

## **“Why Do My Prayers Go Unanswered?”**

Date: Sept. 16, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Matthew 21:21-22

Themes: suffering, prayer, theodicy, God

Occasion: Why, series

In John 15:7 Jesus says, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you.” But anyone who has been a person of faith for any length of time will tell you that there are many times when they prayed and their prayers went unanswered.

And in fact, many people struggle with their faith because of God’s silence and apparent inability, or unwillingness to answer when they cry out in their time of greatest need. Many people can identify with what the psalmist said in Psalm 22:2: “O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but I find no rest.”

And yet other people will tell you stories of times when they have prayed for small things, like finding something they lost, or finding a parking spot and they found both – what was lost and the needed parking space.

How are we to understand God, when people pray for loved ones with cancer, only to have them die? Does God care more about lost keys and parking places than He does about our loved ones? The problem of unanswered prayer has caused many people to abandon their faith.

Disappointment is usually the result of unmet expectations. In the case of prayer, our expectations are shaped in part by Jesus’ words in a handful of passages like today’s Gospel lesson. “Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.” (Matthew 21:21-22)

At first glance, Jesus seems to be promising to do *whatever* we ask, provided we have faith. We read this and other things Jesus said like this, and we can’t help being confused when our prayers go unanswered.

When we pray for a friend who is dying, or for the safety of our children, or for a job to open up, we are left confused when our friend dies, we go for months without a job or something happens to our children.

Some Christians try to explain the so-called failure of these prayers by placing the blame on you. Some of the reasons offered are these: you are not seeking to please the Lord; you have unconfessed sin in your life; you pray with improper motives; or you lack faith.

Adam Hamilton, in his book *Why*, calls this list obscene. To say that God would have answered your prayers for your sick child or dying friend if only you had more fully sought to please God, or if you had confessed your sins is misguided and cruel.

There were many times when Jesus healed people. And guess what. It was never a prerequisite to confess one's sins before receiving the healing. For example, blind Bartimaeus was given back his eyesight, without an examination of his soul and a required confession of sins.

Now hear me, I'm not saying God is uninterested in us seeking a life centered in Him, no, exactly the opposite. Nor am I saying that confession of sin is not something that God's people need to do on a regular basis.

But to explain that God doesn't answer our prayers because we are not holy enough, well, it simply flies in the face of faith built upon grace, whose Savior gave His life for us, "while we were yet sinners," and which teaches that we are saved by God's grace and not by our works.

But what about faith? Of course faith is important in prayer. Faith is the act of trusting that God hears, that God cares, and that God is able to act as we have prayed. Our trust in God touches the heart of God.

But how much faith must we have in order for our prayers to be answered? In Mark 9:14-32, a father comes to Jesus begging him to heal

his son. Jesus replied, “All things can be done for the one who believes,” to which the man answered, “I believe; help my unbelief.” By his own admission, the man’s faith was incomplete, and it wasn’t where even he wanted it to be. Yet, Jesus healed his son.

Over in Matthew 17:20 Jesus observes his disciples’ lack of faith and he says to them, “Truly, I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Now, a mustard seed is smaller than a grain of salt. Jesus’ point is that the smallest impulse of faith will touch the heart of God.

So, if unfulfilled prayer is not the result of our failure to live for Christ, or unconfessed sin our lives, or inadequate faith, then what are we to make of the fact that our prayers sometimes go unanswered?

Perhaps the answer is not found in what we do wrong when we pray, but in our failure to understand what Jesus meant when he said we could have whatever we ask for if we pray with faith.

Adam Hamilton, in his book *Why*, suggests that we need to read Jesus differently. When Jesus spoke he often used a technique called *hyperbole*. Hyperbole is an overstatement or exaggeration to make a point. This was the language of prophets and itinerate teachers in first century.

For example, Jesus said, “If your right hand offends you, cut it off; likewise if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out.” He didn’t mean that we should do those things literally. He meant that we should take this particular sin seriously and do all that we can to avoid it.

Another time, he said it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom. Did he really mean it was possible for camels to go through needles, or was he saying we need to be very careful, lest money divert attention away from God.

If a girl is at the mall with her parents and she sees a boy she likes, she may say, "If he comes over here and talks to me, I think I'll die." Do the parents call the paramedics to be on standby? Of course not. Hyperbole is meant to get your attention. We need to take it seriously without taking it literally. We need to take Jesus seriously without always taking him literally.

When it comes to prayer, Jesus is calling us to take our prayer seriously, to trust God in all things. God cares about us and God is interested in everything that is a concern for us.

Jesus wants us to go to God with our burdens. Jesus wants us to be bold when we pray. Jesus wants us to trust God when we pray. But hear this, Jesus is NOT promising that we will get everything we ask for. Prayer is not a magical formula we use to make our lives easier.

So, what is the purpose of prayer? Why bother praying anyway? Perhaps the real purpose of prayer is not about changing God's mind about how things are going, but instead prayer is intended to change us. Prayer is not a vending machine, where we put in a dollar's worth of prayer and out comes the desired product.

Prayer is the wonderful gift that God has given us so that we can be in relationship with Him. You see, God wants more from us than simply our saying, "I believe in God." God seeks communion with us. God seeks intimacy with us. God wants us to come and sit on his lap and tell him about all the things that are going on in our lives. Not because God doesn't already know, but because God delights in his children.

Something amazing happens when we trust our lives to God's care: Our thinking changes; our expectations change; I think even our body chemistry is changed. And so, I do believe that prayer can produce results.

But hear me people of God, the way God *usually* answers prayers is through other people.

I've seen and I've heard about miracles. I know that God sometimes intervenes miraculously. But more often than not God uses ordinary people like you and me to answer other people's prayers: To respond with compassion and concern, to bring medical care to those who need it. God uses doctors and nurses and medicine to heal people. In fact that is the usual way that God heals people.

"But it's' so disappointing to pray and not get the results that I want," we say to ourselves. There are at least two striking examples in the New Testament when God did not answer people's prayers in the way they wanted. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed that if it was possible, "let this cup pass from me." It did not and he suffered the pain of the cross.

Paul prayed three times to have an affliction removed from him. God never did remove the affliction, whatever it was, we don't know. But God said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you." Paul discovered God's grace was enough and that God's power was perfected in Paul's weakness.

Jesus concluded his prayer in the Garden, "Not my will, but yours be done." In that simple phrase we find the perfect prayer. Surrendering our life to God and trusting that no matter what happens, God will not abandon you, trusting that it will be well with your soul, no matter what happens to the body.

Beloved, trust in God with all of your heart and soul. Like a child, climb into the lap of your Heavenly Parent. God is waiting to hear from you. Life *is* difficult and not all of our prayers are answered to our satisfaction. But God is good, all the time. God is love. God loves you. Never forget it.

Amen.

Let us close with the opening prayer from the bulletin this morning:

“God, you are in everything. You are above everything. You know everything. You are orchestrating everything. All control is yours. Thank you that you want to take care of me. Thank you that you love me. You withhold no good thing from me. Thank you that I can trust you. Not with half my heart, but with my whole heart. Thank you that you know my way, even when it looks not like “my way.” Grant me greater faith to trust you by faith. Stand closer to me so I can dwell in your love. If I move with you, I won’t depart from you. Teach me God in all your ways. I am open and willing to what you want to do in me. I need you, God. Amen.”

~ Kelly Balarie

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Why? Making Sense of God’s Will*, by Adam Hamilton. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018, pp. 31-54.