

Unanswered Prayer: Selfishness

What does it mean to be selfish? Is a prayer of a personal request selfish? What is the difference, and how do I guard against this?

1. Here is a challenging issue we see everyday. What do you observe? What hinders prayer?

One who shuts his ear to the outcry of the poor
Will also call out himself, and not be answered. (Prov 21:13, NASB)

2. Carefully observe how selfishness is on display. What do you observe of sin? What does this reveal about one's character and why God may not answer a person's prayer? Study this passage in parts:

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is the source not your pleasures that wage war in your body's parts?

You lust and do not have, so you commit murder.

And you are envious and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.

You do not have because you do not ask.

You ask and do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, so that you may spend what you request on your pleasures. (Jas 4:1-3, NASB)

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Teacher Notes

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Encourage the student to grapple with the difficult issue of the poor. What defines the poor you would help? People on public assistance? Homelessness? What about people who abuse alcohol / drugs? What about mental illness from genetics, brain trauma, or substance abuse? Discuss and explore your thoughts and difficulties.

Ask the student: does God define who is poor? One method to investigate this is to use a concordance:

- 1) Go to: Biblegateway.com
- 2) Enter "poor" and select the Bible version you desire.
- 3) Peruse the results and see how God speaks of the poor in both the Old and New Testaments.

2. Carefully observe how selfishness is on display. What do you observe of sin? What does this reveal about one's character and why God may not answer a person's prayer? Study this passage in parts:

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is the source not your pleasures that wage war in your body's parts?

Ask the student: when James speaks of "your body's parts," what is he referring to? What does he saying about pleasure in this context?

James is referring to the church. Believers should take pleasure in the company of others in the church.

You lust and do not have, so you commit murder.

Ask the student: what is the cause of quarrels and conflicts within the church? What is the definition of lust?

Lust is often defined as the strong persistent desire for someone; but, it could also be about a strong persistent desire for anything.

Ask the student: read how James defines sin in the beginning of his letter (James 1:14-15).

But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. (Jam 1:14-15, NASB)

Sin is having ungodly desires. This is consistent with the tenth commandment of the Ten Commandments:

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Ex 20:17, NASB)

And you are envious and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.

Ask the student: what is the cause of quarrels and conflicts within the church?

James is confronting the church for having ungodly desires.

Ask the student: read what the apostle Paul says in Romans 7:7. What does it tell you about this church? Encourage the student to explore their observation and interpretation.

What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet." (Rom 7:7, NASB)

Because the tenth command of the Ten Commandments is about coveting, the church either doesn't know God's word or has forgotten it.

You do not have because you do not ask.

Ask the student: does the lustful and envious person seek God? Does James' statement make sense?

A selfish Believer has a poor relationship with God.

You ask and do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, so that you may spend what you request on your pleasures. (Jas 4:1-3, NASB)

Ask the student: read what the apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4:1-3.

Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. (1 Pet 4:1-3, NASB)

Ask the student: what changes does a selfish Believer must make to make his prayers heard?

A selfish Believer prays for his selfish desires.

An abiding Believer prays for what God desires. Jesus shares the Lord's Prayer as an example:

"Pray, then, in this way:

'Our Father, who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.

Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil." (Matt 6:9-13, NASB)