

Prerequisites to Practice to be Powerful in Prayer

Pastor Scott Estell

Introduction

Throughout history, there have been those who have sought to “gain the ear” of God through some peculiar prayer practices. In non-Christian circles, such practices have included the “vain repetitions” that Jesus referred to in Matthew 6:7, as well as the “prayer wheels” of Buddhists. In quasi-Christian circles, there have been the “prayer rugs” of those in the faith movement. And in Christian circles, there have been such practices as the “crying out loud” proposal of Bill Gothard.

The problem with each of these proposals is that they are not proposed by God in Scripture. They are extra-biblical at best and (in the case of most of them) anti-biblical at worst. The solution to such prayer problems, as with any such problem, is Scripture. So, what does the Bible say we must practice in order to be powerful in prayer? What are the conditions we must meet in order for God to comply with our call? What is required in order for God to respond to our requests?

Here are six prerequisites to practice in order to be powerful in prayer:

1. Become connected and keep connected to Christ.

Jesus said in John 15:7: *“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”*

- Becoming connected to Christ begins with being converted to Christ by repentant faith/believing repentance, confessing and turning from sin and placing one’s confidence/trust in Him as the One, and only One, who can save from sin.
- Once we become connected to Christ at conversion/become a Christian, we are called upon to keep our connection to Christ. Jesus said in John 15:4: “Abide in me.” While the Christian is commanded to keep this connection, as part of his human responsibility (see also 1 John 5:21 and Jude 21), God has committed to keeping the Christian, as part of His divine sovereignty (see John 17:12, 2 Corinthians 1:8-9, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, 2 Thessalonians 3:3, 2 Timothy 1:12, 4:18, 1 Peter 1:5, 1 John 5:18, Jude 1, and 24).

So, perseverance in the faith is a prerequisite to being powerful in prayer.

2. Be clean in your conduct.

The Christian is not only to persevere in the faith/belief, but also in faithfulness/behavior. Failure to so persevere (including the sin of prayerlessness)

often prevents prayer¹ and certainly prevents the Christian from being powerful in prayer.

- If we are not holy in conduct, God will not hear when we call:

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.
(Psalm 66:18)

“When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.” (Isaiah 1:15)

But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.
(Isaiah 59:2)

Then they will cry to the LORD, but He will not answer them; He will hide His face from them at that time, because they have made their deeds evil.
(Micah 3:4)

See also 1 Peter 3:7, which implies that a husband’s failure to be his wife’s companion and to consider her position and person hinders his prayers from being heard.

- Conversely, if we are holy in conduct, God will hear when we call:

The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and His ears toward their cry. (Psalm 34:15)

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 prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil. (1 Peter 3:12)

And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him. (1 John 3:22)

And if we are pure in practice, our praying will be powerful:

... The prayer of a righteous person has great power ... (James 5:16)

So, purity is also a prerequisite to being powerful in prayer.

¹An analogy might be how unresolved sin against one’s spouse tends to prevent, rather than promote, communication.

3. **Be calling.**

Jesus said in Matthew 7:7//Luke 11:9: “*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.*” The implication of this verse is that you have to ask in order to be given, you have to seek in order to find, and you have to knock in order for the door to be opened to you.

God likewise says in Jeremiah 33:3: “*Call to Me and I will answer you ...*”

James said in James 4:2: ... *You do not have, because you do not ask.*

The poet put it this way:

Life without purpose is barren indeed;
There can't be a harvest unless you plant seed.

If we send no ships out, no ships will come in.
Unless there's a contest, nobody can win,

For games can't be won unless they are played,
And prayers can't be answered unless they are prayed.

So, praying is a prerequisite to being powerful in prayer.

