

"AND WHEN THEY HAD PRAYED"

"And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness. Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet ..." (Acts 4:31-35).

SOME IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

How long has it been since you have prayed? Have you prayed today? When do you pray? Is it when you have need of something? Feel a dependence upon God? Are aware of defects in your life? Realize your own poverty? Wish to fulfill some craving? Do you pray when there is an insurmountable obstacle in your way?

A complicated problem you have not been able to solve? A dilemma that obscures your view and you do not know which way to turn? A predicament from which you have been unable to extricate yourself? Do you pray when there is a snag which holds you back? A quandary of uncertain and perplexing proportions?

When you are threatened with seeming insoluble hazards daily menacing your life? Or when your heart is set upon some course, or the possession of some thing? When there is no one else to whom you may turn—is it then you turn to God and fall upon your knees?

There may be other reasons why you pray. Perhaps it is because you wish to thank God for your good fortune for which He is responsible, and for His manifold blessings to you. Your reason for praying to Him may be to ask His guidance in the way of righteousness. It may be in the awareness that you are completely helpless without Him, and feeling your dependence upon Him and your need of Him, you turn to Him in prayer regularly.

GREAT THINGS HAVE BEEN ACCOMPLISHED BY PRAYER

James tells us that "the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16). Elijah prayed earnestly that it might not rain on the earth and it did not rain for the space of three years and six months. He prayed again and the heavens gave forth rain (James 5:17-18). Hezekiah prayed for his life and the Lord extended it for fifteen years (Isaiah 38:1-5).

The life of Jesus was a life of prayer. He prayed on or before every important event connected with His recorded life. The early Christians spent much time in prayer, and God's blessings attended them. Peter and John were imprisoned because they preached the gospel. They were released and went among their friends to relate what had transpired. It was then that Luke recorded these very meaningful words: "And when they had prayed ..." (Acts 4:31).

SOME THINGS WHICH OCCURRED WHEN THEY PRAYED

1. "... that with all boldness they may speak Your word" (Acts 4:29). They had prayed that God would grant them boldness that they might speak His word. The grammar of their language expressed a continuation, to go on uttering His word. This is what they had been doing, but there was the possibility that they would allow the threats and harassment they were receiving from the authorities to intimidate them. So, through their prayers they were helped to continue their public preaching openly, hopefully unobstructed by the governmental officials. But blocked or unblocked, they received, in answer to their prayers, the courage, the boldness, the spiritual fortitude to continue as though they had never been threatened. They obeyed God rather than man, and thus entrusted the consequences to God.

I have known those who would not obey the gospel because they were afraid of social ostracism and did not wish to be exposed to the rebuffs of family and friends. To be banished from a circle in which one has always moved, and to be ignored and criticized by those who have been closest to him, is a heavy price to pay by one who is contemplating changing his relationship to God by becoming a Christian. No one, I suppose, wants to be snubbed by friends or separated from the fellowship of dear ones whose company he has always cherished. One has to be brave and daring to cut away those ties. I have had people, on the verge of accepting the truth of God's word, say to me: "Let me first speak to the village elders about this matter." Or, "Although I believe this is the truth, and I would like to accept it, I wish to return to my island home and discuss this subject with my father." Or I have had them ask: "What would my mother and grandmother say, if I should take this step?" Still further, I have been asked: "What would this one say, should I decide to make this move, about my dead husband, or parent, who never believed this or approved of such teaching?" Indeed, it takes courage and strength to choose the right course in life. But when those early Christians prayed, they were given that fortitude!

In most places in our own country today, we can preach the gospel publicly and privately, without fear or apprehension, and without hesitation. Ordinarily there would be no physical threats, bodily harm or personal interference with our activities. There would be some exceptions in places, but typically there would be no danger. But there are other reasons why some are averse to preaching the gospel. Producing that reluctance are such things as the fear of the loss of friendship, or social prestige. Men are disinclined because they do not want to become involved in unpleasant situations. Others are hesitant because they believe that they will be considered eccentric or extreme. Some fear the loss of economic security—that is, the effects that preaching the pure gospel would have upon their business. So, an appeal should be made to all of us to pray for more courage and conviction, more confidence and steadfastness.

2. "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul" (Acts 4:32). To observe the congregation outwardly, it was made up of a great assorted multitude, distinct ethnically, linguistically, educationally, economically. They were complex

because they were old and young, rich and poor, with varied occupations, different aptitudes and gifts, mixed temperaments and diverse inclinations—a thousand personalities!

The 3,000 people who were won to Christ on Pentecost came from many lands and had different cultures. They were a conglomerate, polyglot people. Luke's last count was about 5,000 men who constituted the congregation in those first days. Make your own estimate of the total membership including the women and accountable children. But this assorted assembly was held together. Their strong faith produced a solid bond, a union. "They were of one heart and one soul." And the fruits of this fusion, this togetherness, were love, peace and unity.

They spoke the same things: "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (I Corinthians 1:10). "So continuing daily with one accord ..." (Acts 2:46). They had the same feelings and thoughts. This is the meaning of the term. This great body had one living personality in it. Its whole active life was one feeling, one thought, one speech and one will. They all wanted one thing—to be saved eternally. They all thought one view, one image—to be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ. They all experienced one relief—the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

Despite their great numbers, there was no division among them, and there were no contentions. They believed, and they were together. It was "singleness of heart." Satan's greatest tool against the church is division. There have been fifty divisions, I am told, in the Restoration Movement. Imagine what the Lord's church could be today had these not occurred. What a blessing that, if in their stead, there could have been peace and harmony. It is calamitous that we have fussed about such things as whether we should have Bible classes, one communion cup or more, support orphan homes, cooperate in preaching the gospel to the world.

