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The Motive Needed for Answered Prayer

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One of the most important yet neglected principles on answered prayer is taught by Jesus in John 14:13. We read: “And I will do whatever you ask in My name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.”

I do not claim that this is *the key* to answered prayer. We should be careful when we hear someone talk about *the key* to anything in the spiritual life. Occasionally there is validity in saying that something is the key to a spiritual matter, but that is not so with answered prayer. There is not one key to answered prayer, but several. For instance, the Bible emphasizes the importance of faith, obedience, confession of sin, gratitude, praise, unity in the home, and several other things in relation to answered prayer.

We must not fall into the common trap, however, of trying to juggle all these things into the right “formula” for answered prayer. The result is to approach prayer like the people who pick numbers for the state lottery: Pick the right elements of prayer and put them in the right order, then bingo! You’ve hit the jackpot! Your prayer is answered! A kind of “spiritual lotto.” Many try this approach every day, either staying with the same combination, hoping that eventually they will be a winner, or changing things around, trying to find the formula that works. The problem is that there is a general feeling with this method that prayers are answered about as often as an individual gambler wins the lottery.

What this article declares is not another part of prayer to juggle. Nor does it propose another possibility to try as part of a new combination. Instead it teaches a new attitude about prayer as a whole. This article deals specifically with the *motive* needed for answered prayer.

Why is it important to know the biblical motive for prayer? Because it is possible to do everything we normally think of as the “right things” for prayer and still not have our prayers answered, simply because we have the wrong

motive. Yet, if we have the right motive, most of the other things will take care of themselves, and we will see more answered prayer than ever before. Not only that, the right motive for prayer will give us more peace and rest in acceptance of what we call unanswered prayer than we have ever had before.

If we see this truth for what it is, we will pray differently from before. Even if we pray about the same things in the same way, we will have a completely different attitude about prayer. Among other passages, this principle about prayer is based on John 14:13 where Jesus said, “And I will do whatever you ask in My name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.” Concisely put, the principle of prayer from this verse relating to our motive for answered prayer is this: *The motive for our every prayer should be concern for the glory of God.*

That may not have sounded as revolutionary as you expected, but that's good. If no one had ever heard it before, one would have good reason to be suspicious. This is a truth, though, that has often been neglected, and that to our loss. However, it has not been that way with the great men and women of prayer.

One of the classic popular books on prayer is Andrew Murray's *With Christ in the School of Prayer*. Writing on John 14:13 he says,

That the Father may be glorified in the Son: it is to this end that Jesus on His throne in glory will do all we ask in His Name. Every answer to prayer He gives will have this as its object; when there is no prospect of this object being obtained, He will not answer. It follows as a matter of course that this must be with us, as with Jesus, the essential element in our petitions: the glory of the Father must be our aim and end, the very soul and life of our prayer.¹

The motive for our every prayer should be concern for the glory of God.

Did you notice how Murray said, “This must be with us, *as with Jesus*, the essential element in our petitions.”? That is where we should start.

The Motive of Jesus' Life Was His Concern for the Glory of God

If Jesus' great motivation in life was His concern for the glory of God, that should be our motive, too, especially in our prayers.

Notice these passages which show us just how important the glory of God really was to Jesus.

1. We see it illustrated in His own relationship with the Father.

John 12:27-28. Here is Jesus in His last words before the public prior to His crucifixion. Notice what He says as He realizes the significance of the hour: “Now My heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, *glorify Your name!*” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again” (italics mine).

John 13:31-32. This is right after Jesus and His disciples have finished taking the supper together, and Judas has left to go to the chief priests and Pharisees to betray Him. “When he was gone, Jesus said, ‘Now is the Son of Man glorified and *God is glorified* in Him. If *God is glorified* in Him, God will glorify the Son in Himself, and will glorify Him at once’” (italics mine).

This is not material easily followed, but the point clearly seen is that Jesus' concern here was the glory of the Father.

John 17:1. This is a little later, perhaps less than an hour later the same night. It is only a few minutes before Judas and the leaders of the Jews will come to arrest Jesus. This is what is known as the great High Priestly Prayer of Jesus.

Somewhere between the last supper and His arrest a short while later, the disciples hear Jesus pray this prayer. Knowing that His arrest, torture, and death are only minutes away, notice what Jesus' concern was: "After Jesus said this, He looked toward heaven and prayed: 'Father, the time has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son may glorify you'" (italics mine).

The motive of Jesus' life was His concern for the glory of God. We see this illustrated not only in His own relationship with the Father, but . . .

2. We see it illustrated in His teaching.

Matthew 5:16. Here Jesus says why He wants us to live out the Gospel before the people of the world: "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and *praise your Father in heaven*" (italics mine).

Matthew 6:9-13. This is the model prayer Jesus gave to us. This is especially relevant to the idea that the motive of our every prayer should be concern for the glory of God. Notice in this model prayer what Jesus makes the main emphasis both in the beginning and the end—it is the glory of God.

