

Responding to a question about prayer, Albert Einstein wrote,

"I cannot conceive of a personal God who would directly influence the lives of individuals.... my religiosity consists of a humble admiration of the infinitely superior spirit that reveals itself in the little that we, with our weak and transitory understanding, can comprehend of reality."

I find that many people accept and believe in an infinite creator who set the laws of the universe in motion, but not the loving and intimately present God of Scripture. I am sure God appreciates their humble admiration, but how tragic, to know God as no more than just the creator of the universe - - **for that is to miss out on the very best of God: * God's personal and intimate love for each one of us. * God's care and involvement in each of our lives.**

For example, even before the youth mission trip last week, many of you have been praying in faithful support. I am convinced that those prayers were more than heard and answered with astonishing grace, wisdom, care and attentive detail in more remarkable ways than I have time to describe today. e.g. My work group was assigned to the task of finishing an outhouse and building a couple of sheds for families on the reservation. But the staff member assigned to guide and direct our work was clueless, inexperienced and had no idea how to proceed. As it happened, the recent hail storm in Las Cruces damaged the shed at our house so I decided to build a new one from scratch.... and I finished it up just a couple weeks ago. And as it happened, on the mission trip, our group was provided with exactly the same building materials & tools that I had used. I am pretty sure there's a connection, and I thank God for preparing and equipping me for our work on the mission trip. The experience of planning & building my own shed made a huge difference. Now to the doubting skeptic, that's certainly not enough or irrefutable evidence that God is present, personal and hears our prayers. **But seen through the eyes of faith**, the hand of our loving God, who hears and responds to our prayers **was unmistakable**. But prayer is about so much more than just getting what we want. In the final episode of the popular television program, 'MASH', Father Mulcahy, a priest and the hospital chaplain was wounded in an explosion, gradually losing his hearing, and there was nothing the doctors could do to help him. He was devastated and frightened by that terrible loss, and in a very powerful and poignant scene, he cried out to God:

"Dear Lord, I know there must be a reason. But what is it? I answered the call to do your work. I've devoted my life to it. But how am I supposed to do it? What good am I now? What good is a deaf priest? I prayed for you to help me, and every day I get worse. **Are you deaf too?**"

That question reflects one of the most difficult and troubling aspects of prayer, the extreme mystery of God's sovereign rule and purpose, way beyond our understanding, explanation or control, for there is no formula or technique that assures predictable results. Though there are countless books & articles written about prayer, and though we can grow and learn with experience and practice, **yet it remains a great unsolved and inexplicable mystery**. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them about prayer, he didn't describe specific methods or techniques or results, and he really didn't even explain much about how prayer works. Jesus simply taught them the Lord's Prayer, and then told them a parable with a concluding promise. The situation Jesus described in the parable was a familiar one. In order to avoid the blazing heat of the desert by day it was normal to travel late into the cool of the evening. So it would not be unusual for a friend to show up unexpected even very late at night. In Middle Eastern society and culture, even to this day, hospitality is a very important and critical matter of honor. But when the man goes to his neighbor and friend asking for help, he offers him **silly excuses** that no one would say to a friend. The crowd may have even chuckled when he said,

Luke 11:7

'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.'

In real life, of course any neighbor, and especially a friend, would get up and provide the bread or whatever was needed. As Jesus explained,

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Luke 11:8

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.

This story as told by Jesus, doesn't say or suggest that the man kept on knocking or was insistent that his neighbor respond. There is nothing about persistence mentioned within the parable. Technically speaking, the Greek word translated as, "his persistence", is more commonly and accurately translated, "his sense of honor". So verse 8 probably, would more correctly read, "because of his sense of honor (referring to the man inside the house) he will get up and give him whatever he needs".... which makes way more sense than pounding persistently on his neighbor's door. The point of the story as Jesus originally told it, it was not because of the first man's persistent knocking, but because of that neighbor's cultural sense of honor, because he is a friend and they have a relationship, he will get up and give him the bread that he needs. The lesson that Jesus is teaching about prayer was not about overcoming God's resistance to bless with persistence, but that if we, though sinful and selfish as we often are, will grant an inconvenient request because of honor, because of the relationship we share as friends, then **how much more so** will our infinitely generous, honorable and loving God hear, graciously respond and answer our prayers. **That is the point Jesus is making. This parable is not about us** or about having persistence in prayer, but rather it is about the gracious character and nature of God who is always present with us & hears our prayers with grace.

