

**“Questions about Prayer and Praying”
Matthew 6:5 – 14; Luke 11:1 – 13**

So I’m going to play a clip and in it Greg is meeting his fiancé’s parents for the first time and he has been asked to say grace.

Play Video Clip: “Meet the Parents” – Greg’s grace.

Do you remember the first time you ever prayed out loud in front of others?
For me it was as new believer in a youth led pre-church prayer meeting.
I prayed at home in my own room but this was in front of others and I was as nervous as anything.
But by God’s grace I pushed through.
It was a first but a very important one.

I think it goes without saying, prayer is core to what it means to follow Jesus. I mean, there are a number disciplines that Christians have practiced across different places and spaces, down through the centuries, and one of those is prayer.

So why pray?

If there is one aspect that is thread through all of Jesus’ teaching on prayer, it’s this: prayer is not something you do, it’s Someone you talk to.

That should shape our praying to.

Jesus’ criticism of prayer in Matthew wasn’t posture or that it was public – it was about pretence – it was something they did to be seen by others.

Although there are a lot of clear encouragements to pray in Scripture, if we’re honest, there are times when it raises all kinds of questions.

“What do you think are the biggest questions around prayer?”

Tell the person next to you.

It might be practical questions – when, where, how often.
It might be... just not knowing what to say.

I think it’s unanswered prayer.
It might be like there’s silence. It’s like your prayers go out into the ether...

So many sincere Christians pray and they ask, and... nothing seems to change.

There are estimates that 80 percent of prayers are for healing.

I believe that healing— that inexplicable, often instantaneous recovery – is for today.

Some you here can testify it's reality.

We also know that often healing does occur as quickly as we would like or not at all.

It applies to other areas as well.

A broken relationship where one party prays desperately for it to be mended... and it isn't and the other has gone or moved on.

Or a prodigal child hasn't returned.

Or a family member has made poor decisions and continues to make poor decisions that brings chaos into their lives and the lives of others.

I do believe healing is for today and that God is an interventionist God.

So what's going on?

The Complexity of Prayer ¹

Prayer is not always as straight forward as we would like it to be.

We already know that from experience.

While prayer itself is as simple as talking to a friend, the actual mechanics of prayer are more multi-layered than we assume.

So I want you to have a think for a moment:

“What factors affect the outcome of our prayers?”

Have you ever thought about that?

Have chat with your neighbour and then we'll have some feedback.

When we look at the hundreds of different prayers in the Bible we come face-to-face with a number of variables that affect the way our prayers impact on our world

¹ For the points below I am indebted to Gregory Boyd, *Is God to Blame* (London: Kingsway Publications, 2003) and Mick Duncan, *Who Stands Fast* (Springvale: Urban Neighbours of Hope, 2005), to which I have added my insights.

Let's start with:

- **God's Will**

Praying in accordance to God's will is crucial.

In Jesus we see what God's will is; healing the sick, caring for the broken, setting the captives free, preaching about the Kingdom of God. We are to follow His example.

Now we might say, "But surely, that's all there is to it. God's will can't be thwarted."

Well, yes it can.

For example, it's God's will that no one should perish but all people come to repentance and relationship to God through Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:9). True??? That's clearly God's will.

But we know that this is one specific area where God's will *is* frustrated at times.

We know that sometimes people live in such a way that they bring pain into their own lives and into the lives of others.

Which brings us to another variable:

- **Human Free Will**

"God plays by the rules, especially the rules he in his wisdom chose for this world. One of the rules is for human's freedom to choose." ²

God is not manipulative, coercive or controlling.

By His Spirit he may urge, he may persuade, he may plead, but He will not overpower someone's free will.

There is no doubt there are times when we wish it were otherwise.

The good news is that the influence of God's Spirit does increase as we pray. God will woo, welcome, encourage and pursue.

Another variable is:

- **Faith**

Faith is a component that is found in many of the stories found in the Bible. Jesus commended people for their faith or trust in Him.

On occasions when He healed people, Jesus even went as far as to say, "your faith has made you well."

Conversely there were times explicit times in Scripture where unbelief or lack of trust hindered God's power.

² Michael Duncan, *Who Stands Fast* (Springvale: Urban Neighbours of Hope, 2005), 41.

Mark explains one such occasion: Jesus “could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their unbelief.” ³

We need to be wary though.

Some streams of the Christian church have made “faith” *the* determining factor for seeing prayer answered or not.

It is one aspect of prayer among many.

- **The Faith of Others**

We see in the Bible the story of man who was paralysed that we looked at last week.

You could imagine his state of mind. We not told how long he had been afflicted by this condition but you could imagine he would have been in deep despair.

Well, we’re told that his friends take him to see Jesus, except there is a problem; such a crowd has gathered that they can’t get through by normal means. So they do some home renovations and lower the man down through a hole in the roof. Jesus’ seeing their faith – *the faith the stretcher bearers* – completely heals the paralysed man. ⁴

There have been times in my life – actually a lot of times – I need the faith of others, and that makes the difference.

We can add to that:

- **The Number of people praying**

A couple of years after I became a Christian my grandfather became sick with cancer. I belonged to a youth group that held weekly prayer meetings and I asked for prayer for my grandfather. Week after week a group of ten but often twenty of us interceded before God on his behalf.

Now my grandfather wasn’t a Christian in any way. I don’t even know if he ever attended church in his earlier years.

