

# *Does God Answer Our Prayers?*

## Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – February 1, 2004

### Sermon Background Study

#### Scripture Passages (NRSV)

##### Matthew 7:7-11

<sup>7</sup>“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. <sup>8</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. <sup>9</sup>Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? <sup>11</sup>If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

##### Matthew 17:14-20

<sup>14</sup>When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, <sup>15</sup>and said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. <sup>16</sup>And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.” <sup>17</sup>Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.” <sup>18</sup>And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. <sup>19</sup>Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” <sup>20</sup>He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”

*This week, we continue our six-week series on prayer: A Life of Prayer. Today, we consider whether God truly answers our prayers.*

#### Are we naïve?

Today’s scripture passages challenge us to avoid naïve and simplistic readings of the Bible. On the surface, in both passages Jesus’ seems to say that all we need to do is ask with sufficient faith and God will give us anything we ask for. All we need do is name it and we can claim it. Little wonder that many Christians suspect that somehow God doesn’t really answer our prayers, or at least in any meaningful sense. After all, how many of us have gotten everything we asked for, no matter how hard we prayed or how deep we thought our faith to be?

However, in these passages Jesus is not suggesting that God will give us anything we want so long as we pray hard enough. Let’s take a look at each passage in greater depth.

#### Ask . . . search . . . knock

The first passage is from the Sermon on the Mount. In the sermon, Matthew has placed the Lord’s Prayer at its very center.<sup>1</sup> Thus, it is no surprise that after giving instructions about living a life of discipleship, Jesus returns to the subject of prayer.

#### A Prayer of St. Augustine

“Lord, I seek you with all my heart, with all the strength you have given me. I long to understand that which I believe.

You are my only hope; please listen to me. Do not let my weariness lessen my desire to find you, to see your face.

You created me in order to find you; you gave me strength to seek you. My strength and my weakness are in your hands; preserve my strength and help my weakness. Where you have already opened the door, let me come in; where it is shut, open at my knocking.

Let me always remember you, love you, meditate upon you, and pray to you, until you restore me to your perfect pattern.”

One of the most influential Christian theologians, Augustine (AD 354 - 430) became a Christian when he was 32 years old, having lived a life of great excess. For 35 years, he devoted his enormous abilities to the defense of the faith. His autobiographical *Confessions* is still widely read and is one of the classic expressions of Christian spirituality. Augustine was a bishop in Hippo, a city in North Africa.

<sup>1</sup>For more on the Sermon on the Mount, you can read the Background Studies from last August’s five-part series. These are available on-line at [www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org).

At first glance, it would seem that Jesus is teaching some sort of three-step process to prayer: we ask, then we search, and then we knock. But Jesus is not. All three are merely standard Jewish expressions for prayer (as in ‘knocking on the doors of mercy’). All three expressions point us toward prayer that is a journey, a quest, an expectation. Jesus is encouraging us to go to God in prayer, expecting God to listen and expecting God to answer. To help us grasp his teaching, Jesus uses the analogy of a parent and child. What sort of mother would hand her daughter a stone when she asked for a sandwich? If human, sinful parents can listen and respond in love to their children’s wishes, how much more must our loving God listen and respond to the desires of his children.

In this passage, Jesus is not portraying God as holding some open checkbook ready to give us whatever we want. After all, what responsible parent would do such a thing? Rather, Jesus wants us to understand that prayer is about a relationship with God and he uses the analogy of parent and child to put our prayers within the context of love.

*All is possible with God*

Our second story is of an exorcism. Though Jesus had given his disciples the authority to cast out demons (Matthew 10:1), they cannot and they want to know why! A man, whose son suffers from epilepsy, has brought the boy to the disciples so that they can cure him. When they fail, the man turns to Jesus seeking help. Annoyed and frustrated, Jesus lashes out at the crowd around him and, by extension, all of Israel. How long, he cries, must he put up with this “faithless and perverse generation.” The people seem completely unwilling to trust and to follow Jesus. Even his own

from the *Confessions*

“There is a delight which is given not to the wicked (Isaiah 48:22), but to those who worship you for no reward save the joy that you yourself are to them. That is the authentic happy life, to set one’s joy on you, grounded in you and caused by you. That is the real thing and there is no other. Those who think that the happy life is found elsewhere, pursue another joy and not the true one.

Late have I loved you . . . You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.”

