

I want to address a subject that many of us struggle with— prayer. Deep inside many of us want to know if prayer makes a difference. And if it does make a difference, what difference does it make? Does prayer really work? If it does work, how does it work? Those of us who are Christians know that prayer is something we ought to do. If we need something — if we are confused about something — if we need guidance or direction — we have been taught to pray about it. In fact, most of us have heard well-meaning friends ask us, “Have you prayed about it?”

You know that prayer is important but maybe you struggle with prayer because you never seem to get the results you are looking for. You know you need to take time to talk with God but it just doesn't seem to get you anywhere. You know you need to pray but you just don't seem to get an answer. Maybe this frustrates you because you hear people talk about the power of prayer like God is eating cornflakes with them at the breakfast table every morning and when you pray it feels like you are ringing the door bell to an empty house.

Maybe you are someone who has a heavy burden or a serious issue in your life and you have prayed repeatedly about it and you wonder if all your prayers are falling on deaf ears. Maybe you have prayed for a troubled child, a sick relative, a job, a better marriage, or some other serious issue and you don't seem to be getting the answer you need. You wonder, “Is God listening?” Maybe you feel you are not doing it right and you think if you buy the latest book on prayer or attend a conference you can find the right prayer technique that will “open sesame”!

Johnny, a very bright five year old tells his Dad that he would quite like a baby brother and that along with his request he offers to do whatever he can to help. His Dad a very bright 35 year old pauses for a moment and then replies “I tell you what Johnny if you can pray everyday for two months for a baby brother I promise God will give you one. Johnny responds eagerly to Dad's challenge and goes to his bedroom each night and starts praying for a baby brother. He prays every night for a whole month until he gets impatient and skeptical and decides to pack it all in. After one month Johnny's mum goes to hospital. When she comes home his parents call Johnny into the bedroom. He curiously walks into the bedroom expecting to see nothing, when he sees little bundle right next to his mother. His Dad pulls back the blanket and there is ... not one baby brother but two. His mother had twins. Johnny's Dad looks down at him and says “now aren't you glad you prayed?” Johnny hesitated a little and then looks up at his Dad and says: ‘Yes, but aren't you glad that I quit when I did?’

Perhaps you find the act of praying difficult because you get easily distracted and bored. “Okay God, here I am, I have this need and.... Is God really listening or am I just talking to myself? ... I do need to get to the supermarket... There is that email I need to return.... Well, I can always pray later. After all, this is God. He knows me. He knows my thoughts before I think them. Why do I have to pray when he knows what I am going to say? I can be doing something more productive with my time...”

Can you relate? Some of you may be skeptical about prayer. Maybe you think it is just wishful thinking or whistling in the dark. You think the whole idea of the Creator of the world listening to one prayer among billions is ridiculous. “Really? God has to listen to so many prayers! How does that work?” Does prayer make any difference or are we just wasting our breath? Does prayer matter or are there better things we can do with our time? So much of our frustration with prayer has to do with a lack of understanding of what prayer is. Is it religious magic? Is it giving a cosmic Santa

Claus a list? Is it putting our order into the universe? Is it crossing our fingers Christian style? What is prayer really? Until we understand what prayer is we will never understand the huge difference it can make in our lives.

I want to help you understand what prayer is and how to do it. Prayer is the single most important act for anyone who seeks to follow God. We can't know the will of God for our lives unless we pray. We can't be strong in the face of temptation unless we pray. We can't be the people God wants us to be unless we pray. We can't be healthy spiritually unless we pray. We can't make lasting changes in our lives unless we pray. We can't get faith right until we get prayer right.

Jesus knew this. Jesus understood the importance of prayer and the difference it makes. Jesus prayed all the time. In the first chapter of the gospel of Mark we find that Jesus woke up exhausted from all the healings he did the day before. We are told that he sneaked away to a quiet place and prayed. He had a demanding job and needed to pray as often as he could (Mark 1:35). In fact, in the gospel of Luke we find fifteen different references to Jesus praying! At every turn in his life and ministry Jesus was praying. He prayed as he began his ministry. He prayed to renew himself. He prayed before he chose his disciples. He prayed as he evaluated his ministry. He prayed as he served and healed people. He prayed as he faced his crucifixion. He prayed on the cross. He prayed after he was resurrected. Jesus was always praying. It wasn't an option for Jesus. He knew that in order for him to accomplish what God wanted him to do, he needed to pray. If Jesus thought it was that important to pray, don't you think we should be praying?

In Luke 11 we notice the disciples picked up on Jesus' habit of praying. They saw him praying all the time and thought that they could learn something from it. So one time when Jesus was praying in a certain place, the disciples approached him and asked, "Jesus, that prayer thing you are always doing? Can you teach us to do it too?" Jesus agreed and began to teach them. First he gave them a powerful prayer to learn — the Lord's Prayer. After that, he taught them about the importance of prayer. Please understand — this teaching was not from a prayer guru who had written a best-selling book. This was a lesson on prayer from Jesus himself. Then Jesus told his disciples a parable about the importance of persistence in prayer (Luke 11:5-8). Jesus underscored that the key to effective prayer is to pray persistently and habitually. Are we surprised? For prayer to make a difference it must become a habit.

