

Prayer and Wishes

Chapter 6: Prayer

*"I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day*  
— Abraham Lincoln

Why on earth would the most powerful man on the planet drop to his knees? Well, for starts, in that time period, maybe he was not the most powerful person. I have to chuckle a little in saying that. Was Lincoln more powerful than Karl Marx, Napoleon, Queen Victoria, or Charles Darwin? I could take his quote and twist it. Lincoln believed he was not as smart as Marx or Darwin. Yet, I doubt he cared. What I do think, is that Abraham Lincoln knew who butters his bread. He knew where his prayers go to: something greater.

I am still chuckling. I wonder how we would rank these people in respect to importance? Would Darwin rank near the top? There are others born in that same time period as Lincoln. Is Susan B. Anthony or Thomas Edison smarter or more influential than Abraham Lincoln? How would you rank Marx, Lincoln, and Queen Victoria on their level of importance? Again, I doubt Lincoln cared. He knew God. He knew the importance of prayer. He felt that time on his knees made him great. What do you think those others thought made them great?

Something drove President Abraham Lincoln to his knees. Is it anxiety? Possibly it was nerves. I bet the pressure of being president caused him to wobble and drop. You know I doubt it. Usually a guy in that office is rock solid. They have been tried and tested. They don't become president of a country by dumb luck. They have the fortitude to survive trials and tribulations. Ok, so a rock-solid guy panics?

The way I see it, this man knew something. In times of stress, he found comfort on his knees. How so? Prayer can be powerful if you believe that the one your praying to is more

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powerful than you. Who wants to ask for advice from people equal to you? No, most people go to the expert, advisor, or specialist. I believe Lincoln went to the advice specialist. It's not that he (himself) was not great. It's not that Lincoln didn't have knowledge wisdom, and smarts. He was praying to someone he thought was smarter.

That's the difference between Prayer and Wishes. Prayer is to someone. A wish is commonly something we desire in our hearts. We wish to ourselves that something could come true like meeting a spouse. Sure, people do wish to a well or lake spirit. Yet, that seems a past practice. Today we use wishes to make a statement. Prayer on the other hand, is to an idol, God, or Spirit. I suppose you could say praying to a God is past practice too. Yet, we see people all over the world still praying daily to something.

If we really feel that a wish is to someone, then who? I have heard some say that a wish is to a God. It's not prayer but a wish. Ok, then is God (a real God) or just a higher power. Either way we are seemingly splitting hairs. I know Lincoln believed in the Jewish God Yahweh. I know groups that lean on a higher power. There are spirits, other Gods, and Karma. I like the Buddhism one because it focuses on regeneration and doing better next time. It's all about inner prayer. The Jewish one is all about outer prayer.

A wish is different. It's not a prayer. A wish wants something. A wish is not to improve although you could wish for that if you wanted too. Technically a wish is to obtain something you were missing. Sometimes it's to push something away. Wishes go towards our lives. A prayer inside and out is meant to communicate. Sure, a prayer can be for something, but usually it's geared towards understanding, enlightenment, and wellbeing.

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We could wish for money. I sometimes wish people would leave. We use wishing differently than we do prayer. We don't wish for understanding from someone. We wish that it would not snow. It's not like your asking someone. You are outwardly asking what your heart and mind desires. That is why wishes are at times outrageous. We ask for love from people we can't have. We want time when there is none left. Imagine losing a game in the last second. I have heard atheists wish they had more time. Seems odd if they don't believe in anything. That's the key. A wish is generally understood to be an expression of expectation.

Prayer beats to a totally different drum. Yet, I know we struggle with the difference. Is it possible to believe a wish is to someone? I could ask you who, but the answers would be different across the board. Each person has a particular thing or entity they wish too. Many believe there is a cosmic energy out there. A force seems real. We have déjà vu and murphy's law. There is intuition and that nagging feeling. We are seemingly bound together by something we cannot see.

Prayer is just not like a wish. I pray for help. We could pray a prayer of thanks to God. There are those who pray for the world or that we could be protected. Prayer is just as personal as a wish, yet we are conversating and communicating. Prayer people believe they are talking to someone. They have a vision of what that is. Do wishes look like that?

