

WEEK 6: Does Prayer change God's mind?



This week, we dive into one of the most asked questions from people about prayer as we explore the relationship between our hopes and desires and God's sovereign will. Is God's "mind" fixed, or does he change his mind in response to our petitions?



Our main reading for this week is a parable told by Jesus to teach about persistence in prayer. It's taken from Luke's Gospel, Chapter 18, verses 1 to 8.

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town, a judge neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And a widow in that town kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

"For some time, he refused. But finally, he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'"

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will quickly see that they get justice. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

If you want more than one reading in your service, the suggestions are James 5:13-18 from the New Testament or Exodus 32:9-14 from the Old Testament.



Key Themes and Lessons

This passage tells the story of a widow who persistently seeks justice from a judge who neither fears God nor respects people. Despite the judge's initial refusal to act, the widow's relentless pursuit eventually compels him to grant her justice.

he story isn't really about the judicial system in 1st Century Palestine, though! And it's probably best for the clarity of the theme if you avoid going down that particular rabbit hole! More importantly, for us, the framing is employed as a parable by Jesus to address questions about prayer:

- Does prayer change what God intended to do?
- Does God change his mind if we are persistent in prayer?
- What's the point of prayer if God's will is set in stone?

Here are some "talking points" from the parable.

Persistence in prayer: The parable emphasises the necessity of persistent prayer. Despite the judge's initial refusal, the widow's continuous plea for justice symbolises the importance of perseverance in prayer.

Faith in prayer: Despite the odds, the widow's faith in the possibility of justice is a key theme. This can be related to our faith in the power of prayer and God's justice. Jesus anticipated we'd lose heart in prayer, so having faith is important so we do not give up. The parable encourages Christians to persevere in their faith against all odds.

Timing in prayer: The parable teaches us about God's timing. Our concept of a quickly answered prayer differs from God's, so we shouldn't let our expectations discourage us.

Whether prayer changes God's mind—or rather mainly results in a change to ourselves—is a profound theological discussion. Many believe that prayer does not change God, who is unchanging and constant.

Indeed, the unchanging nature of God is a theological tenet for many. The Immutability or Unchangeability of God is an attribute that "God is unchanging in his character, will, and covenant promises." The Westminster Shorter Catechism says, "God is a spirit, whose being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth are infinite, eternal, and unchangeable."

Instead, prayer changes us. It brings us closer to God, aligns us with His will, and transforms our hearts. It's a means of communication that deepens our relationship with God.

In the context of the parable, the widow's persistent plea did not change the nature of the judge but brought about a change in her situation. Similarly, our prayers may not change God, but they can bring about changes in our lives and circumstances.

Remember, these interpretations can vary based on different theological perspectives.

Practical Application

Here are some practical takeaways from Luke 18:1-8 that an ordinary congregational member can apply straight away:

These takeaways are not just theoretical concepts—but practical actions that can be incorporated into our daily lives. They can transform our prayer life and our relationship with God. Here are some practical ways to cultivate persistence in prayer:

Pray Honestly: God is always listening to you. He doesn't need fancy words. He just wants to talk to you. So, talk to God how you talk to other people.

Pray Specifically: Many times, our prayer time goes something like this: "Dear God, help me have a good day today" There's nothing wrong with that prayer, but if you want your prayers to be more powerful, I encourage you to pray specifically.

Keep a Record of both your “Asks” and His “Answers”. This can help you see how God is working in your life. (There is an activity to help with this later in these resources)

Consider Partnering with Another Believer: Praying with others can provide support and encouragement. (Again, see later in these resources for a helpful activity)

Trust That He Will Answer: Have faith that God hears your prayers and will answer them in His own time—even if it isn’t the answer we expected or desired.

Reflect on the Bible: Understanding the scriptures can enrich your prayer life.

Listen for God’s Voice: Prayer is a two-way communication. Take time to listen to what God might be saying to you.

