

“
**SERMONS
I LIKE
TO
PREACH**
”

DAVID ROPER

When God Said, “Stop Praying!”

Exodus 14:13–16

Years ago, I heard of a sermon on the topic “When God Said, ‘Stop Praying!’” My interest was stirred. Isn’t prayer appropriate for any and every occasion? When I did my research, I found times in the Bible when God did tell people to stop praying—and I discovered that there are times when God does not want *us* to pray.

Lest anyone think that I am belittling prayer, it may be expedient to begin with several passages that emphasize the importance and essentiality of prayer: Jesus said that “men ought *always* to pray” (Luke 18:1; KJV; emphasis mine). The early church was said to be “*continually* devoting themselves . . . to prayer” (Acts 2:42; emphasis mine).

Paul noted that we also should be “devoted to prayer” (Romans 12:12). He wrote, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6). He also penned these lines:

Pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men (1 Timothy 2:1).

I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension (1 Timothy 2:8).

James said, “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (James 5:16b).

Peter emphasized that “the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears attend to their prayer” (1 Peter 3:12a, b).

These passages and many others stress the value of prayer. Never would I encourage anyone to neglect prayer. Nevertheless, men have at times substituted prayer for what God required for that occasion. *Then* God said, “Stop praying!” In our lesson, we will examine four of these times in order to learn when God wants us to stop praying.

GOD SAYS, “STOP PRAYING!” WHEN WE SUBSTITUTE PRAYER FOR ACTION

Fleeing from Egypt, the Israelites had come to the shore of the Red Sea. With the sea before them and Pharaoh’s army rapidly approaching, the people of Israel were in a desperate situation. When the people began to complain, Moses admonished:

. . . Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the Lord which He will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will never see them again forever. The Lord will fight for you while you keep silent (Exodus 14:13, 14).

Judging from the Lord’s response to this statement, apparently Moses was telling the people to stand still and lift their voices to God for their deliverance. He was assuring them that if they would pray, God would deliver them.

Note what God said:

... Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the sons of Israel to go forward. And as for you, lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, and the sons of Israel shall go through the midst of the sea on dry land (vv. 15, 16).

In other words, God told Moses, “This is not the time for prayer; this is the time for action. You have your instructions. I have told you what to do; now do it! Don’t stand praying, but go forward marching!” The implication is that Moses’ cries to the Lord were a delaying tactic when he should have been moving ahead by faith.

Prayer is important, but prayer is meaningless when we refuse to obey the commands of God. Prayer is good, but times come when we must act. Someone put it this way: “Prayer not backed by resolution is nothing more than a spiritual filibuster.” A “filibuster” occurs when a congressman tries to keep a bill from being passed by wasting time; he does that by talking, talking, and talking some more. If we pray, pray, and pray some more—but never act—our prayers are just so much talk.

A little boy heard his father pray for the hungry, the tired, and the poor. When the father had finished his prayer, the boy said, “I wish I had your money, Daddy.” “Why? What would you do with it?” “I would answer your prayer,” the son replied. Did the son see an inconsistency between the father’s prayer and the father’s actions?

The Bible challenges us to help, heal, and lift up. Is it possible that, through prayer, we try to shift the responsibility to God so we can forget about these weighty matters? Nothing is wrong with asking God to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, or to comfort the weary; the Bible teaches that we should include such matters in our prayers. The question is this: What do we do when we rise from our knees?

We ought to be concerned about the spread and growth of the Lord’s church. I am thankful for prayers that are offered for the growth of the church in general and the local congregation in particular. Paul often prayed for congregations and their spiritual health. I am also thankful for prayers that are offered for those outside of Christ and for unfaithful brethren. Regarding the lost, Paul said, “Brethren, my heart’s desire

and *my prayer* to God for them is for their salvation” (Romans 10:1; emphasis mine).

Let us ask ourselves what happens *after* we pray. Do we have specific ones in mind that we are trying to reach? Are we striving to establish relationships with individuals so we can share our faith with them? Are we trying to set up Bible studies? Do we let people know of the concern we have for their souls? Have we talked to any about being baptized or restored?

Possibly, God would say to us what He said, in effect, to Moses: “Stop crying to me. Stop substituting prayer for action. Stop standing still, and go forth with the gospel! Then your prayers will have meaning. Then I can answer your prayers!”