In Star Wars they don't pray or wish. Yes, I know it's a movie, but there is a group of people who believe in the force. What I think they really believe in is something greater than themselves. I believe that is what Abraham Lincoln was driving at. He believed with all his heart that something greater than himself exists. So, he prays. He humbles himself before his God and asks for help, knowledge, and wisdom.

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Praying seems so weird. I mean monks pray. Nuns pray. It's those weird people who pray. We see groups of people in temples praying or chanting. It's mystical and spiritual. We just don't humble ourselves for a wish. A wish is a request most of the time. In prayer there is so much more. Not only are we sending out a prayer. We hope it's being heard. There is someone listening.

Far too often people think they need to be clean in the heart to pray. I just know that's not true. I am positive God has responded to my prayer before I was a Christian. God heard my prayer of help. I certainly did not believe in him at that time or had a clean heart. Yet, in desperation I was praying to an unknow God. Today, I think I know him a little. I still have an unclean heart. Yet, time after time, God is listening. People think just because God did not answer their prayer the right way (your way) that he is ignoring them. I still believe that within silence he is listening. Listening to unbelievers too.

*Isaiah 55:3 "Incline your ear and come to Me Listen, that you may live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, according to the faithful mercies shown to David."*

We pray because we want someone to listen. I could pray to a counselor. I could pray to the Pope. Yet, they are men and women. They are equal to me. Am I as great as the pope? Maybe not as famous, or as great, but we are both still just men. We die the same way. We breathe the same way. To Humankind, the Pope might be greater. To God, we are all the same. That is the beauty of prayer. We come before him equal.

God listens. God hears. A prayer is not a wish. We communicate with God in heaven. It's odd. Why the direct line? Why doesn't God just come down and live among us? Why the prayer? It's because prayer is so much more. First of all, prayer has distance. Adam and Eve talked with

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God, yet it never says how. We just assume it's in a conversation. The Bible also says that we cannot come before God because he is pure holiness. Hence, the distance. Yet, a conversation or prayer can be had regardless of the distance.

Moses wanted to talk with God. The hand of God covered him as God walked on by. We read these conversations with God as if they are talking face to face like you and me (as if we are). Yet, we assume a lot. It's not like that with God. Jesus said he would intercede for us to God (Romans 8:24). The Holy Spirit would search the depths of God for us (I Corinthians 2:10). There is conversation and there is distance. This conversation is a mutual understanding. That is prayer. We don't see that in a wish.

God also says he knows the hearts of humans (Proverbs 21:2). People like to quote Isaiah 64:6 that says our goodness are like filthy rags to God. Romans 3:23 says all have sinned and fallen short. That seems to suggest that we are garbage to God. That he is sickened by us. Our negative thoughts about God could ruin the relationship, ruin prayer. They mis-quote the Bible with those verses above. God is said to love us too in John 3:16. So, which is it?

Prayer is popular because God is holy. He must maintain distance. A gross smell repels us. We try and avoid dangerous or creepy people. God just can't stand ungodliness. Yet, he loves people. I know it seems weird and neurotic. We help those less fortunate. However, would we live in some of the places they do? Of course not. Prayer is the bridge between holiness and sin. We can still have a great relationship with God. It's solidified and accommodated through prayer.

As a side note. I have met my share of people who block the dirty and unclean from prayer. It's true, I've seen it. I wonder if it's because God is holy and we must respect that.

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However, is it that these people believe they have become holy and have rights. To separate the clean and unclean. In Matthew 19 the disciples try and bar the children from Jesus. Jesus rebukes them for holding anyone back who has the heart of a child. Matthew 23 says there will be those who try and mislead us. Jesus never condoned barring people from him.

To have the guts to pray to a holy God takes fortitude and humbleness. It could be embarrassing to lower yourself to something greater. The unclean know they are lower. Sometimes I have met those who don't believe they are dirty. As I said before, we are all equal in the eyes of God regardless the type or amount of dirt. We're all dirty. In a strange way the holy God does care about unholiness. What? He certainly promotes holiness. Yet, he uses prayer and distance to have a relationship with the unholy. I feel he would sacrifice holiness for the relationship. Isn't that what grace is?

