

What Happens When We Pray? 2016

Psalm 13:1-6 Luke 18:1-8

Not too long into beginning my ministry, I prayed with Gladys, a very weak, shaky and infirm aging church member, who was also feeling discouraged and defeated by illness. But then the next time I saw her, she was upbeat, vigorous and even peppy a most unexpected and incredible recovery. And despite my insistence otherwise, she was sure it was my prayer that had brought about the change. A few years later, her husband had a very serious heart attack, which led to a terrible cascade of other major health problems, and being well into his 90's, his doctors were not expecting Hal to survive. Hal has served faithfully on Session and I thought the world of him, and when I prayed for him in the ICU at the hospital, I was saddened and distressed, expecting that it was for the last time. I still don't understand how it happened, but the next morning his condition completely turned around, and he started feeling much better and stronger. In a few weeks, Hal was back to putting around in his garden, they were both back in their regular seats each Sunday... and Gladys was telling everyone that God really listens when Rev. Norm prays. And there was no convincing her that it had nothing to do with me. She was sure that I had some special prayer-pipeline to God.

Now it really is an incredible experience of joy and wonder when it seems that God had heard and answered our prayer. But is Christian prayer about changing God's will and intention? Is it about persuading God to give us what we want and desire? And if I do get what I want and prayed for, does that constitute a good and righteous prayer, and for God to agree, is that really the point when we pray? For on the other hand, if my prayer does not produce the results I sought and asked for, does that mean that my prayer was a failure and defective, that maybe I wasn't praying hard enough, or that my faith was too weak and not persistent enough? ... is that really the lesson Jesus was intending to teach when he told parable we read from in Luke 18? What is Christian prayer, and why do we pray? Is the point of prayer to storm the gates of heaven until God does what we want and fulfills our desires ... like the widow's relentless demands for justice from the corrupt and selfish judge of Luke 18? Is the point of the parable, that God will respond favorably if I pray fervently enough or if enough of us pester the Lord, if we are sufficiently persistent, insistent and annoying? In this part of Luke's gospel, Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem, where four chapters later, he would be crucified. Jesus was preparing his disciples for that coming crisis, so,

Luke 18:1

Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.

We also know that decades later when Luke's gospel was written, that faith community, that church was under severe attack and they were suffering under intense persecution. We can well imagine their discouragement and feeling helpless... like the poor widow seeking justice from the corrupt judge. In that culture, a widow was totally and absolutely powerless, for a woman could not legally own or inherit property, or even testify and speak for herself in court, but rather had to rely on a male relative to handle all her affairs. The fact that she is coming to this judge on her own, suggests that her complaint may well have been against that male relative who was supposed to look out for her, perhaps trying to deprive her of her late husband's estate. The widow has no power or authority or assets of her own. There is no one to speak on her behalf, and no wealth to bribe the judge in order to buy justice... she has no other weapon than her desperate pleas and persistence. All she can do is to keep annoying him, keep bothering that judge until he finally relents. And though that judge had no shame or compassion, or honor, to keep her from persisting and bothering him further he grants her petition, just to quiet the annoyance. I think Jesus told this parable with a slight twinkle in his eye. You've got the big bad bold belligerent corrupt judge who gives in to the demands of this insignificant little woman. And if a corrupt judge with no conscience and impervious to shame can ultimately be brought around by the persistence of a powerless and pestering widow who seeks justice, then how much more so will the God who loves us and cares for us, surely provide whatever is best and beneficial for us. As Jesus explains,

Luke 18:7-8

Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.

In this context, looking at the original Greek, the word decisively is a better translation than quickly. Jesus isn't saying that our prayers are answered immediately, but that God acts decisively, providing whatever is best.

