

A Praying Life – Part 7

Getting Personal with an Infinite God

Based on Chapters 13-14 of *A Praying Life* by Paul Miller

Coast Community Church Pastor's Class; Earl Miles; March 23, 2014

What tempts you not to pray?

Temptation 1: “You pray ... You’re on His good side!”

Should we look for ‘special people’ to pray for us so we can get what we need from God?

- We are tempted to believe that ‘better people’ have more ‘clout’ with God.- 1 Samuel 12:19, 23; Acts 8:22-24; John 11:22
- But one important key to effective prayer is weakness and desperation. - Luke 11:5-8; 18:1-8

Temptation 2: “God bless all the missionaries [long pause] ... over and out!”

What can’t we pray about? Does God care about the ‘little things’ in our lives like parking spots and pajamas? What little things do you pray for?

- We are tempted to believe that God is not really interested in the little details of our lives because He is infinite (majestic and grand) and we are small and insignificant. - 1 Kings 20:23
- But prayer is very much about an Infinite and Personal God who is able and willing to help His children in every situation and with every detail. The incarnation is the public display of the infinite-Personal God. - Matthew 20:32; Mark 10:36, 51; Psalm 23; 2 Chronicles 6:18-21; Isaiah 57:15

‘The ability to make a difference is at the heart of asking.’ – Paul Miller

Temptation 3: “God, please let that firetruck be going to my house because I don’t want anyone else’s house to burn down!”

Am I being selfish if I pray for something for myself that actually implies something problematic or impoverishing or tragic for someone else?

- We are tempted to believe that if we ask for something that will mean that someone else doesn’t get it (if it’s good) or someone else does get it (if it’s bad), then we are automatically being selfish in our prayers.
- But this oversimplifies life and prevents us from being open and honest with God.

Temptation 4: “God, it is just good to be here ... Oh no, I don’t need anything but You!”

Is prayer really about being with God and enjoying His presence?

- We are tempted to believe that prayer is really about being with God and not asking for anything.
- But the weight of Scripture is on the importance of ‘asking’ God for what we need and desire. - Matthew 6:8; 7:7, 11; 18:19; 21:22; Mark 11:24; Luke 11:9, 13; John 14:13, 14; 15:7, 16; 16:23, 24, 26
- Even the Lord Jesus, our Example, asked in prayer. - John 17:9, 15, 20
- God puts us in need so we will ask! - Exodus 17:1

‘Suffering is God’s gift to make us aware of our contingent existence.’ – Paul Miller

Temptation 5: “Whatever You want God, what I want doesn’t matter ... there, I said it!”

Is there a place for asking for what you really want?

- We are tempted to believe that being truly spiritual is suppressing what we desire.
- But being like Christ is expressing desire while surrendering to God’s Will. - Psalm 62:8; Philippians 4:6; Luke 22:42

‘Jesus neither suppresses His feelings nor let’s them master Him. He is real.’ – Paul Miller

Temptation 6: “I would pray more if I just knew how it works.”

Do you struggle with understanding how prayer works? Why some prayers are answered? And others aren’t?

- We are tempted to think that if we could connect all the dots and understand ‘how prayer works’ then we would pray more and be more confident in prayer. - Luke 11:2-4
- But there is a real mystery to prayer that we can’t figure out.

Answers to prayer can’t be proven or observed directly (like other realities like love). We can’t look at answers to prayer and figure out what caused it. We can’t see all the causal connections between our prayers and what happens because it is the direct activity of God and God is not an object to be examined. Answers to prayer often begin before we actually pray. In order to understand ‘how prayer works’ we would need complete knowledge of the past, present and future (ie, we would have to be God). Our trust must be (1) that God knows how prayer works and (2) that it does work and (3) in what God has promised concerning prayer and (4) in following what He has said to do, not in understanding the mystery involved.

So what do we need to pray well? Desire and surrender!

‘Desire and surrender are the perfect balance to praying.’ – Paul Miller

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Introduction

What tempts you not to pray? (imagine: door with 'Do Not Enter!')

