

# The Nature of Prayer

Luke 11:1-13  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
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I believe in the power of prayer. I always have. But to be perfectly honest, and a bit vulnerable, given that I'm a Presbyterian pastor standing behind a pulpit, I'm not as sure what it is I believe about prayer anymore. **What I, you, or anyone believes about the nature of prayer is directly connected to what I, you, or anyone else believes about the nature and character of God – who God is, and what God does and doesn't do. It fits, therefore, that if a person's understanding of God changes, so does one's understanding of prayer.**

My own understanding of traditional prayer has certainly changed since the early conservative and more evangelical days of my journey of faith. That was back when I believed that everything that happens, happens for a divine reason – that it is either caused by or allowed by God according to some divine plan, perhaps pre-ordained. However, the journey into progressive Christianity had led me, and I know many if not most of you, into new understandings.

I'm not sure anymore how God works in and through creation, except to draw us together in and through love. And there are several things that have contributed to that uncertainty. For instance, back in 2013, nine years ago now, I addressed the nature of prayer the Sunday after the devastating F-5 tornado caused such horrific destruction, trauma, and death in Moore and Shawnee, Oklahoma. It's something I also addressed after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, and after 9-11, and Hurricane Katrina. When certain Christians loudly proclaimed, "Look at what God had to do to get our attention!" And then, they tied that to the sinful nature of certain groups of people.

In that 2013 sermon, provocatively entitled, *Can God Intervene?* (May 26, 2013) I questioned the nature of an interventionist God. The purpose was to address that tragedy in response to a common notion by many, even to this day, that **if enough people had prayed for God to intervene, then God would have done so. I wondered aloud, cynically, just how many praying people does it take for God to stop or divert a tornado.** How many for a hurricane, how many to stop a pandemic, a terrorist, the epidemic of senseless mass gun violence shootings in our nation? How many and how often to overcome deep-seated racism, gender inequality, injustice, and the deepening divisions in our country? How many and how often to cure a person with an incurable disease, or keep a person from dying from an illness or tragedy?

**If those prayers aren't answered to our liking, many either blame God, or simply claim, like I used to, that it's just God's will, and we are not meant to understand. Or worse, we blame ourselves for not having enough faith, or not praying hard and often enough.** That's certainly one interpretation of today's Gospel reading from Luke 11 that indicates if we are simply persistent enough God will give us what we ask for and seek. However, how does that play out in reality?

**The other option, as mentioned, is to reevaluate our understanding of the nature of prayer and of God.** But that option is hard to do. To address that, I stated in that

sermon: "I am deeply aware that when some of our core religious beliefs – the ones we were taught from an early age and continue to hold dear – are called into question and challenged, that a deep sense of discomfort, perhaps even fear, enters into the equation." Yet, **discomfort, I suggest, is simply a part of maturing in our faith.** I now question, therefore, whether prayer is really about trying to sway or convince God with our words, or the number of people praying, or the number of times we pray for something to bring about our desired goals – to get what we ask for and seek.

For the past four months, our Adult Church School Class has been studying and discussing **John Pavlovitz's latest book, *If God is Love Don't Be a Jerk*.** Usually spending one week per chapter, we spent two weeks earlier this month looking at one short chapter where he addresses the nature of prayer and how he has changed his understanding since his conservative evangelical days from decades ago. **Concerning the specific issue of prayers of intercession, where we plead with God to intercede, to change the course of what might happen otherwise if we didn't pray, he states:**

I understand why we do this. **Interceding in prayer for other people is a beautiful expression of care and solidarity** and effort to somehow stand beside someone in unthinkable trauma, to let them know that we love them and feel their urgency. **In this way, prayer surely works.** It lets people understand the depth of our concern for them, allowing them to feel a little less alone, lifting them emotionally and physically as they face the senseless suffering of this life.

**We should pray and let people know that we are praying for them,** that we are pulling for them and thinking of them and standing with them from where we are. **I believe prayer changes our hearts as we pray, that it binds us to one another, and that it increases hope in otherwise hopeless situations...**"

But Pavlovitz questions and doubts whether this happens to save sick people from death. Pavlovitz goes on to explain why.

