

Transcription of 18TM820

Psalm 66:18-20 "A Hindered Prayer Life" June 3, 2018

Let's open our Bibles this morning to Psalm 66, beginning in verse 18.

The superscription that we have found in a lot of the Psalms is not here this morning. It just says that this is a song and a Psalm. We don't know who wrote it, we don't know the situation in which they wrote it, and so the Psalm has to stand on its own. And we wanted to focus specifically towards the end of the Psalm, since that is kind of the application of what you read there on this issue of praying.

I am sure that if I could say to you I've got four tips to give you that will really revolutionize your prayer life, I would think you'd be interested; that you would want to do better as you pray. All of us, I think, would rather have answers to prayer than not. And yet there are certain things that can hinder our access to the Lord or hinder our prayer life. And the Bible gives us lots of them to kind of go over and apply to our lives. I'd like to give you the four that are most often mentioned by the Lord, things that will hinder or that will interfere, if you will, as you begin to seek the Lord.

The Bible tells us that one of the greatest accesses or I guess the privileges that you are given as a believer is access to God's throne. Paul when he wrote to the Hebrews in Chapter 4 said, "Seeing that we have a High Priest that has passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. We do not have a high priest who can't be touched with the feelings of our infirmities. He's been in all points tempted as we were, yet without sin. So let us come therefore boldly before the throne of grace, that we can find mercy and grace in times of need." There is nothing more beneficial obviously when you come to the Lord than having access to all mighty God. That God would invite you to come, to come boldly, to come often, that God would welcome you into His presence.

We know from the Bible that God does not hear the prayer of sinners or of unbelievers. There is not one place in the scriptures where you will find an unbeliever praying that unless God chooses to use them for some purpose, it is really an answer to their prayers. There

is only one prayer that God listens to for an unbeliever. It is the prayer of repentance. It is the prayer of crying out for mercy. It is the heart that turns to the Lord. It may be interesting to you to discover that when a believer lives in sin, and does so willfully and doesn't really deal with sin in his life, that he finds himself in much the same place as an unbeliever. God will really hear no prayers until He hears the prayer of repentance, or the prayer of one that would seek to reestablish their connection, if you will, with the Lord.

You might remember that young man that was healed of his blindness by Jesus there in John 9. It caused a stir, as I suspect that you would think so. Everyone came with curiosity. They wanted to know what happened to him. Jesus had disappeared. They all asked him the questions. But, the religious folks, the Scribes and the Pharisees, wanted nothing to do with Jesus, so they sought in any way that they could to discredit this miracle. In fact, they said to this young man as they asked him questions about it, "Well, we know for sure that this Man that healed you didn't come from God, because He healed you on the Sabbath." Which is kind of crazy, because I would think you'd want to argue whoever heals you probably knows what they're doing. But that was their argument. They argued from their religious kind of position of, not wanting to walk with God. They questioned his parents. They came back to question him again about his healing. He even said to them kind of sarcastically, "I suppose you want to follow Him too." But then he said something very interesting when you get to Chapter 9, I think verse 30 or 31. He says this: "We know that God does not hear sinners." His implication to these religious men was that if God doesn't listen to sinners and we all agree that that's the case, then whoever prayed for me must be right with God, because look, I can see. In fact, the next part of that verse says, "But a worshipper of God who does His will, him He will hear." The Psalmist begins in verse 18 saying that same thing here this morning. If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear.

When Jesus began to teach His disciples about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, and it is what we call it The Lord's Prayer. It really is the disciple's prayer. It was given to them. I'm not sure that the Lord intended for us to pray it, it sounds to me more, because it's found in a couple of places as an outline for the things that you want to incorporate as you pray. But He starts with the word, "Our Father," which presumes that there is an absolute need, if you're going to pray, for a relationship with God; that He's your Father who is in heaven. A son or a daughter is acceptable to God. To know Him as a loving father, however, is an awesome privilege. But He doesn't just become your Father because He created you. He's God;

He created all things. But He comes to be your Father in relationship when you are born again.

Jesus said in John 14:20, "In that day you will know that I'm in the Father and the Father is in Me. If you'll keep My commandments, He will love you. And you'll be able to come to your Father, and We'll come to you and make Our love known to you. But if you don't love Me, and you don't keep My words, then you don't belong to Me or to My Father." It is the saving grace of God in coming to Christ that brings you into a relationship with God as a son and as a daughter, so when you're His child.

When sin is found in your life as a Christian, that can certainly interrupt your fellowship with God, but it will not separate your relationship from God. His promise in relationship is to finish the work that He began; that He will present you one day faultless. However, you can certainly interrupt your fellowship with God, or if you will, the benefit or the access or the privilege that you have in being able to go to the Lord in prayer can be interrupted by a life that is just filled with sin and rebellion. So the subject of verse 18 here is loss of fellowship, loss of effective prayerfulness; not a loss of relationship. And I think there's quite a difference. "If I regard iniquity in my heart." The word "regard" means to behold, or to respect, or to provide, or to make room for, to accommodate. If as a believer my life is one where I just give a broad road of access to the sinful ways of life, then I put myself in a position where God will not respond. It isn't that He doesn't want to respond anymore that a good parent doesn't want to bless his children, but sometimes the consequence of just rebellion is just that: It's suffering. And for the believer when it comes to his prayer life, it is one of not having an ear to hear your prayers on high.

To harbor means to find things at rest, to allow things that are not right to just stay in place. So if I make the accommodation in my life, if I live a life of just letting sin run its course, if my most spiritual activity is these 45 minutes here, then we're in trouble. And then you shouldn't really go, "I wonder why the Lord doesn't ever answer my prayers?" Well, we're letting a place in my heart for sin rule. It would be like me getting a speeding ticket. I'm doing 90 in a 45, but I figured out that the cop really didn't have me on a radar gun. It's just his guess, so I'm going to take it to court. What I probably can't do on the way to court is say, "Lord, just bless me right now. I've got him over a barrel." And if you should happen to prevail, don't give God any credit. He doesn't really work with lying, deceitful ways as His tools. God won't answer the prayers of those believers who are now accommodating, regarding iniquity.

If that's the way that you live and you know it, then don't be surprised when your prayers are -- just seem to come and go they don't seem to -- there's no action, there's no response.

I remember going to Farrell's one time and ordering one of them big hot fudge sundaes, and someone said, "Let's bless the food." And I thought, the Lord is not going to -- I could thank Him for it -- you know, thank you, Lord -- but I'm pretty sure it's going to -- my blessing is going to stay with me a lot longer than I think it is. I only have one verse, by the way, for blessing hot fudge sundaes. It's Isaiah 55 verse 2, and it says, "Delight yourself in fatness, fatness." On a more serious note, if you live in sin, if you regard sin, if that's -- if you're a -- an accommodator, then don't expect to have your prayers answered.

Isaiah when he wrote to the nation of Israel at a time when they were doing very poorly said to them, "Look, the hand of the Lord is not shortened that He can't reach you and save you. His ear isn't heavy that He can't hear you. But it is your iniquities that have separated you and your God. Your sins have hidden His face from you. He cannot hear you." Actually, I think it says He will not hear you. You can check it out. You don't have to check now, but you can check later. The prophet Micah said the same thing in Chapter 4. He said, "They're going to cry to the Lord and He won't hear them. He's going to hide His face from them because of the evil deeds that they are doing."

So it is important that we understand that from God's point of view, prayer is a privilege, but it comes with some responsibility. Not that you can earn a meeting with God. That's grace. But that you have to respond to that grace in an action and in a behavior that God can honor. It should be no surprise that our fellowship with God is disrupted or interrupted by sin, and if we will not remove that or seek to deal with it, then our prayers are just nothing more than deception. I can't begin to tell you how many people I've counseled over the years who in sharing their problems, you can just hear -- in fact, anyone could hear but them, hey, there's a lot of sin here. And if you say to someone, maybe you should get rid of this sin in your life, they will say this: Hey, I'm still praying every day, as if somehow that's the salve that covers a whole life of rebellion. In reality, the prayers of a believer who is living in sin willfully are meaningless and useless. They are vocal expressions that never rise above the ceiling. Those prayers are going nowhere. Solomon wrote in Proverbs 15:29, "The Lord is far from the wicked, while he hears the prayers of the righteous." And in I think Proverbs 28 he writes, "One who turns his ear away from the law, even his prayers will be an abomination to the Lord."

So the most often referenced problem as far as hindering our prayer lives is that of regarding iniquity in our hearts, allowing iniquity to continue. For my prayer life to be fruitful, I should be in fellowship with the Lord. I should be living a life that seeks to flee sin, not harbor it. God knows it, we know it. You know the difference between fighting the good fight of faith and capitulating to your flesh. You know the difference between striving against sin or making room for it with excuses and justifications. You know the difference, so don't do it. You want to have a fruitful prayer life? Clean up your act, man. Try to walk where God would have you to walk. Be under -- Pastor Chuck used to say, "Live under the spout where the blessings come out." Put yourself there.

The second most often referenced problem with prayer and its being hindering prayer is the issue of hypocrisy. It's kind of related to the first. Job, when he was writing in Job 27, I think it is, about the hypocrite, he said, "What hope does the hypocrite have? Does he really think he's going to be heard on high?" The hypocrite in his day of trouble will also not be heard by the Lord. Now, if hiding sin in my life is one issue, the hypocrite is the guy who covers up his sinful life with religious actions. He hides himself. The word "hupokrités" in Greek is the name for a guy who's an actor that wears a mask. You know, the happy face/the sad face. You don't really know what he's all about, but he's got a mask on. He masks what he's truly all about. He pretends to be something he's not.

You remember that parable that Jesus told about the publican and the sinner, Luke 18, who came to pray together. And we first are told about the publican, the guy who was so proud of himself, filled with self-righteousness, so impressed with his own accomplishments. He said to the Lord, "I thank you that I'm not like other sinners like that guy in the back over there, that tax collector. I'm so thankful that I fast twice a week, give tithes of everything I possess." And he was proud of himself. He called people extortioners and unjust and adulterers, and even pointed out, like I said, the tax collector. But then the Lord said of him, "This man stood and prayed with himself." Which I thought was such an interesting comment. He was impressed with himself. He figured God would be impressed; God was not. He believed he had accomplished much in prayer; he had not. He thought God would heed his prayer; God would not. And then in the back stood a tax collector. Realized his sinfulness, was ashamed of himself, uncomfortable in the temple, wouldn't lift up his eyes, had only one thing to say: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." And the Lord said, "That man went home justified." The word "justified" in the Bible, just as if I'd never sinned. It's exactly how God saw him. He was a humble man. But the hypocrite won't be heard by the Lord.

The prophet Isaiah was sent by God to speak to a nation in Judah under the reign of Manasseh, a very wicked guy who had really brought, I think, the nation to an all-time low. When the Lord sent Isaiah to speak to them, and you can read Chapter 1, he said to them, he said to the leadership in Israel, "Hey, you rulers of Sodom and Gomorrah." That's usually not a good way to start if you're wanting to be right with God. "To what purposes are all those sacrifices that you are bringing to Me? I've had enough of them, the bulls, the goats, the blood that is shed, the incense. They're nothing more than abominations to Me. I hate your appointed feasts. They are troublesome to Me. I'm weary of them. When you stretch out your hands, I'm not going to listen to you. When you look up, I'm going to hide My face from you. Enough of your many prayers. I'm not listening." You go, wow, man. What happened? They were still coming to service. They were still keeping the feast days. They were still bringing the sacrifices. But God looked beyond their actions to their heart. He called them hypocrites. He ends that sermon, tough sermon, by saying to them, "You should stop doing evil and learn to do good and learn to seek justice and relieve the oppressed and defend the fatherless and plead for the widow. Come, now, let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet, they can be white as snow. Though they're red as crimson, they can be like wool. Come, let's reason together." Do the right thing.

God can begin to move in your heart again and respond. Hypocrisy is a tough issue, because so often it wants to hide whatever we're really all about. These guys Isaiah's day were hypocritical, temple-going, outwardly religious people whose sin dominated their hearts, but they were able to shield them with a mask. Always people like that in church too. They sing the loudest, raise their hands the highest, far away from God. If you want God to answer your prayers, have a pure heart that's undiluted with hypocrisy, and then your prayers will be unhindered. So the one hand it is the accommodating of sin that God says hampers our prayer life. On the other hand, it is the covering up of that lifestyle with some religious kind of behavior that fools us. Doesn't fool Him.

The third hindrance to answered prayer that you'll find in the scriptures is carnality. It's repeated third most often. It is exemplified by what James writes in Chapter 4, "You ask and you do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you might consume it on your own lusts," or on your own pleasures. There are prayers that we pray that God looks at the reasons as to why we are seeking Him for them, and a lot of times will put a block there because what we're asking for is really to indulge our flesh, not honor Him or accomplish His will. Carnality. When prayers are driven by consuming lusts that

we should be setting aside, no one notices, but the Lord notices.

Certainly, one of the major errors behind the whole prosperity doctrine movement is this issue of getting in prayer what is temporal in life. Name it, claim it, nab it, grab it, say it, you know. And then it is placed upon you. If you just had more faith, you could have all of these things. I would say this to them: Have enough faith to trust that God will give you what you need. But for them, the jewelry, the cars, and the \$54 million planes became a symbol to them of their great faith that they can boast upon rather than honor the Lord. It is carnal. God doesn't answer those prayers. I don't care if they get their plane; God didn't do it. And God won't. Prayer at best is to get you to think along the lines of what God wants.

John in his 90s would write in his epistles towards the end of your Bible, "We know that God answers prayer, and if we pray according to His will, we know that we have the petitions that we desire of Him." Sometimes unanswered prayer is simply because you're asking for the wrong thing. And it is good sometimes to stop and go, "Why am I really after this?" Oh, God, give me that really fast Porsche so that I could bring someone to church. We'll never be late again, Lord. And the Lord says, Well, you can only bring one person. Here's a school bus. Park that in your driveway.

When the flesh or when gain or when self, drive you to your knees, God's not going to respond. Lord, show them that I'm smarter than they are. Show them up. Let me be glorified. Well, you're probably praying till you're blue in the face. It's going to hinder your prayer life. Accommodating sin, covering up a sinful life with religious overtones, or being driven to spiritual activity for fleshly gain are all going to stand in the way of you being heard in heaven.

And the fourth one is this: Selfishness. Goes along with the third one. A hard-hearted attitude towards the poor and to the needy can put you in a very bad place when it comes to prayer. There's a Psalm -- no, no, Proverbs 21:13, I believe it is, that says that God would shut His ear -- if you shut your ears to the cries of the poor, He will shut His ears to your cries. In broader terms, you're going to reap what you sow. You say to the Lord, give me stuff and I'm going to keep it. The Lord says, No, I'm keeping what I have. I'm not giving it to you. Proverbs 28 says, "He that gives to the poor will never lack, he that hides his eyes from the poor will suffer through many curses." Selfishness has a way of interrupting our prayer life. God blesses the generous heart. I didn't say give your money away to people that won't work, I'm just saying be selfless

and be generous, because it has a direct effect on what God can do in your life of prayer.

Four predominant issues: Being unsaved, only one prayer is answered; living in sin like the unsaved, only one prayer is answered; hypocrisy, pretend to go be something I'm not; carnality in my spiritual pursuits, godliness and gain somehow being married in my mind; and then this selfishness, where I ignore the needs of the other just so that I might serve myself.

If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord won't hear me, but notice verse 19, "But certainly God has heard me; He's attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, He hasn't turned away from my prayer, nor has He turned away from His mercy towards me!" God does answer prayer. And isn't it good that He does, or none of us would have a chance, because we've all fallen short of the glory of God. So if it's sin that He is taking into account only, we're cooked, aren't we? Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes, I think Chapter 7, "There is none that sinneth not." John will write in his epistle, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." David will write, "There is none that does good, not one," in Psalm 14. For the lost God hears only one prayer, but He hears that prayer of repentance. For the believer, He also hears that prayer. God, restore me. Bring me back to that place of fellowship with You. When we studied Psalm 51 a couple four, five weeks ago, David's classic prayer when he got busted -- well, he was busted for a year with Bathsheba, but it was made known to him by the prophet that God knows and others knew. The first word out of David's mouth was, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to your lovingkindness, according to the multitude of your tender mercy. Now blot out my transgressions." And it says, "And the Lord heard his prayer." Restoration.

