

Are Your Prayers Stinky?

My favorite car of all time was a 1993 Nissan Sentra. I bought it brand new at the end of 1993, and had it until 2013. It was extremely dependable, costing me little in repairs. It had roughly 170,000 miles on it when I sold it.

I loved that car. But in its later years, I rarely used it. Since my wife and I work for the same ministry, we drove together most days—in her newer car. I took an occasional trip to town in it, but I mostly used it for trips to the airport when I had a speaking weekend. I would drive it there on Friday morning and park it, catch my flight, then drive it home on Sunday night when I returned.

As a result, I got a little careless with its cleanliness. It became a “bachelor car.” If I stopped for fast food, I tossed the leftover bag on the back floor. I kept an air freshener hanging in the car, but it was always months past good use.

One day, while driving my three-year-old granddaughter Gabrielle somewhere, she blurted out, “Grampy’s stinky car.” That became my car’s nickname for the final two years of its life. I recall this passage in Revelation 5:8: “Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people.” Scripture says our prayers are like incense rising before the throne of God. I like the smell of incense—well, some incense! But there are other incenses that stink!

So I thought, I wonder if there are “stinky” prayers going before the throne? What does God do with those? What stinky prayers am I referring to?

Bad motive prayers. James 4:3 tells us we can pray with bad motives. We can desire good things in our prayers, but still have bad motives. We may ask for God to bring back a wayward child, but the truth is, we are embarrassed that our child is

rebellious.

Thoughtless, perfunctory prayers. We do them all the time. We pray, “God, please be with Sue on her trip to China.” What? If Sue is a believer, then God is already indwelling her.

Proud prayers. In Luke 18:9–14, Jesus juxtaposes a humble tax collector’s prayer against a proud Pharisee’s prayer. We don’t pray that way, we think. But we can get sanctimonious when we pray about the sinful lifestyle of others.

Manipulative prayers or prayers that teach. We often pray more for the sake of the people in the room than to God. We give instructions or point out a flaw in someone through our prayers. We also try to manipulate God’s response: “I’ll do this, God, if You would just. . . .” Ouch.

It’s easy to get overwhelmed at the thought of our poor prayers. But here is the truth of Scripture: “We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us . . .” (Rom. 8:26). The implication is that when we pray at all, even if we are way off in what we are asking, the Holy Spirit prays what should be prayed. That is a freeing thought!

Work on praying better—yes. But remember, with the Holy Spirit’s help, we can’t really get it wrong!

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