

## **FAQs: 1. Does Prayer REALLY Work?**

**Matthew 6:5-15**

**January 7, 2018**

**Pastor Steve Richards**

Even if you have not embraced the idea of making New Year's resolutions, there is something about entering a new year with hope. It isn't just that 2018 has replaced 2017, but we hope for a better life or better circumstances or maybe this is the year you retire or the year you start a family or find that new job or what if 2018 could mark the end of the health challenges from the past year. It's like the song that began this service: "This is a day of new beginning." You may have thoughts about what you want in 2018, but what does God want? And what if what God wants is beyond anything you have thought or imagined? And how would you know what God wants for you?

This morning, I want to talk with you about prayer. What do we know about prayer? Maybe you grew up in a home where prayer was just this thing you did. It was before meals or before you went to bed, and you had a pattern, a ritual and words you memorized. But at other times, you weren't sure what to say. Because, if you don't use the correct words, does God even listen? Maybe it's like receiving a phone call intended for somebody else – you end the call. Does God do that? Or if you fall asleep during your prayer, what does that mean? Everything you dream about is then part of the prayer? Or maybe when you pray, you find yourself distracted and suddenly you are thinking about the grocery list. We're busy. It's a fast-paced world. It's tough to find time and space to slow down and pray. Besides, maybe you've prayed for something a long time and you didn't get an answer. Maybe God doesn't listen to prayer – or at least your prayers. We wonder, don't we? Does prayer really work?

Prayer is risky. It's a risk. We risk wasting our time. We risk not getting an answer or at least not the one we want. So maybe you've moved prayer to the margin of your life – let other people pray – I'll pray when it's a crisis or a moment of desperation – but until then, why pray?

If you look through Scripture, regardless of what you think about the Bible or your religious background if you just open the Bible, if you look at the stories, it's almost all a form of prayer. From Adam and Eve talking to God in the garden to Abraham talking to God along his journey to Moses talking to God in a burning bush, the people of Israel were a praying people. Even the name Israel means "wrestles with God." If you look at the life of Jesus, the one thing he did more than anything else – he prayed. Even when crowds gather around him; even when life was busy; even when the demands of life were high, he would withdraw from everything – and pray. Jesus once healed a boy from an evil spirit. Afterwards his disciples asked, "Why couldn't we do this kind of thing?" Jesus replied, "This kind can only come out through prayer." Jesus believed prayer mattered, which is why I think he wants his followers to be students of prayer.

Prayer is communication, and isn't communication at the heart of every relationship? Without regular communication, there is no relationship. On Christmas Eve, we heard that God sent Jesus so that we would know that we have been found. God didn't just create us. God wants a relationship with us. And without prayer, without communication, there is no relationship – not really. If you stop talking with someone, stop listening to someone – how long will the relationship last? I was meeting with a couple to plan their wedding and I asked them how did you know he/she was the one? They said, because the first time we met, we talked for hours. We talked so long the restaurant manager finally asked us to leave so the workers could go home. And they've been communicating ever since.

If the method of communication with God is prayer, many of us don't know the language, or we aren't familiar enough with the language to know when God is speaking. We want God to speak on our terms. Last summer, Amanda and I were in Ireland. She faced some health concerns that meant being admitted to a hospital in Derry, Northern Ireland. And the first time, I listen to the nurse, I had no idea what she was saying, and I don't think she understood what I was saying. We both were speaking the same language, but we could not understand. Same language, different dialects – and a few words that meant different things. To communicate effectively, we had to slow down and be patient with each other – and the communication got easier. What I've discovered by traveling to other parts of the world is that you don't even need to know each other's language as long as you get to know each other.

God is ready and waiting, and I am confident that you are only one prayer away from what God can do in your life. Jesus said: **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.** (Luke 11:5-6) God is not a genie in a bottle and your wish is not God's command. Rather it is making God's command your wish. The starting point is discerning what God wants, what God wills. Rick Warren has written the book, "What on earth am I here for?" His answer: Ask your creator! Self-help books suggest people start within – what are your dreams and desires – and that's important, but the starting point must be with God. Here's what I've learned: God will answer but God's answers are not limited by my requests. God has the ability to answer the prayers I should have prayed but lacked the knowledge or ability to even ask. Many of us (maybe most of us) don't get what we want because we don't know what we want.

