

“I’d Like to Hear a Sermon About: Prayer”  
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Luke 6: 12 – 16

12 Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. 13 And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: 14 Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, 15 and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, 16 and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

James 5:13-18

13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 14 Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

Romans 8:26-27

26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Before he became a Baptist preacher, Gordon Atkinson was a seminary student, and a chaplain intern at his local hospital.<sup>1</sup>

He was on call one night when they asked him to come to the ICU to sit with the wife of a patient who had just arrived and, the doctors told Gordon, would not be alive much longer.

Gordon went and introduced himself to the patient’s wife. The patient was Billy Davis, a famous cowboy evangelist. Gordon introduced himself to Billy’s wife, who said,

“Get on your knees, chaplain. We got to get prayin.”

...Mrs. Davis...grasped her bible with both hands, held it up in the air, and began what seemed at the time to be the strangest prayer I had ever heard... She cried out to the Lord in her grief. She said that demons were dragging her husband down to hell. She begged and pleaded for God to spare his life. She reminded God that Billy might be his smallest servant, but he was by no means the least of them. “Please, dear God,” she prayed. “Save my little Billy, your servant, your own little cowboy preacher who loves you

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<sup>1</sup> This entry is no longer online, but I found it on Atkinson’s “Real Live Preacher” website more than five years ago:  
<http://www.reallivepreacher.com/node/999>  
<http://www.reallivepreacher.com/node/1002>

so. Save him from the vicious hounds of hell that would drag him down to perdition.”.... She was putting everything she had into this.

This was a kind of praying I had not heard in the quiet Baptist churches of my experience..... I was bothered by the theology of her prayer. A central teaching of Christianity is that death is no longer something to fear. We approach death faithfully.... It seemed to me that Mrs. Davis was forgetting that part of our faith.

Finally, she stopped praying. She took a couple of deep breaths and nodded at me, indicating that it was my turn.

God love me, I was so young and ignorant. .... After Mrs. Davis was finished, I began my much quieter prayer in a calm voice....I carefully countered each of her theological points with words that I addressed to God but were meant to teach her a thing or two.

*“There is no need to be afraid for Billy, for he is in the hands of his maker.” “Of course we KNOW, dear Heavenly Father, that death is no longer our enemy.” “Not our will but yours, not our desire, but your kingdom.”*

After my prayer I opened my eyes, expecting to find her greatly relieved and comforted, and perhaps happy to have learned something in this hard time. After all, one never knows when the Lord has a thing or two to teach us.

Instead I found her staring at me with her mouth open.

“So he’s died? He’s dead?” she asked.

“No, he’s still alive, as far as I know. We have to wait for the doctor to come and give us the news about that.” Mrs. Davis seemed confused, as if she didn’t know what to make of me or my prayer... “You were praying like he was already dead.”

I had no response for this. Not even a somber nod. I just looked back at her. I had no idea what she was talking about....Unable to comprehend me, she bowed her head and commenced her passionate pleas....This time she never stopped to give me a chance to pray. She kept going right up until the moment the doctor came in and gave her the bad news. Billy fought hard, but he was dead.

I braced myself for what was coming...I wondered what she would do now that the battle was lost.

To my surprise she clasped her hands together just under her chin, raised her eyes to heaven and said, “Thank you, Jesus....We will miss him dearly,” said she, “but he’s in a better place. He’s gone to his reward.” ... She made a complete and very sudden 180 degree turnaround. Suddenly his death was a victory and a reward. I puzzled over this for weeks, wondering what caused the change.....Some years later I finally figured it out.

Sometimes people don’t mean what they say. They mean what they mean. Prayer is not simply a communication of words. It is a full-bodied expression of the soul. People weave their history, their theology, their brokenness, their buzz words, their ignorance, and what wisdom they have into a very private and intimate conversation with God....

What is prayer?

Prayer is a conversation.

Prayer is a practice.

Prayer is a place where we are present with God.

In the Greek the word refers to a direction, “towards,” and an “exchange,” an interaction with God.<sup>2</sup>

Church historian Roberta Bondi writes:

Prayer is central to the Christian life. It joins us to God, and it leads us to ourselves in God. It is the place where we can be completely ourselves..... We can enjoy our own gifts and wonder at all we have been given. We can argue with God about who we are and who we have been. We can acknowledge our mistakes and set them aside. Most important, we can learn to love God, ourselves as belonging to God, and other people as images of God, because we are shaped at our very deepest levels by our prayer.<sup>3</sup>

We are shaped at our very deepest levels by our prayer.

Or, as Richard Foster says, “To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus was a pray-er. He himself frequently took time apart from his public ministry to be in prayer. He prayed as a part of his ministry. He encouraged and taught others to prayer.

While the exact number depends on how you define and translate some of the words, by my count there are more than 50 references to Jesus and prayer, either advising or reporting in the gospels.

Praying is not something you do once you get to the mountaintop.

Prayer does not have to fit any particular form or method or criteria.

You don’t need resources or equipment or an app to start.

Prayer is not a commodity, something we can control, or something we have to “get right.”

Praying starts where you are. Who you are.

And recognizing that God is not only there, God arrived before you.

Some of the best words I’ve found to describe this are the words of Mary Oliver:<sup>5</sup>

**”Praying”**

It doesn’t have to be  
the blue iris, it could be  
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few  
small stones; just  
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don’t try  
to make them elaborate, this isn’t  
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence  
in which another voice may speak.

<sup>2</sup> <http://biblehub.com/greek/4336.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Roberta Bondi, “The Paradox of Prayer,” in *Communion, Community, Commonwealth: Readings for Spiritual Leadership*. (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1996) page 19.

