

# What Exactly Is Prayer Anyway?

October 20, 2019

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## **Luke 18:**

[1] And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

[2] He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor regarded man;

[3] and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Vindicate me against my adversary.'

[4] For a while he refused; but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor regard man,

[5] yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming.'"

[6] And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says.

[7] And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?

[8] I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

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Grace be unto you and peace, from God Our Father and Our Lord and Savior Jesus The Christ!

A girl watched a holy man praying and baptizing people in the river. When the man had finished his prayer after baptizing a man, the girl approached him and asked, "Will you teach me to pray?" The holy man studied the girl's face, and agreed to her request. He took her into the river. The holy man instructed her to lean over so her face was close to the water. The girl did as she was told. Then the holy man pushed her whole head under the water. The girl struggled to free herself in order to breathe. Once she got her breath back, she gasped, "What did you do that for?" The holy man said, "I gave you your first lesson." "What do you mean?" asked the astonished girl. He answered, "When you long to pray as much as you long to breathe, then I will be able to teach you how to pray."

Johnny, a very bright 5-year-old, already knew how to pray. When Johnny told his daddy one day he'd like to have a baby brother, his dad, a very bright 35-year-old, paused for a moment and then replied, "I'll tell you what, Johnny, if you pray every day for two months for a baby

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brother, I guarantee that God will give you one!"

Johnny responded eagerly to his dad's challenge and went to his bedroom early that night to start praying for a baby brother. He prayed every night for a whole month, but after that time, he began to get skeptical. He checked around the neighborhood and found out that what he thought was going to happen, had never occurred in the history of the neighborhood. You just don't pray for two months and then, wham-o, a new baby brother. So, Johnny quit praying.

After another month, Johnny's mother went to the hospital. When she came back home, Johnny's parents called him into the bedroom. He cautiously walked toward the room, not expecting to find anything, and there was a little bundle lying right next to his mother. His dad pulled back the blanket and there was -- not one baby brother, but two!! His mother had twins! Johnny's dad looked down at him and said, "Now aren't you glad you prayed?" Johnny hesitated a little and then looked up at his dad and said, "Yes, but aren't you glad I quit when I did?"

What exactly is prayer anyway?

Each of us has his or her own definition of prayer, and each of us has his or her own personal experiences with prayer and prayer stories we can share with one another, which range from the first prayers we ever learned as children, to the sometimes sobbing prayers we pray as adults for our own children and spouses and parents.

What is prayer for you? How do you define it? How much is prayer a part of your life?

Once as a storm raged, the captain realized his ship was sinking fast. He called out, "Anyone here know how to pray?" One man stepped forward. "Aye, Captain, I know how to pray." "Good," said the captain, "you pray while the rest of us put on our life jackets - we're one short."

Prayer is not a subject that can be dealt with, "put on like a life jacket", in one sermon. Or, for that matter, even in one lifetime. Yet, it is something anyone who wishes to be Jesus' disciple must continually wrestle with. Like Jacob in today's first lesson, we are to wrestle with it and never let go until we get a blessing. Like the importunate widow in today's Gospel, we are to persevere in prayer until the justice we seek is released from the Throne of Mercy. And as Jesus exhorts his disciples at the beginning of today's Gospel, we are to pray continually, always he says, so as not to lose heart.

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For many people, though, prayer is regarded as suspect because, even after repeated requests, the hoped for results still have not occurred.

We are familiar with Ted Turner, the cable television billionaire. Turner, at the American Humanist Association banquet, where he received an award for his work on the environment and world peace, openly criticized ...Christianity. He said, "*Jesus would be sick in his stomach over the way his ideas have been twisted.*" He went on to say, "*I've been saved seven or eight times. But I gave up on it, when, despite my prayers, my sister died. The more I strayed from my faith, the better I felt!*" Ted Turner is dead wrong, but he is perfectly reflecting the attitude many hold concerning God and the matter of prayer. Many people will pray about something for a while and when the answer doesn't come when they think it should, they just throw up their hands in defeat and say, "*Why bother?*" Many of us won't admit that, but we have done the same thing!

We won't ever fully understand prayer in our lifetimes, and it certainly can't be dealt with in one sermon, but there are two things about prayer I want you to go away with this morning, if you haven't, in fact, come with when you arrived!

