

The Prayer-Obedience Relationship

by W. Bingham Hunter, Ph.D.

Vice President and Academic Dean, Phoenix Seminary

Jesus taught that obedience and answered prayer are related: “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you” (John 15:7, NASB). “Abiding in Christ” is sometimes explained in esoteric terms. But abiding is not mystical. It’s primarily volitional: a matter of morality and ethics. Abiding is explained in 1 John 3:24: “The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him” (NASB). Hence, the Apostle says: “we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.” (1 John 3:21-22).¹

Anyone observing a spoiled child understands that a truly loving Father is not likely to encourage disobedience in His children by answering prayer—as if He felt, “My commandments aren’t all that important anyway. It really doesn’t matter whether you take Me seriously.” Because He knows what is best for them, God may often say, “No,” to the plea of the selfish and rebellious. But what exactly is the relationship between obedient Christian behavior and our Heavenly Father’s positive response to our prayers? Specifically, why does scripture say we receive *because* we obey?

An idea appealing to many is that prayer operates in such a way that one pays or qualifies for answers with a currency called good deeds. Such a “this-for-that” arrangement makes God, prayer, and obedience into a mechanism—a “system” that can be operated (read: manipulated) by the petitioner. God becomes a divine vending machine, into which we must place so many units of obedience before pulling the lever (through prayer) that causes answers to drop into our hands. This conception of prayer is both widespread and wrong. God’s creatures can *never* place Him under obligation. Paul, quoting Job, asks: “Who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again?”

(Romans 11:35, NASB). The clay simply cannot control the hand of the Potter who “works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Ephesians 1:11). 1 John 5:14 takes us to the bottom line: “If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.” Contrary to much popular Christian writing, teaching and thinking: Prayer is *not* the way we get God to give us what we want.² *Prayer is a means God uses to give us what He knows we need.* The passion of Christians who want to be more effective in prayer must therefore be learning how to pray according to God’s will.



Bing Hunter

The Relationship Between Obedience and Praying According to God’s Will

One of the least known insights about Christian prayer is the relationship God established between His children’s obedience and His answers to their prayers. The link between obedience and answered prayer is explained by the Lord Jesus in John 14-16. The living heart of it is found in 14:21, 22:

Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him. If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (NIV)

Obedience to Jesus’ commandments facilitates fellowship with our Savior and God the Father (cf. Revelation 3:20). In the hearts of obedient believers, Jesus and the Father make their “home” through the Holy

Spirit: “This is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us” (1 John 3:24, NIV). In the believer who is not “grieving” Him through disobedience, the Spirit works to “show” (or “disclose,” NASB) Jesus. Our Lord used several other verbs to refer to this activity: the Spirit will “teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (14:26); “bear witness about me” (15:26); and “guide you into all the truth” (16:13). That this refers to growth in our understanding of the Father, as well as Jesus, is clear from 16:14-15:

He [the Spirit] will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you. (NIV)

In other words: our obedience is a concrete expression of love which pleases God and creates in us an environment where the Spirit works to encourage growth in the quality of our fellowship with, and depth of understanding of, the Lord Jesus and His Father. As we come to know them better, we also grow in comprehending how God thinks about the issues of life. It becomes increasingly more natural to see the world through God’s eyes. As we live according to God’s will, we learn to think about and see existence in terms of God’s will, and this enables us to pray according to His will more frequently.

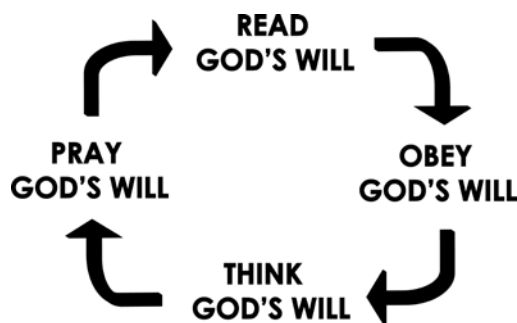
We are positively conditioned, as we express love to God by obeying His commands in Scripture, to internalize biblical thinking and behavior principles that please God and are best for us. Over time, the Spirit develops our facility to make God-honoring decisions in situations the Bible does not directly address. Similar conditioning takes place as parents instill moral values in children. According to Proverbs 22:6, parents who love their children will train them in the way they should go—that is, educate and discipline them to think biblically about right and wrong—so that when they are mature, they are able to make decisions that please God. The Prayer-Obedience relationship can be sketched as in the diagram on this page. (A detailed diagram appears at the end of the article.)