Many times in congregations where we have unity on these things just mentioned, there are other impairments such as bickering, backbiting and criticisms. The mission program is flawed because we should be spending our money in Canada or South America instead of Africa. It is a disaster that we would give to printing and sending gospel literature around the world in different languages when there are so many lost people in our very midst. What a misfortune to skip over fifty million people in our area of the United States to tell folks in the islands or South America about Jesus.

You must know that these statements are spoken in derision. But it is true that today many so-called Christians hold in contempt such good works and ridicule the sincere efforts of dedicated servants of God whose sole purpose is to share the message of light with those who sit in the regions of darkness.

Yes, we need to do some praying. It has been said that "the family that prays together stays together." I believe this may also be said of the church. Are we united in our purposes? Do we have the same goals, desires and aims? There is an old song which, all too accurately, describes the condition of the Lord's church in many places: "Tho' with a scornful wonder, men see her sore oppressed, by

schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed." In that early day of the church, when they prayed, one of the developments in the outcome of those prayers was unity. Peace, unity and good will toward one another are the products of prayer, and you may be sure they do not ensue in the absence of it.

PRAYER PROMOTES GENEROSITY

"Nor was there anyone among them who lacked" (there was not anyone among them that was needy) "... and they brought the proceeds of the things that were sold" (Acts 4:34).

Why did they do that? Why were they so generous? There is one answer—the love they had for God and their fellow-Christians. No one considered anything his personal property. This was a recognition that we do not own anything absolutely. We are just stewards. That word means *house-manager*. We manage the estate of someone else, the Lord. It is just in our custody for a time. We hold it in trust.

These early Christians in that crisis shared what they had with one another. I suppose you would call it an emergency situation—a predicament due to the circumstances which had arisen. Many people had come from other countries to be present for and observe the feasts of Passover and Pentecost. During their stay in the city of Jerusalem, they heard the apostles preach the gospel, and many of them became Christians. Their homes and means of livelihood were far away. They were in serious need of the basic necessities of life, "the daily ministrations." Some were being neglected, or overlooked. It was not intentional. Some had escaped their notice. But the people gave and they gave generously. That willing disposition seemed to be a direct result of, "and when they had prayed."

This, I feel, has been one of our weaknesses in today's world. In that time: "... On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper" (I Corinthians 16:1-2). This has been one of our sins. The word for this withholding what belongs to God is *hettema*. It means "to be less, inferior, default, shortcoming." It is the diminishing of what one should have rendered in full measure. That is, we have not rendered to God a full measure of His part of our possessions. When you look at the contributions that are given into the treasury of the church, you must conclude that many have given a small fraction of what God has entrusted to their care and custody. We have not learned that "it is more blessed to give than to receive." We have shortchanged God. "He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully" (II Corinthians 9:6). "So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver" (II Corinthians 9:7).

After they had prayed, Luke records these words: "Neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common" (Acts 4:32). In verse 34-35, this language is found: "Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need." And of Barnabas it is said in verses 36-37: "... having land, sold it,

and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet." The statement, "And when they had prayed," ought to mean more to us now. Earnest, sincere prayer marshals our true feelings and disposes the heart to mercy and generosity.

PRAYER GIVES ONE GREAT POWER

"And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection" (Acts 4:33). This power and strength were derived from prayer through the word of God. Nothing could deter them from their course. Threats of punishment and events of discouragement did not divert their attention, distract them from their purpose or dissuade them from their avowed course. Weaker men would have been disheartened, and those who do not pray would have been scared. But having prayed, they rose up to perform their duties and achieve their tasks. The Spirit of God actuated them and nothing but complete fulfillment would keep them from their assignment. With this same assurance established in his heart, Paul declared, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Paul used a word which means "to make powerful inwardly."

When Paul was depressed and discouraged, he would talk with God in prayer, and then he would deduce, "The Lord stood with me and strengthened me" (II Timothy 4:17). How can we, as Christians, find strength to bear the burdens of life unless we spend a great quantity of our time in prayer to our Father?

Whence comes that power to bear up in times of sadness and distress? When our hearts are heavy with grief and the burden seems almost too much for us, we need to turn to Him who promises to lift up and bear away the grievous loads and cares of life. I like the poem of Anna Temple that accentuates that need of man and that sufficing provision of God.

The camel at the close of day,
Kneels down upon the sandy plain
To have his burden lifted off
And rest again.

My soul, thou, too, shouldst to thy knees,
When daylight draweth to a close,
And let the Master lift the load
And grant repose.

Else, how couldst thou tomorrow meet
With all tomorrow's work to do,
If thou thy burden all the night
Must carry through?

The camel kneels at break of day
To have his guide replace his load,
Then rises up anew to take
The desert road.
So, shouldst thou kneel at morning dawn
That God may give thee daily care,
Assured that He no load too great
Will make thee bear.

Paul said, "The Lord stood by me." It may have been that Paul, after beseeching the Lord three times to remove his thorn in the flesh, felt discouraged and abandoned; but you can be sure God did not desert him. He said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you."

