

When Prayer Falls on Deaf Ears

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] Lord God, we pray that the light of truth in your word will shine in our hearts, that we may believe it, obey it, and pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Almost every visit prompted the same question. Why doesn't he listen? The old man always sat in the same chair.

His unchanged daily routine over a number of years was to sit in that chair. And either to listen to the ABC Classic FM or to watch the ABC on television.

Or just to sit. Sitting largely and waiting. For over six years since his wife had died at the age of over 93, he would sit and wait and say, Why doesn't he listen?

I pray every day for God to take me. Why doesn't he listen? And I would visit every three or four weeks.

[1 : 17] And every time virtually the same question was asked. And mostly I would give an answer along the same sort of lines. He is listening. In his time he'll act.

Maybe he wants you to do something. Maybe he is trying to teach you something. In the meantime. And five months ago, last September, he finally acted.

Sitting in the same chair, listening to the ABC, he died peacefully. He was then aged closer to 99 than 98.

And this was my grandfather. What happens when prayer falls on deaf ears? Why are so many prayers apparently unanswered?

And I mean here prayers for good things as well. Prayers for healing, for example. We may pray persistently, day in, day out, for the healing of ourself or somebody whom we love.

[2 : 26] And they're not healed. We may pray for peace in the Middle East, in Jerusalem, or in our families. And nothing changes. We may pray for the conversion of someone in our family or someone whom we love who's not a believer.

And they die a non-believer. We may pray for wisdom, for godliness, all sorts of good things. Praying for upright or noble things.

But so often it seems apparent that our prayers fall on deaf ears. And the dilemma is increased because God keeps exhorting us to pray and keeps promising to answer our prayers.

And time and time again in the pages of the New Testament we read verses like the reading from Matthew when Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount said, Ask and it will be given you.

Search and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who searches, finds. And everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who if your child asks for bread will give a stone or if the child asks for a fish will give a snake?

[3 : 41] If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who seek him? Time and again we read those sorts of promises.

So what goes wrong? I hate it when things go wrong, especially things beyond my knowledge and understanding and control.

For example, the diagnosis of computer problems leads me into despair. And if something goes wrong, I usually ring up Tony Caruana or Peter Newnham and they've come and they've looked at it and if they don't know what to do, then I'm in the slough of despond for weeks and weeks.

Where is the fault? Well, the letter of James is a useful place for some diagnosis of the problems or faults that we might perceive in prayer when it falls on deaf ears.

Early in the letter of James, James writes in chapter 1 verse 5, If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly and it will be given you.

[4 : 51] Those words echo and remind us of Solomon requesting of God wisdom when he was the king, the third king of Israel. And God abundantly and overflowing answered that prayer.

Solomon's wisdom is still proverbial literally to this day. We read of his wisdom in the scriptures, in several of the Old Testament books, as well as in the book of Kings, which tells us about his prayer for wisdom and the wisdom that he exercised as king.

So James is writing to ordinary Christians in this church to whom he writes, saying, If you lack wisdom, pray and God will give it to you ungrudgingly and generously.

But then he issues a caution in the verses that follow. He goes on in chapter 1 verse 6 to say, But ask in faith, never doubting.

For the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For the doubter being double-minded and unstable in every way must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

[5 : 59] James' whole letter is actually written to Christians whom he diagnoses are double-minded. not in a sense of being devious or nasty, but double-minded in the sense of being in two minds.

They want to pursue love with the world, but they also want to pursue love with God. And so they're swaying between the two. They're unanchored in their faith. It might be a person who flirts with the world, is enticed by the world's offers of pleasure and indulgence or comfort or whatever.

And then they turn to God when something goes wrong in their need. It might be somebody who doesn't really know God in depth and thinks that God is sort of to be added into the pursuit of the world.

Well, in his mercy, God often does answer the prayers of the double-minded doubter. The person who doesn't really know God but cries out to God in their need. And you see it in stories of church history from time to time as well, where somebody is actually converted when they pray to God whom they don't really know.

God, please answer my prayer. And God does. And they become a Christian. From time to time, God's mercy extends to the double-minded doubter. But not always.

[7 : 15] And here James is writing, remember, to people who profess Christian faith, not those who are ignorant unbelievers. And he's cautioning them and warning them that if they pray as double-minded people in love with the world and also at the same time professing love with God, then in that sort of ambiguous compromise, God may well not answer their prayers.

