

Prayer has been called the heart of religion. For in prayer we stop talking about religion and enter into a personal, one-on-one relationship with God. Prayer in its highest form is communion and encounter with God. When we pray we sense the very presence of God in our lives. Through prayer God meets us where we are and summons us to a new life; to move on to become the person that He created us to be. It is through prayer that all areas of our lives may be influenced and enriched.

But sometimes we wonder how effective our prayers are. Have you ever prayed and you didn't get an answer to your prayer; things didn't turn out the way you wanted or expected them to? I bet that most of us have experienced unanswered prayers at one time or another in our lives. Did you know that there are three unanswered prayers in the Bible? One was from Elijah, the great prophet, who was fleeing from the evil Queen Jezebel and he asked God to let him die. God had a different plan and Elijah rode a chariot of fire into heaven, never experiencing death.

The second was the one that Glenda/Bonnie read to us earlier from 2 Corinthians where the Apostle Paul prayed three times for God to remove the "thorn in his side." There are many theories as to what this affliction was; some think that it was a migraine headache. Whatever the case, God told Paul: "My grace is enough for you, because my power is made perfect in your weakness." The third unanswered prayer is found in our scripture text for this morning which is taken from the twenty-second chapter of the Gospel of Luke, verses 39 through 45.

Read Luke 22:39-45

Following the Lord's Supper, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives also known as the Garden of Gethsemane where He prayed that if it was God's will, let the cup of suffering and death on the cross be taken from Him. Of course, we know how this ended. Have you ever thought that as Jesus hung on the cross that He felt the absence of God and the disappointment that we sometimes feel when our prayers go unanswered, which may have led Him to say: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Do you ever feel forsaken by God when your prayers go unanswered?

Many people struggle with their faith because of God's apparent silence and lack of help when they cry out to Him in their time of greatest need. What makes these unanswered prayers even more disturbing is the fact that some Christians claim that God regularly answers their prayers for such trivial things as the person who prays for a parking space at the mall and gets one right at the front entrance. Or the professional football player who points to heaven after catching a touchdown pass. Does God answer prayers for parking spaces and touchdown passes, but not for those who have cancer or whose unborn child dies without a miracle?

Let's see if we can make any sense of this in the time we have this morning. Now disappointment is usually the result of unmet expectations. And many of our expectations with regards to our prayers are shaped in some ways by some of Jesus' sayings such as in Matthew 21:21-22 where Jesus says: "I assure you that if you have faith and don't doubt... you can even say to this mountain, 'be lifted up and thrown into the lake.' It will be done. If you have faith, you will receive whatever you pray for." Or Matthew 7:7-8 – "Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."

At first glance Jesus seems to be promising here to do whatever we ask, provided we have faith. So in addition to parking spaces and touchdown passes, we can pray for the safety of our children, a new job and a dying friend, and expect these requests to be granted. However, from experience we all know that this does not always happen. Thus, because things don't turn out the way we want, we assume that our prayers go unanswered. Now some Christians will explain this non-response by putting the blame on us. One website lists the following reasons for unanswered prayers: you are not seeking to please God; you have unconfessed sins in your life; you pray with improper motives; or you lack faith.

Now I don't agree with this list. To say that God is not going to answer your prayer for your sick child just because you are not pleasing Him or have not confessed all your sins is ridiculous. God heals because He is holy, not because those He heals are holy. Of course this does not mean that we shouldn't try to walk closer with the Lord and live the best we can. But to assume that God does not answer our prayers because we are not holy enough is contrary to a faith that is built on God's grace; on a Savior who gave His life for us "while we were still sinners;" and on the fact that we are saved by God's grace and not by our works.

But what about faith? Faith is an extremely important part of our prayer life. Faith is trusting that God hears, that God cares, and that God is able to fulfill our request. Jesus asks that we pray in faith; that as we pray we trust in God's grace. In Matthew 17:20, He refers to moving mountains again when He told the disciples: "I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." Now a mustard seed is smaller than a grain of salt. Thus, the point is that the smallest impulse of faith will touch the heart of God.

Perhaps the answer as to why our prayers go unanswered sometimes is not because we are praying wrong or lack faith, but because we misunderstand what Jesus meant when He said that we could move mountains and have whatever we ask for if we pray with faith. Sometimes when Jesus was trying to make a point or get the people's attention, He overstated or extravagated a point; such as if your hand causes you to sin, then cut it off. Jesus was not

teaching self-mutilation here. So as we study the sayings of Jesus, we need to take them seriously, but not always literally, but sometimes symbolically.

With this understanding, let's re-examine what Jesus said in Matthew 21:22 – "Whatever you ask in prayer with faith, you will receive." Were these words a promise to be taken literally, or are they a statement inviting us to pray boldly and with faith? Did the people who first heard these words from Jesus really believe that they could pray and the hated Romans rulers would be gone or that they could be rich? More likely, what they heard Jesus saying was: "Go to God with your problems! Be bold when you pray! Trust that God hears your prayers! And, in ways you don't fully understand, God will see you through the situation you are in."

Now let's pause for a moment and think about what would happen if we got everything we asked for; if we took Jesus' words literally. We would not have to work or put forth any effort. We could pray for food, and it would appear instantly; we could pray for money and there it would be; we pray for health, and we would be instantly well. Of course, this was not what Jesus meant when He spoke about prayer.

Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that our prayers are answered in one of four ways: yes, no, wait, or the one that I don't like sometimes – I have a better idea. In this latter case, it means that things are not going to work out the way I want them to. It can also mean that I may have to make a major change in my life. We also know from experience that some of our prayers are not answered right away or as quickly as we would like; God answers them in His time, not ours.

Another pastor has used the following outline when addressing the question of unanswered prayer:

- If the request is wrong, God says: "No."
- If the timing is wrong, God says: "Slow."
- If you are wrong, God says: "Grow."
- But if the request is right, the timing is right, and you are right, God says: "Go!"

A key point is that God does answer our prayers; however, the answer may be no. Someone once told me that "No" is a complete sentence. A "No" from God does not mean that He has abandoned us, far from it. Sometimes we are like children and don't know what's best for us; we ask for something that will ultimately hurt us or others. This puts God in assuming the role of a parent who has to refuse His child's request because He knows what is best for the child far better than the child knows himself.

We can all cite examples where this has happened in our own lives. Years ago Judy and I prayed for a certain job transfer to the Oklahoma City office of my former agency. I came out first on the promotion list, but in the "good-old-boy system," I was passed over. I was upset

and very disappointed. But a few months later I was promoted to take over our office here in Santa Fe. A few years later, the office that I would have occupied if I had gotten the first job was destroyed in the Oklahoma City bombing, and I might not be here today. God works in mysterious ways.

We must also remember that sometimes God's silence is for a purpose. God moves according to His own purposes. Perhaps He wishes to do more than simply supply our request. Perhaps He wishes to draw us closer to Him, to help us grow spiritually or to force us to re-evaluate our request. Sometimes in the face of suffering and adversity, God's answer to our prayer is not to deliver us or others from suffering, but to walk with us through it, and then to transform and use it to change our lives, the lives of others, or the world. Sometimes prayer doesn't change things; it changes us! When Paul prayed for the thorn to be removed from his side, he asked God to "change things." Instead, God changed Paul so that he could handle his pain and suffering. Prayer may not get us what we want, but it will teach us to want what we need.

Billy Graham shared about the time he was experiencing a "dark night of the soul." His mother told him: "Son, there are many times when God withdraws to test your faith. He wants you to trust Him in the darkness. Now, Son, reach up in faith in the fog and you will find that His hand will be there." Whether or not we feel God's presence when the way seems dark, by faith we know that He is there. You can stake your life on His promise: "I will never leave you or forsake you." Reach out; choose faith over fear. God is always there for us.

James, the brother of Jesus, also addressed the issue of unanswered prayers in the fourth chapter of his letter when he wrote: "You want something, but don't get it.... You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." Strong words, but true. We often don't receive what we ask for because our motives are wrong and selfish. We are thinking only of ourselves and not on how others may be impacted by our request.

Sometimes one person's prayer must go unanswered for another's prayer to be answered. For example, near the end of many close college football games you will see people of both sides praying, but only one team wins. Now I don't think God really cares which team wins; He leaves it up to the skills of the players and the coaches. But fans still lift up prayers for their teams. This reminds us that when we pray we need to think about how our request will impact others.

Have you ever considered that God sometimes intends for us to be the answer to one another's prayers. Now I may have been called a problem or a nightmare for someone, but I don't remember ever being called an answer to a prayer. But in reality and according to God's plan we are. God often works through people like you and me, calling and nudging us by the Holy Spirit into action on behalf of others. As Christians we are His instruments, His hands and His

feet, to address the needs of others. When someone is hungry, you provide food through the Pantry; when someone is cold, you provide coats to St. Felix; when someone is mourning the loss of a loved one, you provide a shoulder to cry on. God answers prayers through us if we are only willing to listen and follow His lead.

Now this does not mean that miracles do not occur. It is okay to pray for miracles; there is never anything wrong with asking. But miracles are miracles because they are rare. God can work miracles, but He also works through the hands of doctors, the words of counselors, and the presence of friends; in other words, He works through us.

Here's a basic law of prayer – in prayer we receive, not the answer we want, but the answer which God in His wisdom and His love knows to be best for us. Because we have human hearts with fears and desires, most of our prayers are prayers of escape. We pray to be saved from some trial, some sorrow, some disappointment, some hurt, or some difficult situation. Most often God does not give us escape; He enables us to accept what we cannot understand; He enables us to endure what without Him would be unbearable; He enables us to face what without Him we could not stand up under. God does not always deliver His children out of a crisis, but He promises to be with us throughout.

One final point – just because some prayers are not answered the way we want does not mean that they go unanswered or that we should stop praying. By no means, as I said at the beginning, prayer is at the heart of religion; it is an essential part of life and our personal relationship with God. In prayer we enter into conversation with God. In a way prayer is like what we experienced as children when we were hurt and would climb up in our mother's lap for comfort. Mom's way of making everything okay was simply to hold us tightly and reassure us that somehow everything was going to be okay.

There was a painting that depicted a large congregation in church on a Sunday morning. The view was from the back row of the long cathedral, and as you looked down the aisle, you could see there was a considerable crowd, filling the pews. But there in the very back, there was a solitary worshiper in prayer. And in the painting, Jesus was seated next to him, arm around his shoulder, talking to him.

That's what the author of our closing hymn must have understood when he wrote: "what a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! O what peace we often forfeit, o what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer." What we need in the midst of life's baffling situations is not an intellectual answer, but the presence of the Lord. Remember God is never more than a prayer away, and prayers can't be answered unless they are prayed! Amen