

WHY DOESN'T PRAYER "WORK" ALL THE TIME?

Many of us have grown up with the belief that all we have to do to have whatever we want is to ask God for it in prayer. We may learn this in Sunday School, youth group or worship. Often this amounts to giving a "to do" list to God. We might have read or even memorized, the verse from the Sermon on the Mount that sounds like a proof text for that view. It's Matthew 7:7: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." Reading further into the New Testament we encounter John 14:22 where Jesus is quoted as saying, "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."

So, what's the problem? Why doesn't prayer work all of the time? We need to remember to whom it is that we are presenting our needs and desires. This is not like petitioning a judge, a college admission committee or even the manager of a company from which we need a donation for a charitable cause. We are seeking a response from God. Not to put too fine a point on it, but in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) God is often referred to as "El Shaddai" which translates as "God Almighty." There are lots of other ways of addressing God, but it helps to start with a sense of awe linked with an equally deep sense of humility when we expect the All Mighty God to listen to us! God will listen. We just need to remember that we are a small part of creation, and God is the Creator of all. Otherwise, we won't be even remotely prepared to pray.

People who work in Silicon Valley and other high-tech areas of the world believe that if we just approach the problem, whatever it is, with enough resources, we can "make this thing work." Indeed, yes, many technical problems

yield to the combination of good financing, sound research methodology and the unique insights of brilliant thinkers. There have been many successes.

One of the most frequently used creations of good design and use of technology is the ATM machine. Sadly, some of us approach God as if God were an ATM machine. All we need to do with the ATM is to touch the screen in the right places so that it knows what we want after we've inserted our debit card. The other requirement is to enter our PIN to make it do what we need it to do.

Fortunately, God is not even remotely like an ATM machine. We don't get PINS issued to us from heaven so that we can have private transactions with God. Instead, if we are blessed to have people who share their experiences with how God communicates with them (prayer is only one way) we learn early on that God does indeed answer all prayer. It's we who have the difficulty because either we



won't take a divine "NO" for an answer or we haven't learned to listen well enough to even realize that God is speaking to us.

I suffered from the problem of not listening to God as well as people. In fact, I devoted one entire unit of my clinical chaplaincy training in 1989-1990 (400 hours in each unit) to learning how to listen to the message and not just hear the sounds of a human voice. I have spent much more time developing the willingness to listen for God to speak. It is not something we generally develop on our own. We need people to show us how and to serve as guides along the spiritual/religious path to a deeper and more personal relationship with God.

I had many good teachers, not only in seminary but also in churches and other programs to promote awareness of an inner voice within me. It took years before I could or would recognize and trust God's presence in that inner voice.

It also required much study of the Scriptures for me to recognize God speaking through them. There's a really challenging set of verses in James 1:19-25 that deal with listening and acting on what we hear from God's Word. I will share just one verse. "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves."¹ What the message in that verse, as well as in the broader context of verses 19-25, is that even reading the Word of God isn't enough to prepare us for a relationship with God. We have to live as people who love God enough to listen to what God is saying through the Bible in each generation.

By extension, as with reading the Bible, praying is good. But we need to follow up by implementing or accepting what God says in response to our prayers. It does little good to besiege God with endless petitions if we don't stop every day at some point, or even at many points, and listen. That is essential to our spiritual growth. Of course, if we are really as interested in listening to God as we are petitioning God, we need to recognize that God does not always say, "Yes" to our every request. Sometimes God says, "No, this is not good for you (or whoever we are praying for)." Instead, God may answer in some way that we are not ready to hear. God may say, "It's better to see a doctor than to ask me to fix that pain." Likewise, God may say, "It is better that you pray for a peaceful death for your mother than for her physical healing."

Sadly for us, this can feel like a rejection of our prayer. Once that thought takes hold of our spirit it isn't a big step to deciding that, "prayer doesn't work." We might even become angry with God and turn away from God for a long time. In the worst scenario we stay angry with God until we die.

We need to pray, but we need to listen as well. God won't give up on us no matter what obstacles to living a life of prayer we encounter. God responds to each of our prayers with love. With God's love to empower us, we can learn to pray in ways that open our hearts to even greater depths of God's love.

Rev. Larry LaPierre

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