



“Does God Answer Our Prayers?”

Matthew 7:7-11; Matthew 17:14-20 (NRSV)

This week, we continue our six-week series on prayer: A life of Prayer. Today, we consider whether God truly answers our prayers.

Are we naïve?

Today’s scripture passages challenge us to avoid naïve and simplistic readings of the Bible. On the surface, in both passages Jesus’ seems to say that all we need to do is ask with sufficient faith and God will give us anything we ask for. All we need do is name it and we can claim it. Little wonder that many Christians suspect that somehow God does not really answer our prayers, or at least in any meaningful sense. After all, how many of us have gotten everything we asked for, no matter how hard we prayed or how deep we thought our faith to be?

However, in these passages Jesus is **not** suggesting that God will give us anything we want so long as we pray hard enough. Let us look at each passage in greater depth.

Ask...search...knock

The first passage is from the Sermon on the Mount. In the sermon, Matthew has placed the Lord’s Prayer at its very center. Thus, it is no surprise that after giving instructions about living a life of discipleship, Jesus returns to the subject of prayer.

At first glance, Jesus is teaching some sort of three-step process to prayer: we ask, then we search, and then we knock. **But Jesus is not.** All three are merely standard Jewish expressions for prayer (as in ‘knocking on the doors of mercy’). All three expressions point us toward prayer that is a journey, a quest, an expectation. Jesus is encouraging us to go to God in prayer, expecting God to listen and expecting God to answer. To help us grasp his teaching, Jesus uses the analogy of a parent and child. What sort of mother would hand her daughter a stone when she asked for a sandwich? If human, sinful parents can listen and respond in love to their children’s wishes, how much more must our loving God listen and respond to the desires of his children.

In this passage, Jesus is not portraying God as holding some open checkbook ready to give us whatever we want. After all, what responsible parent would do such a thing? Rather, Jesus wants us to understand that prayer is about a relationship with God and he uses the analogy of parent and child to put our prayers within the context of love.

All is possible with God

Our second story is of an exorcism. Though Jesus had given his disciples the authority to cast out demons (Matthew 10:1), they cannot, and they want to know why! A man, whose son suffers from epilepsy, has brought

A Prayer of St. Augustine

“Lord, I seek you with all my heart, with all the strength you have given me. I long to understand that which I believe.

You are my only hope; please listen to me. Do not let my weariness lessen my desire to find you, to see your face.

You created me in order to find you; you gave me strength to seek you. My strength and my weakness are in your hands; preserve my strength and help my weakness. Where you have already opened the door, let me come in; where it is shut, open at my knocking.

Let me always remember you, love you, meditate upon you, and pray to you, until you restore me to your perfect pattern.”

One of the most influential Christian theologians, Augustine (AD 354 - 430) became a Christian when he was 32 years old, having lived a life of great excess. For 35 years, he devoted his enormous abilities to the defense of the faith. His autobiographical Confessions is still widely read and is one of the classic expressions of Christian spirituality. Augustine was a bishop in Hippo, a city in North Africa.

from the Confessions

“There is a delight which is given not to the wicked (Isaiah 48:22), but to those who worship you for no reward save the joy that you yourself are to them. That is the authentic happy life, to set one’s joy on you, grounded in you and caused by you. That is the real thing and there is no other. Those who think that the happy life is found elsewhere, pursue another joy and not the true one.

Late have I loved you . . . You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.”

Augustine’s Confessions is written as an extended prayer. Reading it is like listening in on the most intimate of conversations, as Augustine’s heart seeks its true home.

the boy to the disciples so that they can cure him. When they fail, the man turns to Jesus seeking help. Annoyed and frustrated, Jesus lashes out at the crowd around him and, by extension, all of Israel. How long, he cries, must he put up with this “faithless and perverse generation.” The people seem completely unwilling to trust and to follow Jesus. Even his own disciples disappoint him. Their faith, their trust in Jesus, is simply “too little.” What faith they have may be genuine, but it is ineffective, so much so that they cannot do what Jesus told them to do. Their faith must grow into a larger faith, grounded in a deep trust of their master and teacher.

But as he would so often do, Jesus immediately offers a perspective that contrasts with “little faith.” If the disciples have faith only so large as a mustard seed,¹ they could move a mountain – and presumably exorcise a demon. Here, it seems as if Jesus means to say that even the tiniest amount of faith is sufficient for all things. Douglas Hare notes that we do not have to resolve these two perspectives.² There is truth in each and each serve to correct and balance the other. Jesus is pushing his disciples toward greater reliance upon and trust in God. They can do great things for God only when they expect great things from God.

So...does God answer prayer?

Of course!! What sort of loving father ignores his children? In these passages, Jesus teaches his disciples (that includes us!) that we can rely on God in all things. Now, we may not always get the answer to our prayers that we want nor when we want it. After all, the parent often knows better than the child what is best for the child. In the same way, God knows our hearts and needs better than we do. With boldness, the psalmist writes “But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer”

(Psalm 66:19). The only question for us is whether we will trust God. Will we trust that he listens and answers, even when it seems to us that he does not?

Daily Bible Readings

(A selection of prayers from the Old and New Testaments)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday	1 Samuel 1:1-2:10	Hannah prays for a son and God answers
Tuesday	Psalm 66	“But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer”
Wednesday	2 Corinthians 1:3-11	The blessings of God. In v. 11, Paul refers to the answering of prayers offered up by many.
Thursday	1 John 3:18-24	We can be bold in our prayers because we are obedient. Obedience to God (loving God and others!) is much more a part of the Christian life than we sometimes imagine!
Friday	1 John 5:13-17	Again – John writes that we can be bold in our asking. (Note: John is vague about ‘mortal’ sins. He is probably referring to an outright denial of Jesus.)

¹ Jesus uses hyperbole here to make his point, contrasting one of the tiniest of all seeds, the mustard seed, with the largest physical object anyone could imagine, a mountain.

² from Hare’s commentary on Matthew in the *Interpretation* series, John Knox Press, 1993.