

**Unhindered Prayer**  
Sermon by Pastor Joe Davis  
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**I. INTRODUCTION**

Have you ever had an experience where someone whom you know is living in obvious unconfessed sin, tells you that they've been spent time in prayer and have received clear direction from God about something? And this clear direction from God they've received is in direct contradiction to what God has shown you through prayer over the same issue?

Have you ever had a period in your own life when you disobeyed God in something and found it affected the closeness of your relationship with him and your ability to hear his voice and direction? I can remember several times in my own life when this happened. One of the times was during the first couple years after I moved out of Alaska. Before I left Alaska I had diligently, by God's grace, eliminated all of my debt and the Lord had directed me to continue living this way. When I ended up in Spokane, Washington, for 8 months, I was able to stay out of debt even though I had a very poor paying job, but it definitely took some inconveniences like having some junky furniture, sleeping on a mat on the floor, and being extremely careful about everything I spent my money on.

However, when I then moved to Colorado after those 8 months in Spokane I lost my patience with having no money and decided I was ready to have some real furniture, some nice new bookcases, and start enjoying life a little. I knew this wasn't what God had directed me to do, but I went ahead and did it anyway. I pulled out my credit card and soon ran up quite a good chunk of debt. And you know what else happened, my closeness with God suffered. I knew in my heart that this was not the way he had directed me to handle my finances and I felt a clear break in my fellowship with him. I continued reading my Bible and trying to pray, but my growth stalled out and God seemed very distant. I pretended for several months that I had done anything wrong, but in my heart I knew I had, and I began experiencing the consequences of my choices not only in my financial situation but also in my relationship with God. My prayers were hindered and my study of God's Word was dry and uninspiring. And I found I was

in another tight financial situation, only this time I had some nice furniture and a few toys to look at.

Finally, after a few months of difficulties and distance from God, I acknowledged my mistakes to God, asked forgiveness for stepping outside of his plan for me, and my closeness with him began to be renewed. And God was good enough to leave me with the financial consequences of my mistakes for quite some time as he continued to teach me the life lesson that living outside my means really doesn't work well.

I'm sure that all of us here have had similar experiences in our walks with God. There are choices and decisions we make that hinder our prayers and our ability to grow in our relationship with God. And while we may not admit it to God or others, we are usually quite well aware within ourselves of what the issues are that are causing the break in our communication with God. It just takes us awhile and often some miserable experiences to finally get ready to admit it and get right with God again.

So what I want to do today in our prayer study, is outline 6 things that Scripture tells us hinder our prayers, with the goal that each of us here today would become aware of anything within ourselves that's currently keeping us from praying unhindered. We've learned a lot of great truths and principles about prayer in this series, but they will do us no good if we have things in our lives that are hindering our communication with God and keeping us from hearing his voice.

## **II. HINDRANCES TO PRAYER**

### **A. Praying while living unrepentant in unconfessed sin (*the prophets; Psalm 66:18; Proverbs 15:29; Proverbs 28:9; 1 Peter 3:7, 12*)**

The first hindrance to prayer we'll look at, and really the one that encompasses all the others is living unrepentant in unconfessed sin...continuing to participate in attitudes and activities that are sinful and out of step with who God is and how he's directed us to live. If we're living in sin, refusing to admit and confess it and allow God to work on it, our prayers will be ineffective and we will not be able to walk in close fellowship with God. Scripture could not be more clear on this point.

Consider these verses:

Psalm 66:18

***If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear;***

Proverbs 15:29

***The Lord is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous.***

Proverbs 28:9

***He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, even his prayer is an abomination.***

Do you know what an abomination is? It's a disgusting thing. If we're living in unrepentant, unconfessed sin and then coming to God as if it's not happening or it's not an issue of concern, God views our prayer as disgusting to him. That should get our attention and encourage us to be real and honest about our sin and failures and not delay in getting it resolved with God.

And here's a final verse that should get our attention in relation to sin affecting our prayers:

1 Peter 3:10-12

***10 "THE ONE WHO DESIRES LIFE, TO LOVE AND SEE GOOD DAYS, MUST KEEP HIS TONGUE FROM EVIL AND HIS LIPS FROM SPEAKING DECEIT. 11 "HE MUST TURN AWAY FROM EVIL AND DO GOOD; HE MUST SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT. 12 "FOR THE EYES OF THE LORD ARE TOWARD THE RIGHTEOUS, AND HIS EARS ATTEND TO THEIR PRAYER, BUT THE FACE OF THE LORD IS AGAINST THOSE WHO DO EVIL."***

Are you still in doubt that sin in your life affects your prayers? Here we're told that the face of the LORD is against those who do evil. If we live in unrepentant sin and refuse to acknowledge and confess it to God, he's going to be giving us some pretty severe consequences to get our attention and return us to where we need to be with him. I certainly know that I wouldn't want the face of the LORD against me. If on the contrary, we're dealing with sin as it arises, confessing it and allowing God to change us, we have the beautiful promise that God is listening to us and communicating with us. His ears attend to our prayer.

