

Man's Difficulty Concerning Prayer

Second Series – Sermon Seventeen

Original by George MacDonald

Paraphrase by Dale R. Howie



Prayer is about communion and fellowship far more than about answers and provision. It is the fruit of our relationship with the Father, Son, and Spirit in which we are seeking Them for Themselves, wanting nothing but Their presence moment to moment. Prayer is as dynamic as Life itself. Ever-changing, responding to one another and others around us. It is the very power of Love flowing through us in our mutual Life with our common Father.

God is not slow to act as it appears to us. He needs no information or persuasion to give us His best. It is we who do not trust in Their goodness and faithfulness, and there lies the difficulty with prayer. Wanting what we think we need or want, now, when we ask. However, there is much more going on than we could possibly know. We cannot receive until the way is prepared and we are ready. Our readiness is far more about our inner life than our outer. God has the answers ready before we ask and an eternity to suffer with us until we are prepared to receive them!

We need to embrace our troubles, let them be our patient friends. Allow them to bring us to the Father's knee where deliverance and freedom are!

Outline

Openness of God – His design is that we will be free, active, and living beings. He sees to it that room is given for our participation.

Jesus' Plans Adjusted – Jesus did for His mother what for Himself He would not have done.

Prayer for Others – I believe I can pray for my friends, enemies, and everybody! And there is an essential good, and power in the prayer for another to the Maker of both.

Effects of Prayer – Pray on my child, I hear you. Your prayers combined with Mine are a help to others.

Prayer brings Communion – There are times when you want nothing but God. This is the ultimate objective of prayer!

The Problem of Waiting – For everything that requires a process, to begin the process is to act quickly!

God's Vengeance – Vengeance is the destroying of sin making the sinner reject and hate it.

Troubles – No matter where our troubles come from, the world outside or of the one within, keep praying. In God's good way, He will provide for us.

Luke 18:1-8 NASB

“Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart,”

How could any plan of God not be adjusted in response to our prayers?
How could we believe otherwise?

Openness of God

“Recognizing that God is the All-wise one. The one who sees the future, and that nothing can stop His plans.” No! This objection concerning us springs from a false concept of God. It supposes we do not matter concerning His care, intentions, and plans. So, what is the purpose of creation, if not for our education? Does the Father care more for stars and planets or divine calculations, order theories, and their harmonies, than His children? I think He cares more for a barnyard animal than for those.

The Father makes no plans without regard to His children. His design is that we will be free, active, and living beings. He sees to it that room is given for our participation. We need time and space to struggle out of our cocoons! Opportunity for our transformation to be complete, the metamorphosis that comes with the awakening of the will. The entering into His life as sons and daughters in the relationship and home of their Father! Surely He leaves room in His plans, eagerly awaiting the beautiful and free expressions of His children!

Is not the first lesson in this course of our education to bring us into communication, into prayer with Them? Would His plan require that His life for us be deterministic, hard, and inflexible? That He would

be rigid and unaffected by us, as if an unfeeling and machine-like force? Unable to answer our prayers because of His very own system, the one He designed for the sake of encouraging communion and prayer?

True, in many cases, prayer, more than its answers, is God's purpose. So, how will the ultimate goal of prayer be reached which is the oneness of the heart of the child with His Father? How does the child keep praying if he knows the Father will not answer him? A "no" answer may be from love, but how would we continue from a self-imposed "cannot"?

How could He be Father, if in creating, He did not make provision for the babbling prayers of His children? Is God's perfection a mechanical one? Does God Himself, have no room for change or choice? Therefore, He can offer none to us? There must be choices within the Divine as there are in the human. However little we may be able to conceive of it.

What kind of nonsense would this type of perfection be that would leave no room in God's work? No room for a change of plans based on the change of circumstances? Yes, even the adjustments made when His children begin to pray! You see the freedom of God in His sunsets, no two ever alike! All of creation is ever-evolving, adapting, and moving within the harmony of the law of liberty. God's creative perfection is love flowing from within Him!

How could there be a divine perfection where there was no freedom! Is His a perfection that excludes options? I can move my body as I please: can God move His? If God were alone, stagnant, and not dynamic, perhaps He would desire no change? But He is ever creating for the sake of His ever-expanding creation and creatures! All God's outpouring of love for us reflects change, change as its only constant!

