

The GOSPEL TRUTH

From the book “Power from on High”

By: Charles G. Finney

[Charles Finney 1792-1875 led over 500,000 souls to Christ. Not to a mere conversion but to a full salvation through sanctification. A survey found that 85% of those he led to Christ were actively walking with God 10 years after their conversion. Many Christians, across denominational lines, consider him to have been America’s greatest evangelist and the founder of modern revivalism.]

CHAPTER 6

PREVAILING PRAYER

Prevailing prayer is that which secures an answer. Saying prayers is not offering prevailing prayer. The prevalence of prayer does not depend so much on quantity as on quality. I do not know how better to approach this subject than by relating a fact of my own experience before I was converted. I relate it because I fear such experiences are but too common among unconverted men.

I do not recollect having ever attended a prayer-meeting until after I began the study of law. Then, for the first time, I lived in a neighborhood where there was a prayer-meeting weekly. I had neither known, heard, nor seen much of religion; hence I had no settled opinions about it. Partly from curiosity and partly from an uneasiness of mind upon the subject, which I could not well define, I began to attend that prayer-meeting. About the same time I bought the first Bible that I ever owned, and began to read it. I listened to the prayers which I heard offered in those prayer-meetings with all the attention that I could give to prayers so cold and formal. In every prayer they prayed for the gift and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Both in their prayers and in their remarks, which were occasionally interspersed, they acknowledged that they did not prevail with God. This was most evident, and had almost made me a skeptic.

Seeing me so frequently in their prayer-meeting, the leader, on one occasion, asked me if I did not wish them to pray for me. I replied: "No." I said: "I suppose that I need to be prayed for, but your prayers are not answered. You confess it yourselves." I then expressed my astonishment at this fact, in view of what the Bible said about the prevalence of prayer. Indeed, for some time my mind was much perplexed and in doubt in view of Christ's teaching on the subject of prayer and the manifest facts before me, from week to week, in this prayer-meeting. Was Christ a divine teacher? Did He actually teach what the Gospels attributed to Him? Did He mean what He said? Did prayer really avail to secure blessings from God? If so, what was I to make of what I witnessed from week to week and month to month in that prayer-meeting? Were they real Christians?

Was that which I heard real prayer, in the Bible sense? Was it such prayer as Christ had promised to answer? Here I found the solution.

I became convinced that they were under a delusion; that they did not prevail because they had no right to prevail. They did not comply with the conditions upon which God had promised to hear prayer. Their prayers were just such as God had promised not to answer. It was evident they were overlooking the fact that they were in danger of praying themselves into skepticism in regard to the value of prayer.

In reading my Bible I noticed such revealed conditions as the following:

(a) Faith in God as the answerer of prayer. This, it is plain, involves the expectation of receiving what we ask.

(b) Another revealed condition is the asking according to the revealed will of God. This plainly implies asking not only for such things as God is willing to grant, but also asking in such a state of mind as God can accept. I fear it is common for professed Christians to overlook the state of mind in which God requires them to be as a condition of answering their prayers.

For example: In offering the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come," it is plain that sincerity is a condition of prevailing with God. But sincerity in offering this petition implies the whole heart and life devotion of the petitioner to the building up of this kingdom. It implies the sincere and thorough consecration of all that we have and all that we are to this end. To utter this petition in any other state of mind involves hypocrisy, and is an abomination.

So in the next petition, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," God has not promised to hear this petition unless it be sincerely offered. But sincerity implies a state of mind that accepts the whole revealed will of God, so far as we understand it, as they accept it in heaven. It implies a loving, confiding, universal obedience to the whole known will of God, whether that will is revealed in His Word, by His Spirit, or in His providence. It implies that we hold ourselves and all that we have and are as absolutely and cordially at God's disposal as do the inhabitants of heaven. If we fall short of this, and withhold anything whatever from God, we "regard iniquity in our hearts," and God will not hear us.

Sincerity in offering this petition implies a state of entire and universal consecration to God. Anything short of this is withholding from God that which is His due. It is "turning away our ear from hearing the law." But what says the Scriptures? "He that turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be an abomination" (Prov. 28:9). Do professed Christians understand this?

What is true of offering these two petitions is true of all prayer. Do Christians lay this to heart? Do they consider that all professed prayer is an abomination if it be not offered in a state of entire consecration of all that we have and are to God? If we do not offer ourselves with and in our prayers, with all that we have; if we are not in a state of mind that cordially accepts and, so far as we know, perfectly conforms to the whole will of God, our prayer is an abomination. How awfully profane is the use very frequently made of the Lord's Prayer, both in public and in private. To hear men and women chatter over the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," while

their lives are anything but conformed to the known will of God is shocking and revolting. To hear men pray, "Your kingdom come," while it is most evident that they are making little or no sacrifice or effort to promote this kingdom, forces the conviction of bare-faced hypocrisy. Such is not prevailing prayer.

(c) Unselfishness is a condition of prevailing prayer. "You ask and receive not, because you ask amiss, that you may consume it upon your lusts" (James 4:3).

(d) Another condition of prevailing prayer is a conscience void of offense toward God and man. 1 John 3: 20, 22: "If our heart (conscience) condemns us, God is greater than our heart and knows all things; if our heart condemns us not, then have we confidence toward God, and whatsoever we ask we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight." Here two things are made plain: first, that to prevail with God we must keep a conscience void of offense; and, second, that we must keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.

(e) A pure heart is also a condition of prevailing prayer. Psalm 66:18: "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me."

