

Trusting in God even when it hurts (part 2: prayer) Matt 7:7-11 James 5:13-18

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At a church in Kentucky, a little boy got a little too rambunctious during the worship service. His father picked the boy up and started for the door. As they were heading down the aisle, the boy said, at the top of his voice: 'Ya'll pray for me now!'

Another little boy was spending the day with his father. They went to a diner for lunch. When the waiter brought the food, the father said, 'Son, we'll just have a silent prayer.' Dad got through praying first and waited for the boy to finish his prayer. The little boy sat there for a long time with his head bowed. When he finally looked up, his father asked him, 'What in the world were you praying about all that time?' The little boy replied, 'How do I know, Dad' It was a silent prayer.'

We have been talking about Trusting in God's will for our lives – even when it hurts. And last week we closed with the question: If God is bringing to pass his sovereign will for our lives – as planned from eternity past -- whatever our circumstances, whatever our relationship with Him, even as we and other apparently exercise free choice to do good or evil..... then why bother praying?

How does praying change anything?

What does prayer do for us?

What does prayer do for God?

And especially – How then does God answer our prayers?

The Bible teaches us that prayer is an essential part of our relationship with God.

- Prayer strengthens our relationship with God,
- connects us with God's power for our lives,
- and enables us to hear the will of God for our lives.
- Through prayer, God speaks to our lives.
- So, according to the Bible, prayer is essential for our lives as Christians.
- A strong prayer life keeps us strong as Christians.
- But how does the sovereign God answer our prayers?

Let's take a quick survey. How many of you believe that God answers prayer' – raise your hand. Seems like most of us believe that God answers prayer.

Now, how many of you have ever prayed for something that didn't happen' raise your hand again.

So, what do you make of that' If God answers prayers, why do some of our prayers go unanswered'

To be honest with you, I also have questions as to how my prayers get answered. You see, I am in the same boat as you are.

- I have prayed many times for things to happen that never happened.
- I have prayed for people to get well and they didn't.
- I have prayed for marriages to be saved and they weren't.
- I have prayed for success of church programs that were flops.
- I have prayed for people to change their lives, and they didn't.
- I have prayed for people to live and they died.
- I have prayed for a lot of things over the years that never happened.

Yet, I believe with all my heart that God answers prayers. But there are still so many things about prayer that I don't understand, and I sure don't understand why God seems to answer some prayers and not others.

To make things more complicated, the Bible talks about prayer in ways that seem to contradict our experience:

In this morning's text we hear Jesus say: *Ask, and it will be given to 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* (Matthew 7:7-8).

And James, the brother of Jesus writes to the Church that ...*The prayer of faith will save the sick ... The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.*

Sounds confusing, doesn't it. The Bible seems to say that we will get whatever we ask for in prayer. Yet, our experience in prayer is just the opposite. We don't always get that for which we pray.

There's our dilemma. So, don't expect this talk to be the last word on prayer. Instead, see it as a work in progress from someone who, like most of you, doesn't have all the answers.

But first we must understand and remember two essential truths about prayer – which might help us better understand How God answers prayer..

First: Prayer is about our relationship with God. The purpose of prayer is to establish and enrich our relationship with God. The simple truth of the matter is that God wants more than anything to have a relationship with each one of us. God loves you so much that He wants to be in your life. **If you don't hear anything else I say this morning, hear that. God wants to be a part of your life! God loves you more than you can ever imagine.**

God wants only good things for your life – He proves His love by sending Jesus into our world to seek us out and rebirth us into his family so that He can be a part of our life.

Remember what Jesus said about just as we earthly parents know how to give good things to our children ... so our Heavenly Father knows and desires to give only good things to us. God wants to walk with us through life and prayer is the major way we keep contact with him.

Christian writer Max Lucado tells the story of taking his young daughter, Andrea, for a walk in their neighborhood. She was about four years old at the time. Listen to the story:

The area was brand new to her. We walked down streets she'd never seen and petted dogs she'd never touched. The yards were different. The kids looked older. The houses bigger.

I thought all the change might trouble her. I thought the new sights and sounds might generate anxiety.

'Are you okay' I asked.

'Sure.'

'Do you know where we are'

'No.'

'Do you know how to get home'

'No.'

'And you aren't worried'

Without slowing her pace she reached up and took my hand and said, 'I don't have to know how to get home. You already do.'