When we try to substitute prayer for action, God will say, “Stop praying!”¹

GOD SAYS, “STOP PRAYING!” WHEN WE SUBSTITUTE PRAYER FOR REPENTANCE

Our next biblical illustration of a time when God said, “Stop praying!” is found in Joshua 7. To appreciate what happened here, let us back up a chapter or two. With the help of God, Joshua and the Israelites had taken the city of Jericho. When they took that city, they were told not to keep any of the spoils. Gold and silver were to be put in God’s treasury, and the rest was to be destroyed. Everyone obeyed—except one individual, a man by the name of Achan. He “saw,” then “coveted,” and then “took”—the progression of sin. He took “a beautiful mantle from Shinar and two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold fifty shekels in weight” (Joshua 7:21). He committed this sin in secret, no doubt thinking no one would ever know about it, but “all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do” (Hebrews 4:13b).

Next on Joshua’s agenda of conquest was the city of Ai. Compared to the city of Jericho, Ai was nothing. Spies were sent to survey the situation, and they came back confirming the city’s

¹This idea can be expanded. For example: “If we know we should renounce a selfish ambition, let us renounce it. If we know we should cut off an ungodly relationship, let us cut it. If we need to make a hard decision, let us make it. If we know we should follow a certain pathway, even if it is difficult, let us follow it. *Then* our prayer lives will be meaningful.”

weakness. The army of the Lord went up against the little city, and—to their surprise—they were soundly defeated.

Joshua could not understand it. Obviously, God had left them, but why?

Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the Lord until the evening, both he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust on their heads. And Joshua said, "Alas, O Lord God, why didst Thou ever bring this people over the Jordan, only to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? If only we had been willing to dwell beyond the Jordan! O Lord, what can I say since Israel has turned their back before their enemies? For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it, and they will surround us and cut off our name from the earth. And what wilt Thou do for Thy great name?" (vv. 6–9).

It sounds as if Joshua was mixing some complaining with his praying!

So the Lord said to Joshua, "Rise up! Why is it that you have fallen on your face? Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. And they have even taken some of the things under the ban and have both stolen and deceived. Moreover, they have also put them among their own things. . . . Rise up! Consecrate the people and say, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, for thus the Lord, the God of Israel, has said, "There are things under the ban in your midst, O Israel. . . ."' (vv. 10–13).

God told Joshua to stop praying and to cleanse the camp of the sin that was in it!

You know the rest of the story: Achan's sin was discovered and punished. Then, and only then, did God answer Joshua's prayer and help Israel to capture the city of Ai.

Again, we must realize that when God told Joshua to stop praying, He was not implying that prayer is unimportant. Rather, He was saying that at that particular time, something else needed to be done: Sin had to be removed from the camp. Joshua could have prayed for days, weeks, and months until he developed calluses on his knees an inch thick—but until the sin was removed, God could not be with His people.

You cannot pray around unrighteousness. Prayer cannot bypass the fact of sin. Your prayer life is rooted in your relationship with God. If there is willful sin in your life, continued rebellion against the Lord, then your prayers cannot

be answered. You cannot condone unrighteousness and have a meaningful prayer life.

When we sin, we should pray (1 John 1:9), but that prayer cannot take the place of deep-felt penitence and the resulting change of heart and life. When Peter told Simon to "pray the Lord" so that the intention of his heart might be forgiven, the apostle first told him, "*Repent of this wickedness of yours*" (Acts 8:22a; emphasis mine).

If our prayer lives are not as meaningful as they once were, perhaps we should see if we have neglected to repent of sins in our lives. If it seems as if our prayers are not being heard and answered, perhaps we should see if we have completely dedicated our lives to the service of the Lord. If we are being defeated by the insignificant "Ai's" of life, perhaps we have been excusing and defending some personal sin in our lives. If, as a congregation, victory seems to elude us, perhaps it is because too many of us, like Achan, are living by our own rules instead of God's rules.

God is still "declaring to men that all everywhere should repent" (Acts 17:30). We read, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3b). Anytime we substitute prayer for genuine repentance and a change of life, God will say, "Stop praying!"