You will remember that in the difficult times of Jesus' life and personal ministry, he spent much time in prayer. After being tempted by the devil, "angels came and ministered to Him" (Matthew 4:11). The strength of our Lord to bear the burden of the cross came through prayer. Time after time, he knelt and prayed in the garden. The strength obtained there carried him through to the cross. Without this commitment to prayer we do not know how much more difficult the ordeal would have been.

"And great grace was upon them." It was God's favor which built up their faith and love and gave them incredible strength as a result of the time they spent with Him in prayer. "And when they had prayed."

HOW GOD ANSWERS PRAYER

"Pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (I Thessalonians 5:17-18).

Christ taught His disciples to pray and left them an example of the constancy in prayer that should characterize their lives. There is but little doubt that the average Christian prays too infrequently. Prayer does not occupy the paramount place it deserves in the register of activities in our daily lives. Note the priority given to it by the apostles very early in their lives in the church. "It is not desirable," they said, "that we should leave the word of God and serve tables" (Acts 6:2). Attending to the needs of these Grecian widows was tremendously important; but what took precedence over this was the preaching of the word of God. They then gave instructions that the church should select qualified, dependable and faithful men to attend to this matter. "But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4).

If I had been recording these events and writing the words Luke left us in the Acts of the Apostles, in all likelihood, I would have put "the ministry of the word" first on my list. Luke never did that. He topped the list with prayer. Perhaps, he arranged it in this order, not because prayer was more important than preaching the word, but because he knew that the effective preaching of the word of God must be preceded by prayer. That's the natural order. It is prayer that installs and establishes the proper attitude in the heart of the preacher. Without this insertion, the preacher is not really ready to deliver his message. Until the character and position of his heart is right, the message will not be what God wants and intends it to do in the hearts of the hearers.

And prayer was necessary for the hearts of those who received the message. "Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you" (II Thessalonians 3:1). Some Christians, had they arranged this list, would have placed *servicing tables* before either prayer or preaching the word. I believe the Holy Spirit knew what He was doing!

SOME BASIC FACTS OF PRAYER

1. God wants us to pray. "I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands" (I Timothy 2:8).

2. He wants us to come boldly before him in prayer. "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

3. He wants us to come in faith and assurance. "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. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:6-8).

4. He wants us to trust God that He is able to answer our prayers. "Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever" (Ephesians 3:20-21).

GOD DOES NOT ANSWER ALL PRAYERS IN THE SAME WAY, OR AS WE MAY WISH OR EXPECT

1. **God sometimes gives a negative answer.** There are times when God says no to our requests. It is not always best for us (or, perhaps, others) to have an affirmative answer.

Those of us who have reared children understand very clearly that there are times when their requests must be denied. Most children would be content to eat sweets almost exclusively, play in a busy street and run through the house with a butcher knife, if they were allowed to do so. For their own good, in these, and other matters, we do not hesitate to say no to them and disallow their requests that we know would be injurious to them. We withhold from them anything that would lead to personal hurt or injury or that is not right, morally or otherwise. Such constraints are not an indication of a lack of love, but we simply know that their petitions are not always wise and their appeal, if accommodated, would not yield benefits to them or the betterment of those who may be affected by their petition.

We are God's children, and while most of us think we are mature enough to know what is best for us, it is not always true. God can see dangers we cannot detect and to which we may be blinded, due to personal desires and fleshly cravings. Often it is said, "I can't see anything wrong in this particular course of action." But that doesn't mean there is no wrong in it. As human beings, we are not always able to see what antagonistic effects an affirmative answer to our prayers may have. In the end, it may work contrary to our good and the harmful consequences produce repercussions which we neither desired nor anticipated. You may be sure God knows best.

God is the Father of many children and often He has to deny us something, give us a negative answer to our request, because it is best for others. Three times Jesus prayed that the cup might be removed from him. "He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, 'O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me' " (Matthew 26:39). "Again, a second time, He went away and

prayed, saying, 'O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done' " (Matthew 26:42). "So He left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words" (Matthew 26:44).

But if God had answered that prayer by delivering His Son from the death of the cross, we would be living in a world without hope. For our good His request was denied. You know, of course, that Jesus' plea that the cup of suffering and death be removed from Him was qualified with, "Your will be done." And there must be such an abridgment in all of our prayers. God places limits on our petitions. One of those limits is mentioned by Jesus in these prayers concerning His passion: "We ceased, saying, 'The will of the Lord be done' " (Acts 21:14). "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (I John 5:14).

God said *no* to Paul. "And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness' " (II Corinthians 12:7-9).

We should imitate Paul in his response to God's answer to him. "Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (II Corinthians 12:9-10). When we do not get what we ask for, or want, we become unhappy, critical and faultfinding. We censor God for not hearing our prayers, and our faith in Him is shaken! We need to learn that it is necessary, at times, for God to say no to us, even if we do not understand why His answer is negative.

2. God sometimes delays answer to our prayers. Jeremiah was requested by the people to pray for them that they might know what the will of the Lord was for them. "Please, let our petition be acceptable to you, and pray for us to the Lord your God, ... And it happened after ten days that the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah" (Jeremiah 42:2-7). No reason is stated for the delay. You can be sure that God knows best and He has His reasons. He does not always have to tell us the reason why there is a postponement, or a pause in His fulfilling our requests. And prayer does not fail simply because He does not answer us immediately.