So, the central idea of creation is the bringing into the world of a free, beautiful, and divine will in us. Shall this will, in union with the Father's, find itself confined, chained, and restricted by former laws? This will, would come as a new principle, creating new possibilities. We are not bound to our pasts, but is God bound to His? **No, the law is but a single means of responding in this life. Law is but a slave to life. God's life is not bound by some perfection that would limit His reach and freedom. He is not an imprisoned power trapped within the machine of His own ordered system.** God is the willing, ordering, and indwelling power in all that He has made. And man's soul a shadow of God's in His universe.

If you say, He is the clockmaker. I say, if this machine were to interfere with just one of His children's prayers, it would be swept away! Not to bring back chaos, but to make room for His child. His order is divine and cannot obstruct His higher goals, but serve them. Order, free order, is neither chaos nor senseless law, but is the Home of Thought!

If you say, perfection means only one way. I say, the perfect way to bring us to a crisis, cannot be the ideal way for us to live afterwards, the plan must change. Since the crisis depends on the response of the will, the outcome cannot be precise. We must remember that God's universe is not a divine toy! And the worlds and their forces are but a small portion of the tools in His workshop. Tools to draw us into His House of Love! Would the Father have let His Son die for His tools?

To say that God cannot interfere, by adjusting His plans without changing His ends is absurd! If we can change, God can change. Otherwise, He is less free than us. God can change His plans, but not His purposes or ends! That is to change them after a divine way, not our way. His ways are higher, just as the heavens are higher than the earth.

Jesus' Plans Adjusted

As in all of Jesus' miracles, He did in the small, what They are always doing in the vast reaches of Their universe. Jesus' first miracle of changing water to wine at the request of His mother, illustrates the point I am making.

Poor was the making of wine in the stone pots, compared to the beautiful design of nature in the growth of the vine with its clusters of plump grapes. The vine's roots were gathering life and water from the earth. Nature's water was borne in pitchers and poured into the great vases. But the message is precious in the same, even in its outcome, as the Lord's consideration of ordinary human rejoicing. However, even more, there is a point at the beginning of the story that makes it dear to me. That is Jesus' consideration of the wish of His mother. Unfortunately, how differently is the story heard, how misunderstood!

His mother suggesting there was an opportunity for Him to display His power. However, this was not in His plans, as we gather from His response. For the Lord never acted independently, never pretended it was ever about Himself, to His mother or anyone else. He let Mary know that, and she had different outlooks on what His work would be. "Dear woman, that's not our problem," Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come." But His "yes" answer was there in His tenderness to Her.

What are we to conclude except that the Son of God and Mary, at His mother's request, made room in His plans for the thing she desired? It was not in His plan to work a miracle, but at His mother's request, He would! Jesus did for His mother what for Himself He would not have done. He did not always do as His mother asked, but at this moment, it was not outside His Father's will.

If this would have hurt His mother or was against His Father's will, He would not have done it. That would have been to harm her in answering her prayer. His yielding makes the story twice as special to me. Jesus could change His plans and harm nothing. So, the Father can do the same. For Jesus could do nothing but what He saw the Father do.

Prayer for Others

However, having found it possible to understand how God can answer prayer for those who pray for themselves, what are we to think about prayer for others? What appropriateness can there be in praying for someone else? Would God give to another because of our asking that He would not do without it? Would God not, if it could be done without the person asking, do it without the intercessor as well? Yes, if He were a tyrant whose heart could be softened by our fearful love. One who needed to be informed, enlightened, or reasoned with before acting? Or one who needs to awaken His interest by information about the character, need, or claim? If these are required, would there be a basis in prayer for another?

- If we believe that God is the unselfish one, the Good One in the universe, would He not with a singular heart for His children make them Good, perfect, as He is perfect?

- **If we believe not only that He gave Himself once, but He is always giving Himself to us in our lives, would He not, therefore, do His best for “every” man?**
- If we believe that God knows every man’s needs, would He not for love’s sake, spare not a single trouble that would help liberate one of His children- if we believe all these?

“How can we think He will change His way with someone because another prays for him? For this prayer would arise from nothing, no need in the person praying. Why should intercession initiate a change in God’s dealings with him?”

I do not know how to answer this argument. I can only say looking at the face of it and feeling the difficulties still say, **“I believe I can pray for my friends, enemies, and everybody! And there is an essential good and power in the prayer for another to the Maker of both. And that, because their Maker is perfect, no less than Love!”**

I will not bring authority into this, for it can only cause us to believe a reason is there, but not help us see it. The difficulty is the same, even when we hear Jesus pray to His Father. Pray for those the Father loves who rely on the Son. The Father, therefore, loves with a special love those leading with faith. **He loves them not just because they would die if He didn’t, but He loves them from the depths of Divine approval. Those who trust in Jesus will be content even in the face of the uncertainty. That is trust in what He does, for reason and right lie here, even when we don’t understand.** I think we would pray for others even if we weren’t instructed to do so.

