

PRAYER: GOD'S PART, OUR PART

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Matthew

INTRODUCTION

Jesus speaks at length about prayer in [Matthew 6](#). He teaches us when, where, why, how to pray. He tells us what kind of prayer is invalid.

We've already seen that prayer is real because God is a speaking God, and created us in His image. He spoke to us, and calls upon us to speak to Him; our speech to Him is called prayer.

And we've seen that the basis of prayer is sonship. Prayer is the privilege of the children of God, those who are in Jesus Christ. The Father receives us, His adopted children, just as He receives His natural Son.

Today let's talk about who does what in prayer: what is God's part, and what is our part?

This is so important because of the misunderstandings and wrong assumptions that many people have about prayer. Some insist that God is largely passive regarding our lives, and that we must motivate Him through demanding, insistent prayer. Others repeat tired old mantras, like "prayer changes things."

We want to be people of the Word, who believe and conduct ourselves according to God's will. So let's think about what God does and what we do in prayer.

PRAYER: GOD'S PART

God's part in prayer is rooted in His sovereign power. The power of an answered prayer is God's sovereign power at work.

The word "sovereignty" is not one that we use enough when it comes to our God, but the Scripture is clear that nothing happens apart from the Creator's sovereign decree. There are hundreds of statements to this in the Word, too many to even review, but let me show you just four, from [Proverbs 16](#).

[Proverbs 16:1, 4, 9, 33](#)

Proverbs 16:1 *ESV*

The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.

Proverbs 16:4 *ESV*

The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.

Proverbs 16:9 *ESV*

The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.

Proverbs 16:33 *ESV*

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.

Sovereign Power

What does it mean that God possesses sovereign power? It means that answers to prayer are not accomplished by the person prayer, but by God who answers.

There is a horrific, false teaching that says that because God can create and alter reality by His Words, and man is created in God's image, man also has the power to create reality by HIS words. It claims that creatures are indistinguishable from the creator. It's a blasphemous lie. In March the false teacher Kenneth Copeland put on a show for his followers, claiming that he was summoning the wind of God to blow away the coronavirus from the United States, saying to the coronavirus, "I blow the wind of God on you. You are destroyed forever, and you'll never be back." He obviously was doing no such thing.

God, and only God, can answer a prayer. He does so according to His own sovereign will and purpose, and for His own eternal glory.

[How Pray Works: The Common View](#)

A visual aid might help:

The common view is that prayer begins with us. We see a need, or experience a crisis, or are convicted about some right or wrong. So we decide to pray about it. God hears our prayer, hopefully, and decides what He will do about it. Somehow it all works out for His purpose.

There are a lot of problems with this view, but I'll focus on the most important one. It assumes that our Father is passively waiting for us to first, see an issue rightly, and second, pray about that issue in a way that He finds compelling, and third, then He will decide what He might do in response, if anything.

I wonder if you see just how legalistic this sort of prayer is. It all begins with us, and God's response is determined by what we do.

Let me explain.

In order to set up church each week (at the Elkhorn Valley Museum), Linda and I have to get a lot of details exactly right. We have to bring the right boxes from our home to the room. Linda has to get all the kitchen things set up, the coffee ready, and so on. For my part, I set up the sound and projector system, which requires a number of different devices and cables, all of which have to be connected in exactly the right way. There is no room for creativity from week to week; it has to be set up exactly the same way each time, or it won't work. I don't get any credit this week for having it all right last week. It's very much like living under the Law.

That's how many people approach prayer. God is your Father who loves you and will answer your prayers, but if you get some detail wrong, God is just a machine that won't work.

True prayer isn't like this, praise God.

[How Prayer Works: The Biblical View](#)

The biblical view of prayer is very different. We are told in Scripture that God the Father has revealed His will through His Word. His revealed will tells us what He is doing in creation and redemption for His glory and the eternal blessing of His people. We pray according to our understanding of His Word, and He answers according to His eternal purposes. This diagram illustrates the biblical teaching on prayer.

We see that all things begin with God, our Father, the Creator. He created all things by His power, according to His decree. He now sustains all things by His power, according to His decree. We only become aware of a need because He has permitted it to be a need. We pray accordingly, not intruding into God's purposes, but because He brings us into His eternal, redemptive work. Our prayers are not "I don't care what God wants, He's going to give me what I want!" Our prayers are "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Let me put it differently. Our Father doesn't stop what He's doing to answer our prayers; our prayers are answered when they are aligned with what He is doing. We know whether or not they are aligned with His work by what He has revealed in His Word.

You see, God is not our servant. Neither is He a machine that gives us what we want if we can figure out how to operate it. He is our Father, the God who created us physically through our parents, and spiritually through Jesus Christ. Some seem to think that God is obligated to answer their prayers because they ask in the right way (they think), or because their need is real, or because it's what THEY would do if THEY were God. But God is never obligated to us.

Why pray if all things have been decreed?

I'll give you three reasons, briefly; there are certainly more.

First, because answers to prayer are inseparable from His decree. The Father never answers contrary to His own sovereign will and purpose. Before creation He decreed all things that would ever be. He will not answer a prayer that is not in line with His decree.

Second, because His decree has determined our prayer as well as His response. I don't mean that we are robots; I mean that God knew before creation that you would pray for that particular issue. He knew then whether or not your request would be according to His redemptive work. And He knew then how He would answer your prayer; as it's often said, God answers His children in one of three ways: yes, no, or wait.

And third, because why on earth would we pray if God ISN'T in control of all things? Why pray if God is not sovereign and omnipotent? Why pray if our only hope is that God will try really hard, but can't actually promise results? Listen, if you aren't sure that God can answer your prayer for a JOB, then why would you think He can answer your prayer for SALVATION?

