

Was Jesus Lying When He Said, "Ask, and You Shall Receive?"

"But if God is so good as you represent Him, and if He knows all that we need, and better far than we do ourselves, why should it be necessary to ask Him for anything?" I answer, What if He knows Prayer to be the thing we need first and most? What if the main object in God's idea of prayer be the supplying of our great, our endless need -- the need of Himself? ... Hunger may drive the runaway child home, and he may or may not be fed at once, but he needs his mother more than his dinner. Communion with God is the one need of the soul beyond all other need: prayer is the beginning of that communion, and some need is the motive of that prayer ... So begins a communion, a taking with God, a coming-to-one with Him, which is the sole end of prayer, yea, of existence itself in its infinite phases. We must ask that we may receive: but that we should receive what we ask in respect of our lower needs, is not God's end in making us pray, for He could give us everything without that: to bring His child to his knee, God withholds that man may ask.
-George MacDonald, UNSPOKEN SERMONS, Second Series, *The Word of Jesus on Prayer*

As Christians, we are all called to share in the prophetic mission of Christ. The world is drowning in a sea of confusion, and many are seeking a truth they can hold on to for refuge. But many non-Christians, by having a poor understanding of what Christianity is about, don't know the right questions to ask. Indeed, many Christians do not know any better either. One example of not knowing the right question to ask is, "Is it true that God grants all prayers?" In my opinion, we do a great disservice to our evangelistic mission by telling the curious, "Oh yes! God grants all our wishes. Try it and see, then tell everyone about it on #Askandreceive."

Okay, this is a slight exaggeration, but let's be honest: when a non-believer asks one if one's prayers do indeed work, does one say, "It's not about getting what I want, it's about furthering my personal relationship with God by being honest with Him about my wants and fears," or is one more prone to say, "My husband just got laid off, so I prayed about how we could pay the mortgage, and the next day an old army buddy of his finally paid back that loan we gave him 20 years ago!" I hope the answer is closer to the first one, but in my experience (both from self-examination and personal observation), the second answer seems more typical of what is given.

It is understandable why we might choose the second one: we have someone's attention, and we don't want to miss this opportunity to lead them into the faith by discouraging them. Or maybe we just don't know how to explain why the so-called "unanswered prayers" are not a contradiction to our faith. Or maybe it is something else. In any case, I hope what I write here will help.

I will begin with the simplest concern -- fear of losing a potential follower of faith. I believe that Christianity is ultimately about teaching what truth is. Honesty is a virtue, and is demanded by the Ten Commandments. Jesus claimed to be truth incarnate (John 14:6). Kindness is also a virtue, but it is not the greatest commandment, the second greatest commandment, nor even part of the Ten Commandments. Jesus Himself was unkind quite often. Unfortunately, we are told by the world that kindness is how we demonstrate the virtue of "love." This, however, is false. Kindness is indeed part

of love, but Biblical love is so much more. Saying that "love" is expressed by "kindness" is essentially the same as a foreigner, after only visiting New York City, saying he has "seen America."

The truth is not always kind (being told a loved one died in an auto accident), and being kind is not always truthful (consider the scene from the movie *Titanic* when a woman, scared of boats, asked if it was safe, and the White Star Line attendant said, "Not even God can sink this ship."). In the Bread of Life discourse (John 6:22-59), Jesus tells the people they must eat of His body and drink of His blood. All but twelve of them leave (verses 60-71). We know that there would have been 5,000 men and their families that left because it was the day after he fed the multitudes (verses 1-15). Who can blame them? Drinking blood was explicitly forbidden by Mosaic law (Leviticus 17:13-14), and there is no reasonable explanation to make one think they thought differently about eating human flesh (at the very least, it was against Roman law). Look how resolute He was to tell the truth. While His words are considered unkind and foolish by worldly standards, look at what those twelve remaining men accomplished. Furthermore, I cannot find a single example in the gospels where Jesus twisted His message so as to convince someone to follow Him. He told the truth, and people either accepted or rejected Him for it.

Now, when someone says, "Ask, and you shall receive," it is either implied or even explicitly said that since it's in the Bible, it must be true. But this is not true. It is text taken out of context and used as a pretext for what, I don't know. All I do know is that it is deceitful to say that. The complete passage is:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him. (Matthew 7:7-11)

When we read the whole passage, we know that *something* will be given, but *what* will be given is not very clear. We see a subtle but clear transition away from what is being specifically asked for to the idea that we will receive something, and that this something will be good for us. In other words, what is given, what is found, and what is opened up to us may not be what we expected, but it will satisfy us.

But if we just focus on the opening few words, it is all too easy to assume that Jehovah is Google, Amazon and FedEx all wrapped up in one. He is not, and we should be grateful for that. It's easy to forget that these commercial giants, like the pagan gods of old, only promise to give us what we specifically ask for. If it does not satisfy us, then it is not their problem. Even if we return the product, we are still left wanting. But Jehovah, if we trust and accept Him, will give us what will satisfy us.

