

GETTING BY THOSE PRAYER BLOCKERS
FEBRUARY 8, 1987

Page 1

When you try to pray, do you sometimes feel your prayers don't go anywhere? When you try to relate to God, do you sometimes feel blocked, like you ran into Refrigerator, the blocker for the Chicago Bears? When you try to get through to God, do you sometimes feel as if you have run into a wall? A wall may be built to keep a person from getting out, but also a wall may be built to keep someone on the outside from getting in.

Frustrated Christians often say, "It just seems as if God doesn't hear me," or "My prayers don't seem to go higher than the ceiling," or "God seems a thousand miles away." Some people become inactive church members when they experience the prayer blockers. They join the church, become part of the church family, with high expectations. Perhaps they came into the church because they felt they needed to make some drastic changes in their lives. They have problems, or lack a sense of direction, so they joined the church. They came to the church with high hopes, high expectations, and then were disappointed when they didn't get zapped.

Perhaps one reason for failing to get in touch with God as we would like is because we have a wall--a blocker--that is keeping us from relating to God in the fullest. We send out our energy to God, but somewhere it gets blocked, and we are prevented from finding, living and experiencing a deep relationship with God.

But before we deal with prayer blockers, let's look at some false assumptions some people have about prayer. First, do not expect or assume you will always feel in touch with God. I don't know what you expect to feel but feelings are not good barometers. If you expect to feel warm or bubbly or prickly all over every time you pray, you will be disappointed. It's like love. You won't always feel romantic towards your spouse, but that does not mean you have fallen out of love.

A second false assumption about prayer is don't assume God is a puppet who responds when you pull the strings. Don't assume that if you do such and such, God will answer, or even let you know that you are in God's presence. God does not respond to magical formulas. Just because you do steps 1-2-3 does not mean God will automatically respond.

A third false assumption is don't assume there is no work or discipline involved. Don't assume that because you make one response--you make a commitment to Jesus or you join the church--everything thereafter is peaches and cream. It's like marriage. For a marriage to last and grow into something beautiful takes time, energy, commitment, and constant attention. There are high moments that make it all worthwhile, but those high moments are not constant or predictable. They point the way, they offer encouragement, but to get from one high moment to another requires work, commitment, devotion, and good habits.

Now for some prayer blockers. First, test your attitude. Are you open to the Holy Spirit? Arnold Prater in his book, Learning to Pray, puts it this way, "You can't get fixed until you're broken." You've heard the good advice, "If it isn't broken, don't fix it." Likewise is it true, "If it isn't broken, it can't get fixed." Psalm 51:17 gives us a promise, "The sacrifice

GETTING BY THOSE PRAYER BLOCKERS
FEBRUARY 8, 1987

Page 2

acceptable to God is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." The Good News Version puts it this way, "My sacrifice is a humble spirit, O God; you will not reject a humble and repentant heart."

God rarely interferes in our lives, and when we put up a wall, a blocker, God does not penetrate that wall, until asked, until invited. God is very polite, except once in a while he hits us with a lightning bolt or an earthquake in hopes of waking us up and letting us know he is there. God cannot relate to us in full power while we have stiff necks, while we are filled with pride. We cannot get through to God when we have built a wall of self-satisfaction and self-congratulation. If you think you have done a wonderful job with your life on your own, and are quite smug about it, how can you expect to "turn on" God whenever you please. God responds to a broken and humble heart.

Jesus told of two men who went to the temple to pray. One prayed, "O God, I thank you for my good life. I thank you that I am not like other people, that I am superior." I know it's strange, but Jesus didn't think much of that prayer. Oh, we're too polite these days to be quite so blatant. But some people pray, "Oh, God, I don't understand why so many people are homeless, or on welfare. They could certainly work if they wanted to. After all, God, I made it on my own. Nobody helped me. Of course, I realize I am white, my ancestors were not illiterate slaves and that gives me a certain advantage. I admit I received a superior education, had parents who supported me, and got quite a few breaks; but, O Lord, I deserved every break I got. And if I made it successfully, certainly all these parasites on the system can. O Lord, I thank you for my good life." I'm afraid Jesus doesn't think much of that prayer either. And if you are praying that kind of prayer, if you have that kind of attitude and opinion about yourself, it is easy to understand why you have difficulty connecting with the God who says that the sacrifice acceptable is a broken spirit.

Jesus told of two men in the parable. The one prayed out of his self-righteousness. After all, he was white, male and educated. The other man was a sinner, looked down on by polite society. He was a tax collector, hated even more in those days because a tax collector was a traitor to his own people. He made deals with the Romans. The tax collector bowed his head in humility and asked, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner." Jesus liked his prayer. Jesus said that man would go to his house justified, blessed. That man had broken through the prayer blocker of self-pride. He had come to terms with himself. He knew who he was. He admitted he had needs. He admitted he could not live his life on his own terms. His heart and spirit were broken and, therefore, could be fixed.