"This is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, *hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one, for Yours is the kingdom and the power and the *glory forever. Amen*" (italics mine).

What Jesus taught, and especially when He taught on prayer, He taught that our main concern was to be the glory of God.

3. We see it illustrated in the results of His ministry.

A quick survey of five familiar passages in Luke's Gospel shows that the results of Jesus' ministry reflected that

which most motivated and concerned Him—the glory of God. Notice the response of the瘫痪的 healed in Luke 5:24-26: "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . . He said to the paralyzed man, 'I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.' Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home *praising God*" (italics mine).

Observe what happened when Jesus raised a dead man of Nain in Luke 7:15-16: "The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and *praised God*" (italics mine).

After Jesus healed a crippled woman on the Sabbath, the result was that she gave glory to God.

"When Jesus saw her," says Luke 13:12-13, "He called her forward and said to her, 'Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.' Then He put His hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and *praised God*." (italics mine).

We normally think of the cleansing of the ten lepers in the context of giving thanks. As appropriate as that is, look at what Jesus really asked in Luke 17:17-18: "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give *praise to God* except this foreigner?" (italics mine).

See how God received glory when Jesus healed a blind man in Luke 18:42-43: "Jesus said to him, 'Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.' Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, *praising God*. When all the people saw it, they also *praised God*" (italics mine).

In His personal relationship with the Father, in His teaching, and even in the results of His ministry, Jesus' main motive and concern was the glory of God. If it was the main motive of His life, then certainly it should be for ours. That is why . . .

The Motive of Our Every Prayer Should Be Concern for the Glory of God

That, according to Jesus, is the motive needed for answered prayer. Remember our beginning text, John 14:13? Jesus said, “And I will do whatever you ask in My name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father” (italics mine).

When we pray, our first concern should be for the glory of God.

I came across the story of a man who prayed like that. He lived in Switzerland during the latter part of the last century and early part of this one. His name was Samuel Zeller. He was visited by a godly Norwegian seminary professor named Ole Hallesby. Hallesby later recorded the story in his enduring book titled simply, *Prayer*.

Hallesby writes, “I do not exaggerate when I say that I have never heard anyone pray as he did, although I have heard many who were more emotional and more fervent when they prayed. Zeller, on the contrary, was quiet and confident while he prayed. He knew God well, and for that reason he was confident.

I do not believe that I have ever heard any one expect so much of God and so little of his own prayers as he did. He merely told God what was needed. He knew God would take care of the rest. His prayers were reverent, but natural, conversations with God, as though God were sitting in the first pew and Zeller were standing before Him.

Thus he prayed every day for many people and for many things. But as I listened to these prayers of his I had to say to myself, “After all he prays only one prayer, namely that the name of God might be glorified.”

Oftentimes he prayed for miracles. But never without adding, “If it will glorify Thy name.” Nor was he ever afraid to pray for

instantaneous healing, but always with the provision mentioned above.

He made no attempt to dictate to God or to force Him by His own promises. . . . For that reason he would often say, “If it will glorify Thy name more, then let them remain sick; but, if that be Thy will, give them power to glorify Thy name through their illness.”

Here the purpose and meaning of prayer dawned upon me for the first time. Here I was privileged to see more clearly than ever before the purpose of prayer: to glorify the name of God.²

The motive of our every prayer should be concern for the glory of God.

That is how it has always been. A much earlier biblical illustration that shows concern for the glory of God as the motive for answered prayer can be seen in the story of Elijah on Mt. Carmel with the prophets of Baal. Notice in this brief prayer what his main concern was:

At the time of the sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and have done all these things at Your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that You, O Lord, are God, and that You are turning their hearts back again” (1 Kings 18:36-37. Italics mine).

As Psalm 37:4 reveals, David knew this too. He knew that the motive needed for answered prayer is concern for the glory of God. David tells us, “Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.”

In other words, if your first concern is sincerely for the Lord and His glory, your prayers will be answered. If the

answer to your prayer will glorify the Lord, then it will be done. But the motive that is needed for answered prayer is concern for the glory of God.

The same is true in Psalm 79:9. The prayer request here is for help from God, for deliverance, and for the forgiveness of sins. But notice the motive behind the prayer: “Help us, O God our Savior, *for the glory of Your name*; deliver us and forgive for our sins *for Your name’s sake*.” The motive of our every prayer should be concern for the glory of God.

This sort of motive will make a tremendous difference in our praying. It can give us peace and rest in whatever answer we receive because we know it is to the glory of God. It can sometimes even give us great boldness in prayer because we know our highest concern is God’s glory.