GOD SAYS, "STOP PRAYING!" WHEN WE SUBSTITUTE PRAYER FOR RECONCILIATION

For our third example, we will turn to the New Testament—to the most famous sermon ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5 Jesus contrasted the old covenant with His covenant. He noted that under the old covenant, one was not to kill; but under His covenant, He said that one should avoid the inner emotions and outward expressions that can lead to murder (vv. 21, 22). Jesus then added:

If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering (vv. 23, 24).

To understand Jesus' statement, let us put ourselves in the place of those listening to Him. They were Jews, still offering sacrifices in the

temple. In other words, Jesus was saying, "One day, you bring your goat or lamb or calf, or perhaps grain or wine for a thanks offering, and you hand it to a Levite at one of the gates into the Court of the Priests. Then you return to the Court of the Women to pray while your sacrifice is being offered.

"While you are on your knees, however, you are painfully aware of resentment, bitterness, and maybe even hatred in your heart. Get up at once! Don't wait until the priest or the Levite comes out to signal that the offering has been made. Your relationship with God cannot be right if your relationship with your fellow Jew is not right.

"Get up and leave the temple. Search until you find your brother, and get the matter straightened out. Apologize if you need to apologize. Show mercy if you need to show mercy. Help your brother with his attitude if that is required. Overlook a slight if that is required. Do all *you* can to make matters right. Then, without that matter weighing on your mind and heart, you can come back and bow before your God and really pray; you can really worship."

We no longer bring animal sacrifices to a physical altar, but it is not difficult to make application. We have a spiritual altar (Hebrews 13:10), and we still offer our sacrifices to God: the sacrifice of service as we help others (Hebrews 13:16), the sacrifice of our lips as we praise Him (Hebrews 13:15), the sacrifice of our bodies and lives as we obey Him (Romans 12:1). These sacrifices are all to be bathed in prayer.

Let us imagine that we have come to offer our sacrifices to God. . . . No, let us bring this application to the "here and now." Here we are; we have come to offer our gifts of time, money, praise, and love to God. Our heads are bowed in prayer. Unfortunately, on one side of this auditorium, there is a brother who cannot stand a sister on the other side of the auditorium. He avoids looking that way during the service, because every time he sees that brother, he gets upset. He gets a pain in the pit of his stomach; his blood pressure rises; and he starts grinding his teeth. His heart is full of resentment and animosity toward his brother. Jesus would say, "Wait a minute. You have everything backwards. Before you came here to worship God, you should have first been reconciled to your brother!"

We read, "The one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20b). "If you do not forgive . . . , then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matthew 6:15). It is imperative that we straighten up any misunderstandings with our brothers or sisters as far as we humanly can.

Jesus did not teach that one who needs to be reconciled with a brother should struggle through the rest of the service. He did not say to sit through the prayers, the Scripture reading, the sermon, and the communion service—and then, as soon as the last "amen" is said, go to your brother. Rather, He said to stop praying and go to that brother—or sister, wife, husband, parent, child, friend, or acquaintance—and be reconciled.²

Go see him (or her) in person if you can. If it is impossible to see him in person, make a phone call, write a letter, or whatever it takes; but make contact, and work on the relationship. Then, Jesus said, you are ready to worship. If you will, worship will be sweeter. Your soul will soar.

All of us need the lesson of reconciliation. Nothing will more surely stifle prayers than accumulated resentment. Eventually, we will get to the point that we must either give up our resentment or we will give up our prayers. When we try to substitute prayers for straightening out matters with others, God says "Stop praying!"³

GOD SAYS, "STOP PRAYING!" WHEN WE SUBSTITUTE PRAYER FOR OBEYING THE GOSPEL

We could give other biblical examples of when God says, "Stop praying!"⁴ We will close, however, with one last illustration—one with a lesson that the religious world must learn.

²As far as I know, I have never had anyone leave the worship service at the exact moment I gave the challenge to go be reconciled to someone. I hope, however, that some have taken care of the matter of reconciliation soon after the service was over.

³I fear that occasionally a person comes forward and asks for prayers when he has not gone to the person he has hurt. That is a case when God would say, "Stop praying! First go to that person; then come to Me."

