

How to Receive Answers To Prayer

Earlier in this course I said that prayer is nothing special. Though this is true in a sense, it is not so true in another sense. Prayer may be the most special thing ever. Think about it. Prayer gets you face time with God. Prayer is one-on-one with the creator of the universe. Most amazingly, prayer allows you to give your input into what God is doing in the world. Through prayer, you get some say in how God runs the universe. Imagine that! Furthermore, I am convinced that there may be some things which God wants to do in the world, but He won't do except through prayer. That is, there are aspects of God's will which are contingent upon people asking Him for them. There are some things God won't do unless people ask Him to do it.

Yet if this is so, why is it that so many of our prayers go unanswered? Yes, I know that there is no such thing as an unanswered prayer. I know that God saying “No,” is just as much of an answer as God saying “Yes.” So maybe a better way of asking the question is, “Why does prayer seem so ineffective?” If prayer gets you face time with God, if prayer grants you some say in how God runs the universe, then why does it seem that most of your prayers don't actually affect much change?

If this is your frustration with prayer, there are three basic answers for you to consider. First, maybe you are not praying according to the will of God, or what it means to pray in Jesus' name. Second, maybe you don't understand how prayer works. Finally, maybe you don't quite understand how to receive answers to your prayers. This lesson provides input on these three areas.

Pray According to the Will of God

One of the benefits to approaching prayer as a conversation with God is that prayer no longer becomes a way to get stuff from God, but instead becomes primarily a way to grow in your relationship with God. When prayer is an ongoing conversation with God, you learn that prayer is not about presenting your wish list to a Santa Claus in the sky, but is instead about getting to know the heart, desires, and goals of a person who loves you very much.

As you get to know the heart, desires, and goals of God for your life and for this world, you come to better understand the sorts of things God wants you to ask Him for. And when you ask for the things that God wants you to ask Him for, He will always say “Yes,”

because these requests are according to His will. So the key to seeing God answer your prayers is to learn what is important to God and what He wants to accomplish in this world, and then pray for those things.

As you do this, you will also discover that the things God wants are also the things you want. Though you may think you want a mansion with a fancy car, when you grow in your relationship with God, you discover that such material possessions are not what your heart really longs for. Your heart actually longs for the things God longs for. God wants you to live in fellowship and unity with Him and with others, and be at peace with all people. God wants you to be generous, kind, gracious, patient, and merciful, just as He is with you. So when you ask God to help build these things into your life, He is more than happy to bring them to pass.

When Psalm 37:4 says that if you delight in the Lord, He will give you the desires of your heart, this does not mean that God will give you whatever it is you want. It means that when you enjoy being in God’s presence, and when you enjoy talking with God and learning about what is important to Him, He places His desires into your own heart, so that your desires come from His desires. He gives you the right things to desire, and then He works to help fulfill those desires. This is what it means to ask according to the will of God (1 John 5:14).

Praying according to God’s will then, is not so much when we ask God for the things we want, but when we first seek God’s heart and will on various matters, and then ask Him for these things. Proper prayer occurs when we speak God’s heart back to Him, asking how we can get actively involved in what He is already doing in the world. Prayer is when we verbalize to God our desire to join Him in accomplishing His will that He has whispered to our hearts.

Pray in Jesus’ Name

A similar concept to praying according to the will of God is praying in Jesus’ name. Many people seem to think that to “pray in Jesus’ name” simply means to tack the words “... in Jesus’ name, Amen” at the end of their prayer. This is not what it means at all. To pray “in Jesus’ name” means to pray as if Jesus Himself was praying our prayers.

When an ambassador visits another country “in the name of the king” (or president), it is as if his king (or president) is speaking the words that the ambassador speaks. The leaders of these other countries are to assume that whatever the ambassador says, it is

as if the king (or president) himself said them. The ambassador speaks “in the name of the king.”

Since this is so, the ambassador must be certain that what he says is exactly what the king himself would say. If an ambassador says something foolish or insulting, he could easily start a war, ruin a trade agreement, or destroy a treaty. To be a good ambassador, the ambassador needs to know the mind and heart and will of his king so intimately that the two minds are nearly one.

