

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Why Pray?”
Keeping Company with God, pt. 1
Luke 11:1-13; Philippians 1:3-11
June 7, 2015

So, the Leadership Team at this church you’re going to asks you to pray for the next week, and even gives you a guide to help along the way. So, of course, you *are* going to do it. Right?

...You all know the right answer here. So, let me try that again. [repeat]

Of course you will... Or at least you’ll try your best to participate. Maybe you’ll miss a day or two, but you love your church and you care about the people there, so you’re going to make every effort to pray with them and for them. I know you will.

Even... even if you don’t think of yourself as the praying type, or don’t think you know how.

Even... if in the back of your mind you’ve got your questions,
and maybe your doubts about this whole prayer thing.

I know a lot of you do, because thanks be to God, we’re an honest enough church where people know it safe to name those doubts and questions, and some of you have been honest enough to tell me along the way.

I know many others of you have your questions and doubts too because you all are thinking people and it’s hard not to wonder... at times... why in the world we should pray.

Does it really matter? Are we so self-important as to think we might change God’s mind? And if not, are we really just talking to ourselves?

Have you ever wondered... is prayer just self-talk or self-help? Is it really just some kind of psychotherapy exercise clothed in religious sentimentality?

And if it’s not, if God is listening, does God really care? Because it’s hard to get around all the unanswered prayers out there. Why do my deepest prayers seem to go unanswered?

As one philosophy professor put is, **“If God can influence the course of events, then a God who is willing to cure colds and provide parking spaces but is not willing to prevent Aushzitz and Hiroshima is morally repugnant. Since Hiroshima and Auschwitz did occur, one must infer that God cannot (or has a policy never to) influence the course of worldly events.”**¹

So, why pray?

¹ Quoted in Philip Yancy, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?*, 74

“Well, because my church asked me to.”

I hope that’s a good enough reason for you to do it this week, but I’m sure it’s not a good enough reason for you to pray beyond this week... except maybe when you’re really desperate.

My only living grandparent was a POW in Korea. He’s never been much of the church-going type. But when I asked him one time if he believed in God, he said, **“Well, Chris, you’ll never find an atheist in a fox-hole.”**

When my grandma was in her last few hours, in a hospice bed, a little over a year ago, I remember him clinging our hands tightly and with tears in his eyes, asking us to pray the Lord’s prayer with him.

Sometimes... only our deepest moments of desperation are enough to push us past our questions and hesitations and insecurities... when it comes to prayer.

Sometimes we pray with the distant hope that somehow it might matter... even if most days we don’t think it does.

I was in college when they found another blockage in my Dad’s arteries. The first time it happened he was 35... my age now. I was only 10 at the time. I remember he was in the hospital for a few days, but I had no idea how serious it was for my 35-year-old dad to have two major arties around his heart almost completely blocked.

Then in college, it happened again, and this time I got it. Only this time, it was in a tricky branch, on the backside of his heart.

I remember how scared Mom was... We all were. I remember being back home. He was waiting to hear back from another specialist. And I prayed in the hallway, in a moment by myself:

“God please. Please let Dad get some hopeful news. I want to believe you hear my prayers. I want to believe my prayers matter, so show me they do. Mom and Dad really need something they can hope for....Please.”

Later that day, they got the phone call. It was serious. They couldn’t do another angioplasty, not in that spot. But he didn’t have to have heart surgery... at least not yet. They could wait... and technology is always getting better.

We were relieved.

And I believed.

And I’m still grateful for that moment.

But I also know that countless other prayers that were more pure and more holy than mine have gone unanswered. Some of those prayers have been yours, I know. They didn’t make it. They weren’t healed. Hope didn’t come. Maybe I just got lucky. Maybe Dad would have gotten the same news anyway. I don’t know.

So, why pray? Does it really matter?

It's a big question, a question that you can wrestle with for a life-time. There's a number of ways that spiritual teachers have answered that over the centuries.

Kierkegaard said, "**Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays.**" CS Lewis said something similar, "**I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God, it changes me.**"

It's one camp of thought to answer the question. And I think they are right, but not in the way most people hear it. When we pray, we aren't going to convince God to care more about a particular situation, ***because God already cares more about it than we do.*** God is already more present in it than we are.

