

## **The Problem of Feelings in Our Prayers**

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Prayer: Hungry for God Series

Luke 11:5-8; Luke 18:1-8

I've been doing a series on prayer over the last month or so. One of the biggest challenges we face in prayer is dealing with our feelings. Sometimes we feel like our prayers are just bouncing off the ceiling. We get up in the morning and we try to pray, but we don't feel like we're getting through. It feels like God has put a sign over heaven saying, "Closed for business. Gone Fishing!" At other times, we feel like there is a big sign over heaven flashing: "Open! Please Come In. We Welcome New Business."

The question that arises for us is whether our feelings are good indicators of how God is viewing our prayers. Do our feelings determine whether our prayer is going to be granted or not?

Hudson Taylor was one of the great missionary heroes from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who helped to open up China to the Christian faith. He was one of the early missionary pioneers. Hudson Taylor made a huge difference in world missions because he was one of the first missionaries to carefully distinguish between being a Westerner, with all the customs, dress, and thought processes of a Westerner, and being a Christian. Hudson Taylor understood that Christianity was rejected by many people not because people weren't interested in Jesus, or because the gospel wasn't the best news they've ever heard. Many people were turned off to Christianity because the thought to become a Christian was to stop being Chinese that they had to become a Westerner.

So Hudson Taylor dressed in traditional Chinese garb. He lived as a Chinese man would live. He presented the gospel in the form that Chinese people would culturally understand it.

Hudson Taylor, this pioneer missionary, saw amazing answers to prayer. Late in life someone asked him: Did he always feel joyful when he prayed? Did he always feel the presence of God when he prayed? Hudson Taylor replied that "his heart usually felt like wood when he prayed and that most of his victories came through 'emotionless prayer.'"

Now, it is not that feeling is out of place. God instructs us to pour out our hearts to him. We find the people in the Bible carrying on an emotionally very honest relationship with God. For example, the psalmist in Psalm 102:4-7 says this:

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Ps 102:4 My heart is blighted and withered like grass;

I forget to eat my food.

Ps 102:5 Because of my loud groaning

I am reduced to skin and bones.

Ps 102:6 I am like a desert owl,

like an owl among the ruins.

Ps 102:7 I lie awake; I have become

like a bird alone on a roof.

If you want to see emotional honesty, read the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah takes us a roller coaster ride as his emotions are battered by the circumstances of life. He tells God that he feels betrayed by him. Jeremiah 20:7.

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Jer 20:7 O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived;

you overpowered me and prevailed.

I am ridiculed all day long;

everyone mocks me.

Then he communicates his confidence in God, verse 11:

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Jer 20:11 But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior;

so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail.

They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced;

their dishonor will never be forgotten.

He is confident that he will be vindicated, verse 12:

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Jer 20:12 O LORD Almighty, you who examine the righteous

and probe the heart and mind,

let me see your vengeance upon them,

for to you I have committed my cause.

And from there, he ascends to the heights. He exults in God. Verse 13:

SLIDE

Jer 20:13 Sing to the LORD?

Give praise to the LORD?

He rescues the life of the needy

from the hands of the wicked.

And from the heights, Jeremiah descends to the very depths of despair. Verses 14-18,

## SLIDE

Jer 20:14 Cursed be the day I was born!

May the day my mother bore me not be blessed!

Jer 20:15 Cursed be the man who brought my father the news,  
who made him very glad, saying,  
“A child is born to you—a son!”

Jer 20:16 May that man be like the towns  
the LORD overthrew without pity.  
May he hear wailing in the morning,  
a battle cry at noon.

Jer 20:17 For he did not kill me in the womb,  
with my mother as my grave,  
her womb enlarged forever.

Jer 20:18 Why did I ever come out of the womb  
to see trouble and sorrow  
and to end my days in shame?

It is good to be honest with God about our feelings. But over-dependence, especially too much introspection about our feelings can be a major obstacle for us in prayer. We often don't feel in the mood to prayer.

