

Prayer: Its Problems and Possibilities

4. Prayer and Expectation

Matthew 9:27-31

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We return this morning to the subject of prayer as we continue our series of sermons over Lent. Thus far I said in our introduction to the series that an active and vital life of prayer, despite our continuing questions and our often-felt inadequacies, is essential if our life of faith if that faith is to be primarily a relationship rather than a ritual or a religion. Prayer is part of the Christian's spiritual DNA as it were. I went on to say the following Sunday that the first purpose of prayer is to know God, not to get the things that we desire for ourselves or others or and not persuade the Lord to govern the universe in ways we deem best.

In our third treatment of prayer I discussed the importance of "seeking God's face," that is to say, recognizing prayer as the discipline for consciously placing ourselves in God's presence and opening our hearts as to God's companionship in all the varied circumstances and seasons of life. Prayer is far more than the words we speak. Prayer is "keeping company" with our Creator, our Redeemer and our Sustainer as one old definition of prayer contends. Words can be spoken or not. But it's the companionship and not just the conversation that matters.

As we continue to look at some of the problems and possibilities with regard to prayer, let me ask you this morning: What do you really expect when you pray? Do you really expect God will hear you? Do you expect God in some way to respond? Do you expect that your prayer will make any discernable difference in what occurs? Or is all this praying we do in public and in private just a part of some religious routine? Unfortunately, the blatant truth is that often we really don't entertain any realistic hopes that our prayers will make a difference. We pray because we are told to pray, or we are expected to pray or promised to pray but in point of fact we really do not expect much as a result.

I cannot tell you how often I have encountered these low expectations when it comes to prayer. Here is a typical example: A person is chronically ill, perhaps even terminally ill, and a friend will say with the best of intentions, "Is there anything at all I can do for you?" "Well, you can pray for us," and then the person responds with the best of intentions, "Oh of course I'll pray but I am being serious – I really do want to do something." Does this not suggest that prayer is not really doing something? It's just a perfunctory exercise, a courtesy or a thoughtful

gesture. Oh, I know, people want or need to do something physical or concrete to show their love, but I want to assure them that in addition to baking a cake or casserole or running an errand for us prayer really is doing something that helps regardless of whether it's physical or visible.

What is true of us as individuals when it comes to low expectations is often true of us in corporate worship as well. Each week we pray for world peace, for racial justice, for the plight of the hungry and the homeless. We pray for troubled families, ailing and grieving friends, yet we do so on occasion with such dispassionate indifference that an observer might well conclude that this is simply empty rhetoric or mindless ritual with no sense of confidence or expectation behind the prayers.

There are even instances of low expectation in the scriptures as well. In *Acts 12* we find such a story. If it were not so typical and a part of such a tragic story of the persecution of the church it would actually be rather humorous. Does anyone remember who Rhoda was in the Bible because it involves this young girl? *Acts 12* opens telling how King Herod, who earlier had beheaded John the Baptist, had initiated a bloody persecution of the followers of Christ as the gospel began to move out into the Roman world. James, the brother of John, had already been slain by the sword and Peter had been seized and placed in prison under heavy guard. This was done we are told in order to pacify the Jews of Jerusalem during Passover who so resented in the inroads the followers of Christ were making among the populace. The plan was to put Peter on trial after the Passover festival had concluded. Verse five then reports: "While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him."

Next Luke goes on to report that on the night prior to the beginning of the trial, while Peter is bound by chains and sleeping between two soldiers in his prison cell, an angel of the Lord appears in the cell and awakens Peter. The chains binding Peter fall off and the angel leads him past the sleeping guards out of the prison and through the iron gates that miraculously open. Peter himself who had been sleeping cannot believe what is happening and assumes that he must be having a vision. The angel proceeds to lead Peter into the city and as suddenly as he had arrived now then mysteriously disappears. Peter then makes his way to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many followers of Christ are inside praying for Peter. A little servant girl names Rhoda comes to answer the door as Peter knocks on it and she recognizes Peter's voice outside. She is ecstatic and runs back to announce to those fervently praying that Peter is actually standing outside even now. And how does the praying church respond to this news? According to verse 15 they say to Rhoda: "You are out of your mind. It must be his angel." And they were *astonished* (NIV) or *amazed* (NRSV). And why were they?

Clearly these people in prayer were not expecting much for all their praying, were they? Yet God heard and responded in spite of that. So be careful what you pray for because God may just answer your prayer and do so in spite of your doubts and disbeliefs.

So, I ask you again, what do you really expect when you pray? I have not been able to discern whether it is fact or fantasy, but I was sent a few years ago an interesting account of a story from the small town of Mount Vernon, Texas. It seems that a Mr. Drummond had begun construction of a new building he intended for a tavern. The local Baptist church started a petition and a prayer campaign to stop the opening of Mr. Drummond's bar. Work progressed right up until the week before the planned opening when lightning struck the bar and burned it to the ground. The church folks were apparently rather smug and pleased until Mr. Drummond decided to sue the church on the grounds that it was ultimately responsible for the destruction of his building, either through direct or indirect actions. The church of course denied all responsibility or any connection to the building's destruction in its reply to the court. As the case made its way into court and the judge was looking over the paperwork he commented: "I don't know how I'm going to decide this, but it appears from the paperwork that we have a bar owner who believes in the power of prayer and an entire congregation that doesn't."