TRANSITION: The power of answered prayer is not in man's hands, but in God's hands. He has given us our part, though, and that is to pray according to His will. How do we do that?

PRAYER: OUR PART

What is our part in prayer? What is it that we do that brings about answers to prayer? We are given very basic, very simple guidelines by the Lord Jesus Christ. We must pray in faith, and we must pray in Jesus' name.

Praying in Faith

The Lord made some remarkable promises about praying in faith.

[**Matthew 9:29; 21:22**](#)

Matthew 9:29 ESV

Then he touched their eyes, saying, "According to your faith be it done to you."

Matthew 21:22 ESV

And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”

Did you notice that each of these verses promises on God’s part, not the thing itself? According to your faith **be it done to you**. Whatever you ask in prayer, you **will receive**, if you have faith. The focus of our faith is not the thing that we want, but on the Father who can do it, and give it, so that we receive it. The object of our faith is never to be the thing that we want, but on the Father who gave give it or withhold it, according to His purpose and love.

Faith in God’s character and nature is absolutely foundational to our relationship with Him. [Hebrews 11:6](#) says,

Hebrews 11:6 ESV

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

You see, faith must be specific. I don’t mean specific as to the result; you can pray for an opening for the Gospel in your town, or you can pray that the Lord would cause a specific person to hunger for eternal life while you are having lunch with them. I do mean specific as to God’s ability and nature, as [Hebrews 11:6](#) says. Do you believe that God exists, and that through Jesus Christ is your Father? Yes? Good. Do you believe that the Father will answer your prayer, according to His will and purpose? Yes? Good. No? Then why would you expect an answer? James writes this,

James 1:5–6 ESV

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.

Ask in faith, without doubting. Without doubting what? Without doubting your Father's power and love. By the way, may I point out that this is a very specific situation, not a general promise to everything. We have the Father's promise to give us wisdom when we need it. That doesn't mean that He will drop money out of the sky for you, or instantly heal you of your disease.

Now, when the Lord answers our prayer with a "yes," we'll often see that answer; sometimes we don't see the "yes" because the answer is not what we expected. But what if He answers "no" or "not now"? Can we know whether the reason is that our prayer was faulty to begin with, or that it is just not His time?

[James 4](#) says that some do not have, because they do not ask, and others ask but don't receive, because they are asking for sinful reasons.

TRANSITION: I can't answer every possible question about unanswered prayer, but the second guideline Jesus gives us regarding prayer will give us tremendous confidence: We must pray in Jesus' name. This is how we can truly pray in faith, and be certain that we are not simply trying to satisfy our own flesh.

PRAYING IN JESUS' NAME

In the Upper Room Discourse – that's what we call [John 13-16](#), because took place in the upper room where Jesus and His disciples shared Passover before His crucifixion – Jesus spoke about praying in His name.

[John 14:13-14](#); [15:16](#); [16:23-24](#)

John 14:13-14 ESV

Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

John 15:16 ESV

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

John 16:23-24 ESV

In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

What does it mean to ask in Jesus' name? It does not mean ending each prayer with "in Jesus' name, amen." It means praying according to Jesus' redemptive work, as those who are in submission to Him, and labor with Him. When we are saved, His work becomes our work; His priority becomes our priority. In [John 15](#) Jesus describes our relationship to Him as that of vine and branches. He is the vine; we are the branches. The branches don't produce their own fruit, but the fruit of the vine.

There is a direct connection between His fruit and our joy. Fulness of joy will only come when we are producing the fruit of the vine. [John 15:16](#) makes it abundantly clear that Jesus' fruit in our lives, and the Father's answers to prayer, interrelated and inseparable.

Praying in Jesus' name means praying according to His redeeming work through His life, death, and resurrection. It means praying in light of the Gospel, not to enrich ourselves, but as workers in His harvest, for His glory. This sort of prayer will never fail, although it may not be answered as we think or hope it might be. Prayer in Jesus' name is prayer that seeks the fulfillment of [Philippians 2:10-11](#), when every knee bows at the name of Jesus, and every tongue confesses His Lordship, to the glory of God the Father.

BRINGING IT HOME

I have to say, I feel that I have just barely skimmed the surface of prayer. But I want to urge you to keep these two thoughts with you, and keep them precious in your heart.

Remember God's Part

First, remember that God's part in prayer is to do the actual work, to manifest His Kingdom, to fulfill His will on earth as it is fulfilled in heaven. He does not rely on us to figure out what He should do at this point, or in that situation. Everything is fully in His control. He doesn't need your advice or counsel or plans.

Our Father wants you and I, as His beloved children, to love what He loves, and seek what He seeks, and pursue what He pursues. He wants our hearts to ache for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose, just because it IS His purpose. He wants us to pray for His glory, not only trusting His power, but rejoicing in His work.

Remember Our Part

Second, remember that our part in prayer is to pray to the Father in faith, and in Jesus' name, to act for His glory and our good.

Praying in faith means trusting not only in the existence of God, but the gladness He has in answering our prayers, WHEN they are offered in Jesus' name, for the fulfillment of His redemptive work.

Praying in Jesus' name means praying in light of [Philippians 2](#), that every knee would bow at the sound of Jesus' name, and that every tongue would confess that He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. This is the glorious safeguard to our prayers; it protects them from being self-centered, and helps us keep our eyes on our God's eternal glory.

Let's pray, trusting that the Father will work, and longing for Jesus Christ to be glorified by every man, woman, and child!