

LESSON 7

GETTING ANSWERS TO PRAYER

IN THIS LESSON

Learning: What must I do to get an answer from God?

Growing: Why doesn't God answer "yes" more often?

Many people think the only answered prayers are those that God answers with a yes. However, as we discussed in an earlier lesson, God sometimes answers us with no and wait. God's answers are always for our good, and they inevitably call us to grow in our faith and to walk more closely with Christ. Nevertheless, we want God to say yes in answer to our petitions.

We must recognize at the outset that God does not answer our prayers on the basis of our self-worth or our accomplishments. In other words, we cannot earn a yes answer from God. His answers are not granted on the basis of our being good in our own human nature. Rather, God's basis for answering our prayer is His love. If we ever doubt this, we need only to look to the cross. God sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins so that we might be restored to Him in loving fellowship and live with Him forever in heaven (see John 3:16).

God gives His children the desires of their hearts—if those desires are within the parameters of His will. If we delight in the things of God, we will desire to do God's will. God will quickly give us our desires because they are His own for our lives. When we ask something of God, He says yes to us if it will build us up, lead us to eternal life, and helps us to be more fruitful witnesses for Him on earth. He knows what is best for us. He will only give what is useful and beneficial for us and for those with whom we have a relationship.

Many people unfortunately think that God wants them to live in poverty. They deny their needs and shun possessions in an effort to increase their faith. The fact is, God delights in providing us what we need. We are to receive God's blessings with a spirit of gratitude. We may enjoy possessions, but we do not place our trust in them. Our loving heavenly Father does not want us to live with great areas of need in our lives. That brings no glory to Him.

At the other extreme are people who think that God should give them everything that they want at the snap of their fingers. The reality is that there are certain things that God does not grant to us for our good. If He granted all of our requests, we could easily become greedy and lose sight of His call for us to help others who are in need.

God balances His giving to us. He desires we walk in close relationship with Him, trusting Him to meet our needs and equip us in every area of our lives to do the work that He is calling us to do.

A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

In the Bible, God outlines five prerequisites for receiving yes answers to our prayers. The first prerequisite is a right relationship with Him. God wants us to live in fellowship with Him and others. Of course, at times we slip and cause our relationships with Him and others to be strained. We are human beings, and we have a great capacity to fail. God knows this.

He does not look at our track record nearly as much as He looks at our motivation. Is our aim and our desire to love and serve Him? If so, God will correct us and continue to hear our prayers and answer them with yes. Those who have a heart for God often fail and pick themselves up and try again, and fail and pick themselves up and try again. All the while, God knows they are desiring to move ever closer to Him and to serve Him to the best of their ability. Such people receive many yes answers to their prayers.

If our aim, however, is to continue willfully in sin and to ignore God's attempts at correcting us, then God is under no obligation to hear and answer us. We are choosing to pursue our own self-interests, which God knows inevitably will lead to our downfall. God will not contribute to anything that will be negative to our spiritual growth or cause pain to others.

1. "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the LORD will not hear. But certainly God has heard me; He has attended to the voice of my prayer" (Psalm 66:18–19). What do you think it means to "regard iniquity" in your heart? Why does God not hear your prayers in that condition?

2. What is the solution to this situation (see 1 John 1:9)?

A RIGHT METHOD

A second prerequisite to receiving a yes answer from God is a right method. God does not give us a universal formula for making our petitions, but He does ask us to be definite and specific in our prayers. He also tells us to ask with thanksgiving and with faith. Some people pray, “God, please bless the nation, bless the church, and bless my family.” But what do they mean? How do they define blessing? Nobody would say to a waitress in a restaurant, “I want food and drink.” When we order in a restaurant, we make a specific request.

I know people who say, “Well, God can read my mind and my heart. He knows what I want.” My response to them is, “If you have a blank mind, what is God reading?” In the Bible, we read the story of an encounter between Jesus and a blind man named Bartimaeus. “When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ ” (Mark 10:47). Jesus responded by asking, “What do you want Me to do for you?” (verse 51). Jesus asks the same question of us.

We are also to pray with thanksgiving. Our praise and thanksgiving to God are direct reflections of our faith—we are saying to God, “Lord, I know that You are working all things together for my good and You will grant me only what is for my eternal benefit. I thank You for giving me what I need, when I need it, and in the proper way. I am voicing my desires for what I believe is best for me, but I thank You for granting what You know to be the best for me.”

3. “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6). Why does Paul say we should make our requests “with thanksgiving”? What are we to be thankful for?

4. What does anxiety have to do with prayer? Why are we commanded not to be anxious—how is our will involved in anxiety?

A RIGHT REQUEST

A third prerequisite to receiving a yes answer from God is a right request. If we desire to receive a yes answer from God, the request we make must be according to His will (see 1 John 5:14). God has a plan and a purpose for our lives. He sees precisely what will be involved and required for that purpose to be fulfilled—today, tomorrow, next year, and on down the path. He will not grant us a petition that causes us to stray from that plan.