Temptation 1: “*You pray ... You’re on His good side!*”

Should we look for ‘special people’ to pray for us so we can get what we need from God?

- We are tempted to believe that ‘better people’ have more ‘clout’ with God.

Mother and the woman who couldn't sleep

The people and Samuel - 1 Samuel 12:19, 23

Simon the Magician and Peter - Acts 8:22-24

Martha to Jesus – John 11:22

‘Even now I know that whatever You **ask** of God, God will give You.’

- But one important key to effective prayer is weakness and desperation.

The Friend at Midnight - Luke 11:5-8

The Widow and the Judge – Luke 18:1-8

Temptation 2: “*God bless all the missionaries [long pause] ... over and out!*”

What can't we pray about? Does God care about the 'little things' in our lives like parking spots and pajamas? What little things do you pray for?

- We are tempted to believe that God is not really interested in the little details of our lives because He is infinite (majestic and grand) and we are small and insignificant.

The god of the mountain vs the god of the plain - 1 Kings 20:23

Non-Westerners doubt the infinitude of God.

Westerners doubt that God is personal.

- But prayer is very much about an Infinite and Personal God who is able and willing to help His children in every situation and with every detail.

The incarnation is the public display of the infinite-Personal God.

Two Blind Men - Matthew 20:32

James and John – Mark 10:36

Blind Bartimaeus – Mark 10:51

The Infinite Lord and the Personal Shepherd - Psalm 23

The Personal Prayer of Solomon to an Infinite God – 2 Chronicles 6:18-21

The High and Lowly Dwelling of God – Isaiah 57:15

‘The ability to make a difference is at the heart of asking.’ – Paul Miller

Temptation 3: “God, please let that fire truck be going to my house because I don’t want anyone else’s house to burn down!”

Am I being selfish if I pray for something for myself that actually implies something problematic or impoverishing or tragic for someone else?

- We are tempted to believe that if we ask for something that will mean that someone else doesn’t get it (if it’s good) or someone else does get it (if it’s bad), then we are automatically being selfish in our prayers.
- But this oversimplifies life and prevents us from being open and honest with God.

Are we making prayer a **‘zero-sum’ game**?

‘In game theory and economic theory, a **zero-sum game** is a mathematical representation of a situation in which a participant's gain (or loss) of utility is exactly balanced by the losses (or gains) of the utility of the other participant(s). If the total gains of the participants are added up, and the total losses are subtracted, they will sum to zero. Thus cutting a cake, where taking a larger piece reduces the amount of cake available for others, is a zero-sum game if all participants value each unit of cake equally. (Wikipedia)

Can we be honest with God about what’s on our hearts?

How should our prayers be honest and unselfish?

Be honest about what we want and about those we care about, but also consider those who may be affected by our same concern

Temptation 4: “God, it is just good to be here ... Oh no, I don’t need anything but You!”

Is prayer really about being with God and enjoying His presence?

- We are tempted to believe that prayer is really about being with God and not asking for anything.
 - ‘**Ask nothing of God, save God Himself.**’ – Augustine
 - ‘Don’t ask me for anything, I’m your best gift!’ – overspiritualizing husband (Paul Miller)
 - Neoplatonism values the spiritual and undervalues the physical.
 - Enlightenment thinking values the physical and undervalues the spiritual.
- But the weight of Scripture is on the importance of ‘asking’ God for what we need and desire.

So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you **ask** Him. – Matthew 6:8

“**Ask**, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. – Matthew 7:7

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who **ask** Him! – Matthew 7:11

“Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may **ask**, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. – Matthew 18:19

And all things you **ask** in prayer, believing, you will receive.” – Matthew 21:22

Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and **ask**, believe that you have received them, and they will be *granted* you. – Mark 11:24

“So I say to you, **ask**, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. – Luke 11:9

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will *your* heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who **ask** Him?” – Luke 11:13

Whatever you **ask** in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. – John 14:13

If you **ask** Me anything in My name, I will do *it*. – John 14:14

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, **ask** whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. – John 15:7

You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit would remain, so that whatever you **ask** of the Father in My name He may give to you. – John 15:16

In that day you will not question Me about anything. Truly, truly, I say to you, if you **ask** the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you. – John 16:23

Until now you have **asked** for nothing in My name; **ask** and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full. – John 16:24

In that day you will **ask** in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request of the Father on your behalf; - John 16:26

- Even the Lord Jesus, our Example, asked in prayer.

