

7 September 2014

More Than Words: What Is Prayer (Not)?

Matthew 21:18-22; James 5:13-16

Matthew 21:18-22. *In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, 'How did the fig tree wither at once?' Jesus answered them, 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, "Be lifted up and thrown into the sea", it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.'*

James 5:13-16. *Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.*

As we begin this season of exploring prayer, I wanted to start with these two passages, both of which speak directly to the Power of Prayer. In Matthew 21, Jesus blights a barren fig tree with a word and tells his disciples that if they have faith, without doubt, they can do such things, too – can even tell mountains to cast themselves into the sea, because *anything* they ask in faith they will receive. Then, in the second passage, Jesus' brother James says that when the elders of the church pray over the sick, the afflicted will be healed and their sins forgiven, because the prayer of the righteous is powerful. These are inspiring, encouraging words. God hears us when we pray, and God does reach into the world and change the normal order of events in response to our prayers, in recognition of our faith and righteousness and that of the church.

These are also troubling words, though. Because looking these two passages . . . well, don't you have some questions? Like, Does God really grant trivial prayers? Jesus did *what* to a fig tree? Then he suggests that his disciples could make mountains toss themselves around? Why? Wouldn't that cause unimaginable human suffering for people living nearby? Okay, so maybe the mountain thing was just a figure of speech, but we still have a dead fig tree here. Has it never occurred to you that if Jesus could blight the tree with a word because it bore no fruit, he might have been able to say a different word and make it fruitful? Then everybody could have had figs. Win-win. And then there's the healing stuff over in James. It's great that the elders can anoint the sick and pray over them and bring healing, but . . . how many times? Because, you know, if it worked every time, we'd all live forever, wouldn't we? So when doesn't it work? Well, Jesus seems to say that it works when we have faith and never doubt. James says that the prayer of the *righteous* is very effective.

And that's when these Bible verses come smashing into the very different testimony of experience. The fact is, we pray for people to be healed, and it doesn't always happen. Not even when we pray with faith. Dale and Leilani Neumann of Weston had enough faith that their prayers would heal their daughter Kara that they were willing to bet her life on it. Whatever else

you may say about the Neumann's tragic decision not to take Kara to the doctor, they certainly had a lot of faith, and their prayers weren't answered. In fact, in light of experience, there are many questions to ask about prayer. Let me read you a recent email from my daughter Grace:

So, prayer has been on my mind for a while now – for a range of reasons. I know this isn't one of those easy-answer type of things, but I keep on thinking myself in circles and I think I need to get this out of my headspace. *[At this point Grace describes a prayer that she had prayed fervently on behalf of a friend, a prayer that had not been granted. She continues.]*

And I keep thinking about this and I'm not getting anywhere. On the one hand, the easy answer is that I didn't pray right, or hard enough, or I wasn't looking at the issue from the right direction, or something like that. But I'm not sure that's right – because it is the easy answer. It turns the problem into my fault for not praying better rather than the big overarching issue it actually is. It becomes an excuse for me to take the blame, which is not right.

But on the other hand, if I believe in prayer – and I do – then I must believe that a single person's prayer can have an effect – which begs the question why mine didn't? Which lands itself quite nicely back where I started – not helpful. So I try to circumvent that train of thought. Maybe this was the better solution. Maybe God carefully weighed all the options and decided that this was better for everyone involved, or at least for my friend. But that's also an easy answer, leading to "Everything happens for a reason," which is – at best – an insensitive platitude. I don't like that option either.

She puts it nicely, doesn't she? All pastors should have daughters to write their sermons. But now that Grace has framed the question for us, how do we even begin to answer?

