

Prayer: Conformity and Submission to God's Will

Written by David Wise

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I have spent my last few Sunday morning messages considering different prayers and aspects of prayer. One theme that has really stood out to me throughout those studies and messages is this: one of the chief purposes (if not the main purpose) of prayer is to more fully conform ourselves to submission to the will of God in our lives.

People often say “what is the purpose of prayer?” Can my prayers really change anything? The short and long answer is a resounding “Yes!” We are petitioning the God with all power in heaven and earth, with no limitations on his ability, to intercede on our behalf. Oftentimes, God might see fit to powerfully display his ability and answer our petition in a mighty way. However, sometimes (in my experience maybe even the majority of the time), God might seem to be silent and not actively intercede in the way we want as we pray unto him.

This leads to an important question: what is our purpose in prayer? Do we view God like an all-powerful clean-up man? I mess things up, and then I pray and want my sovereign God to come and clean up my mess. Then for some reason we are disappointed when God does not seem to answer that prayer and he forces me to actually lie in the bed I have made for myself and reap the just consequences of my actions. That is a negative example, but let's think about a more positive example. When I pray for a loved one to be healed of a dreaded disease, do I view God the same way? Maybe I'm just petitioning God to fix the situation because I know he's the only one that truly can heal them (which many times is true). Do I just view God as my last alternative, who I pray to only once I have exhausted all other options and then I just want to use my all-powerful dynamite stick to get my intended outcome that I couldn't accomplish on my own?

If that is the case, that I simply use God to get done the things I have finally resolved in myself that I cannot do, then how do you respond when God's answer to your petition is “No”? I believe

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God answers every prayer we pray in one of three ways: yes, no, or not now. If we just view God as our last call effort to fix every situation, what do we do when the answers are “No” or “Not Now”? That’s why so many people reach a state of distrust in the power of God or question God’s care for them when they don’t get their intended outcome. They view the Lord as their own personal lottery ticket to give them whatever they want at the drop of a hat, and if he doesn’t give them that, then either he’s not really God or he doesn’t really love me.

This goes back to our prior question: what is our real purpose in prayer? Let’s be honest with ourselves here. Do I just view God as an all-powerful deity who is at my beck and call to give me whatever I desire (even if that is a good and honorable thing that I am praying for)? Or do I pray to beseech the unmerited favor of a sovereign God with a humble submission to God’s will, even if the outcome of my prayers is not what I originally wanted.

I saw a quote recently that really cuts to the heart of the matter: **“Prayer is not an exercise to get man’s will done in heaven; prayer is the way for God’s will to be done on the earth.”** The purpose of prayer is not to conform God to our standards and to obligate him to do our will and what we want; prayer is to conform us to God’s will and God’s standards, to understand and accept that God’s will is best for us, even if it’s contradictory to what we have asked for.

Jesus emphasizes this purpose in prayer in his Model Prayer to his disciples in Matt. 6:9-13. The 3rd line in the Model Prayer (after glorifying God’s name and praying for the advancement of his kingdom) is “Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” (Matt. 6:10) God’s will is always done perfectly in heaven, but that’s not always the case on the earth. The angels in heaven don’t question or object to the will of God; they just obediently carry out God’s will immediately after they have received their marching orders. Our prayer should be for God’s will to be just as perfectly obeyed and submitted to here on earth as it is in heaven.

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Jesus concludes that Model Prayer by denoting the proper closing to all of our prayers unto the Lord: "Amen." (Matt. 6:13) When we say "Amen" to close a prayer, we are not just following a church or family tradition to say that, we are following the command of Jesus Christ. Let's not miss the significance of what we are saying when we close our prayers by "Amen" though. Amen means "so let it be". We should have already prayed for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Then, as we close our petition unto God, our final thought is us letting go of the rope and telling the Lord, "so let it be" according to your will.

I was recently looking at the angel Gabriel's announcement of Jesus' birth to Mary in Luke 1:26-38. Mary is told that she, even as a virgin, will give birth to a son, which is naturally a very confounding statement to her seeing she was still a virgin. In spite of her initial doubt and hesitancy, Mary concludes that interaction with Gabriel by saying, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word." (Luke 1:38) No doubt, Mary still did not fully understand the full significance of what she was being told or how it was going to happen, but she did display total submission to the will of God. She gave us a great practical definition of what "Amen" should mean to us as we close our prayers: "be it unto me according to thy word." Just like Mary, we might not understand the "what" of everything that is going on around us, and we certainly might not understand the "why" of many events, but in spite of that we should display that same submission to God's will in our lives – "be it unto me according to thy word".

Why then do we pray if it's not guaranteed for the Lord to give us what we want? One of the important aspects of prayer is allowing the process of making our petitions made known unto God to slowly more conform us to God's will. Just as the potter with each revolution of the clay more conforms the pot to his intended image; in like manner, with each prayer we are being more conformed as a vessel more fit for the Master's use, working towards total submission to God's will. Our purpose in prayer is to allow God as that potter to slowly mold us more accurately into his image – into servants that are fully submissive to the will of God, regardless of what route or outcome that might ultimately lead us to in our lives.

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