We forget that God is big on prayer too. God may have distance between clean and unclean, yet prayer equalizes that. It's sad that some try and help God make distance. We're all God's people. In Mark 10 they asked Jesus about divorce. He famously said "*Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.*" God knows we want to separate, categorize, and segregate. We always have. Prayer busts that. It grinds against that.

Prayer is personal. God knows us and we want to know him. It's tricky, I know. There is a certain amount of Bible knowledge required with prayer. Men on the steps of a legislature cannot pray if they don't care to know God. You can't just pray. Prayer has searching, understanding, and listening involved. In the Bible, we read that God listens. We read that he knows our hearts. We also know that Jesus talks to God the Father for us. I just mentioned that the Holy Spirit searches the depths of God for us. Prayer is meant to be personal.

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There are many people who believe that we must give a sacrifice, work, or effort for God to listen. We must be holy. There are scriptures that point that way. Yet, as a pastor, it's my solemn duty to inform you of your rights with God. With prayer it's best to come with an open heart. It's best to be clean of sin. Unfortunately, we are not that way. In reality, God offers grace as his solution. Grace means God has given us clemency for evil tidings. This is the era of grace. We can come to him in prayer regardless of the lives we lead.

Ephesians 2:8-9 *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”*

Yes, it's best to be holy before a holy God. In my way of thinking it's just not possible on this side of heaven. A prayer is accepted because God, accepts us regardless of sin. Like I said it's tricky. The Bible is full of scripture, that taken by themselves, fight against each other. So, God rejects sinners? God loves sinners? God is holy, yet, God dwelt among us? Prayer is the great equalizer in this debate.

If we say that we want to pray, and someone says you can't, then what? It's a shame when that happens. There is good news. That person can say “you can't pray” all they want. You can pray because we are free to do so. They can say no. yet, God listens, and God hears. It does not matter what anyone else says. Prayer is personal. Prayer is private. I could list hundreds of verses saying prayer is private. Jesus went alone to pray. Jesus chastised the religious for praying in public. Mary pondered things of God in her heart. She was probably praying. Don't let anyone ever tell you can't pray.

So, is prayer just private. Kings in the Old Testament prayed in private and they prayed for the people in public. We can pray for others in public. The people cried out several times to

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God for help. That is prayer too. It comes back to the heart. The heart in public sometimes wants to be seen. It wants to be heard. You cannot pray to God and people at the same time. Prayer is personal. Jesus prayed in public and said it was so that people would know God the Father listens in John 11:42.

Isaiah 55:11 *“so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”*

Reading the Bible is important to prayer. To know how others, pray is important. To use scripture to remind God of his promises is important. Prayer has a way of asking God for things. It has a way of returning information. If we take time to pray then we are being patient. We want answers, yet were not just running off and making mistakes rashly. Prayer has a way of slowing us down and finding clarity. Prayer has a way of reminding us of what God says and Gods character. God is pretty consistent in the Bible. Sometimes in prayer, we need to be reminded of that.

That’s why I say prayer is personal. It changes the relationship with God. Prayer inadvertently changes us too. We ask but in the end, we begin to see what was not there before. I have always heard that prayer reminds us that we pray to God because we are not God. It’s why Abraham Lincoln reminds himself that he is not in control. Prayer has a way of grounding us. That brings on better insights, better decisions, and better clarity.

It’s sad that people say they don’t believe. Does it have to be all about you. Must you be in control all the time? I guess if God did exist then you are not in control. We say control is dominance, slavery, and unfair. Is it unfair to gain wisdom in prayer? Is it slavery, to wait before you decide. Is it unfair that it’s not just our idea? I was in a bad relationship. In time I realized

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that it was better to make my ideas her ideas. She certainly took credit, but who cares as long as it got done. Yet, many would rather lay in ruin than give dominance or credit to another. Can't we allow God the chance to succeed on our behalf? Many would rather burn in hell than see a better solution that was not theirs. Prayer is humbling and personal.

I feel that wishes are singular. They are for something. We gain something. A wish is ours. We are told to keep it private or it won't work. Prayer is that way too. We are asked to keep it to ourselves most of the time. Pride and prayer in public make us look good. Answered prayer should make God look good. Prayer can also be public if it, yet again, makes God look good. Prayer is not really singular. It's between two. It can also be for many. Read John 17:20-23.