Ruth Meyers, in her wonderfully helpful book titled *31 Days of Prayer*, quotes the Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, who said: “We should pray when we are in a praying mood, for it would be sinful to neglect so fair an opportunity. We should pray when we are not in a praying mood, because it would be dangerous to remain in so an unhealthy a condition.”

Pray regardless.

Well, today what I want to do is call your attention to some of the feelings you may have that block you from being able to pray, or block you from being able to pray effectively. I've called today's talk, “The Problem of Feelings In Our Prayers.” Let's invite God's presence.

Luke 11:5-8

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Lk 11:5 Then he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread,

Lk 11:6 because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.’

Lk 11:7 “Then the one inside answers, ‘Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.’

Lk 11:8 I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

Let me set the context for this little story of the sleepy neighbor. The context is a request made by Jesus' disciples about prayer. We read in Luke 11:1,

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Lk 11:1 One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

Now there are a number of things that must have been remarkable about listening to Jesus pray. But certainly, among the most notable things was Jesus' intimacy with God the Father. It was this closeness, this intimate communion between Father and Son that must have impressed the disciples. So they said to Jesus: Jesus, we want some of what you've got. Teach us to pray.

Jesus, borrowing from Jewish prayer, offers them what we call the Lord's Prayer. It is in a shortened form here in Luke 11:2-4. We find its fuller expression in Matthew 6.

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Lk 11:2 He said to them, "When you pray, say:

" 'Father,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come.

Lk 11:3 Give us each day our daily bread.

Lk 11:4 Forgive us our sins,  
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.  
And lead us not into temptation

Why then, did Jesus go on to tell the story about the sleepy neighbor? Because the issue for us in prayer is not only getting a proper form for our prayer, but there is a more fundamental issue. That is our view of God. He not only gives us a form for prayer, he gives us the foundation for prayer. You are not going to be able to pray properly unless you deal with your view of God. Jesus takes us back to the fundamentals. Who are you speaking to when you kneel down to pray?

And, friends, in this series we come back to this over and over again because there is nothing more important regarding your prayers than you get clear about who you are talking to. Who is it that you are trying to have communion with? We discussed this when I talked about the Prodigal Father. Is God really a generous father, or not? When Stephen Van Dop taught, he also talked about God as a father who generally gives gifts. Is that true, or not?

The problem is that when we actually get down to praying, we often feel like there are too many obstacles in the way of God granting us this particular request. In this case, a traveler comes to a friend's house at midnight. Remember, this is at a time before there were a bunch of hotels and motels on every major highway for people to stay in. So, if someone showed up in town at midnight, they went to a friend's house. In the ancient near East, hospitality was a major social obligation. It is today in the Near East and throughout the Asian world. Bread was then, and is today, always set out in front of a guest, no matter what the hour is.

That was my experience in Central Asia on my recent trip there. It was 10:00 at night. We had just finished dinner and then we went to visit a Central Asian family. Without asking whether we were hungry or not, they immediately put a loaf of bread in front of each person. Now, the bread is not the meal. The bread is the spoon, the fork, and the knife for the meal. You take off a piece of bread and dip it into a common dish and then pop the whole thing into your mouth. The common dish is not defiled because you continually take a new piece of bread and dip it in the common bowl.

But in this story the host doesn't have any bread to set in front of his guests. And so he runs to his neighbor for help and his request is refused. The one inside answers: "Don't bother me. The door is already locked and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up to give you anything. There are too many obstacles in the way of me granting your request." In ancient Near-Eastern houses all of the family would sleep together in one room that also might contain some of their animals. "If I get up," the neighbor says, "I will wake up everyone. And besides for that, the door is bolted."

We often feel like that needy host when we go to God. We feel that there are too many obstacles in the way of God granting our request. In fact, often we talk ourselves out of the answer to our prayer, even when we're praying because we're not talking to God, we're mentally rehearsing a list of the problems that are in the way of God answering our prayers. Have you ever done that? Simply mentally rehearsed the reasons why God won't give you what you are asking for? I'm going to pray, Lord, but I understand if you can't do this because the person's whose approval I need, the person with the real authority is against this. I would like this plan to succeed at work. I'd like to get this zoning change. I'd like to have this custody issue resolved. The person with the real authority seems to be against my request, so God I'm going to pray, but I don't know what you can do.