Their doubt may be that they doubt God's ability to answer their prayer. They may doubt God's faithfulness to answer their prayer. It may be doubt about the value of praying to God at all or doubt about God's character.

Is unanswered prayer a sign perhaps of double-minded doubt in two minds about God, in two minds about prayer?

I don't mean by that necessarily that when you actually pray that you're doubting the existence of God, but that in your life as you pursue for six or seven days in a week the love of the world and when something goes wrong you say, oh yes, I better turn to God and pray.

That's double-minded doubt in effect. That is, it's not so much the doubt necessarily in the words of the prayer, but the doubt that is expressed by the way that the life is lived.

[8 : 37] How do we address that? Well, one reason would be to keep coming back to the scriptures to convince ourselves again of the power and ability and love and desire of God to answer prayers for us as is best for us.

To convince us again of the importance, value, power of prayer. To change us from double-minded to single-minded Christians. Well, later in his letter, in James 4, the first of today's readings, James returns to the issue of prayer.

In these opening verses of chapter 4, which build on the statements at the end of chapter 3, it is clear that the Christians to whom he writes are in some dispute and conflict with each other.

These conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Well, picking up the language of the end of chapter 3, they come from their selfish ambition and their envy. That is an expression of the love of the world rather than the love of God.

Chapter 4, verse 1 goes on to say, do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? That is at war between fellow Christians, craving desires of the world that bring you into conflict and clash, but also at war within you, that is perhaps the conflict within the person about what they desire and crave as well.

[10:00] Their double-mindedness expressed in an internal desire conflict. And then he goes on in verse 2 to say, you want something, you do not have it, so you commit murder, you covet something and cannot obtain it, so you engage in disputes and conflicts.

Here is worldly desire being expressed, leading to conflict among brothers and sisters in Christ. Their greed, their covetousness, their envy, their selfish ambition, maybe even literally murder, maybe murder in the way, in the heart of the way that other people are treated by us.

Now two more possible solutions to the dilemma of unanswered prayer come before us. We've seen in chapter 1 of double-minded doubt in general. But now in the end of verse 2, James writes, you do not have because you do not ask.

Simply, sometimes our prayers, in inverted commas, are not answered because actually we're not praying. That might strike you as odd, but I think so often it's true.

That is, we might wish for, long for, hope for, and yearn for something, but that's different from actually praying for it. You see, so often there is a longing and desire within us, but we don't actually get on our knees and pray to God.

[11:30] You do not have because you do not ask. You see, the basic question surely must be, well, actually, am I praying for this? You see, if I've got a computer problem, the first thing probably I should ask myself is, have I switched it on?

I mean, if the computer screen is not doing what you expect, it may be, because I'm so ignorant and stupid, that I haven't actually switched it on properly. Well, in prayer, the same thing. If we're complaining that our prayers are not answered, firstly, we've got to ask ourselves, am I actually praying?

Prayer, of course, is speaking directly to God the Father. And yet still, I'm often surprised at how many Christians are reticent and reluctant to pray to God. And we see it, of course, in various Christian so-called traditions where instead, saints are prayed to or Mary or something or someone else.

We see it in traditions where somebody else is asked to pray. And often people say, will you pray for me as though their prayers are ineffectual. Nonsense. I mean, I'm happy to pray for people but it's nonsense that a believer's prayers are ineffectual.

Indeed, James, at the end of chapter 5, says that Elijah was a person just like us. His prayers are thoroughly effective as a righteous person in the eyes of God through sins forgiven.

[12:50] Why are we so nervous sometimes to approach the throne of grace? do we feel too inadequate or unworthy to actually approach the living God with our prayer requests?

If that's the case, then we've failed to grasp the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ. For at the heart of the gospel is a death of Christ that gives us free access to God the Father.

Not because of our worthiness but because our sins are dealt with by him on the cross. and the gate is open wide to the throne of God's grace to which we are exhorted in the scriptures to approach with confidence and boldness.

So let me exhort you and ask if your prayers are not being answered, are you actually praying to God the Father through his Son Jesus Christ? Are you praying on the grounds of his blood shed for you that takes away your sins and gives you free access to that heavenly Father?

Are you actually praying or are you just wishing for something? The gospel is a glorious privilege and a central part of that privilege is that we can pray boldly and confidently to our heavenly Father.

[14:06] We have full access by means of his blood shed for us. So pray and keep on praying and persist in praying as Jesus so often taught his disciples and those who listened to him.