This happened to the famous reformer of the church, Martin Luther. In 1540 Luther’s good friend, Frederick Myconius, became deathly sick. Both Myconius himself and others expected that he would soon die. One night he wrote with a trembling hand his farewell to Luther, whom he loved very much. When Luther received the letter, he sent back the following reply immediately, “I command thee in the name of God to live because I still have need of thee in the work of reforming the church. . . . The Lord will never let me hear that thou are dead, but will permit thee to survive me. For this I am praying, this is my will, and may my will be done, because I seek only to glorify the name of God.” Myconius had already lost his ability to speak when Luther’s letter came, but in a short time he was well again. True enough, he lived six more years and survived Luther by two months.³

Quoting Hallesby again, “Nothing makes us so bold in prayer as when we can look into the eye of God and say to Him, ‘Thou knowest that I am not praying for personal advantage, not to avoid hardship, nor that my own will in any way should be done, but only for this, that Thy name

might be glorified.’”⁴

The motive of our every prayer should be concern for the glory of God. But what is usually our motive when we pray? That is made painfully clear to us in James 4:3. Why is it that we pray as rightly as we know how and still do not see answers come?

“When you ask, you do not receive,” James says, “because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”

In other words, we may pray and do everything rightly—we may praise the Lord, confess our sins, express gratitude, and ask in faith—and still not have our prayer answered. Why? Because our motive was wrong. Instead of our motive being concern for the glory of God, our motive was selfish. We prayed with *our* concern in mind *more* than for God’s glory. What does the Bible say? “You ask and do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”

That thought about spending it on our pleasures is not just referring to extravagant and needless prayers like, “Give me a million dollars, so we can be rich.” Maybe it would clarify things to emphasize the word “your” just before the word “pleasures.” That is saying that our prayers are not answered—even when we do everything else right—because we want the answers for *our* pleasures, not God’s. With that standard of measurement, we can pray for most *good* things with the wrong motive. For instance, we can pray for revival with selfish motives, we can pray for someone to be healed with wrong motives, we can pray for someone to be saved because *we* want it.

We can pray for the right things in the wrong way. We can pray for the right things but have the wrong motive, and our prayers will not be answered. George Mueller, who stands like a mountain peak above most others as a man of prayer, said, “As the great root of sin is self and self-seeking, so there

is nothing that even in our spiritual desires so effectively hinders God in answering as this: we pray for our own pleasure or glory.⁷⁵

The right and only motive for answered prayer is concern for the glory of God.

More Application

1. Praying with concern for God's glory as our motive will sometimes be difficult to do sincerely.

Praying with this motive may be difficult to begin with because we are used to praying for something only because we want it. To pray now for that same thing for the glory of God, and to do that without hypocrisy, will take an adjustment.

It may also be difficult sometimes, such as in personal crises, to pray without being dominated by personal feelings. When you are praying about a family crisis, for example, it is hard to be concerned more with the glory of God than with your own feelings, but we must learn to pray this way.

2. Praying with concern for God's glory as our motive is a reality when we are willing for God to withhold the answer we desire if that would bring Him more glory.

If you ever wonder whether you are really praying with God's glory as your main concern, ask yourself whether you would be willing for God to give you the opposite of what you are asking if that would bring more glory to Him.

3. Praying with concern for God's glory as our motive is just as valid in praying for ordinary, little things as in praying for big things.

It may be easy to think that we are only talking about matters of prayer that are of major significance, but this is for all prayer, even prayer about day-to-day, minor kinds of

things. The Lord knows that our daily lives are not made primarily of big things, but of little things. Since He wants us to pray about everything, He wants us to learn to be concerned about His glory even in the little things of daily life.

4. Praying with concern for God's glory as our motive gives us words to pray when we do not know God's will in a matter.

The Bible tells us that our prayers have to be within God's will before He will answer us (1 John 5:14-15). Although we often fail to spend time trying to determine God's will on a matter, the truth is that sometimes we can never know God's will. When praying for someone who is sick, for example, or for a decision you are uncertain about, you may not have a clear sense of God's will in the matter. In such times, one thing you can pray is, "Lord, work in this matter so that You are glorified in it. Whether it should be this way or that, do the one which will glorify You the most."

5. Praying with concern for God's glory as our motive will bring more peace and rest into our praying.

No longer will we feel as though we are trying to overcome God's unwillingness in our prayer. We feel at peace that what we are praying is what He wants. We can rest knowing that whatever answer He gives is ultimately for His glory. That gives us a new perspective on what we have previously called *unanswered* prayer.

Conclusion

In the Westminster Catechism, the most famous and enduring (written in 1647) of all Protestant catechisms, the first question is, "What is the chief end of man?" The unforgettable answer is, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." In the same way, the chief end

of every prayer is to glorify God. As the Scripture says,
“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, *do it all*
to the *glory of God*” (1 Cor. 10:31. Italics mine).
Let us *ask all* to the glory of God!

End Notes

- 1 Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, p. 110.
- 2 Ole Hallesby, *Prayer*, pp. 126-27.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- 5 Murray, p. 188.

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