God, I'm going to pray, but the doctors said that the prognosis is really bleak.

I'm going to pray, God, but this person's heart that I'm praying for is really hard. I don't know what you can do.

Jesus, in this story, is trying to draw a contrast between what God is like and what the sleepy neighbor was like. He is not saying God is like a sleepy neighbor. In teaching the disciples to pray, he is communicating that God is unlike a sleepy neighbor. In fact, the original actually reads in verse 5:

Then he said to them, "Can you imagine if one of you had a friend and he goes to him at midnight and says: 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me and I have nothing to set before him.' Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' Can you imagine any such event in your village?"

In contemporary America, we would say: Yes! I can imagine a neighbor saying, go away. It is late. Talk to me tomorrow. But in the Middle East, the answer unanimously would be: No! We can't imagine such a thing. These excuses are not real obstacles for granting a request. If the children wake up, they'll go back to sleep. The bolt on the door is not too heavy for you to easily move it.

And friend, whatever your feelings are about the obstacles in the way of God answering your prayers, they aren't real obstacles to God. The Lord spoke to Abraham 4 thousand years ago when his wife was well past childbearing age. She'd probably experienced menopause 30 years before. God spoke to Abraham and promised him a child saying in Gen. 18:14

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Ge 18:14 "Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."

Compared to the person you are speaking to, say to every obstacle: "So what? This is not too hard for God." So what if you are a woman, or you are young, or if the people in your small group are a different race than you and your experience has been that you might not be accepted by them. Race, age, gender, education, none of these things are obstacles in the way of God, if God is calling you to Christian leadership. So what if the person you are praying for is an atheist or has lost of past issues with the church, or comes from a non-Christian home, or is a lawyer or engineer. We're talking about God here. No person is too hard for God. Nothing is too hard for the Lord! Nothing in creation, nothing in redemption – nothing is too hard for the Lord.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that when you kneel down to pray? If you did, how would it change your feelings?

30 years ago when I came to the Lord as a college freshman there was one guy, who I'll call Tom, in my friendship circle who really rode me about my decision for Christ. He used to say things like: "Well, I wonder what the Jesus freak would tell

us now. Rich, we remember what you were like before. Don't lay some religious trip on us."

Well, I never really liked this guy before I came to Christ and I really struggled with my feelings about him after I came to Christ. One day after he made some cutting, sarcastic remark to me, I said to the Lord: "Lord, you know that I have real difficulty with this guy. But if you will save him, I will give up smoking cigarettes."

Well, understand, I was a very young Christian coming from a totally atheistic background. I'm not recommending to you that you bargain with God and cigarette smoking is bad for you regardless. But I said to God: "If you will save this guy, I will give up smoking cigarettes." I said that on a Friday. Three days later on Monday morning there is a knock at my door at 7:00 a.m. Who is it, but this guy I will call Tom. I said: "Tom, what are you doing here?"

He said: "Rich, man, I got saved over the weekend! I got to talk to you."

I said: "You got saved? How did that happen?"

He said: "Man, I was doing a drug deal at a motel in Youngstown and two guys beat me up and left me on the floor in the motel room. While I was lying there on the floor in the motel room, I cried out to the Lord and I got saved."

He laughed; I looked up and I said: "okay. You got me, God. And I took my cigarettes, crumpled them up and threw them in the garbage and never smoked again."

Nothing is too hard for God! Look around this room. There are hundreds of amazing stories of people's conversions around the room. God, in this church, has saved successful, but totally empty physicians. God has saved women who were drug abusing strippers and prostitutes. God has saved angry rebellious teenagers and people who were homeless alcoholics. God has saved college students and educated people from Muslim backgrounds, Jewish backgrounds, and Hindu backgrounds. God saves single moms, and 75-year old grandfathers. Never, ever look at another human being and say: this one is too hard for God.

Have you heard the term "compassionate conservative?" Do you know who helped to coin it? It wasn't George Bush. The man who helped coin the phrase was Marvin Olasky. Let me tell you about Marvin Olasky. Marvin was a Jewish Marxist, very, very bright, and a very committed Marxist.