The first prayer blocker is a proud, self-righteous attitude. It is so subtle. I'm sure that if I asked all of you who are self-righteous to raise your hands, I wouldn't get many takers. But in the silence of prayer, with the example of Jesus before you and the kind of life he lived and taught us to live, compare yourself with that ideal, and then admit, "O God, I really need help. I cannot do it on my own. I need your grace. I need your power." The promise is there for us all. God will not reject a humble and repentant heart; a broken and contrite heart, God will not despise.

GETTING BY THOSE PRAYER BLOCKERS
FEBRUARY 8, 1987

Page 3

A second prayer blocker is unforgivingness, when you are unwilling or unable to forgive. This is a giant. Unforgivingness is certain to block God from moving in your life. Your prayers will not go anywhere if you are unforgiving. Do you know why? You put a curse on your head every Sunday, and every time you pray the Lord's Prayer. Do you realize what you are asking when you pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"? As I forgive others, Lord, forgive me! Jesus was not content to leave the matter there. Jesus was afraid his disciples would overlook the obvious, so Jesus added these words in Matthew 6:14-15, "If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done." Could Jesus be any clearer? But countless persons cannot understand why in one breath they pronounce, "I will never forgive so and so," and in the next breath complain how they feel their prayers don't go anywhere. They are effectively being blocked.

Now there are at least two types of forgiveness. The first type is the forgiving of those who have wronged you, hurt you, and who ask you for forgiveness. These are the folks who feel sorry for what they have done and ask you to forgive them. A man went to the hospital to visit his partner, who was dying of some unknown disease. Suddenly the dying man said, "John, before I go I must confess some things to you and ask your forgiveness. I know I'm about to die. I want you to know that I robbed the firm of \$100,000. I sold our secret formula to our competitors, and also, John, I'm the fellow who supplied your wife with the evidence that helped her get her divorce from you." John mumbled, "Oh, that's OK, old man. I'm the guy who poisoned you." An old Vietnamese proverb says, "When vengeance is heaped upon vengeance, there is nothing left."

The second type of forgiveness is the forgiving of those who have hurt you but who are not sorry and who do not ask to be forgiven. Do you forgive those who do not want to be forgiven, who do not ask to be forgiven? Do they deserve to be forgiven? I've had people ask me, "Do you mean to tell me I am supposed to forgive her when she doesn't even apologize?" Yes, because the unforgivingness only hurts you. Perhaps the offender is inconvenienced slightly, but evidently the incident is not so disruptive in the offender's life to bring him/her to repentance. But the incident is eating away at you, the victim.

Some ask, "What about people with whom I have no relationship? For example, am I supposed to forgive someone who robs me and I don't even know who he is?" Yes, because the unforgivingness is hurting you. It is eating away inside you, causing who knows how many problems. The burning, churning, hard core of unforgivingness could turn into cancer or ulcers or keep you awake at night. In other words, when you choose not to forgive others, even when they do not apologize or ask for forgiveness, you are hurting yourself. When you hold a grudge against someone, you are holding it against yourself, and it will eat your insides. I believe Jesus was emphatic in his admonition to forgive others because he knew what unforgivingness does to the "unforgiver."

Clara Barton, the famous nurse, was one who held no grudges or resentment. One day she befriended a woman who had been cruel and had spread false rumors about her. A friend said to Clara, "How can you be so kind to that woman?"

GETTING BY THOSE PRAYER BLOCKERS

DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

FEBRUARY 8, 1987

Don't you remember what she did to you?" Clara answered calmly, "No, I distinctly remember forgetting that." That is forgiveness: distinctly remember forgetting. Sometimes we confuse forgiveness with memory, and because the memory lingers, feel we haven't forgiven and forgotten the matter. No, forgiveness does not necessarily mean that the incident is erased from memory. Forgiveness means to remember forgetting the incident. What you remember is not only the incident but also the choice you made to forgive and forget.

After the Civil War, General Robert E. Lee visited a Kentucky woman who took him to the remains of a grand old tree in front of her home. There she cried bitterly that its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Federal artillery fire. She waited for Lee to condemn the North or at least sympathize with her loss. But Lee paused, and then said, "Ma'am, cut it down and forget it." Are there some old trees of resentment, grudges, and hurts you need to cut down and forget, so that you then can distinctly remember forgetting them, and get on with your life?

Remove those prayer blockers. Break through that wall. When you are broken, admit it so God can get you repaired. When you have needs, be open to God so that God can move in your life. Break through the wall of unforgiveness. Let the walls come tumbling down so that you may be filled with the Holy Spirit, the love, joy, peace and forgiveness of God.