

2016

# Why Prayers Go Unanswered



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BCUMC/CCUMC/TCUMC  
7/24/2016

A teacher and pastor I know tells of the time when he was helping to paint his neighbors' house. The neighbors had a little black dog that had a ritual of going to the back door and barking and barking until someone finally got the message and let him out.

One day, he was painting the outside of the house when no one was home. The little dog, who was inside the house, took up his station at the back door and he barked and he barked all day long. The sad thing was that it never dawned on his little brain that all his barking was totally useless -- no one was home to hear!!

How many of you feel like that dog? You've prayed and prayed for something and there seems to be no answer – it seems like there's no one home! And maybe you're tuning in today because you have this nagging wonder why your prayers are going unanswered.

You are not alone! Throughout scripture, we see instances of followers of God who cried out and did not seem to have their prayers answered. The two best examples are Jesus and Paul. Remember, Jesus begged for God to "take this cup from me," to no avail. And the Apostle Paul begged God to take away "the thorn in his flesh," but God never did. Obviously, their prayers weren't answered – at least, not to their satisfaction.

We can take comfort from the fact that Paul and even Jesus went through times of passionate prayers, pleading for God to do something, while God never complied with their requests. We aren't alone.

But maybe you're thinking, "Wait a second, didn't Jesus just tell us that if we ask, seek, and knock, we will get an answer?" Yes. That's what he said, and his words are true. But first, we have to understand what prayer is before we can understand the truth and power of Jesus' words. Prayer is one of the most misunderstood and misused practices of our faith. And like the little black dog, 'til we understand the nature of prayer and how God answers prayer, all of our barking and praying will ultimately leave us frustrated. The truth is, our wondering about unanswered prayer often stems from a misunderstanding of what prayer is.

For a lot of people, prayer seems to be an exercise in magic. There's no shortage of books out there to support that. People believe that if they say the right phrases or have the proper technique, they can persuade God to answer their prayers.

There's an old story of a monk who was bothered by mice playing around him when he prayed. So he got a cat and kept it in his prayer room to scare the mice away. But he never explained to his disciples why he had the cat. So one day, when the monk

walked down the halls of the monastery he noticed that each of his disciples had a cat in their prayer room. After seeing the monk with a cat, they thought having a cat was the secret to powerful praying.

This could be a parable for many Christians today. They believe they have to do something special in order for God to hear them and have their prayers answered. So, you see people running here and there to learn the latest prayer gimmicks from self-proclaimed spiritual gurus.

But prayer is not a magic lamp. It's not presenting some kind of letter to Santa with a list of things we want. Prayer is an intimate communication with the Creator. But it's as natural as turning around and talking to a friend. And more importantly, it's being quiet – being still -- and listening to God; being transformed by what God is communicating to you. Prayer is vital; how can we say we're in a relationship with God if we don't talk with God?

Jesus taught us this. Just read through the gospel of Luke, and you'll find Jesus praying consistently at every turn in his life. He prays as he senses God's call on his life; He prays before choosing his disciples; He prays as he serves and heals people; He prays as he feels the demands and pressures of his ministry; He prays as he faces the cross; He prays on the cross as he finishes his work. Jesus is continually praying. You could say that prayer for him was as vital as taking his next breath. He knew that in order to live out the life that God called him to live, he needed to be continually connected to God in prayer; God was the source of his power.

It's out of his own consistent prayer life that Jesus gives this teaching in today's reading. The disciples noticed Jesus praying all the time, and they finally get a clue and say, "Teach us to pray." They observe that prayer is a vital practice for Jesus, and they want to learn how to do it. And what follows is a profound lesson from Jesus about prayer. And it's not a lesson about technique. It's not a lesson in phrasing. It's not a lesson in how to sway God. It's a lesson in persistence.

Through the story of the man banging on the door all night, and the repeated words, ask, seek, and knock, Jesus tells us that effective prayer is consistent prayer. Effective prayer is a continual connection to God. And if you look close at today's reading you'll notice Jesus telling us that effective prayer is not about what we want from God, but what we receive from God. There is a big difference! Because, often, what we want from God, and what we receive from God, are two different things.

Maybe this changes your wondering about your unanswered prayers. Maybe God has answered you and you just don't like the answer. Someone once said that God

answers prayer in one of four ways: Yes, No, Wait, and Are you Kidding? This is somewhat glib, but there is some truth to it. There've been times in my own life when I prayed and prayed for God to give me something, and my prayer was never answered, or so I thought. I realize that what I wanted was not the right thing for me. That event always reminds me of the Garth Brooks song, "*Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayer.*"

There've been other times when God seemed to know that I wasn't ready for the answer to a prayer, or the timing wasn't right, and God made me wait. God's time not mine, right?

We need to keep in mind that the implication of Jesus' words today is that God always answers prayer. Of course, God may not give us the answer we want when we want it, but God always answers. And God will always answer with our best interest at heart. Jesus said, "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?" This is a great promise that should encourage us to pray more!

But notice what Jesus doesn't say. He doesn't say, "How much more will the heavenly Father give you what you want when you ask for it?" He says that those who ask him will be given the Holy Spirit. This means that when we pray, God gives us what we need to be empowered and to grow.

when I was a kid I used to play with the pew pencils in church. And they always had the words "Prayer Changes Things" inscribed on them. As I've grown in my faith, I've learned that prayer does "change things," but it's not God who does the changing. It's me.

There's a saying that gets to the root of it, "Prayer doesn't give us what we want, it helps us want what we need." How true. You see, prayer isn't designed to change or persuade God; it's designed by God to change us! Prayer is a spiritual discipline through which we are formed into disciples of Jesus Christ.

In his classic book, *The Meaning of Prayer*, the great preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, puts it this way: Some things God cannot give to a person until he or she has prepared and proved his or her spirit by persistent prayer. Such praying cleans the house and the windows, hangs the curtains, sets the table, opens the door, until God says, "Ok! The House is ready. Now the guest may enter."

I believe this is what Jesus is driving at in our Scripture reading for today. When we ask long enough, seek hard enough, knock loud enough, and pray persistently enough, something happens inside of us. The discipline of prayer begins to awaken us to the Holy

Spirit inside of us, and our motives and desires begin to change – to line up with God’s desires and motives. It’s like the persistence of our praying becomes the axe that breaks up the iceberg of our souls. Then the power and wisdom of God can break in and we begin to be formed by the will of God.

18<sup>th</sup> century deist and freethinker, Peter Annet, once said that those who pray are like sailors who have cast anchor on a rock. As they pull on the anchor, they imagine they’re pulling the rock to themselves, when they’re really pulling themselves to the rock.

That’s what persistent prayer does. It pulls us closer to the Rock, the Almighty God. And as we move closer to God in prayer, we find we don’t get what we want from God. We get something better: we get what we need. We get what God wants. We discover that as we move closer to the Rock, we begin to want what God want, so that what we ask for, knock for, and seek after, becomes what God desperately wants to give to us. Then the truth of Jesus' words come to life, and we truly receive what we pray for. It’s a sacred surprise.

Are you still wondering about your unanswered prayers? God has an answer for you. But whatever your request, know this: God's answer will always involve your heart being changed by God’s love, and not the other way around.

A prayer by John Greenleaf Whittier:

*Drop thy still dews of quietness,  
Till all our strivings cease;*

*Take from our souls the strain and stress,  
And let our ordered lives confess  
Thy beauty of Thy peace.*

*Breathe through the hearts of our desire  
Thy coolness and Thy balm;  
Let sense be numb, let flesh retire;  
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,  
O still, small voice of calm!*

Amen.