God wants to have a relationship with us like Andrea has with her father. God wants us to walk with Him and love Him, and trust Him. God wants us with Him and God has made the way for that to happen in Jesus.

And that's where prayer comes in. Prayer helps us to move closer to God, and keeps us close to God. Do you realize that 2/3rds of the Lord's Prayer – that Jesus taught us to pray, is about strengthening our relationship with God. Prayer is first and foremost about our relationship with God.

Second: prayer changes our lives. To say that another way, when you move closer to God, your life changes.

Have any of you experienced that to be true in your life'

Have any of you had your life changed because of your relationship with God' I have.

When we move closer to God, our lives are changed! So, if prayer helps us to move closer to God, and keeps us close to God, prayer changes us!. Perhaps you've heard this expression: '**Prayer changes things. Prayer changes you.**'

In France, there is the shrine of Lourdes where people go to pray for healing. A war veteran who had lost a leg appeared at the shrine sometime after World War II. As he hobbled his way along the street to the shrine, someone said, 'Look at that silly man! Does he think God is going to give him back his leg?' The young man overheard the remark, turned toward the speaker and said: 'Of course I don't expect God to give me back my leg. I am going to pray to God to help me live without it.' Our relationship with God changes our lives. It helps us to live from day to day.

I have heard stories all my life of how people were changed when they gave their lives to God. I know that at the age of 14 my life changed dramatically when I came to personally know and claim Jesus as my savior. Not from bad to good ... because I was always a good child (just ask my older sister). But from purposeless to passionate – from shy to bold -- that's quite a life change.

And I know of people with serious problems ` drug abuse, alcoholism, and other addictions ` who changed completely when they gave their lives to Jesus.

And I know people who before were just plain mean then becoming gentle souls after giving their lives to God. If you talk to Christians who work with prisoners, they will tell you stories of how even the hardest of criminals change when God comes into their lives.

When we move closer to God, our lives change ` our attitudes, our prejudices, our desires, our values, all change when we move closer to God. Prayer helps us to move closer to God. Prayer changes us.

So Prayer is all about our relationship with God.

And Prayer changes our lives.

These are two things that are important to remember. When we start with those two ideas ` prayer is all about our relationship with God and prayer changes our lives -- how God answers prayer may become a little bit clearer.

Now, let's think on another Bible passage. It's in the Gospel of John, the 15th chapter. Jesus is talking to his disciples about their relationship with him, about how he is a part of them and they are a part of him. Jesus says: '***I am the vine; you are the branches.***' ***A little later he says: 'If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.'***

Did you hear that? We usually focus on '*ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.*' But did you hear the first part of the sentence? '***If you remain in me and my words remain in you . . .***' Jesus is not promising his disciples that anything they ask for will be theirs for the asking. He's talking about their relationship with him. He's

saying that what we ask for is part of our relationship with him, a relationship that changes our lives.

If our lives are changed, then our desires are changed, our needs are changed, our view of the world has changed, and what we ask for will change.

A lot of people these days – ask God to change the circumstances of their life. But they don't want God to change their life. They treat God like a heavenly concierge who stands behind his desk just waiting to do whatever we ask to make our life better – but otherwise he just leaves us to our own business. This is actually one of the most prevalent forms of Christian faith in America today. It's called "therapeutic deism."

Many people approach prayer like they do a drink machine. you go up to a drink machine' You put in your money, you make your selection, you punch the button, and you wait for your chosen drink to drop out of the machine. The whole transaction takes a few seconds. If the drink doesn't drop out of the machine, you get ticked-off. You push the machine. You hit it, and if that doesn't work, you write a nasty little note that says 'This machine took my money' and you leave it on the machine. Many people approach prayer like that!

Many people think that God is always going to answer their prayers the way they want them answered and in the time that they want them answered.

And when God doesn't perform the way they think God ought to perform, they feel cheated. They think God is not a 'good' or loving God. I've had people tell me that they no longer believe in God because their prayer wasn't answered. It's like they're saying: 'So, there, God. If you won't do what I want, I won't believe in you.'

Prayer is not like presenting our Christmas wish list to Santa Claus.