So, do you expect anything to happen when you pray? Or, are you just going through the motions?

In our gospel lesson today two blind men come before Jesus seeking mercy and healing. Then Jesus asks them explicitly, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They respond, "Yes, Lord" and Jesus proceeds to touch their eyes and says, "according to your faith let it be done to you." And their eyes are opened.

Obviously, Jesus considers our expectations, our confidence, and our assurance of faith important aspects of prayer. Whether God does what we ask is another matter but at a minimum we should trust that God is able to do whatever we ask. We ask believing anything can be done by our God even though we recognize that we are not privy to God's ultimate plans and purposes. You see, God cannot see our needs and our perceived problems from the same perspective that we do. Unlike our limited vision, God can see and even determine how our problems and challenges can be turned into benefits and blessings.

In the case of these two blind men God must have had a purpose in mind behind their healing. But does God restore the sight of every blind person who prays in faith? No. The world and the church have been incredibly blessed by the gifts and insights of the visually impaired whose perceived disabilities often equipped them to see and to produce what sighted people could not. Would Fanny Crosby have written over 8,000 beloved gospel hymns, one of which

we will use this morning, had she not been born blind? I rather doubt it, but this much I know for sure: God is able to do things far beyond anything we can see or even imagine.

This idea of God seeing our lives from a different perspective came to my mind several years ago when Tita and I were out in Colorado to visit our daughter and her husband for a few days. After church on Sunday morning we decided to go out to Red Rocks west of Denver and climb a mountain. I had to stop about three-fourths of the way up the mountain due to exhaustion in that high altitude. The other three continued to the top and it was an hour or so before they made their way back down to where I was. But I thoroughly enjoyed my time alone on that mountain side for I had a view for miles and miles beyond and below. It became a prayer time for me and I was conscious of being in God's presence and anxious to listen and learn from this vista. I watched through binoculars as cars and motorcycles curved around mountain passes, as hikers traveled different trails up the mountain, as deer grazed below me unconscious that they were being watched. I knew better than some of these objects I was observing what they were about to encounter and experience, only because I could see ahead of them what lay around the bend or what was coming behind them. The motorcycle below me racing around slower vehicles had no awareness that there was a bus blocking the road about a half mile ahead, or that a state trooper with blue lights flashing was giving out speeding tickets further down the pass. Nor could the man on the motorcycle see the spring shower approaching in the distance from the Denver skyline. It must be like this for God, I thought to myself. While we can see only what is occurring in the present moment, God can see before and after and must govern our lives and the life of the world from a far greater and grander vantage point. The tour bus blocking the motorcycle's path and the slow-moving cars, all of which were a frustration for a biker may well have been saving him from a speeding ticket or even a tragic accident.

So, when you pray, pray with expectation pray with the confidence that God can and very well may do whatever you ask. And pray with the trust and the faith that God also knows what is best for us and for others, even though we may not because our vision is limited, our concerns are so restricted, and our knowledge is so incomplete.

Now I know that there may be some here today who will think that I have not gone far enough with the necessity and the power of faith and expectation when it comes to prayer. Some Christians believe passionately that if our faith were only strong enough and our confidence unshakable enough then God will answer any prayer just as we pray it. Name it and claim it they often say! And they might well quote me a passage such as *Mark 11:22f* where Jesus tells his disciples: "Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So, I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

Now my take on this passage is that Jesus is exaggerating a point here to underscore the importance of a principal that our faith does play a role in effective praying. But his language is clearly hyperbole, an exaggeration that is not to be taken literally. To take this word of Jesus literally is to make of prayer a talisman, a magic wand. It is also to put man in the position of determining how our sovereign God governs the universe as well as our individual lives.

Furthermore, if we take this word of Jesus literally we must also assume that no one has ever had sufficient faith to ensure a certain outcome from all their praying – not the Apostle Paul, who prayed three times in faith that his “thorn in the flesh” (*2 Cor. 12:28*) might be removed. And not even Jesus, who prayed through blood, sweat and tears that he might be spared the suffering of the cross. In spite of his fervent prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane the cup of suffering was not taken from him.

So, you see, it is one thing to believe that God is capable of doing what we ask, but it is quite another to conclude that simply by our praying we can make God do as we ask if only our faith and confidence, our sincerity and persistence are strong enough.

Now I do not know if this approach to prayer and expectation helps you or further frustrates you in your life of prayer. I know full well that we live in a scientific age and people today expect a verifiable connection between cause and effect. Ever since the Enlightenment people have placed their faith in the power of the human mind and we have tried to control nature and have concluded that anything that cannot be understood, explained, and even proved is not to be taken seriously. And to be sure, I cannot prove anything I have said this morning. It is a statement of faith. Try as we may we will never unravel the mysteries of prayer and so far, as I am concerned this is as it should be. Faith is after all “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (*Hebrews 11:1*)

In conclusion, therefore, I invite you to pray in faith, to pray believing that God can do anything and even more than we can ask or imagine. I encourage you to pray with expectation, knowing that God has your best interest in mind and will not only sustain you and comfort you but will give you the grace to cope with whatever may come in life.

In the name of the Father, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.