God has created us to love like Himself and long to help. If, like Him, we are willing to give ourselves to help others be free of the distance created by their darkness. Love, moving us to even suffer pain in order to give. Us, giving out of our need to bless and help, being fully aware of our weaknesses. We would see clearly that all our hope lies in God! Where else can we go other than to Him with our needs and difficulties? If my friend can help me, how much more will God help with our needs and do what we can’t? God is helping my friend that I will be encouraged as well. Then perhaps, in turn, I can help someone else.

You see, in praying for another, the burdens of our love are relieved as well. We are not just praying for someone else alone. Would God give us the self-giving Love with which He creates, the root of all power in us, and then leave that Love powerless and ineffectual? Can He not expedite something because of our prayer, speed up what He cannot alter? Help us so that we can give to others? If God desires that we should work with Him, surely our prayers help Him?

God is always seeking to lift us up through the sharing in His divine nature. We, like Jesus’ disciples, bearing witness to the Truth, will share in Jesus’ glory even on the throne of His Father. See the majesty of the creative love of the Trinity! Nothing else will do than to have His children, through His and our suffering, share in His glorious throne! If this is the goal of the infinite, why should it bring Him under restraints and difficulties rather than set Him free to accomplish His goals even in the face of opposition? **If His glory is in giving Himself, and we will share in His glory, that is giving ourselves, why should we not begin now?**

Effect of Prayer

God planned for His children to be coworkers with Him. His plan was not only for Jesus, but for us, to help as well. Those He has birthed from above, helping bring others to His knee as well! So that the Father's house will be full! That our prayers, I know not how, help in the accomplishing of His will. So that we who pray, help empower others who have not yet seen, and somehow assist them in their journey!

One thing is clear. Prayer operates in the mind of the one who prays; its light grows, brightens, draws, and enlightens. However, there must be more to prayer. The perfect idea in prayer is the lifting up of the soul into the will of the Father. Will not prayer work towards the union of the Father, His child, and the one for whom prayer is offered? The one who has not yet chosen the Father's embrace? His children cannot come into His embrace all at once or at all, without God's suffering as well as their own. But, would not any parent find a way to grant the request of their child who asks, "Papa, this is my brother's birthday. I have nothing to give him, and I do love him so much! Will you give me something to give him, or give him something for me?"

"Still, could not God have given the gift without the prayer? And why should the good of anyone depend on the prayer of another?"

My answer, "Why should my love be powerless to help another!" We must not tie God to our measure of time. Or think He has forgotten our prayers for another, going seemingly unanswered to us. **Death is not the end, not an impenetrable wall.** Surely our prayers for them go on to help? If we live and move and have our being in Him, and our very loving lies in Him, then surely we all exist in the breath of God Himself! If prayer is like a pulse that sets this breath in motion then we are closer to one another than our bodies could ever be. Surely, in the Eternal, hearts are never parted!

The divine method would be incomplete without God's highest beauty, love itself! If prayer did not receive its power from love? If I love and cannot help? Does not my heart move me to ask Him to help? The God who loves and can! Will He answer, "Child, do not bother me, I'm already doing all I can!"? If that were His answer where would the one who loves be content in the situation? But, if the eternal, the limitless Love, the unbelievable self-forgetting devoted God who demands all and gives all should say, "**Pray on my child, I hear you. Your prayers combined with Mine are a help to him. We are one in this. I will have you "all" safely home with me in time! Have no fear; only we must work together and not lose heart.** Go and let your light shine before men that they may see the good and glorify Me in knowing that I am light, and in Me, there is no darkness at all." What then?

Prayer brings Communion

It may be that the answer to prayer looks like a "no". It may come, for instance, as of one who prayed for more love. The answer came in a great division, but in the end, it birthed a beautiful tenderness of love! Our vision is so limited, and our concepts are too small, our intellects so diminished that we hardly see at all. This is why we're rebels against our own true selves.

