

# Can We Get Anything We Pray For?

John 14:1-14  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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May 22, 2011

Last July, I preached a sermon entitled, "Keep Praying - Even when you don't feel like it!" (July 25, 2010) That particular sermon focused on those times in our personal journey of faith when our prayer life seems to run dry and become fruitless. In that sermon I stated:

**I believe there are a lot of misguided understandings concerning the purpose and nature of prayer itself - reflecting, perhaps, a misunderstanding of the nature of God.**

I'll preach some other time how I believe that God is not like a divine vending machine, that all we have to do is drop in our prayer coin, make a selection, and wait for the desired product to drop out.

Rather, prayer is a way to express our deepest concerns and convictions. And in the process, it can be one of the best tools in our spiritual toolbox to help us connect with others. Prayer can function in a way that deepens our compassion for the ones we love and for the world around us.

Prayer does indeed have the ability to help transform hearts and minds, and it is that transformation which in turn has the power to make a difference in the world.

So today is an opportunity to pick up on that theme of the nature of prayer. My premise, however, continues to be that **we should start with our own personal understanding of the nature and character of God, and in turn let that guide our understanding of nature and purpose of prayer.**

Let me tell you a story. A local bar in a small conservative town began construction on expansion of their building to increase their business. In response, a local church started a campaign to block the bar from expanding with petitions and prayers. Work progressed right up until the week before the grand reopening when lightning struck the bar and it burned to the ground!

After the bar was destroyed by the ensuing fire, the church folks were rather smug in their outlook, bragging about the power of prayer. That was until the bar owner sued the church on the grounds that the church was ultimately responsible for the demise of his building, either through direct or indirect actions or means. In its reply to the court, the church vehemently denied all responsibility, accountability or any connection to the building's destruction.

The judge read through the plaintiff's complaint and the defendant's reply, and at the opening hearing commented... "I don't know how I'm going to decide this, but it

appears from the paperwork that we have a bar owner who believes in the power of prayer, and an entire church congregation that now does not."

Setting aside the issue of whether or not an entity is willing to publically change their views toward prayer when economics are involved, this does indeed lead us to pause and reflect upon our own understanding of prayer.

I bring this up today for a couple of reasons. First, the lectionary gospel passage assigned for this Sunday is from John 14:1-14, and it talks about prayer. So does the passage we heard from Matthew 7:7-11. I will address this in just a moment.

The second reason is that it fits nicely into the work that the **Visioning Ministry Team** is doing here at the church. The **U.S. Congregational Life Survey** that was taken during a service of worship a few months ago has been compiled into ten strengths of our congregation.

The first strength is called "Growing Spiritually." **Of those who took the survey, a very high 87% responded that they feel their spiritual needs are being met in this congregation.** That's higher than the national average of both congregations our size (from all denominations), and specifically of all other Presbyterian congregations.

Interestingly, however, we fall quite a bit below the average in the area of naming Bible study and prayer groups or prayer ministry of the congregation as one of the three most valued aspects of this congregation. What that indicates is that here at College Hill, **many folks define having their spiritual needs met in a way that doesn't necessarily involve the more traditional incorporation of prayer.**

Given what I would consider a good number of congregation members who do not particularly perceive God in the traditional way of a directly intervening God, that would indeed partially explain why traditional prayer wouldn't rank high as being instrumental to having their spiritual needs met. And I think it's fair to say that traditional prayer does not have as high of a standing for progressives as it does for more conservative or especially evangelical Christians.

Yet in our discussions just last Sunday, the Visioning team thought it was important that perhaps we take a closer look at this issue of prayer. Through study and specific sermons, like this one for example, we could perhaps expand the traditional definition of prayer. There is, for instance, an entire tradition of prayer without words. Experiencing the awe and wonder of nature and life itself is yet another example of untraditional prayer.