Marvin was working on his Ph.D. at the University of Michigan. The Ph.D. was going to have a decidedly left-wing slant to it. But he decided as part of his research to try to find a group of people that were absolutely on the other end of the spectrum than the people that he was consulting. And so he went to a little

Baptist Church in a rural town in Michigan with his wife. And Marvin and his wife got saved!

He turned in a doctoral dissertation that was decidedly in a very different direction than the one he intended. Dr. Olasky has become a very thoughtful Christian leader over the last several decades and as I said, helped to coin the term, “compassionate conservative.”

No one and nothing is too hard for God! How would your feelings in prayer change if you believed this?

Again, in Jesus’ story we have a man who goes to his neighbor at midnight and says in verse 5,

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Lk 11:5 Then he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread,

Lk 11:6 because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.’

People in the ancient world did not bake every day. Sometimes a woman would bake enough loaves for 3 days or even a week at a stretch. If a host had run out of bread, and that host had an unexpected guest, according to Eastern culture, it is the community’s responsibility to help this host. In fact, when a guest came to a house in a village, the village was responsible for the guest’s entertainment, not just the host. Unlike in contemporary America where we barely know our neighbors and could care less about their friends or guests, in ancient Israel the guest was the guest of the community, not just the guest of the host home. In fact, when the guest entered the host home, he would be told: “You have honored our village.” Not just: “You have honored me; you’ve honored our village.”

So when Jesus said: “Can you imagine a situation in which you went to your neighbor for bread and he refused you?” the answer would be, no, we can’t imagine such a thing. It is unthinkable.

What’s Jesus’ point? He is speaking to us about our feelings regarding God and specifically our feeling that we’re on our own concerning our problems and the people we care about in our lives. Jesus is talking to us about our view of God. The story presents us squarely with this question: are your feelings accurate that you are on your own regarding the people in your life and the things you are concerned about, or does God say, trust me. These people and these issues are my responsibility.



Imagine having a child that you are worried about. Most of us who have kids worry about our kids – some of us more than others. But imagine if you felt like your child was making bad choices, they were making decisions that would hurt them as your son or daughter. You are concerned about your child's relationships. You are concerned about your child's attitudes. You are worried about your child's perspectives. Maybe your sleep has even been disturbed by your worries.

Or imagine you are facing a huge mountain of debt. Your bills are piling up. Creditors are calling. You've got collection notices. You are physically getting sick because of the pressure on you, so you pray. And when you pray, who are you talking to? Are you speaking to someone who is like a neighbor in a contemporary American suburb, who could care less about your problems, or your loved ones. Are you on your own or are you talking with someone who is more like a neighbor in an ancient Middle Eastern village? Someone who says, "This guest in your house is my guest. I see myself as responsible for his well being." Are you talking to someone who says: "Your issues are not yours alone. I view them as mine."

Can you imagine the change in your feelings, if you really believed that God saw your children as his responsibility. Can you imagine the change in your feelings when you prayed if you really believed God cared about your marriage and your bills more than you do?

Brothers and sisters, isn't it true that most of our feelings of anxiety arise from our need to control, fix and manage people and circumstances in our life because we feel like we are ultimately on our own. We are not convinced that God is completely invested in the people, and the things closest to our hearts. In the end when the chips are down, we feel like the buck stops with us, even though we're praying.

Can you imagine what it would feel like to be able to roll the burden of your anxiety onto someone who is bigger, stronger and wiser than you. Someone who saw himself as ultimately responsible to mend, correct, fix and control all the people and things that are precious to you? Friend, what if the buck really didn't stop with you? What if the buck stopped with God? How would you feel then?

Now, the NIV translation of verse 8 is really very bad. In the NIV we read:

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Lk 11:8 I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

The best commentaries suggest that this is a very poor translation of the original Greek. The verse should read this way:

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I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of his desire to avoid shame he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

Ancient Near Eastern culture and Eastern culture today are examples of shame-based cultures. Ken Bailey, who is an expert on Middle Eastern culture said that patterns of behavior in the Middle East are encouraged by appeals to shame. A parent does not tell a child, "That is wrong, Johnny" with an appeal to an abstract standard of right and wrong, but "that is shameful, Johnny," which is an appeal that stimulates feelings of shame or feelings of pride.

