SIX CHARACTERISTICS OF ANSWERED PRAYER

Many of us, though we may pray often, still feel our prayer life is a sort of uncertain, hit-or-miss proposition in which many prayers seem to result in few answers. This stands in sharp contrast to the many scriptures of the Bible revealing the Father's delight in responding to the prayers of His children. We know that He doesn't take note of our prayers because of our position in the church or in society, or because of our beautiful, 'King James'-style poetic expressions. But what manner of prayer does move God's heart? Let us look at some characteristics of prayer He promises to answer.

1. PRAYERS OF RIGHTEOUS MEN - James 5:16-18 "Therefore, confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit."

For the Bible to call a man righteous he must be just, correct and innocent with respect to God's requirements. The promise in the verse above is that this man's prayers are effective and very productive. How can a man be righteous when he comes before God in prayer? First, by not claiming his own merits as the basis for his approach to the throne of grace. God counts us righteous when we have believed that His Son is the sacrifice for our sins. That is, when we become the righteousness of God in Christ (2Cor. 5:21). However, a man's righteousness must show forth at the human level as well. "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: any one who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother. For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another..." (1John 3:10-11). A righteous man lives (and prays) in love for God and for his neighbor. His prayers avail much because they are consistent with his life of righteousness before both God AND men.

2. CONSISTENT PRAYER - 1John 5:14-15 "And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask any thing according to His will, He hears us: And if we know that He hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him."

The Scriptures promise answered prayer to those who pray consistent with God's will. This makes sense - asking God to do what He already wants to do. Sometimes we wonder, "What is God's will in this situation?" According to James 1:5 we can confidently ask for wisdom so that we might know how to pray in a given circumstance. Fortunately, in so many areas of our lives, His will is clearly revealed to us in the Scriptures. For example, all of His commandments express His will. Whatever Scripture says to pray for; this is His will. God has made it easy for us to pray according to His will so clearly expressed in His Word. Don't get caught in the habit of trying to persuade God to do your will. Find out His will – it's the best for you, too.

3. PERSISTENT PRAYER - Luke 18:1-8 "And He spake a parable unto them to this end, that
men ought always to pray, and not to faint; saying, 'There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man: and there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, "Avenge me of mine adversary." And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, "Though I fear not God, nor regard man; yet because this widow troubles me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me." And the Lord said, 'Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him, though He bear long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of Man comes, shall He find faith on earth?'"

Many Scriptures tell us to persist and not give up in prayer. Remember the story in Daniel chapter 10 of the spiritual warfare that delayed the answer to Daniel's prayer? (Note that persistence in prayer may naturally lead to prayer AND fasting.) Remember how the Lord Jesus tested the resolve of the Syrophoenician woman, at first evading her urgent request (Mark 7:26). Consider Jesus' parable of the man who asked his neighbor at midnight for bread (Luke 11:5-8). He was heard because of his persistence and shamelessness. Remember that the fruit of the Spirit is patience, toward both God and man. In Hebrews 6:12 we are encouraged to be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. Abraham is given as our example. He knew the will of God for him to have a son, and yet many years elapsed between the promise and the fulfillment. Later, when Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt and ended up in Egypt's prison - had God forgotten him? We would be tempted to think so if we were in that situation. Yet in God's timing, in one day the cry that was surely in Joseph's heart began to be answered. Pharaoh took Joseph from the prison and exalted him to command over all Egypt. We must never, never give up in prayer and in believing God to see His kingdom come upon the earth.

4. PRAYER FROM THE HEART – Psalm 50:15  "And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me."

The power to persist in and be shameless in prayer comes in truly praying from a humble heart. This heart feels its own and others' need for God. For most of us, unless we are in an immediate situation of great need, it takes some waiting upon the Lord to get beyond our theological, wordy and "proper" prayers to where we are truly "pouring out our hearts before Him," (Psalm 62:8) and "casting ALL your care upon Him" (1Peter 5:7). As we do this and empty our hearts, He is able to pour into us what is on His heart. This should be our aim in prayer; not merely to "unload" on God -- though He wants us to do that. Our aim is to empty out our little hearts so that He might fill us from His big heart. When our hearts are filled from the strength and depth of God's heart, it's much easier to pray with perseverance in clarity, simplicity and expectancy.

5. EXPECTANT, CONFIDENT PRAYER - Mark 11:22-24  "And Jesus answering saith unto them, 'Have faith in God. For verily I say to you, that whosoever shall say unto this mountain, "Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea;" and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall
The Lord doesn't want us to get in the habit of reciting our "wish list" to Him. If we are praying according to His will, knowing He hears us, we can believe that we have received what we have asked. God wants to give us that faith and confidence by which we KNOW we have what we have asked before it is ours in personal experience. Again we consider Abraham and what is said about him in Romans 4:20, "He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what He had promised, He was able also to perform."

6. UNITED PRAYER - Matthew 18:19-20  "Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

1Timothy 2:1-8 "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men;... I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting."

Acts 4:31 "And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness."

If the prayer of one righteous man avails much, what can happen when there is great unity in prayer among many?

In summary, putting all these Scriptures together, our conclusion must be this: the persistent, consistent, heartfelt and faith-filled prayers of God's righteous people agreeing together must surely accomplish much. The Lord longs to prove Himself true to His promises for a people expectantly desiring His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Let us join together and encourage one another in prayer.