

Providence and Prayer (Luke 11:1-8)

How does God work in the world? If God is in heaven or God is invisible, how do we know what God is doing? The last two weeks we have been looking at the idea of providence. That is, how does God work in the world. The first week we looked at providence at preservation. God working in the world by preserving and sustaining the whole creation. Therefore we should trust God in daily life. Last week we looked at providence as government. God working in the world by governing over all, acting to work out his plan for the world. By governing directly by his own action and by governing through the work of human beings. In fact we saw that God could even act work through sinful human actions. So I suggested, as Christians we should have a confidence in the ultimate outcomes of life.

But for some people, the doctrine of providence raises a few questions. One is, what does prayer really accomplish. If prayer has an effect on what happens, then it seems that God's plan was not fixed in the first place. On the other hand if God's plan is fixed and he will preserve and govern the universe as he sees fit and will do the best good he can do – then why does it matter if we pray? In Malachi 3:6 it says, 'I the Lord do not change.' His plans are fixed. Yet James 5:16 says, 'The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.'

For a number of years I was on a committee for the diocese called the southern region council. And some of us wondered about the value of the committee. What often happened is that the Bishop comes in and says, well, these are the grants for various parishes in the southern region. And these are the plans for various building projects around the region. And these are the ministers that are going to this and that parish. And we're meant to rubber stamp it. It feels like we are just there to state our agreement with the Bishop.

And sometimes we can feel like that with prayer. Sure we pray, but God's just going to do what he's going to do anyway... is that right?

Well, let's look at what the bible says. And it seems to me that there are some conditions if prayer is to be powerful and effective.

We're used to having conditions placed on us. Like, you can go to your friends if your assignment is done. Yes you can get a discount on your tax return if you have private health insurance. Yes, you can have Friday off if you have got that proposal submitted before then.

In the bible the first condition of effective prayer is asking. Psalm 50:15 says, ‘Call on me in the day of trouble;’ And throughout the bible we are instructed to Call on God. Imperatives like, Ask, and you shall receive...and demand and request and beseech and beg and petition and intercede. Nothing wrong with praying quietly or praising God or even meditating on who God is. But the bible demands that we ask – that we use words and call on him. What was the last thing you asked God for?

Another condition for prayer seems to be confession. It’s the prayer of the RIGHTEOUS that’s powerful and effective. As Proverbs 28:9 says, ‘When one will not listen to the law, even one’s prayers are an abomination.’ God will hear us when we are sinners, otherwise he would hear no one. But we need to make sure confession is part of our prayers. Its why we have a confession in every service here.

Again, Persisting seems to be important in the bible. Luke 18:1 tells us that ‘Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to give up.’ The parable is particularly about praying for justice, and sometimes it seems justice doesn’t come straight away – and sometimes justice may not even arrive until the Lord’s return. So it is important to persist in prayer – at the very least, persistent prayer will encourage our faith. Romans 12:12 says, ‘persevere in prayer.’ One of the helpful things someone said to me was, ‘pray until you pray’. Sometimes we shut our eyes and say Dear God..... and start thinking about the new pair of shoes we’ve just bought. Pray until you pray.

And the very next passage in Luke 18 teaches us that Humility is an important condition of prayer. Remember the Pharisee and the Tax collector praying – one confessing his sin, the other proud that he is not like the tax collector. Jesus said it was the tax collector who went home justified.

As well, it might seem obvious, but we need to pray according to God’s will in order for it to be effective. Jesus prayed in the garden that the Father’s will would be done and not his.

Of course the most important condition of effective prayer is how we have access. Jesus says in John 14:13, ‘I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.’ The only reason that prayer is effective at all is because Jesus has opened access to the Father. When we pray in Jesus name, we pray through him, because it is through him we have access to God.

So effective prayer in the bible is asking prayer, prayer involving confession, prayer which persists, prayer which is humble, prayer according to God’s will and prayer which goes through Jesus.

But let's get back to the crunch question, what does prayer change? We're so used to change being a part of our lives these days – I always think it's funny that we've changed phones from using cables to using airwaves and we're changing TV's from using airwaves to using cables – it's like they've swapped. But what does prayer change? What does prayer actually do? How does God work in the world through prayer?

Firstly, I think prayer changes us. Now some people are so concerned to protect the sovereignty of God and how he works in the world that they think the ONLY thing that prayer can change is us. Like – God will do what he wants anyway, so prayer is just kind of getting us in tune with what God is doing. That is prayer is just a kind of glorified form of meditation. Immanuel Kant said 'One might well adore him for his mighty acts of creation but one could not expect him to do anything.' Now I will argue that prayer changes more than us. But it is true that simply praying will change us. That sense of inner peace we have when we pray 'your kingdom come, your will be done', knowing that God is working out his plan. The sense of Philippians 4:6-7, 'Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.' How can we say at the end of many services, 'the peace of God which passes all understanding?' It is because we have just had a service where we have brought everything to God in prayer. Prayer changes us. Prayer change show we feel.