One of the sharpest criticisms possible of a man in the Middle East is that he doesn't feel shame. In this culture, had the sleeper refused the request of a loaf of bread, the host would have continued on his rounds cursing the sleeper loudly. By morning, the story would have been all over the village and the sleeper would have been met by cries of shame everywhere he went.

Here is Jesus' point. The sleepy neighbor cared nothing about the host. He only granted the host's request because he wanted to avoid shame in the eyes of the village. But God is not motivated simply by his desire to avoid shame. God is motivated by his commitment to be our friend. Four times in this text Jesus uses the word "friend." Verse 5,

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Lk 11:5 Then he said to them, "Suppose one of you *has a friend* [highlight in yellow] and he goes to him at midnight and says, '*Friend*, [highlight in yellow] lend me three loaves of bread

Lk 11:6 because a *friend* [highlight in yellow] of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.'

And then in verse 8:

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Lk 11:8 I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his *friend*, [highlight in yellow] yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

The ultimate issue for prayer and our feelings always boils down to the nature of God. Who are we talking to? We sometimes feel like we're talking to a sleepy,

unreasonable, excuse-making, uncaring neighbor. How would your feelings in prayer change if you felt like you were talking to a good friend?

Brothers and sisters, how do you feel when you sit down with a good friend and tell them your problems. You are struggling in a relationship. You are struggling at work. You are struggling with something that someone said to you. Often just getting together with a good friend and unloading your worries and problems brings a sense of relief. Certainly, a wise friend can give you a sense of perspective. And if your friend has resources to help you, they will offer to assist you with your problem.

Let me ask you a personal question. When you pray, do you think of God as your friend? Be honest. Is the word friend, best friend, good friend, close friend one of the first things you think about when you think of God? Perhaps you think of God as Lord, or as someone who is distant and faraway. Some of you may think of God as a disapproving father. But Jesus tells this story in part to say: if you want to learn how to pray, talk to God like you would a really close friend.

You read a similar story in Luke 18:1-8.

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Lk 18:1 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

Lk 18:2 He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men.

Lk 18:3 And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

Lk 18:4 "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men,

Lk 18:5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!' "

Lk 18:6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says.

Lk 18:7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?

Lk 18:8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

The context of this story is that Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of God. We read in Luke 17:20,

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Lk 17:20 Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation,

And this story about the widow who went to the unjust judge is in the context of teaching about the kingdom of God. When the kingdom comes, God will set everything straight. Everything broken will be mended. Every disabled person will be healed. Every mental illness will be cured. Every griever will be comforted. Every hungry person will be fed. Every wrong will be righted.

But we live in the present time, a time when we are instructed by Jesus to pray: “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” And when we pray that prayer, what we’re saying is, “Lord, bring into the present time, in this age, at this moment, the healing you promised when your kingdom comes in the future. Lord, bring at this moment the justice you promised when you will set everything right. Bring right now to this grieving widow the comfort that they will experience fully when the kingdom comes. Bring the salvation you promised for my loved one. The intimacy with you that you promised. Let us experience now what we will fully experience in the future.”

You know, when you pray: “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” and you pray that over and over again – “God, let there be justice, let there be healing, let there be protection for the most vulnerable people in society,” it can raise in your heart all kinds of doubts about God. Here we are in the present moment. We’re praying and praying, but our request is not granted. Like the widow in this story, she keeps coming to the judge with the plea: “grant me justice against my adversaries.” What should we do when we pray and pray and we get no breakthrough?

Now, it is important to say immediately that God always has the freedom to say “no” to our requests. If God gave us everything we wanted, we would be God. God knows what’s best for us and for this world. He is wiser than us. He is kinder than us. He is more loving than us. We have to, in faith, accept God’s refusals. So if you are certain that God has said no to you, then we need to submit. We need to say: “Our Father knows what he’s doing. Thy will be done, Almighty God.”

