

The Strengthening Power of Prayer
Matthew 6:5-6

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But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Mt. 6:6

Today we wrestle with the important subject of prayer. Some people were talking about prayer one day and a woman cut straight to the heart of the matter when she said, “What good does prayer do?” There is a question worth locking our eyes on and staring down. What good does prayer do?

We know prayer does not get us every answer we want.

I do not need to pause to illustrate that for you with examples. Dr. Blackwood loved to quote a 19th century missionary, Mary Slessor, who said, “My life is a daily, hourly record of answered prayer.”¹

I do not know anyone like that. The people I know have a missed record of answered and unanswered prayer. If they kept a notebook of their answered prayers and a notebook of their unanswered prayers it could even be that their notebook of unanswered prayers is thicker than the notebook of answered prayers.

We are not alone in being a people with a mixed record of answered and unanswered prayer. The Apostle Paul knew the experience of unanswered prayer. We do not know what that nagging thing was that he called his thorn in the flesh. Some think it was malaria. Some think it was epilepsy. Some think it was some kind of eye trouble. Whatever it was, Paul wanted to be rid of it. He prayed to be rid of it. He prayed at least three times for it to be taken away. It never was. The Apostle Paul knew the experience of unanswered prayer.

The Lord Jesus knew the experience of unanswered prayer. When you go through Holy Week you come upon Maundy Thursday. When you come upon Maundy Thursday and follow it through you come to the Garden of Gethsemane. When you come to the Garden of Gethsemane there is a spot where it says that there Jesus was deeply grieved. You come to a spot where it says his sweat became like great drops of blood. You come to a spot where it says he prayed three times for the cup to be removed. The cup was the cup of suffering. The cup was his waiting cross. It was not removed. He prayed that it be allowed to pass, but it was not. The Lord Jesus was acquainted with the experience of unanswered prayer.

So whatever prayer is we know it is not some loading dock you can back up to and take on your truckload of desired blessings. Whatever prayer is it is not some kind of curb-side pick-

¹ Andrew W. Blackwood, *Doctrinal Preaching for Today* (New York: Nashville: 1956), p. 165. Blackwood’s reference for this quotation is W. P. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor of Calabar* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1916), p. 293.

up where you can phone in your request and have someone bring it out to you. Whatever prayer is it is not something that gets us everything we want. That is not what prayer does.

We can know prayer brings us to Answerer we need.

I was privileged to travel to Edinburgh, Scotland, in 2014, to study the papers of the famous preacher James S. Stewart, who taught at New College, a seminary of the Church of Scotland. Stewart's papers are stored in the archive at the library of New College. It was about a half mile away from my motel, and I walked there each day my study trip lasted. The first time I walked from my motel to New College I went to the address I had and came upon what I thought was a building. I came to what I thought was the front door. I imagined that, when I opened that door, it would open into a foyer or lobby with a reception desk. But when I opened the door, it did not open to a lobby at all. It opened to a huge, open-air courtyard that was filled with natural light. The buildings around the courtyard were positively steeped with history and beauty and warmth. And there was quiet in that courtyard, a quiet that was quite a contrast to the busy street just outside the doorway I had entered. I stood mesmerized and amazed at the beauty and serenity and history I encountered.

Jesus says we have just something like that in prayer. Prayer is the outer door. It stands at anywhere and anytime. It stands even in your most personal space. It stands even in the innermost secret corner of your heart. Open that door and go through it carrying any and every burden you may have. It doesn't matter how heavy it is or how light, how seismic a thing it is or how trivial. Carry it through the door. The door opens to the one whom Jesus called "Father." Open the door of prayer and immediately you are steeped in something far different from the world you left outside the door. You are immediately in the presence of the majesty of heaven. You are immediately in the presence of love and glory and goodness. You are immediately in the presence of one who is bigger than your problems and greater – far greater – than your imagination.

John Baillie, who taught at New College, too, around the same time as James Stewart, opens one of the prayers in his devotional classic *A Diary of Private Prayer* with these words:

Almighty God, who art ever present in the world [around] me, in my spirit within me, and in the unseen world above me, let me carry with me through this day's life a most real sense of Thy power and Thy glory.²

That is what you get when you pray: you get placed in the presence of God's power and glory. Before there is any hint of an answer, even if there is no hint of an answer, there is the gift of the Answerer. Sit down to pray, open the door of prayer, and God almighty is with you in the living of your life, the facing of your day, and the bearing of your burden. That is the strengthening power of prayer. That is what prayer does.

Way back in the first half of the 19th century there was a young man who loved to pray. He wrote about it in his diary one February Sunday. "Rose early," he recorded, "to seek God, and found Him whom my soul loveth. Who would not rise early to meet such company?"³ That

² John Baillie, *A Diary of Private Prayer* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 73. This is the morning prayer for the seventeenth day.

³ The diarist was Robert Murray M'Cheyne (1813-1843). The quotation can be found at www.mcheyne.info/his-life/ Accessed June 26, 2020.

young man knew what prayer does. He knew prayer puts a person in the company of the friendship and fellowship of God.

Whether you rise early or late, I hope you can come to enjoy the company of God through prayer.