

Lake Cities Community Church
May 23, 2010
Pastor Craig Schill
Series: Prayer – Mission Impossible

“What Hinders our Prayers? “

Many of you know I have just graduated from Rowlett’s Citizen’s Police Academy. It was a great experience that I would recommend to any of you, especially as we are often serving the Police. It was an eleven-week program with classes such as criminal investigations, record keeping, traffic enforcement and SWAT.

But everyone looked forward to two classes in particular. First was the class where we got to drive a police car through an obstacle course backwards with everyone watching you – I think I took out 20 cones. The second class was when we went to the gun range to shoot police issued Glock 22 pistols. I mean Wow – I felt like Jack Bauer, cracking off several rounds into a life size target. Now - to shoot a gun, we had to have some basic gun safety instruction and wearing the proper gun safety gear. For each person we had to put on a protective vest, eye and ear protection.

The ear abatement devices were like these, which I have borrowed from Micah. They look like headphones – but when you put them on you are surrounded in almost total silence. Between shooters we would take them off so we could hear the instructor. The instructors had fancier technology, which were smart enough to allow in regular sounds, and to only muffle the high volume discharge of a gun. It was fascinating technology - which could **say “no” to one kind of sound and “yes” to another.**

And that reminded me of the aspect of prayer we are studying this morning. What we will learn from scripture today is that God sometimes puts on his high tech prayer abatement headgear– so that certain prayers come into his ears, and other prayers are suppressed. Our subject this morning is hindrances or barriers to prayers.

We will begin by looking at several Scripture passages that teach us about some of the things that can hinder our prayers. We will go through each one briefly – to get a big-picture view of the topic. After that I want us to think about why God works in this way – what is going on theologically? And finally we will end with a point of application.

Hindrances to Prayer

Depending on how we define hindrances to prayer, we might come up with dozens or passages. The first hindrance passage is found in Psalm 66, verses 17-18. I invite you to follow along with me in your Bibles. We will go in order from OT to NT. The Psalmist said: **“I cried to Him with my mouth, and He was extolled with my tongue. If I regard wickedness in my heart, The Lord will not hear.”** These verses describe the first hindrance to prayer which is **hypocrisy**. Praising him with your lips and Sunday and cursing him with the same mouth on Monday. Hypocrisy – Play-acting. Being two-faced. A devotional guide gave this illustration of hypocrisy: “He made free use of Christian vocabulary. He talked about the blessing of the Almighty and the Christian confessions which would become the pillars of the new government. He gave public testimonies to the press. He showed his tattered Bible

and declared that he drew the strength for his great work from it as scores of religious people welcomed him as a man sent from God. Indeed, Adolf Hitler extolled God with his tongue while treasuring wickedness in his heart.” Out text teaches that God will not hear such prayers.

Our next passage is in Proverbs 21, verse 13: **He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be answered.** In other words, **a lack of mercy toward others** can be a hindrance to prayers. In your time of need as you pour out your heart to God he goes back and checks on how compassionate you were to those who came to you in their time of need. It should make us think seriously about how we as individual and as a church treat the poor, as it has an impact on prayer. There is an Indian parable where a lion catches a mouse and is about to eat him up. The mouse cries, "Show mercy to me, O King and perhaps one day I can help you." The Lion was so tickled at the ridiculous idea of the weak mouse being able to help him that he lifted up his paw and let him go. Some time after - the Lion was caught in a trap, and the little Mouse happened to pass by, and seeing the sad plight in which the Lion was, went up to him and soon gnawed away the ropes that bound the King of the Beasts. **"Was I not right?"** Said the little Mouse. And he was. And if we show mercy to the needy in their time of difficulty, in our time of need God will hear us.

The third passage is a few chapters over, Proverbs 28 verse nine: **He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, even his prayer is an abomination.** The hindrance here is that **if we won't listen to God, why would we expect Him to listen to us?** Sometimes children have been known provide illustration of this – (not in our home, of course, but in some homes) the parent might say: “Listen, child – you need to clean your

room, practice your instrument, do your homework, finish your chores, etc.” And the child practices selective listening ignoring the parent’s instruction yet fifteen minutes later comes to you and says, “Mom, may I have some ice cream? That request in light of disobedience is an abomination? So it is with God.

Next, we turn now to the prophet Isaiah, chapter 1, verses 15-16: “**So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean.**” Isaiah tells us clearly that involvement with **blatant evil and wickedness** is a serious hindrance to prayer. I read a story this week in Christianity Today that detailed abuse that had occurred at a Christian school for missionary children in West Africa during the 1950’s and 60’s. Wess Stafford is now president of Compassion International but he was a victim of the abuse at the time and he wrote that he was once beaten physically 17 times in one week. They experienced years of physical, emotional and sexual abuse. He wrote: “The people who read us Bibles stories during the day prowled the dorm halls at night, preying on the defenseless. There was no one to protect us. The very people who should have been our defenders were in fact our attackers.” If you were God, would you incline your ears to the prayers of those evil men and women? God says No. And it doesn’t have to be as extreme as that – any unconfessed sin or treasured evil will put up a barrier between God and us. The next two passages continue this theme:

Isaiah 59, verses 1-2: **Behold, the LORD’S hand is not so short that it cannot save; Nor is His ear so dull That it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does**

not hear. Through Jesus Christ we have been reconciled with God - he bridged that separation by taking the punishment for all sins on himself. But now in our day-to-day walk with the Lord unconfessed sin can put up a barrier. Lamentations chapter 3, verses 41, 42 and 44. **We lift up our heart and hands toward God in heaven; We have transgressed and rebelled... (therefore) You have covered Yourself with a cloud So that no prayer can pass through.** When the clouds of sin are dark and thick –they block our prayers to God. Sin, evil, wickedness are all hindrances to prayer.

