

**“Even the
dogs
under the
table eat
the
children’s
crumbs.”**

Mark 7:28



Crummy Answers to Prayer

Mark 7:24-30

Sunday, July 14, 2024, Aledo UMC

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As most of you know, I lead a Bible Study at 9 am Tuesday mornings. We’re taking July off, but we will resume in August with a study of a book entitled, “God Relents.” You are invited to participate.

In June, we wrapped up a study of the epistle of James; our guide was *Life Lessons from James* by Max Lucado. I really like the way Max Lucado has set up this Bible study series because it’s geared for group discussion, and we had some excellent discussions over the past few months.

The last chapter of James is about prayer. James writes:

¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (James 5:14-16).

And then, wanting to present an example of a righteous person, James turns to the prophet Elijah. Elijah is one of my favorite Bible characters. James writes that—

¹⁷ Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops (James 5:17-18).

Reflecting on that passage and the example of Elijah, Max Lucado floats this question: “*What kind of prayer makes great things happen?*”

Throughout the course of *Life Lessons from James*, Max Lucado asked 144 questions, and of all the questions he asked, that question bothered me: “*What kind of prayer makes great things happen?*”

When you look back at the text, you’ll find that you have about three different choices. The answer, according to verse 15, is: “The prayer offered in faith will make the sick persons well.”

The answer according to verse 16 is: “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”

Or the answer according to verse 17 is: “Elijah prayed earnestly.”

So which verse gives us the right answer? Maybe it’s all three: *Great things happen when a righteous person earnestly offers a prayer of faith.*

The problem with that—and the problem I had with Max Lucado’s question is that it suggests that we control the outcome by the prayer we offer. And when we don’t get the outcome for which we prayed, then we feel guilty. “Oh, no! I must not be righteous enough.” Or, “I must not have prayed earnestly enough.” Or, “I must not have had enough faith.” So what do we do then? We pray again, only this time we try to gin up our own righteousness. Or we somehow crank up our faith. Or we pray more earnestly by shouting louder to “pump up the volume.

Why? because we didn’t get the desired outcome for our prayers.

The problem is that we live in an outcome-based society. That’s part of what it means to live in a capitalist society: our economy is based on production and outcome. But that doesn’t mean capitalism applies to our prayer life. We cannot control outcome by the prayers we offer. We’re not God. We’re not in management; **we’re in sales**.

The problem is further compounded by the fact that sometimes—many times—we get crummy answers to our prayers. Case in point: The Syrophenician woman of Mark 7:24-30—

²⁴ Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵ In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. ²⁶ The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

²⁷ “First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

²⁸ “Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

²⁹ Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”

³⁰ She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

We forget that Christ came for the Jews first. But he always had in view the expanse of his kingdom from Jew to Gentile until all the world would be welcomed into the love and the grace of God. But at this point in the story, Christ’s concern was for the Jews first. However, the

Syrophoenician woman perceived that there was more in store, and she wanted that more now.

Sometimes we pray knowing there's more in store for us, but we ask for it now. Perhaps the best example of that is found in the story of the prodigal son who asked his father for his share of his future inheritance. Of course, we know what happened: the prodigal son squandered his inheritance on riotous living; that's a subject for another sermon.

There's really nothing wrong with the form of this Canaanite woman's prayer. She expresses humility. She calls Jesus "Lord." Her prayer expresses a concern for someone else. Nonetheless, she gets a crummy answer to her prayer. In fact, in Matthew's account of this story, we read that Jesus initially ignored her. Only after much persistence on the woman's part does Jesus finally say, "It's not right to take bread out of children's mouths and throw it to dogs."

Now that's a crummy answer to prayer! It sounds cruel and heartless. "Dog" was the derogatory term used by Jews to describe Gentiles. It sounds so uncharacteristic of Jesus—in fact, he runs the risk of sounding racist. If he had said that on mic over ESPN, he would have lost his job!

However, this story does come face-to-face with the reality that sometimes God doesn't answer prayer the way we had expected him to. This story invites us to ask ourselves, **What am I going to do when Jesus gives me a crummy answer to my prayer?**

The Syrophoenician woman provides us with a clue. She was convinced that even a crummy answer would be enough. "You're right, Lord," she shot back, "but even begging dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table."

In other words, "If crumbs are all you've got for me, then crumbs will have to do!" The woman knew that crumbs would be enough!

I'm not sure that I would have responded the way this Syrophoenician woman did. I might have been tempted to say, "Hey, God, other people get full meals at your table! Do you mean to tell me there's not enough to go around?"

This woman was not going to get caught in the trap of looking at the plates of others to see how her share measured up. She was not going to tell Jesus that she deserved better. No, if crumbs were all that were available, then she was convinced that even crumbs from God's table would be sufficient to heal her daughter.

I'll go a step further: this Syrophoenician woman had far more important problems in her life than comparing her crumbs to someone else's plate! She had to press in to God to see that her daughter was healed.

This woman refused to focus on the full plates of others: she knew the answer wasn't there. Rather, she chose to focus on the one person who held the answer to her prayers: the Lord Jesus.

That's significant because there are **two** things which are at work in this story. Unfortunately, we generally focus on the second to the point that we completely miss the first thing which occurred. And the first is far more important.

The second thing which happened is the Syrophoenician's daughter was healed. But the first thing which happened is that *the Syrophoenician woman connected with Jesus*.

And that's really the crux of matter: prayer is all about connecting with Jesus more than it is about get our wish list fulfilled.

Let me say that again: the primary purpose of prayer is to connect with Jesus and that is far more important than checking items off our wish list.

When we make Jesus the focus of our prayer, then we're not disappointed should our prayers not be answered because we've still met Jesus.

That doesn't mean we've lowered our standards. How can meeting Jesus be of lesser importance than *anything*?

That doesn't mean we're "throwing in the towel." Now let's be honest. When we reach that point of resignation, we often say, What's the worst that could happen if our prayer-wish list isn't fulfilled?

We often say that the worst that could happen is that we would die. But I have some problems with that assumption.

First of all, if we've met Jesus through prayer, then even if we die, we still have Jesus. And that's not at all bad.

So if prayer is more than presenting our wish list to God, then what lies at the heart of prayer?

In its purest, most simple form, prayer is the act of elevating ourselves from this earthly world—with all of its cares and concerns—into the spiritual realm.

And that leads us back to the question we've just raised: What is the worst thing that could happen? The worst that could happen is that we never encounter Christ at all. In any given situation, the worst that could happen is not that we would die. The worst thing that could happen is that we wouldn't press in to meet Christ in prayer. That's what the Syrophenician woman did—and she was blessed because of it. Like the Syrophenician woman, we can't let anything—even crummy answers to prayer—keep us from pressing in to meet Jesus.

Prayer is faith put into action, despite all obstacles—including obstacles like crummy answers to our prayer. Even our prayer-wish list can become an obstacle if we are more concerned with finding an answer to those prayers than we are with finding Christ. But if we make Jesus the focus of our prayer, then we'll get what we most need.

And sometimes, when we've encountered Christ, he fulfills our prayer-wish list. If we focus on Christ, we'll discover what Paul said, that he "is able to accomplish abundantly more than all we can ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20).