Some who argue for prayer are not seeking to gain answers, but the benefit of spiritual perspective in the heart of the prayer. And some who believe in no God at all, still pray for others as well. They say it helps them to achieve spiritual insight. I will not contradict their testimony. **So effective is prayer in the soul that, in its practice, anyone who prays will be encouraged.** Yet, to pray to no one is somewhat

foolish. Yet the good that comes from it may correct their unbelief. Prayer is natural, consistent with the way we were created. The pagan's discipline in prayer is better than the believing Christian, praying, but not believing God will answer. It is a disgrace to Him, themselves, and the truth. Whoever be the God to whom we pray in disbelief. This unbelief is far worse than praying to no God at all.

On the other hand, let God give no response to the request, the answer being unworthy of Him. Yet the one who prays will be better for it, if only in talking to His Father. Prayer is good for us, no matter the answer.

There are emotional states of satisfaction in prayer where a man feels he has nothing to ask. Having prayed he patiently waits for God to work. **There are states of passion where asking is reduced to tears. And there are times when you want nothing but God. This last one is the ultimate objective of prayer!** A person may not believe in the Trinity, but believes there is a God and still not care to be in communion with Him. **But he who prays and does not lose heart will come to recognize that communication with His Father is more than to have all his prayers answered.**

This communication is the purpose of all prayer, regardless of whether answers are given or refused. The seeking of the Father more than anything He can provide. This one is likely to ask and receive more freely, knowing His Father's heart more clearly.

Even those who ask amiss will have answered prayer. Our Father will never give a stone when His children ask for bread. However, He will give a stone to those who ask for a stone. If the Father says, "My child, that is a stone, not bread." And the child answers, "It is bread, and I want it." Maybe it would be best for him to try his bread?

The Problem of Waiting

The next point concerning this parable is the Lord's recognition of the delay in the answer. **The parable seems to take the delay for granted even though He says, "He will vindicate them quickly!" The resolving of the contradiction is that He decides immediately, though the answer may take some time to arrive.**

He may delay because we are not ready for the answer. To give before we are ready to receive would be to destroy the real purpose in prayer. The Father not protecting us when we are not prepared. The delay may work to bring us closer, increase our desire, focus our request, and mature our receptive condition.

Again, it is not from any adjustment in God, but in our condition, capacity, or timing for the working out of the answer. God limited only by what is best for us, best for our education. In this education, we play a large part, and this part involves time. Perhaps the better the gift we ask for, the more time is necessary for its arrival.

To give us the spiritual gifts we desire, God may need to dig into our past and into places we may be unaware of their relevance. His work done in us may not be understood until the end. My awareness is often only on the surface just as the flames of the volcano are to the core of its source. In the center of our being, God works behind our conscious selves. Through His holy influence and presence, He works for the things for which we most earnestly cry. He is approaching our consciousness from behind,

working forward from our darkness into the light. All this before we are aware of His presence and the answered prayer in His child.

To vindicate quickly, must then mean to make no delay beyond what is necessary. To begin to answer the moment it is possible to start. Just because Jesus did not appear for thousands of years after men began to ask for a Savior, are we to imagine He did not come in the first moment that He could? Can we doubt that for Him to come a moment sooner would have been a delay, not help? Help in the coming of His Kingdom? **For everything that requires a process, to begin the process is to act quickly!** God does not postpone like the unjust judge. He does not delay until He is irritated with the prayers of the needy. He hears while they are speaking, yes. He answers before they call.

God's Vengeance

Of course, no selfish cries for vengeance will be answered until the fire of God consumes the selfishness in them. Be sure, when Jesus prayed to His Father to forgive them while He was being crucified, He spoke His own desire and His Father's will together. **God never punishes according to an abstract concept of sin. As if we knew what we were doing!** "Vengeance is mine," He says. With a right understanding of vengeance, we might as well have asked for forgiveness as for revenge. **Vengeance is the destroying of sin making the sinner reject and hate it. There is no satisfaction in a vengeance that seeks or effects less.** We must turn against the selfish-self, and so be for ourselves! If it seems that nothing is working, then whatever brings repentance and self-denial will do!

Friends, if anyone calls for vengeance from us, because of something we have done. Then God's grace will give them vengeance! Let us not seek to be treated any less!

Perhaps the Lord was talking here, not of persecution, or human wrongs, but of our foes within. If so, He recognizes the selfish-self against which we fight. We are not in a fight with our true selves, but with the enemies within and the strife we have with them.

God can never create a being that could be in its' essential being and nature evil! This evil is not from us, but comes against us. This evil is the enemy of which we need revenge. When we engage, God will avenge. Until we resist, this evil will have power over us, a power that makes us miserable. **Miserable is all we can be, in a yoke with a nature contrary to our own.** Be comforted that you are not alone when this seems too much for you. God delivers; He does not delay. He is at work in you. You need only to pray and not faint. Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek the best, for to seek His best is to have it. The seed of it is already in you, or you would not know to ask for it.