(f) All due confession and restitution to God and man is another condition of prevailing prayer. Proverbs 28:13 "He that covers his sins shall not prosper. Whoso confesses and forsakes them shall find mercy."

(g) Clean hands is another condition. Psalm 26:6: "I will wash my hands in innocence, so will I compass Your altar, O Lord." 1 Timothy 2:8: "I will that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting."

(h) The settling of disputes and animosities among brethren is a condition. Matthew 5:23,24: "If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has ought against you, leave there your gift before the altar and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift."

(i) Humility is another condition of prevailing prayer. James 4:6: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

(j) Taking up the stumbling-blocks is another condition. Ezekiel 14:3: "Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumbling-block of their iniquity before their face. Should I be inquired of at all by them?"

(k) A forgiving spirit is a condition. Matthew 6:12: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"; Verse 15: "But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Heavenly Father forgive your trespasses."

(l) The exercise of a truthful spirit is a condition. Psalm 51:6: "Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts." If the heart is not in a truthful state, if it is not entirely sincere and unselfish, we regard iniquity in our hearts; and, therefore, the Lord will not hear us.

(m) Praying in the name of Christ is a condition of prevailing prayer.

(n) The inspiration of the Holy Spirit is another condition. All truly prevailing prayer is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:26, 27: "For we know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit itself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And He that searches the heart knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God." This is the true spirit of prayer. This is being led by the Spirit in prayer. It is the only really prevailing prayer. Do professed Christians really understand this? Do they believe that unless they live and walk in the Spirit, unless they are taught how to pray by the intercession of the Spirit in them, they cannot prevail with God?

(o) Fervency is a condition. A prayer, to be prevailing, must be fervent. James 5:16: "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that you may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."

(p) Perseverance or persistence in prayer is often a condition of prevailing. See the case of Jacob, of Daniel, of Elijah, of the Syrophenician woman, of the unjust judge, and the teaching of the Bible generally.

(q) Travail of soul is often a condition of prevailing prayer. "As soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children." "My little children," said Paul, "for whom I travail in birth again, till Christ be formed in you." This implies that he had travailed in birth for them before they were converted. Indeed, travail of soul in prayer is the only real revival prayer. If anyone does not know what this is, he does not understand the spirit of prayer. He is not in a revival state. He does not understand the passage already quoted--Romans 8:26, 27. Until he understands this agonizing prayer he does not know the real secret of revival power.

(r) Another condition of prevailing prayer is the consistent use of means to secure the object prayed for, if means are within our reach, and are known by us to be necessary to the securing of the end. To pray for a revival of religion, and use no other means, is to tempt God. This, I could plainly see, was the case of those who offered prayer in the prayer-meeting of which I have spoken. They continued to offer prayer for a revival of religion, but out of meeting they were as silent as death on the subject, and opened not their mouths to those around them. They continued this inconsistency until a prominent impenitent man in the community administered to them in my presence a terrible rebuke. He expressed just what I deeply felt.

He rose, and with the utmost solemnity and tearfulness said: "Christian people, what can you mean? You continue to pray in these meetings for a revival of religion. You often exhort each other here to wake up and use means to promote a revival. You assure each other, and assure us who are impenitent, that we are in the way to hell; and I believe it. You also insist that if you should wake up, and use the appropriate means, there would be a revival, and we should be converted. You tell us of our great danger, and that our souls are worth more than all worlds; and yet you keep about your comparatively trifling employments and use no such means. We have no revival and our souls are not saved." Here he broke down and fell, sobbing, back into his seat. This rebuke fell heavily upon that prayer-meeting, as I shall ever remember.

It did them good; for it was not long before the members of that prayer-meeting broke down, and we had a revival. I was present in the first meeting in which the revival spirit was manifest. Oh! how changed was the tone of their prayers, confessions, and supplications. I remarked, in returning home, to a friend: "What a change has come over these Christians. This must be the beginning of a revival." Yes; a wonderful change comes over all the meetings whenever the Christian people are revived. Then their confessions mean something. They mean reformation and restitution. They mean work. They mean the use of means. They mean the opening of their pockets, their hearts and hands, and the devotion of all their powers to the promotion of the work.

(s) Prevailing prayer is specific. It is offered for a definite object. We cannot prevail for everything at once. In all the cases recorded in the Bible in which prayer was answered, it is noteworthy that the petitioner prayed for a definite object.

(t) Another condition of prevailing prayer is that we mean what we say in prayer; that we make no false pretenses; in short, that we are entirely childlike and sincere, speaking out of the heart, nothing more nor less than we mean, feel, and believe.

(u) Another condition of prevailing prayer is a state of mind that assumes the good faith of God in all His promises.

(v) Another condition is "watching unto prayer" as well as "praying in the Holy Spirit." By this I mean guarding against everything that can quench or grieve the Spirit of God in our hearts. Also watching for the answer, in a state of mind that will diligently use all necessary means, at any expense, and add entreaty to entreaty.

When the fallow ground is thoroughly broken up in the hearts of Christians, when they have confessed and made restitution--if the work be thorough and honest--they will naturally and inevitably fulfill the conditions, and will prevail in prayer. But it cannot be too distinctly understood that none others will. What we commonly hear in prayer and conference meetings is not prevailing prayer. It is often astonishing and lamentable to witness the delusions that prevail upon the subject. Who that has witnessed real revivals of religion has not been struck with the change that comes over the whole spirit and manner of the prayers of really revived Christians? I do not think I ever could have been converted if I had not discovered the solution of the question: "Why is it that so much that is called prayer is not answered?"

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