

Hey Preacher sermon series
What's the Point of Prayer?
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I was always told that prayer was powerful, but I didn't realize just how powerful until I started working with youth groups. I learned that if I ever wanted to quiet down a rowdy group of teenagers, I only had to say three words: "Let us pray." Think about how you react when you hear those words. Instantly, voices quiet, heads bow, hands clasp.

Those are indeed powerful words. They can quiet noisy Sunday School classrooms or bring a hush to a crowded sanctuary. The response we get when we say those words implies a certain amount of reverence for the act itself. I have heard many people say that the most powerful thing we can do as Christians is to pray. But that statement, as true as it is, assumes that we know how to pray and why we pray.

One of the questions that was asked by you for our "Hey Preacher!" sermon series was, "What's the point of prayer?" It's a fair question. Why do we take our valuable time to speak words into the void in hopes that some faceless deity will hear and answer them? Is it worth it? What are we hoping to accomplish? What's the point?

A tourist bus visiting Jerusalem makes a stop at the Wailing Wall, one of the world's most famous sites for prayer. One of the tourists sees a devout Jew on his knees in front of the site, rocking back and forth, beating his chest, raising his hands. When he finishes, the tourist asks him, "What were you praying for?" The Jew answers, "I pray for righteousness. I pray for the health of my family. I pray for peace in the world." The tourist asks, "Are these prayers effective?" The Jew responds, "It's like talking to a wall." When life is tough, prayer can often feel like we're talking to a wall.

That may be because we don't think we're doing it right, as if there's a certain magic formula to make your prayer gets through the God-o-sphere and makes it to heaven. For example, I always sense in people a hesitance to pray in public. Whenever I'm in a group and we're about to eat, someone will say, "Let's have a blessing" and then all eyes turn to me. Why? Because I'm the professional! As if my prayers somehow have a better chance of making it to God's ears because I wear a robe on Sundays. When most people are asked to offer a prayer, the response I usually hear is something like, "Well, I'm not really good at this kind of thing, but I'll give it a shot." And yet their prayers are beautiful, much better than what I would have said. Why is the act of praying so intimidating? What keeps us from engaging in this activity so essential to our faith?

Maybe we're afraid we'll turn into Ben Stiller's character in "Meet the Parents." Stiller is meeting his fiancée's parents for the first time, and before dinner starts, the father, played by Robert Deniro, asks Stiller if he would say the prayer for the food. This was not a polite invitation. This was a future-son-in-law test. Stiller very reluctantly agrees, and says, "Oh, dear God, thank you, you are such a good God to us. A kind and gentle and accommodating God, and we thank You oh sweet, sweet Lord of hosts for the smörgåsbord You have so aptly laid at our table this day, and each day, by day, day by day, by day oh dear Lord three things we pray to love Thee more dearly, to see Thee more clearly, to follow Thee more nearly, day, by day, by day. Amen."

OK, so that may not make be crocheted on any blankets, but it *was* a prayer. You may not think it was particularly eloquent or spiritual, but as soon as we start applying those kinds of

categories to prayers I think we miss the point. The quality of prayers cannot be judged by length or vocabulary or rhyme scheme. God is not checking Dictionary.com to make sure you parsed your verbs correctly. Martin Luther said, “The fewer the words, the better the prayer.” And author Anne Lamott wrote, “The two best prayers I know are ‘help me, help me, help me’ and ‘thank you, thank you, thank you’.”

There simply is no right way to pray. If there were a standard formula for all our prayers, we wouldn’t have the richness of variety. I’ve prayed with my eyes opened, eyes closed, head bowed, head lifted up to God, hands clasped, hands outstretched. I’ve said long prayers, short prayers, prayers with no words at all. We can pray while we’re on our knees, but we can also pray while in our car, while waiting in the dentist’s office, while taking a bath. Some people prefer silence, others like having music in the background. Some pray out loud, others in their head. There’s no right or wrong way. We have to be careful not to get so caught up in the “how” of prayer that we miss the “why” of prayer. Gandhi said, “It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart.”

