

James 4:1-8 – Lent 2 Wednesday – Prayers God Doesn't Hear – March 8, 2023

+In Nomine Iesu+

Right or wrong—faithful or selfish—there are many reasons why we pray. Maybe we pray to relieve our sense of guilt. Maybe we are looking for a mystical way to inner peace. Maybe we just want to be heard. We pray out of religious duty. Some believe that the quantity or quality of our prayers will earn God's favor—and thus the attention of His ear. And still others pray out of a dynamic and living relationship with God.

We have been talking about prayer in this Lenten season. And so far we have defined prayer as speaking God's Word back to Him. We don't want to confuse wishing and wanting—good thoughts and good vibes—with prayer. God gets to define what it means.

The disciples called upon Jesus to teach them to pray. And in this sense, it is skill to be learned. And, as we learned to speak by listening to our parents, we learn to pray by listening to God's Word. Prayer is always a word of response. We speak to God because God has spoken to us. And we pray according to His will, when His words are on our tongue.

And among the most valuable words that help us here are the prayers of the Bible. We have mentioned the Lord's Prayer—which was given in response to the disciple's request. We have the prayer of Jesus with greatest detail in His High Priestly Prayer in John 17.

And finally, we have the Psalms. They are prayers. They are the prayers of God's people. To read them is to pray them. And we pray them in and through Jesus Christ. He is at the center of the Psalms. His ministry is prophesied there. He prays His petitions through the ancient Psalmists. And we see that as He picks up the Psalms in His own speaking, especially at the cross.

And this means, of course, that our prayers will closely resemble the prayers of Scripture. And that many of the prayers we have heard in our lives—or prayed ourselves—are much less than what they could be. Even more, sometimes we have to pray against the desires of our own hearts to pray rightly. We shouldn't just pray about the things that are important to us. Instead, we pray those things that God wants us to pray. It isn't the poverty of our hearts that should define our prayer, but the richness of God's Word.

To take this idea another step forward, God hears us when we pray according to His Word—and according to His will. "Thy will be done" is central to all of this. But there are prayers that God doesn't hear—at least not in a certain sense.

We would like to think that God hears all people and all prayers. We are relational beings. We talk to other people because we want them to actually listen to us. We need each other in ways that are fundamental to our being. We open up to others so that our deepest thoughts might be verbalized, heard, and understood. The longing here is so persistent, in fact, that we keep trying, even when others fail to listen.

And so it is with prayer. We cry out to God because we want Him to hear us. Like the Psalmist in Psalm 17, we pray with words like these, "Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry! Give ear to my prayer." Or in Psalm 55, "Give ear to my prayer, O God, and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy! Attend to me, and answer me." And, of

course, as these petitions are found in the Psalms, these prayers are sound. And they are our prayers too.

Now, even as we make such requests, sometimes we're tempted to wonder if God is listening. And this sense of uncertainty even pops up in the Psalms. Psalm 13 begins with a lament, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"

After months or years of praying for someone or for a particular situation, sometimes we can't find much evidence that God is listening. There is even a phrase to describe this in Deuteronomy 28. When the Israelites failed to keep God's covenant, the curse for disobedience would mean that "the heavens over your head shall be bronze." And this describes so well the silence of God.

And of course, technically, God hears all things—just as He knows all things. He sees all things. In prayer, we tell God nothing He does not already know. As the Psalmist says, "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!"

He is aware of every word that we utter. And as Jesus says in Matthew 12, "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak." Although, I am not sure that leaves us feeling much better—even though it means He hears every word.

But there is a sense in which there are prayers that God doesn't hear. And by that, I mean that there are times when He doesn't heed our prayers. He doesn't act as we have requested. This reaction from God is actually quite prevalent in the Scriptures. And I want to look at some of these passages today.

And let's start with something positive here. There are times when we pray—and we pray for the wrong thing. We don't know what is in our own best interest. We don't know what best serves the kingdom of God. And God, in His kindness withholds that request from us.

Here, He protects us from ourselves. Often, as Paul says in Romans 8, "We do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us." Thus, God doesn't answer our prayer sometimes simply because He has something better planned. His silence is actually gracious.

But there are times when we pray that we are merely asking for something selfish. I think this is a common use of prayer among the TV evangelists and the so-called prosperity gospel. Many in the church world today hold to an idea of prayer that suggests we can change our reality by speaking it into existence. They think that they visualize and realize the life that they want—the things that they want—by simply manifesting the words out loud.

But God is not willing to receive such selfish prayers. And this often only benefits the TV evangelist who is getting rich selling a technique or some "blessed" prayer trinket that is supposed to make all the difference.

In James 4, we hear the Apostle confront his readers regarding their prayers, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." God will just tell you "No" when your prayers only reflect your selfish passion. Or worse, He will

give you what you ask for, but it will be to your own demise. Our passions often lead us where we don't want to go.