Like Moses we become impatient with God and insist that we get a reply without any interval of delay. We do not want any suspension of our wishes. An interim between our asking and receiving causes us to become restless and maybe indignant—at least, provoked. Moses cried to the Lord on behalf of his sister, Miriam, who was leprous, "Please heal her, O God, I pray" (Numbers 12:13). God had a law with which His people must comply under such circumstances. So the Lord replied, "Let her be shut out of the camp seven days, and afterward she may be received again" (Numbers 12:14).

Jesus told a story about the importunate widow that well illustrates this truth about prayer. "Then He spoke a parable to them, that men

always ought to pray and not lose heart ..." (Luke 18:1-17). God sometimes allows one to suffer long after they have begun to pray for deliverance. He counsels us to pray night and day, to be persistent, and in His own time, according to His will and for our good, He will answer.

Job complained to God, "I cry out to You, but You do not answer me" (Job 30:20). But God was hearing. He was simply delaying His answer. We do not always know why. It may be that He is testing our faith and the *metal* of our characters. He hasn't always disclosed to us the understanding of His own will. These considerations may be kept from us and it would be speculation for us to hazard a guess! But the answer finally came to Job. "Now the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning" (Job 42:12). David teaches us an excellent lesson on this subject: "I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry" (Psalm 40:1).

3. God sometimes gives us something different from what we ask. After Moses had sinned against the Lord, He determined that Moses should not see the land of Canaan. Moses prayed about this matter earnestly: "I pray, let me cross over and see the good land beyond the Jordan" (Deuteronomy 3:25). God did not answer that prayer by allowing Moses to cross the Jordan, but answered him in a different way. "Go up to the top of Pisgah, and lift up your eyes toward the west, the north, the south, and the east; behold it with your eyes" (Deuteronomy 3:27).

The Psalmist records, with reference to Israel, "And He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul" (Psalm 106:15). He sent them quail for their food supply, but He also sent leanness into their souls. In a short while Israel was filled with dissatisfaction and disgust. After eating quail for a month, it was loathsome to them. If you, like Israel, can think of nothing but your own desires and satisfaction, God may answer your request for material goods and wealth, but you may get something you haven't bargained for—dissatisfaction and unhappiness!

When Lazarus became ill, his sisters sent for Jesus. They wanted the Lord to cure him of his malady, whatever that affliction was. And they believed, of course, that He could do so (John 11).

Jesus delayed His coming until Lazarus had been dead four days. He did not answer that prayer as they expected Him to do. Instead He raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:43-44).

I mention Paul again and his thorn in the flesh. God did not see fit to answer his request by making him whole. He answered it in an entirely different way by giving him the patience and the power to endure his affliction. "My grace is sufficient for you."

4. Sometimes God gives us exactly what we ask. This was true in the case of Jonah. He had disobeyed God and was swallowed by a great fish. "Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the fish's belly" (Jonah 2:1). We often get ourselves into serious predicaments due to our own sins and in the midst of the dilemma we cry to the Lord for help. It is often only in crises that we turn to the Lord. "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord" (Jonah 2:7). Helpless in an emergency, we do not know where or to

whom else to turn! "And my prayer went up to You" (Jonah 2:7). "So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land" (Jonah 2:10). "I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction, and He answered me" (Jonah 2:2). So, the Lord delivered him according to his request.

Elijah prayed earnestly that it might not rain. God heard him and answered his prayer exactly as he had petitioned the Lord (James 5:17). Then the Book says that he prayed again and the heaven gave forth rain (James 5:18). We withhold blessings from ourselves simply because we do not ask. "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you" (John 15:7). "Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you" (John 16:23).

As we have stated before, God's blessings are not showered upon us without any qualification. James made that clear in his writings, James 4:2-3: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures." You will notice in these passages some requisites, some stipulations: (1) If you abide in My words (2) if My words abide in you (3) you must ask (4) the purpose of your asking must not be to spend what you get on your own lusts (5) and we have previously learned that we must ask according to His will.

5. God sometimes gives us more than we ask. This was so in the case of Solomon. God said to him, "Ask! What shall I give you" (I Kings 3:5)? Solomon's answer was, "Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours" (I Kings 3:9)?

"The speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing. Then God said to him: 'Because you have asked this thing, and have not asked long life for yourself, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have asked the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern justice, behold, I have done according to your words; see, I have given you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall any like you arise after you. And I have also given you what you have not asked; both riches and honor, so that there shall not be anyone like you among the kings all your days' " (I Kings 3:10-13). Solomon asked for wisdom, and God gave it to him; but He also gave him riches, honor and longevity.

The church in Jerusalem prayed for Peter when he was in prison. In all likelihood, they prayed for his strength, for, no doubt, they remembered a time of recent weakness in Peter, and his wavering conduct. God answered their prayers and miraculously released the apostle (Acts 12:12-17). The thief on the cross asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom (Luke 23:42). But the Lord gave him more than he asked, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

But isn't that always true? God gives us far more than we ask. He abundantly supplies us in all of our needs (Philippians 4:19). Here is the real richness of prayer—God often gives us more than we ask:

"Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20).

1. God is **able**.
2. God is able **to do**.
3. God is able to do **abundantly**.
4. God is able to do **exceeding abundantly**.
5. God is able to do exceeding abundantly **all**.
6. God is able to do exceeding abundantly **above all**.
7. God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all we **ask**.
8. God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all we ask or **think**.

Paul must have laid aside his pen feeling that words are destitute to express God's willingness and power to bless us. He seemed to exhaust his vocabulary in his effort to express God's care for His people and His capacity to endow them with life's blessings.

