

## When We Don't Get What We've Asked (Part 1)

In this sermon series on prayer we are asking what the disciples asked Jesus: Lord, teach us to pray. We begin learning to pray by understanding the generosity of God. God is at least as generous as the most generous people we know, therefore we simply ask, seek, and knock. Last week Lowell talked about the simplicity of prayer as evidenced by the Lord's prayer.

Yet there remains the issue of unanswered prayer. When we ask, seek, and knock, we *don't* always get the things that we've asked for. Sometimes it's a relatively trivial matter. I can remember after I first started walking with Christ in college I tested out prayer in some rather literalistic ways. I read Jesus' teaching that "if you have faith and do not doubt . . . you can say to this mountain, 'Go throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." (Matthew 21:21-22). This is a bit embarrassing to admit (although I'm probably not the only person in the room who's tried this), but I tried unsuccessfully to move objects (not mountains, but a book or a glass) with faith and prayer. That's a trivial example of unanswered prayer. I'd put prayers for a parking space near the front door of a store in the same category.

But sometimes we pray for important things and we don't get what we've asked. We pray for things that we are convinced are the will of God – things that *we* would gladly give if we were God: the healing of a chronic disease, reconciliation of a relationship, relief from financial stress. Sometimes God answers our prayers in amazing ways; other times it seems like He's not even there. This wouldn't be such a big deal if Jesus didn't make such bold promises about God's willingness to give what we ask in faith.

In this series we are hoping to stimulate a deepening of our prayer life as individuals and as a congregation. If we are going to have greater dependence upon God in prayer, we have to address this issue of unanswered prayer. How are we supposed to keep asking, seeking, and knocking when we experience the disappointment of not getting what we've asked for?

Significantly, the Scriptures address the topic of "unanswered prayer" in a very unashamed, honest way. God not giving people everything they ask for isn't some dirty little secret that we're not supposed to talk about; we're not supposed to pretend that God always answers prayers that are prayed in faith. Rather, the Scriptures acknowledge very openly and honestly that we don't always get what we ask for. Sometimes reasons are given why that's the case; other times there are no good reasons why people don't receive what they've asked. This morning we are going to address the first category (some possible reasons why God doesn't give what we've asked). Next week we'll address the second category (when there are no good reasons why we don't receive what we've asked for).

But first I want to say a few words about the *context* of prayer: ***God is a person, not a principle.*** Being an effective pray-er requires a different skill set than being a good computer programmer. God is not a set of code that can be manipulated and accessed in order to get certain outcomes. God cannot be reduced to a list of propositions. God is a person (not a human, but a person). This means that when we pray we are entering into the realm of relationship. And relationships can be complex. God is always consistent in character; but that doesn't mean that He's predictable or easy to understand. As we'll see

next week, sometimes people expressed to God how baffled they were at the things He did or didn't do.

When we think about unanswered prayers, we have to keep in mind this context: God is a person, not a principle. When we make petitions, we are making requests of a personal God who has a mind and a will and who has relationships with billions of other people and who has a master plan for history. Given this reality, it's not surprising that there are times when we can't figure God out. Ultimately we have to get to the place where we're okay with that reality.

***A few questions when we don't get what we've asked for. . . .***

Given this context of prayer, let's consider some of the reasons why we might not be getting the things for which we're asking. I'm not suggesting that we can always (or even usually) figure out exactly why we haven't received what we've asked for. I may think I know why God hasn't granted what I've asked, but I really can't say for sure. I'm suggesting that when God isn't giving what we've asked that we take the opportunity to evaluate our praying and our lives. God is always interested in more than simply giving us things; He is relentlessly committed to refining us and drawing us closer to His heart. My encouragement is to use the following questions to *evaluate* our praying and our lives.

***What is my motivation in asking? (James 4:3)*** This is a question that isn't always easy to answer. Sometimes we don't know our own hearts and our own motivations, and so we might be oblivious to *why* we are asking God to give us a certain job or fix some problem that we've encountered. Turn with me to James 4:1-3. James first addresses the larger issue of disunity and conflict within the church:

4:1 What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? 2 You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. . . .

James finishes up verse 2 by saying:

2. . . . You do not have because you do not ask.