Remember, cultivating persistence in prayer is a journey. It takes time and practice. Most (perhaps all) Christians struggle with understanding the complex relationship between our prayers and God’s will. You likely struggle with this yourself, at least some of the time. Be honest with your congregation—and help them engage with this difficult subject.



Online resources

Helpful blog posts on this theme

<https://www.christtheredeemer-ls.org/blog/post/does-god-change-his-mind-when-we-pray#>

Why keep praying if God’s will is fixed?

<https://roomfordoubt.com/post/does-prayer-change-gods-mind>

A contrary case for God changing his mind:

<https://faithgateway.com/blogs/christian-books/keep-praying-god-changes-mind>

A few bullet points from the above sources:

A. Does Prayer change God or change us?

This profound theological question has been the subject of much debate. Here are some perspectives based on various sources:

Prayer Does Not Change God’s Mind: Some believe prayer does not change God’s mind. God, in His divine nature, is unchanging and constant. The Bible says certain things God has decreed from all eternity will inevitably come to pass. However, prayer is one of the means He uses to bring things to pass in this world.

Prayer Changes Us: Most commentators believe that prayer changes us. It aligns our hearts and minds with God's will and transforms us. It's a means of communication that deepens our relationship with God.

Prayer and God's Will: Some argue that throughout Scripture, "a great deal of what God does in the world is influenced by whether his people pray". However, most agree that God does not always change His mind in response to prayers.

God's Sovereignty and Prayer: Regardless of whether we believe prayer changes God's mind, if we trust that God is sovereign and His love always prevails, we can trust that our prayers are not in vain and that He is at work redeeming all things.

B. How can we balance praying for specific things and surrendering to God's will?

Balancing specific prayers with surrendering to God's will can be a delicate task. Here are some suggestions based on various online sources:

I. Pray Specifically, but Surrender the Outcome: Pray for specific needs, desires, or situations, but surrender the outcome to God. Acknowledge that God's wisdom and understanding surpass ours, and His plans are always for our good. This attitude of surrender can deepen your relationship with God and increase your faith.

II. Seek God's Will in Scripture: The Bible is a guidebook filled with God's intentions, character, and promises. Aligning our prayers with biblical truths is a sure way to pray according to God's will.

III. Cultivate a Heart of Surrender: By praying for a heart of surrender, trusting in God's plan, obeying God's will, being humble, surrendering control, worries and anxieties, personal desires, the need for recognition, past hurts and forgiveness, and surrendering daily to God's leading, we can actively seek and develop an attitude of surrender toward God.

IV. Maintain a Dialogue with God: Keep the lines of communication open with God. Share your thoughts, feelings, and desires, and listen for His guidance.

Remember, prayer is a personal journey, and these suggestions may not fit everyone's spiritual practice. It's always beneficial to seek guidance from spiritual mentors or others in your faith community.



QUOTES

"I don't pray so I can change God. I pray so God can change me." (C.S Lewis)

"Our prayers can go where we cannot...there are no borders, no prison walls, no doors that are closed to us when we pray." (Brother Andrew)

The function of prayer is not to influence God but to change the nature of the one who prays. (Soren Kierkegaard)

We cannot change God. God is unchangeable. If changes are to be made, they must be made in us. (R.C Sproul)

Though prayer doesn't change God's mind or God's purposes, prayer does change something- It changes us. (Chuck Smith)

Only the Holy Spirit has the power to make the changes God wants to make in our lives.... We allow Christ to live through us... through the choices we make (Rick Warren)

Prayer does not change God. It changes us. It deepens insight, increases intuitive perception, and expands consciousness. It transforms personality. (Wilfred Peterson)

As I repeatedly say throughout these resources, these sermon outlines are not prescriptive. You can develop the sermon in any way you choose, but feel free to adapt and develop this one if it helps.



As we say each week, these sermon outlines are offered as a resource—a “starter for ten”, if you like. It is NOT designed to be prescriptive. You are encouraged to “work up” your sermon according to your usual method of preparation. However, this outline is offered as inspiration for those who might need some!