But most times God has not said no. He has not said: “I’m not going to do this thing you are asking for.” Most times, we experience the silence of God. We feel like the door is simply shut. Or we hear from God: “Wait.” Most times we don’t hear a refusal. “No, I’m not going to do what you ask.” Most times there is silence or the feeling that we have to wait. What should our attitude be when God simply hasn’t answered?

Friend, an ungranted request is different than a refusal. So what should we do with ungranted requests? Luke 18:1,

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Lk 18:1 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

In light of the delay in the kingdom's coming, Jesus says here is one of the great works I have for you, I want you to keep praying. So many times friends, yours and my failure to keep praying is not faithful submission to the will of God, it is just surrendering to the feeling that nothing is ever going to happen, so why bother praying again? We prayed about this a dozen times, a hundred times, nothing is ever going to happen. We're never going to see the power of God's kingdom break into our situation, into our lives. So let's just throw in the towel and give up.

You know, having an ungranted request raises all kinds of negative feelings and doubts that we have about God. Remember the essential issue concerning prayer is who is it that you are talking to. Nowhere is this more painfully brought to the surface than when you have to wait and we hear silence at the other end of the telephone line. If you want to see what you deeply believe about God, check out your feelings when you have to pray about something again and again. Waiting really sifts us concerning our view about God.

In this case, Jesus tells us about two people, a widow who in the ancient world would be a chief example of someone who was vulnerable, weak, and who could be taken advantage of by the powerful, and the second person is an unjust, corrupt judge. We read in verse 2,

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Lk 18:2 He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men.

He's even worse than the sleepy, unresponsive, excuse-making neighbor. This is a man who cannot be shamed into granting a request. He doesn't care about his reputation in the village. Why does he grant the request? Because this poor widow badgers him into it. We read in verses 4-5,

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Lk 18:4 "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men,

I don't care about my reputation. I don't care whether people yell shame at me.

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Lk 18:5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!' "

What is Jesus' point? His point is not that God is unjust and corrupt and has to be nagged or badgered into granting our requests. Jesus' point is just the opposite. Keep praying because God is nothing like this unjust judge. If someone like this wicked judge can be argued into working justice, how much more will God, who desires to bring his kingdom, give justice and grant requests to those who ask him?

So here's the million-dollar question then: Why does God make us wait? If he is willing to grant our request, if God wants to bring his kingdom and he is concerned about justice and he desires to heal and to save, why doesn't he do it right now, rather than make us wait and pray about the matter over and over again?

Now, obviously, this raises a host of issues that one could write volumes on. Let me quickly suggest two answers to you. First, often we think that the issue is out there with this other person, this situation that we think needs to change. And we pray and pray about it, but God wants to do something not only out there, but also inside here in our own hearts, in the pray-er's life now. And he uses our persistent prayer to reshape our own hearts, attitudes and perspectives.

Have you seen this, friend, in your own life when you are praying for a parent, spouse, or workmate and your request has gone ungranted? God hasn't said no, he just seems to be silent, or he is saying wait. So you continue to pray. One thing that happens is that your prayers begin to change. Often God reveals that one of the things he wants to do is change not just your child, or your boss, or coworker, but God wants to change you. He wants to change you in your role as a father or mother, or you in your role as an employee, worker, or boss. He doesn't just want to fix your spouse. He wants to fix you as a husband or wife. He doesn't just want to give you a better job. He wants to deal with identity issues inside of you, your feelings of failure.

You know, when you are debating a stubborn opponent, and you aren't prevailing, you're not winning, they often will make you think more deeply than you would have thought about the issue. When you are debating a stubborn opponent, they often will change the way you construct your arguments. You begin to wonder as you pray: Why am I facing so much opposition? What does God want to do inside of me?

Certainly one of the things that God wants to do inside of you, friend, and inside of me as we are forced to wrestle with God over and over again about an issue is to change our view of him. There is something about the pain of waiting as you

cry out for God's kingdom to come in an area. It raises to the surface all of your fears and doubts regarding whether God really is a generous father.

Am I talking to a close friend? Am I speaking to someone who really cares? Is there anyone really there? Does prayer really make a difference?

