

Does God answer the prayers of unbelievers?

(adapted from the work of Dr. John MacArthur)

God is sovereign and can choose to answer any prayer He sees fit. But Scripture clearly indicates that God does not listen to or answer every prayer. In fact, Scripture gives at least fifteen reasons for unanswered prayer. God does not answer the prayer of those:

1) Who have personal and selfish motives.

James 4:3 (NET 2nd ed.) — 3 you ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, so you can spend it on your passions.

2) Who regard iniquity in their hearts.

Psalm 66:18 (NET 2nd ed.) — 18 If I had harbored sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

3) Who remain in sin.

Isaiah 59:2 (NET 2nd ed.) — 2 But your sinful acts have alienated you from your God; your sins have caused him to reject you and not listen to your prayers.

John 9:31 (NET 2nd ed.) — 31 We know that God doesn't listen to sinners, but if anyone is devout and does his will, God listens to him.

4) Who offer unworthy service to God.

Malachi 1:7–8 (NET 2nd ed.) — 7 You are offering improper sacrifices on my altar, yet you ask, ‘How have we offended you?’ By treating the table of the Lord as if it is of no importance. 8 For when you offer blind animals as a sacrifice, is that not wrong? And when you offer the lame and sick, is that not wrong as well? Indeed, try offering them to your governor! Will he be pleased with you or show you favor?’ asks the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.

5) Who forsake God.

Jeremiah 14:10–12 (NET 2nd ed.) — 10 Then the Lord spoke about these people. “They truly love to go astray. They cannot keep from running away from me. So I am not pleased with them. I will now call to mind the wrongs they have done and punish them for their sins.” 11 Then the Lord said to me, “Do not pray for good to come to these people! 12 Even if they fast, I will not hear their cries for help. Even if they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Instead, I will kill them through wars, famines, and plagues.”

6) Who reject God's call.

Proverbs 1:24–25 (NET 2nd ed.) — 24 However, because I called but you refused to listen, because I stretched out my hand but no one was paying attention, 25 and you neglected all my advice, and did not comply with my rebuke,

Proverbs 1:28 (NET 2nd ed.) — 28 Then they will call to me, but I will not answer; they will diligently seek me, but they will not find me.

7) Who will not heed God's law.

Proverbs 28:9 (NET 2nd ed.) — 9 The one who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination.

Zechariah 7:11–13 (NET 2nd ed.) — 11 “But they refused to pay attention, turning away stubbornly and stopping their ears so they could not hear. 12 Indeed, they made their hearts as hard as diamond, so that they could not obey the law of Moses and the other words the Lord of Heaven’s Armies had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore, the Lord of Heaven’s Armies had poured out great wrath. 13 “ ‘Just as I called out, but they would not obey, so they will cry out, but I will not listen,’ the Lord of Heaven’s Armies says.

8) Who turn a deaf ear to the cry of the poor.

Proverbs 21:13 (NET 2nd ed.) — 13 The one who shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and will not be answered.

9) Who are violent.

Isaiah 1:15 (NET 2nd ed.) — 15 When you spread out your hands in prayer, I look the other way; when you offer your

many prayers, I do not listen, because your hands are covered with blood.

Isaiah 59:2–3 (NET 2nd ed.) — 2 But your sinful acts have alienated you from your God; your sins have caused him to reject you and not listen to your prayers. 3 For your hands are stained with blood and your fingers with sin; your lips speak lies, your tongue utters malicious words.

10) Who worship idols.

Jeremiah 11:11–14 (NET 2nd ed.) — 11 So I, the Lord, say this: 'I will soon bring disaster on them that they will not be able to escape! When they cry out to me for help, I will not listen to them. 12 Then those living in the towns of Judah and in Jerusalem will go and cry out for help to the gods to whom they have been sacrificing. However, those gods will by no means be able to save them when disaster strikes them. 13 This is in spite of the fact that the people of Judah have as many gods as they have towns and the citizens of Jerusalem have set up as many altars to sacrifice to that disgusting god, Baal, as they have streets in the city!' 14 But as for you, Jeremiah, do not pray for these people. Do not raise a cry of prayer for them. For I will not listen to them when they call out to me for help when disaster strikes them."

Ezekiel 8:15–18 (NET 2nd ed.) — 15 He said to me, "Do you see this, son of man? You will see even greater abominations than these!" 16 Then he brought me to the inner court of the

Lord's house. Right there at the entrance to the Lord's temple, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men with their backs to the Lord's temple, facing east—they were worshiping the sun toward the east! 17 He said to me, "Do you see, son of man? Is it a trivial thing that the house of Judah commits these abominations they are practicing here? For they have filled the land with violence and provoked me to anger still further. Look, they are putting the branch to their nose! 18 Therefore I will act with fury! My eye will not pity them nor will I spare them. When they have shouted in my ears, I will not listen to them."

11) Who have no faith.

James 1:6–7 (NET 2nd ed.) — 6 But he must ask in faith without doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed around by the wind. 7 For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord,

12) Who are living in hypocrisy.

Luke 12:1 (NET 2nd ed.) — 1 Meanwhile, when many thousands of the crowd had gathered so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

13) Who are proud of heart.

James 4:6 (NET 2nd ed.) — 6 But he gives greater grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble."

1 Peter 5:5 (NET 2nd ed.) — 5 In the same way, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. And all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

14) Who are self-righteous.

Luke 18:11–14 (NET 2nd ed.) — 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself like this: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: extortionists, unrighteous people, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get.' 13 The tax collector, however, stood far off and would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, be merciful to me, sinner that I am!' 14 I tell you that this man went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

15) Who mistreat God's people.

Psalms 18:40–41 (NET 2nd ed.) — 40 You make my enemies retreat; I destroy those who hate me. 41 They cry out, but there is no one to help them; they cry out to the Lord, but he does not answer them.

Micah 3:2–4 (NET 2nd ed.) — 2 yet you hate what is good, and love what is evil. You flay my people’s skin and rip the flesh from their bones. 3 You devour my people’s flesh, strip off their skin, and crush their bones. You chop them up like flesh in a pot— like meat in a kettle. 4 Someday these sinful leaders will cry to the Lord for help, but he will not answer them. He will hide his face from them at that time, because they have done such wicked deeds.”

So, does God answer the prayers of unbelievers? A strict yes or no answer is difficult without qualifying the answer in various ways.

However, it is noteworthy that the above mentioned principles represent some of the key characteristics of an unbeliever. Thus we can safely say that, in general, God does not answer the prayers of an unbeliever.