But there's more here as well. It seems that some were praying. Verse 3 goes on to say you ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly in order to spend what you get on your pleasure.

There's two possible solutions to the problem or diagnoses here. They're intertwined in a sense. you ask wrongly. That is either for the wrong thing or for wrong motives.

For the right or the wrong thing. Wrong motives and wrong requests or desires. Of course for Christians who are double-minded like this readership of James originally was their requests will be compromised.

Their love of the world means that they are praying for or asking for worldly things. You have asked wrongly in order to spend what you get on your pleasure.

[15:21] That is not only are they asking for wrong things but their desire is for their pleasure.

Their motive is a selfish motive. As we've seen at the end of chapter three that they are earthly and

unspiritual they've got selfish ambition that's now being expressed if they do pray in their prayers. They are praying with selfishness for their own indulgence and their own pleasure. And when such prayers happen for wrong requests or by wrong motives God may well say no.

It's not that their prayers are unanswered their prayers are answered but not the way they want. God says no. So there is another diagnostic question.

Are our prayers selfish? Are they indulgent? Are they expressions of greed or covetousness? In such cases our prayers may well not be answered the way we want.

But God's answer is no. Remember what we learned last week in the Lord's Prayer. Your will be done. Not my will, not my desires but your will be done is what Jesus taught us to pray.

[16:38] You see prayer is not like children writing a little letter to Santa. I want every latest toy and gimmick no matter how expensive it is because I want to have fun. Prayer is not an open invitation to indulge ourselves with every pleasure and comfort.

Your will be done. Not my desires and wishes, not my greed and my envy to be satisfied. God's prayer is in this also it's worth noticing that slightly more subtly we can pray actually for good things but with wrong or selfish motives.

James is directing us to pray not only for good things but with good motives. So it may be that the request is wrong in which case God says no but it may be that the request itself is okay but our motive is wrong.

Our motive is selfish or greedy or covetous. we may pray for the conversion of somebody. I remember a friend at university praying for the conversion of the person who he wanted to be his girlfriend but he knew that he shouldn't go out with a girl who's not a believer so he's praying desperately that she become a Christian.

Now actually in God's mercy she did and they're married still happily 20 years later. But sometimes those prayers aren't answered. The thing itself might have been a good thing to pray for but perhaps the driving motive is a little bit selfish.

[18:01] Again it may be something that we're praying for that's good like healing and we're not healed. Could it be that our motives are actually selfish? I don't like the pain, the discomfort, the frustration or the dependence.

Healing's not a bad thing it's good to pray for it we're exhorted even in James to pray for healing. But what's our motive in praying? Are we praying for God's honour as the Lord's Prayer commands us to pray and to constrain our prayers praying for God's honour, God's kingdom and God's will? Or are we praying even for good things but for selfish motives and purposes? Are we driven to our knees for the honour of God?

Or are we driven to our knees for our comfort and indulgence and pleasure? Are we praying for my world to be okay?

Or are we praying for God's kingdom to come? Again the issue here is this double mindedness. James goes on with very strong language in the next verse 4.

[19:13] Adulterers, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. You see you can't sit on the fence, you can't serve two masters.

Double mindedness in the end tips us away from God. And our love of the world may be expressed with Christian piety and prayer, but actually it's driven by selfishness and love for the world and what it offers, rather than for love of God and his kingdom.

The people to whom James writes are actually falling in love with the world. It's a danger each one of us faces. The pleasures of our world are great and they are thrust in our face and in our eyes all the time.

to be driven by the honor and love of God is something that we have to work at and persist with day in and day out as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

You cannot serve two masters and the Lord's prayer keeps reminding us which master we're to pray to. God's honor, God's kingdom and God's will.

[20:21] That's why the verses go on in James chapter 4 to urge in no uncertain terms his listeners to repent. Submit yourselves therefore to God, verse 7 says.

Resist the devil and he'll flee from you. Draw near to God he'll draw near to you. Cleanse your hands you sinners and purify your hearts you double minded. Lament and mourn and weep.

Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. They're strong words. But what James is directing us to there is that maybe through what appears to be unanswered prayer God is saying not just no but teaching us something.