To be honest, no matter who’s praying, whether it’s Ben Stiller or Gandhi, it will never be perfect, because we are limited in what we can say by the words at our disposal. How do you authentically capture in words our feelings of gratitude or love or confession? Is “thank you” really good enough? Is “help me” really impassioned enough? Of course not. Every prayer falls short of matching God’s magnificence. A monk once said that, “For many years I was bothered by the thought that I was a failure at prayer. Then one day I realized I would always be a failure at prayer, and I’ve gotten along much better ever since.”

So there’s no perfect prayer, but there’s no such thing as a not-good-enough prayer, either. Through the Spirit’s interceding, “help me” and “thank you” become the most eloquent of prayers. Through the Spirit’s interceding, the naming of someone’s name becomes a prayer, like we do each Sunday morning. We have a lot of people on our prayer list, many of whom we don’t know. How can we pray for them if we don’t know what they need? Because God does. We name the name or imagine the face and the Spirit fills in the blanks.

No matter how we pray, it’s important to note our lack of eloquence or expertise doesn’t make our prayers any less potent. In our scripture reading from Mark, Jesus says that prayer has the power to move mountains if we believe that what we pray for will actually happen. And that’s a key part of praying. You don’t hear too many prayers that say, “Dear God, I really like life right now. Don’t change a thing.” People often pray because something is out of whack, something in life is not as it is supposed to be. We don’t pray, “Let my grandma stay sick” or “Let people stay hungry.” We ask God to change the situation or to help us change it, or we thank God for changing it. “Dear God, heal my grandma.” “Dear Lord, show me how to help others.” “Dear God, thank you for my son’s safety.”

One of the reasons we pray is that prayer is our way of recognizing that the something needs to be done and we can’t do it ourselves. That doesn’t mean we should pray to save ourselves from our own negligence or wrong-headedness. I tell students, “Don’t pray to God to help you get an A on a test. Study!” In other words, don’t ask God to do for you what you can do for yourself. But there are some things we can’t do and prayer is a way of acknowledging that God is God and we are not.

So if God is God, why do we pray? Is it really going to make a difference? Yes, it does. I can say that because I’ve been on the receiving end of prayers. I’m not a touchy-feely kind of guy, but when I knew I had people praying for me, I was uplifted. I can’t explain what the felt like – again, our words fall short – but I knew I was being prayed for and that gave me a sense of

peace and strength to persevere. We don't pray to God to bring God into the loop of what's going on; we pray to acknowledge that God is already there with us and has the power that we don't to provide comfort and peace and assurance.

Prayer not only makes a difference for the people being prayed for, but also for the person saying the prayer. Prayer is our way of conversing with God, of nurturing and deepening our connection to God. When we pray, we are daring to share with God those concerns that keep us awake at night or those fears that we can't tell anyone else. There is no safer place to share what delights us and worries us most than in prayer. Prayer is simply a conversation between you and God. Dallas Willard said, "Prayer is talking with God about what we are doing together." Prayer allows us to be in an ongoing relationship with God.

During the course of our day, we have the opportunity to shift our orientation from ourselves and our lives to God. This can be a simple pause in the midst of the day to give a word of thanks. It doesn't matter the situation, there's always a reason to pray. To give thanks for making it home safely. To ask God to heal a loved one who is sick. To lift up people in other countries. To praise God for our families. Or, simply to express our gratitude for God's continuing presence with us.

We pray because we believe in something and Someone greater than this world has to offer. We pray because we actually believe God can do what the Bible says God can do. We pray because it makes a difference. We pray because Jesus prayed, constantly and fervently. We don't pray in order to master the art of prayer; we pray to acknowledge that we are not on this journey of life alone, that Jesus Christ, who showed us how to pray, now prays for us and with us. And because of that, simple pleas like "help me" and plain words like "thank you" are good enough prayers. Thanks be to God.