

God Answers Prayer

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
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Luke 11:1-13

God answers prayer. It's a bold claim, isn't it! How can we say with confidence and conviction that "God answers prayer," when so many of us feel that all too often our prayers go unanswered?

How often have we prayed for peace in the world only to see violence and war continue unabated? How many of us have prayed for healing for a loved one, only to see that person's health decline even further?

We want to believe that God answers prayer. So, when it seems that God has not answered our prayers, it's easy to blame ourselves. We think, it must be our fault, somehow. Maybe we didn't pray hard enough. Maybe we didn't use the right words. Maybe our faith isn't strong enough.

Of course, we're not the only ones who have had these questions. Wrestling with the efficacy of prayer is not solely a 21st-century phenomenon. Indeed, the question of whether God answers prayer can be found throughout the Bible.

Hear these words of Job addressed to God: "I cry to you and you do not answer me; I stand, and you merely look at me." Or listen to the prophet Habakkuk: "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?" Even Jesus does not always get what he prays for! Before his arrest, Jesus prays to God: "if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." But he is arrested anyway, stripped, beaten, and finally nailed on a cross to die. And there, hanging on the cross, Jesus cries out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Nevertheless, elsewhere in the scriptures, we find Jesus assuring us that God does, indeed, answer prayer.

In this morning's reading from Luke, we find Jesus at prayer. When he is finished, one of his disciples asks him to teach them to pray, as John taught his disciples. And in response, Jesus offers them a model prayer – a shorter version of what we now refer to as the Lord's Prayer.

Jesus says to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

Biblical scholars believe this barebones version of the Lord's Prayer to be closer to the original form of the prayer than the longer, more familiar form found in the gospel of Matthew.

Jesus goes on to tell a story about someone who knocks on a friend's door at midnight asking to borrow three loaves of bread. The friend doesn't want to get up out of bed and risk waking his children in order to help his neighbor in need. Nevertheless, he does eventually get up and give his neighbor what he asked for.

Jesus says: "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."

Here, the Greek word that is translated as "persistence" might be better translated as "shamelessness," referring not to the neighbor in need, but to his sleepy friend. Jesus' story is meant to contrast the obligations of friendship with those of the society's honor-shame code. The sleepy friend would have been shameless to refuse his neighbor's request. Honor demanded that he get up out of bed, waking his whole family if necessary, to help his neighbor in need, if not out of friendship then at least to avoid being shamed.

What point is Jesus trying to make with this story? Well, I don't think he means for us to equate God with the sleepy friend, grudgingly answering our prayers. Rather, I think Jesus means for us to see a contrast between the sleepy friend and God. If a sleepy neighbor will respond to our pleas in the dead of night, how much more will God, who neither slumbers nor sleeps, respond to our prayers? We may pray with confidence, Jesus is saying, because in a time of need, God is even more trustworthy than a neighbor.

Jesus goes on to offer another contrast – this one between the actions of God, our divine parent, and the actions of human parents. “Is there anyone among you,” Jesus asks, “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?” The obvious answer is: “No, of course not! None of us would do that!” Well then, Jesus says, if you, who are sinful human creatures, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will God, your heavenly parent, give you? God will give even the Holy Spirit to those who ask!

God answers prayer not because of our nagging or cajoling, or because we have found the right words, but because of God's nature as a divine parent who loves her children and wants to provide for their needs.

“Ask, and it will be given for you,” Jesus says. “Search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” Prayer is seeking. It is a form of spiritual searching. Have you ever misplaced something and had to search for it? Your car keys, perhaps? Or your glasses? Sometimes you have to go through every room in the house before you find them, right? For me, it's usually some important piece of paper that I've lost track of and I end up having to go through every stack of paper and every file in the whole house before I find it. Prayer is like that. It is a continual searching after spiritual good.

Prayer can be compared to an intellectual search like that of the astronomer Copernicus, who questioned the heavens year after year to discover the truth about our solar system. Or it can be compared to a geographical search like that of Admiral Peary, who searched for the North Pole. "For 24 years," Peary said, "sleeping or awake, to place the Stars and Stripes on the Pole had been my dream." Prayer is a spiritual searching. The spirit of prayer is the spirit of seeking.

Note, however, that while Jesus assures us that God answers prayer, he does not guarantee that we will always receive what we ask for. "Everyone who asks receives," Jesus says. He doesn't say what one will receive. "Everyone who searches finds." Jesus doesn't say what one will find. How many times have we gone searching for one thing only to find something else that we had lost and given up looking for?

God answers prayer. But God's answer is not always what we expect. Sometimes God's answer is "no." Sometimes God's answer is "wait." Sometimes God's answer is "you can do that yourself."

What would the world be like if God gave everyone in the world everything that we prayed for? Were it even possible! How is God to respond to people praying for contradictory things? Consider people on opposite sides of a war both praying for victory over their enemy! Or for that matter, consider sports fans of opposing teams both praying for their team to win the game! Even if it were desirable for God to give us everything we pray for, it's hard to see how it would be possible.

And what would it say about God? It would mean God was nothing more than a "cosmic bellhop," as one writer put it, waiting on our every beck and call. That would not be a God I would want to worship. No, I want to worship a God of wisdom and power, a God with good judgment, a God who sees the big picture and not just my own particular point of view.

One more thing needs to be said. When we speak of God answering prayer, we are really talking about only two kinds of prayer: petition (praying for ourselves) and intercession (praying on behalf of others). We need to be careful not to limit our view of prayer to only those two kinds. Let us remember prayers of adoration, in which we praise God for who God is. Let us remember prayers of thanksgiving, in which we express gratitude to God for the things God has done. Let us remember prayers of confession in which we acknowledge our sin and repent for what we as individuals and as a people have done or left undone. And let us remember prayers of self-dedication, in which we offer ourselves to the purpose and glory of God.

Prayer is not just asking God for what we want. It is much richer than that. Prayer is our primary means of communicating and communing with God.

I want to conclude with an excerpt from a book entitled *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, by Presbyterian minister and writer Marjorie Thompson.

“I have said that the spiritual life has to do with how God relates to us and how we in turn relate to God. Prayer is the essential expression of this relationship. Like the spiritual life itself, prayer is initiated by God. No matter what we think about the origin of our prayers, they are all a response to the hidden workings of the Spirit within.”

“God’s desire for us ignites the spark of our desire for God. God’s guiding heart nudges forth our prayers to be led. The apostle Paul assured us that the Spirit ‘helps us in our weakness’ and ‘intercedes with sighs too deep for words’ (Rom. 8:26). Have you considered what an astonishing promise it is that *the Spirit prays in us*, and does so ‘according to the will of God?’ Perhaps our real task in prayer is to attune ourselves to the conversation already going on deep in our hearts. Then we may align our conscious intentions with the desire of God being expressed at our core.”

“Prayer expresses our relationship with God. It should not surprise us that this relationship parallels in significant ways our relationship with other persons. It cannot be forced, but grows best in the soil of freedom and mutual commitment. The health and vitality of this relationship depend on clarity and frequency of communication. And any form of intimacy requires time spent in each other’s presence, time simply to explore and enjoy the gift of companionship.”

“Prayer involves freely entering a relationship of communication and communion with God, for the sake of knowledge, growth, and mutual enjoyment.”

So, may we seek to deepen our relationship with God through prayer, in the confidence that God hears our prayers and does, indeed, answer them.

Thanks be to God. Amen.