

OBSTACLES TO ANSWERED PRAYER

By Bill May

A mother was making coleslaw in her kitchen, and her little boy was just big enough to want everything and to be into everything. This was before the invention of modern food processors, so she was chopping the cabbage with a butcher knife on her kitchen counter. Pretty soon the little 2-year-old saw that knife with the black handle and long, shiny blade. He didn't know what it was, but he wanted it desperately. He kept asking his mother for it and reaching out, so she kept pushing him back with her elbow and moving the cabbage farther back on the deck.

Then the phone rang. It was one of the woman's dear friends, so they got into an animated conversation. In her haste to answer the phone, the mother had accidentally laid that knife down right on the edge of the counter. The little boy looked at it and said to himself, "I think I could reach that." So he got on his tip toes, reached up, and got it. Then he sat down in the middle of the floor, thinking, "I can't believe I have this thing—whatever it is." Just about that time, the boy's mother turned and saw him with that knife. She screamed and ran across the room, grabbing the knife out of his chubby hands. Then he really began to make an earnest appeal for the knife.

Do you suppose the mother said, "Well, all right; since you want it so badly, I'll just give it to you"? Of course not.

Likewise, when we cry out to God so sincerely and so earnestly for something, He might say "No" because we are asking for a knife. Asking for the wrong thing is the first obstacle to answered prayer. James 4:3 says, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." One of the first things we'll want to do when we get to heaven is to thank the Lord He didn't give us everything we asked for in prayer.

Covered-Up Sins

The second obstacle to answered prayer is found in Psalm 66:18: "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." Now perhaps you are saying: "Wait a minute! Does that mean if I have any sin in my life, I may as well not pray?" No, it doesn't. God will always hear a prayer of genuine repentance. This Scripture is talking about presumptuous sin. Let me illustrate.

A congregation was having an evangelistic crusade, and it was going very well. One man sat in the second or third row, and every night as the evangelist preached, he said, "Amen, amen." On the fourth night, the evangelist spoke about "Practical Godliness" and took seven minutes of his message to focus on honesty. Suddenly the man sitting up front stopped saying, "Amen." He dropped his head until the service was over, and then he literally ran out of the auditorium. The evangelist noticed the abrupt change in his behavior and thought to himself: "I believe the Lord spoke to that man tonight. I'll have to watch for him tomorrow."

When the evangelist stood up to preach the next evening, he noticed that the man who usually sat near the front was by himself, sitting way back in a little alcove underneath the balcony. His head was down, and he did not say "Amen" even once. The evangelist thought to himself: "I've got to see him right after this service. But last night when the service was over, he literally ran out of the auditorium! I think I'm a little younger than he is. Maybe I can outrun him."

So at the end of his message, the evangelist ran straight for a little side door that led out into the parking lot. But nobody was outside. He thought: "I can't waste a second. Maybe he is around in front of the church." So he ran around the church and saw some cars parked along the curb. One of them had its lights on and the motor running, so the determined preacher ran up and knocked on the window, motioning for the driver to roll it down. Sure enough, it was the man from his meeting.

The evangelist said, "Could I talk to you for a minute, please?"

"I guess so," the man replied. He invited the evangelist into the passenger seat and then turned off the engine.

The evangelist said: "I'm so glad you have been coming to our meeting. What an encouragement you have been to me to sit there and say, 'Amen, amen.' But last night you suddenly stopped saying, 'Amen,' put your head down, and then tonight you sat way out underneath the balcony. I just wanted to see if anything is wrong."

The man said, "No, everything is just fine."

"All right," the evangelist said, "but at these meetings we pray earnestly that the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon us all, and if things need to be pointed out in our lives, they will be pointed out by the Holy Spirit. I just thought that maybe

God had said something to you that made you uncomfortable and that you might need some help."

"I said, No!" the man nearly shouted.

The evangelist said, "I understand." Then he had a word of prayer with him and started to get out of the car when the man blurted out: "Wait just a minute! There really is a problem," the man conceded. "I just hate to talk about it. This has to do with copper rivets."

Then he began to pour out his story. The man worked for a boat builder, and great big copper rivets were used to put the boats together. Some time before, he had asked his boss for a raise, reasoning that he put out 50 percent more work than any other person in the shop. But the boss refused. The man stewed about it for awhile and then decided to start taking rivets home in his lunch pail. He had them in boxes under the bed, in the closet, in the attic, and in the garage.