As one writer puts it, "*We do not pray to tell God what [God] does not know, nor to remind [God] of things [God] has forgotten. [God] already cares for the things we pray about.... [God] has simply been waiting for us to care about them with [God]. When we pray, we stand by God and look with God toward those people and problems.*"²

In other words, when we pray for one another, we are joining God's love and God's heart, and God's presence in those situations. Or to use Philip Yancy's phrase... in prayer, we are "***keeping company with God.***"

So, no, we don't have to convince God to care.

But here's the pitfall in this line of thinking. If that's the case, then it's easy to think that our prayers for one another, for the world, for those we love don't make any real difference. If God already cares, why pray? Just for my own sake?

Lewis and Kierkegaard and others are right. Prayer, keeping company with God, it does change me and sometimes profoundly, and that in itself makes praying worthwhile.

But if Jesus and Paul and the biblical witness are also right, prayer is also more than that. If Jesus and Paul and the bible have anything to say about it, prayer does somehow makes a real and profound difference in our world.

Why pray when my most profound prayers seem to go unheard?

Why pray, when it doesn't make sense?

The best and simplest answer I can give to those questions is: "**Because Jesus did.**"

The gospels record over a dozen specific prayers of Jesus. We also know that Jesus regularly withdrew by himself to pray. Jesus prayed to center and to be spiritually

² Tim Strafford, quoted in Yancy *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?*, 58.

nourished. Prayer seems to be a lifeline for him... giving him energy, connecting him to the Father... giving him guidance.

But he also treated prayer like it made a difference for others. He turned to prayer in times of trouble. He prayed for himself, for his friends, for his disciples, for the Jewish people that he was part of.

Jesus prays like it matters...
as if God were there, listening, communing with him.

And yet, he also knew the profound pain of getting no response to his pleas... and the heartbreak of having his prayers go unanswered.

Despite his prayers, the disciples still don't understand him.

Despite his prayers, Judas betrays him. Peter denies him.

The disciples all desert him.

Despite his prayers, the cup of suffering isn't taken from him.

And yet he prays... and prays... and people are healed, and he finds strength. In fact, his prayers seem so intimate and so meaningful that his disciples finally ask him, ***"Lord, teach us to pray."***

And so ...he gives them words to pray that we still pray today, "The Lord's Prayer." And he teaches them parables about prayer... like the one we heard earlier today... which is a really playful parable when you understand their culture.

He tells this story that in our day would be about one neighbor pestering another neighbor in the middle of the night until he got out of bed and loaned him an egg for the cake he was making ... and this neighbor is so grumpy and annoyed about being pestered that he starts loading him up with everything else in his pantry.

"And here's our half drunk gallon of milk, and here a bottle of wine, and while you're at it why don't you just take these package of rib-eye stakes in my freezer.... Take it all. I don't care. Just leave me alone."

This is one of those rare parables that Jesus actually explains. And what he says is really radicle. **"And so I say, Ask and it will be given. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be open. For everyone who asks, receives. And everyone who seeks finds. And everyone who knocks the door will be open."**

Jesus, is not naïve. He knows what it's like to pray... and to hear nothing. And yet he insists that your prayers matter! He even repeats himself to make the point.

Despite your experience, despite the silence on the other side of your requests, pray.

Pray, so that you will receive.

Pray, because God is better than the most loving parent, and certainly better than your grumpy neighbor.

Pray, because God is more generous than you understand.

“And when you ask for an egg or a fish, God is not going to give you a snake or a scorpion... but God is going to give you... the Holy Spirit.” Jesus says.

In other words, you’re going to get more than the egg you asked for. You’re going to get the whole house. Pray... and keep praying... As Buechner puts it, **“Keep on beating the path to God’s door, because the one thing you can be sure of is that down the path you beat with even your most half-cocked and halting prayer the God you call upon will finally come, and even if he does not bring you the answer you want, he will bring you himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers that is what we are really praying for.”**³

Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will open. Pray like it matters, Jesus says.