I will tell you two stories. The first is of a strip joint that opened right at main and center street where I live. In a small town you do not want the worst bar or strip club right at the center of town. The city rules for a business did not foresee a strip club, bikers, and drunks at the center of town. Yet, because of the laws, it was legal. The pastors of town did not protest. They did not fight back by conventional means. This happened only once as far as I know in my town.

We all came together (about 100) and prayed for Gods guidance and action towards this establishment. We did it a block away. I heard the prayers. They did not ask for fire and brimstone. However, that would have been cool. No, they prayed for God to intervene. We kept distance between us and that place. We gave God room to work. Six months later this place was closed down and bulldozed to the ground. I was stunned. Prayer works.

The second story is the reverse. I was asked in my heart by God to pray over my church. We were going to build an expansion of some sort. I decided to walk around our building for two years praying for the leadership and building. This church decided to rebuild and add on to the

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current building. One day in the summer I had to go away on a trip. I usually prayed every Tuesday night. The Tuesday while I was away, nobody came to pray in my place. That same night the rebuilt portion of the roof fell down.

I am not saying my absence caused that disaster. I do believe that the absence of prayer did. I firmly believe that this church did not think prayer was that necessary. I bet some felt I was a nut for saying God asked me to pray. Many said the Devil knocked down the roof. What if it was God? What if the absence of prayer meant the absence of hearts towards God. Maybe we rely on ourselves too much. Maybe it was God holding the roof up until it was finished. Maybe, God got tired of only one person praying.

I don't know those answers. Far be it for me to think I made a difference. Yet, it appears prayer did in both cases. What I really think happened in both of these stories is community. I said prayer is personal. I said prayer can be public. I also think that it binds the community. A people of one mind and one desire could accomplish a lot. To see your friends, family, and community all on the same page would be amazing. It would probably be a miracle.

I have heard stories of the whole community rising up and rebuilding a house or barn. People have banded together for a cause like a petition or food bank. I hear these loud mouth preachers spouting on and on about the power of the Spirit and prayer. Yet, it's a strong community that gets things done. Not prayer? Oh no, prayer is pivotal. How about a community that prays together stays together? They could accomplish anything in prayer. Why? It's a single mind doing what's best for all.

Certainly, private prayer works just as good. I just get the feeling we need patience with single prayer. I don't know why. However, I feel we build bridges, mend fences, and make life

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better when were all on board. It's faster somehow. It's more effective somehow. I could pray for a white door and try and convince my wife who wants a blue one. Yet, if we both prayed for the right color, it seems to come around quicker. It's the art of mutual hearts. In Matthew 18, Jesus says if two ask in his name the Father in Heaven will do it. There is just something powerful when more than one pray. Usually two people wishing together does not happen.

Within all that, we need to be mindful of our hearts. Prayer is not to be taken lightly. In church circles they laugh and say "be careful what you pray for." They say that in wishes too. In 2 Kings 20, King Hezekiah asked God for more time to live. God granted this request. In those last 15 years Hezekiah ruined the kingdom. We should be mindful of what we pray for. My professor said it's the 80/20 rule. 80% is prayer of thanks and 20% is requests. Again, prayer should be community and relationship minded more than for ourselves. I doubt we do that with wishes.

Do you know the story of the tower of Babel? It's found in Genesis 11. The people became wise. I wonder how old this group of people were. In those days people lived much longer. There are gaps in the Bible timeline. Babel might have been a very old and ancient city. Anyways, they decided to build a tower to the heavens. I'm sure it was the intent more than the height.

In those days, they all spoke one language. I bet they were smart and of one mind. God looked down and said "*If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.*" If God is our creator, then God knows how we tick. He knows what we can and could achieve as one mind. Yet, God is greater. He is said to have scattered us all over the earth and confused our language. That is certainly true

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today. Tell me two countries that had never met and have the same language, culture, and way about them. It's not a one. Yet, if we were of one mind and one spirit what would happen?