One day, Jesus and his disciples were leaving the city of Jericho when two blind men by the side of the road shouted, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" And Jesus stopped and asked: "What do you want me to do for you?" Did Jesus even need to ask? It was obvious to everyone. They were blind men who sat by the roadside everyday. Yet, Jesus wants them to define exactly what they wanted from Him – to spell it out – not because Jesus didn't know, but Jesus wanted them to know what they wanted. What's on their heart. What's on your heart. And isn't that the starting point of a relationship. Like the blind men of Jericho, we need an encounter with the Son of God. We need an answer to the question he is asking, "What do you want me to do for you?"

In his teaching to his followers, Jesus says, **Go into your room, close the door, and pray...** [camera] It's not the words that matter, but we need the space and the time to get acquainted, to share what's on our heart, and to hear what's on the heart of God. God already knows what's on your mind. You are praying not because God doesn't know, but God wants you to know. And when your mind wanders it wanders to what's truly on your mind – and God is usually waiting for us to get there. Dallas Willard said, "**Prayer simply dies from efforts to pray about 'good things' that honestly do not matter to us.**" In other words, when you pray, start where you are. Bring the real you to the real God, because God knows.

So for the next 40 days, I'm inviting you – challenging you to create time and space to get acquainted with the Creator. In the bulletin, we've placed a prayer card: Keep a notebook nearby because you may want to remember what comes to you in prayer. **1. Center yourself.** Go into your room and close the door. Give yourself time and space. This is not a 30 second conversation. **2. Thank God.** Acknowledge that God is – that you aren't just talking to yourself, but you know that God is. **3. Ask for forgiveness.** Jesus says, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." Let go of what you carry. Humble yourself. I am not what I want to be. **4. Fill me with your Spirit.** Be quiet and still and let God fill you – body,

mind, heart, and spirit. **5. Lift up the needs and tasks of the day.** Whatever is on your mind, ask for God's direction. And then take time to listen. **6. Lift up people/needs/concerns.** Whomever is on your heart. Ask for God's perfect will. **7. Amen.** Let your life be the amen. Let's read this together: **God, send me forth as an instrument of your peace, joy and reconciliation into this day. May all I think, say, and do be in accordance with your purposes for me today. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Max Lucado tells the story of a man who was hospitalized. He was dying. His daughter came everyday to visit him, and in one of her visits she noticed a chair had been placed beside the bed, and she asked, "Dad, have you had a visitor today?" And he said, "Didn't I ever tell you about the chair? A long time ago, I knew a great man of prayer, and I asked him how to pray. The man said, 'I visualize Jesus sitting next to me. I know he is with me all the time but whenever I pray I pull up a chair and sit next to it. I close my eyes and imagine Jesus sitting next to me because I know he is.' And as I lay here in this bed, I asked for a chair to be put next to me so I would know Jesus is right here and I could pray." The next day, the daughter received a call from the hospital to come quick. Her father was near death but when she arrived he had already passed away. Later she told her pastor that when she arrived there was a strange thing. "My father's head was not on the pillow. He had leaned out of his bed and his head was resting on the chair next to the bed."

I so want and I so want you to have that kind of relationship with God – who sustains you and empowers you that you might have regular, daily, intimate conversations with God. Go home. God to your room. Shut the door. Pull up a chair. And pray.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for Week of January 7, 2018**

**Weekly Prayer:** O Lord, help us to pray unceasingly, that we may be transformed by the renewing power of the Spirit. Create spaces in our prayer, so that we might hear and live out your words, words of love and justice, grace and forgiveness. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

This week's scripture and reading are based on "Draw the Circle: The 40 Day Prayer Challenge."

### **Monday, January 8 – "Get Ready"**

#### **Scripture: Acts 10:1-9**

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea." When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.

**Observation:** A man named Cornelius has a vision while praying in Caesarea. Simultaneously, Peter has a vision while praying in Joppa. These two visions, that come through prayer, collide in a way that radically alters the course of history. At this time, Christians were known as followers of the Way. They were a sect within Judaism. To be part of this sect, one had to be a Jew. But when two people started praying, the doors opened to Gentiles.

**Application:** If you pray to God regularly, irregular things will happen on a regular basis. Are you ready for what God wants to do in you and through you? Don't try to answer your own prayers. Stay humble. Stay patient. Stay focused. For as long as it takes!

**Prayer:** Eternal God, thank you for your faithfulness and patience with me. I often want to do your work for you, determining what is best. Help me to wait on you and listen for your direction. Amen.

## **Tuesday, January 9 – “Established by God”**

### **Scripture: Proverbs 16:9**

In their hearts humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps.