So how should we understand and apply this parable? Since God is not anything like that reluctant corrupt judge, maybe the point is not about getting what we want through prayer, but rather it's the gracious nature and character of God... which is why we keep praying and why we do not lose heart. God is in control, and God alone knows what is best for us, and so prayer remains a great and unexplainable mystery. We do not know God's will or intention in every situation, and we never know for sure what God might have done or would not have done with or without our faithful fervent prayers... and so it seems both foolish and arrogant to suppose that prayer is about changing God's mind or his intended course of events. Yet, absolutely Jesus instructs his disciples to ask in his name, and yes we are to pray fervent intercessory prayers, but that does not mean or guarantee that what I want & desire is necessarily God's will, or that even in my best, most selfless and faithful prayer is in agreement with the will, purpose and perfection of God. So when I pray these days, my focus is less on trying to suggest what God should enact and bring about, or even what I desire, because even more importantly, I want to know God, so that I will grow toward the Lord and God's purpose, and by faithfully listening and trusting Christ, maybe I can be more useful in the work of God's Kingdom, knowing that in prayer, God reshapes the one who prays. When we pray, it's to enjoy, converse, refresh and thank God, to linger with our wise Lord who loves us beyond all measure, and it is recognition that the work and life we are called to live cannot be accomplished apart from one who calls us to do it.

Consider the recent news, that despite all the fervent prayers, the path of Hurricane Matthew truly hammered the east coast. Prayer didn't prevent the storm's catastrophic destruction, but prayer will strengthen the people to endure, to comfort, encourage and care for those in need. God's power in answer to prayer, isn't always getting what we want, but it's the miracle of how God brings us through struggle & loss and that we experience God's blessings, in unexpected ways, and in how God is with us when all else falters and fails. That same message is found in Psalm 13, which begins, 1-2

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

That doesn't sound much like the prayer of a happy camper who is feeling blessed, and definitely not of someone trying to sound religious. It's an authentic cry for help, a lament and complaint against God. But then something happens, a shift between verse 4 and verse 5,

But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

There's nothing to indicate a change in the psalmist's situation, but clearly there is a change in perception and perspective I believe that's the authentic & sacred space of fervent prayer. God's purpose for prayer is not to provide a quick fix for our life, but it's a beckoning to us to enter the Lord's Holy Presence, to go down deeper into the more significant layers of living. Despite troubles & trials in the world around us, keep on praying. When fear grips our hearts, we are called to enter prayer anyway, and in confidence & trust, know that God will never let us down. The message is not persist and God will bless you, but, that amid disappointment, adversity, struggle and trial, we can still trust and hope, and not lose heart, and have faith even when life is crashing all around us. The call is to a life empowered by prayer, the lifeblood of faith.

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Back in the corporate world, when I had a secretary, over the years of working closely together, she got used to me and learned to anticipate my ways. So when something came up, she already knew how I would handle it, and over time, our working together, became more and more of a cooperative partnership. And our Christian prayer-life can become something like that. Prayer is open wondering and asking God about our inner longings, especially when our courage is stretched, or we are discouraged. Sometimes prayer help us refocus, see the problem differently. Prayer helps us focus on the Lord and grow more Christ-like.

A pastor was struggling with some opposition and church conflict, and a wise elder invited him to her apartment for a visit, where she showed him a picture of Daniel in the lion's den. She asked him, "What do you see?", and he described the picture. Then she asked, "Do you see anything else?" He knew there must be something more, but he didn't see it, until she added, "What I want to you to notice and see, is that Daniel's eyes aren't on the lions, but he has kept his eyes, his focus on the Lord." Prayer, is keeping our focus set on the Lord our God. So what should we pray for? The specifics we don't always know, except that we would be more in line with the will and desire of God, who so passionately and steadfastly loves us toward his promised kingdom of grace. Jesus call us to persist in prayer, so to align ourselves better to hear God's voice, and help us to live out our lives more in tandem with God's will and purpose for our lives. Our prayer life is not a pious game of getting whatever we want, but it's the serious business of learning to walk with God, of learning to be authentic and real, to trust God's grace.

In the parable that Jesus tells and in his teaching about prayer, the issue at stake is not the faithfulness of God, and it's not about the fulfillment of God's promises... but rather the issue is about me, the question is really about us... vs. 8 And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth, will he find faith in us and will he find faith in me?