The first is this: prayer is getting yourself in line with God. It is aligning your will to God's will. Someone has put it this way, "The primary effect of prayer is not on God, but on us. God's love is already unconditional, God's justice perfect, God's compassion without limit. God recognizes our needs even before we do. It's not God who needs to change, it is up to us to get in line with God's program, and prayer is a large part of how that comes about. The importunate widow in today's Gospel had what is known in Yiddish as chutzpah. Our prayer needs to have chutzpah, not because God is deaf but because opening our hearts to God is no easy matter."<sup>1</sup>

You and I can ask God for anything we like at any time we like and as frequently as we like. The request can be as outrageous as asking God to have a new red Ferrari sitting out in front of the church for me as soon as the service is over. Or it can be as simple as asking God to help me resist eating too many cookies at the coffee hour following worship. Whatever the prayer is, though, we should always add, "if it be your will."

The second thing about prayer I want you to go away with this morning, if you didn't come with it, is this: persevere in prayer. Keep praying. Don't stop. I'm not talking about asking God for silly or selfish things. I'm talking about the very serious and ultimate things, like requesting patience in suffering or the will to forgive or asking God to give us the wisdom to make the right choice in the voting booth. Persevere in prayer. Don't stop!

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<sup>1</sup> The Very Rev. Charles Hoffacker

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Lutheran Church



One of the ancient rabbis said, “Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is.”<sup>2</sup>

We don’t persevere, though, in order to brow beat God into doing something He was not planning to do anyway. We persevere because we trust God to do the best and kindest and most merciful and most just and most loving thing and with His own perfect timing. We know He will, we just want Him, in human terms, to hurry up! As if God can be speeded up! Or we just want Him, humanly speaking, not to forget us! As if God can have senior moments! Yet, our perseverance will not get him to hurry up or to remember us. God never forgets us. God always answers prayers with His own perfect timing. But don’t forget, God always answers in one of three ways: “Yes.” “No.” “Wait.”

We persevere in prayer because we trust God and we want to be aligned with His Will when it is revealed. That is the faith God wishes to give us. The faith, Jesus says, “The Son of Man” wishes to find when He comes.

Faith as trust that perseveres.

Years ago in Illinois, a young man with six months of schooling ran for an office in the legislature. As might have been expected, he was beaten. Next he entered business but failed in that too, and spent the next seventeen years paying the debts of his worthless partner. He fell in love with a charming lady and became engaged, and she died. He had a nervous breakdown. He ran for congress and was defeated. He then tried to obtain an appointment to the U.S. land office, but didn’t succeed. He became a candidate for the Vice-Presidency and lost. Two years later he was defeated for Senator. He ran for office once more and was elected. That man was Abraham Lincoln.

It took Winston Churchill three years to get through the eighth grade, because he couldn’t pass English -of all things! Ironically, he was asked many years later to give the commencement address at Oxford University. His now famous speech consisted of only three words: “Never give up!”<sup>3</sup>

Faith as trust that perseveres. That’s what prayer is. And sometimes we put it into words. Often, though, prayer as trust that perseveres, that keeps on asking, occurs, not in words, but in actions.

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<sup>2</sup> As told by Dr. Fred Craddock.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.frtommylane.com/stories/persistence/never\\_give\\_up.htm](http://www.frtommylane.com/stories/persistence/never_give_up.htm)

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John Greenleaf Whittier, the great Quaker abolitionist poet and hymn writer, wrote in his famous hymn, "O Brother Man,"

***O brother man, fold to thy heart thy brother; Where pity dwells, the peace of God is there; To worship rightly is to love each other, Each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer.***

Faith as trust that perseveres. That's what prayer is. It occurs in words and actions. Jesus says that is what He wants from us.

I think it is worth pointing out that in Greek, when Jesus says, as we read in English, "And I tell you, ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you,"<sup>4</sup> in Greek, it reads, "And I tell you, keep on asking .... keep on seeking ... keep on knocking ...."

Faith as trust that perseveres. That's what prayer is, exactly, anyway! Thank you for asking! Seeking! Knocking! Keep it up!

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, help us to trust you completely. And to keep on trusting, no matter what happens. You know what is best. Let the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight and in line with your sovereign will and loving purposes. Through Christ Our Lord, we pray.

Amen

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 11:9

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