

The Essential Prayers sermon series  
Help!  
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Hi, my name is Kory, and I'm a member of the Overthinkers Club. I had a friend in college that I envied because she was always able to make the right choice with what seemed like such a little amount of effort, while I was always overthinking every decision. One day, as I stared at the lunch menu while she ordered in five seconds, I asked her how she did that. She paused and said, "Chewing gum." I started thinking about that. What a great analogy! Chewing gum is elastic, so there is flexibility to go this way or that. Chewing gum is also like making a choice because it can start out fresh and exciting, but the more time it takes the less appealing it tastes, which is how ideas feel when you think too much about them. They get boring or seem too difficult or you start chewing on the idea that things could go wrong. I told my friend that was a great answer to my question, and she said, "What question? I just asked if you'd like a piece of chewing gum."

Overthinking. Paralysis by analysis. We spend too much time worrying about what to do instead of just doing it. I think that's a major obstacle for many of us in our faith, especially when it comes to prayer. What is supposed to be a simple conduit of communication with God can turn into a source of anxiety because we worry too much about how to do it and when to do it and if we're doing it wrong and whether or not it's worth doing instead of just doing it. We usually overcompensate in one of two ways: we either don't pray at all, or we opt for style over substance, making our prayers so eloquent and flowery in order to cover up what we perceive to be an inadequacy.

Jesus warned about this. In the Sermon on the Mount, he cautioned the crowd against over-thought prayers. The religious leaders in Jesus' day were guilty of praying in such a way that others would be sure to hear just how pious they were. There was one Jewish prayer which actually began with sixteen different adjectives attached to the name of God. Do you remember how in college you would try to stretch a five-page paper into a 10-page paper by using a profuse, abundant, copious, and plentiful amount of adjectives? That's what the religious leaders were doing with their prayers.

Author Anne Lamott argues that the best prayers aren't the longest ones or the most eloquent ones; the best prayers are the most honest ones. She calls wordy prayers the good china of prayers, only to be brought out for special occasions. She said in one of her early books that the best prayers she's ever heard are "Help me, help me, help me" and "Thank you, thank you, thank you." She then wrote a book about this, adding a third prayer: "Wow!" That book, titled, "Help, Thanks, Wow" serves as a blueprint for honest, real prayers, and is the focus of this sermon series. Today we'll talk about praying, "Help."

Sounds simple enough, right? Help! Everyone say that with me: "Help!" That feels...weird, doesn't it? It should be the most natural thing in the world, and yet so many of us struggle with asking for help. As Lamott says, "This is a hard planet, and we are a vulnerable species." And yet, we will often go to great lengths to not admit that we need help, especially from God. Why is that?

I have several theories. The first is pride. That can be a nasty thing. Our pride will often keep us from admitting that we can't do everything ourselves, or that things are beyond our control. To admit a need for help is to admit vulnerability, even failure, and no one likes to be

thought of as a failure. So instead of inviting someone into our pain and our problems, we choose to shoulder that enormous weight ourselves, thinking we have what it takes to pull ourselves out of the muck. Lamott writes, “When my friends and I run out of good ideas on how to fix the unfixable, when we finally stop trying to heal our own sick, stressed minds with our sick, stressed minds, when we are truly at the end of our rope and just done, we say the same prayer. We say, ‘Help’.”

Another theory about why we don’t ask for help is sort of the opposite of pride. It’s the believe that we’re not worthy of being helped, that praying “Help!” to God is somehow selfish, that God is way too busy to worry about my little problem. I see this played out all the time when I make hospital visits. I’ll walk into the room and the person will say, “Oh, you didn’t have to come here, I know how busy you are!” And I want to say, “You’re in the HOSPITAL! This is exactly where I’m supposed to be.” But we have this almost insidious little voice in our heads that clicks on when we’re vulnerable and says, “You’re not important enough to be cared about. Don’t impose.” Is that why we don’t pray, “Help”? Do we think God is going to respond, “Sorry, I don’t have enough grace for that. Check back later”?

Maybe we don’t pray this prayer because we’re not sure if anyone is listening. That’s fair, because we don’t usually get a direct response. You know when you text someone and, while you’re waiting for them to text back, you see those three little dots? Those dots mean they are working on a response but haven’t sent it yet. Sometimes I feel like that with prayer. I say “Help!” and then wait for those three little divine dots to turn into a response. That prayer says something like, “It’s all hopeless, I don’t know for sure if you even exist, but I could use a hand.”