Opening:

- Introduction to the Parable of the Persistent Widow.
- Briefly touch on the question of the meaning and purpose of prayer.

The Four ‘P’s’ of Prayer

- **Persist in Prayer:** Discuss the widow’s persistence in seeking justice and relate this to the importance of persistence in prayer.
- **Practice Dependence:** Highlight the widow’s dependence on the judge for justice. Draw parallels to our dependence on God in prayer—his will, not ours (You can link this to the Gospel reading from Jesus in Gethsemane)
- **Perceive God’s Timing:** Discuss the judge’s response to the widow’s pleas and relate this to God’s timing in answering our prayers. Sometimes, we expect things on our schedule!
- **Promote Faith:** Discuss the role of faith in the widow’s persistence and the importance of faith in our prayer life. We don’t always understand, but God is love and wants the best for us.

Conclusion:

- Summarise the key points discussed.
- Challenge the congregation to apply these lessons in their prayer life.
- Encourage them to persist in prayer, trust in God’s justice, depend on God, understand His timing, and strengthen their faith.
- End with a call to action, encouraging the congregation to reflect on their prayer life and make any necessary changes to align it more closely with the lessons from the parable.

Remember, a sermon is not just about delivering information—but also about inspiring your congregation to apply these lessons in their daily lives.



Suggested Hymns and Songs

STF H&P

545	378	Be Thou my vision
529	557	Prayer is the soul's sincere desire
	687	Trust and Obey
63		Over all the earth
566	705	Take my life and let it be
465	437	Guide me, O thou great redeemer
707		Make me a channel of peace
355	528	Jesus, love of my soul
51	66	Great is Thy faithfulness
692	784	Your hand, O God, has guided

Call To Worship

Praise the Lord!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
Praise him in his mighty heavens!

**All: With joyful hearts, with voices raised high,
Let us extol His name; let our praises fly.**

Praise him with trumpet sound;
Praise him with lute and harp!
Praise him with tambourine and dance;
Praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with sounding cymbals;
Praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

**All: Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!**

Prayers of Approach and Penitence

Opening Prayer

Divine Creator,
As we gather in this sacred space,
We open our hearts and minds to Your presence.
Guide us as we seek alignment with Your will,
And grant us the wisdom to discern Your voice
In the stillness of our prayers. **Amen.**

Prayer of Surrender

Gracious God,
Teach us the humility to surrender our own desires
And align our will with Yours.
May our prayers not be a list of demands,
But rather surrendering to Your divine plan,
Trusting in Your wisdom and love. **Amen.**

Kyrie Confession

Let us come before the Lord in humility and repentance, acknowledging our need for His grace and guidance.

For the times when we have acted out of selfish desires, disregarding the needs of others and failing to align ourselves with God's love and compassion,

Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

For the moments when we have allowed fear and doubt to overshadow our faith, neglecting to trust in God's wisdom and guidance,

Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

For the instances when we have turned away from the path of righteousness, succumbing to temptation and straying from God's will,

Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

May the mercy of our loving God
cleanse us from all unrighteousness,
renew our spirits and restore us
to align with His divine purpose.
Amen.

Collect

Almighty and ever-present God,
who knows the depths of our hearts
and the complexities of our lives.
Grant us, we pray, the wisdom to discern Your will
and the courage to align our lives with Your divine purpose.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Amen.

Intercessions

Let us pray for the grace to align our will with God's will in our daily lives. We pray for the strength to surrender our desires and ambitions, trusting God's plan. May we seek His guidance in every decision we make, knowing that His wisdom far surpasses our own. Let us align our actions with His teachings, showing love and compassion to all we encounter. May we be empowered by His Spirit to live lives that reflect His glory and honour His name.

Your kingdom come

You will be done, O Lord.

