

Too sinful to pray?

There have been times in my Christian life when I've felt so terrible and sinful that praying was the last thing I wanted to do. Times when my gut turns within me, I feel a lump at the back of my throat. I'm petrified at the thought of someone seeing my heart for what it is. And at those times, God can be the one I want to hide from most. At those times my prayer life has wavered or stopped completely because I felt too sinful to pray. But if we let that feeling stop us from praying, we'll have missed the very heart of the gospel we claim to believe.

Praying can be a hard slog at the best of times. We know we should do it, we know its important, and yet things seem to get in the way. And yet nothing seems to kill someone's prayer life like sin. Maybe you can remember a time when you've felt just totally rotten because of some stupid evil thing you've done. You might be ashamed or feel disgusting. And even though you could pretend to be all OK on the outside, you can't pretend with God can you? Its at times like these that prayer almost feels wrong. You just think, 'How can I talk to God now, after I've gone and sinned again? How can I ask him for help with this other thing, when I've been such a rotten Christian?' The sad truth is when we feel like this, we usually don't pray at all. We secretly wait a few days, maybe even a few weeks before we feel comfortable to pray again. That is, *we wait until we feel a bit better about ourselves*, and then we turn to our Father in prayer.

You may not have thought about it like that before, but if we avoid praying to God because we feel bad about ourselves, that's very significant. It means we've understood something very important about ourselves, but we've misunderstood something very important about God.

Its right to feel like we can't pray

If you've ever felt like you can't pray to God because you're too sinful, then you've understood something very important about your sin. God hates sin, and he gets very angry at people who do sin. And we especially feel this if we're in a relationship with God as Christians. Sin feels so much worse when you're a Christian, because we're supposed to know better, and somehow be better. We can feel like failures and would rather not face up the God we know we've failed. We avoid praying because praying will mean facing our own terrible sinfulness—and the God who hates it.

But its more than that too. Sometimes, when we slip and sin we can feel hopeless. We honestly think that we're just *too* sinful for God. We feel like this isn't just any little sin, we

feel like its huge—too huge. We've personally offended God, and there's no reason he should take us back. We feel like we may as well throw in the towel as Christians. We genuinely feel unworthy of God's love. We're convinced that he can't love us. He just can't! We refuse to pray to God because we've convinced ourselves we've gone to far, and he could never want us now.

Both of these responses have got something very right about them. They both see God as the righteous judge who hates sin. However, they are both completely inappropriate responses for the Christian who calls Jesus Christ their lord and saviour.

Its wrong to feel like we can't pray

When we feel unworthy to come to God in prayer because of our sin, that is a right feeling, but a wrong response. Feeling unworthy of God's love is a proper and correct feeling. But its very wrong to believe that God's love is available only to those who don't sin too badly. Rather, the cross of Jesus shows us God's love for sinners.

God has revealed himself to us in the Bible as a loving God who hates sin. Yes our sin makes his wrath boil, but that very same wrath has already been exhausted upon his Son Jesus on the cross. God has offered us forgiveness for our sins through Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus didn't just die for the little sins (if there was any such thing), he died for the big ones too. Even for the ones we think put us beyond God's mercy. That is, God really can, and really does forgive our sin. Each and every sin. Each and every time.

1John 1:9 says, 'If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.' There is no sin too great that Jesus death can't pay for it.

The proper heart of prayer

We must remember to believe both things in our heart;

1. We are always unworthy to pray to God,
2. God is always willing to forgive our sin because of Jesus death in our place.

We find it so hard to believe that God wants us to come to him admitting our unworthy status, and depending on his forgiveness. God never wants us to think we are *worthy* to come to him in prayer! And God never wants us to think we can be so *unworthy* that we can't come to him in prayer!

What does our avoiding prayer show what we think about God? Do we think God acts like a spurned little child? Is your heavenly Father really thinking, “Don’t you dare talk to me! I know what you did! I don’t want to hear a peep out of you for 2 weeks!!” The cross of Jesus tells us he’s not like that! He knows the extent of the sin you have done, but he has already dealt with it. God wants us to come to him convinced of both *our* unworthiness and *his* forgiveness.

Hebrews 10:19-22 says “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience”. Praying to our heavenly Father—no matter how sinful we’ve been—is a primary benefit of the gospel. God hears our prayers, not on the basis of our lives, but on the basis of his mercy. And that truly is amazing news. That means the moment we sin, God is still there willing us to turn to him for forgiveness. We have no reason to turn away from prayer, and every reason to jump into prayer at that very moment. You might only be able to say a few words like, “Father God, I feel so bad about my sin, that I’m tempted not to pray to you. Please help me to believe that you are willing to forgive even me”. It might feel wrong, but is it the right thing to do if you believe the gospel.

Personally, some of the times I have felt most loved by God are those times when I have come to him with nothing in my hands but my horrible sin. I have felt truly undeserving of God’s love. Every part of me tells me that God couldn’t restore me to his favour. But there is nowhere else to turn to, and no-one but Jesus to hope in. And at that point the gospel convinces me that I’m not forgiven begrudgingly, but whole-heartedly by God.

The gospel gives us the amazing privilege of opening our lives to God in prayer, and allow him to see—and then forgive—the sin that weighs so heavily upon us.

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