

## The Power of Prayer Matthew 6:7-15

Jesus says we should avoid vain repetitions – that means we should not heap up empty phrases when we pray. Surely, He’s not talking us to modern Presbyterians, right? I don’t know about you, but the problem I have with prayer is more often brevity than too much elaboration. Sure, before COVID, we could all plead our busy schedules that made it too hard for us to find time to pray. But when March rolled around, even though the shutdowns and social distancing requirements cleared our calendars, it has still been easier to medicate our disappointment with distraction than with prayer, hasn’t it? Vain repetition? Not a problem for us.

But that doesn’t mean we can’t learn something from these verses. After all, have you ever heard folks talking about the “power of prayer?” Have you ever heard folks say, “prayer works?” I have, and there’s a sense in which that is of course true. For haven’t we all witnessed God answering so many of our prayers throughout our lives – sometimes in miraculous ways? Moreover, we know that Jesus taught us to be persistent in prayer. He said we should hold up our urgent concerns before God as steadily as we might knock at a friend’s door at midnight to get some food to set before a travelling visitor (Luke 11:5-13). He said we should pray as ceaselessly as a helpless widow pleading for justice against her adversary (Luke 18:1-8).

But here’s the catch: we must never fall into the trap of thinking that God will answer our prayers because we pray, or because we pray a certain number of times, or according to a certain format or formula. We must never imagine that we can manipulate God, forcing Him to comply with our wishes because we say some sort of incantation, or perform some sort of ritual. God is not a genie who does our bidding because we rub the lamp of prayer.

And that means we must never assume that the power lies in the prayer itself. And so it is probably better not to talk about the power of prayer, or to say that prayer works. For the power doesn’t lie prayer – the power lies in God. It is not prayer that works – it is God Who works. That’s why we bring our urgent concerns and cares to Him in prayer – because He’s the only One Who can really solve our problems.

And Jesus reassures us of that very fact in verse 8, doesn’t He? He says, “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” So, even if our grammar is not polished, even if our memories are poor or our knowledge is incomplete, we can be sure that God knows what we’re talking about. We can be sure that God will do what’s best for us and for our loved ones.

But have you ever wondered if God was listening to your prayers? Have you ever prayed urgently, even desperately for something or someone, only to have your prayers go unanswered?

Sure, we all have. Some of you may remember praying for soldiers overseas who never did come home. And we’ve all offered prayers for the sick who didn’t recover, or prayers for jobs that were lost, or prayers for children who keep making bad decisions. Over the last seven months or so, we’ve all been praying that this COVID mess would go away.

And so maybe it's because some of our prayers go unanswered that we talk about the power of prayer rather than the power of God. Maybe saying things that way, maybe focusing on our prayers rather than our Father helps us hold on to our faith in God. For doesn't talking about the power of prayer instead of the power of God let God off the hook? For it allows us to wonder – maybe if we just prayed more often, or more fervently, maybe God would hear us. Maybe if we just prayed with more faith, God would give us what we need.

But think of the most heart-wrenching unanswered prayer ever offered – a prayer offered in perfect faith and devotion: “Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup of suffering away from me!” That's the prayer that Jesus offered in the Garden of Gethsemane. But on that same night, He would be betrayed and abandoned by His closest friends, beaten and mocked by His worst enemies. And the next day He would drink the cup of suffering down to the dregs, as the Father allowed Him to be crucified. Oh no, we most certainly don't always get everything we pray for, and it's not just because of some problem with our prayers.

But there's a very good reason for this. For look again at verse 8 – Jesus says that God knows exactly what we need: not what we want, not what we think we need, what we truly need.

For what did the people of Jerusalem think they needed at the time Jesus was crucified? The same sorts of things that animate those crazy crowds in Portland: political freedom. Justice. Relief from the high taxes and onerous regulations of the Roman Empire. And so, because of all these urgent needs, they wanted a Messiah to rise up and sit on the throne of David, a Messiah Who would destroy the Romans and restore freedom and prosperity to the Jews. And when Jesus refused to give them what they wanted, what they were absolutely certain that they needed, they crucified Him.

But in doing that, God was making sure that all of us have what we truly need. For our greatest need is not for this or that candidate to win an election – no one stays in office forever. Our greatest need is not for a plague or a war to come to an end – both Scripture and history warn us that there's always another one waiting in the wings. Our greatest need isn't even for a loved one to be healed – for all healing is only temporary in this life.

No, our greatest need is not for any of the material things in this life, not even for the abundant and delicious food on that table. No, our greatest need was not for Jesus to have His prayer answered in the Garden of Gethsemane, but to have His body given for us and His blood shed for us. In other words, our greatest need is what's on this table – the forgiving, cleansing, spiritual presence of Christ. And until we recognize that our greatest need is for Jesus Himself, for Him to become part of us and for us to become part of Him, well, even if we were to have all our other prayers answered, they wouldn't do us any real good.

But if we will pray for what we really need, if we pray to draw ever closer to Christ, if we pray for Him to fill us with His Holy Spirit, then we won't need to go on and on in prayer. For we can be sure that God will give us what we really need – right here, and right now.