Praying amiss or with the wrong motives really boils down to selfishness in what we ask for. We would rather ask God for what we want than

practice **Philippians 2:3-4** by putting the needs of others before us as we ask for things on their behalf. **If our prayers were somehow transparent for everyone to see, what would it reveal? How much of what we pray for is about us vs. about others?**

We could include with this a lack of response for the poverty-stricken.

Proverbs 21:13 “If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.”

Both the Old and New Testament exhort us to help the orphans and widows, to look out for the needy. We do a great job with our gifts at Christmas with packing shoe boxes to go to the less fortunate. We give to help abused women and children at Easter by making gift baskets for LACASA. We are doing a drive this month for the Pregnancy Help Center.

As I have talked with school officials here in Hartland in the past, there is a growing population of homeless people in the county. Carriage Town Ministries isn't too far a drive to serve meals or assist in other ways. COVID has left many families destitute because of an inability to work. **How can we help? What can we do?**

A lack of right scope can hinder prayer, not only in what we pray for, but why we pray for it.

Then there is a lack of regard for Scripture.

VII. A LACK OF REGARD FOR SCRIPTURE –

Proverbs 28:9

Zechariah 7:11-13

God has given us clear guidelines in Scripture that we are to obey. If we refuse to heed God's Word, our prayers are loathsome to the Lord. Instead of prayers offered as a sweet aroma, they are an odious stench to Him. We wouldn't think of going to the local landfill to rummage through the trash picking out scraps of food to feed a guest. It is no different to God when we attempt to pray all the while ignoring the clear instructions in His Word.

In our next series, we will consider the importance

of God's Word in the life of the believer. We need to believe all of it is the Word of God, not just some of it and that it should be obeyed. When we reject the authority of God's Word how can we say we know Him or obey Him? **How can we expect an answer to prayer when we ignore the authority of God's Word from cover to cover?** For God to answer prayer, have a regard for Scripture – obey it.

I end with one final barrier to answered prayer and it hits close to home.

VIII. A LACK OF RESPECT FOR ONE'S SPOUSE – I Peter 3:7

This is specific to husbands. **Are you treating your wife with respect? Are you creating an environment of unity and harmony in the home or are you sowing discord?**

One author writes “where there is a serious conflict in family relationships and the head of the household is not demonstrating the attitudes Peter mentions, the husband's prayer communication with God is hindered.”

But he continues with a caution to wives as well.

“Likewise, wives are to follow the biblical principles of submission to their husbands headship if their own prayers are not to be hindered **(Ephesians 5:22-24).**”

Husbands, are we considerate of our wives? The idea Peter conveys here is one of understanding our wives. **Do we know her needs, her gifts, her desires, her abilities and then do we act on that understanding?**

Now let's be clear that Peter is not saying the woman is weaker in a spiritual, or intellectual, or even a moral sense. He is speaking of physical weakness where generally the man is stronger than the woman. There are exceptions. I know a couple where the husband was content to be inside baking cookies and making dinner while his wife was outside changing the muffler or brakes on the car. She wasn't usurping his role of headship as designed by God, that's just how they were wired.

I like how Warren Wiersbe describes it: The husband is the thermostat setting the emotional and spiritual temperature in the home. The wife is the thermometer letting him know what the temperature is in the home so he can make the right adjustments.

Being considerate of your wife means you will protect, honor, and help her. You will respect her opinions, listen to her advice, be considerate of her needs and relate to her both privately and publicly with love, courtesy, insight and tact. You don't demean her in public or belittle her in private.

Love can't exist and neither can prayers be answered where honor and respect are absent. Those prayers will be hindered. The word was used to describe a road broken up to impede someone. If an invading army was marching against another city, that city would break up its roads making it difficult for the approaching army to advance.

Husbands, don't just listen to her words, listen to her heart. Let me ask you husbands: are you praying for your wife and then do you pray with your wife? I'm not talking about praying at meals, I mean spending time knitted together in prayer.

This passage reminds us that we are joint heirs meaning that when it comes to the promises of God, they are on equal ground with us. Paul reminds us that we are to love our wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her. The warning from Peter is clear. When we don't treat our spouse with respect, our prayers will be hindered.

I close with this thought. While this is specific to husbands, I think there is application for each of us in how we treat others. **Do we treat them with evidence of the fruit of the Spirit developing in us?**

There all kinds of obstacles that can keep prayer from being answered. We would do well to take inventory and see if any of these are the reason our prayers may not be answered. It's our responsibility to hurdle the barriers to prayer as swiftly as we can so that our prayers aren't hindered.