Many of us forget this simple truth. We pray for something once and we are disappointed when nothing changes. Perhaps we think, "Doesn't God hear me the first time?" Yes, God hears us the first time, but prayer is deeper than that. Next Jesus basically tells them that God always answers our prayers (Luke 11:9-11). Whenever we ask, God will answer. Whenever we search, we will find. Whenever we knock, God will open the door. Jesus says this is true for everyone. Everyone who seeks God persistently in prayer will receive an answer. This is a spiritual law. God answers prayer. The power of God through prayer is available to everyone.

Notice what Jesus did not say in this text. Jesus did not say everyone who asks receives the answer they want, finds what they are looking for, or has the door they want open opened. God always answers us, but we may not always like the answer or expect the answer we get. What we want from God and what we receive from God are two different things. God loves us too much to always give us what we want because sometimes what we want is not good for us or what is best for us, but God will always answer us.

Jesus clearly states that there is something we can always count on to receive from God when we pray. Jesus says that whenever we seek God in prayer, God will always give to us the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:11-13). What is the purpose of the Holy Spirit? To love us, mould us, shape us, guide us, empower us, and direct us.

This means that prayer is not putting our order in to God. It is not rubbing a magic lamp or giving a Santa Claus in the sky our list. Prayer is not getting our phrasing right so we can unlock the God machine. Prayer is the one essential practice that brings us closer to God and allows us to be formed by his love. Prayer is not “getting” from God; prayer is intimacy with God. Prayer is developing a relationship with God. That’s why it must be a habit. Prayer is not meant to persuade God; it is meant to change us. Prayer does not give us what we want from God; prayer helps us want what we need from God. What we need is to get our hearts right. What we need is to get our souls right.

What we need is to get our relationships right and this can only happen through a relationship with God in prayer. The truth is that most of the time we don’t want a relationship; we want a road map. We pray, “Okay God, I don’t need much of your time. You don’t need to get too involved. Just give me some direction here. What should I do?” God replies, “Just hang out with me for a while. Let’s spend some time together. I want to show you some things.” We persist, “Lord, really. I don’t need that much of you. Just give me a yes or no.” God replies, “Just abide in me and my love from day to day and you will find what you are looking for.”

God still wants us to bring him our needs, our desires, and our questions and doubts. God loves us and wants us to give him all that we are but the answer to our questions, needs, and desires comes as we develop an intimate relationship with God through prayer. When we develop intimacy with God through prayer, we find that abiding in his love and being the people he wants us to be is where true life is found. The more we experience true life the more we want to please God. And the more we want to please God the easier it is for us to change. And the easier it is for us to change the quicker we are to pray, “Lord, I want to fit into your plans.” Do you want God to move like a tidal wave in your life? Do you want prayer to make a huge impact in your life? Be prepared to pray, “Lord, whatever you want, that’s what I want too!” When you are ready to surrender like that in prayer, life gets exciting and becomes more interesting than you would ever imagine. You see, we must move from “Lord, this is how I want things to work in my life” to “Lord, I want what you want for my life.” If you desire intimacy with God through prayer today, I have a simple suggestion for you. If you do what I am about to suggest you will experience the difference that prayer can make in your life. For the next seven days start your day with prayer. It doesn’t have to be a long time, just five to ten minutes. You can stay in your bed, sit in a chair, or do it at the breakfast table. Get a devotional or turn to your favourite passage of scripture. Read the devotional or scripture passage. When you find that you are quiet on the inside, pray, “Lord, I want to get to know you better. I want to know your love. I want a relationship with you.” Then share with God what is on your mind and heart. Don’t hold back. Just share it. He is listening and wants to hear from you. Be sure to include not only your own needs but the needs of others. Before you end your prayer time, pray, “Lord, I want to please you. I want to do your will. Whatever it is you want, that’s what I want too. I want to fit into your plans. Show me the way.” Jesus knew the power of submitting to God’s will. Perhaps Jesus’ most important prayer was the one he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. His capture and crucifixion were close at hand. He was emotionally and spiritually exhausted. He was tempted not to go through with God’s plan. He pleaded with God to let the “cup” pass from him. It was at that moment when he said the prayer that changed everything — “Lord, not my will but yours be done.” This was not Jesus’ first prayer to God. He had been praying his whole life and ministry. He had developed such

love and trust for God that when it came to the moment of truth, he was prepared to surrender to God's will. As a result, the world was changed.

It is my assertion that what enabled Jesus to do what God had sent him to do for the world was his consistent prayer life throughout his ministry. Just imagine how close you could feel to God if you prayed more. Imagine what God could show you if you prayed more. Just imagine what God could do through you if you prayed more. Imagine the strength and wisdom you could have if you prayed more. Imagine the opportunities from God that would open for you if you prayed more. Imagine the person you could become if you prayed more. Imagine the relationships that could be healed if you prayed more. Imagine the impact your church would have if everyone in our congregation developed the habit of prayer. Imagine the lives you could touch for Christ if you prayed more often. Imagine. Amen.

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