We now turn to the NT. On the topic of forgiveness Jesus taught: **Matt. 6:14-15 “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. “But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.**

Unforgiveness is a hindrance to prayer. Savannah, GA has statues of its founding father John Oglethorpe and its spiritual leader John Wesley. It is reported that Oglethorpe once made the proud comment to Wesley; “I never forgive.” Mr. Wesley wisely replied, “Then, sir, I hope that you never sin.” If we do not forgive others – God will not forgive us. I do not believe this is talking about gaining or losing salvation, but (again) in our day-to-day walk with God.

Let me give you the last three quickly: **James 1:6-7: But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord. Lack of faith** is a hindrance to prayer. I was reading about some people who believe in prayer and to hedge their bets, they pray to Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, etc. Christian prayer requires belief in the historical person of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible. James also says, James

4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend *it* on your pleasures. **Wrong motives** are a hindrance to prayer. We have already learned that we are to seek God's will and not our own. Finally perhaps the most well know hindrance passage: 1Pet. 3:7: You husbands in the same way, live with *your wives* in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered. **A poor marriage** is a hindrance to prayer. And although husbands are in view here I believe the same principle would apply to wives if they sin against their husbands.

Theology

Ok what are the hindrances we have seen from the Bible? Hypocrisy, lack of mercy toward the poor, unwillingness to listen to God, evil and wickedness, unforgiveness, doubt, wrong motives and a poor marriage. And so now the question I have been struggling to answer all week: **Why does God work this way?** Why would God choose not to listen to what might otherwise be a perfectly good prayer for these reasons? A father might offer a prayer that God might work powerfully through a missionary. But because he was harsh with his wife God says "no" to that prayer. A mother might offer a meaningful prayer at a Mom's in Touch meeting but have it rejected because of unforgiveness. A church might pray for God to help them through a financial crisis, but because they have not shown compassion for the poor in their community God does not listen. Isn't that what we have been learning. Why does God work in this way?

There may be many answers to that question, but I think what God would have us learn about prayer is that in its most fundamental sense: **Prayer is deeply rooted in**

relationship. Our relationship with God and our relationships with other people. I don't know if you have noticed, but everything we have been talking about has been relational in substance.

Let's think about that together – When you are in a relationship with someone, does trust matter? (Give me a yes or no). Yes! Does integrity matter? If you ignore your friend week after week, will that hurt or help the relationship? If you abuse your friend's children, and are rude to your friend's mother or father, will that help or hurt your relationship? Are you beginning to see? *Prayer is an extension of our personal relationship with God.* If we don't trust God. If we lie to him. If we don't listen to Him. If we treat his extended family with unforgiveness and evil, we should have no expectation that He will respond to our prayers and say: "Hey that doesn't matter! Good idea, good prayer, here you go."

Prayer is deeply rooted in relationship. The problem is we tend to view God like a vending machine – you put in faith and the fifty cents and he is obligated to grant your request. And if your Doritos get stuck – you pound in anger on the glass. The vending machine doesn't care if you were harsh to your wife, or your children, if you stole money from the company or didn't forgive your neighbor. But God does, and because of that the effectiveness of our prayer are directly correlated with the health of our relationship to God and other people.

Application

Our application is therefore to **prepare for prayer.** Before entering into prayer we have learned the importance of checking our relationship with God and our relationship with others. Do we have unconfessed sin? Are we harboring evil? Has my marriage fallen in

disrepair? Have I been unwilling to forgive someone who has hurt me? Have I been harsh toward the poor and those in need? To go to God unprepared in prepared, is actually a waste of time, because God will not respond. So we must prepare for prayer. To pray well, we must live well. I wrote a poem to close our time together:

Prepare for Prayer

Coming unprepared to God in prayer
Is neither wise nor good
To open God's ear to your request
Some things must be understood.

Prayer is forged deep in relationship
With God and fellow man
Prayer is not a chant, a cold force
Or a power - to carry out our plans.

God responds to our humble plea
Like a father to a son.
It matters to Him how we each live
And the things that we have done.

So to open God's ears
When He speaks - listen up - and do all that he commands.
Forsake evil, seek forgiveness,
have faith and show mercy
To the poor - lend a kind-helping hand.

Seek first God's will and not your own
To ensure your prayers are heard
Forgive your neighbor, love your spouse
Show kindness and compassion,
Be a doer; not just a hearer of the Word.

Coming unprepared to God in prayer
Is neither wise nor good
So we seek His grace and humbly ask
"Lord help us to live as we should."