In addition to unanswered prayers, there are *unasked* prayers. There are some things – good things – that we do not have because we haven't asked for them. As we've talked about before, what is true in human relationships is often true in our relationship with God. How many times have you said (or heard someone say), "You should have just asked me . . . I had an extra one of those . . . you didn't need to buy one ." Or, "You should have asked me . . . I could have given you a ride . . ." In our relationship with God, sometimes we do not have because we do not ask. Last week Lowell taught about the simplicity of the "Lord's prayer." One of the petitions Jesus taught us to pray was, "Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil." I wonder how often I experience unnecessary temptation because I haven't asked, "Do not lead me into temptation." That's worth pondering.

In verse 3 James gives one reason why we don't receive what we have asked for:

3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Remember that back in verse 1 James mentioned that the “pleasures” that wage war in the members of our bodies cause conflicts among us. He mentioned lust and envy as two such pleasures. Lust is an intense desire to possess something; it could be sexual lust or the lust for power or the lust for status or whatever. When a person is envious s/he takes no joy in the good things others have; the envious person can only think, “I want what they have. . .” James is suggesting that sometimes our praying is fueled by things like lust and envy.

For example, there’s a job you really want and so you’re praying, “God, please give me this job.” That’s a good, natural thing to pray. But one person could be praying for that job because it would meet their financial needs, because it would allow them to use their gifts most fully, because it would provide the opportunity to do lots of good. Those are good motivations for wanting a certain job. But another person could be praying for the same job because they want status or because they want to prove to people that they have worth. Those are sub-Christian motivations for wanting a job.

In the church, we need to evaluate our motives in prayer. All sorts of wrong motives can creep into praying. We can be praying for the right things for the wrong reasons. Envy and pride can fuel a lot of spiritual-sounding prayers. “God bless this ministry,” can be fueled by pride; that same prayer can be fueled by love/compassion. God wants to refine our motives so that we want the right things for the right reasons.

And so, if God hasn’t given what we’ve asked, it’s good to ask the question, “What is my motivation?” If you realize that your motivation is wrong, don’t give up. Allow God to refine you and to give you a pure motivation.

***Is some area of disobedience hindering my relationship with God (and therefore my praying)? (1 Peter 3:7, Psalm 66:18)*** Since God is a person, we have to view the requests we make of Him in light of our overall relationship with Him. This is something that we instinctively do in human relationships. If you have a strong, healthy relationship with someone, you feel great freedom in asking them for things. If you’ve had a lot of conflict with someone, you hold back and carefully consider what you say to them.

In a similar way, the more closely you walk with God, the more freedom you will have in your prayer life. We have hints of this in different Scriptures. In 1 Peter 3, for example, Peter urges husbands to honor their wives and makes this comment:

7 You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered.

The basic idea is that if a man is married to a woman who Father is God, he should honor her accordingly. If he doesn’t, it only makes sense that his prayers would be hindered; it affects his conversation with God. If some guy was mistreating *my* daughter, he shouldn’t expect me to be very generous to him; his “prayers” would be hindered. This realization

should be a powerful challenge for married men to honor their wives so that their prayers not be hindered.

This doesn't mean that we somehow earn answers to prayer by good behavior or that God holds petty grudges or anything of the sort. It only means that how we treat God in general affects our prayer life. Again, this is only consistent with the dynamics of all relationships. And it reminds us that God is not merely concerned with the things we're asking for; God is concerned about our entire life and our entire relationship with Him. Bingham Hunter put it this way:

God does not just hear your prayers. He "hears" your whole life. He doesn't respond to what you *say*. He responds to what you *are*. He responds to you.  
*(The God Who Hears, p. 39)*

Psalms 66 reflects upon this same dynamic in prayer:

16 Come and hear, all who fear God,  
And I will tell of what He has done for my soul.  
17 I cried to Him with my mouth,  
And He was extolled with my tongue.  
18 If I regard wickedness in my heart,  
The Lord will not hear;

At this point, some of you might be tempted to say, "Since I'll always have wickedness in my heart, God will never hear my prayer." But this truth didn't lead the psalmist to despair; it took him in the direction of repentance and in the direction of God's lovingkindness. He understood that it is possible to turn from wickedness and that God's grace is very abundant.

19 But certainly God has heard;  
He has given heed to the voice of my prayer.  
20 Blessed be God,  
Who has not turned away my prayer  
Nor His lovingkindness from me.

When (not if) we recognize wickedness in our hearts (sin in our lives) we should repent of that sin based upon the shed blood of Jesus. We shouldn't lose heart and quit praying. We should realize that in Christ God has made it possible to turn from that sin. When we do, we will find God more gracious than we ever imagined. (See also Isaiah 1:15-17.)

