

“Prayer and You” (Part 1)

The Pew Research group in 2018 reported that 55% of people in the United States say they pray at least once every day. Actually, if this is true, it is surprising to me, given the secularization taking place in our American culture!

Regardless of how often Americans pray, for people in the Judea-Christian tradition, prayer has been central to our belief and practice. The Old Testament, the New Testament, and 2,000 years of church history all bear out the truth that prayer has always been a vital component of our faith.

Yet, isn't it true that many of us struggle to develop a meaningful and consistent prayer life? Prayer can be frustrating. Even the most mature Christians can experience “dry spells” when praying seems to be dull and unsatisfying. Maybe some of us can identify with David Head's brief, honest prayer in his delightful little book, *He Sent Leanness*: “Lord, talking to You is like talking to a brick wall.”

I want to spend the next few sermons talking about *prayer*, and how to grow in our prayer life. Some of my thoughts for these sermons I've gotten from a book entitled *Prayer and You*, by Cecil Osborne.

Let me start by saying some things about *the nature of prayer*, itself: what prayer is, and what prayer is not. There is a common assumption that we've succeeded in prayer when we somehow get God to give us the things we ask for. If we can only learn some magic *methods* of praying, the “tricks of the prayer trade”, we can get what we want from God!

Holding on to this attitude shows that we have a basic misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of prayer! Prayer is not just asking and receiving, but opening ourselves up to the presence of God, and aligning ourselves with His purposes. *Prayer is not getting God to give us what we want, but allowing God to make us what He wants.* I will say it again. *Prayer is not getting God to give us what we want, but allowing God to make us what He wants.* In other words, prayer is not so much *getting* as it is *becoming*.

This truth about prayer is shown when we consider Jesus' teaching that **God is our heavenly Father**. The Lord's Prayer begins, “*Our Father*, who art in heaven...”. Realizing God is our heavenly *Father* helps define the nature and purpose of prayer! Now our image of God being like a Father is tarnished because all earthly fathers are imperfect, with sins and shortcomings. God *is* like a good, loving father – but infinitely more wise and caring than the best of earthly fathers.

If you're a father (or mother), your relationship with your children shouldn't be limited to just their coming to you when they want something. Right? Nor is it you giving them anything and everything they ask for (even if you could!). If the only interest your children have in you is whether or not you can give them the toys, or expensive clothes, or money they want, what kind of relationship is that? This kind of “you ask and I'm supposed to give” arrangement never defines a healthy child-parent bond. It's kind of like where you have a son or daughter in

college, and the only time they call is when they need money! Or you have an adult son or daughter out on their own, and the only time you hear from them is when they want something! *Some of us in our praying haven't moved beyond this juvenile, elementary stage where the only reason we pray is to ask favors of God.*

When God created us, He wanted more than a “do me a favor” relationship. I’m a father. I liked giving gifts to our children as they were growing up. I still enjoy giving them things. But giving “things” was and is *secondary* to wanting most to have a relationship with our children that would mature into a healthy adult-to-adult bond.

This is what God wants from us most! God loves us, and longs for us to love Him in return. He wants us to appreciate and to enjoy everything He’s given us. He yearns for us to stop doing the things that break His heart, and to care about the things He cares about. God wants an *ongoing relationship* with us where this can happen. And *prayer is the communication line that makes this relationship possible.*

Does this mean I shouldn't ask God for things? No! Jesus told us to ask. Jesus said, “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. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”(Matthew 7:7-11). James 4:2 says, “You do not have because you do not ask God.”

If you’re a caring father or mother, you want to give your children good things. God wants us to have good things. Notice, Jesus said, “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give **good** gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give **good** gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:11).

This also means that sometimes we don't give our children what they ask for, because we know it wouldn't be good for them! Right? Can you think of a time when your child, or a child in your family, asked you for something and you said “no”? Or when you were a child and asked for something and your parents said “no” for a valid reason? Sometimes God says “no”, doesn’t He? Why? Because He loves us. Garth Brooks sings a song, “Unanswered Prayers.”

Just the other night at a hometown football game
My wife and I ran into my old high school flame
And as I introduced them, the past came back to me
And I couldn't help but think of the way things used to be
She was the one that I'd wanted for all times
And each night I'd spend prayin' that God would make her mine
And if he'd only grant me this wish I wished back then
I'd never ask for anything again.

Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers
Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs
That just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean he don't care
'Cause some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers

The English grammar in this song isn't the best, and it's kind of folksy, but I think we get the point, don't we! *God doesn't give us everything we ask for because sometimes He knows it would hurt us. God doesn't give us everything we ask for because He wants us to grow.* Cecil Osborne, in his book *Prayer and You*, tells how when his son and daughter each moved from home, there were times when he desperately wanted to rush in and help them out financially. Both were caught up in our society where we are urged to buy, buy, buy. He decided not to do that. He let them know that if financial disaster ever struck, to let him know. But more than they needed money right then, they needed to learn how to live on their incomes.

So, I'll repeat what I said before: *Prayer is not getting God to give us what we want, but allowing God to make us what He wants.* The late Archbishop Temple once said: "The essential act of prayer is not the bending of God's will to ours, but the bending of our will to His. The proper outline of a Christian's prayer is not, 'Please do for me what I want', but 'Please do in me, with me, and through me what you want.'"

Maybe this is a good time to say something about the way God answers our prayers. Sometimes God answers our prayers by saying, "Yes". We like that answer, don't we! But here's when a "yes" answer is most beautiful: *not* when we have begged and twisted God's arm so finally He gives in and gives us something He's not crazy on giving us, but when our desires are so surrendered to the Lord, and our wills are so in sync with His will, that we cease asking for silly, short-sighted, selfish things, and only ask for things pleasing to Him. So, one answer is "Yes."

Another answer is: Wait. That's harder, isn't it, especially for us Americans, who are always in a hurry! Maybe God's answer is "Yes", but it's out there in the future, down the line. Things aren't in place, or it's just not the right time. So, God says, "wait".

We know what the other answer to our prayers is, don't we? The answer: *No.* A pastor and author named Jess Moody once quipped: "God's answers to prayer are yes, wait, and *you gotta be kidding*" Like we said earlier, as a loving Father, sometimes God says no because it's a foolish thing to ask for, or it would be hurtful, or God has something better in mind. Like any wise and loving parent, sometimes God says "no".

Let me close with some comments about this question: ***How long should we keep praying for something when an answer doesn't seem to come?*** You've been praying for something, but nothing seems to happen. What should you do?

First, it's a good idea to do some self-examination: *Do I really want what I am saying I want? Or is this just a passing whim? I can also ask myself, is what I'm asking for selfish or foolish or hurtful?* If in all honesty we realize in asking these questions that our motives are not the best,

then it's wise to stop asking God for what we have in mind. But if this isn't the case, I'd suggest that we keep praying until one of these things happens: *We can see that our prayer **has already been** answered.* It can build up our faith when we can verify answers to prayer. Keeping a prayer log is good idea, where we keep a record of our requests, and also how God has answered them.

Also, we can keep praying for something until *we sense God saying, "I'm **going to** answer your prayer. You can stop asking."* When I was growing up, a boy who lived next door fell and broke his arm in a very serious way. Doctors feared they may even have to amputate the boy's arm. Our pastor asked God to heal Jimmy, and received assurance that the boy would be okay. He told Jimmy's parents not to worry, that healing would come. (As I recall, they were a bit skeptical about our pastor's words of assurance). Sometimes God gives us that sense that our prayer will be answered, and we can stop praying that particular request.

In addition, I believe we can keep on praying for something until *we feel God telling us: "Now is **not the time** to be asking for this. **Maybe later.**"* Maybe down the road we can go back to praying for this, but not now.

Finally, keep on praying for something until we sense God saying, *"No. It's not going to happen."* The Apostle Paul wrote about his "thorn in the flesh." "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Corinthians 12:8-9). Apparently Paul stopped asking and accepted God saying "no".

Old timers used to talk about "praying through". Keep on praying. Keep on asking the heavenly Father. When Jesus said ask, the Greek there means "ask, and keep on asking." Keep on asking the heavenly Father until we sense God is saying either "Yes," "Wait" ("Later!!"), or "No."

Asking is part of our life in Christ, as God's children, because there are things we need from our heavenly Father. But remember, prayer is not just about *asking*. It's about *becoming*. Prayer keeps us in touch with God so that He is able to help us become more the person He wants us to be.

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