

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH FACEBOOK QUESTIONS, GOOD BOOK ANSWERS

How Does Prayer Work?

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Luke 11: 5-13

Last week we began a new message series called *Facebook Questions, Good Book Answers*. The seed of this series was a simple question I posted on my Facebook page several months ago: What Question Would You Like a Sermon to Answer? I was amazed at the response. After just a few days I received close to 100 responses.

In the first sermon last Sunday I addressed the question “Why do bad things happen to good people?” or, if you like, “If there is a God why do people suffer?” My answer was that everything that happens to you is not God’s will but God has a will in everything that happens to us. If you were not here I encourage you to grab a transcript of it or watch the video on the website. I believe it will help you if you struggle with the theodicy question.

Today I continue this series by responding to the most popular question I received on Facebook: How does prayer work? Of course, the question came in different forms: How do I know if I am praying right? Why do my prayers go unanswered? Why does God answer some prayers, but not others? Can prayer change God’s mind? How should I pray? Do I pray to God or Jesus? Do I need to save up my prayers for important things? How do you tell the difference between God’s voice and your own voice? How can I receive answers directly from God?

I imagine that many of you have the same questions. So today I am going to respond to all of these questions by answering one central question: How does prayer work? I believe most of our questions about prayer center around that question.

If you grew up in the church you were taught that prayer is important. And even if you didn’t I am sure you have heard about the importance of prayer. If you need something, ask

God for it. If you need guidance, ask God for it. If you are worried, pray about it. If you need strength, pray for it. I am sure many of you are here today because you are seeking God to answer a prayer.

But maybe you struggle with prayer because you never seem to get the results you are looking for. You pray and never seem to get an answer. And you are frustrated because you hear people talking all the time about the power of prayer like God is eating their cornflakes with them at the breakfast table every morning and when you pray it feels like you are ringing the doorbell to an empty house!

A colleague of mine tells of the time when he was helping to paint the outside of his neighbors’ home. His neighbor had a small black dog that had a ritual of going to the back door of the house. Once the little dog took up his station at the back door, he would bark and bark until someone finally got the message and let him out.

One day my friend was painting the outside of the house when no one was home. The neighbor’s dog started his ritual at the back door and barked and barked all day long. The sad thing was that it never dawned in his little brain that all his barking was totally useless—no one was home to hear!

Ever felt that way about your prayers? You have prayed and prayed for something and there seems to be no answer—there seems to be no one home!

Maybe you have a heavy burden in your life and you have prayed and prayed about it and you wonder if all your prayers are falling on deaf ears. Maybe you have prayed for a troubled child, a sick relative, a job, a better marriage, or some other serious issue and you don’t seem to be getting the answer you need. You wonder, “Is God listening?” And maybe you feel you are not doing it right, and

you think if you come to the right church or sing the right song or say that right prayer, things will be different.

Some of you here today may be skeptical about prayer. Maybe you think it is just wishful thinking or whistling in the dark. You think the whole idea of the creator of the world listening to one prayer among billions is ridiculous. “Really? God has to listen to so many prayers! How does that work?”

Does prayer make any difference or are we just wasting our breath? Well, so much of our frustration with prayer has to do with a lack of understanding of what prayer is. We have to understand what prayer is before we can know how it works. We can’t get faith right until we get prayer right.

Let me begin by saying that prayer is not religious magic. People often believe that if they say the right phrases or have the proper technique they can persuade God to answer their prayers.

There is an old story of a monk who was bothered by mice playing around him when he prayed. To stop it, he got a cat and kept it in his prayer room so the mice would be scared away. However, he never explained to his disciples why he had the cat. One day the monk walked down the corridors of the monastery and noticed that each of his disciples had a cat in their prayer room. After seeing the monk with a cat, they thought having a cat was the secret to powerful praying!

I believe this is a parable for many Christians today. Many believe they have to do something special in order for God to hear them and answer them. You will often see folks running here and there to learn the latest prayer gimmick from self-proclaimed spiritual gurus.

Prayer is not rubbing a magic lamp. It is not presenting some Santa Claus in the sky with a list of things we want. So what is prayer? I know that is the burning question for many of you today. How does prayer work?

Well, I know someone who has the answer. His name is Jesus. Jesus knew how about the power of prayer and how it worked. Take a look at this verse from Luke:

Jesus would withdraw to deserted places and pray.
-Luke 5:16

In the gospel of Luke we find 15 different references to Jesus praying. Jesus taught us what prayer is by his own example. He prayed at every turn in his life. He prays as he senses God’s call on his life; He prays before choosing his disciples; He prays as he serves and heals other people; He prays as he feels the demands and pressures of his ministry; He prays as he faces the cross; He prays as he finishes his work on the cross. Jesus is continually praying. Prayer was as vital to Jesus as taking his next breath. Jesus could not have accomplished what he did on earth without the power of prayer.

It was out of his own consistent prayer life that Jesus gives us a powerful lesson about prayer in Luke 11. The disciples notice Jesus praying frequently, and they finally get a clue and say, “Uh, Jesus, that prayer thing you are always doing? Can you teach us to do it too?” They observe that prayer is a vital practice for Jesus, and they want to learn how to do it. What follows is a profound lesson from Jesus about prayer:

And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’

I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.”

-Luke 11:5-8

Now notice that this is not a lesson in right technique. It is not a lesson in right phrasing. It is not a lesson in how to persuade God. It is a lesson in persistence. Through the story of the man banging on the door all night Jesus is telling us that effective prayer is consistent prayer. Effective prayer is a continual connection to God. For prayer to make a difference it must become a habit. When conversation with God becomes a habit we will be rewarded. Take a look at what Jesus said about it:

“So I say to you, ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”
-Luke 11:9-10

You know what this means? This means that God always answers our prayers. Whenever we ask, God will answer. Whenever we search, we will find. Whenever we knock, God will open the door. And Jesus says this is true for EVERYONE. Everyone who seeks God persistently in prayer will receive an answer. This is a spiritual law. God answers prayer.

