

What Do We Pray For?
Sermon Series: Teach Us to Pray
1 Kings 3:3–14; James 5:13–18
Sunday, September 1, 2024

Let us pray: Make us to know your ways, O Lord; teach us your paths. Lead us in your truth, and teach us, for you are the God of our salvation; for you we wait all day long. Amen.

For the past couple of weeks, we have been talking about prayer – what it *is*, how to *do* it if you don't know how, and how to *grow* in it if you *do* know how. We started by saying that prayer is communion with God. It's not just *talking* to God. It is a relationship with God, a conversation with God that involves both talking *and* listening to God. So two weeks ago we talked about how we listen to God, how we practice being silent and still, letting God have the first word. Then last week we talked about how we start talking to God by praying the prayers of others – prayers that we have been taught by our parents or someone else, the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms, different models of prayer, or the prayers that have been written by Christians who came before us. That there are no magic words when it comes to prayer. Just talk to God like you talk to a friend, and if it comes from your heart, *that* is what God wants.

Today we're going to continue talking about what we *say* to God, specifically what do we pray for?

When I was around 7 or 8 years old, our dog ran away. We were all gone one night, and he had accidentally been left outside. There was a storm, and he must have gotten scared, so he found a way out and just took off. By the time we got back the next morning, he had been gone all night. I don't remember how long he was gone – a day or two. But I remember how upset and scared I

was. I was 8 years old, and this was my dog, my best friend in the world. And the thought of him getting hurt or never seeing him again was just too much.

I was in my room, and I prayed the most heartfelt, sincere prayer that I had ever prayed in my life. Something along the lines of, “Dear God, *please* help him be okay. Please, keep him safe and help us find him.” Not too long after that, we got a phone call from a family one neighborhood over that had found him. We got our dog home safe and sound, and I remember thinking, “It *worked!* I *prayed to God*, and it *worked.*” There was a part of that, even as a 7- or 8-year-old, that put me in *awe*. Like, “Wow! God *heard my prayer!* I better be careful with this.” I had this awareness that I was dealing with something very powerful. But there was *another* part of me that thought, “I wonder what *else* I can pray for....”

Is that what prayer is? Asking God for what we want and God giving it to us? I think most of us would probably say no to that. If we pray to God to win the lottery, God’s probably got bigger fish to fry. It reminds me of the movie *Bruce Almighty*, where Jim Carrey is a man named Bruce who meets God (Morgan Freeman). Things haven’t been working out the way he wants lately, and he thinks he could do a better job than God, so he receives God’s power for one week. Pretty soon he starts hearing all these voices in his head that he comes to realize are people all over the world praying. It’s too much noise in his head; he can’t hear them all. So he creates a computer that sends him everyone’s prayers by email. He starts going through them – people praying to win the lottery or get a promotion or whatever – but there’s just too many of them. So he hits *reply to all* and says *yes to everything*. Everyone gets what they want. You come to find out later that 400,000 people won the lottery, and they each only got \$17. All these other people who got what they want end up being miserable.

I had a professor in seminary who used to say that God is not some cosmic vending machine that, if you push the right buttons, you get what you want. It's like we said last week, we know what we *want*, but do we really know what we *need*?

There is an age-old question when it comes to prayer: Is prayer about *us* changing *God* or *God* changing *us*? What that's getting at is, do our prayers have an impact on God? God *wasn't* going to do something, but we pray for it, and now God *will*? Our immediate reaction to that question is usually, "Well, no, we can't change God. It's about God changing us. God doesn't change."

Well, first of all, God is God, and God can do whatever God *wants* to do. If God wants to change God's mind, God can change God's mind. But also, if we say that prayer is not about *us* influencing *God* but *God* influencing *us*, then why do we pray for someone to be healed of an illness? Why do we pray for peace in the world? Why do we ask for *anything at all* in prayer, if our prayers have no impact on God? And there *are* examples in scripture of people praying and God changing God's mind. Abraham, Moses, the story of Jonah. There *are* instances where God was *going* to do something or *not* do something, but people's prayers led to God *changing* those plans.

Remember, prayer is a relationship. It is a conversation. And relationships and conversations cannot just be *one way*; one party imposing their will on the other. There is a back and forth, a give and take. If I'm always telling you what to do, but when you ask me for something, I refuse to do it, that's not much of a relationship, is it? I believe that prayer *is* about asking God for what we need, what we hope for, and prayer is *also* about God changing us, helping us to see a bigger picture, so that eventually *our* wills line up with *God's* will, and *we* come to want what

God wants *for us*. So in thinking about what we pray for, I want to think about it in those two ways: prayer is about asking God for what we need and hope for, and prayer is about God changing us.

Let's start with asking God for what we need and hope for. Years ago, one of my best friends called me one day, totally distraught, because his mother had just come back from the doctor, where she had been diagnosed with cancer. He told me all about it, and then he asked me to pray for her. So we both prayed for her on the phone. I prayed for her again that night. I think he stayed up praying for her *all* night. The next evening, I got a phone call from him. He told me that his mother had gone back to the doctor that day for more tests, and the doctors could not find one single spot of cancer in her body. He was saying, "It's a miracle. I prayed to Jesus to heal my mother, and he did!"

Do I believe that's what happened? *Yes I do*. I believe that we devoted ourselves to prayer for his mother to be healed, and she was healed. If I *didn't* believe that, why would you ever want me to pray for *you* or *anything* ever again? I believe that God answers prayers. I have had too many experiences in my life to believe otherwise. When I say that I am praying for you, that's not just something I say to make you feel loved and supported. It means that at least once a day, I am holding you in my heart and in my mind, asking God to provide you with what you need to live the fullness of life, because I believe that God *does that*.

