

If You Pray Hard Enough, God Will Answer

Psalm 55:1-7; Luke 18:1-8

I want to start today's message with two readings, one a prayer of the heart by an Old Testament Psalmist and second some teaching about prayer by Jesus.

Psalm 55:1-7

God, listen to my prayer; don't avoid my request! Pay attention! Answer me! I can't sit still while complaining. I'm beside myself over the enemy's noise, at the wicked person's racket, because they bring disaster on me and harass me furiously. My heart pounds in my chest because death's terrors have reached me. Fear and trembling have come upon me; I'm shaking all over. I say to myself, I wish I had wings like a dove! I'd fly away and rest. I'd run so far away! I'd live in the desert.

Luke 18:1-8

Jesus was telling them a parable about their need to pray continuously and not to be discouraged. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him, asking, 'Give me justice in this case against my adversary.' For a while he refused but finally said to himself, I don't fear God or respect people, but I will give this widow justice because she keeps bothering me. Otherwise, there will be no end to her coming here and embarrassing me." The Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. Won't God provide justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he be slow to help them? I tell you, he will give them justice quickly. But when the Human One comes, will he find faithfulness on earth?"

Have you ever wondered how prayer works?

There is a scene in an old Simpson's episode in which Bart and Lisa make a reasoned request of their father Homer. Let's watch it. Simpsons – can we have a pool Dad? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6Yc3hzVsBc>

Lisa begins: "Dad, as you know, we've been swimming, and we've developed a taste for it. We both agree that getting our own pool is the only way to go. Now before you respond, you must understand that your refusal would result in months and months of..." Whereupon she and Bart begin repeating: "Can we have a pool Dad? Can we have a pool

Dad? Can we have a pool Dad? Can we have a pool Dad? Can we have a pool Dad?" After just a little while of this, Homer says simply, "I understand" and relents.

The Simpson children were employing a time tested children's strategy: just keep asking your parents over and over and over again and eventually they'll give in, just to shut you up. Everyone knows the virtues of the "dripping tap strategy", also known as the "squeaky wheel gets the grease" strategy

Jesus' Lesson

Jesus talks about this strategy in the parable of the Unjust Judge we just read. This woman is in need of justice, but the judge is not concerned about justice. She comes to him every day and somehow pesters him to the point that he gives her justice just to go away.

Jesus notes that if an unjust judge will relent and give justice, how much more will a just and loving God do so for his chosen ones?

Jesus' main point about prayer is that God is not disinterested and standoffish, but caring and responsive. But does God's timely response to justice apply to all kinds of prayers? Does this hold true for every instance of prayer?

It doesn't appear that this has been the experience of the author of the 55th Psalm which we read:

God, listen to my prayer; don't avoid my request! Pay attention! Answer me! I can't sit still while complaining. I'm beside myself over the enemy's noise, at the wicked person's racket, because they bring disaster on me and harass me furiously.

The great thing about the Psalms is their honesty. They cover the entire range of human emotion and particularly the range of emotions in our relationships to God. There are psalms of praise, psalms of joy, psalms of lament (sadness), psalms of anger. And there are psalms of desperation like the one we read earlier. A psalm crying out to God to hear the psalmist's prayer. A prayer that has been repeated often, but seemingly goes unheard.

The psalmist's experience is not unique, is it? We have all had those times where we keep praying for something—fervently, repeatedly, insistently, then pleadingly—and hear nothing at all. We continue to pray, but our prayers become more troubled. We begin to bargain with God: "Dear God, if you will simply grant my request, I'll..." And we promise anything.

All of us here know this experience. All of us, including me, know the passion with which we can pray for something we desperately want, but feel that our prayers are falling on deaf ears. And we don't understand why that should be. Why won't God answer? Does God not care? Am I doing something wrong? Have I not been faithful enough?

Because somewhere we have heard that all we have to do is be patient enough and keep asking and have more faith and God will give us what we want. Like the woman in Jesus' parable, our persistence will pay off eventually.

God the petty dictator??

I read one interesting observation about the portrait of God often encountered in the Bible. This person noted that there are passages about God that alternate between flattering praise and slimy grovelling that make God appear to be a petty tyrant, similar to some of our world's political dictators.