"I was about ready to sell them and get my raise," he told the evangelist, "and I was really enjoying it—until the other night when you spoke about honesty. I began to see rivets. What shall I do?"

The evangelist said, "Well, I'm glad you asked me. The Bible is very clear. Ezekiel 33:15 says to take them back."

"I thought so," the man said. "That is why I didn't want to discuss it. I can't do it."

"Why not?" asked the evangelist.

"Well," he said, "it is because of my boss. This man is godless. And he thinks Christians are the biggest farce in the world. Once he told me, 'The only difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is that a non-Christian doesn't claim to be anything, and of course, he isn't. A Christian, on the other hand, claims to be something but isn't.' Now, if I go in and say, 'I've been stealing rivets from you,' what chance will we ever have to reach him?"

The evangelist said, "I didn't write the Bible, but as a pastor and a worker for God, I need to tell you what it says. It says, 'Take them back.' When you go, you

won't go by yourself. The Lord says: 'I'll go with you. I'll be with you till the end of the world.' So, remember you have company."

The next evening when the evangelist got to the pulpit, the man was seated in his original spot near the front of the church. And when he began preaching, the man said a loud "Amen!" When the service was over, the man ran up to the platform and said, "Guess what?"

"You got rid of some rivets," the evangelist answered.

He said, "Yes, I did. I knew I wouldn't take them back if I didn't do it immediately. So early this morning, I went out and sat in the waiting room at the boss's office. When he arrived, he said, 'Come on in.' I went in and sat down.

"I said, 'Oh, I hate to tell you this. I've got to tell you something that really makes me feel bad. You didn't know it, but I've been stealing rivets from the company. I asked you for a raise, and you wouldn't give it, so I voted myself a raise. And I've got rivets everywhere in my house and garage. I planned to sell them and get my raise, and I was rejoicing about it until the other night when the evangelist at my church spoke on honesty. And, oh man, I knew I was going to have to do something about those rivets.'

The man continued, "'God spoke to me so loudly and so clearly, and I feel badly because that is not Christian conduct. I can't defend it. But I'm going to bring them back. If it costs you anything, I'll pay for it. Anything you want me to do, I'll do it. I just want to get it right.'

Then the boss said, "Well, you didn't know it, but I knew you were taking those rivets all the time. I can tell you almost to the rivet how many you have, and you aren't the only Christian I employ who is doing the same thing."

At this, the man nearly fainted. He thought: "Uh-oh, here it comes. I know what he's going to say next." But instead, the boss said: "If you've found something over at your church that'll make you do what you just did, then I think I'd like to look into it."

If you are praying and you're not getting through, maybe it is because you have some "copper rivets" to take back. The Bible is very clear on this matter. It says,

"He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy." Proverbs 28:13. Praise God! It doesn't matter what it is, how horrendous it is, or how indescribably awful. Bring it before the Lord to be cleansed. What a blessed Lord we serve!

Window Shopping

The third reason why some prayers are not answered is found in Matthew 21:22. It says, "And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive."

The ladies I know and love the best like to do a thing called "window shopping." It means they just look at everything and say, "Isn't that stunning!" and "Wouldn't you like to have that?" or "That would look good on you," and that sort of thing. When they're window shopping, they don't expect to buy anything. They're just looking.

You know what I think? I think we sometimes pray as if we're just window shopping. We say: "It would sure be wonderful if I got rid of this temper," or "It would sure be great if my dad gave his heart to the Lord," or "Wouldn't 50 baptisms be nice?" But we don't expect to take anything home, and that's exactly what happens.

Wanting Our Own Way

The next principle is one that has been a challenge to me. It says, "And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us." 1 John 5:14. We find the same thought in the Lord's Prayer. "Thy will be done." Matthew 6:10. I don't have a bit of trouble saying it, but I sometimes have a lot of trouble meaning it. What I often pray goes something like this: "Lord, I don't care how you work it out. You can go about it any way You want to, but this is what I want You to do. Thy will be done."

Does that sound familiar? It's such an easy thing to do, and here is the reason. It has to do with the root of sin. Isaiah 53:6 puts it in a nutshell: "We have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord hath laid on him [Jesus] the iniquity of us all." That's what sin is all about. I want to have my own way, and you want to have your own way.