At this point, several comments are necessary: First, this cycle interacts with other aspects of your

Christian experience. There are a number of spiritual processes going on in each of us. These often interact (positively and negatively) with those of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Second, the prayer-obedience relationship describes a way of life, not a system one “works” to get things from God. Third, you must think about this process in a *personal*, not a mechanical context. God is *Abba*, whom we love, not an appliance we use. Fourth, so-called “prayer warriors” are usually formed over many years. Developing the mind of Christ—thinking (and praying) His thoughts after Him—takes time as well as discipline. Fifth, the process will go on your entire life. You will never reach a threshold after which *all* your prayers are answered as you wish. The godliest Christian mind will not attain omniscience. Sixth, your progress may differ significantly in comparison with other believers: suffering and persecution seem to accelerate the process. Keeping these realities in mind, you can reasonably expect the Holy Spirit’s work through your obedience to God’s Word to increase your prayer effectiveness as you mature in Christ.

In a brief essay entitled, “Petitionary Prayer: A Problem Without an Answer,” C.S. Lewis claimed the New Testament describes two types of prayer—which cannot be reconciled: (A) a form which submits to the will of God (“Thy will be done”); and (B) a form which asks, on the ground of the petitioner’s unwavering faith, whatever the petitioner wills.³ He sees

the A-pattern as submissive and doubtful and the B-pattern as assertive and confident. The former Lewis associates with “the very weakest,” and the latter with those who seek miracles. He concludes the essay with: “I come to you, reverend Fathers, for guidance. How am I to pray this very night?” It seems to me, Lewis’ struggle is grounded in an apparent conflict between 1 John 5:14, “if we ask anything according to his will he hears us,” and 3:22, “whatever we ask we receive from him.” What He wants or what I want? God’s will or my will? The way out of Lewis’ dilemma is the last clause of 3:22, “whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.” It is through sustained obedience to Christ’s commands that—no matter how great or small our faith—we are spiritually conditioned by the Spirit to think God’s thoughts and hence, more frequently pray according to His will. As we internalize God’s will



by reading, meditation, and study of Scripture and systematically reinforce its truth through obedience, my will becomes progressively conformed to His. As I diligently seek to be his obedient disciple, His will increasingly becomes my will.

The Prayer-Obedience Relationship Throughout Scripture

Scripture assumes this process in much of its prayer teaching. Psalm 37:4 is an example: “Delight yourself in the Lord; and he will give you the desires of your heart.” David takes it as a given that those who truly “delight” in our Lord will also hide His Word in their hearts, meditate on it, and earnestly follow His statutes (see Psalm 119:11, 14-15). Sustained “delight in the Lord” changes the desires of our hearts to God’s desires. This is why James 5:16 says: “The prayer of a righteous person has great power”—because such a believer has been trained by sustained reflection on, and the obedient pursuit of, God’s will, to comprehend life from God’s perspective. (Hungering and thirsting after righteousness leads to the sort of purity in thinking, motive, and behavior that enables a believer to see God and His world rightly—in ways consistent with spiritual reality.) The word “righteous” in James 5:16 does not imply unique spiritual clout. “Righteous” is an adjective describing one whose head, heart, and behavior are fully committed to God. Such persons often pray in tune with His will. The Bible regards “powerful” prayer as a natural spiritual consequence of “delighting” in God’s will in all of life.⁴

