

# Prayer and Forgiveness

By David Phillips

Many people desire the forgiveness of their sins, but few understand the role that prayer plays in that process. In a world full of quick-fixes, many have come to view prayer as a quick-fix for their sins. After we sin we pray to God and then go on our merry way without giving it a second thought; no reflection, no sorrow, no remorse for sin's dreadful effects. As a result, though we pray much, we never truly overcome our sins. The fact of the matter is, we can pray to God all we want, but if our hearts are not in it, then our prayers are useless.

In the Scriptures, God teaches us about the kind of attitude required of those who desire His forgiveness. *"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart -- These, O God, You will not despise"* (Ps. 51:17). He shows us that prayer is not a quick-fix. Rather, it is an essential part of a life-long process. The purpose of this lesson is to show the role that prayer must play in the lives of those who are actively fighting the battle between sin and righteousness. As we will discuss, prayer must be a constant companion in every step of our struggle to overcome sin.

## Prayer and Knowledge

The psalmist teaches us to pray for God to examine us and to teach us (Ps. 94:12; 119:2, 5, 10, 12). We must be willing to turn to God for guidance and to be instructed by Him. Our prayers for these things must be accompanied by action. If we pray for knowledge and understanding, we must be willing to pursue that knowledge from the word of God. We must be willing to *ask* AND to *seek*: *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find..."* (Matt. 7:7). *"Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You"* (Ps. 119:11). If we never learn what God wants, how can we change? If we truly desire to be forgiven, then we must seek the knowledge necessary to overcome sin.

Even as we learn more about God, we must continue to pray for wisdom. Knowledge is useless without the wisdom to apply it. By having the wisdom to apply the Scriptures to our lives we can better use the tools God has provided therein to overcome sin. *"For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the **knowledge** of His will in **all wisdom** and spiritual understanding"* (Col. 1:9).

## Prayer and Humility

Because of pride, many people seek to avoid the heartache and sorrow that comes as a result of sin. Many who are full of pride either refuse to acknowledge their sins or acknowledge them in such a way so as to "save face" as much as possible. Jesus teaches that if we truly desire the forgiveness of our sins then we will learn to humble ourselves before God. *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth"* (Matt. 5:3-5). *"Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up"* (James 4:7-10). Sorrow is essential for overcoming sin. Only when we have the humility to allow ourselves to experience godly sorrow will we truly be successful. *"Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better"* (Eccl. 7:3). *"For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted"* (2 Cor. 7:10).

By repenting we acknowledge the evil nature of our sins and turn our hearts to pursue the righteousness of God. In essence, we make a commitment to God and to ourselves wherein we determine to no longer walk

practice that of which we are repenting. As Job made a covenant with his eyes to not look upon a young woman (Job 31:1), we must make a covenant with our bodies to cast off the works of darkness (Rom. 13:12).

Through prayer we express our combined godly sorrow and repentance to God. We must do as David did when confronted with his sins, *“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness...blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me...”* (Ps. 51:1-4). Through every step in overcoming sin, prayer is both necessary and helpful. We need the Lord’s guidance and His strength. As we repent we ask God for forgiveness, and with that request we also acknowledge our dependence upon Him. Our repentance must be as that described in Ezek. 18:30-31, *“...get yourself a new heart and a new spirit.”*

### **Prayer and Determination**

Determination is what causes us to carry out the commitment that we make when we repent. Overcoming sin is difficult, especially when it has been a part of our lives for many years. Sin is like an invasive weed that takes root and does not want to let go. Sometimes, it takes several attempts to remove every part of it. Without determination we will never be able to overcome it. The life of the apostles Paul provides an example of the determination that we need to have. He was transformed from a zealous Jew to a devout apostle of Christ, preaching the very name that he once persecuted. Through Christ we can overcome even the most stubborn sins if we are determined to do it. *“No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it”* (1 Cor. 10:13).

We must combine constant prayer with our determination. We need the Lord’s guidance so that our zeal and determination do not become misplaced. We must pray for endurance as well. Determine is helpful only if it is constant. Through prayer God can help us to learn patience and endurance (James 1:5).

### **Prayer and Transformation**

With time, as we continue in our efforts to overcome sin, we will see transformation taking place. *“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God”* (Rom. 12:1). Our goal must be to not sin at all. *“My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin”* (1 John 2:1a). Yet, because we live in the flesh, we may sin from time to time in spite of our efforts. But we must not become discouraged. *“And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world”* (1 John 2:1-2). Because Jesus understands our weaknesses He is able to be compassionate toward us so that *if* we sin we know that He is willing to forgive us. But, for this to be true, our efforts must be focused on overcoming and avoid sin. We must be steadfast in our prayers, not only praying for forgiveness, but for guidance, for wisdom, for instruction, and for endurance. Prayer must be our constant companion in this transformation—a process that will last the rest of our earthly lives.

### **Conclusion**

As we consider the relationship between prayer and forgiveness, let us avoid the quick-fix mentality and use prayer the way God intended. Sin must not be taken lightly, and neither should our need to be forgiven. Jesus endured the cross so that we, through Him, might have the strength to overcome the world (Rev. 3:21). Through faithful prayer, let us use that gift so that we may experience the joy of forgiveness.

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