This is what it means to pray “in Jesus’ name.” These three words are not a magical incantation that you can tack on to the end of your prayers to get whatever you want. Instead, to pray in Jesus’ name means to develop a mind frame in which you know you are speaking for Jesus. You are approaching the throne of God as if Jesus Himself was speaking through you. This means that, like an ambassador, you must so intimately know the mind, heart, and will of Jesus in whatever situation you are praying about, that the words you speak are the same exact words Jesus would speak if He Himself were the one making the petition to God.

In John 14:13-14, Jesus instructs His disciples to pray in His name. His words can be expanded and paraphrased as follows:

But when you pray, spend time thinking about what I value, what I instructed you to know, how I lived my life, the kind of example I provided, the people I hung out with, the goals I sought to achieve, and the relationship I have with God. Take careful notice of what I taught and what I prayed for. Then, offer your requests to God in light of these things. And when you do, make these requests boldly, knowing that the words you speak are the same words I am speaking. When you pray this way, know that your prayers will be answered.

So when you are praying something which you know with absolute certainty is the will of God, and which Jesus Himself would pray, this is when you can pray “in Jesus’ name,” as if He Himself were praying your prayers. You can know you are praying according to the will of God when you pray the things Jesus prayed for, or when you pray for the things which God has revealed in Scripture.

But what about when you are not quite as certain? What about when you want to pray for something, but you are not sure whether or not your request is the will of God or your own will? Does this mean you cannot and should not pray for such things? No. You can and should. But rather than pray for such things “in Jesus’ name,” this is when it is best to tell God, “... yet not my will, but yours be done.” In other words, tell God what is

on your heart and mind, but also let Him know that you understand that you are unsure about His will in this situation, and although you have presented your requests to Him, you will submit to whatever He decides to do. Unless you are praying the clear commands and instructions of Scripture, it is likely that most of your prayers will be of this second sort, where you recognize that your heart can be deceived and your mind darkened, and so you leave the decision up to God.

So to pray in Jesus’ name does not mean that you will get whatever you ask for if you simply tack on some magic words at the end of your prayer. To receive what you ask for in prayer requires you to pray according to the things God wants you to pray for, or to pray for the things that Jesus Himself prays for. When you pray “in Jesus’ name,” this means that you should pray as if it is Jesus Himself praying through you. When you pray, if you cannot imagine Jesus praying for it, you probably shouldn’t pray for it yourself. Can you imagine Jesus praying for a Lamborghini and a mansion? No? Then you shouldn’t pray for such things either.

But when you do pray for the things Jesus would pray for, when you do pray for the things that are according to the will of God—and especially His revealed will in Scripture—this is when God steps in to act boldly and mightily in response to your prayers. This is why the prayers of a righteous person accomplish much (Jas 5:16). It is not because the person is so righteous and holy, but because such a person better understands the heart of God than others, and so when they pray, they are praying according to the will, desires, and goals of God. When you pray this way too, your prayers will also accomplish much.

How Prayer Works

Another reason you sometimes don’t see God working in response to your prayers is because you might not understand how prayer works. Or maybe it is better to say that you might not understand that prayer *is* work. This truth is something I learned from C. S. Lewis in his essays “Work and Prayer” in the book, *God in the Dock*, and “The Efficacy of Prayer” in the book, *The World’s Last Night*.

Essentially, the argument of C. S. Lewis is that any responsibility in this world which God can pass on to human beings, He does pass on to human beings. He prefers not to do something if a human can do it. This is because we are His ambassadors on earth. As the image of God in this world, we carry out the work of God. Toward this end, God has provided two means by which we can accomplish these God-given tasks: work and

prayer. And just as we view work as a way of getting things done in the world, we must begin to view prayer similarly.

Here are some excerpts from Lewis’ essay, “Work and Prayer” which explain this point:

Everyone who believes in God must therefore admit (quite apart from the question of prayer) that God has not chosen to write the whole history with His own hand. Most of the events that go on in the universe are indeed out of our control, but not all. It is like a play in which the scene and the general outline of the story is fixed by the author, but certain minor details are left for the actors to improvise. It may be a mystery why He should have allowed us to cause real events at all, but it is no odder that He should allow us to cause them by praying than by any other method.