Conclusion: Let Scripture Shape Your Mind, Life, and Prayers

God has not left it all up to you. Our Heavenly Father is gracious beyond measure. Through the intercession of Jesus, the Holy Spirit and other believers, He provides what we need—even when we pray in error or ignorance of His will. So whether you’re a recent convert to Christ, or have known Him for years, there is much to anticipate as you grow spiritually. And if you wish—as we all do—to become personally “powerful and effective” in prayer, to more frequently experience the joy of having our Lord give you the “desires of your heart,” then *you must become committed to reading, memorizing, meditating on, and obeying the written will of God in the Bible*. There are no short cuts, no seminars, no amazing prayer-power techniques, nor any “secrets” which bypass this reality. The path to spiritual maturity—to answered prayer—is the way of obedience.

The emphasis above on obedience points to several uncomfortable conclusions: (1) *Prayer is not a labor-saving device*. God acts in response to prayer when the situation is beyond solution by those who are praying: God acts when He perceives help is actually needed. God will not do for us, in answer to prayer, what He has equipped His children to do for themselves. There is a time to pray and there is a time to act. (2) *We are unlikely to pray better than our commitment to obey*. There is no shortcut to effective prayer that bypasses basic Christian discipleship. (3) *Those who want to be more effective in prayer must think very hard about the implications of Luke 6:46: “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?”* Unless we respond to this verse before we pray, we may well receive it as the answer to our petitions.

The underlying spiritual principle is found in John 9:31: “We know that God does not hear sinners [because they neither respect, understand, nor pray according to His will]; but if any one is God-fearing, and does His will [who has been trained through their reverent obedience to understand God’s will and pray according to it]; He hears him” (NASB). The same truth is found in Romans 12:1-2: pleasing God in how we live is directly linked to the Spirit’s renewal of our minds, which, in turn, is essential to accurate perception of God’s will.⁵

Make a commitment to live more like Jesus, and God will teach you to pray more like Jesus. Our Savior said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me” (John 11:41-42). He had such effectiveness in prayer because in His humanity, *He was totally committed to obedience*: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me” (John 4:34; cf. Hebrews 10:7), and “I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 5:30). Through the prayer-obedience relationship, the Spirit of Christ will increase your understanding of the mind of Christ: He will help you learn to pray more frequently as Jesus always did: according to the will of our Father who is in Heaven.

Notes

1. Unless marked otherwise, Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, copyright ©2000, 2001 by Crossway Books, a division of Good News Publishers. Other translations cited: *New American Standard Bible (NASB), Updated Edition*, copyright ©1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by the Lockman Foundation; and *The Holy Bible: New International Version (NIV)*, ©1973, 1978, 1984 by the New York International Bible Society.

2. Prayer promises using words like, “whatever you ask” or “anything you ask,” are either found in, or logically linked to, biblical contexts from which they *cannot* be removed. These contexts are invariably detailed statements of the moral and ethical characteristics describing an obedient disciple of Christ. The “ask, seek, knock” prayer promises of Matthew 7:7-11, for example, are made to those disciples of Jesus who “hunger and thirst after righteousness,” who both “teach and obey God’s commandments,” who see God as their “Treasure in heaven” and who serve Him as “Master” in every aspect of their lives. The petition: “we want you to do for us whatever we ask” (Mark 10:35), is an expression of selfishness and ignorance.

3. C.S. Lewis, “Petitionary Prayer: A Problem without a Solution,” in W. Hooper, ed., *Christian Reflections*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1967, pp. 142-51.

4. The goal of Christian prayer is the glorification of God through Christ (John 14:14) in the accomplishment of His will and growth in our understanding of and relationship with God (James 4:8).

5. The NIV translators rightly make it clear the last clause of Romans 12:2, “Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will,” is the *result* or consequence of the actions directed in 12:1-2. See on this: James H. Moulton and Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek: Syntax*, Vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), p. 143.

W. Bingham Hunter is the author of *The God Who Hears and Praying When Life Hurts*. He joined Phoenix Seminary after six years of pastoral ministry, having served 24 years as Professor and Academic Dean of Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

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8001 Braddock Road, Suite 300 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
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