Jesus, on the night before His crucifixion, prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39). Jesus did not want to stray even one degree from God’s perfect plan for His life. His prayer must become our prayer, for then—and only then—can we be assured of continual yes answers from the Lord.

God’s plan for us includes His perfect timing. Some things may be right for us . . . but not right now. When we pray, “Your will, not mine,” we must be aware we are also praying, “Your timing, not mine.”

5. “[He] prayed, saying, ‘O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will’ (Matthew 26: 39). What were Jesus’ desires in this passage? How important were these things to Him?

6. What desire was greatest in His mind? What price was He willing to pay to attain that goal?

A RIGHT FRAMEWORK

A fourth prerequisite to receiving a yes answer from God is a right framework. There is no formula for prayer, but there is a framework. Our prayers are to be voiced in the name of Jesus.

Many people close all of their prayers with the phrase, “in the name of Jesus, amen.” Some do this as if this phrase is a magic tag to get what they want. Nothing could be farther from the truth of God. Others take God’s promises regarding the name of Jesus to mean they can ask for anything they want and then seal it with the name of Jesus to ensure they get it. They look for a particular promise in the Bible and then claim it “in the name of Jesus” for themselves. They are asking amiss. The emphasis must always be on abiding fully in the name of Jesus and not on the request that we make.

To pray in the name of Jesus means to pray as if Jesus Himself were voicing the prayer. To be “in His name” is to have His identity so buried in our own that we are totally covered with Christ. To any observer in the heavenly realm, we are operating as if Christ Himself were acting or speaking. What we ask in Jesus’ name must be completely in character with what Jesus would ask if He were walking in our shoes. What would Jesus need? What would Jesus desire?

These are the things that we are to request in Jesus’ name. When we do, we are in the proper position to receive a yes answer from God.

7. “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you” (John 15:16). What sort of “fruit” does God want you to bear? How will such fruit “remain”?

8. In what way is fruit-bearing a prerequisite for answered prayers? In what way is answered prayer not a result of good works?

A RIGHT ATTITUDE

A fifth and final prerequisite to receiving a yes answer from God is a right attitude. We are always to make our petitions without doubt. Our attitude must be one of faith. As James writes, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind” (James 1:5–6). Many people ask God for things, but the tone of their voice conveys, “Oh, but I’m not worthy of this.” Perhaps they are attempting to be humble, but if so, they are displaying a false humility. God calls us to make our petitions boldly, in faith, and without doubt. We base our faith on the fact that God wants only what is best for us. So, if we ask for what God desires for us, we must ask as if we are already in the process of receiving it.

You may say, “But what if I am asking for the wrong thing?” The Lord will show you if you are asking for something in error. You are not omniscient—and God doesn’t expect you to be. What He does expect of you is that you exercise faith and keep an open heart for Him to guide you into the precision of perfection that He desires for you.

If you come to Him with that attitude, He will grant you many yes answers, and He will lead you to ask only for those things that He can answer with a yes.

9. “Let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind” (James 1:6). Picture a wind-tossed wave in your mind. How is that a picture of someone asking for wisdom without faith?

10. When have you asked God for wisdom in a difficult situation? What was the result?

ALL FOR GOD'S GLORY

When we voice our prayers out of a right relationship with God and in a specific and thankful way, we can be assured that we are praying in Jesus' name and that our requests will be in keeping with God's will. Each of the five prerequisites to yes answers works together with all of the others. For example, a right attitude flows from a right relationship. A right request is best voiced with the right method. The right framework is directly linked to a right relationship.

The reason God says yes to our prayers is so we might find fulfillment and joy and so that He might be glorified. Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). When nonbelievers see us living in right relationship with God and the Lord answering our prayers, they are drawn to Him. They desire to know Him as their Lord. God wants to say yes to you when you pray.

TODAY AND TOMORROW

Today: God wants to say yes to my prayer requests because He wants me to be like Jesus.

Tomorrow: I will ask the Lord to teach me how to pray in His will this week.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, thank You for giving Your children the desires of their hearts—when those desires fall within the parameters of Your will. Teach us today to take delight in the things in which you take delight. We want our purposes and our motivations to line up with Your will and to be fruitful for Your kingdom. We want to stand in right relationship with You. We want to employ the right method, make the right requests, and have the right framework and attitude in our prayers. Reveal to us any areas in our lives that are lacking—areas where we are not seeing prayers answered because our requests do not line up with Your perfect purposes.

NOTES AND PRAYER REQUESTS

Use this space to write any key points, questions, or prayer requests from this week's study.