"Thy will be done"? No, mine. We might let Him take the wheel for awhile, but then we jerk it out of His hands. That's why He died. I want to have my own way; you want to have your own way.

Here's why it is so good to say, "Thy will be done." The last part of Psalm 84:11 says, "No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly." If it's good and if it's going to be good for me, then I will get it. Let Him decide. He knows.

The purpose of prayer is not to give us what we want. It is to make us the kind of people God wants us to be. Sometimes He has to say to me, "No, Bill, you can't have that." He knows what I need, and He's telling me, "Bill, if you will just permit it, I will take you into the kingdom. I know what has to happen to your character." He says, "As you pray, I'm listening very carefully. At times you may ask for something, and I may give you something else in order to help you get to the kingdom. Trust Me!" That's what God is saying to us over and over again.

Trouble in the Home

The next principle for effective prayer is found in 1 Peter 3:7: "Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered."

This Scripture is clearly asking, "Is there trouble in the home?" There's trouble everywhere today. And a Christian's home is where the devil likes to go. He can upset everything.

Is there trouble in your home? What are you doing about it? Your marriage may look impossible. You may think, "What are we going to do?" My friends, I don't care what the trouble is or how impossible it seems. Start getting down on your knees, hold hands with your spouse, and say, "Lord, we do not know what to do with this mess. It's out of our control. We don't love each other anymore." Whatever the problem is, say, "We're counting on you, Lord."

Isn't it wonderful to serve a miracle worker? He's just waiting to work the miracles. In 1 Peter 3:7, the Lord is telling us that if there is a problem in the home, don't hide from it. Don't ignore it. Get down on your knees, and ask the Lord to solve it. Otherwise, you will suddenly discover you're having problems with your prayers.

A Bitter Heart

The biggest problem in God's church today is addressed in Mark 11: 25, 26. It says: "And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have aught against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses." What a passage!

There is nothing worse than a bad attitude. It eats your innards. And that is what the Lord is talking about in Mark 11:25, 26. People do so many things that just drive you up the wall, and it's easy to let a barrier build up. A little hatred. A little anger. A little bitterness. You know, the devil is very wise. He watches. He's too wise to give Christians little trials, because he knows that we'd thump those out of the way. So he has someone do something to me that is so utterly rotten and filthy and low-down and demeaning that if I tell you about it, you'll get angry yourself. You'd probably even say, "I don't blame you for being upset." Then I begin to get this kind of righteous indignation.

By the way, I'm not completely sure that I know what righteous indignation is, but most of it I've seen didn't seem really righteous. We justify ourselves by comparing ourselves with other people. But the devil knows that I am just as lost if I'm being bitter for a real "good" reason as for a "bad" reason. So he gives me a "good" reason so that I'll feel justified going around lost with bitterness in my heart.

You can have bitterness or you can have love, but you can't have both. If you settle for bitterness, love departs, and then you don't get through anymore with your prayers.

Don't Know Him

Have you ever heard anybody say, "In this old world, it certainly isn't what you know, but who you know"? If you're like I am, you've probably said it a few times yourself. Do you know what? In prayer, this is true. It's all in Who you know.

Do you know Him, whom to know is life eternal? You see, the devil's strategy is to get us all so everlastingly busy doing good things that we crowd out time for the King of kings. There is no way to get acquainted with anybody unless you spend time

together. That's true with God, too. You can know Him for awhile, but if you stop spending time with Him, in time you won't really know Him anymore.

According to Matthew 7:21-23, when Jesus comes back, a lot of people will say, "Oh, here He is." But He'll say, "Excuse me, I never knew you." Of course He knew who they were. What He means is, "I wanted so desperately to get acquainted with you. I wanted so desperately for you to spend time with Me. But you were always too busy. And so, you don't know Me."

Too busy? Who isn't too busy? The busier we get, the more urgent it is to find time to be on our knees with our Lord. Only then can we stay acquainted.

I would like to remind you that it's difficult to get appointments with people who are well-known. Have you ever tried to get an appointment with the mayor, governor, president, some wealthy tycoon? Pretty soon you'll say: "Forget it. He's not going to listen to me." But you know, God makes it easy. The King of kings, Lord of lords, and Saviour of the world has His door open and waiting for us. We don't even have to make an appointment. His telephone line is never busy. He's right there waiting for your call. Incredible! Astounding! Glorious! What a Lord to serve!