4. **Continue to call.**

“*Ask* [literally: keep on asking], *and it will be given to you*; *seek* [literally: keep on seeking], *and you will find*; *knock* [literally: keep on knocking], *and it will be opened to you.*” (Matthew 7:7//Luke 11:9, which is preceded by the parable of the persistent friend in Luke 11:5-8)

And He [Jesus] *told them a parable* [the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18:2f] *to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.* (Luke 18:1)

... be constant in prayer. (Romans 12:12)

Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance ... (Ephesians 6:18)

Continue steadfastly in prayer ... (Colossians 4:2)

Pray without ceasing, (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

So, perseverance/persistence in prayer is a prerequisite to being powerful in prayer.

- Prime examples of this in biblical history are Elijah (in 1 Kings 18:42-43), Nehemiah (in Nehemiah 1:6), David (in Psalm 55:17), Daniel (in Daniel 6:10), the church at Jerusalem (in Acts 2:42² and 12:5), the apostle Paul (in Romans 1:9, Philippians 1:4, Colossians 1:3 and 9, 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 and 3:10, 2 Thessalonians 1:11, and 2 Timothy 1:3), and Epaphras (in Colossians 4:12).
- A prime example of this in church history is George Mueller, who prayed for over 50 years for the salvation of two men, one of whom was saved shortly before Mueller died, the other after.

5. Call according to/consistent with what God has communicated.

Prayer is not about getting our will done in Heaven (James 4:3); rather, it is about getting God's will done on Earth (Matthew 6:10b, Matthew 26:39//Mark 14:36//Luke 22:42, and Matthew 26:42).³ Our prayers are one way God accomplishes His purposes. So, being powerful in prayer means perceiving God's plan, purposes, and passions and praying accordingly. As 1 John 5:14-15 says:

And this is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of Him.

The only way in which God makes His will known is His Word.⁴ So, being powerful in prayer means praying prayers that comply with what God through His

²The Greek verb translated "devoted" in this verse is an intensified form of a Greek verb for perseverance/endurance. It means something like: adhere strongly to, stick with, be obstinately persistent in, have a dogged determination. This same verb is found in other passages on prayer (Acts 1:14, 6:4, and Colossians 4:2).

³"Prayer is not a device for imposing our will upon God, but rather the bending of our will to His in the desire that His good will may be done" (D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistles of John*, p. 256). W. Bingham Hunter (*The God Who Hears*, p. 12; emphasis his) concurs: "... I passionately disagree with the notion that prayer is a way to get from God what we want. Christian prayer, as explained in Scripture, seems something else entirely: *Prayer is a means God uses to give us what he wants.*"

⁴Consider the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*; the Baptist distinctive of the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice; the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:17 and 2 Peter 1:3-4); and the cessation of all other means of special revelation with the completion of the canon of Scripture at the end of the first century A.D. (1 Corinthians 13:8-10).

prophets and apostles has penned in the pages of Scripture.⁵ Accordingly, John Bunyan defined prayer as “a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the heart or soul to God, through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit, for such things as God has promised, or according to the Word of God, for the good of the church, with submission in faith to the will of God.”

- Another way of communicating this concept is praying “in Jesus’ name”:

Whatever you ask in My name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in My name, I will do it. (John 14:13-14)

... so that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He may give it to you. (John 15:16)

... Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive ... (John 16:23-24)

”To pray in the Name of Christ ... is to pray as one who is at one with Christ, whose mind is the mind of Christ, whose desires are the desires of Christ, and whose purpose is one with that of Christ” (Samuel Chadwick, quoted in W. Bingham Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, p. 197).