And this points to the kind of thing that starts to get between us and God. There are barriers to prayer—things that keep our prayers from being heard. Like any relationship, when we sin against God, distance happens.

In Isaiah 59, the prophet confronts God's people saying, "Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear."

Sins—iniquities—keep us from His blessings. Maybe we can call these pet sins. We keep dogs and cats—maybe lizards—as pets because they enrich our lives. We enjoy their presence. They make our days better. At least that is usually the case. And strangely enough, we sometimes think the same of pet sins.

These are sins that draw us in. They appeal to us. We begin to think that experiencing these sins would somehow be fulfilling or thrilling. They offer a self-indulgent distraction from the patterns and responsibilities of daily life. And its presence comes to feel natural.

And, in the process, we delude ourselves. We destroy our lives. And even more, we drive a wedge between ourselves and God. Even to the point that our prayers are hindered.

Our Psalm today comes with a warning about these pet sins. But it also comes with a resolution. Listen again to what the Psalmist says.

"Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for my soul. I cried to him with my mouth, and high praise was on my tongue. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me!"

Sandwiched between these powerful declarations of steadfast love is this sober warning. Cherished sins, pet sins, can be a cause of unanswered prayer. Again, to cherish sin is to look forward to doing what God forbids.

In Romans 13, Paul talks about this as making "provisions for the flesh, to gratify its desires." It involves allowing certain thoughts, secret habits of life, or questionable relationships to remain. We keep these sins in our lives to bring fleeting pleasure. We keep pet sins on the side, just in case God's promise of something better doesn't pan out. And in doing so, we keep our prayers from being heard.

Peter offers us a concrete example in 1 Peter 3. Here he speaks to the way that husbands deal with their wives. But by extension, I think that this could be true of any family relationship. He says, "Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor...since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered."

Thus, when we don't love and honor one another in the family—not only do we damage the peace of our homes—we damage our peace with God. Cherished practiced habitual sin hinders our prayers. And even more fundamentally, it hinders our relationship with God.

But it need not be this way. Here, we follow the example and praise of the Psalmist. He doesn't cherish His sin. He repents of sin. He confesses it. He puts it to death.

And he calls us to come and hear what God has done for him. This is his invitation to fellow believers to witness the works of God in his life. Works that occurred in answer to prayer. He wants us to bless the Lord—as He does. To join him in high praise for God has listened. He has not rejected his prayer.

This Psalm reminds us that God does hear the prayers of His repentant people. And even more, He even chooses to use our prayers as part of His divine plan. This is a mystery for sure. But it is part of God's plan for the world—in common grace and saving grace—that He answers our prayers. It isn't as if prayer changes His mind. Remember that prayer primarily changes the nature of the one who prays. We are the ones who change. And that is God's wonderful work in our hearts in prayer.

But He is not above including our simple prayers—prayed according to His Word—according to His will—to make a real difference. And we see hints of this in James. He suggests, “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

So, God rejects the prayers of those who cherish iniquity. He does not listen. The heavens can be brass for us. And our prayers just don't get through. God is silent when we revel in our sin. We can't snub our noses at God in life—and expect Him to come to our rescue in our difficulty and pain.

But when we deal honestly with our sin before God, we agree with the Psalmist. And we share in his renewed confidence in God's grace. God cares for us in our weaknesses. We can even say that for our own good, He graciously turns us away from cherishing sin. And in this painful process of discipline, He grants us His steadfast love and faithfulness. And then we pray according to His instruction. According to His Word. And our prayers are joyfully received. He hears His people when they pray in repentance and faith.

Let's conclude with prayer. It is from Stark's Prayer Book. He was an early 18th Century German Lutheran pastor. And his prayer book has greatly influenced the church for generations. This is part of a prayer for the confession of sins. Notice how personal this prayer is. And yet it is also shaped by the Psalms. Let us pray.

“O Lord, You are all knowing, and from You nothing is hid. You see all that we do, and hear all that we speak. When I think of this, I am grieved, for I have surely spoken, thought, and done much evil in Your sight. In view of this, You would have just cause to turn Your back forever on me as Your disobedient child, and abandon me utterly to hell. But behold, I come before You in this season of grace. I am ashamed to lift up my eyes and say: God be merciful to me a sinner. Oh, do not discipline me in Your hot anger as I have deserved. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions. According to Your mercy, remember me for Your goodness' sake. Yes, for the sake of the blood and death of Jesus, have mercy on me. Let me know in my heart the consolation that my sins are forgiven me, that I am reconciled to You by Jesus, my Savior. By the power of Your Holy Spirit I will amend my life. I will contemplate You most holy presence and reflect that whether I am moving or standing still, or whatever I do, You are present and watching me. Let such thoughts never leave my heart.” Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+