Of course, he is not the first in this observation. Many have noted that there is much in the prayers of Christianity that are basically forms of grovelling. Now, it may have been natural for Ancient people to have imagined their ruling god as your typical monarch. That's hardly surprising. It is a reflection of that ancient culture. And it's not an accusation against God, but simply a reflection of our limited ability to view God outside our own culture.

But we continue to use this image, don't we? Even though it's thousands of years old, produced by a culture we no longer identify with, and yet this image of God as a dictator, whom we have to beg to get facetime with persists.

We act as though, if we pester God enough, God will concede. God will become convinced of our seriousness of faith and give in to our pleading. In some situations, intercessors are asked to pray on our behalf, maybe somehow to get God's attention, so that our prayer will be heard. It's fascinating how often this model of God persists in our unconsciousness.

But let's not be too quick to point the finger at ancient cultures. Our home-grown cultural interpretations of God aren't much more helpful. If we were to reflect on the way God is understood in our culture it would be as a God of "instant self-gratification", a celestial "buddy" who demands little of us and provides what we need – a Santa Claus type of God.

Theologians call it Moralistic therapeutic deism.

This Santa Claus model of God is found everywhere. Where prayer is seen as a method to obtain what we want. The illustration here demonstrates the kinds of things we are accustomed to asking for from God. Good grades, better teeth, perfect love, lots of money, success in all we do, the All Blacks or the Black Caps to win (current form proves that God loves NZ more than any other country in the world), and so on. A Christmas list of things we want, and God is the way we get them. And so we pray. And pray. And pray.



When we don't get what we want, we sometimes console ourselves with the platitude that while God answers all prayers, God sometimes answers "no". That may be a valid solution to the problem, but is indistinguishable from God failing to answer at all. What if God doesn't always answer prayer? Or...what if prayer is about something else altogether?

Prayer is creating God Space

Indeed, let's ask ourselves, ultimately: How does prayer work? Can we really imagine that God is unaware of the things we need? Doesn't Jesus comment on exactly this absurdity?

Matthew 6:7-8

"When you pray, don't pour out a flood of empty words, as the Gentiles do. They think that by saying many words they'll be heard. Don't be like them, because your Father knows what you need before you ask."

If God knows what we need before we ask, either we have to come to the conclusion that God simply wants to hear us grovel, or maybe that prayer is about something altogether different than requesting things from the Almighty.

In the mystical traditions of Christianity, prayer has a very different purpose. In fact, prayer can have a very different approach. Prayer is often seen as operating on three different levels.

1. The first I've called "structured" prayer; prayer using words, sentences, and often involves speaking aloud and yes quite structured, either

concerning a particular situation (“Dear God, help me in this time of need...” or words of a mantra over and over (Come Lord Jesus, Holy Spirit, fill us afresh, or for Catholics “Hail Mary, full of grace...”).

2. Then there is non-structured prayer in which the pray-er might imagine a situation, or sits with a feeling, and prays through that, that might be a bit more of a rambling prayer, not very structured.
3. But then, the mystics talk about a highest level of prayer, in which God prays through you. It involves the challenge of trying to remove all selfishness and our own agenda and allowing of the Spirit of God to work within us. In some of the prayer traditions this kind of prayer is seen as the highest kind of prayer. Interestingly, it is the kind of prayers least connected with getting something we want.

What if the mystics are right? What if prayer isn't about getting what we want?

To be quite honest, the popular idea that prayers are pleas to God, who like a king (or Santa Claus) simply has to pay attention to our request and be willing to grant it, is somewhat bizarre when you think about the other things we say about God.

- We claim that God is omniscient, all knowing—so why do we have to pray unless God likes to make us beg?
- We claim that God is gracious—so why do we have to ask - rather than a gracious God act out of His own freedom and generosity?
- We claim that God is wise and generous—so why do we think that we have to jump through the prayer hoops by praying a lot or stronger, or louder or with more people in order to get God to do what we want?

How does a system of petitions and requests match up with everything we know about God elsewhere in the bible? It doesn't. It seems that the greater truths about God and who he is, as far as prayer is concerned, are being unintentionally laid to the side.

