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Pastor's Point of View: Does God Listen to the Prayers of the Lost? An Explanation of John 9:31

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"We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshipper of God and does His will, God listens to him" (John 9:31)

These words are spoken by the man born blind, yet given sight by Jesus. They are said in response to the Pharisees, who question the man about the alleged miracle and his views of Jesus, who performed this mighty work on the Sabbath. The Pharisees believe Jesus is a sinner (9:24), which doesn't simply mean that Jesus has committed a sin, but they believed that God would not display such a mighty work through someone who broke the Sabbath (as they understood breaking the Sabbath). Thus, in the eyes of the Pharisees, Jesus has committed a great sin by healing on the Sabbath—something God would surely never do, since He rested on the 7th day after creation.

The man who had received his sight agrees with a basic assumption of the Pharisees that God does not listen to sinners but those who worship Him and do His will. The question people ask is "Is this kind of thinking correct? Doesn't God hear all prayers, even of the lost?"

Here's my take: we could argue that all of us are sinners and easily dismiss that statement altogether, but that isn't what the man is arguing. The contrast in the statement is between those separated from God (called "sinners") and those who worship Him (evidenced by doing His will). Because such a mighty work has been performed by Jesus in giving sight to a man born blind, He cannot be separated from God but must be someone who worships God and does His will. The man doesn't believe Jesus is the Christ yet, but he comes to that understanding later in the passage.

Hopefully that clarifies the statement a bit, but the underlying issue in our minds is "Does God listen to (answer prayer requests of) sinners (those separated from Him) or does He only listen to believers?"

One could argue for God's common grace, which is shown to all people, even though we don't deserve it. Jesus Himself said that God "makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). Elsewhere the Bible affirms that "the LORD is good to all, and His mercy is over all that He has made" (Ps 145:9) as well as "the eyes of all look to You, and You give them their food in due season (Ps 145:15). So if a Muslim farmer prays for rain or sun for his crops or a poor, Hindu man prays for food for his family, God often answers the request out of His common grace shown to all.

Common grace, however, is not the issue in John 9. Jesus doesn't go around healing *every* single person that has a sickness or disease or abnormality, but He specifically chooses to heal *the* man born blind to display God's work in Him as the light of the world (9:3-5)—Jesus gives true knowledge and understanding of God via special (saving) grace (see Ephesians 2:1-10).

So the point of John 9 is to highlight Jesus as the Christ and show that being part of God's family centers around a right understanding of Christ. Even though the Jewish leaders excommunicated the man who had been born blind (9:34), Jesus finds him, questions him and reveals Himself to him. The man appropriately responds, "'Lord, I believe,' and he worshipped Him" (9:38).

This exchange was no act of *common* grace, but of *special* grace, for Jesus began by healing *him* of his lifelong blindness, seeking *him* out after his excommunication from the synagogue, and revealing Himself to *him*. While Jesus could have done this for *any*body, He especially did it for *some*body. That's not common; that's special.

God's special grace relates directly to believers, not only in their salvation, but in their covenant relationship with Him. The Bible contains numerous examples of godly people having confidence that God hears their prayers because of their relationship with Him. The psalmist said, "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; He has attended to

the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, because He has not rejected my prayer or removed His steadfast love from me!" (66:18-20). The word for God's steadfast love in the Old Testament includes His mercy, love and saving grace.

Moreover, the Scriptures declare that "the LORD is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous" (Prov 15:29). Obviously, the righteous are those in a right relationship with God through faith (see Rom 3:21-4:25 for a more complete treatment of righteousness via faith).

Furthermore, one of the most well-known verses in the Bible is 2 Chronicles 7:14, where God says, "If My people who are called by My name humble themselves, and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land." Here the Lord gives a binding promise to hear His people's prayers, should they meet the conditions. God never makes this kind of promise to unbelievers, because they aren't part of His family.

Jesus even accentuates a right relationship with Him in order to have access to the Father through prayer—"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). The only sure way to have access to God's throne of grace is through a right relationship with Christ—praying *as a Christian*. Jesus adds, "Whatever you ask in My name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (14:13). This verse doesn't mean that Jesus answers every single request we make to Him, but He binds Himself to those requests done "in Him," and those who are "in Him" are believers.

Finally, every time the Bible underscores Jesus as the only Mediator between God and man, it does so in the context of Jesus interceding on behalf of believers, those who are being saved. The Apostle Paul assures believers that Christ Jesus "is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us" (Rom 8:34). The author of Hebrews elevates the high priesthood of Christ and affirms that "He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (7:25; cf. also 1 Tim 2:4-5). The clear teaching of the Bible about having your prayers heard by God is to have a right relationship with Him through faith in Jesus Christ—be part of God's family!

So what about the sinner separated from God who wants to pray to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior? Is his prayer heard? Yes! Yes! Yes! But you must realize that the sinner who prays to receive Christ isn't praying as an unbeliever any longer but as a newborn believer. Thus, once a sinner understands the basic message of the gospel, he may pray to receive Christ, and he can be confident that his prayer is heard by God!

All of these verses don't mean that a sinner cannot pray anything, because God often bestows common grace, as noted above. So we should encourage children who have yet to express saving faith in Christ to pray, because the common grace and kindness and goodness of God may lead them to repentance (see Romans 2:4). Then, they aren't merely our children but also God's children.

John 9:31 has much more theology about answered prayer than we realize. Hopefully, we will learn to marvel at our Lord who revealed His special grace to us so that through faith we could have a right relationship to Him—a relationship that includes God hearing *our* prayers!