Pascal says that God “instituted prayer in order to allow His creatures the dignity of causality.” It would perhaps be truer to say that He invented both prayer and physical action for that purpose. He gave us small creatures the dignity of being able to contribute to the course of events in two different ways. He made the matter of the universe such that we can (in those limits) do things to it; that is why we can wash our own hands and feed or murder our fellow creatures. Similarly, He made His own plan or plot of history such that it admits a certain amount of free play and can be modified in response to our prayers. If it is foolish and impudent to ask for victory in war (on the ground that God might be expected to know best), it would be equally foolish and impudent to put on a [raincoat]—does not God know best whether you ought to be wet or dry?

The two methods by which we are allowed to produce events may be called work and prayer. Both are alike in this respect—that in both we try to produce a state of affairs which God has not (or at any rate not yet) seen fit to provide “on His own.” And from this point of view the old maxim *laborare est orare* (work is prayer) takes on a new meaning. What we do when we weed a field is not quite different from what we do when we pray for a good harvest. But there is an important difference all the same.

You cannot be sure of a good harvest whatever you do to a field. But you can be sure that if you pull up one weed that one weed will no longer be there. You can be sure that if you drink more than a certain amount of alcohol you will ruin your health or that if you go on for a few centuries more wasting the resources of the planet on wars and luxuries you will shorten the life of the whole human race. The kind of causality we exercise by work is, so to speak, divinely guaranteed, and therefore ruthless. By it we are free to do ourselves as much harm

as we please. But the kind which we exercise by prayer is not like that; God has left Himself discretionary power. Had He not done so, prayer would be an activity too dangerous for man and should have the horrible state of things envisaged by Juvenal: “Enormous prayers which Heaven in anger grants.”

Prayers are not always—in the crude, factual sense of the word—“granted.” This is not because prayer is a weaker kind of causality, but because it is a stronger kind. When it “works” at all it works unlimited by space and time. That is why God has retained a discretionary power of granting or refusing it; except on that condition prayer would destroy us. It is not unreasonable for a headmaster to say, “Such and such things you may do according to the fixed rules of this school. But such and such other things are too dangerous to be left to general rules. If you want to do them you must come and make a request and talk over the whole matter with me in my study. And then—we’ll see.”

I love how Lewis concludes his essay by talking about prayer as if it were a conversation you had with a headmaster of a school in his study. This is right in line with what we have been learning in this course about prayer. More importantly, though, Lewis shows the close connection between work and prayer as a means of accomplishing God’s will in the world. This explanation by Lewis shows how important prayer is, and also how to go about accomplishing God’s will in this world.

Prayer is not a lesser form of work, but a greater and more powerful form. This is why God leaves Himself some discretionary power to say “No.” God is willing to talk to you about everything and anything, but since He alone knows everything, He allows Himself the freedom to say “No” to the things you ask for which run contrary to His will, goals, and purposes for this world. This understanding of prayer as a form of work brings us to the third truth which will help you understand how God answers your prayers.

How God Answers Prayer

One of the primary ways God wants to answer your prayers is to have you answer them yourself. As you grow in your relationship with God through prayer, God places His desires into your heart so that you know how to pray according to His will. But God doesn’t just place His desires into your heart so that you can pray for them. No, God gives you these desires so that you can actually go do something about them. Very often, the burdens God places on your heart and mind regarding the needs or issues of other

people is not simply so that you can pray about them, but so that you can do something about them.

It is not uncommon in the church, and especially in church prayer meetings, for people to gather together and share the prayer requests that lay heavy on their hearts. Then, after they share these requests, they sit in a circle and pray about them. They might pray for the neighbor lady whose husband is in the hospital, for the coworker who just got laid off, for the homeless people to find work, and for more people to start showing up for church. These are all valid prayer requests, and all of them, I believe, are within the will of God. However, I do not believe that God wants us to do nothing but pray about these requests. I think God sometimes makes needs known to us, not so that we can pray about them, but so that we can do something about them.

I once saw a comic strip where a guy was praying, and he said, “God, why aren’t you answering any of my prayers?” God’s reply was, “I was about to ask you the same thing.” Praying for needs is important, but one way God wants to answer our prayers is by us going out to be the answer to our own prayers. Sometimes we fail to see answers to prayers, not because God doesn’t care or doesn’t want to answer, but because God is saying to us, “Answer your own prayer! Why do you think I laid that burden on your heart?” He lays needs upon our minds so that we can both pray and do something about these needs.