- What if when we prayed, we were to imagine that God already knows what we want?
- And that God already seeks to provide for us the things we need.
- And that God already loves us and seeks to be in relationship with us.
- And that God does not need to be bribed or bullied or persuaded to provide for us.

- That God is already at work, before our pleading, before our repetitions, before our attempts to get God's attention.

So, am I saying that prayer has no use? By no means. Prayer is incredibly important and useful, but perhaps not in the ways we're accustomed to thinking.

Prayer creates God space

What if prayer is about the *prayer* more than the *prayee*? What if it's more about transforming ourselves rather than calling upon God for something?

This is not some new teaching, some new idea. John Wesley (Charles Wesley's brother) theologian in the 1700's himself spent two hours a day in prayer and said, (it's in pretty old English so not easy to understand.)

One great office of prayer is... to exercise our dependence on God; to increase our desire of the things we ask for, to make us so sensible of our wants, that we may never cease wrestling till we have prevailed for the blessing."

That is, prayer makes us more aware of what we need, actually need. And prayer helps us to discern what is worthy of our desires and what isn't worthy:

"nothing being fit to have a place in our desires which is not fit to have a place in our prayers."

That is, our desires and God's desires become one in our prayers.

In both instances, Wesley is pointing out that prayer works some sort of change within the life of the person praying. It makes us more aware of our real needs, it places our thoughts and God's thoughts before us, and it gives us courage to strive after the blessings we seek. It is not about calling upon a reluctant God who will only give us what we ask for if we beg.

I believe that **prayer should create a "God-space" in us**. Prayer opens up our spirit to God's presence, allowing God to some room in our souls. And that's where the change begins.

But what about praying for healing? That is another whole sermon on its own, but I would want to point out that when we pray for healing, it does not mean "curing" — I don't think too many Christian are saying that everyone who comes for prayer with the sniffles will walk away afterwards cold-free. I would want to emphasize spiritual healing includes coming to peace with the things

life gives us, and looking for God in the midst of suffering. In so doing, however, we also encourage the possibility of the miraculous. We do not deny God the power to make a difference through curing, even miraculous curing. And in fact, when we open ourselves up to God's healing power and accept that we may have to face our afflictions, that is when, unexpectedly, real healing can take place. When curing can take place.

In the same way, when we open ourselves up to God through prayer—not in an effort to sweet-talk God into doing what we want—but in an effort to open up a 'God-space' in our souls, we may find ourselves blessed in ways we hadn't realized possible, even to the extent that the very thing we seek becomes unimportant.

Again these things are not new discoveries. Oswald Chambers of the 1800's wrote: *"Our ordinary views of prayer are not found in the New Testament. We look upon prayer as a means for getting something for ourselves; the Bible's idea of prayer is that we may get to know God Himself."*

So Prayer first changes us,

Prayer gets God and us on the same page, it allows us to come into fuller communion, or relationship, or closeness with God.

And then through that closeness with God, He works His purposes in the world. In our praying, we seek not to get God to do what we want, but seek to be the people God wants us to be.

Conclusion

I think we might have inadvertently developed some bad habits about prayer. We have imagined that prayer is some kind of system for getting the things we want or need. In so doing we convince ourselves that the one we petition is a petty dictator, or a Santa type figure, or like ourselves: unjust, inattentive, in need of sweet-talking, bargaining, promising, and pestering.

But God is not like an emperor or king of old, with whom we must gain an audience and lay before them our petitions. God is not like an unrighteous judge who responds, only because we convince him we will not go away quietly.

God knows our needs. God knows our desires. God seeks our well-being. And when we pray, we open our souls up to encounter this God. When we pray, we create a 'God-space' within us, which helps us to see ourselves more

clearly. That helps us to be more aware of our own needs, our own dependence. That helps us to face the road ahead with faith, because we have opened ourselves to His divine presence.

And when we do that, we find that we are transformed. The prayers we pray to get what we want do not change our lives, opening ourselves up to the God who can transform lives does. And when we are transformed ourselves, we become agents of a transformation, changing the world into the very thing we would have prayed for.