Friend, you can't have a deeply rooted faith unless you honestly face all of the fears and doubts about God that you hide in the basement of your soul. Until you have to pray about something that really is of concern to you dozens and dozens of times over the stretch of many years, your own faith can't be matured. Is it really humanly possible to pray about something over the course of years, or even decades and then have God grant your request?

A few months ago I had an extraordinary conversation with an elderly couple in our lobby. They were both in their mid-70's. The man introduced himself to me and said that he was happy to meet someone else who came from a Jewish background. He said: "Pastor Rich, I come from a Jewish background and just a few months ago at the age of 75, I gave my life to Christ."

I said: Really, how did that come about?

He mentioned the immediate circumstances in which he knelt down in a church and prayed to receive the Lord. But he said: "Actually, what made the difference was my wife prayed for me for half a century."

And so I talked with his wife. I said: "Is that true? Did you pray for your husband's salvation for half a century?"

She said: "It is absolutely true."

Now they had all kinds of ups and downs in their marriage. There was lots of pain, lots of months and years of distance. But she said: "I did. I kept praying for my husband's salvation for 50 years. I believe this was God's will for him." It is humanly possible to keep praying.

Let me close with a story. Some of you are familiar with the name George Muller. Muller testified that he received over 10,000 answers to prayer. He used to keep a journal with the prayer request and then the date that it was answered. His secret was that he tried to discover the will of God concerning a matter and he kept praying about it until God granted his request.

In George Muller's journal, he recorded this example of persistence in prayer: *In November 1844, I began to pray for the conversion of five individuals. I prayed every day without a single intermission, whether sick or in health, on the land or on the sea, and whatever the pressures of my engagements might be. Eighteen months elapsed before the first of the five was converted. I thanked God and*

*prayed on for the others. Five years elapsed, and then the second was converted. I thanked God for the second, and prayed on for the other three.*

*Day by day I continued to pray for them and six years passed before the third was converted. I thanked God for the three and went on praying for the other two. Years later, these two remained unconverted.*

*Muller wrote: The man to whom God in the riches of his grace is given tens of thousands of answers to prayer in the self-same hour or day in which they were offered has been praying day by day for nearly thirty-six years for the conversion of these two individuals and yet they remain unconverted. But I hope in God, I pray on, and look yet for the answer. They are not converted yet, but they will be. I have not a doubt that I shall meet them both in heaven; for my heavenly father would not lay upon my heart a burden of prayer for them for nearly three score years if he had not concerning them purposes of mercy.*

Now, listen to the rest of the story. In 1897 Muller died. After he had been praying to God on these two men's behalf for 52 years, those two men who were sons of a friend from George Muller's youth were still not converted. One man was converted at George Muller's funeral. He attended the funeral, listened to the message, and was converted there. The other man was converted a very short time after his funeral.

Do not let your feelings determine whether you are going to pray on and pray something through. Do not let your feelings that your prayers are bouncing off the ceiling, or that they don't make any difference, or that there are too many obstacles. Do not allow your feelings to determine whether or not you are going to pray. When you pray, you are speaking to your very best friend, whether you know it or not. When you pray you are speaking to someone who takes responsibility for your concerns. When you pray you are speaking to your father in heaven, who knows what you need before you ask. Always pray and never give up!

Let's pray.



## **The Problem of Feelings in Our Prayers**

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Rich Nathan

October 16-17, 2004

Prayer: Hungry for God Series

Luke 11:5-8; Luke 18:1-8

- I. We Feel Like Our Prayers Are Not Getting Through (Jer. 20:7-18)
  
- II. We Feel Like There Are Too Many Obstacles In The Way (Lk. 11:5-7)
  
- III. We Feel Like We Are On Our Own (Lk. 11:5-7)
  
- IV. We Feel Like God Is A Sleepy, Unresponsive, Excuse-Making Neighbor (Lk. 11:7, 8)
  
- V. We Feel Like Nothing Is Ever Going To Happen (Lk. 18:1-8)
  
- VI. We Feel Like No One Could Humanly Keep On Praying In The Face Of Silence