Troubles

No matter where our troubles come from, the world outside or the one within, keep praying. In God's good way He will provide for us. We are like Him, and He will answer our prayers with help. He will destroy our adversaries quickly, reminding us that we are vessels of love and forgiveness to all, and not adversaries to any. Let us hope to be delivered from our adversaries without or the ones within our hearts along our way, by paying the last penny!

CLIFFNOTES WITH ORIGINAL MACDONALD QUOTES

Openness of God

He lays no plans irrespective of his children; and, his design being that they shall be free, active, live things, he sees that space be kept for them.

How could he be Father, who creating, would not make provision, would not keep room for the babbled prayers of his children?

Is the one idea of creation the begetting of a free, grand, divine will in us?

Law is but mode of life-action. Is it of his perfection that he should have no scope, no freedom? Is he but the prisoned steam in the engine, pushing, escaping, stopped—his way ordered by valve and piston? or is he an indwelling, willing, ordering power?

That God cannot interfere to modify his plans, interfere without the change of a single law of his world, is to me absurd.

Jesus' Plans Adjusted

What am I thence to conclude, worthy of the Son of God, and the Son of Mary, but that, at the prayer of his mother, he made room in his plans for the thing she desired? It was not his wish then to work a miracle, but if his mother wished it, he would! He did for his mother what for his own part he would rather have let alone.

Prayer for Others

If we believe that he not only would once give, but is always giving himself to us for our life; ...that God does his best for every man;

'Yet I believe I may pray for my friend—for my enemy—for anybody! Yet and yet, there is, there must be some genuine, essential good and power in the prayer of one man for another to the maker of both—and that just because their maker is perfect, not less than very God.'

loves not merely because they must die if he did not love them, but loves from the deeps of divine approval. Those who believe in Jesus will be satisfied, in the face of the incomprehensible, that in what he does reason and right must lie; but not therefore do we understand.

If his glory be in giving himself, and we must share therein, giving ourselves, why should we not begin here and now?

Effect of Prayer

Death is not an impervious wall;

Surely the system of things would not be complete in relation to the best thing in it—love itself, if love had no help in prayer. If I love and cannot help, does not my heart move me to ask him to help who loves and can?

'Pray on, my child; I am hearing you; it goes through me in help to him. We are of one mind about it; I help and you help. I shall have you all safe home with me by and by! There is no fear, only we must work, and not lose heart.

Prayer brings Communion

So needful is prayer to the soul that the mere attitude of it may encourage a good mood.

On the other hand, let God give no assent to the individual prayer, let the prayer even be for something nowise good enough to be a gift of God, yet the soul that prays will get good of its prayer, if only in being thereby brought a little nearer to the Father, and making way for coming again. Prayer does react in good upon the praying soul, irrespective of answer.

there are moods of such hungering desire, that petition is crushed into an inarticulate crying; and there is a communion with God that asks for nothing, yet asks for everything. This last is the very essence of prayer,

but he that prays and does not faint will come to recognize that to talk with God is more than to have all prayers granted—that it is the end of all prayer, granted or refused. And he who seeks the Father more than anything he can give, is likely to have what he asks,

The Problem of Waiting

in the very structure of the parable he seems to take delay for granted, and says notwithstanding, 'He will avenge them speedily!' The reconciling conclusion is, that God loses no time, though the answer may not be immediate.

He may delay because it would not be safe to give us at once what we ask: we are not ready for it. To give ere we could truly receive, would be to destroy the very heart and hope of prayer, to cease to be our Father. The delay itself may work to bring us nearer to our help, to increase the desire, perfect the prayer, and ripen the receptive condition.

To avenge speedily must mean to make no delay beyond what is absolutely necessary, to begin the moment it is possible to begin.

For anything that needs a process, to begin to act at once is to be speedy.

God's Vengeance

God will never punish according to the abstract abomination of sin, as if men knew what they were doing.

that vengeance is, to destroy the sin—to make the sinner abjure and hate it; nor is there any satisfaction in a vengeance that seeks or effects less.

other than miserable can no one be, under the yoke of a nature contrary to his own.

Troubles

But from whatever quarter come our troubles, whether from the world outside or the world inside, still let us pray. In his own right way, the only way that could satisfy us, for we are of his kind, will God answer our prayers with help.