Teaching us perhaps patience teaching us repentance of our sin in this case teaching us also humility the end of this section verse 10 says humble yourselves before the Lord and he'll exalt you. It builds on verse 6 God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble and so often you see when we're in love with the world we're far from humble because our world doesn't like humility so in love with the world pursuing our selfish ambition our envies our covetousness and greed that's pride at work not humility fundamental opposite of what God wants if we want to receive the grace of God then on is how we're to pray not with greedy proud expressions of prayer that's why of course in that parable that Jesus taught in Luke 18 where the Pharisee and the tax collector go to pray the Pharisee prays God I thank you that I'm not like other people thieves rogues adulterers or even like this tax collector I fast twice a week I give a tenth of all my income there's no humility there but the tax collector standing far off would not even look up to heaven but was beating his breast and saying

[22 : 24] God be merciful to me a sinner and Jesus tells those listening this man went down to his home justified rather than the other for all who exalt themselves will be humbled but all who humble themselves will be exalted when we're in love with the world we exalt ourselves and our prayers become expressions of self exaltation God's silence in answering such prayers is no because of wrong requests but more than that in God's mercy and opportunity to learn and grow James is teaching that unanswered prayer may be disciplinary may be educative calling his readers to repent to humble themselves to learn trust in God to learn patience and so on so when our prayers appear not to be answered what is

God teaching us how are we to learn and grow from that is he teaching us patience as I suspect my grandfather had to learn is he teaching us reliance upon God is he teaching us to trust in the sufficiency of God's daily grace and provision is he teaching us to repent of our sins certainly scripture teaches us in many places that sin is a fundamental blockage in our relationship with God it's why Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden in the first place and why Jesus had to die on the cross for us to have a relationship with God and so the scriptures teach us that God's silence to our prayers is often because of our sin that is unconfessed or unrepented of way back in the prophet Isaiah for example Isaiah said your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear Malachi the prophet said similar things to ancient Israel as well God's silence may actually be his mercy in alerting us to our need to repent of our sin

God's silence in our prayers may actually be him saying to us search your hearts and get right because it doesn't mean get perfect none of us is perfect but our relationship with God is grounded on sins atoned for by the death of Jesus that's what gives us the access but if we're harboring sin in our life unconfessed and unrepented of then we're actually denying the death of Jesus and therefore closing the gate to the throne of God's grace as we pray then to deaf ears and in particular relational conflicts hinder prayers the scripture tells us in 1 Peter 3 that marital conflict may well hinder the prayers of the married couple Matthew 5 in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says as much that if you come before the Lord but you're unreconciled with your brother or sister in Christ in effect go back and get reconciled before you come back to the presence of the Lord James 4 verse 1 has identified the conflicts and disputes in the Christian congregation no wonder their prayers may not be answered because as Jesus taught in the Lord's prayer forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us if we're not pursuing reconciliation with our brothers and sisters in Christ we have no right to expect that God will hear our prayers he may well be silent to alert us to our need to find reconciliation with our brothers and sisters in Christ what this passage then opens up for us is a series of in effect diagnostic questions if you come to me and say to you my prayers are not being answered what's wrong I'm not going to be able to give you a specific answer even though I hope that when my computer goes wrong Tony or Peter or someone can but I can give you a series of questions that you are to ponder in your heart and pray about maybe for a long period of time to see what the answers may be am I in fact praying to God or am I just desiring something but not getting on my knees are my prayers compromised by doubt am I double-minded in my life and in my prayers loving the world and pretending to love God at the same time are my requests selfish are my motivations selfish am I praying out of a desire for

God's honour or for my comfort and pleasure is unconfessed sin blocking my prayers are relational conflicts hindering my prayers being answered and of course in the end even then with those questions we may not yet have an answer for God is God and he's sovereign and he's supreme he has mercy on whom he'll have mercy he's not beholden to us he's not our debtor his name means I am who I am and we are to let God be God he's not under the control of our prayers the Lord gives the Lord takes away blessed be the name of the Lord simplistically someone has written if our request in prayer is wrong the answer is no if our timing is wrong the answer is slow if we are wrong the answer is grow but if all is okay the answer is go it's simplistic but helpful but if all is okay then go let's not be discouraged about praying we are commanded time and again even in [28 : 28] James on several occasions pray pray expecting a good and loving and merciful God to answer our prayers pray in the name of Jesus pray through his death for our sins forgiven pray with confidence and boldness to the throne of God's grace and keep on praying and keep on praying and keep on praying ask and it will be given you search and you will find knock and the door will be open for you for everyone who asks receives and everyone who searches finds and for everyone who knocks the door will be opened Amen