So let's spend some time now looking at some sin areas specifically identified in Scripture as particularly significant in relation to hindering our prayers. All unconfessed sin affects our prayers, but these are items that have been specifically mentioned in Scripture.

**B. Praying with bitterness and a spirit of unforgiveness (Mark 11:25-26; 1 Timothy 2:8; Matthew 18:21-35)**

The first is bitterness and a spirit of unforgiveness. In recent messages on prayer we've already discussed verses 25 and 26 from Mark 11, teaching us to forgive people as we pray, rather than holding on to bitterness and resentment until they make it right with us. God teaches us that we need to do it as we pray and not wait until some uncertain time in the future. We're hurting both ourselves and our relationship with God when we as forgiven saints refuse to offer the same forgiveness we've received to others.

I want to share with you a sobering story from the Bible that you've definitely heard before, but probably haven't fully considered the implications. It's found in Matthew 18, verses 21 to 35. Peter is asking Jesus a question we can all relate to. What do you do when people keep sinning against you and hurting you over and over again? How do you relate to someone who's gone too far? Is there a point when righteous anger can just take over and you can be justified in not forgiving them? Is there a point when you can just be done with them?

Beginning in verse 21 of Matthew 18, we read this:

***21 Then Peter came and said to [Jesus], "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. 23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 "When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25 "But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. 26 "So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' 27 "And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released***

***him and forgave him the debt. 28 "But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' 29 "So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' 30 "But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. 31 "So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. 32 "Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' 34 "And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. 35 "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."***

Did you notice what the king did to the servant who wouldn't forgive as he had been forgiven...who refused to treat others as he had been treated? The king handed him over to the torturers. Communication with the king was cut off and the torturing began until the servant would learn the lesson he needed to learn. In the same way, when we hold bitterness and unforgiveness in our hearts toward other people, our communication with God is broken and he lets us experience the consequences of allowing bitterness and anger to take root within us and eat us up from the inside out...a process that is vividly described as being handed over to the torturers.

Don't ever think that God doesn't care about the bitterness and unforgiveness you hold in your heart against other people, and don't ever fool yourself into thinking it doesn't hinder your prayers. If that's where you are, admit it, bring it to God and hand whatever injustice you think you've experienced over to the One who judges justly. As you stand praying, forgive as you have been forgiven, no matter how terrible the crime or hurt may be. Bring it to God and he will give you the grace to let it go. Ask him to get to work on bringing the healing you need. If you continue to hold it back from God's healing power, you can expect the torturers to have their way with you.

God's way of living, free from bitterness, wrath and anger, is so much better and will allow us to pray unhindered and maintain close fellowship with our Father. As Paul says in 1 Timothy 2, verse 8:

***Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension.***

If we want to pray unhindered, we need to do it without wrath and dissension. We need to forgive as we have been forgiven.

### **C. Praying while treating our spouse badly**

A third hindrance to prayer relates specifically to marriage relationships and how we treat our spouses. The apostles Peter tells us that our prayers are hindered when we are treating our spouses badly.

In 1 Peter 3:7, he says this:

***You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered.***

Clearly, the way we treat our spouses can hinder our prayers. Husbands, if we're disrespecting our wives and treating them poorly or with contempt, we can know that our communication with God will be severely affected. And the same goes for wives. The way you treat your husband and relate to him affects the effectiveness of your prayers.

If we want to pray unhindered we need to operate in marriage the way Paul taught us in Ephesians, chapter 5: Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her; Wives, submit to your husbands and respect them. Both of you, resolve any issues you have with each other and forgive, refusing to live in bitterness and anger toward each other. We shouldn't expect to have open communication with God while we're dishonoring each other in our marriages and refusing to forgive as we've been forgiven.

#### **D. Praying with selfish motives (*James 4:3*)**

Another hindrance to prayer highlighted in Scripture is asking for things with selfish motives. In James chapter 4, verse 3, we read:

***3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.***

The problem here is that we have an earthly focus in the things we're praying for. We're focused on our own comfort and pleasure and getting the toys we want. And if this is mostly what our prayers are about, we shouldn't expect to get what we ask for. God loves to give us blessings and gifts if they're not going to turn us away from him, but if we're asking for things he knows are just going to be a distraction from our pursuit of him or something we're going to try and find our satisfaction and fulfillment in, we shouldn't expect to receive them. If the focus of our life is still on earthly things, we shouldn't expect to be effective in prayer. We will very likely be praying according to our purposes rather than God's.

Praying with selfish motives can also be evidenced by a tendency to keep telling God how he can solve our problems, rather than presenting our problems to him and asking for his solutions. If in prayer we're mostly telling God what to do, we should examine our motives and develop some humility. We need to believe in our hearts that God really does know best and can provide much better solutions than we could ever think of. Bryan Chapell says, "All who are so bold to tell God exactly how to answer [a prayer] are expressing a kind of belief, but it is great faith in human wisdom and faint confidence in God." In contrast, "We expect a God who is truly sovereign to answer prayers in ways beyond our wisdom. How else could he 'do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.'"

If we want to pray unhindered, we need to take a good look at our motives and learn to desire God and his purposes rather than our own. We need to begin believing that he really is everything we want and need, while what the world has to offer is just emptiness.