Yet an amazing thing happened: my grandfather’s cancer went into remission. During this remission he started to attend a local church. And before he died he became a follower of Jesus.

³ Mark 6:5, 6.

⁴ Mark 2:1 – 5.

Some activities we can accomplish alone; others require help.
The larger the rock the more likely we will need help in lifting it. There is no reason to think the labour of prayer is any different.

And have we considered:

- **Angelic activity**

The Bible explicitly speaks of inter-dimensional beings known as angels.
The majority of these angels serve God, while the rest have fallen and aligned themselves with Satan.

Through their influence and activity they seek to hinder God's plans and purposes.

Scripture sometimes removes the veil so that we can 'see' what's happening in the spiritual realm.

A classic case is the story of Daniel (Daniel 10:12 – 13).

Daniel we are told sought the Lord persistently in prayer. God answers his prayer by sending an angel to him. The angel affirms that Daniel has been heard: "Since the first day that you set your heart to humble yourself before God, your words were heard and I have come in response to them."

This all seems straight forward. But then the angel adds: "But the Prince of Persia resisted me twenty-one days" until another angel intervened.

Paul insisted that our "struggle is not against flesh and blood."⁵ He speaks of a time when his plans were thwarted by Satan.⁶

In our rationalistic Western climate we do well to acknowledge that prayer can be hindered by forces that we cannot see but are just as real what we can see.

Then there is:

- **Sin**

The presence of will block the flow of our prayers much like a dam blocks the natural flow of a river.

Scripture makes it clear before prayers can be answered, known sin must be confronted and confessed.

I mean Jesus stated that we are to make sure we have forgiving everybody before we pray (Mark 11:25).

⁵ Ephesians 6:12

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 2:18

Proverbs 21:13 is clear:

“If a man [or woman] shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.”

If you're a married man, consider 1 Peter chapter 3:

“Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the [physically] weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, *so that nothing will hinder your prayers.*”

If our conscience pricks us, or the Holy Spirit convicts, we need to 'fess up and seek God's cleansing and forgiveness. James tells us that the prayer of the righteous person is powerful and effective (James 5:16).

- **The Kingdom is Already but Not Yet**

Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”⁷

In his teaching, his lifestyle, his healings, his power over demons Jesus was saying is what God's reign is like, and it's good!

Jesus came saying, “*This* is what the life of the age to come looks like and it's found in me. I am the one who is bringing it about.”

Not only that, but Jesus said by putting your trust in Him and giving your highest loyalty to Him, you will be able to share in it.

In and through Jesus *the life of the age to come has invaded this present age.*

In Jesus' teaching, his lifestyle, his healings, his power over demons, through his death and resurrection, the life of the age to come has entered this world.

BUT... we also live in a world marked by injury, illness and death, environmental degradation and incredible cruelty.

The awful purges and genocides of the last century were carried out by neighbours who had lived for decades beside the people they killed.

⁷ Matthew 6:10.

Closer to home we all have moments when we act in insensitive and unthinking ways.

We say and do things – often small things – that hurt immensely.

So live and pray in this space of the *already* but *not yet*.

How then should we pray, and with all these factors at work, can we have any confidence?

In Luke 18 verse 1 Jesus said we should pray and never give up.

Luke chapter 11 verse 9 we read:

“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

For everyone who asks receives; those who seek find; and to those who knock, the door will be opened.”

Literally, “Keep on asking... keep on knocking... keep on seeking...”

There is a labouring aspect in prayer.

We should pray and not give up.

This is not to twist the arm of a reluctant God but it recognises that there are other factors in prayer and a discernment to know what variables are at play.

In fact the contrast in our Luke readings is a reluctant friend on one hand and generous, compassionate Father in Heaven on the other.

The example of the friend who finally gives in highlights the persistent nature of prayer in the face of the variables we face.

And our Father in Heaven is open handed towards and in prayer is able to give us the greatest gift of all – His Holy Spirit.

We pray with confidence trusting the heart of a generous Father whatever we face.

The Most Important Prayer You’ll Ever Pray

Haven’t said that, there is one prayer that God will always answer with a resounding “Yes!”

It’s a prayer that He will put His full weight behind.

It’s one He always hears and responds to.

It’s a prayer the angels in heaven through a party over.

It's a prayer of surrender; it's a prayer of salvation.
It's prayer where new life begins.

It goes something like this:

Lord Jesus,

You are the world's true King and put my trust in You this morning.
I believe that You lived, died on the Cross for my sins and rose again.
Please forgive me and make me clean.
I invite You to come into my heart and life by Your Spirit.
I trust in You now as the Forgiver of my sins and King over my whole life
as I follow You in the community of the Church.

Amen.

Have you said a prayer like this?

The Bible says that "if we "confess Jesus is Lord with our mouths and believe in our hearts God raise Him from the dead, we will be saved." (Romans 10:9).

You may have gone to church for a week, or a month, or a year, or even decades but it may be you've never bowed your heart and bent your knee to King Jesus.

Is that you this morning?

Make today that day when Jesus becomes your true King and forgiver of your sins.

And I'm after our service today, I going to wait around at front and we can talk some more.

Then for others, it's not unanswered prayer, it's found in our reading from Matthew

Jesus says, when you pray, "... your Father knows what you need before you ask him".

If God's prayer, why bother?

Well this God knows us most intimately, knows our secrets, our hopes, our joys, our wins, our losses... He loves to hear your voice.

Prayer is not something we do, it's Someone we talk to.