How would you answer the question, "Is there some area of disobedience in my life that's hindering my praying?" I realize that some of us are more introspective than others. There's no reason for self-condemnation: there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (R. 8:1). It's simply a matter of being honest before God. We should be in conversation with God about areas of disobedience so that He might lead us to a better place. God wants to transform that area of your life so that you can experience Him more fully. And that includes experiencing Him in prayer.

***How might God's purposes be advanced if I don't receive what I've requested? (2***

***Corinthians 12:7-10)*** This isn't a question that we can answer ahead of time. It's not even always clear after the fact how God is glorified when He doesn't give us what we ask. Let's consider briefly Paul's "thorn in the flesh." People have different understandings of exactly what this thorn in the flesh was – whether a physical ailment or a difficult circumstance. In either case it was something in Paul's life that he wanted God to remove. Chances are that there is something in your life that you want God to remove. You're convinced that your life would be better; you may even be convinced that your walk with God would be better if He removed this thing. It could be some medical problem, some relational problem, or some other type of trial/problem. Listen to Paul's experience:

7 Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me-- to keep me from exalting myself!

Paul gives a very nuanced explanation of why he was given this thorn in the flesh: it was "a messenger of Satan to torment" him, yet it was also meant to accomplish the virtuous objective of keeping him from exalting himself. Paul allowed that it could simultaneously be from Satan **and** accomplish God's purposes. Paul did what we should do when we want something; he asked God to remove it.

8 Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. 9 And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

These verses open up all sorts of issues we could discuss. But notice that Paul eventually understood that God would be glorified by not removing the thorn in the flesh. God said, "I am not going to give you what you've asked for. I am going to give you grace to endure your thorn in the flesh. Paul, in this case, I want you to experience My power in your weakness." God – being God – has the prerogative to say the same thing to any of us.

I don't necessarily think we need to take Paul's experience as a pattern (pray about something 3x and then call it quits). But when God doesn't remove something from our lives in response to our praying, his experience should make us stop and ask the question, "How might God be glorified anyway?"

I can think of a time when I prayed and prayed and prayed for something. It was obvious that God wasn't working on my time frame. God didn't seem in any particular hurry to remove this trial from my life. I think it was good to keep praying/asking God to remove this trial. But in retrospect perhaps I should have also been asking, "God, show me Your grace in this situation. Show me how you want me to experience Your power in the midst of my weakness." God never wastes a perfectly good trial in our lives.

Like Paul we need to be open to the possibility that God would be more glorified by giving us grace to endure some circumstance than by removing it from our lives. Like Paul we need to entrust ourselves to God, believing that He is good and sovereign and wise.

**Conclusion:** I would summarize what we've been talking about by saying that when our prayers go unanswered, it's possible that God is actively doing a deep thing in our lives: refining our motives, addressing some area of disobedience, or advancing His purposes through our suffering. These are each good things; these are each aspects of God's will for us. Therefore the reality of unanswered prayer forces us to evaluate why we follow God. Do we follow God because He might give us what we want or because He's God!?!

**A Final Comment:** Beginning this morning, after each of our services people will be available at the front of the room to pray for any who would like prayer. It may be something large or something small. Perhaps God has spoken to you in some way here today and you'd like someone to pray for that issue in your life. If you would like someone to pray with you, simply come forward after the benediction and you'll find someone who would love to pray for you.

**NOTE 1:** As an aside, pleasures aren't necessarily a bad thing. As a matter of fact, God created everything good – including the pleasures of food, sex, sleep/rest, beauty, knowledge, music, etc. Each of these pleasures was originally meant to provide an opportunity to experience God. But through the fall, the good pleasures God created became corrupted. For example, the enjoyment of food can become gluttony; the enjoyment of rest can lead to laziness; people come to worship the creation instead of the Creator; etc. In our sinful state, our pleasures can become corrupted. In Christ, legitimate pleasures are restored.

James is using the term “pleasures” in this corrupted sense when he says that “you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.” He's talking about praying for things that fuel our sinful pleasures instead of the purposes of God. This is where we have to be brutally honest with ourselves; nobody but God really knows our motivations.

**NOTE 2:** Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane would be the ultimate example of God being more glorified by not giving what is asked. Jesus asked, “Father, if you are willing, let this cup pass from Me.” God was not willing; God was more glorified by Jesus drinking the cup of His suffering all the way to the bottom. He was more glorified by Jesus going to the cross and bearing the sin of the world.