Proper petitionary prayer is when we speak God’s heart back to Him, asking how we can get actively involved in what He is already doing in our lives and in the world. Prayer requests are not primarily those petitions we present to God, but are instead the verbal requests we make to Him which mirror the requests He has whispered to our own hearts. In a sense, we could almost say that God prays to us so that we can pray His prayers back to Him. God lays on our hearts and minds the things He wants done in the world, and then as we become aware of these issues and needs, we pray these requests to God, asking how we can collaborate with Him in the work He is doing.

This is exactly the point of James 2. For centuries, the church has argued about James 2:14-26 and what it teaches regarding the connection between faith and works. This is tragic, for such a debate only shows that those who engage in it don’t understand what James is talking about at all. The passage is not about how to determine whether or not our faith is genuine. The passage is about how to see God work in response to our

faith. We could say that James 2 is about how to see God work in response to our prayers.

In the church that James was writing to, there was one group of people who had need of food and daily clothes. There were others within the church who could meet those needs by providing food and clothes. But rather than providing for the needs of others, this second group instead said to the first, “I have faith that God will provide for you.” In modern church lingo, we say, “I’ll pray for you.”

James blasts this sort of thinking. He says, “What good is that? Faith isn’t going to help in this situation! Faith isn’t going to put food on their table or clothes on their backs! The reason God made those needs known to you is because you have the means to help. Don’t believe in God to provide for the needs of others; you provide for them. Don’t ask God to give them food; you give them food. Don’t pray for God to give them clothes; you give them some clothes.”

The point of James is that while faith is wonderful and prayer is good, talking about your faith and how you will pray for God’s provision is worthless when it comes to actually helping these other people. Yes, it is true that God can provide for their needs, but the way God wants to provide for their needs is through you! Faith is not sitting back and waiting for God to act while we do nothing. Faith is when we recognize that God is pointing out the needs to us because we have the means to meet the needs. While faith alone is genuine and good, faith alone does nothing to help those in need.

So yes, faith can exist by itself. But what’s the point? Yes, you can pray for the needs of those around you, but if you do nothing to actually meet those needs, why pray? Faith, by itself, is worthless. Prayer alone accomplishes nothing. For faith to truly be energized, for faith to truly move mountains, for faith to accomplish much, you must join your faith with your actions, and seek to meet the needs for which you pray.

Though there are some things only God can do, there are many things that God cannot do except through us. Prayer is not so much us asking God to do things for us, but us asking how we can do things with Him. Most of the things you pray for can be accomplished by inviting God to work through you to meet the need you pray for, and then stepping out in faith to actually meet the need. We could say that God prays to us before we pray to Him, and so our prayers to Him are nothing more than a recognition of what He has been inviting us to do in this world. When we see a need and we pray for it, it is only because God has revealed that need to us and has invited us to get involved

with Him in meeting it. In some sense then, when we wonder if God hears and answers our prayers, what we should really be wondering is if we hear and answer His.

When we pray, “Lord, reach our community with the gospel!” God says, “Yes! I want to send you to reach your community with the gospel. Are you ready to love and serve them like Jesus? Let’s go!” When we pray, “Lord, help that homeless man find a job,” God says, “Okay. I will do that if you take some time to go help him find a job.” When we pray for God to end violence, stop wars, rescue victims, feed the hungry, clothe the poor, and help the sick, God is asking us to do the same things with Him. Indeed, God cannot do these things unless we participate with Him. Sometimes prayer is not so much a question of whether God hears our prayers, but whether we hear His.

As a pastor, I participated in the Wednesday night prayer meetings of our church. One week, one of the elders shared a prayer request about a retired pastor who was moving into town the following Wednesday. He asked that we pray for this man’s transition, that he would safely arrive in town and get unpacked and settled in without problems. So the next Wednesday, when everybody gathered for our weekly prayer meeting, I began by announcing that God had heard our prayer and answered. I said that a whole group of people from the church had shown up to help this retired pastor unpack his moving van and get settled into his new house with his wife. The people were ecstatic to hear that God had answered our prayer in such a tangible way and that He did so through some of the people in our own church. Then they asked who these people were, for none of them had heard that this was happening. I smiled and said, “It’s us. Let’s go.” And we went. There was some grumbling later on that the pastor had cancelled the prayer meeting to go move boxes, but overall, I think people got the point.

I hope you do too. If you want to see God answer your prayers, the first place to look for answers might be in your very own life. God does want to answer your prayers, and He probably wants to answer them through you.