### **E. Praying casually with no expectation (*James 1:5-8; 4:2c*)**

Another hindrance to prayer specifically mentioned in Scripture is the habit of praying casually with no real expectation that God hears and is going to take action on our requests. This essentially is praying with doubt and when we're praying this way we're usually doing it as a religious duty, while not actually believing it has any real effect on our lives or the lives of other people. James has a pretty scathing description of those who approach prayer this way and makes it clear that this type of praying is completely ineffective. In James chapter 1, verses 5 to 8, we read:

***5 But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. 6 But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, 8 being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.***

Half-hearted prayer performed as a religious duty has no power and we shouldn't expect to receive anything from the Lord if we approach prayer this way. If that's where you are today in your attitude toward prayer, admit it to God honestly and ask him to transform your mind. Spend some time in the coming weeks reflecting on the Scriptural truths we've learned in our prayer study and challenge yourself to believe they really are true. Keep asking and asking and asking God to change the way you view prayer. He'll do it if that's what you desire and you keep asking him persistently.

### **F. Being too busy to pray (*Luke 8:14-15*)**

And this brings us to the final hindrance to prayer we're going to look at today...one which is very powerful in the modern world we live in. This hindrance is described well in the parable of the seed and the sower in Mark 4, verses 18 to 19. In explaining the parable Jesus says:

***18 "And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, 19 but the worries of the***



***world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.***

This final and very effective hindrance to prayer and thereby growth in the Lord is being too busy and too distracted with other things... allowing the worries of the world, the lure of worldly wealth, and the endless enticements available to us, to cause prayer to be the one thing we can just never quite fit in.

And lest you think this is only a modern problem, listen to what Charles Spurgeon had to say back in the 1800s about how worldly cares hinder our prayers:

“...when care comes in it confuses the mind and puts the heart away from pleading. A heart clogged with care is like a man trying to swim with heavy clothes. Many a sailor has cut his clothes to pieces because he felt he should sink if he did not get clear of them. I could wish that many Christians would tear themselves away from their excessive worldly engagements, for they have such a mass of care upon them that they scarcely keep their heads above water.”

Can any of you relate to Mr. Spurgeon’s descriptive words here? Do you feel like you’re trying to swim with heavy clothes? Do you feel like you’re trying to swim with a pair of hip waders on? Sadly this is the way too many of us live our lives, sinking under the weight of too much activity and too many commitments... running frantically through each day and not surprisingly never finding a moment to get in a quiet place and fellowship with our Father in prayer. And if this was a problem back in the 1800s, how much more of a problem do you think it is today?

### **III. CONCLUSION**

So as we close today, I’d like to ask: What are the hip waders in your life that need to be cut loose so you can have time to pray and walk through life in calm dependence on and close fellowship with God? In my hometown of Soldotna, Alaska, fishing in hip waders in the swift Kenai River has resulted in the death of some who have lost their footing and drowned as their hip waders filled with water and swimming became impossible.

Are you drowning in your life because you've allowed it to be so full of activity that you don't have time to get to know God and hear his voice? Are you drowning because you're filling your life with everything but God? Are you drowning because you're in the grip of bitterness and your communication with God has been cut off? Are you drowning because you're walking through life in dependence on yourself, not really believing that God actually works through prayer?

God invites each of us to live in his power and experience his presence in unhindered prayer, but we've got to be willing to honestly offer up and deal with those things in our lives that are hindering our close fellowship with him. This often requires difficult choices and a reorganizing of our priorities, but the rewards are out of this world. If God showed you something today that is hindering your prayers, please deal with it and soon! Don't hold any part of your life back from God. Talk to him honestly about it and invite him to start his healing work within you. Freedom, joy and the power of God awaits!

I'll be honest with you about my own prayer journey. Praying as I go through my day is an area where I feel like I'm making pretty good progress. I'm definitely far from arriving, but I'm doing it more and more and am very aware of my desperate need for God in everything. However, taking even 15 or 30 minutes to just sit and pray is difficult for me and something I have to consciously force myself to do. Life is busy, I have an extensive to-do list, and there are a lot of things that will fill up my time if I let them. And yet, when I do pause and take the time to be alone with God, I always come away encouraged and strengthened.

Getting alone with God requires a conscious choice and a belief that God does work through prayer and will show us himself and grant us his wisdom as we take time to do it. So, my friends, I'm challenging both myself and all of you, to begin deliberately setting aside time blocks to be alone with God. Start small...10 or 15 minutes...but do it regularly and with expectation that you're really going to meet with God and grow in him in ways you've never grown before. You'll be surprised how fast the time goes, especially when you keep yourself focused with a tool like TACKSI that we looked at last week.

God is going to fill us up with himself and do some powerful things here in our body as we begin to wholeheartedly seek him together in prayer and learn to

walk through our days in constant communication with him!...as we get rid of those things, by his power, that are hindering our prayers. Next week, Lord willing, we'll close out our prayer series with a slam-bang finish, looking at what we'll call, "Tenacious Prayer."