

THE PASTORS' PEN

articles from the elders of BBC

How much would you pay for a prayer? That is the question that was asked in a recent edition of *The Atlantic* magazine by Sigal Samuel. The article carried the following sub-heading: "In India, thousands are embracing apps that allow them to pay for a ritual to be performed on their behalf."

The story begins with Ravi Ganne, a young investment banker in Bangalore, who wondered what it would take for him to see divine intervention in his career. As we all do these days, he googled the question, which led him to the website of a company called ePuja. For a little more than R200, he could have a prayer offered on his behalf in one of ePuja's many in-network temples. He would avoid the inconvenience of having to go to worship himself and reap the benefit of divine intervention.

What was the result? "It worked out for me," he says. "I got a better job offer. So I started doing this on a regular basis."

ePuja, and similar companies, have hit a large target market among Hindus, both in India and abroad. If you lack the time and resources to find your way to the temple with the best reputation for solving your particular problem, you can simply download an app or visit a website and have a priest perform the ritual for you. Some companies even allow you to Skype in while the ritual is being performed! Samuel summarises:

The convenience offered by sites like ePuja and Shubhpuja may be their biggest selling point, but it also risks making a ritual feel less meaningful: What's a devotional experience without some effort, inconvenience, and, well, devotion?

[ePuja's founder] acknowledges that an in-person temple visit is better but says, "We are the second-best way."

He describes himself as "a postman carrying your requests to God."

Allowing for the fact that this is a Western outlet reporting on an Eastern religious phenomenon, and therefore assuming that some of the facts above are probably horribly oversimplified, it remains interesting that a company that sells prayers—that sells the convenience of true devotion—is as popular and successful as it is. It's as easy as ordering a pizza—"connect to God in one click," as one of ePuja's competitor's puts it.

Christians, of course, understand that God's blessings cannot be bought. When Simon the sorcerer tried to purchase the power of the

Holy Spirit, Peter said, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God" (Acts 8:20–21).

Having said that, a full-orbed understanding of the biblical teaching on prayer does reveal that prayer—effective prayer—is costly. As E. M. Bounds puts it,

Prayer that costs nothing gets nothing. The remnant have counted the cost of it, and are willing to pay the price of regular, prolonged times of praise and intercession. They know that prayer is honourable work, indeed the most rewarding work; that prayer occupies itself entirely with the impossible; and that the church of Jesus Christ has a monopoly on prayer. No one else has anything like it.



Prayer is spoken of in Scripture as an offering to God (see Revelation 8:3–5) and, as David (in another context) vowed, “I will not offer ... offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing” (2 Samuel 24:24). Prayer that is defined biblically as effective costs at least four things.

First, effective prayer costs time. You must plan to pray, which means that you will need to set other things aside to do it. Speaking of Jesus’ prayers, Mark writes, “And when he had sent them away, he departed to the mountain to pray” (Mark 6:46, NKJV). Notice that: He sent something (the multitude) away before he went to pray. He knew that he needed time to pray, and he did what he needed to do to set that time apart. The multitude had many needs, and he could have accomplished much good had he remained among the people, but he realised the importance of prayer and therefore sent the crowd away so that he could pray.

How often do we pray brief prayers simply because we have “so much to do”? Surely we should realise that the more we have before us, the more need there is for prayer! Effective prayer will cost you time—time that could be given to other things, even good things—but it is a cost we must be willing to pay if we will pray effectively.

Second, effective prayer costs affections—worldly affections. Those who will pray effectively must be committed to setting aside worldly affections in the pursuit of godly affections. After all, it is “the prayer of a *righteous* person” that has “great power as it is working” (James 5:16). And David tells us only the one with “clean hands and a pure heart,” and the person “who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully” is able to “ascend the hill of the LORD” and “stand in his holy place” (Psalm 24:3–4).

David knew that iniquity cherished in his heart would hinder prayer (Psalm 66:18). Husbands who mistreat their wives should not expect their prayers to be effective (1 Peter 3:7). Prayer should be done by lifting “holy” hands to the Lord (1 Timothy 2:8). God responds to prayer as “we keep his commandments and do what pleases him” (1 John 3:22). If we want to pray effectively, we must pursue obedience.

Significantly, effective prayer is often linked to the obedience of godly relationships. Husbands must treat their wives in a godly way if their prayers will be answered. According to 1 John 3:22, quoted above, the commandment we must keep is to “believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and [to] love one another, just as he has commanded us” (1 John 3:23). When we mistreat others, God is deaf to our prayers.

Third, effective prayer costs patience. Some prayers are answered quickly; many more are not. Solomon spent seven years building the temple (1 Kings 6:37–38). When he had finished, he prayed a prayer of dedication (1 Kings 8:22–53) and then spent thirteen years building his own palace complex (1 Kings 7:1–12). It was only after he had finished his own house—thirteen years after finishing the temple!—that the Lord appeared to him in answer to his prayer of dedication (1 Kings 9:1–3). In other words, if my reconstruction of events is correct, the Lord answered Solomon’s prayer thirteen years after he prayed it! God’s timetable is not our own!

Fourth, effective prayer costs abandonment—that is, the abandonment of human honour. This may be more implied than directly stated, but effective prayer is promised to those who pray *believing* prayers, and true belief requires us to forsake human honour. As Jesus said, “How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” (John 5:44). The evidence may be anecdotal, but it certainly appears that the most effective prayer warriors are those who are more concerned with God’s praise than man’s. How much would you pay for a prayer? In real terms, effective prayer will cost you far more than R200. It will cost you time, affections, patience, and abandonment. That is hardly convenient. But the prize is more than worth the cost. We ought always to pray and not lose heart (Luke 18:1).