Well, that's all we're going to try to do today: begin. We'll be meditating on prayer for the next six weeks, so today all I want to do is suggest three basic parameters. First, whatever understanding of prayer we come up with has to include the possibility of God choosing not to do what we ask. I know this sounds like a cop-out, that if our prayers aren't answered we can just say, "Oh, well, I guess God said no." But the truth is, if God is not free to say no, then we are the ones in control, not God, and a god that we can control is not God. Christians have been fighting for 2000 years about whether humans have free will; can we at least agree that God does? Second, our answer has to allow God more than two options in responding to our prayers, not just *yes* or *no*, but also *not yet* and *well, yes, but not in the way you want and up to a point, maybe* or even *Is that all you want? You can do better than that*. One example: my last couple of years as a Baptist pastor I was desperately unhappy and prayed hard for God to get me out of there. Now my plan was for God to make one of my books a bestseller. God's still stalling on that one. The idea that, instead of escaping the pastorate entirely, I might find renewed fulfillment as a pastor at the Methodist church that I drove by every day on my way to work, and in the process make one of the great friends of my life in Karen Ebert, never occurred to me. I didn't pray that because I couldn't imagine it, and yet it was the answer to my prayer. Third, when we pray for God to act in the world, we can't imagine that God will always just do everything while we stand by and watch. We must be open to the possibility that the first step in answering our prayer may be step that we have to take ourselves.

We do have some weird ideas about prayer. Let me give a biblical example. Two weeks ago, when I finished the series of sermons on the Exodus, I touched lightly on the story of Balaam. As you may remember, the king of Moab, Balak, sent for the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites who were about to move through his land. Now, as I said, God permitted Balaam to go but warned him to speak only what God told him. Balak took Balaam up on a mountain, offered sacrifices, then said, “Curse away!” But instead, Balaam blessed the Israelites. So what did Balak do? He took Balaam to a different mountain and said, “Try it from here.” Again Balaam blessed Israel. So Balak took him to a third mountain: “See if it works better from this angle.” Balak isn’t interested in what God might want, only in what he can get God to do for him, for Balak, getting God to meet his demands is about getting the right person to say the right words in the right environment. Balak treats prayer like a chemistry lab experiment. If you mix the right chemicals in the right proportions – all the while controlling for impurities and maintaining the correct lab environment – you should get the desired result every time. And too often, we take that toward prayer. When we complain about how God doesn’t answer our prayers, it is generally because we are picturing prayer as a lab experiment that we are initiating, where God is the key reactive agent that we are adding to the solution.

But prayer is not a science experiment, because God refuses to be measured out to use at our discretion. Instead – and we’re going to flesh this out over the next few weeks – *prayer is communication in relationship*. No relationship can survive if one party sees the relationship only as a way to get stuff. Our relationship with God has to be about more than that. We pray, “Our Father,” not “Our Sugar Daddy.” Prayer is communication in relationship, and in a genuine relationship, both parties are free, which means that even when each party trusts the other, neither is entirely predictable. And it is in that volatile and exciting environment that we have to start.

But now we’ve talked enough about prayer. It is time to pray.

Our God, do you really hear us? If so, then hear our prayer today

We pray for those in our congregation who are grieving today.

(silence)

For those who live in the presence of death each day, either their own or that of someone they love.

(silence)

For those who live each day with pain, the pain of aching joints, of scars not yet healed, of addictions that gnaw at every unguarded moment, of depression

(silence)

We know we can't demand your obedience, God. We can't tell you what to do, but these people whose names and faces have filled our meditation today are people we love. Do something, at least! Help them, I pray.

And tell us how we can be your instruments.

Our God, do you really hear us? If so, then hear our prayer today

We pray for those in world who are refugees today: we name the peoples of Syria, Iraq, Sri Lanka, South Sudan, Central America

(silence)

For those who face death each day, by disease or war: we name the people of West Africa, and Iraq, and Syria

(silence)

For those who are oppressed because of their faith, their language, their sex: we name the girls of Nigeria, the Christians of Egypt and China and Iraq, the Muslims of Central African Republic.

(silence)

We know we can't demand your obedience, God. We can't tell you what to do, but these people whose names and faces have filled our meditation today are people you created in love. Do something, at least! Help them, I pray.

And tell us how we can be your instruments. Amen