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS AFFECT GOD'S ATTITUDE TOWARD OUR PRAYERS

If one's attitude toward a brother in Christ is not right, God will not hear the prayer of that person. "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24).

God refuses to hear the prayers of those who turn away their ears from hearing the truth. "One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination" (Proverbs 28:9). God refuses to heed the prayers of those who are not walking according to His will. "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2).

Jesus concurred that one must be a worshipper of God and do His will if he expects his prayers to be heard and answered. "Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshipper of God and does His will, He hears him" (John 9:31).

Prayer is too valuable to the Christian for one not to enjoy its bountiful and beautiful benefits. If your heart and life are not right with God, you should make them so that you may not miss God's proffered treasure which He has in store for His people.

THANKS BE TO GOD

"Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift" (II Corinthians 9:15). "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 15:57). "Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ ..." (II Corinthians 2:14).

The word *thanks*, in the sense of *showing gratitude*, is found sixty-nine times in the New Testament. Once each year in America, the people observe a day specially appointed and set aside for the

expression of thanks. It started a long time ago when some of our Pilgrim fathers landed on these shores on December 20th, 1620. Then in the Autumn of 1621, after the first crops had been gathered in, a number of those early colonists in the Massachusetts Bay area, in company with a number of Indians, observed the first Thanksgiving Day in this country. The day was filled with expressions of gratitude and acknowledgments for the favors from God and the many acts of kindness received in the first year of their sojourn in this new country.

Looking at this bit of history from a remote period, we conclude that their expressions of thanks were more than a polite utterance of courtesy. They came from hearts filled with a real sense of indebtedness. I believe we need to hark back to the spirit of those early days.

IT IS A GOOD THING

"It is good to give thanks to the Lord ..." (Psalm 92:1). It is good for us. It makes us aware of the source of our blessings. "My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning" (James 1:17). So, it is good, indeed, to know whence our blessings come! From the way many people live and act, one would think that most of them have neither knowledge nor care about the origin of their good fortune.

It is good to acknowledge our dependence upon Him. "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want" (Psalm 23). "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). This says that we recognize that He is the Fountain of our treasure; He is the Giver of all that we have or hope to have. Remember He said, "My God shall supply **all** your needs." The truth is that we are hangers-on; we are sponges living off the goodness and generosity of God. Our place and dependence remind me of the remora with the sucking disk on his head by which he clings to larger fish and receives from their abundance his own support and sustenance.

And more than all of this which we have said, it is good for us to have the awareness, the perception of the origin of our blessings, but also we need the feeling of gratitude, that we are blessed by One who cares about us and our welfare. It is not good to be unmindful and insensible to His benefits, oblivious to His blessings and wanting in this grace of recognition and appreciation. I fear that too many of us want remuneration without labor, recompense without effort and compensation without contribution. Far too prevalent is the feeling: "The world owes it to me; I have it coming." So often I hear the remark: "What is the government doing for me and my people?" Or, "What is this city doing to make my lot better?"

SOME THINGS FOR WHICH WE SHOULD GIVE THANKS

1. **Our material blessings.** David once said: "... give thanks to the Lord! Call upon His name; make known His deeds among the peoples ... talk of all His wondrous works ... for He is good" (I Chronicles 16:7-9, 34). "For all that is in heaven and in earth is Yours ... and You are exalted as head over all" (I Chronicles 29:11). "Now,

therefore, our God, we thank You and praise Your glorious name" (v. 13). "For all things come from You" (v. 14). "It is He who gives you power to get wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:18). "In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness" (Psalm 24:1).

We have such reason to be thankful. We have everything that adds to our comfort and contributes to our physical-well-being, food, houses, clothing, good health, jobs, schools, doctors, everything that seems to make for happiness in this world. Much of the world does not have access to these things as we do in America. Half of the world has fewer than 1500 calories a day to eat. Poverty is found in every country. Millions of people in America live *below the poverty line*. But poverty in America, for the most part, is not comparable to the wretched, miserable poverty that characterizes so many of the Third World countries. Millions of children die each year of malnutrition. The future that most of them face is bleak and hopeless. This should make us even more grateful and more disposed to share what we have in such great abundance with those who are less fortunate.

2. For having revealed His will to us. "... I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You ... have revealed them to babes" (Matthew 11:25). "To reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles" (Galatians 1:16). "To open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light ..." (Acts 26:18). "But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew ... but God has revealed them to us through His Spirit" (I Corinthians 2:7-10).

I am grateful that I have lived my life in a land of Bibles—that I have had access to the word of God from my childhood. I am indebted to God for having communicated His will to me, and I am obligated to my parents, and others, for having taught me the truth early in life. Much of the world has not enjoyed this blessing. I am not always able to explain just why I am the recipient of so many wonderful things that have come from the hand of God; but this one thing I know, having received these beneficial, helpful and useful fortunes in life, I am doubly responsible to share these treasures with others along the journey of our existence in this world. Apart from this inestimable blessing of knowing His will, we would be blind, naked, deprived, diseased and spiritually dead. Our daily prayer should be that God would make us even more appreciative.

3. For the power of the gospel. While we are grateful that He has revealed His will to us, we are also thankful for the power of that will. Speaking to the Roman Christians, Paul declared, that "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes ..." (Romans 1:16). In writing to the Corinthian church about the gospel, he told them it was that "... by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain" (I Corinthians 15:1-4).