I **ask** on their behalf; I do not **ask** on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours; - John 17:9

I do not **ask** You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil *one*. – John 17:15

“I do not **ask** on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; - John 17:20

- God puts us in need so we will ask!
 - The Need for Water – Exodus 17:1

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Temptation 5: “Whatever You want God, what I want doesn’t matter ... there, I said it!”

Is there a place for asking for what you really want?

- We are tempted to believe that being truly spiritual is suppressing what we desire.

In Buddhism, ‘nirvana’ (heaven) is to stop desiring.

- But being like Christ is expressing desire while surrendering to God’s Will.

Pouring Out an Empty Heart? - Psalm 62:8

Your Requests or God's Requests? - Philippians 4:7

My Will and God's Will - Luke 22:42

Are we rushing to 'Your will be done' before we express our hearts?

'Jesus neither suppresses His feelings nor let's them master Him. He is real.' – Paul Miller

Temptation 6: "I would pray more if I just knew how it works."

Do you struggle with understanding how prayer works? Why some prayers are answered? And others aren't?

- We are tempted to think that if we could connect all the dots and understand 'how prayer works' then we would pray more and be more confident in prayer.

Some doubt that 'prayer works.'

January 19, 1936

My dear Dr. Einstein,

We have brought up the question: Do scientists pray? in our Sunday school class. It began by asking whether we could believe in both science and religion. We are writing to scientists and other important men to try and have our own question answered.

We will feel greatly honored if you will answer our question: Do do scientists pray, and what they pray for?

We are in the sixth grade, Miss Ellis's class.

Respectfully yours,

Phyllis

January 24, 1936

Dear Phyllis,

I will attempt to reply to your question as simply as I can. Here is my answer:

Scientists believe that every occurrence, including the affairs of human beings, is due to the laws of nature. Therefore a scientist cannot be inclined to believe that the course of events can be influenced by prayer, that is, by a supernaturally manifested wish.

However, we must concede that our actual knowledge of these forces is imperfect, so that in the end the belief in the existence of a final, ultimate spirit rests on a kind of faith.

Such belief remains widespread even with the current achievements in science.

But also, everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that some spirit is manifest in the laws of the universe, one that is vastly superior to that of man. In this way the pursuit of science leads to a religious feeling of a special sort, which is surely quite different from the religiosity of someone more naive.

With cordial greetings,
your A. Einstein

But many do believe 'prayer works.'

There are things we should be praying for all the time. Jesus lays those out for us in the 'Lord's Prayer.'

May Your name be properly honored.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day [or this day] our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins.
Lead us not into temptation.- Luke 11:2-4

When you pray 'Give us this day our daily bread,' what goes into answering that prayer?
Do you know all that goes into answering that prayer?

When you pray 'Lead us not into temptation,' what goes into answering that prayer?
Do you know all that goes into answering that prayer?

- But there is a real mystery to prayer that we can't figure out.

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We can't look at answers to prayer and figure out what caused it.

We can't see all the causal connections between our prayers and what happens because it is the direct activity of God and God is not an object to be examined.

Answers to prayer often begin before we actually pray.

In order to understand 'how prayer works' we would need complete knowledge of the past, present and future (ie, we would have to be God).

Our trust must be (1) that God knows how prayer works and (2) that it does work and (3) in what God has promised concerning prayer and (4) in following what He has said to do, not in understanding the mystery involved.

Conclusion

So what do we need to pray well?

- Desire.
- Surrender.

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A praying life must open itself up to God's omniscience and surrender to His will. –
Matthew 6:10

What do we lose in a praying life?

Independence. Control. Self-sufficiency. My kingdom. My orphan life.

What do we gain in a praying life?

Friendship with God. Quiet heart. Work of God. Victory over evil. His kingdom. A child's life. Dependent love. – Paul Miller