Paul seems to think it will matter too. His letters are full of prayers for the churches... and he prays as if it matters. He tells the Philippians **“I pray that your love might become even more and more rich with knowledge and all kinds of insight. I pray this so that you will be able to decide what really matters and so you will be sincere and blameless on the day of God. I pray so that you will be filled with the fruit of righteousness.”**

He prays for them because he cares deeply about them. He prays because he believes it will make a difference in the life of their church.

Jesus... and Paul like him... they pray, not because God’s heart needs to be changed, but because somehow they believe it opens up new possibilities in our world... new avenues in which God can come to us and God can work in us as mysterious as that is.

A few years ago we started a compost pile in the back corner of our yard. And you know how those things go, you have good intentions and first, but after awhile, you stop taking food scraps out to it. It’s just easier to throw them in the kitchen trash. Maybe one bag of mulched up grass got in there. Mostly it’s just leaves from one weekend’s fall clean up. But after that... you forget about it. You know it should be turned and things added to it, but who’s got the time? It seemed like a good idea. Maybe someday, right?

And that’s how it’s been in our forgotten compost pile. Truth be told, I’d given up on the whole thing. I figured it was one of those fun ideas... but basically a loss.

Well, this spring, Jessi and the kids decided that we should garden here at our Community Garden. So, for the first time, we signed up, got a plot out there. And we

³ Fredrick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, 87.

knew that if we were going to make this work, the soil was going to need some help. I figured we'd need to go out and buy some compost. But Jessi said we should use ours.

"Well, that's not ready," I said. **"We haven't done anything to it in a long time."**

"Can you start turning it for me?" she asks so nicely.

I, on the other hand, am just annoyed at this point, and I remind her, ever so patiently, that this garden thing is *her* project. I told her from the beginning that if she wanted to do it, I didn't want to be responsible for it. I figured that settled it, but about a month later she asked me to box the compost pile up so we can take it to church.

"But it's not ready!" I said. **"We talked about this."**

"I've been turning myself because you wouldn't help."

"You have? Well once or twice isn't going to do it."

"I've done it several times a week. It is ready, but I really need your help."

Of course I was surprised, but still felt grumpy about having to box up the whole compost pile. **"This isn't my project,"** I mumble to myself as I get the boxes out.

"Why am I the one doing this?" And as I work on the pile I'm irritable and complaining to myself.

(You know, it's hard being a pastor when you're not a very good Christian to begin with.)

Well, finally we load up the van and brought it all up here. With the kids help we began breaking up the soil and working that compost into our would-be garden. It became a family affair. We even got slushy's from Sonic on our way over here. Honestly, it was probably the best way for us to spend that afternoon together. Needless to say, the garden plot soil wasn't the only thing that needed to be softened up and re-nourished that day.

One of the most common biblical metaphors for God is that of gardener. God is farmer, vineyard owner. God plants, prunes, grows, cultivates... It's all over the pages of scripture... both the old and new testament... which tells us a lot about our prayers. ***Our prayers... are the fertilizer to the soil in which God is gardening.*** Somehow they open up new possibilities in which God can work, and grow and cultivate life in our world.

They aren't magic. They don't let us control God. They don't guarantee an outcome. God knows, there's nothing about farming that guaranteed. But they do have a way of reorienting us to the work God is already doing... to what God is already cultivating. And at the same time... in some mysterious way, in prayer we become co-gardeners with God. ***Our prayers open up new possibilities in the soil of God's garden.***

So, even if your prayers haven't been touched in months or years... it's time to start turning that pile over again.

Ask. Seek. Knock. Pray.

Pray like Jesus did, knowing that it matters, Trusting, that the Father is listening.

Pray... and when you do, bring along all those old dried up leaves and rotting food scraps, and everything else that's been hiding in the back corner of your heart.

Because even if it all seems like a waste to you,

and even if it all looks pointless, like a lost cause, to you,

God knows that's the stuff that creates the richest soil to work with.

[Prayer]

O God, we do that now.

From wherever we are, with whatever we have piled up in our lives...

we bring them to you now.

As hard as it is for some of us, we're asking again.

We're knocking again...

Please, God, hear our prayers... use our concern and our love,

our hopes and our fears,

all the things that we carry to you in our hearts and minds right

now...

use them to cultivate new life in us and in our world.

We ask this in the name of the One who taught us to pray, saying... "Our Father... who art in heaven...