With the gospel, "He delivered me from my enemies ... Therefore I will give thanks to You ... Great deliverance He gives ..." (Psalm 18:48-50). By our obedience to the gospel, we have been made free from sin and have become the slaves of righteousness (Romans

6:17-18). "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free" (Galatians 5:1). "He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love" (Colossians 1:13).

The gospel will change men's lives if they will respond to it by believing it and bringing their lives into conformity with its directions and injunctions. God decrees that we must not treat it lightly or indifferently. At His request we must conscientiously follow the guidelines He has provided for us.

It has been my experience and good fortune to see the gospel change men's lives from the former evil ways in which they walked. The gospel has reversed the lives of men who have been given over to such sins as gambling. I have seen young men out of homes of heathenism, polygamy, drunkenness, immorality, dishonesty, and a host of other things, do a complete turnabout—not just a modification of their conduct, but a transformation of their beings. This was not a partial switching of direction, but a total turn in their thinking, a revolutionizing of their speech, an elevation and a perfecting of their attitude, a banishing of their former deportment and a displacement of the old course with a total new discipline of life. I have seen such men dedicate themselves and their talents to the preaching of the gospel. Yes, we should thank God for the power of the gospel.

THE MESSAGE ITSELF IS POWERFUL

"It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (I Corinthians 1:21). We often think that the power is in the man or in some methodology. We have our plans, schemes, programs, methods, devices and contrivances; and we have substituted man's philosophy and human wisdom in the pulpits and class rooms. It is my conviction that we need a reappearance of the first century gospel—a total return to the power of preaching! It is not the man, nor the method. The message itself is supreme. It is vigorous and mighty.

It was by the word that God spoke the worlds into existence (Hebrew 11:1-3); it was by His word that the dead was raised (John 11:43-44); the tempest was stilled (Mark 4:39); the leper was healed (Luke 17:12-19); the blind was made to see (John 9:7-12). It is the word of God by which men are made clean (John 15:3), having been born again (I Peter 1:23). We are set apart from the world and completely segregated from its corruption by that powerful word (John 17:17). It furnishes us everything necessary to life and godliness (II Peter 1:1-3). For all of this we should be constantly thankful.

THANKFUL FOR DUTIES IMPOSED

The charge we have to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth is the most sacred duty, the most exalted honor and the most tremendous responsibility ever devolving upon human agents. Those early Christians counted it their most treasured commitment, their finest obligation to tell their friends and neighbors this wonderful story of Jesus and his redemption. They went everywhere preaching the word (Acts 8:4). "They departed from the presence of the

council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41).

"To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see" (Ephesians 3:8-9).

Paul counted this, and other duties to the Lord Jesus Christ, as a grace—a gift—bestowed upon him and he was thankful. Too many of us think of this duty as a hard, wearisome task which requires *blood, sweat and tears*, and most of us are not willing to undergo such sacrifices.

Things that are tiring and tedious are not objects for which we are inclined to give thanks! Hunger, cold and destitution, as well as physical pain and hardships, accompanied Paul through the entire course of his life of service to Christ.

"But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ ... that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:7-11).

It is this kind of gratitude that will cause us to plant the gospel of Christ on every continent and in every country the world over in every generation. Let us be thankful that He has chosen us to be His servants and has bestowed upon us this grace—to make known to the nations the unsearchable riches of Christ.

THE BOUNDARIES OF PRAYER

"And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear" (I Peter 1:17). It seems natural that we should want to communicate with Him for it is "in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

"God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things" (Acts 17:24-25). Knowing this, we should want to stay in touch with Him.

James tells us: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning" (James 1:17). In our awareness of this, recognizing that He is the source of all that we have, we should strongly desire a closeness, a connection, an association with Him who dispenses all these wonderful things to us.

THE PRIVILEGE OF TALKING TO HIM

"And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!' " (Galatians 4:6). It is not that we deserve this great blessing, but through His inestimable love, it is a privilege He confers. "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16). The effectual fervent prayer of Hannah availed much. She was given a son (I Samuel 1). The effective, fervent prayer of Elijah availed much (James 5:17-18). The effectual fervent prayer of righteous Daniel availed much (Daniel 6).

PRAYER, AN OUTLET FOR OUR SOUL'S LONGINGS

"Is any among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms" (James 5:13).

HANNAH'S PRAYER AND PROMISE

"And she [Hannah] was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the Lord and wept in anguish" (I Samuel 1:10). "Then she made a vow and said, 'O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life' " (I Samuel 1:11). What a song of rejoicing and thanksgiving flowed from the heart and lips of Hannah when the Lord answered her prayer (I Samuel 2:1-10).

NEHEMIAH'S CONCERN FOR HIS PEOPLE

"When I [Nehemiah] heard these words, I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven" (Nehemiah 1:4).

JOB'S EARNEST PETITION

Job was a man of prayer and poured out his heart's longings and needs before God. "So it was, when the days of feasting had run their course, that Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, 'It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.' Thus Job did regularly" (Job 1:5).

"Then Job arose, tore his robe and shaved his head; and he fell to the ground and worshiped. And he said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong" (Job 1:20-22).

AN OUTPOURING OF DAVID'S HEART

David seemed overwhelmed with the emotions created by his own sins and transgressions and turned to God in trust and dependence in one of the most beautiful and meaningful prayers to be found anywhere.

Here are some excerpts from it: "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your loving kindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, 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. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight—that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless You judge. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear joy and gladness, that the bones You have broken may rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners shall be converted to You. Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, the God of my salvation, and my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness” (Psalm 51:1-14).

