

Why Pray?

If you listen to Bishop Robert Barron on the Word on Fire show, he has one podcast called, the metaphysics of prayer. This podcast answers the basic questions we all have about prayer because we all pray and we have all wondered, “what IS prayer? HOW does prayer work? What am I DOING when I pray?”

Bishop Barron goes on to teach that it is part of the nature of God to be unchanging. God does not change. Malachi 3:6: For I the Lord do not change. We are also reminded that God is all knowing, omniscient. As Jesus says: Your father knows what you need before you ask him (Mt 6:8).

So...when we pray we are not praying to change God’s mind? And...we are not praying to make known to him our needs because he knows them already? Then...why should we pray? It seems like there is no point in praying.

Why do we pray?

Yet despite all these things, Jesus still encourages us to pray. Jesus himself prayed as the Scriptures attest and he encourages his disciples to pray persistently.

Jesus uses a type of argumentation which proves that if this lesser statement is true then how much more true is the second statement. (Elbow falls, Ha Ling). This is known in philosophy as an a fortiori argument (x2).

So Jesus says in his parable: look even if your friend is not willing to get up in the middle of the night to give you a piece of bread because of your friendship, he will at least give you the bread because of your persistence, because you annoyed the heck out of him.

Therefore, how much more will God respond to your needs if you ask him persistently not because you annoyed him, not because he is your friend but because he is your Father.

However, when Jesus tells us to be persistent, it still does not solve our issue of why we should pray? Does Jesus want us to be persistent because God is playing games with us? Is God just waiting to see how much we really want something and then he gives it to us?

I have a nephew and he loves cars. I'm sure his first word was "Car!" then his second words were "Mommy, car!" But imagine he comes up to me and says, "uncle can I get a car?" So being a good uncle, I get him a 2019 Deep-Pearl Blue Nissan GTR V6 fully loaded 600 hp with NOS capability. So I hand him the keys and because he is a toddler he might start eating the keys. But when he bites on one of those buttons and realizes that the keys are for the car. If he even opens the door because he is only a toddler, he will struggle to get into the seat. He will pretend he is driving for a few minutes if he can even touch the steering wheel, take a nap and then he will walk away.

In SOME cases, we may experience a delayed prayer, an unanswered prayer because SOMETIMES the gift God wants to give to us is greater than our ability to receive it. ***In fact, God wants to give us the gift more than we are ready to receive it.*** Sometimes we want the gift, but we are not ready for the magnitude, the greatness of the gift.

"Suppose you want to fill some sort of bag, and you know the bulk of what you will be given, you stretch the bag or the sack or the skin or whatever it is. You know how big the object that you want to put in and you see that the bag is narrow so you increase its capacity by stretching it. ***In the same way by delaying the fulfillment of desire God stretches it. By making us desire, he expands the soul, and by this expansion he increases its capacity.***" (St Augustine)

One of the reasons God desires that we pray persistently is so that we can expand our hearts to receive the greatness of the gift. Just like my nephew who is not ready for a Nissan GTR, sometimes in some cases we are not ready for God's gifts. It is like God is saying: I know you want this gift and I want to give you this gift, but your hands are too small to receive it, your heart is too small so I want to stretch it even more. Prayer for St. Augustine then is an exercise of desire. Persistent prayer is about opening our hearts, stretching our hearts even wider for the gift that God wants to give.

16 years ago when I desired to be a priest, I was like my nephew. I wanted it but I wasn't ready for it. And so this 16 year journey has been a journey of desire just so that I can even begin to receive the gift of the priesthood, a gift which I will need to unfold for the rest of my life.

This explanation works in certain cases of desiring certain things like a new job, or a future spouse or overcoming a particular sin or vice. But in the cases when someone is sick or dying and we are praying, isn't it clear to God that this is something we already truly desire? That we desire the health and well-being of our loved ones?

I was listening to Catholic Answers on Youtube and Karlene called in who had a 22 year old son with colorectal cancer which effects the bowels. She had thousands upon thousands of people praying for him in Ireland and Rome, candles were lit everywhere for her child.

In July his condition got worse and worse until September when he passed away. And so this mom is in tears on the phone saying: I had people doing rosaries...doing everything we could do...where does God fit into this, where does the power of prayer fit into this because we had so many people praying for this kid.

The doubts or questions that might arise in the mind of Karlene or even in us is: does prayer even work?

Yet Jesus responds even to this. Jesus uses the same type of argumentation again he used above: Is there anyone among you who if your child asks for a fish or an egg, will give a snake or a scorpion instead? If you, earthly parents, give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give you good gifts.

This is a key point because Jesus is calling us to trust that God is truly a good Father. That is why when the disciples ask him how to pray, what is the first thing he says? *When you pray say, Father...* We aren't just praying to an unchanging all knowing being. We are also praying to the Father who gives good gifts.

We need to pray over and over again because we need to be reminded over and over again that God is our Father. If we know that God is our Father, then nothing can shake our faith. What may seem like a snake or scorpion when we asked for a fish or bread, what may seem like an unanswered prayer, intolerable suffering, we know that it will work out for the good as St. Paul reminds us: *We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose (Rm 8:28).*

When we trust that God is our Father, then we begin to trust that there is a plan that is greater than what we can see. Padre Pio once said that we are like children who are sitting by the feet of our mother who is weaving a piece of embroidery. All we can see is the backside of the embroidery and it looks like an absolute mess with no patterns, colors are mixed up and it might seem to make no sense.

Likewise, for us on this side of eternity, all we can see of God's plan is that it seems like a mess, like there are no patterns and how it doesn't make sense. But when we get to heaven, when we see the other side of the embroidery of his providence, we will recognize that his plans for us and those we love were for the good this whole time and we will praise his majesty for all eternity.

To conclude, we asked, why do we pray? We pray because we need to stretch our hearts to receive the good gifts our Father wants to send us for our good and the for the good of the whole world. Ultimately, we are stretching our hearts to receive him in all his majesty. But when it seems like he is giving us snakes and scorpions, let us look to the Cross and trust that he can turn snakes into fish, scorpions into bread, death into life. And when it seems like all is dark let us pray like he did trusting like a child that God has a plan even though we don't see it: Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.