

Why I Don't Pray

October 26, 2003

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. *Matthew 6:7-8 NIV*

Q: Why do we need to ask God for things?

Why do we need to inform an all-knowing God of what He already knows? Why do we need to instruct an all-powerful and all-loving God to do what He would already want to do, and can do better than we ask?

INCONSISTENT AND VAGUE

I stink at prayer. Not prayer in general; prayer is just talking to God, but there are different kinds of prayer:

1. Adoration
2. Confession
3. Thanksgiving
4. Petition

I have a hard time consistently asking God for things. Frequently I do it because it's expected – especially when we're praying as staff.

When I do pray consistently, my requests are usually general and repetitive. "Father, help me honor and glorify you in this day." I can't tell how many times Marilyn has heard me say that. That's not a bad prayer, but it's not the same as daily seeking God's wisdom and strength for the specific challenges I face as I seek to glorify and honor Him.

- My petitionary prayers are inconsistent and vague because I lack conviction and passion when it comes to asking God for things.
- Because I have struggled with this, I hope to help you.

Why do our prayers lack conviction and passion? I've found two reasons. Your temperament will determine which is more applicable to you.

1. To the analytical, petitionary prayer doesn't make much sense.
2. To the relational, petitionary prayer seems impersonal.

Q: Which group do you find yourself relating to?

PRAYER DOESN'T MAKE MUCH SENSE

I fall in the first group. It is difficult for me to pray with conviction and passion because I don't understand prayer. Why do we need to inform an all-knowing God of what He already knows? God already knows everything!

...your Father knows what you need before you ask him. *Matthew 6:8 NIV*

- I wish Jesus would have finished that thought by saying, "Even though He knows, you still need to pray, because...."

Why do we need to instruct an all-powerful and all-loving God to do what He already wants to do, especially when He'll do it better? I'm sure I usually pray for the wrong thing, so I hope God ignores me.

- Isn't praying like a 3-year old instructing the president?

Prayer does not seem to make sense. Because I am not sure *how* it works, I have a hard time believing *that* it works. And so I have a hard time praying with conviction.

THE BIBLE AND PRAYER

I wish I could tell you I found some nifty answer in the Bible, the Phonics of Petitionary Prayer. Maybe there is; I just haven't found it.

The Bible isn't clear on how prayer works. It doesn't explain why we need to inform God of what He already knows or instruct Him to do what He already wants to do.

- The Bible is clear that prayer does work and that we need to pray.
- Our prayers have the ability to affect the world around us.

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. *James 5:16 NIV*

IT SEEMS SO IMPERSONAL

If petitionary prayer is hard to understand, it also seems so impersonal. Other types of prayers worship God or spend time talking to Him, building our relationship with our Father.

- Petitionary prayer just asks for stuff.

If I don't understand petitionary prayer and it doesn't bring me any closer to God, my prayers will lack conviction and passion.

THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER

The good news is that there are very good reasons that we need to ask God to do things. The purpose of prayer is not to inform God or instruct Him. He doesn't need us to pray to accomplish his objectives.

- The purpose of prayer is to draw us closer to God.
- It is all about relationship.

Petitionary prayer can build our relationship with God in a way that nothing else can. There are very good reasons why we need to ask God for things. I'm going to give you three benefits I've observed.

But first, there's a key principle you must know. Petitionary prayer can be relational, but it's not guaranteed. Without this key, you could spend a lifetime asking God for things, but never know Him better.

If petitionary prayers fail to draw you closer to God, your prayers will lack conviction and passion, they will be forced and unnatural. Or else they will be demanding, treating God as a vending machine.

- Unless you understand this key, you will forfeit the true benefits of petitionary prayer.

AUTHENTICITY

Jesus demonstrated this principle when He prayed in the Garden.

Going a little farther, [Jesus] fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me." *Matthew 26:39 NIV*

Q: Did Jesus think that there may have been another way?

If Jesus knew that there was no other way, then Jesus is asking for something that He knew He couldn't have.

Q: Why would He do that?

Q: Do you ever pray how you think God wants rather than how you feel?

Jesus pleaded for something He knew He couldn't have because He was being honest about what He wanted.

- The key to relational petitionary prayer is authenticity.

Prayer is the last place that we should attempt to hide our fears, pain, or even selfish desires. In prayer, God prefers our authentic humanness to our artificial holiness.

Being honest with God is risky. It means bringing our dark side into the light, knowing that He will want to deal with it. It also means risking being disappointed by Him.

Being dishonest with God isn't as risky, but it means we will never be able to grow closer to God through prayer. And we will never fulfill God's true purpose for petitionary prayer.

- Inauthentic prayers may get answered, but they will not achieve prayer's true benefits.

TRUST

If we follow Jesus' example and establish authenticity in our petitionary prayers, we can begin to know its benefits. The first is seen in Jesus' prayer in the garden:

My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will. Matthew 26:39 NIV

Jesus did not end his prayer with an authentically expressing what He wanted. With one short, simple sentence, Jesus reconfirms His trust in God's wisdom, love, and purpose.

Petitionary prayer involves great risk - God may say "no" when we need Him to say "yes" the most. Sometimes His refusals will seem cruel and unloving.

- Our perception of God goes from theoretical to very, very concrete.
- We must decide if God doesn't exist, doesn't care, or knows best.

If we believe that He is loving and knows best, we will trust that He will always act in our best interest.

The act of petitionary prayer is an act of faith. We don't understand how it works, but in faith we accept it.

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Hebrews 11:6 - NIV

The habit of petitionary prayer is a habit of trust. How we respond to answered and unanswered prayers will both teaches us to trust His character and test that trust.

- 1) Petitionary prayer teaches us to trust God.

UNDERSTANDING

Not only does prayer help us trust God's character, it also helps understand His wisdom.

- A lifetime of answered and unanswered prayer teaches *why* He responds the way He does.

As parents, we know that every time our children ask us for something, it is a potential teaching moment, regardless of whether we say yes or no. We don't know what to ask for, but God teaches us.

As we pray and come to better understand God's wisdom, we learn to pray better. But in the meantime God receives the intent of our heart more than the nuance of our words.

- 2) Petitionary prayer helps us understand God.

PARTNERSHIP

Finally, petitionary prayer allows us to partner with God in His work. This isn't a 50-50 partnership, it's not even a 99-1 partnership, but God delights in working through us.

- He prefers to work through us rather than do something by Himself.

My eight month old girl loves standing up. But even more, I love helping her stand. This is our partnership. Anything that she is able to do, I let her do. I don't do this for the sake of efficiency.

- Our goal is to see our children become healthy, functioning adult.

I believe that our Father God has the same goal. I don't understand how prayer works, but it does. And through it, we get to work with our Father to affect the world around us.

- 3) Petitionary prayer allows us to partner with God.

I'm still not sure exactly how prayer works, but do know why God wants me to ask Him for things.

As I learn how authentic prayer draws me closer to God, teaches me to trust Him, helps me understand Him, and allows me to partner with Him, I am finding it easier to pray with conviction and passion.