MOSES PERSISTENCE IN PRAYER

Moses’ feeling of great need and his deep concern for Israel caused him to spend forty days and nights in communion with God over their flagrant violations of His will.

“And I looked, and behold, you had sinned against the Lord your God—had made for yourselves a molded calf! You had turned aside quickly from the way which the Lord had commanded you. Then I took the two tablets and threw them out of my two hands and broke them before your eyes. And I fell down before the Lord, as at the first, forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all your sin which you committed in doing wickedly in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger. For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure with which the Lord was angry with you, to destroy you. But the Lord listened to me at that time also. And the Lord was very angry with Aaron and would have destroyed him; so I prayed for Aaron also at the same time. Then I took your sin, the calf which you had made, and burned it with fire and crushed it and ground it very small, until it was as fine as dust; and I threw its dust into the brook that descended from the mountain” (Deuteronomy 9:16-21).

PAUL PRAYED FREQUENTLY

No one, outside Jesus, prayed more frequently than Paul. Every direction in which he turned, every task he undertook, every circumstance of life in which he found himself, Paul prayed. His dependence upon God was total. None ever gave thanks more often or more sincerely than did he.

“And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs,

in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (II Corinthians 12:7-10).

I hope you will have noticed that the *boundaries of prayer* in all of these cases and examples cited have been fixed very largely by the disposition of the hearts of those praying. *There were such things as repentance, confession of sin, willingness to do the whole will of God, total trust in Him and contentment with how God handled their affairs.* In addition to all of these things, there was the ever present element of thanksgiving. What an excellent lesson for all of us to learn.

Prayer is a great well, an inexhaustible fountain, at which our thirst may be satisfied. Some stand by that well, draw and drink and fulfill their need. Others stand near by and die of thirst.

OBSERVE SOME OF PAUL'S PRAYER LIST

The Corinthians: "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God" (I Corinthians 1:4). **The Ephesians:** I "do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers" (Ephesians 1:16). **The Philippians:** "I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine" (Philippians 1:3-4). **The Thessalonians:** "... night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face" (I Thessalonians 3:9-10). **To Timothy:** "... I remember you in my prayers night and day" (II Timothy 1:3). **To Philemon:** "I thank my God, making mention of you in my prayers" (Philemon 4). What an extraordinary, noteworthy list; and there must have been many more. Paul believed in prayer. Would you like to have been included in that list?

THERE ARE SOME BOUNDARIES TO PRAYER

Someone has said: "I firmly believe that nothing lies beyond the reach of prayer, except what lies beyond the will of God." Most of these boundaries are set by man. Yet, man often blames God for any unanswered prayer—or any prayer he may feel is unanswered! Some things are not wrought by prayer, and, in all likelihood, it is because we try to make the power of prayer reach beyond the will of God. Maybe we are praying that *two plus two will not make four!* "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him" (I John 5:14-15).

1. **The boundary set by failure to ask:** "Yet you do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2). Unclaimed promises are like uncashed checks. When God makes a promise, the fulfillment of which is dependent upon prayer, then "let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace" (Hebrews 4:16). The Lord said, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). Failure to ask shuts one out from the blessings of God. We can never expect to get on our feet in progress, until we get on our knees in prayer. When man's prayers ascend to God, God's help and power descend to man. "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" (James 1:5).

2. **The bounds set by doubt:** "But let him ask in faith, with no doubting" (James 1:6). It is a matter of faith, of believing. "And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (Matthew 21:22). We often try to convince God that we have great need when we are not convinced that He even hears us! We pray for peace in this war torn world and discuss with our friends the probable length of the war, or when and where the next war will take place. We remark, "We are so involved in war, it just can't be over for a very long time." Or, we say, "Another war is looming on the horizon and it is bound to materialize soon." Many of us are like the woman who prayed that God would remove the mountain that obscured the view from her kitchen window. The next morning she hurried to her kitchen to look out and remarked: "It is still there just as I expected it to be!"

3. **The bounds set by wrongdoing:** This boundary of prayer is likely set by us more than any other. "One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination" (Proverbs 28:9). God will not listen to your prayers unless you listen to His precepts. If you will not regard His request, He will not regard your petition. "The Lord is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous" (Proverbs 15:29). "For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil" (I Peter 3:12). It is the effective fervent prayer of a righteous man that avails much (James 5:16).

The blind man whom Jesus encountered in John 9, said: "Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him" (John 9:31). The record does not indicate that this man was inspired, yet he spoke in keeping with what the Scriptures teach on the subject. And, more than that, Jesus did not contradict or gainsay his statement.

David knew the value of prayers and something of its bounds. "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear [me]" (Psalm 66:18).

It is sin that separates man from God. "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1-2). So, this is the real reason why many prayers are not answered. He who prays the right kind of prayer will endeavor to live the right kind of life.

Let me make this suggestion: Take a clean sheet of paper, and at the top put some such heading as *My Mistakes, My Failures, My Sins*. And I might also suggest that you get plenty of paper and quite a number of pencils! The list may surprise you! Write them down in order—1, 2, 3—mistakes, errors, sins, failures, of which you are aware. You may counter, "I already know about them and do not need to write them down."

But I challenge you to write them down. They look different on paper. Don't just glance at them; give them some attention and study them. Don't let anyone see the list. They know enough about you already! It is for your own personal check-up and is between you and God alone. Then, when you have finished, take the first one and

find every passage you can in the Bible on that particular sin, read them carefully and ask God to help you overcome that sin. And determine that this sin will not condemn your soul. Continue this process. There is no doubt but that this will help greatly.