To contend that God heals when we pray for those who are terribly sick or physically injured or emotionally traumatized is to **imagine a Creator who needs to be convinced.** It is to paint an image of a God who – though already fully aware of the gravity of the situation and the worry of loved ones and the reality of the injury – **refuses to move until we ask Him to.**

In this way, prayer appeals can almost become spiritual GoFundMe campaigns, where we're told that if we "just get enough people praying," healing will happen, as if there is some unknown magic number or critical mass that will move the Almighty in our favor...

**By seeing healing as a divine choice, we are essentially praying to change God's mind, asking Him to save people from Himself by undoing suffering He either allowed or manufactured to begin with. The challenging fallout from praying for someone in that way is that we have to make sense of the results afterward.**

If the person lives or gets better, we somehow believe we have engineered their survival and (if we're cognizant enough to others' suffering) need to process why

our prayers were enough and those for the person in the next hospital room weren't. And when healing *doesn't* come, we are stuck second-guessing whether we prayed hard enough or lamenting that we didn't enlist enough "prayer warriors" to effectively move God, or we try to figure out why our petitions failed. Either way, it's not a healthy way to engage with the mystical source of all life or the unpredictability of healing and recovery.

Now, I realize that all this may be a lot to process, and it might even be painful for some to hear, but I think it's worth our time and effort to explore and reflect upon. **While I personally continue to pray for those who are sick, as well as for the medical team and caregivers, I no longer pray for a cure – as in a miraculous physical rejuvenation. But I do pray for healing and wholeness, knowing that it is different than praying for a cure. For there is emotional and spiritual healing and wholeness, even in the process of dying and accepting death.**

Therefore, I will always continue to ask for your prayers, and I will always continue to pray for you. But as Pavlovitz states it:

I no longer believe in a supernatural Santa Claus who dispenses life and death based on the conduct or the heart of the recipients and their friends. **I don't believe in a God who withholds miraculous healing or compassionate care until sufficiently begged by us to do so. I believe prayer works by unlocking our empathy for others, that it knits us together in deeper relationship.** I believe it to be a beautiful expression of love for and solidarity with people who are suffering; that it connects us personally to one another and to God in ways that cannot be quantified. I believe it is a **sacred act of kindness** we extend to other human beings to declare oneness with them. **But I don't believe prayer can change God's mind about healing people we love – nor do I want it to.**

I realize I've spent a good portion of this sermon quoting John Pavlovitz because I not only agree with his perspective, I could never have stated it in a more relevant and succinct way. In my ministry, **I have come to learn that it's spiritually healthier to seek the experience of God's Presence in the difficulties in life, rather than to try to understand if any of it is part of God's divine plan, which we cannot discern anyway beyond loving God, neighbor, self, and all creation.**

I also realize that I've only addressed one very small piece of the entire issue of the nature of prayer, prayers of intercession. So let me quickly add how much I encourage all of us to **never stop engaging in prayers of thanksgiving and appreciation – for God, for others, and for life itself.** Perhaps a major purpose of prayer is to indeed make us a more grateful and forgiving people, a more generous and peaceful people, a more compassionate and empathetic people when others are hurting, and indeed a more loving people.

**Prayer is for our benefit in that it has the ability to help transform hearts and minds – ours and others.** It is that transformation, and responding actions and words, which in turn has the power to make a difference in the world. **Our prayers inevitably draw us closer to God and to one another.** For prayer necessarily assumes that we are not alone, that there is a Sacred Presence beyond ourselves, even as we acknowledge God's Presence among and within us. **Prayer is an important way to acknowledge our need to be in relationship or connection with that Presence.**

I encourage you to seriously reflect upon your understanding of the purpose and nature of prayer. And by connection, your understanding of the nature and character of God.

Amen.

Resources:

John Pavlovitz, *If God is Love, Don't Be a Jerk: Finding a Faith that Makes Us Better Humans*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2021.

*Feasting On the Word* Lectionary Commentary