Now, the person one is talking to may indeed say, "What good is this religion then?" and walk away. Don't worry, for it would be the sin of pride to think one *has* to convert them. The seed is planted, let God take it from there. The absolute worst that will happen is that he will know someone was truthful to him that day. In today's world, we are subject to 4,000 to 10,000 advertisements a *day* (www.redcrownmarketing.com, 10 September 2015)! Very few of these contain much truth. Maybe this truthfulness will be what stands out for him that day. In any case, let the seed grow or perish as Jesus tells us in the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-9).

But before one can hope to explain why prayer is important, one must know the reason! We must understand that this world is expiring. While Jehovah does want us to be happy in this life, happiness in this world is secondary to joy in the next. Once we understand this, we can better accept the idea that, when we pray to Jehovah, He answers with "yes," "later," or "I got something better for you." Oftentimes, "later" and "I got something better for you" are confused with "no." The "I got something better for you" can be the harder of the two to accept because we may never see what the "better" is in this life, or miss the connection even if we are given the "better." And there are reasons why Jehovah does not always say "yes."

One reason is that it would lead one to sin, in which case God is protecting us. It is pride to think we know better than God does, and there are times we just need to humble ourselves to God's wisdom. Another reason is that our faith needs growing. Faith is like a muscle and must be exercised. It is a shallow faith that can only exist if things go well. A toddler needs help taking the first steps, but sooner or later the parents need to let go if the child is ever going to truly walk. Our faith in God can grow while suffering through the "later" and "something better" answers. Another reason I will discuss is found in James 4:3, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." Unlike the first reason I gave, where we don't know how our desires will affect our souls, this is a specific request for what we know to be wrong.

Now I want to address the question of not getting a "yes" from another angle. I do not believe it is enough to simply ask "why" not all our prayers are answered the way we want. After all, we Christians believe that God's Will will be done no matter what. We are also told that God loves us no matter what. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17) This is not much different from what I spoke of above, except that now we are talking about motivation. If God is going to look out for our best interests no matter what, and we are not necessarily going to benefit in an Earthly manner from our petitions, the logical question becomes, "Why should we do it?"

For no small reason, we should petition Jehovah because Jesus has commanded us to do so in numerous scriptures. Obedience is a requirement, even if we are not perfectly obedient. "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, *but whoever disobeys the Son will not see life*, but the wrath of God remains upon him." (John 3:36, italics mine) Looking at the one prayer Jesus taught us to say, the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), we see only two lines of praise, but four unique petitions! But even beyond mere obedience, we still have practical reasons to pray.

To begin with, the idea that God will do what He wants regardless of our prayers is narrow-sighted. If it is pointless to pray to save your grandmother's life after she collapses because Jehovah has already determined her fate, does that mean calling an ambulance to take her to the hospital is likewise pointless? I think not. As Christians, we are not passive actors on an immovable stage. When Jehovah tasked man and woman to tend to the garden, they were allowed to do as they pleased (Genesis 1:28). They could shape it to meet their whims. Man retained his mastery of the world even after being expelled from Eden. We see Jehovah destroying the entire world, including animals, because man's sin had shaped the world. And man's ability to shape the world is accepted even by the harshest critics of Christianity. Science seeks to dominate the universe by learning its secrets, industry can only exist by shaping the world, and environmentalists seek to prevent us from shaping the world too much. Jehovah gave us a framework to build upon, and we are called to build on it.

And there are two ways we can shape the world: action and prayer. Action may seem like the

more powerful of the two, as more often than not our desires are met, and they are met more quickly. But this is an illusion. Jehovah has no need to regulate this type of shaping because the limitations of the physical world we live in already keep us in check. We only have so many resources at our disposal, and we can only process them so fast. But there is no limit to our imagination.

It is out of mercy that Jehovah reserves the right to decide how each prayer is answered. If it were unchecked, the entire universe could be destroyed by a single hateful thought. But we need not be so dramatic, as there are plenty of everyday things to remind us just how foolish we are with our wants. People want and buy massive homes with lots of land, but then have to work so much overtime that they barely have time to maintain the new land, much less enjoy it. Most winners of the lottery wind up in worse financial positions just months after getting the winnings than before. Bards and scribes sing and write of those spurned by their heart's desire only to find what they really wanted in someone else. The popular comedy *Bruce Almighty* gives us a good look at what unfettered prayer granting would be like.

Finally, too many people forget what prayer really is. It is a heart-to-heart conversation with our friend and brother Jesus, and should be looked at as such. Talk to Him about one's disappointments, one's aspirations, one's joys, one's pains, the minutia of one's life, and everything else one would talk about to a friend and/or brother. We don't expect family or friends to give us everything we ask of them, but we do expect them to watch out for our best interests in the end. God behaves in the same way. Jesus is family and friend, and in a perfect way. These are the reasons one should engage in honest, heartfelt prayer regardless of how it may be answered.

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