I feel that if churches are unplugged these days, it's directly related to prayer. The strength of their prayer ministry is indicative of their health as a church. If prayer is spiritual, then to unplug the life force of God is a bad idea. If the Spirit searches the depths of God then we must pray a lot in the spirit. Pastors pray that a certain amount of money would be given. They pray that ministry is successful. Are they praying singular or corporate? I call this agenda prayer. We pray that God will push people to do what we want. In a church (means universal) we should always be praying corporately. It's about all of us. It's about God's will, God's glory. Individual desires are not the way prayer in church works best.

I love seeing prayer answered. Yet, it's not a present. It's not a power we use rightly. How often do people say their prayer was answered directly because they are in right standing with God. In Luke 18:19 Jesus says "only God the Father is good." That is astounding if Jesus is sinless, holy, and God himself. Prayer and our relationship with God is solely based on our respect of him. Jesus got that. Do you?

Prayer is fun. Prayer is powerful. Prayer is about others mostly. We cry out in prayer for mercy from someone more powerful than our situation. That is the benefit of prayer. Prayer is insightful. We can learn a lot from a bottomless knowledge base. If God is in eternity, then how deep is eternal knowledge. They say God is outside time. I know it's a mind buster. He looks down on time as a beginning and end. Then he knows the best outcome. He sees it.

That's why prayer is good. It asks the right questions. Sometimes prayer only receives the right answers. That's the tough part. Our prayer does not always line up with God's answer. Yet,

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it's like meditating. It's like stopping and smelling the roses. Prayer is not held to distance. It's not based on anything. Yet, it is a relationship between two people mostly.

However, prayer does something a wish cannot. A wish is for something to happen usually. Prayer has the ability to help us grow. I guarantee that you will know yourself better in prayer. Sometimes we get to know others too. We gain a ton of clarity in prayer. Call it meditation if you want. Ironically, we get to know God better too. Can a wish do that?

Prayer is discipline. Prayer is consistency. It's revelation and affirmation. Prayer bonds people together. It helps us avoid bad things. Prayer scares people. I think that's why churches avoid it. How would God mold and change your church if prayer got ahold of it? What agendas, direction, and commitment would have to change? Would clarity inside a church scare the hell out of them. I bet it would.

I know a pastor at a large church that was spearheading a new building campaign. He got it in his head that prayer must come first. He made people uncomfortable by holding prayer groups in the service. He brought in speakers to speak about sins of all kinds. He challenged the congregation to come clean. I know he prayed privately and corporately for the church and community. So many leaders fell. So many people left. Yet, in the dust of prayer, was a fully paid for building project. The church is bigger now than ever before. Prayer looks ugly and nasty at times, but it works for all the right reasons.

You can wish. We all do. The word wish is more than just a saying or figure of speech. It's has the ability to change our desires. A wish can be reflective and make us patient. Yet, prayer moves mountains. It fosters deep relationships when we pray for each other's needs. Prayer can be meant for evil. Joseph in Genesis 50 got it right. He was talking to his brothers and

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said *“you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”* We can make prayer like a wish. Make it for our own use. God will take that prayer and change people’s hearts. I wish can’t do that.

Take a hard look at how you yearn for things. How often do you say I wish, I may, I might? It’s so sad to use the word wish and never really grow as a person. Wishing for things is good for the soul. We should desire things. Were not dead. However, prayer goes beyond a wish. It expects to be heard. It relies on the listener of the prayer. A wish can’t mold you. It can’t help you grow. It’s hopeful’ but not part of a relationship. Prayer is all about a relationship with something greater.

Make sure you are doing the right thing. Put prayer and wishes in the proper perspective. Wishing bring hope and anticipation. It’s fun and usually impulsive in the moment. Prayer should be part of our lives. We see an ambulance rushing by. Why not pray for the hurt person and the ambulance staff. When we feel odd among people, maybe pray for clarity. If we did that each day, then I bet we would be slowing down. We would be taking time to see the world beyond our own needs.

You know I said it was for God’s glory that we should pray. Does that mean God is selfish and egotistical? It’s yes and no. God is complete within himself. Yet, I would also say God is community. He created this universe for creation. His plan and will is bent towards seeing this creation flourish. Somehow and someday our hopes and prayers are interwoven into Gods plan for creation and us. It fits his will. Always? No, but most of the time. When we slow down and pray more often. We usually see Gods plan and will more often. That makes prayer easier. Begin a prayer life today. That is my wish for you.