

The Difference Prayer Makes

Hosea 1:2-10, Colossians 2:6-19, Matthew 6:5-15, Luke 22:41-46

The Sunday School teacher asked, “Tommy, do you pray every day?” “Oh, no,” Tommy answered. “*I don’t pray every day: some days there’s nothing I want.*”

We laugh...but isn’t that what our prayer life is sometimes like? Don’t preachers often sell Christianity as a sure fire way of *getting what we want*—whether it’s money or success or peace of mind or a happy home?

Back in 1971, Janis Joplin wrote a song making fun of the way Christians often use prayer to get what they want:

“*Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?*

“*Oh Lord, won't you buy me a color TV?*

“*Oh Lord, won't you buy me a night on the town?*”

Several years later, Randy Travis recorded a song that says pretty much the same thing about prayer: “*Jesus on the mainline—Tell him what you want. Just call him up and tell him what you want.*” And here at Greenbrier’s First United Church, we like to sing about a “*sweet hour of prayer*” that “*bids us at our Father’s throne make all our wants and wishes known.*”

Now it’s true that God wants us to be completely honest when we pray, and sometimes that means telling God about our wants and wishes. But if prayer is only that—if it’s no more than telling God what we want—haven’t we turned prayer itself into just one more way to express our fundamental self-centeredness—just one more instrument of our relentless drive to have our own way?

Maybe you have seen the plaque hanging on someone’s living room wall—“*Prayer changes things.*” It really is true, you know: “*Prayer changes things.*” Fervent, heartfelt prayer unleashes a supernatural power that can make an enormous difference—an eternal difference—in the way things are. Prayer changes things. *But the first thing that prayer changes—and the one thing that most urgently needs to be changed—is the heart, the mind, the spirit, the will of the one who is praying.* For prayer is not an attempt to change God’s mind or get God to do *what we want*. It’s about *changing our minds* and empowering us to be and to do *what God wants*. It’s not about changing *God*. It’s not even, primarily, about changing *things*. It’s about changing *us*. It’s about redirecting our hearts so that we can begin living lives centered in God rather than in self—seeking his will, his way, rather than our own.

God is not Santa Clause...and prayer is not just telling God what we think he ought to do for us. God already knows our needs even before we ask! In fact, God knows our needs far better than we do. One of the many problems with telling God what we want is that human ignorance, selfishness, and short-sightedness often lead us to ask God for things that we *don’t* need, things that would be harmful, things that

would be destructive to ourselves or to others. God loves us too much to give us some of the things we ask him for. When I ask God for lots of money, God knows how hard it is for the rich to make it into the Kingdom. When I ask God for riches, it may well be that God knows I'm not strong enough to resist the temptations that wealth always brings. And God loves me too much to place in my hands the poison that might destroy my life. If I'm craving wealth or power, God lovingly withholds it—*"lest"* (in the words of John Wesley) I *"become entangled therein...and perish."*

But the bottom line is that prayer is not about telling God what we want. It's about seeking the power of the Holy Spirit to change *us*—so that God's will becomes our will, and we want what God wants.

Maybe that's why the words *"I"* and *"me"* and *"my"* and *"mine"* are totally absent from the Lord's Prayer.

- Jesus tells us to address God not as *"my Father"* but as *"our Father."*
- Jesus tells us to ask not for *"my daily bread"* but for *"our daily bread."*
- Jesus tells us to pray not for our desires to be fulfilled but for God's:

"Let your Kingdom come, let your will be done"—not mine.

According to Jesus, it's not about me anymore, and prayer is not just a way of getting what I want.

And he practiced what he preached.

Just before the Roman soldiers came to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus fell on his knees to pray. His own will was to go on living. What he wanted was to find some way out of the agonizing death that lay before him. Just like you and me, Jesus had a natural human desire to evade the suffering and bleeding and dying that he saw headed his way. So he prayed, *"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me."* But then he got to down to the heart of what prayer is really all about: *"Yet not my will but yours be done."*

And his prayer was answered: an angel came and strengthened him to do what God wanted him to do for the redemption of the world. The circumstances facing Jesus had not changed. The Cross and the grave still loomed before him. But when Jesus got up from his knees, he was changed, strengthened, empowered to fulfill the perfect will of God for his life and for the life of the world. That's how prayer made a difference for Jesus, and that's how prayer can transform our lives as well.

What difference does prayer make? I'll tell you.

Prayer may—or *may not!*—change *"things,"* but real prayer—the kind Jesus taught and modeled for his disciples—*will always change us!* And when we are changed, then we can become co-workers with God in transforming the things that need to be changed in our own lives, in the lives of those for whom we pray, and finally in the life of the world that Jesus died to save. For us today, this is the Word of the Lord. Amen.