**Observation:** There is far more that we cannot control than we can. The writer of Proverbs reminds us of the sovereignty of God. Ultimate decisions belong to God. We may attempt to influence or determine what we cannot control, but God is ultimately working his purposes and has all of eternity to do so. One example is found in the Genesis story of Joseph who is sold into slavery by his brothers but ultimately saves their lives and the destiny of Judaism. This verse from Proverbs teaches that God is involved in the smallest detail.

**Application:** God is great not just because nothing is too big for God; God is also great because nothing is too small. How does it feel to hear that God has everything under control? Can you trust God?

**Prayer:** O Lord, great is your faithfulness. Thank you for loving me and watching over me in all things. May I be open and available to what you want for me this day. Amen.

## **Wednesday, January 10 – “Amazing Things”**

### **Scripture: Joshua 3:5-6**

Joshua told the people, “Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you.” Joshua said to the priests, “Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on ahead of the people.” So they took it up and went ahead of them.

**Observation:** The Israelites were camped on the eastern banks of the Jordan River when God gave them this command: “Consecrate yourselves.” And because they obeyed, God delivered on the promise. He parted the Jordan River, and the Israelites walked through on dry land. Consecration is letting God do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. It is complete surrender to God.

**Application:** Consecration means you no longer call the shots. You don't ask God to serve your purposes, rather it's all about serving God's purposes. If you give more of yourself to God, God will give more of Himself to you. What must I give up to let God take control?

**Prayer:** Lord God, you know me even better than I know myself. Help me to remember you have promised to never let go of me. In this moment, I wait again to know your presence so that I may sense the power of your presence throughout this day. Amen.

#### **Thursday, January 11 – “Don’t Pray Away”**

**Scripture: John 9:1-7**

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

**Observation:** Jesus encountered a man who was born blind, and the people falsely assumed it was the result of sin. But Jesus set the record straight by revealing the real reason: “This happened so that God’s mighty works might be displayed in him.” Sometimes, the purpose of prayer is to get us out of circumstances, but more often than not, the purpose of prayer is to get us through them.

**Application:** There is a big difference between *praying away* and *praying through*. Have you ever been so focused on getting out of a situation that you did not get anything out of the situation? The primary purpose of prayer is not to change circumstances but to change us! Sometimes God delivers us from our problems; sometimes God delivers us through our problems.

**Prayer:** As the writer of Psalm 46 heard your voice, O God, help me to also hear: “Be still and know that I am God.” In all things, let me be ready to receive what you want for me. I entrust the outcome to your will and way. Amen.

#### **Friday, January 12 – “Write It Down”**

**Scripture: Habakkuk 2:1-3, 14**

I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint.

Then the LORD replied: “Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

**Observation:** We have a natural tendency to remember what we should forget and forget what we should remember. Habakkuk was living in Judah during the years leading to the nation’s destruction by the forces of Babylon. His message began with a complaint that God was not answering Habakkuk’s prayers. Evil was going unpunished. Destruction was imminent. But then, the voice of God came to him: “Write it down.” Don’t forget! And what is the revelation that Habakkuk wrote? Verse 14.

**Application:** We tend to forget, which is why we write down what we should remember. When we write down what we hear in our times of prayer and meditation, we are able to look back and see how God was present. When we “write it down,” we can see God’s fingerprints on our lives.

**Prayer:** Gracious and loving God, thank you that you are always working to accomplish your purpose in my life. I want to see you. As I move through this day, let me see where you are present and working in my life and the people around me. Amen.

### **Saturday, January 13 – “Shameless Audacity”**

#### **Scripture: Luke 11:5-10**

Then Jesus said to them, “Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.’ And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity, he will surely get up and give you as much as you need. “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; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

**Observation:** Jesus told a story about a man who would not take no for an answer. He kept knocking on his friend’s door until he got what he came for. It is a parable about prevailing in prayer. Jesus honored his bold determination. The NIV translation says it was his “shameless audacity” that prompted his friend to give him what he wanted. It was risky. What if he didn’t get what he wanted?

**Application:** Prayers often go unanswered simply because they go unasked. The point of this parable is to prevail in prayer, but it also reveals the character of the One who answers prayer. The request is not granted simply because of repeated requests. Prayer is answered to preserve God’s good name. In other words, answered prayer points us toward God. We let go and let God.

**Prayer:** Lord God, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you this day. I bring to you the names and the needs of those on my heart, trusting in your readiness to answer and to be present at the point of each person’s deepest need. Guide me to be your messenger. Amen.