But notice what Jesus does not say. Jesus does not say everyone who asks receives the answer they want or finds what they are looking for or has the door they want open opened. God always answers us, but we may not always like the answer or expect the answer we receive. Effective prayer is not about what we can get from God, but what we receive from God. There is a big difference! For, often times, what we want from God and what we receive from God are two different things.

Perhaps this changes your wondering about unanswered prayer. Maybe God has answered you and you just don't like the answer. Someone once said that God answers prayer in one of four ways: “yes, no, wait, and are you kidding?” Someone else put it cleverly: “If the request is wrong, God says, ‘No.’ If the timing is wrong, God says, ‘Slow.’ If you are wrong, God says, ‘Grow.’ But if the request is right, the timing is right and you are right, God says, ‘Go!’”

I recall times in my own life when I prayed and prayed for God to give me something, and my prayers were never answered, or so I thought. Later, I discovered that what I wanted was not right for me. That event always reminds me of the country song, “Thank God for Unanswered Prayer.” There have been other times when God seemed to know that I was not ready for the answer to my prayer or the timing was not right, and God asked me to wait.

But Jesus clearly states that there is something we can always count on receiving from God when we pray. Listen closely:

“Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then...know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”
-Luke 11:11-13

This is the single most important text about prayer. Jesus says that whenever we seek God in prayer God will always give to us His Spirit (the Holy Spirit). What is the purpose of the Holy Spirit? To love us, mold us, shape us, guide us, empower us, and direct us.

This means that prayer is not putting our order in to God. Prayer is not getting our phrasing right so we can unlock the God machine. Prayer is intimate conversation with God. It is as natural as turning around and speaking to a friend. It is also being quiet and still and listening to God and being transformed by him.

Prayer is a conversation with God that brings us closer to God and allows us to be formed by His love. Prayer is intimacy with God.

So here is how prayer works. Are you ready? Prayer does not change God; it changes us. Prayer does not give us what we want from God; prayer helps us want what we need from God.

When C.S. Lewis was going through a difficult time someone once said to him, “I know how hard you've been praying; and now God is answering your prayers.” Lewis replied, “That's not why I pray. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God, it changes me.”

Prayer is not bending God's will to our will; it is bending our will to God's will. Again, prayer does not give us what we want from God; prayer helps us want what we need from God.

I remember going on vacation with my family when I was a kid. Our resort was next to a big lake and you could take canoes out. One morning I decided to go canoeing. On my way back in I accidentally dropped the oar in the water and the current took it away.

So there I was stuck in the middle of this lake. The current drifted me a little closer to the shore and I began to call out. Finally, a man saw me, grabbed a rope, threw it out to me and then tied

the rope on the dock and told me to pull myself in. I got the feeling this was not the first time he had done this for a guest! As I was pulling on the rope, there was this optical illusion. It looked like I was pulling the dock to me, but in reality I was pulling myself closer to the dock.

This is what persistent prayer does. It does not move God to us. It pulls us closer to God. As we move closer to God in prayer, we find we are changed by His love and power. Prayer does not change God; it changes us.

So often we forget this and pray, "Okay God, I don't need much of your time. You don't need to get too involved. Just give me some direction here. What should I do?" God replies, "Just hang out with me for a while. Let's spend some time together. I want to show you some things." We persist, "Lord, really. I don't need that much of you. Just give me a yes or no." God replies, "Just abide in me and my love from day to day and you will find what you are looking for."

God still wants us to bring Him our needs, and our desires, and our questions and doubts. But God wants more than that. God wants us! God wants a relationship with us.

When I make prayer a habit something happens on the inside of me. I become more sensitive to God's love in my life and my motives and desires begin to change. For me prayer allows the power and wisdom of God break in and I begin to be transformed by God's love.

If you want to experience the power of prayer I have a simple suggestion for you. If you do what I am about to tell you, you will experience the difference that prayer can make in your life. For the next seven days start your day with prayer. It doesn't have to be a long time - 5 to 10 minutes. You can stay in your bed or sit in a chair or do it at the breakfast table. Get a devotional or turn to your favorite passage of scripture. Read the devotional or scripture passage. When you find that you are quiet on the inside, pray, "Lord, I want to get to know you better. I want to know your love. I want a relationship with you..." Then share with God

what is on your mind and heart. Don't hold back. Just share it. He is listening and wants to hear from you. Prayer is simply a conversation with God. Be sure to include not only your own needs but the needs of others. Then take a moment to listen in your heart to God and write down what you sense God is saying to you. Before you end your prayer time, pray, "Lord, I want to please you. I want to do your will. Whatever it is you want, that's what I want too. I want to fit into your plans. Show me the way."

The organ in a large church broke down one Sunday morning just before services were to begin. A member of the congregation happened to be an organ repairman and he immediately went to work on the instrument – finding it was a simple electrical problem. When he finally got it fixed it was just about the middle of the sermon. He quietly passed a note to the organist which read: "After prayer - the power will be on."

It's true. After prayer, the power will be on in your life. We need to remember that the same God who created the universe is waiting to hear from us. The same God who parted the Red Sea is waiting to hear from us. The same God who enabled David to defeat Goliath is waiting to hear from us. The same God who raised Jesus from the dead is waiting to hear from us.

After prayer, the power will be on.



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