A few people on the Visioning team also recalled a time in the not too distant past when this congregation set up a program of having **anonymous prayer partners.** **They reflected upon the strength and encouragement they felt, and continue to feel, in simply knowing that another person in the congregation was praying for them.** This may be something that the Visioning team will propose at the end of its study.

Let's return now to what we can glean from today's gospel reading from **John 14:1-14.** The first half of this passage includes the comforting words that are most commonly heard at memorial services. The gospel writer John writes that Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." Jesus then tells them that he is going to leave them and will prepare a place for them. He then comments that they know the way to the place where he is going. Thomas, however, has the courage to admit that they do not know where Jesus is going, so how can they know the way.

**In a remarkable theological statement about the identity and character of Jesus, the gospel writer states that Jesus responded with the profound words, "I am the way,**

**and the truth, and the life.**" Before the term "Christians" became popular late in the first century, followers of Jesus were known simply as "people of the Way."

Then comes another profound theological statement: **if you know Jesus, then you also know God.** That's why we, even as progressive Christians, can affirm that Jesus is the decisive revelation of the nature and character of God. I do not see this understanding as exclusive, however. Neither, when properly understood, is the statement often used to exclude non-Christians that **"no one comes to the Father, but through me."**

**It is crucial to recognize that it does not say that, "no one comes to God, but through me." The specific term "Father" refers to the particular understanding of God that is revealed in and through Jesus. Therefore, the statement is true that it is only through Jesus that we come to know God as "Father."** Yet, I believe there are other ways to know God, perhaps like through Mohammed or Buddha. But that's another sermon altogether.

Today, I want to focus briefly on just the last two verses of today's text, for they have been the source of much discussion and controversy within the church over the ages. The gospel writer states that Jesus said, "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. **If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.**" Hence, the question posed in the title of this morning's sermon, **Can We Get Anything We Pray For?**

If you were to ask anything from God in Jesus' name, what would you ask for? And does "anything" really mean *anything*? If not, then are you willing to accept that prayer has its limits? **If you do think that prayer is limited, then what do you do with these scriptural words, "If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it"?**

In referring to this scripture passage, a large segment of modern Christianity has termed this approach to prayer as, **"name it and claim it."** If you can name it in prayer, then you can claim it, for your prayer is as good as answered. What do you believe?

**If you ask me, this attitude toward prayer is a very shallow theological understanding of God.** For similar to the divine vending machine, it puts God into the role of a kind of a divine Santa Claus. "Here's my wish list. I'll come back later and check under the tree for my gift."

**What happens, however, when our wish list, our name-it-and-claim-it prayers, go unanswered?** Here's something that I'd like for each of you to consider. When we pray for something, and then don't see the results that we want, we face a major fork in the road in our spiritual journey of faith. We tend to do one of the following:

- Blame ourselves for not having enough faith;
- Blame God for not listening or caring;
- Turn away from God altogether;
- OR, come to a new understanding of the nature and character of God, and therefore the meaning and purpose of prayer itself.

This last option, coming to a new understanding of God and the role of prayer, is often (as poet Robert Frost put it) the road less traveled. I know far too many Christians who blame themselves for not having enough faith – I used to be one of them. Ultimately, this can be very damaging to our spiritual well being, as of course, is the path of thinking God is deaf to our needs, or the path of turning from God altogether.

Unfortunately, I'm basically out of time for this particular sermon – but there will be others on this topic. And I realize I have not fully explored the meaning of this particular verse about prayer in its biblical context. Suffice it to say, however, that **asking for “anything” was in specific reference to furthering the kingdom of God through the work and ministry of the church.** And another qualifier further narrowed this, in that **what we ask for should ultimately be for the glory of God.**

Saying all that, perhaps we can come away from this scriptural passage with the following guidance toward prayer:

If our true goal is not selfish gain, but to glorify God and further the realm of God here on earth, then perhaps we (especially as a congregation) should take this passage, in its context, seriously. For as the passage also tells us, “and greater works than these shall we do!”

Amen.