Prayer is all about our relationship with God, about aligning ourselves up with what God wants for our life - not about getting what we want. Remember praying the Lord's prayer *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

I heard of a woman who had a different understanding of prayer. She wanted a swimming pool in her back yard. Her husband was in the anti-swimming pool camp. He didn't want one, said they couldn't afford one, that they didn't need one. No, no way, no how were they going to have a swimming pool in their back yard.

Now, this woman believed that if she prayed for a swimming pool, God would make it happen. So, she prayed for a swimming pool in her back yard. Then she put feet to her prayer by calling the swimming pool company and ordering a pool. And when the pool was delivered, she charged the cost to her

husband's credit card, all the while proclaiming that God gave her the swimming pool!

Prayer is not about swimming pools or new cars or houses or clothes or CD players or stuff. Prayer is all about our relationship with God. When we pray for stuff -- we tread close to missing the point that prayer is about our relationship with God.

Jesus demonstrated the way we are to approach prayer when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane. The setting is this: Jesus has just finished the Last Supper with his disciples. In just a short while, he will be arrested, tried, and executed. In between his last meal and his arrest, Jesus went to the Garden on Mount of Olives to pray. Do you remember his prayer? Jesus said: **'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.'** Matthew 26:39

It's important to note here that Jesus earnestly prayed this same prayer three times that night. Yet his prayer was unanswered, at least in the way that one might expect. He prayed for there to be another way to finish his mission without dying! His prayer wasn't answered. Why? Because he added 'not what I want. What do you want?'

You see, our prayers are answered according to the will of God. Whether or not we get what we pray for depends upon whether or not what we pray for fits into God's will.

Does that sound unfair to you? Does that sound like God is some kind of dictator? If it does, then you need to move closer to God. When you move closer to God you realize that God wants the very best for you; that God's will always helps you in the long run, even if it hurts you in the short run.

I know it's hard to understand. I don't always understand it, either. But my not understanding the will of God doesn't mean that God's will is bad for me! It just means that I don't understand.

Not long after Jesus prayed in the Garden of Eden, he was arrested, tried, and crucified. While he hung on the cross, under the weight of the sins of the world, he prayed again, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' Jesus felt totally alone in that moment, and he expressed his despair to God. But even when he felt abandoned by God, Jesus didn't stop praying! In fact, he prayed seven different times while he hung on the cross. He didn't give up on God! And just before he died, Jesus prayed: 'Father, I place my life in your hands.' He trusted God and God didn't let him down!

Jesus may have felt alone on that cross, but he was never really alone – God was there working through that horrible situation to bring about good both in Jesus' life and in ours. – the third day Jesus rose from death; healthy whole and now eternal. And

Jesus boldly promised to all who follow him: because I live, you shall live also. Could Jesus make that promise to us, had he not first carried our sins to that cross?

As I was writing this sermon, my mind returned to an unanswered prayer. Bruce Banta was the pesky younger brother of a dear friend of mine. In time he also became my dear friend as well. Bruce was a very athletic young man who developed an aggressive form of bone cancer at the age of ten. They had to amputate all of his left leg and half of his hip. But that never slowed Bruce down – he went on to become a sterling high school athlete in both gymnastics and wrestling (if you can imagine). But neither did the cancer slow down; eventually it took his life at the age of eighteen. Yet Bruce throughout his shortened life was one of the most joyous persons I ever knew. Bruce also had a great Christian faith. And I am sure that he joined with me and many others in fervently praying that God would cure this cancer and spare his life. Bruce still died. Bruce always said: **it's not how long you live, but what you do with the life your given.** Bruce lived a lot in the years that he was given. And he taught me to do the same. And how can I be sad that he died so young, especially as I now see him with two legs back under him, enjoying eternity with his savior, Lord , and friend.

We don't always get what we pray for. But if we are part of Jesus and Jesus is part of us, then we often will get more than what we pray for, and better than what we pray for. Here's how someone has put it:

I asked for strength, that I might achieve. God made me weak that I might listen. I asked for health that I might do greater things. I was given grace that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy. I was given poverty that I might be wise. I asked for power that I might have the praise of men. I was given weakness that I might feel the need for God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life. I was given life that I might enjoy all things. I received nothing that I asked for, yet all that I hoped for. My prayer was answered.

We don't always get that for which we ask in the way that we want it. God can give us more than we ask for! So, keep praying, even when you don't understand, keep praying. Move closer to God and your life will change!