<sup>4</sup> Richard J. Foster, *A Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1988) page 33

<sup>5</sup> Mary Oliver, Thirst <http://maryoliver.beacon.org/2009/11/thirst/>

And so, prayer, with its countless varieties and forms, is,  
 at its most basic about two things:  
 Speaking and Listening.

Speaking...

How we begin.  
 Sharing who we are, where we are.  
 Worries.  
 Needs.  
 Perspective.  
 With complete honesty.

So many of us think that our prayers aren't good enough.  
 That we aren't doing it "right."  
 That we aren't praying for the things we are supposed to be praying for.

That is an unfounded fear.  
 God does not need our protection.  
 God's feelings do not need to be spared.  
 God can sort it out.

It's not our job to figure out what God wants us to say,  
 it's our job, in prayer, to be completely truthful about where we are.  
 If we aren't honest about our starting point, how will we ever be able to follow  
 God's directions to get where God needs us to go?

To start, our prayers need to mean what they mean.  
 All of Mrs. Davis' prayers were true because she was honest.

Being honest and bold in our prayer is how we give God material to work with.  
 How we open ourselves to allow God to shape us.  
 When we put it all out there, that's when we are then able to listen.

Which is the other half of prayer. Learning to listen.  
 To discern where God is calling us to go,  
 how God is calling us to live, how to navigate the challenges that are before us.

Sometime's God's Will will intersect with our own.  
 And sometimes it will not.  
 Listening to God helps us figure out the difference.

We've not yet taken the plunge to get one of those "smart home" assistants that will answer your questions or play your music- like Amazon's echo or Google Home-

But my brother and his wife purchased an Echo recently, and it came with some unexpected benefits. Their four-year-old son, Everette, loves it. Loves Alexa.

“Alexa, Alexa” he’ll say. Make the sound of a lion.

“Alexa, Alexa,” he’ll say, is it time for me to go to bed?

And my favorite, “Alexa, Alexa, call Nanta”

But in order for Alexa to do these things, Alexa and Everette had to learn each other’s languages. They had to learn how to speak and listen to one another for the relationship to work.

To know that Nanta is really me, his Aunt Anna.

To know that while Alexa might be able to make the sound of a lion, she can’t cook him a bowl of pasta as he one day requested.

My brother had to learn to teach Alexa how to respond when Everette asked if it was his bed-time.

Prayer is no different. It takes time. It takes practice to learn our own language, and to learn God’s. To see the role and path of discernment across time and hindsight. To learn the ways in which God speaks- the still small voice and the bow in the sky. Through the voice of community and the wisdom of love.

It takes time. And it takes practice.

And knowing, that Alexa would not fix a bowl of pasta for my nephew.  
But I bet she could have given him the directions to cook his own bowl of pasta.

God will do what we cannot.  
God will not do what we can.

So, to go back to the original question about prayer.

Does prayer work?

Why do we pray if God is in charge?

As best I can discern from the Bible and what I’ve learned from community and ministry,  
we pray not to change God’s mind (not that the Bible tells us that is impossible)  
but because we want God to change  
our own minds, our own lives, our own communities to be more God like.  
More kingdom apparent.

Prayer is a conversation.

Prayer is a practice.

Prayer is a place where we are present with God and are lead into deeper faith,  
where we know more about ourselves,  
about God,

and the ways in which we are called to work together.

How do you start? As so many of you already know, you start by praying <sup>6</sup>

Several summers ago, a child of the congregation I used to serve, was in an accident at the local trampoline park.

Catherine was having a great day jumping with friends, but while doing a flip into the foam she fell in a way in which her head and neck made contact with a hard surface. It wasn't a dangerous move. It wasn't a reckless move. It was just the wrong move. It would be hours before the Drs would see her X-rays, but she had broken her neck.

The Mom, Kari, who was the mom for all of the kids on this particular outing, took charge, called 911, and when the ambulance arrived insisted she ride with Catherine, conscious but afraid.

In order to do so, Kari left her own children, Madi, Megan, and Tessa standing outside, waiting by themselves until a family member could come and get them. They were old enough to handle this responsibility, but just barely. And they were scared, too. About the unknown. For their friend.

As they waited, another mother stepped away from her own children to ask them what was going on, what had happened, and to see if they needed any help. After she realized that there was a plan and that they were okay, she told them she would pray for Catherine. And then she did something that, even though I wasn't there in person, I won't forget. She went over to her children, gathered them in a circle, and they stopped what they were doing to pray, out loud, in public, to pray for Catherine. For her health. For her friends.

Catherine's story has a happy ending.

After surgery, a long stay in the hospital, and rehabilitation work,

Catherine is okay. She'll be enrolling as a first-year student at Agnes Scott College in the fall.

But, I'll never forget the woman who thought to offer to pray  
and who followed through on her offer **without delay**.

The example she set for three young Presbyterians,  
and the God that was present with them that day, too.

Our culture may throw around the phrase "thoughts and prayers" without much thought or prayer, but to really pray, to really know prayer, is to tap into a volcano, a whirlwind, and winding river, a pool so deep we cannot see the bottom.

Yes, we need to pray.

But let's not make the mistake of thinking that we can really pray.

Really open our hearts to pray and think that things will stay the same.

That God will allow us to remain certain or comfortable or afraid or whatever we use to build a wall between the right now and the Kingdom of God. Prayer will knock those walls down.

And maybe that's the most important thing we need to know about prayer,  
prayer changes everything,  
we can't mature in our faith without it,  
and there's no better way to learn to pray than to **get to praying**.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> I share this story with the permission of the Bryan and Marvin families. A news story about Catherine's accident can be found here: [http://abclocal.go.com/story?section=news/abc11\\_investigates&id=9317805](http://abclocal.go.com/story?section=news/abc11_investigates&id=9317805)