⁴Other examples would include the time Moses was told to stop praying when Miriam was punished (Numbers 12:9–15), and the inspired instructions not to pray that people will be forgiven in their impenitence (1 John 5:16).

Let us take a few minutes to look at the conversion of Saul. The details of his conversion are found in three chapters: Acts 9, 22, and 26. Chapter 9 is the original account; then in chapters 22 and 26, Paul included his own story in two special sermons. Each account provides details not found in the others.

Saul was on his way to Damascus to find Christians so he could imprison them. On the way, the Lord appeared to him in a bright light. Trembling, Saul asked the Lord what he should do. Jesus told him to “rise, and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do” (Acts 9:6). Saul, who had been blinded by the light, was led into the city. There he waited three days for someone to come with instructions. While he waited, he fasted and prayed. Why did he go without food? Why did he pray? Because he was penitent, and that is what Jews did when they were conscious of sin in their lives.

Finally, a man named Ananias came. He looked at Saul, who was down on his knees. What do you think the inspired preacher said to this praying man? In effect, he said, “*Stop praying and do what you must do to be saved!*” Listen to Ananias’ words: “And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16). Nothing is wrong with praying about your relationship with God, but if you pray when you should obey, your prayer is considered “delaying” or “tarrying” (KJV). Saul did not need to pray to God to save him. God was ready and willing to save him, and He had already given the terms of salvation:

He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned (Mark 16:16).

... “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

⁵Lest you think this is an isolated case, look at the case of Cornelius, which is recorded twice (in Acts 10 and in Acts 11). Cornelius was a Gentile who believed in the true God, and he was a praying man. An angel appeared to Cornelius and commended him. Notice, however, that he was not told that his prayers would save him. Rather, he was told to send for Peter so the apostle could tell him what to do to be saved: “Send to Joppa, and have Simon, who is

Instead of praying, Saul needed to express his faith in Jesus by being immersed in water. Thus we read that “he arose and was baptized” (Acts 9:18). He stopped praying and started obeying.⁵

This truth must be emphasized, because today many teach that alien sinners—those who have never been Christians—are to pray in order to “receive Jesus as their personal Savior.” People are told what to pray, or they are led in a prayer, or they are asked to read aloud the words of a written prayer. They are told that when they have thus prayed, they will be saved. The Bible does not teach this. Alien sinners are never told to pray for forgiveness. Rather, they are told to believe (Acts 8:37; 16:30, 31), to repent (Acts 2:38), to confess their faith in Jesus (Acts 8:37; Romans 10:9, 10), and to be baptized (immersed in water) so their sins will be washed away (Acts 22:16; Romans 6:3, 4, 17, 18).

Through His Word, God is saying to false teachers, “Stop telling the lost to pray and tell them to obey what I have commanded.” He is saying to all those who need salvation, “Stop praying and do My will, and then I will bless you!”

CONCLUSION

I hope that each of you has a great prayer life. At the same time, I hope that none of you will ever substitute prayer for obedience to the will of God. Self-examination is in order: Have you ever tried to substitute prayer for action, for repentance, for being reconciled with a brother, or for doing what God desired? If the answer to any part of that question is “yes,” you need to come humbly before your God in penitence, asking His forgiveness and resolving to do better.

As we close, let me direct a special challenge to those who need to be baptized and to those who need to be restored: If you plan to be baptized, do that today. You will then have the right to join with the saints as they pray, “Our *Father* who art in heaven” (Matthew 6:9b; emphasis mine).

also called Peter, brought here; and he shall speak *words* to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household” (Acts 11:13, 14; emphasis mine). Peter came and preached those words of salvation; he told about Jesus and what Cornelius and his friends needed to do: “And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:48a). Cornelius was not saved by his prayers, but through his obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If, as an erring Christian, you want to be restored, you need prayer—but you need more than that. Prayer will not substitute for clearing up the past. After you have confessed your sins to the Lord (1 John 1:9), “confess your sins to one another” (James 5:16a), making the request one

made long ago: “Pray to the Lord for me” (Acts 8:24b).

If you desire to be baptized or restored to the Lord and His church, “*now* is ‘the acceptable time,’ behold, *now* is ‘the day of salvation’” (2 Corinthians 6:2; emphasis mine). ❖

©Copyright, 1997, 1998 by Truth for Today
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED