

Conditions of Prevailing Prayer Pt.--3

by Charles Finney

The conditions of prevailing prayer include confession to God and man, restitution to God and man, and being reconciled to our brother, and repentance is essential in prevailing prayer.

Scripture: Matthew 5:23, James 4:3

Topics: "Prevailing Prayer", "Repentance and Restitution"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the conditions necessary for prevailing prayer, focusing on the importance of confession and restitution to both God and others. He argues that true repentance involves acknowledging our sins and making amends for the wrongs we have committed, both to God and to our fellow beings. Finney illustrates that withholding what is due to God is akin to robbery, and that sincere prayer requires a heart willing to return to God and dedicate all that remains of our lives to His service. He stresses that reconciliation with others is also essential before approaching God in prayer, as unresolved conflicts can hinder our relationship with Him. Ultimately, Finney calls for a deep, penitent return to God, emphasizing that our prayers must align with His will and purposes.

Transcript

"Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss that ye may consume it upon your lusts." James 4:3

In a former discourse on this text, I mentioned, among other conditions of prevailing prayer, that confession should be made to those whom our sins have injured, and also to God. It is most plain that all sins should be confessed to God, that we may obtain forgiveness and be reconciled to him; else how can we have communion of soul with him? And who can for a moment doubt that our confessions should not omit those of our fellow beings whom we have injured?

In the next place I remark that restitution should be made to God and to man.

To man we should make restitution in the sense of undoing as far as possible the wrong we have done, and repairing and making good all the evil. If we have impeached character wrongfully, we must recall and undo it. If we have injured another even by mistake, we are bound, if the mistake come to our knowledge, to set it right,--else we are criminal in allowing it to remain uncorrected. If the injury done by us to our neighbor affect his property, we must make restitution.

But I wish to call your attention more especially to the restitution which we are to make to God. And in respect to this, I do not mean to imply that we can make good our wrongs against God in the sense of really restoring that which we have withheld or taken away; but we can render to him whatever yet remains. The time yet to be given us we can devote to him, although the past has gone beyond recall. Our talents and influence and wealth, yet to be used, we may freely and fully use for God; and manifestly, so much as this, God and reason require of us, and it were vain for us to hope to be accepted in prayer unless we seriously intend to render all the future to God.

Let us look more closely into this subject. How many of you have been robbing God,--robbing him for a long time, and on a large scale? Let us see.

We all belong to God. We are his property in the highest possible sense. He brought us into being, gave us all we have, and made us all we are; so that He is our rightful owner in a far higher sense than that in which any man can own any thing whatever.

All we have and are, therefore, is due to God. If we withhold it, we are just so far forth guilty of robbing God. And all this robbery from God, we are unquestionably bound, as far as possible, to make up.

Do any of you still question whether men ever do truly rob God? Examine this point thoroughly. If any of you were to slip into a merchant's store and filch money from his drawer; you could not deny that the act is theft. You take, criminally, from your fellow-man what belongs to him and does not at all belong to yourself. Now can it be denied that, whenever by sin you withhold from God what is due to him, you as really rob God as any one can steal from a merchant's drawer? God owns all men and all their services in a far higher sense than that in which any merchant owns the money in his drawer. God rightfully claims the use of all your talents, wealth, and time for himself,--for his own glory and the good of his creatures. Just so far, therefore, as you use yourselves for yourselves, you as really rob God as if you appropriated to yourself any thing that belongs of right to your neighbor.

Stealing differs from robbery chiefly in this: the former is done secretly;--the latter by violence, in spite of resistance, or, as the case may be, of remonstrance. If you go secretly, without the knowledge of the owner, and take what is his, you steal; if you take aught of his openly--by force--against his known will, you rob. These two crimes differ not essentially in spirit; either is considered a serious trespass upon the rights of a fellow-man. Robbery has usually this aggravation; viz. that it puts the owner in fear. But the case may be such that the owner may do all he wisely can to prevent being robbed, and yet you may rob him without exciting alarm and causing him the additional evil of fear. Even in this case, there might still be the essential ingredient of robbery; forcibly taking from another what is his and not yours.

Now how is it that we sin against God? The true answer is, we tear ourselves away from his service. We wrest our hearts by a species of moral violence away from the claims he lays upon us. He says--Ye shall serve me, and no other God but me. This is his first and great command; and verily, none can be greater than this. No claim can be stronger than God's upon us.

Still, it evermore leaves our will free, so that we can rebel and wrest ourselves away from the service of God, if we will do so. And what is this but real robbery?

Suppose it were possible for me to own a man. I know we all deny the possibility of this, our relations to each other as men being what they are; but for illustration it may be supposed that I have created a man and hence own him in as full a sense as God owns us all. Still he remains a free agent,--yet solemnly

bound to serve me continually. But despite of my claims on him and of all I can wisely do to retain him in my service, he runs away; tears himself from my service. Is not this real robbery? Robbery too of a most absolute kind? He owed me every thing; he leaves me nothing.

So the sinner robs God. Availing himself of his free agency, he tears himself away from God, despite of all his rightful owner can do to enlist his affections, enforce his own claims, and retain his willing allegiance. This is robbery. It is not done secretly, like stealing, but openly, before the sun; and violently too, as in the case of real robbery. It is done despite of all God can wisely do to prevent it.

Hence all sin is robbery. It can never be any thing less than wresting from God what is rightfully his. It is therefore by no figure of speech that God calls this act robbery. Will a man rob God? "Yet ye have robbed me, even this whole nation." Sin is never any thing less than this,--a moral agent owned by the highest possible title, yet tearing himself away from his rightful owner, despite of all persuasions and of all claims.

Hence, if any man would prevail with God, he must bring back himself and all that remains not yet squandered and destroyed. Yes, let him come back saying--Here I am, Lord; I have played the fool and have erred exceedingly, I am ashamed that I have used up so much of thy time,--have consumed in sin so much of that strength of mind and body which is thine;--ashamed that I have employed these hands and this tongue and all these members of my body in serving myself and Satan, and have wrested them away from thy service: Lord, I have done most wickedly and meanly; thou seest that I am ashamed of myself, and I feel that I have wronged thee beyond expression.

So you should come before God. See that thief, coming back to confess and make restitution. Does he not feel a deep sense of shame and guilt? Now unless you are willing to come back and humbly confess and freely restore to God the full use of all that yet remains, how can you hope to be accepted?

You may well be thankful that God does not require of you that you restore all you have wrested from him and guiltily squandered; all your wasted time and health perhaps, and influence;--if He were to demand this, it would at once render your acceptance before him, and your salvation too, impossible. It would be forever impossible, on such a condition, that you should prevail in prayer.

Blessed be God, He does not demand this. He is willing to forgive all the past--but remember, only on the condition that you bring back all the rest--all that yet remains to be used of yourself and of the powers God has given or may yet give you.

So much as this God must require as a condition; and why should He not? Suppose you have robbed a man of all you can possibly get away from him; and you know that the facts are all known to him. Yet you come before him without a confession or a blush and ask him to receive you to his confidence and friendship. He turns upon you--Are not you the man who robbed me? Where is that money you took from me? You come to me as if you have never wronged me, and as if you had done nothing to forfeit my confidence and favor;--do you come and ask my friendship again? Monstrous!

Now would it be strange if God were, in a similar case, to repel an unhumbled sinner in the same way? Can the sinner who comes back to God with no heart to make any restitution, or any consecration of himself to God, expect to be accepted? Nothing can be more unreasonable.

It is indeed nothing less than infinite goodness that God can forgive trespasses so great, so enormous as ours have been;--O what a spectacle of loving-kindness is this! Suppose a man had stolen from you ten

thousand pounds, and having squandered it all, should be thrown in his rags and beggary at your door. There you see him wasted and wan, hungry and filthy, penniless and wretched; and your heart is touched with compassion. You freely forgive all. You take him up; you weep over his miseries; you wash him, clothe him, and make him welcome to your house and to all the comforts you can bestow upon him. How would all the world admire your conduct as generous and noble in the very highest degree!

But O, the loving-kindness of God in welcoming to his bosom the penitent, returning sinner! How it must look in the eyes of angels! They see the prodigal returning, and hear him welcomed openly to the bosom of Jehovah's family. They see him coming along, wan, haggard, guilty, ashamed, in tattered and filthy robes, and downcast mien--nothing attractive in his appearance; he does not look as if he ever was a son, so terribly has sin defaced the lineaments of sonship; but he comes, and they witness the scene that follows. The Father spies him from afar, and rushes forth to meet him. He owns him as a son; falls upon his neck, pours out tears of gladness at his return, orders the best robe and the fatted calf, and fills his mansion with all the testimonies of rejoicing.

Angels see this--and O, with what emotions of wonder and delight! What a spectacle must this be to the whole universe--to see God coming forth thus to meet the returning penitent! To see that He not only comes forth to take notice of him, but to answer his requests and enter into such communion with him, and such relations, that this once apostate sinner may now ask what he will and it shall be done unto him.

I have sometimes thought that if I had been present when Joseph made himself known to his brethren, I should have been utterly overwhelmed. I can never read the account of that scene without weeping.

I might say the same of the story of the prodigal son. Who can read it without tears of sympathy? O, to have seen it with one's own eyes--to have been there, to have seen the son approaching, pale and trembling;--the father rushing forth to meet him with such irrepressible tenderness and compassion;--such a spectacle would be too much to endure!

And now let me ask--What if the intelligent universe might see the great God receiving to his bosom a returning, penitent sinner. O, what an interest must such a scene create throughout all heaven! But just such scenes are transpiring in heaven continually. We are definitely told there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents. Surely all heaven must be one perpetual glow of excitement--such manifestations are ever going forward there of infinite compassion towards sinners returning from their evil ways.

Yet be it evermore remembered,--no sinner can find a welcome before the face of God unless he returns most deeply penitent. Ah! you do not know God at all if you suppose He can receive you without the most thorough penitence and the most ample restitution. You must bring back all that remains unwasted and unsquandered. You must look it all over most carefully and honestly, and say--Here, Lord, is the pitiful remnant--the small amount left: all the rest I have basely and most unprofitably wasted and used up in my course of sin and rebellion. Thou seest how much I have squandered, and how very little is left to be devoted now to thy service. O! what an unprofitable servant I have been; and how miserably unprofitable have I made myself for all the rest of my life.

It were well for every hearer to go minutely into this subject. Estimate and see how many years of your life have gone, never to be recalled. Some of these young people have more years remaining, according to the common laws of life, than we who are farther advanced in years. Yet even you have sad occasion to say--Alas, how many of the best years of my life are thrown away, yes, worse than thrown into the sea; for

in fact they have been given to the service of the devil. How many suits of clothing worn out in the ways of sin and the work of Satan. How many tons of provisions--food for man, provided under the bounty of a gracious Providence--have I used up in my career of rebellion against my Maker and Father! O, if it were all now to rise up before me and enter with me into judgment--if each day's daily bread, used up in sin, were to appear in testimony against me; what a scene must the solemn reckoning be!

Let each sinner look this ground all over, and think of the position he must occupy before an abused yet most gracious God, and then say--How can you expect to prevail with God if you do not bring back with a most penitent and devoted heart, all that remains yet to you of years and of strength for God.

How much more, if more be possible, is this true of those who are advanced in years. How fearfully have we wasted our substance and our days in vain! How then shall we hope to conciliate the favor of God and prevail with him in prayer, unless we bring back all that remains to us, and consecrate it a whole offering to the Lord our God?

We must pass now to another condition of prevailing prayer; namely, that we be reconciled to our brother.

On this subject you will at once recollect the explicit instructions of our Lord; "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."

This passage states very distinctly one important condition of acceptable prayer, and shows that all men are not at all times in a fit state to pray. They may be in a state in which they have no right to pray at all. If they were to come before the Lord's altar in this state, He would bid them suspend their offering of prayer, go back at once, and be reconciled to their brother.

It is important for men to understand that they should approach God in prayer only when they have a right to pray. Others seem entirely to misconceive the relations of prayer to God and to themselves, and think that their prayers are a great favor to God. They seem to suppose that they lay the Lord under great obligations to themselves by their prayers, and if they have made many prayers, and long, they think it quite hard if the Lord does not acknowledge his obligation to them, and grant them a speedy answer. Indeed, they seem almost ready to fall into a quarrel with God if He does not answer their prayers.

I knew one man who on one occasion prayed all night. Morning came, but no answer from God. For this he was so angry with God, that he was tempted to cut his own throat. Indeed, so excited were his feelings and so sharp was this temptation, that he threw away his knife the better to resist it. This shows how absurdly men feel and think on this subject.

Suppose you owed a man a thousand dollars, and should take it into your head to discharge the debt by begging him to release and forgive it. You renew your prayer every time you see him, and if he is at any distance you send him a begging letter by every mail. Now inasmuch as you have done your part as you suppose, you fall into a passion if he won't do his and freely relinquish your debt. Would not this be on your part sufficiently absurd, sufficiently ridiculous and wrong?

So with the sinner and God. Many seem to suppose that God ought to forgive. They will have it that He is under obligation to them to pardon and put away from his sight all their sins the moment they choose to say.

Now God has indeed promised on certain conditions to forgive; and the conditions being fulfilled, He certainly will fulfil his promise; yet never because it is claimed as a matter of justice or right. His promises all pertain to an economy of mercy and not of strict justice.

When men pray aright, God will hear and answer; but if they pray as a mere duty, or pray to make it a demand on the score of justice, they fundamentally mistake the very idea of prayer.

But I must return to the point under consideration.

Sometimes we have no right to pray. "When thou bringest thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee, leave there thy gift, and go, first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." The meaning of this precept seems to be plain. If you are conscious of having wronged your brother, go at once and undo that wrong. If you know that he has any good reason for having aught against you, go and remove that reason as far as lies in your power to do so. Else how can you come before God to ask favors of Him?

Here it is important to understand certain cases which though they may seem, yet do not really come under the spirit of this rule. Another man may suppose himself to have been injured by me, yet I may be entirely conscientious in feeling that I have done no otherwise than right towards him, and still I may be utterly unable to remove from his mind the impression that I have wronged him. In this case, I am by no means cut off from the privilege of prayer.

Thus it often happens when I preach against backsliders that they feel exceedingly hurt and think I have wronged them unpardonably; whereas I may have been only honest and faithful to my Master and to their own souls. In such a case I am not to be debarred the privileges of prayer in consequence of their feelings towards me. It were indeed most absurd that this should shut me away from the mercy-seat. If I am conscious of having done no wrong, the Lord will draw me near to himself. In such a case as this I can make no confession of wrong-doing.

But the case contemplated by our Lord is one which I know I have done wrong to my neighbor. Knowing this, I have no right to come before God to pray until I have made restitution and satisfaction.

Sometimes professors of religion have come to me and asked, Why are we not heard and answered? We pray a great deal, yet the Lord does not answer our prayers.

Indeed, I have asked them--Do you not recollect many times when in the act of prayer you have been reminded of having injured a brother, and yet you did not go to him and make restitution, or even confession? Yes, many have said; I can recollect such cases; but I passed them over, and did not trouble myself with them, I do not know that I thought much about the necessity of making confession and restitution, at all events I know I soon forgot those thoughts of having wronged my neighbor.

You did, indeed; but God did not forget. He remembered your dishonesty and your neglect, or perhaps contempt of one of his plainly taught conditions of acceptable prayer, and he could not hear you. Until you had gone and become reconciled to your brother, what have you to do with praying? Your God says to you--Why do you come here before me to lie to my very face, pretending to be honest and upright towards your fellow-beings, when you know you have wronged them, and have never made confession and restitution?

In my labors as an Evangelist, I have sometimes fallen into a community who were most of them in this horrible state. Perhaps they had sent for me to come among them saying that they were all ready and ripe for a revival, and thus constrained me to go. On coming among them I have found the very opposite to be the fact. I would preach to the impenitent; many would be convicted; and awful solemnity would prevail; but no conversions. Then I would turn to the church and beg them to pray, and soon the fact would come out that they had no fellowship with each other and no mutual confidence; almost every brother and sister had hard feelings towards each other; many knew they had wronged their brethren and had never made confession or restitution; some had not even spoken kindly to one another for months; in short it was a state of real war; and how could the Dove of Peace abide there? and how could a righteous God hear their prayers? He could do no such thing till they repented in dust and ashes, and put away these abominable iniquities from before his face.

It often happens that professors of religion are exceedingly careless in respect to the conditions of prevailing prayer. What! Christian men and women in such a state that they will not speak to each other! In such relations to each other that they are ready to injure one another in the worst way--ready to mangle and rend each other's characters! Away with it! It is an offence to God! It is an utter abomination in his sight! He loathes the prayers and the professed worship of such men, as he loathes idolatry itself.

Now although cases as outrageous as those I have described, do not occur very frequently, yet many cases do occur which involve substantially the same principle. In respect to all such, let it be known that God is infinitely honest, and so long as he is so, he will not hold communion and fellowship with one who is dishonest. He expects us to be honest and truthful, willing ever to obey him, and ever anxious to meet all the conditions of acceptable prayer. Until this is the case with us, He cannot and will not hear us, however much and long we pray. Why should he? "Thou requirest truth in the inward parts," said the Psalmist of his God, as if fully aware that entire sincerity of heart, and of course uprightness of life towards others, is an unalterable condition of acceptance before God. It is amazing to see how much insincerity there often is among professed Christians, both in their mutual relations to each other, and also in the relations to God.

Again, we ought always to have an honest and good reason for praying and for asking for the specific things we pray for. It should be remembered that God is infinitely reasonable, and therefore does nothing without a reason. Therefore in all prayer you should always have a reason or reasons that will commend themselves to God as a valid ground for his hearing and answering your prayers.

You can have a rational confidence that God will hear you only when you know what your reasons are for praying and have good grounds to suppose they are such as will commend themselves to an infinitely wise and righteous God.

Beloved, are you in the habit of giving your attention sufficiently to this point? When you pray, do you ask for your own reasons? Do you enquire; Now have I such reasons for this prayer as God can sympathize with--such as I can suppose will have weight with his mind?

Surely this is an all-important enquiry. God will not hear us unless He sees that we have such reasons as will satisfy his own infinite intelligence--such reasons that He can wisely act in view of them;--such that He will not be ashamed to have the universe know that on such grounds He answered our prayers. They must be such that he will not be ashamed of them himself. For we should evermore consider that all God's doings are one day to be perfectly known. It will yet be known why he answered every acceptable prayer,

and why he refused to answer each one that was not acceptable.

Hence if we are to offer prayer, or to do any thing else in which we expect God to sympathize with us, we ought to have good and sufficient reasons for what we ask or do.

You can not help seeing this at your first glance at the subject. Your prayer must not be selfish but benevolent--else how can God hear it? Will he lend himself to patronize and befriend your selfishness?

Suppose a man asks for the Holy Spirit to guide him in any work; or suppose he ask for that Spirit to sanctify himself or his friends. Let him be always able to give a good reason for what he asks. Is his ultimate reason a selfish one--for example, that he may become more distinguished in the world, or may prosecute some favorite scheme for himself and his own glory or his own selfish good? Let him know that the Lord has no sympathy with such reasons for prayer.

Thus a child comes before its parent, and says, Do give me this or that favor. Your reason, my child, says the parent;--give me your reason; what do you want it for?