We have the example in the Old Testament of a very wicked man named Manasseh. He was the son of a godly Hezekiah. He has to be in the Bible one of the most horrible men upon the face of the earth. He was certainly the worst king Judah had ever seen. He led the children of Israel into idolatry. He offered his own children at the sacrifices to these foreign gods. You can read about him in II Chronicles 33. He took a nude statue of Astaroth and stuck it in the temple. He brought false gods into the holy place. He practiced witchcraft and Satanic worship. The Bible says he filled Jerusalem with the blood of God's people. And the nation followed this guy down into the sewer. There couldn't have been a worse man. In fact, the Lord says -- and when the Lord says of you, this is the worst -- no, what he said was, "This king is worse than any heathen king that's ever lived." That's not good.

When the Babylonians came against the nation, Manasseh was captured and treated very harshly and dragged off to Babylon. In fear, this loudmouthed terror begins to pray. In his affliction he implores the Lord is what we read. He humbles himself before the God of our fathers. He prays to Him and it says God heard his entreaty and his supplication. He brought him back to Jerusalem. He restored him to his kingdom, and then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God.

I can't begin to tell you how often I've talked to Christians who think that somehow they've lost their salvation, or they're not worthy to be saved, or I don't know if I'm really saved. And I always say this: Oh, you can get saved. Just let me tell you the story of Manasseh. If he makes it, everyone makes it. There is nobody worse than this man in the Bible, and yet he made it. I fully expect to see Manasseh in heaven one day. We're all going to be shaking our heads at him, I can't believe you're here. But then we're going to get that from everyone else when we're there anyway. It won't really make much of a change. God brought him in. There is hope for us to be forgiven. No matter how low we go, God can raise you up. Come now, let us reason together.

Jesus tells us that story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 who asked his father for his portion of his inheritance before his dad had died, and then went out and just lived a life of waste in the world, self-indulgent, kind of unrestrained, but a famine came and whatever he had left was gone. He ended up as a Jew working slop with the pigs. Not exactly a kosher job. And in that position, he came to himself. Broken and seeing what sin had done to his life and the foolishness of his choices, he came to himself and said, you know, "I'm going to go home. My dad treats all of his employees so good. They all have it so good. I'll never be his son again, but I'm going to just ask him for a job and get out of this miserable existence." And so he headed home. And we read there in the account in Luke 15 that while he was still a far ways away, his father, seeing him on the horizon, came running to welcome him. He received him back as a son. He was just coming for a job. He said "Father, I've sinned against God and against you. I just want to be hired as a servant." But with great compassion the father came and kissed him and hugged him and put a ring on his finger and best robe over his shoulder, put some sandals on his feet. Said to his servants, "My son, which was lost, is found. He's come home. Rejoice with me." There's forgiveness with God. There's access. Kill the fatted calf, join the party. My son that was lost is found.

Prayer with God is a privilege and it is given to His people who can then be fruitful as they surrender themselves to Him. Prayer ought to be a joy for you and a magnet to draw you in. It shouldn't be

a chore or a last resort. It's the greatest benefit that you have as a Christian. But you're going to have to go through it. At least look at how you're living your life to be sure that you're taking full advantage of God's goodness. He'll cover your sin with mercy. It says so right here in verse 20. Mercy is not getting what you deserve. Grace is getting what you don't. God hasn't removed mercy. Oh, He'll cover my weakness. As long as I'm trying, I'm doing my best. Best foot forward. I'm not faking Him out or trying to pretend when I'm living in sin. He's just -- He knows. Harboring sin. Living that life of hypocrisy. Those are the things that are going to get in the way of what God would want to do in our lives.

How's your prayer life? What does it tell you about how you're doing? And put some time in. I know this: God wants to answer prayer. He delights to bless His people. And even as you parents, you got teenagers, you'd like to bless them, but it's the way they behave.