

"DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER?"

PREACHED: February 17, 1957
PARK AVENUE METHODIST CHURCH
TEXT: Luke 11:9

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Luke 11:9

A select group of architects representing different countries was in charge of the interior decorations of the United Nations Building. To this group of experts there came suggestions from all corners of the earth. Many of the suggestions that came to them were concerned with the Prayer Room in the United Nations. For instance, there was one man who had worked out an art motif which he claimed would liberate mankind from:

"War.....the boom-bust cycle.....overdrug and overalcoholic usages.....automobile accidents, industrial accidents and mental disease....."

Such faulty ideas of the purpose of prayer are quite frequent. Prayer cannot be thought of as a magic cure for the human ills that beset us. The answer to the question, DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER depends on how we think of God. A God who may be coaxed into breaking his own laws to satisfy our selfish whims and desires is not the God that the Christians worship. As Albert Day expresses it:

"If you mean that God is....the manager of a Celestial Lost and Found Bureau....or if you think of God as the President of an Eternal Insurance Company guaranteeing policy holders against all loss by fire, lightning, tornado, earthquake, theft, changes in the weather, accident, sickness, bad guesses on Wall Street.. Or if you think of God as a Sleepless Nurse whose business it is to cater to insomniacs and hypochondriacs, delivering them from the necessity of using their brains and from all possibility of mistake.....if you think of God in such terms, then the only answer to the question, "Does God Answer Prayer" is...NO!"

Jesus, however, did not think of God in such terms. In his story of the unexpected midnight guest, he tells us of a God who does answer prayer.

In the parable, we read of a man who is greatly embarrassed. A traveling friend has come to his house late at night, and custom requires that he serve something to this unexpected friend. But he doesn't have a thing in the house. He's upset. His first impulse is to go next door to his neighbor's house. He knocks on his door. He disturbs him and awakens him from a sound sleep. The neighbor is rather slow to act. The knocking on the door continues. The man is persistent. He needs a loaf of bread. Finally the neighbor gives in and gets up. He helps the man by giving him a loaf of bread. It's a beautiful story. Jesus is not trying to give us a definition of prayer or show us what God is like. Actually the meaning of the parable rests in the lesson that Jesus draws from it.....

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock and it shall be opened to you....."

A closer look at this parable will help us to find answers to the question: DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER?

FIRST: GOD ANSWERS OUR PRAYERS WHEN THE VOICE OUR DEEPEST NEEDS IN KEEPING WITH THE WILL OF GOD!

The embarrassed host had a real need that he himself could not meet. His need was not a selfish one. No great calamity was involved. It wasn't a matter of life and death. He didn't want to disturb his neighbor. He simply wanted to do the right thing for the visitor, who probably had been kind to him on a previous occasion. In the spirit of friendship, he turned to his neighbor for help. His need....his appeal was natural. It was genuine and within the realm of possibility.

Here we get an insight into the kind of prayer that God does answer. Many of our prayers go unanswered because we pray for things that are impossible, superficial or unworthy. The Apostle Paul said:

"I will pray in the Spirit, but I will pray with my mind....."

In other words, our prayers should be intelligent as well as spiritual.

"Jesus said: 'Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do.....'"

He means that our prayers should be in accord with his nature. This means that our prayers should be in accord with the will of God. In the text we read:

"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him....."

That is to say, that God sends the Holy Spirit, the spirit of divine understanding to those who ask for it. God does answer our prayers at the point of our deepest need. These needs may be more fundamental than we suspect, and his answers may be more profound than we realize.

God's universe has laws - physical, moral, and social. But within the framework of that universe man finds an ally in God through prayer. God never fails to meet our deepest needs. What are some of these needs?

- More than heavenly handouts, we need insight from above.
- More than easy paths, we need growth through struggle.
- More than the absence of temptation, we need moral courage.
- More than answers to our questions, we need honesty and understanding.
- More than things, we need poise and power and patience.

Things such as these, God does give to us in answer to our prayers, no matter what the situation.

One cold winter night during the Civil War, a stranger came to the parsonage home of Henry Ward Beecher in Brooklyn. It was late at night, and Mrs. Beecher went to the door to see who was knocking. She found a tall stranger, muffled to the eyes who asked to see the great preacher. He refused to give his name, and since her husband's life had been threatened, she refused to admit him to their living room. She returned upstairs and told her husband.

Henry Ward Beecher never knew fear. He came down at once to talk to the rather mysterious stranger. A few minutes later, Mrs. Beecher heard her husband admit him, and then she heard her husband's voice raised in earnest prayer. An hour later, Henry Ward Beecher rejoined his wife, and told her that the muffled stranger was none other than Abraham Lincoln.

Jesus is urging us to make our wants known to God. The burdens of life weigh heavily upon us. When we turn to God in prayer, our minds become clarified, our lives become unified, and our weaknesses are overcome.

God does answer our prayers when they voice our very deepest needs, and when those needs are in keeping with his will!

SECOND: GOD ANSWERS OUR PRAYERS, WHEN THEY ARE SINCERE!

The man in the parable who was caught without food to serve his friend, did something about it! He didn't waste time making up excuses. He put feet under his desires. He got out of bed and hustled next door to borrow a loaf of bread. He had a need. BUT HE ALSO HAD A CONCERN TO FILL THAT NEED! And this is important.....we get an insight into another kind of prayer that God can answer.

This needs to be said - THAT OUR SINCEREITY IN PRAYER IS FOUND IN OUR WILLINGNESS TO BACK UP OUR PRAYERS WITH OUR BEST THOUGHT, OUR TIME, OUR ENERGY, AND OUR MONEY! Many of our prayers go unanswered simply because we don't want them answered bad enough to do anything about it.