So God says to us, his children;--your reason, my child; what is your reason? You ask, it may be, for an education; why do you want an education? You say, Lord furnish me the means to pay my tuition bills and by board bills and my clothing bills, for I want to get an education. Your reason, my child, the Lord will answer; your reason; for what end to you want to get an education? You must be able to give a good reason. If you want these things you ask for, only that you may consume them upon your lusts; if your object be to climb up to some higher post among men, or to get your living with less toil, or with more respectability, small ground have you to expect that the Lord will sympathize with any such reasons. But if your reasons be good: if they are such that God will not be ashamed to recognize them as his own reasons for acting, then you will find him infinitely ready to hear and to answer. O, he will bow his ear with infinite grace and compassion.

Your hope of success in prayer therefore should not lie in the amount, but in the quality of your prayers. If you have been in the habit of praying without regard to the reasons why you ask, you have probably been in the habit of mocking God. Unless you have an errand when you come before the Lord, it is mocking to come and ask for any thing. There should always be something which you need. Now, therefore, ask yourself,--Why do I want this thing which I ask of God? Do I need it? For what end do I need it?

A woman of my acquaintance was praying for the conversion of an impenitent husband. She said, "it would be so much more pleasant for me to have him go to meeting with me, and to have him think and feel as I do." When she was asked--Is your heart broken because your husband abuses God, because he dishonors Jesus Christ, she replied, she never had thought of that--never; her husband had troubled and grieved her, she knew; but she had not once thought of his having abused and provoked the great and holy God.

How infinitely different must that woman's state of mind become before the Lord can hear and answer her prayer! Can she expect an answer so long as she takes only a selfish view of the case? No, never until she can say, O my God, my heart is full of bleeding and grief because my husband dishonors thee; my soul is in agony because he scorns the dying blood and the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

So when parents urge their requests for the salvation of their children, let them know that if they sympathize with God, he will sympathize with them. If they are chiefly distressed because their children do

not love and serve their own God and Savior, the Lord will most assuredly enter into the deep sympathies of their hearts, and will delight to answer their requests. So of the wife when she prays for her husband, so universally when friend prays for friend. The great God seems to say evermore--"If you sympathize with me, I sympathize with you." He is a being of infinite sympathies, and never can fail to reciprocate the holy feelings of his creatures. Let the humblest subject in his universe feel sincere regard for the honor and glory of God and the well being of his kingdom, and how suddenly is it reciprocated by the Infinite Father of all! Let one of all the myriads of his creatures in earth or heaven be zealous for God, then assuredly will God be zealous for him, and will find means to fulfil his promise,--"Them that honor me I will honor." But if you will not feel for him and will not take his part, it is vain for you to ask or expect that he will feel for you and take your part.

It is indeed a blessed consideration that when we go out of ourselves and merge our interest in the interests of God and of his kingdom, then he gathers himself all round about us, throws his banner of love over us, and draws our hearts into inexpressible nearness of communion with himself. Then the Eternal God becomes our own God, and underneath us are his almighty arms. Then whoever should "touch us, would touch the apple of his eye." There can be no love more watchful, more strong, more tender, than that borne by the God of infinite love towards his affectionate, trustful children. He would move heaven and earth if need be, to hear prayer offered in such a spirit.

O for a heart to immerse and bathe ourselves, as it were, in the sympathies of Jehovah--to yield up really our whole hearts to him, until our deepest and most perfect emotions should gush and flow out only in perfect harmony with his will, and we should be swallowed up in God, knowing no will but his, and no feelings but in sympathy with his. Then wave after wave of blessings would roll over us, and God would delight to let the universe see how intensely he is pleased with such a spirit in his creatures. O then you would need only put yourself in an attitude to be blessed and you could not fail of receiving all you could ask that could be really a good to your soul and to God's kingdom. Almost before you should call, He would answer and while you were yet speaking he would hear. Opening wide your soul in large expectation and strong faith before God, you might take a large blessing, even "until there should not be room enough to receive it."

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