Therefore, as we read in

Luke 11:9-10

"So I say to you, 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.

When Jesus commands us to ask, search and knock, he is not telling us, "God will always give whatever you want." He is encouraging a journey toward open intimacy and trust with God by offering the gift of the Holy Spirit, if we are open.... the promise is to be with us, to guide us, and to strengthen us in whatever we're facing. The Bible teaches us that God's reason for creating the universe, that God's ultimate purpose was not just to spin the planets and stars, nor just to fill the seas and land with plants and animals. Yes, it does proclaim God's glory, but that's not why God created. God created all that is, and all that ever will be, to provide a place for life and relationships, some place for us to be loved, and thereby learn to love, a place where God could love and care for his people and where we can grow and deepen in that love... .. **which goes to the very heart of prayer...** for throughout Scripture there are wonderful proclamations of God's love, intimate connection and delight in his people, because God has chosen to love all the people he has made. That not only means, God knows who you are and even the number of hairs on your head, but God also knows all that you have ever done, all you ever said or thought, of even thought of thinking, and God is intensely and intimately in love with you, and God takes delight in who you are ... right now... and delights in giving whatever is best for us... .. **which goes to the very heart of prayer**. As Jesus explains it,

Luke 11:11-13

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!"

The point is, if we who are selfish, sinful and self-centered, if we can and do still manage to love and care for other people, if we can handle giving good things to our children, **then, how much more so**, does our God, who is perfect, eternal and loving, care for us, and **how much more so** will God give to us. Therefore, prayer is not about storming the gates of heaven to get what we want, but rather it is relational – it's about our connection with God. Christian prayer becomes a petition that seeks the presence of God, which helps bind us to God, to grow & walk with God in trust & hope. And by listening, faithfully attending to God in prayer we are transformed as we learn to see & think as God thinks & sees, as we learn to love and trust, to recognize God's presence in the world as Jesus did. And since God actually does want a relationship with us, then as God's

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beloved children, it becomes our task and delight to search and seek out a spirituality that works for us... a prayer-life that helps us listen, and connect with the Lord.

That means trying different forms of prayer and meditation, to stay with it and discover what works best for us, for there are countless ways to pray and experience God's presence, for prayer is anything that nurtures our relationship with God... and please come to see me if you need help with prayer. It doesn't matter so much how we pray or which words we use, as it does, that we do pray and that we do seek a closer and deeper walk with God... .. **and the only way we can fail in prayer, is not to show up.**

In that final MASH episode where Father Mulcahy is going deaf, it turns out that even with prayer he does not regain his hearing. But as a deaf priest he is invited to stay and serve in Korea. The loss of his hearing has become a gift that God will use, uniquely equipping him to serve deaf children and war orphans. God had far more and better than Father Mulcahy ever expected... .. **which goes to the very heart of prayer.** Our lives & our prayers are really about getting connected to God, to God's sovereign wisdom, purpose and steadfast love. Our primary task and ultimate goal in life, is to know God. It is to walk ever closer, more intimately with our Lord, and to delight and enjoy our God who so endlessly loves us. Friends, God knows everything there is to know about us; our past, all the trouble and difficult stuff in our lives now, and even all about our mistakes and failings yet to occur. And yet God has always loved us, and will always love us, and in fact God delights in who he has made. God delights in who we are today just as we are today, and who we are in the process of becoming... .. **which goes to the very heart of prayer.** The point is to trust the goodness of the One who hears us pray. The writer of Ephesians describes it in this way:

Ephesians 3:17-21

may Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ... who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ever ask or imagine ...