⁵W. Bingham Hunter, in his book on prayer entitled, *The God Who Hears* (p. 104), writes: “Effectiveness in prayer will always be coupled with regular reading, memorizing of and meditating on Scripture. I see almost no potential to become a so-called prayer warrior where systematic Bible reading and study are absent. The Bible is the only divinely inspired guidebook to the will and thought of God. And learning to pray effectively boils down largely to learning to think like God and understand His will. Read the Book.” D. Edmond Hiebert (*Working with God Through Intercessory Prayer*, p. 108) writes regarding George Mueller, who, according to Donald Whitney (*Praying the Bible*, p. 82), had over 50,000 specific answers to prayer recorded in his journals: “We must learn to use the Bible as the guide for our praying. Prayer nourished and guided by the Word of God will be effective. George Mueller, a noted man of prayer, used this secret. For some years he had followed the custom of praying first and then reading the Bible, with no special connection between the two. Then he was led to turn the process completely around; after a word of invocation to have the Spirit’s teaching, he now spent hours pouring over the Word, filling himself with the living Word of God; after this, in the very mind of Christ which he had thus received, he poured out praise, prayer, and supplication in great fullness and assurance.” Donald Whitney (in his *Praying the Bible*, p. 7) mentions how God used one R. F. Gates “in ways neither of us could have ever imagined in that moment on March 1, 1985, when [he] held up the Bible and said, ‘When you pray, use the prayer book!’”

- Yet another way of communicating this concept is God’s Word abiding in the believer:

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (John 15:7).

Commenting on this verse, Edwin Blum (“John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 2:326) states: “Christ’s words condition and control such a believer’s mind so that his prayers conform to the Father’s will. Since his prayer is in accord with God’s will, the results are certain.” John Stott (quoted in W. Bingham Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, p. 195) adds: “It is only when Christ’s words abide in us that our prayers will be answered. Then we can ask what we will and it shall be done, because we shall will only what he wills.”

D. A. Carson (*A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, pp. 32-33) counsels: “...[O]ne of the most important elements in intercession is to think through, in the light of Scripture, what it is God wants us to ask for.” This would include:

- Praying for what the Bible explicitly reveals to be the will of God, which includes:
 - The salvation of sinners (1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9; cf. Ezekiel 18:23, 32, and 33:11), as did Paul in Romans 10:1
 - The sanctification of saints (1 Thessalonians 4:3), as did Jesus in John 17:17
- Praying for what the Bible explicitly says we ought to be praying for, which would include such things as:
 - Our enemies (Matthew 5:44//Luke 6:28)
 - Laborers for the harvest (Matthew 9:38)
 - Political leaders (1 Timothy 2:1-2)
 - Other believers (Ephesians 6:18 and James 5:16)
- Praying the prayers of Scripture⁶

So, perceiving and praying prayers that are parallel to God’s plan, purposes, and passions is another prerequisite to being powerful in prayer.

6. Be confident in God’s character and in what God has communicated.

⁶ See my “Praying the Prayers of Scripture” series (accessible under resources at faithwaybaptist-ypsilanti.com).

Faith in God and His Word is a final factor in effective praying.

- This begins with believing that God is not only able to answer our prayers, but is also quite willing, that He is magnanimous, not miserly.

“Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!” (Matthew 7:9-11//Luke 11:11-13)

John Newton said it like this:

Come, my soul, thy suit [petition] prepare:
Jesus loves to answer prayer.
He himself has bid thee pray,
Therefore will not say thee nay.

Thou art coming to a King,
Large petitions with thee bring.
For his grace and power are such,
None can ever ask too much.

- This also includes believing the promises pertaining to prayer by praying, faith simply being taking God as His Word, not only “standing on the promises of God,” but also walking according to them.

“And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.” (Matthew 21:22//Mark 11:24)

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord. (James 1:5-7)

So, being persuaded of God’s Person and promises is a final prerequisite to being powerful in prayer.

Conclusion

Being powerful in prayer is not the product of peculiar prayer practices. It is the product of applying the prerequisites that have been presented in Scripture:

- Becoming connected and keeping connected to Christ/persevering in the faith
- Being clean in conduct/being pure
- Calling/praying
- Continuing to call/persevering/persisting in prayer
- Calling according to/consistent with what God has communicated/perceiving and praying prayers that are parallel to God's plan, purposes, and passions
- Being confident in God's character and in what God has communicated/being persuaded of God's Person and promises