Now, the question that naturally comes up is, "I prayed for this person that I love to be healed, and they weren't. Where's *my* healing? Did I not pray hard enough?" I have asked that question myself. We'll get to that in just a bit.

But our scripture reading from James *says* this. It says, “Are any of you suffering? You should pray. Are any sick? You should pray for them. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and God will raise them up. Therefore pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” We pray for people here every week – people who are sick, people who are having surgery, people who have cancer or addictions or mental health issues. We pray for peace in the places of the world where there is *not* peace. And we *give thanks* for the healing and the peace and the blessings that we believe God *has* given. Why would we *do that* if we did not believe that those prayers have some kind of impact?

So to the question of what you can ask God for in prayer, you can ask God for *anything*. Anything at all. There is no guarantee that you will *get it*, and I think that some requests are better than others, but you can *ask* for it. I’m not going to pray to win the lottery, but I believe there could be a situation where someone is so absolutely, genuinely desperate and in need, and maybe that’s the way that God provides for them. I don’t know, but I am never going to put limits on what God can do.

God wants you to turn to *God* for what you need, trusting *God* to provide for this world and for your life, rather than you just saying, “I got this. I can take care of this. I don’t need God’s help.” God wants your heart and everything that is on it. God wants you to open your heart and your mind and your life to God’s presence and power and love. So pray for healing. Pray for peace. Pray for God to watch over your family and friends. Pray for God to change someone’s life who really needs it. Pray for God to bless people. Pray that God will provide a way where there appears to be no way. Pray that God will give you and others what is needed to live the fullness of life. And *trust*, not that God *will* do it, but that God is *able* to do it.

So prayer is about asking God for what we need and hope for. But prayer is *also* about God changing us, helping us to see a bigger picture and to have as our desire God's will for us. And this comes back to that question of, "I prayed for this thing that I thought was good and right, but God didn't do it. Did I not pray hard enough? Did I not have enough faith?"

Almost 20 years ago, I met a man named Rex Buchanan. Rex was 70 years old when I met him, and he lived right across the street from us. I had just lost both of my grandfathers in less than a year, and Rex became like a grandfather to me. He taught me things that I needed to know as a first-time homeowner; how to *fix* things around the house, how to take care of my yard. He helped me renovate the nursery for our first child, and he was there for me when we lost that child. We used to rake leaves and take them down to the dump together. He was an absolutely wonderful man, a *dear* friend to me, and I loved him.

Rex was diagnosed with cancer in 2009 (fifteen years ago, almost to the day), and I prayed for that man *every single day* for two years, that God would heal him. The church that I was pastoring at the time, where he and his wife were members, prayed for him at least twice every week for two years. But on May 5, 2011, Rex died. I was there with him as he took his last breath. And I remember afterwards thinking, "I have never prayed harder for anyone in my life. And it didn't work." I remember sitting in the empty sanctuary at the church, pouring out my heart to God, saying, "He was *such* a good man. Helped everyone and never hurt anyone. We prayed *so hard* for him. Why didn't you heal him?" And I remember hearing that still, small voice say, "I did." *Yeah, okay, not the healing I was asking for, God. Perhaps I should have been a little more specific.* Eventually, I begrudgingly accepted that the healing Rex needed could not be found here. It could only be found with God.

That experience changed the way that I pray. It opened me up to trying to see a bigger picture of what life and blessing and healing *is*. When I prayed for healing, I always meant in *this* life. But this life is not all that there is. After that, when I prayed for healing, I would say, “Lord, give them the healing that they need. I *hope* that is here with us. But if that’s not possible, may they find the healing they need with you.” *Here is what I want and hope for, God, and I will badger you relentlessly with that. But in the end, may your will be done.* I don’t believe that it was God’s will for Rex (or *anyone*) to die. God’s will is healing and blessing and *life*. That is what we see in Jesus, who perfectly reveals God’s will to us.

Pastor and author Brian Zahnd says that prayer is not about getting what we want from God. It is about being properly formed in the likeness of Jesus Christ. Think of Jesus praying in the garden before he was arrested and killed. He prayed, “Lord, if it is possible, take this away from me. Yet not what *I* want, but *your* will be done.” We can ask God for what we want and what we hope for, but we have to accept the possibility that *our* will and *God’s* will might not be the same. That our understanding of healing and God’s understanding of healing might not be the same. So a big part of prayer is opening ourselves up to seeing a bigger picture of the world and life. It’s asking God to help us desire God’s will.

This is what King Solomon did in our first scripture reading. God says to him, “Ask what I should give you.” Solomon could pray for riches or power or women, but he recognizes that God has given him the tremendous responsibility of leading the people of Israel. So he says, “Give me an understanding mind, able to discern between good and evil.” *Not what I want, but what you want, Lord.* And God says, “Because you have asked for this and not something selfish, I’m going to give you everything else, too.” It’s like the song, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.”

Now, that doesn't mean that if *you* pray for wisdom and an understanding mind, God will give *you* everything else, too. God sees our hearts and knows what our motivations are. It's about opening ourselves up to this bigger picture in which God's will is done in *us*, in *others*, and in the *world*. A mature faith is never self-serving. It always seeks the good of others and for God's will to be done. We *can* ask for what we need and hope for, as long as we are continually trying to open ourselves up to God's will. *Here's what I want, Lord. What do you want? Because you see a bigger picture than I possibly could. Help me to see it, too, and to trust that whatever happens, you are with me, giving me everything I need to live the fullness of life, in Christ. Amen.*