

Why Do My Prayers Go Unanswered?

Presented By Pastor Scott Walters on 03/08/20

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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 matter or are there better things we can do with our time? Well, so much of our frustration with prayer has to do with a lack of understanding of what prayer is. Is it religious magic? Is it giving a cosmic Santa Claus a list? Is it putting our order into the universe? Is it crossing our fingers Christian style? What is prayer really? Until we understand what prayer is we will never understand the huge difference it can make in our lives.

In our scripture lesson for today we notice the disciples picking up on Jesus’ habit of praying. They see him praying all the time and think that they ought to learn something from it. So today we see Jesus praying in a certain place and the disciples approach him and say, “Uh, Jesus, that prayer thing you are always doing? Can you teach us to do it too?” Jesus agrees and begins to teach them. First he gives them a powerful prayer to learn – The Lord’s Prayer. After that he teaches them about the importance of prayer.

Jesus clearly states that there is something we can always count on, to receive 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, who are evil, 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. What is the purpose of the Holy Spirit? To love us, mold us, shape us, guide us, empower us, and direct us.

Rabbi Kushner writes about a man in Florida who sued his pastor. It seems that the sermon was based on the idea that God is generous to those who are generous. That pastor made the tactical mistake of saying God would reward them “tenfold.”

When the parishioner’s business faltered, he sued the pastor for false preaching. [I should mention that the case was thrown out of court and the business man was told to take sermons less literally.]

This means that prayer is not putting our order in to God. It is not rubbing a magic lamp or giving a ‘Santa Claus in the sky’ our list. Prayer is not getting our phrasing right so we can unlock the God machine. Prayer is the one essential practice that brings us closer to God and allows us to be formed by His love. Prayer is not “getting” from God; Prayer is intimacy with God. Prayer is developing a relationship with God. That’s why it’s better if it’s a habit – if it is done regularly.

People ask if prayer “works,” or complain if it doesn’t. Some people think my prayers, since I’m a pastor, are more likely to “work” than regular folks’ prayers. Like when it rains at the church picnic.

Is prayer about getting God to “answer,” to do us favors? What if I told you Jane is a terrific wife because most of the time she does stuff I ask her to do? You’d think I was a cad.

Prayer is more than asking. In C.S. Lewis’s writes in his essay, “*The Efficacy of Prayer*,” “The very question ‘Does prayer work?’ puts us in the wrong frame of mind. ‘Work’: as if it were magic or a machine. Prayer is either sheer illusion, or a personal contact between incomplete persons (ourselves) and the utterly concrete Person.

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Prayer in the sense of asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine. In it God shows Himself to us.”

Prayer is a relationship. We love God, God loves us, and so we share, we just sit together, we weep, we laugh; just like in a marriage, conversation, and togetherness, are everything.

So here is the message I want you receive today: **Prayer is not meant to persuade God; it is meant to change us.** Prayer is not bending God’s will to our will; it is bending our will to God’s will. Prayer does not give us what we want from God; prayer helps us want what we need from God. And what we need is to get our hearts right. What we need is to get our souls right. What we need is to get our relationships right. And this can only happen through a relationship with God in prayer.

The truth is most of the time we don’t want a relationship; we want a roadmap. We 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 awhile. 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. God loves us and wants us to give Him all that we are. But the answer to our questions, needs, and desires comes as we develop an intimate relationship with God through prayer. When we develop intimacy with God through prayer we find that abiding in His love and being the people He wants us to be is where true life is found. The more we experience true life the more we want to please God. And the more we want to please God the easier it is for us to change. And the easier it is for us to change the quicker we are to pray, “Lord, I want to fit into your plans.”

How does God answer prayers? Adam Hamilton reminds us God’s chief way of answering prayers, is through people. While God may use miracles occasionally, most often God works through people, calling and nudging us to be the good someone or something needs.

I already know that God has used some of you to answer someone else’s prayers. Maybe you can be one of God’s answers this week!