Or maybe we don’t pray “Help!” because we’re not sure God wants to hear what we have to say. Usually, when we’re at the point of crying for help, we’re filled with a mix of nasty emotions like anger and resentment and frustration and despair. Maybe we think it’s not appropriate to express those emotions to God, as if God’s not big enough to handle them. In the movie “The Apostle,” Robert Duvall is an evangelist who is struggling with his own personal demons. One night in his bedroom, he unloads all his emotions on God in a bellowing, wall-shaking tirade. A neighbor calls his mother, who is downstairs, and says it sounds like she has a madman in her house. His mom responds, “Oh, that’s my son, that is. I’ll tell ya, ever since he was an itty bitty boy, sometimes he talks to the Lord and sometimes he yells at the Lord. Tonight, he just happens to be yellin’ at him.” Are we afraid to pray “Help!” because we’ll have to use our outside voice, to yell at God to get God’s attention?

If only we were all blessed with the audacity of the woman in our story. For 12 years she’s been dealing with this medical condition. She’s seen every doctor possible, from the specialist at the university hospital to the witch doctor with voodoo dolls. She’s drained her savings account and taken out a second mortgage, and yet nothing has made a difference. She’s tried to fix the unfixable. So finally, pushed to her limit, she cries out “Help!” by grabbing the hem of Jesus’ garment as he passed by.

I love Jesus’ reaction. He turns the disciples and says, “Who touched me?” They look at the enormous crowd pressing in on him and say, “Gee, Jesus. I don’t know. Maybe one of these hundreds of people!” But Jesus knows something significant has happened. This isn’t a glancing brush or an accidental bump. Someone has grabbed him with intentionality, with desperation. Someone has screamed “Help!” by making such a bold grasp. And did you hear what he says to her? “Your faith has made you well.”

That doesn't mean that if you just have enough faith, all your problems will be solved. That's a slippery slope that no believer should be led down. But to me it does mean that there is a potency in the raw, honest prayer of someone who comes to God with urgency and an honest belief that praying is worth doing. And even if the outcome of the situation isn't what we want it to be, I still believe prayer makes a difference.

One of the ways it does is that praying "Help!" forces us to admit our own limitations and vulnerability. As Lamott says, "Most good, honest prayers remind me that I am not in charge, that I cannot fix anything, and that I open myself to be helped by something, some force, some friends, some something. These prayers say, 'Help, this is really all too much, or I'm going slowly crazy, or I can't do this, or I can't feel anything. Or help, he is going to leave me, or I have no life, or I hate the one I've created, or I forgot to have a life, or I forgot to pay attention as it scrolled by. Or even help, I hate her so much, and one of my parents is dying, or will never die. Help.'"

I believe there's vulnerability in praying for help that actually deepens our relationship with God. When we do, we open ourselves up to God, showing God our deepest fears, our most hurtful wounds, and our rawest of emotions. It's us saying, "OK, God. I've got nothing left. Did you really mean it when you said you loved me no matter what? Well, here I am, warts and all." It's at that moment, that moment when we are real and honest and utterly open to God, that our healing begins.

The other thing that praying "Help!" does is that it takes our focus off ourselves. We humans are hardwired to default to worst-case scenarios at the slight mention of bad news. It's like in the movie "Kindergarten Cop" when Arnold Schwarzenegger mentions to a group of youngsters that he has a headache and one of them says, "It's a tumor." He responds, "It's not a tumor!" But when our problems begin to plague us, it's easy for us to lose sight of the bigger picture, for our problems to consume us because we're trying to deal with them all alone. When we pray, we invite God into our problems with us.

Lamott says, "Praying 'Help' means that we ask that Something give us courage to stop in our tracks, right where we are, and turn our fixation away from the Gordian knot of our problems. We stop the toxic peering and instead turn our eyes to something else: to our feet on the sidewalk, to the middle distance, to the hills, whence our help comes – someplace else, anyplace else. Maybe this is a shift of only eight degrees, but it can be a miracle."

For the woman in our story, it took her 12 years to come to the place where she prayed, "Help." It's a hard prayer to say, or at least to say it and mean it. But when we do, whether it's whispered through tears or shouted at the top of our lungs, we invite God into the mess that we have made or that has been made without our permission, and we say, "OK, God. Help. Help me walk through this. Help me find the other side. Help." It may not be eloquent, but it is effective. Lamott calls it "the first great prayer. May we have the courage to say it.