To pray is not only to desire something in our lives. It is also to set ourselves to the task of satisfying that desire. John Haynes Holmes said:

"PRAYER IS ATTENTION UNFOLDING INTO INTENTION"

Prayer is:

PURPOSE - RESOLUTION - DEDICATION - DETERMINATION.

All of this brings us face to face with the spiritual discovery, that if our prayers are to be answered, then we must help to answer them ourselves!

This is not limiting the power of God. God can do things far beyond our feeble efforts or abilities. Many miracles of prayer have been recorded in the past. What I wish to emphasize here is this - that God works through the laws that he himself has set up. If he didn't we would be living in a topsy-turvy universe rather than an orderly one. It is as we discover and understand these laws that we help God answer our own prayers.

"Ask, and it shall be given you. Seek and ye shall find. Knock, and it shall be opened unto you....."

In other words, whatever we pray for we get. Whatever we want badly enough to go out and work at and give ourselves to, we usually attain. We must be honest with our prayer.....

If we want to be healthy, we must seek health by obeying the rules.....

If we want our families to be Christian, we must work at it. We can't set a bad example before our children and then expect God to answer our prayers to make them good.

We can't live shallow, selfish, mean lives, and then pray to God for peace of mind.

We must be honest with ourselves and with God. It takes struggle and inner searching. It calls for work and sacrifice. It requires an open

mind and a willing heart. It is very important that we be careful about the things we pray for. The answers to our prayers are often right before our eyes if we have the sincerity and energy to look for them.

We pray for a rich and abundant life. We pray for peace of mind. We pray for happiness. We pray for a better world. The answers to our prayers depend on how badly we want these prayers answered. God does answer our prayers when they are sincere!

THIRD: GOD ANSWERS OUR PRAYERS WHEN THEY ARE PERSISTENT.

The neighbor to whom the man at midnight went for bread was very slow in responding. But the man persisted. He knocked on the door. He called out loudly. He insisted on help. Finally he got what he wanted. HERE THEN is another important insight. Jesus is suggesting that God responds to our prayers when they are persistent.

This does not mean that God is reluctant to please us, and that he has to be begged to grant us our wishes. It means rather that God is concerned with our over-all concern for his will and way. It does not mean that God is a heavenly Santa Claus handing out toys to clamoring children. It means rather that God is interested in our total attitudes and direction of life as well as our day to day needs. Sometimes it may seem that God is deaf to our petitions. ~~But he knows better than we do what we need.~~ He has a way of ignoring our casual petty requests in favor of long term commitments.

Paderewski said that if he stopped practicing on the piano for a single day he could notice the difference. If he stopped for two days his family knew it. If he stopped for a week, his public knew it. Discipline, perseverance, and persistence are all needed. These are essential ~~to acquiring a meaningful life of prayer.~~ A person cannot experience success in prayer by giving only a few hurried minutes to it each day.

When a young man said to his minister that he wished prayer meant as much to him as it had to his mother, the minister asked, "How long has she been praying?" He replied, "Every day for forty years." "Keep on praying for the same number of years" replied the minister, "and prayer will produce the same results in your life".

In cultivating a life with prayer, we are cultivating a mind that is open to the will of God. It is a life long undertaking. As we practice the command to "Wait upon the Lord", we find our prayers changed and purified. Persistent prayers are heard.

There's a story of a little girl who prayed very hard and long for a pony on her birthday. Her brother who was a few years older and well into skepticism, laughed at her. But the little girl held firm. "God will answer my prayers", she said.

The birthday came, and there was no pony. The brother teased her and said, "And you thought God was going to answer your prayers....."

The little girl had tears in her eyes, and said in a defiant tone, "God did answer my prayers". "He said NO".

Perhaps she showed some real insight at this point. She was wiser than she knew, because God is wiser than we are. If God granted all our requests, we would be spoiled children, and the world would be chaotic. If our ways are committed to him, we can trust his wisdom, even though we may not always understand his reasons.

~~The point is that persistent prayer conditions us to discover the will of God for our lives.~~ When we are on God's side, then nothing is impossible. This is no mere matter of religious mysticism. Our is not a rigid, fixed mechanistic order. It is a spiritual universe.....alive with powerful, unseen forces far beyond our understanding. All of this is borne out by the modern science of physics, medicine and psychology.

All of this is to say that there are spiritual, supernatural, divine powers in our world which we may tap as we continually seek to put ourselves in harmony with God. When prayer becomes a central and dominating part of life, it does change things.

WE SHOULD NOT REFUSE

WHY

~~Why should we refuse~~ to use it just because we don't know ~~how~~ it all works. Marconi, the inventor of the wireless, told a friend one time that there was only one thing he did not understand about radio - WHY IT WORKS. So it is that countless people, while not knowing how it works, have nevertheless found through prayer the answers to the deepest problems of life.

DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER?

He does:

When our prayers voice our deepest needs in keeping with His will.

When our prayers are sincere.

When ~~our~~ prayers are persistent.

If radio's slim fingers can pluck a melody
From night - and toss it over a continent or sea;
If the petalled white notes of a violin
Are blown across the mountains or the city's din;
If songs, like crimson roses, are culled from thin blue
air -
Why should mortals wonder if God hears prayer?

LET US PRAY:

Dear Father, bring us closer to Thee through prayer. Help us to understand that there is no easy way to secure any of the great blessings of life. With earnest spirits and persistent minds may WE ASK - AND SEEK - AND KNOCK...so that the door of spiritual truth may be opened unto us. Give to us the faith that we may see that prayer is one of the ways in which Thou dost work in the lives of men and in the world.

Amen.