Secondly, Prayer changes things. Linked to the last point, Prayer changes things in us. So for instance, Solomon asks for wisdom in 1 Kings 3, and God is pleased to grant Solomon wisdom – it changed him. In 2 Kings 20, Hezekiah prays when he is very sick and near death and God grants him another 15 years of life. God changing things in us.

God also changes things through us. Like I mentioned last week, God governing his world through free human actions. So when we pray God also involves us in the answer. Like in the birth of Samuel in 1 Samuel 1. Hannah prays for a child. The priest blesses her. They worship God. Hannah and her husband go home and have sex. God answers their prayer and they have a baby. It's like sometimes when I am praying for my non Christian friends... not that they start having babies...I mean I pray for them to become Christians and then God sets them up to ask me some questions about Christianity. God changing things,

through prayer, through us. Involving us in his actions in the world. Who was the last person you prayed for to become a Christian?

God also changes things, if I can put it this way, 'without us'. God can change the weather. SO Elijah prayed and it didn't rain for 3 ½ years. In Acts 12 The church is praying fervently for Peter and he is miraculously freed from Jail.

God also changes many people throughout the bible as a result of prayer. Jesus tells the disciples (Matthew 9:38) to 'ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into the harvest.' In other words a prayer that God would change people's hearts so that they go and share the gospel. Jesus prays that the Christians will be one in John 17– that they will stop fighting each other and be unified. James 5:15 says, 'The prayer of faith will save the sick'. Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 1:11 that their prayers actually help Paul and his colleagues.

Prayer change things. Prayer changes things in us and through us and without us. God is at work in the world through prayer.

Of course sometimes our prayers don't seem to change things. Sometimes our prayers seem to go unanswered, or at least it seems that the answer is no, at least for the moment. Jesus prayed for the cup of suffering to be removed from him if it was God's will. But it wasn't. The answer was no. Paul prayed three times for his thorn in the flesh to be removed in 2 Corinthians. But the answer was no because something else was needed. A sense of strength through weakness. Obviously there is still suffering left in the world. Assuming God does change things through prayer, then we need to be able to cope when God's answer is no.

But if prayer does change us and prayer does change things, does that mean that Prayer also changes God. Well, to soften it, that God allows himself to be changed by prayer? God was going to destroy the Ninevites in Jonah chapter 3, he even organised Jonah to go and tell them. But then the Ninevites repented and it says in 3:10, 'When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he said he would bring about upon them; and he did not do it.'

So did the Ninevites prayer change God? Many argue that it is ‘as if’ God changed. That is, God knew all along what his plan was and what they would do. God was just using language to accommodate himself to humanity.

Yet it seems to me that while God is changeless in his goodness and in his faithfulness and in his love, if God is at all a ‘person’. If God is personable, then he needs to be able to respond to real events. It be strange if God couldn’t do what we do every day – respond to events in the world. Just look at God’s change of mind with Moses pleading for the people in Deuteronomy 9 after the golden calf incident. Or the Lord relenting from destroying Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 24. The Lord changing his judgement after Amos’ prayer in chapter 7.

I guess it raises the bigger issue of whether God can change at all. I certainly believe that God can’t be manipulated or cajoled into changing – that would make us God and he would be our servant. It’s often what people are trying to protect when they say God can’t change. But God I believe can willingly change. He can chose to change. SO at one point in history God decided to adopt humanity and take on human flesh in the person of Jesus.

And I think it is the same with prayer. God can chose to change because of our prayers. God has so set up his universe that one of the ways he cares for the world is to allow himself to be changed because people pray. God is still sovereign. God is still achieving his purposes. God is still omnipotent – all powerful. But God is big enough in his providence to be able to use our prayers in order to care for the world.

When Jesus says in Matthew 7, ‘Ask and it will be given you’ and ‘how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.’ Jesus doesn’t say ‘Ask and it will seem like it has been given to you.’ Almost all the books of the bible have examples of prayer or encouragements to prayer. I mean if we’re not careful the whole bible becomes a book of ‘as ifs’ and ‘seems likes’ and ‘God accommodating himself’. I think we have greater confidence in prayer knowing that God can chose to change because of our prayers. I actually think that God is greater in his sovereignty in that he can include our prayers in the way he does his best for the universe.

But let me finish with being practical rather than theoretical. Here are some things I'm praying for

St Mark's at the moment.

- For enough money to meet budget and for good budgeting process for next financial year
- For a clear and staged site plan (that will happen and not end up back in some filing cabinet!) – and for the money to achieve that.
- For more people to be involved in small groups
- For discipleship and biblical orthodoxy amongst all parishioners
- For increased local mission and to build more 'feeders' into St Mark's
- For effective joint events with other key local parishes.
- For our marriages.

As part of our vision for St Mark's we want to encourage prayer in all sorts of ways....here are some of them.

Individual prayer Prayer triplets

Work group prayer Small group prayer

Church service prayer After church prayer

Whole church prayer nights Staff modeling prayer

God does change things through prayer. What was the last thing you prayed for?