



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# Can Prayer Change God's Mind?

SCRIPTURE:  
Luke 11:9-13 and  
22:39-42

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June 12, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

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**W**hat is supposed to happen when you pray? Is the purpose of prayer to somehow change God's mind? To put an illness or a need, a hurt or a hope, into the lap of God with enough passion or repetition that God will choose to do something that God otherwise would not do?

Jesus seems to suggest this is exactly what prayer is when he taught, "Ask, and it will be given. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened for you." Has that been your experience? Not mine.

What do we do with words of Jesus which are clearly inconsistent with our own experience? I would not be surprised if you, at times, have prayed, have asked, have knocked and despite the promises of Jesus, have stood on the wrong side of a closed door.

Some may feel more like the psalmist who cries out, "Wake up God, do you not hear your children praying? Why do you hide your face from us? Wake up and come help us." That's how Psalm 44 ends. If prayer is supposed to change God's mind—inspire God to give us what we pray for—it doesn't seem to work.

Our son Nathan was entering the first grade. His older sister, a veteran of the first grade, was giving him advice. "You want Mrs. Taylor as your teacher; of all the teachers I have had in my life, she is the best." Sarah was right about that. If God ever fashioned a person to be a first-grade teacher, it was Mrs. Taylor. Sarah then told her younger brother, "I think you should pray that you get Mrs. Taylor."

Nathan said, "Sarah, I've been praying all my life and God doesn't do nothing." Overhearing this conversation, I felt a need to correct an obvious inaccuracy. I said, "That's not right, son. It's 'God doesn't do anything'."

In his defense, Nathan was drawing on his own experience. At the time, there were fires burning across the state of Florida. Ash would travel through the air for miles; we would find it on our cars each morning. It was the topic of our dinner conversation one evening. Nathan asked, "Why don't they call a fireman to put the fire out?" "Well, it's more complicated than that. The firefighters need rain to help put out the fires." "So, let's pray for rain," they said. "That's a good idea." We were putting dinner on the table, so we thanked God for food and for another good day, for the joy of being family, and we prayed, "God, please send rain so the fires will go out. Amen."

Nathan leaned back in his chair, looked out the window. No rain. He shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "Well, that didn't work. God doesn't do nothing." Well, that's cute, until it's not cute anymore.

I've known folks who have prayed in hospitals with tear-stained faces, but the doctor still says, "We have done all we can do." I have known women, who like Sarah and Hannah have prayed for God to bring a child, but the doctor says, "I'm sorry. We have done all we can do." I have known people in war-torn countries who have prayed for peace, but still the night is interrupted with bombs and gunfire.

"Ask and it shall be given," Jesus says. Who does Jesus understand God to be when he talks this way? We know from his own life that Jesus didn't experience God to be some kind of prayer machine where you put in your request and it's done. After he says, ask, seek, knock, Jesus prays in the garden, "Let this cup pass. I know this is what you want, but I don't want what you want... find another way. Let this cup pass."

But it doesn't pass. He pleads, he asks, he knocks, but the divine door is closed. What do we

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make of this? One thing this Gethsemane moment teaches us is to be honest in prayer. Pray what you want. Jesus teaches us to be honest with God.

My friend Bill called me. His voice was shaky. “Tom, I’m at the hospital with Julia.” Julia was 14. “They say it’s leukemia. Tom, come and pray for us.” I did. I prayed, “God, she is a little girl and we have never needed you like we need you now. We are confused and afraid. We need you to bring us comfort.” Bill had had enough of my prayer. He interrupted. “God, she is 14 years old and you are going to heal my baby. You are going to fix it; you are going to make her well. You take me if you need someone, but that little girl deserves to live. Do you hear me? You heal my baby.”

That was more than 20 years ago and today she has children of her own. That happens sometimes, but we all also know those who have prayed the same, but the healing never comes.

Regardless of the result, I think we honor God by being honest. It’s not prayer if we hide our heart in the back room and spread our lives before God like a tidy living room with doilies and matching throw pillows. Prayer is the place for us to be honest.

Ask. Knock. Seek. Jesus says. Be honest. He was. “Let this cup pass by, because the truth is I don’t want this.” That’s what Jesus prayed, but he didn’t stay there. A careful read of this text reveals that God will not answer every ask—will not respond to every request. God is not some gumball machine in which we insert our prayer quarter and get our treat for the day. What God will give is his promised day. What God gives to those who ask is his Spirit, or stated more clearly, God’s self. What happens when we are honest in our prayers, I think, is we learn to pray bigger.

Jesus said, “I don’t want what you want, God. Let this cup pass.” He was honest about that. But he didn’t stay there. He then said, “I want your will.” Prayer is less about changing God and more about changing us—inspiring us to live toward God’s promised day. I think when we are honest with God, we learn to pray about what matters most.

My mother had company coming for dinner. Dinner was in the oven. But she was out of something. I know not what it was. I was probably eight

years old. She threw me in the car and we raced to the store and while she drove, I heard her say, “God, I need a parking space. I need a space or my dinner is going to burn. God, I need a space right next to the door.”

We pulled up in front of the grocery and it was an ocean of cars. Mom drove right to the front door and sure enough, there was a space right next to the door. She ran inside and got whatever it was we lacked. On the way home, I asked, “Mom, did God get you that space?” She said, “Tom, I hope not.” “What?” She said, “Tom, boys are dying in Vietnam. There is trouble in Birmingham. The hospital is full of people who are hurting. Your friend Danny Martin? His father left the family last week. With all those needs in this world, I hope God knows where I park is not worth God’s attention.”

That’s what I mean. When we learn to be honest in prayer, and it takes a while, it is then we learn to pray bigger. Ask, seek, knock and God will give God’s self. When we recognize God is giving us God, when we recognize that the work of God is the kingdom—the promised day—where we park just isn’t as important anymore.

Jesus compares those who pray to children. And he asks, “If a child asks his parent for an egg, will the parent give a scorpion? If the child asks for fish, will the parent give a snake?” Of course not. Parents are for their children’s good. Jesus says: God is for your good.

I took our daughter, Sarah, when she was four years old, to the emergency room. It was not serious; Sarah fell and needed three little stitches in her bottom lip. The nurses strapped her into a velcro blanket they called a “papoose.” It wraps around a child so that she cannot move. They placed the sterile field over her face with the hole over her bleeding lower lip. I searched for her hands so that I could hold them. They were plastered to her side, unable to move. She looked at me through a little hole in the sterile sheet while the instruments darted in and out. She cried, “Daddy, make them stop. Make them stop, Daddy. Please, Daddy; it hurts.” “Be still, sweetheart. It will be alright,” I said, feeling anything but alright myself. “Hold on. Daddy’s right here. Daddy’s right

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here.” “But Daddy it hurts. Make them stop!” It was accusation. It was plea. It was prayer.

Eventually, they finished. They unwrapped her from the papoose. It was then that an incredible thing happened: Sarah jumped into my arms. I held her in amazement. Her petitions had gone unanswered. I hadn't stopped them. I hadn't let her up. She had pleaded and I just said, “Hold on.” But when it was over, rather than boxing me in the lip and saying, “Now you lie down...”, she clung to me with unwavering trust. She jumped into my arms because in spite of the circumstances, she

trusted that I was for her good. That I was safe. That even in confusing times, she was loved.

If I understand the text, Jesus says pray like that. Know that in prayer, you are in the presence of God, so be honest. And know that the God to whom you pray will give you God. Little else will matter then. No matter the circumstances, little else will matter.

So, ask, seek, knock... and God will give God. And God will be for your good. Even in confusing times, you are loved by a holy love that calls you by name.