Augustine’s *Confessions* is written as an extended prayer. Reading it is like listening in on the most intimate of conversations, as Augustine’s heart seeks its true home.

disciples disappoint him. Their faith, their trust in Jesus, is simply “too little.” What faith they have may be genuine, but it is ineffective, so much so that they cannot do what Jesus told them to do. Their faith must grow into a larger faith, grounded in a deep trust of their master and teacher.

But as he would so often do, Jesus immediately offers a perspective that contrasts with “little faith.” If the disciples have faith only so large as a mustard seed,<sup>2</sup> they could move a mountain – and presumably exorcise a demon. Here, it seems as if Jesus means to say that even the tiniest amount of faith is sufficient for all things. Douglas Hare notes that we don’t have to resolve these two perspectives.<sup>3</sup> There is truth in each and each serves to correct and balance the other. Jesus is pushing his disciples toward greater reliance upon and trust in God. They can do great things for God only when they expect great things from God.

So . . . does God answer prayer?

Of course!! What sort of loving father ignores his children? In these passages, Jesus teaches his disciples (that includes us!) that we can rely on God in all things. Now, we may not always get the answer to our prayers that we want nor when we want it. After all, the parent often knows better than the child what is best for the child. In the same way, God knows our hearts and needs better than we do. With boldness, the psalmist writes “But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer” (Psalm 66: v.19). The only question for us is whether we will trust God. Will we trust that he listens and answers, even when it seems to us that he does not?

<sup>2</sup>Jesus uses hyperbole here to make his point, contrasting one of the tiniest of all seeds, the mustard seed, with the largest physical object anyone could imagine, a mountain.

<sup>3</sup>from Hare’s commentary on Matthew in the *Interpretation* series, John Knox Press, 1993.

## Daily Bible Readings

*(passages about God's answering prayer)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 1 Samuel 1:1-2:10 Hannah prays for a son and God answers</p>	<p>Day 2 Psalm 66 "But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer" (v.19)</p>
<p>Day 3 2 Corinthians 1:3-11 The blessings of God. In v. 11, Paul refers to the answering of prayers offered up by many.</p>	<p>Day 4 1 John 3:18-24 We can be bold in our prayers because we are obedient. Obedience to God (loving God and others!) is much more a part of the Christian life than we sometimes imagine!</p>
<p>Day 5 1 John 5:13-17 Again - John writes that we can be bold in our asking. (Note: John is vague about 'mortal' sins. He is probably referring to an outright denial of Jesus.)</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### February Book Recommendation: *Prayer* by Richard Foster

Richard Foster's book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, has been one of the most popular books on prayer since it was published in 1992. I doubt you could find a contemporary book that will be more helpful as you seek a richer and more enduring prayer life. Note though, my recommendation comes with a caution. Foster's book is so rich that I urge you to avoid trying to consume it all at one time. Instead, consider reading one chapter every couple of weeks or so. Foster notes that "Some people work at the business of praying with such intensity that they get spiritual indigestion." Take your time with this book. Use it as a guide over many months. It will repay a slow, thoughtful, and prayerful reading.

Available in the St. Andrew Bookstore

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Nearly all of us have at least some experience with prayer. How many of us have not, at one time or another, attempted some sort of bargain with God? . . . *Dear God, if you'll only do this one thing for me, then I promise that I will [insert empty promise of choice].* . . . How many of us have not been disappointed by seemingly unanswered prayers? . . . *the job does not materialize; our loved one does not recover.* A young woman in one of my classes once said to me, "Of all the things we Christians claim, the hardest one for me to believe is that the creator of the universe listens to me . . . to me." Truly, it does seem almost incomprehensible. Too quickly, we conclude that our prayers are "unanswered" because God isn't really listening . . . *surely, he has larger matters at hand* . . . or because our faith is inadequate . . . *if I were only a better Christian, God would answer.* God *does* listen. God *does* answer.

Discuss your own experiences with "unanswered" prayer. It won't be easy, but try to recall specific occasions when you felt that your prayers were to no avail. How can we come to trust God much as we would a loving parent, who is eager to listen and sure to answer? How can we come to handle the idea that we often pray from our own will, not God's will? How can we go about better conforming our own will to God's? How can we become better at accepting the idea that we don't always know what is best for us, much less for others? Prayer is a relationship with God that, together, we develop over time. As our relationship with God grows, as our trust deepens, we find that more and more we want what God wants for us . . . we come to understand that God always listens and God always answers!