4. **The bounds set by self-righteousness.** The example of this sin that comes first to my mind is that of the Pharisee and the publican. "He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess." 'And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" 'I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted' " (Luke 18:9-14).

Paul told the Corinthians: "For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise" (II Corinthians 10:12).

This is what a sinner does. Although he is outside the church, he boasts, "I am just as good, if not better, than those in the church. I am not guilty of some of the sins they commit: gossip, bitterness, hate, division. I go to church some of the time, and many of them do no more than that. I give my money to good causes. In fact, I am better than many of them."

David cast aside the cloak of self-righteousness and prayed: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties" (Psalm 139:23). We may not always know our own thoughts and our own ways. So often we try to justify what we think, say and do until we are blinded to our true selves. We need to earnestly pray, "Lead me in the everlasting way," knowing that we need God's guidance always. It is hard for us to see our own lives as they are. Often we are not as good as we really think we are.

"If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless [vain]" (James 1:26). The meaning of *vain* is worthless. Then James proceeds to tell us in verse 27 what *worthwhile religion* is or should be. There are so many faults that we readily and clearly see in the lives of others around us, but are unable to detect in our own lives. "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye" (Matthew 7:3)?

5. **The bounds set by selfishness.** "You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:3). One of the thieves, who was crucified by the side of Jesus, said: "... save Yourself and us" (Luke 23:39).

The religion of Christ is the most unselfish religion the world has ever known. The true Christian concerns himself with the welfare and good fortune of the other person. Words like *one another* and *each*

other are found many times in the New Testament, telling us what our attitude toward and our treatment of *one another* should be.

I counted seventy-one (71) times this one word (another) is used in the New Testament on how we should or should not treat one another. Seventeen of those times we are admonished to love one another (John 13:34-35; Romans 12:10; Galatians 5:14; Ephesians 4:2; I Thessalonians 4:9; I John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 21; II John 5). Look at some of these passages which show that Christianity is the exact opposite of selfishness: "In honor given preference to one another" (Romans 12:10).

"To be like-minded toward one another" (Romans 15:5). "Through love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13). "Forgiving one another" (Ephesians 4:32). "Be kind to one another" (ibid.). "Bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2). "Comfort one another" (I Thessalonians 4:18). "Edify one another" (I Thessalonians 5:11). "Having compassion for one another" (I Peter 3:8). "Be hospitable to one another" (I Peter 4:9).

These are a few of the passages that tell us of the unselfish character of Christianity. In his dying hour, Stephen did not pray for himself, but for others. "Lord, do not charge them with this sin" (Acts 7:60). Paul prayed unceasingly for others, but only three times that his thorn in the flesh might be removed (II Corinthians 12:8). I fear that many of us as Christians have reversed this order. We pray for others three times, and we pray for ourselves without ceasing!

6. The bounds set by neglect. One should pray, but he should not neglect to work. He certainly taught us to work and pray, as well as watch and pray (Matthew 26:41). And he warned us not to neglect to give thanks. "In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (I Thessalonians 5:18). "But in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6). I have known some people along the way who never said, "Thank you."

It is so easy for us to daily receive from God's abundance, and then come to think we are deserving of what we get. Somehow we feel that God owes it to us. This is a characteristic of people all over the world. I hear people ask: "What is the government doing for me?" "What is this city or community contributing to my welfare and the advantage of my people?"

I noticed in the newspaper some time ago where America had given one large, poor country, eight and one-half million tons of wheat. There was some delay in the next ship. It arrived about thirty days late; and the people in that country were mad at the Americans and were negotiating with Russia to provide some of their needs.

After supplying some European countries with more than 100 billion dollars worth of goods, one prominent European said: "We owe the Americans nothing and we are not grateful to them."

I do not know that we are very different in America. Many of us seem to think that the world owes us, and should provide sumptuously to satisfy our needs, or wants. Gratitude is a commodity seriously wanting among many so-called Christians.

Nine of those lepers whom Jesus healed never came back. Only one returned to thank him, and he was a Samaritan! As long as things are going well with us in life—the seas are smooth sailing, there are no clouds in the sky, there is nothing to upset the boat, all is well and we neglect to take time to give thanks! No wonder our prayers are not heard and answered!

7. **The bounds set by lack of forgiveness.** This is certainly one of the most common boundaries we set. Jesus taught us to pray: “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). Jesus further taught His disciples during His stay with them: “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14-15).

“And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32). Without doubt this is one of the most difficult lessons we have to learn. We hold and hoard bitterness and animosity in our hearts and they fester to make our lives miserable. The Lord promised He would forgive us and remember our sins no more forever (Hebrews 8:8-12). Then he commands us to forgive in the same way. This is where we miserably fail, and then we wonder why our prayers are not answered.

We have erected a barrier, a blockade, across which God refuses to come. It is up to us to remove that barricade, because it forms a roadblock to the hearing and answering of our prayers. Peter asked Jesus one time, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times” (Matthew 18:21)? This sets a boundary that bars the answers to our prayers.

If we would have God answer our prayers—and surely we want Him too, for we need Him so much—then we must hear and respond to His will concerning the way we conduct our lives as Christians. It is hoped that we will all see that prayer is too valuable for us not to avail ourselves of its tremendous benefits.