Let us pray for the alignment of our will with God's will in our relationships. We lift to God all those with whom we share our lives – our families, friends, colleagues, and neighbours. Grant us the humility to love unconditionally, to forgive freely, and to reconcile differences with grace. Help us to see others as You see them and to treat them with the same kindness and compassion You extend to us. May our relationships be grounded in mutual respect and understanding, reflecting the unity and harmony of Your divine love.

Your kingdom come

You will be done, O Lord.

Let us pray for the alignment of our will with God's will in our vocations and callings. We lift to God all those discerning their purpose and seeking direction in their careers, studies, and ministries. Grant them clarity of vision and courage to follow where You lead. May they find fulfilment and joy in serving You and others, using their talents and gifts to bring about Your kingdom on earth. Strengthen them in times of doubt and uncertainty, and inspire them to persevere in faithfulness to Your call.

Your kingdom come

You will be done, O Lord.

Let us pray for aligning our will with God's will in our stewardship of creation. We lift to God all who work tirelessly to care for the earth – scientists, activists, policymakers, and ordinary people. Grant them wisdom and perseverance in their efforts to protect and preserve Your creation for future generations. Help us be mindful of the impact of our actions on the environment. Inspire us to be responsible stewards of the resources You have entrusted to us, using them wisely and sustainably for the good of all.

Your kingdom come

You will be done, O Lord.

Sending Prayer (Benediction)

Eternal God,
As we conclude this time of worship,
May the alignment of our hearts with Yours
Continue to guide us in all that we do.
Bless us with Your peace and presence,
And empower us to be instruments of Your love
In the world around us.

Amen

Blessing Prayer:

May the Lord bless you and keep you,
Aligning your heart with His divine purpose,
And guiding your steps along the path of righteousness.

Amen.

May the Lord make His face shine upon you,
Illuminating your way with His love and grace,
And filling your life with His peace and presence.

Amen.

May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you,
Empowering you to align your will with His,
And to be instruments of His light and love in the world.

Amen.

May the blessing of God Almighty,
The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
Be with you now and always.

Amen.



Prayer Activity: Scripture Memorisation

This week, we are going to try some Bible memorisation. This means choosing a verse or passage of scripture to memorise and reciting it regularly. By doing so, we internalise its message and allow it to shape our prayers.

- Select a verse or passage of scripture that speaks to your current spiritual journey or challenges.
- Write the verse down on a notecard or piece of paper and place it somewhere you'll see it regularly, such as on your desk or refrigerator.
- Take time each day to memorise the verse, repeating it aloud or in your mind until you can recall it easily.
- Reflect on the verse's meaning and how it applies to your life, allowing it to shape your thoughts and prayers.
- Offer prayers of gratitude for the wisdom and guidance found in scripture, asking for strength to live out its teachings in your daily life.

Prayer Activity: Prayer Exploration

The objective of this prayer activity is to visually track and reflect on the impact of our prayers over time.

Materials Needed:

- *Large paper or a whiteboard*
- *Post-It or Sticky notes*
- *Smaller pieces of paper*
- *Pens*

Divide the paper or whiteboard into three columns labelled "Prayer Request," "Date Prayed," and "Observed Change."

Ask participants to write down specific prayer requests on Post-It Notes and Stick them in the "Prayer Request" column. Each person should write the date they intend to pray for that particular need.

To help remember, each person should note the prayer request on a smaller scrap of paper to take away with them. This is a visual reminder of what they commit to praying for and should be kept in a Bible, pinned to a noticeboard or fridge, etc.

Over time (you could spread this over several weeks), participants return to the board to add updates in the "Observed Change" column. They should note any changes they've observed, whether they believe the change is directly related to their prayers or not.

After several weeks, you could carve out time to discuss how tracking prayers and changes have affected their view of prayer's effectiveness. Reflect on the process of waiting and noticing changes and whether these observations provide a sense of answered prayer.

Ice Breaker Questions

If you could make one change in the world just by praying for it, what would you choose and why?

or

Can you share a surprising or unexpected way your prayer was answered, whether it was what you hoped for or something different?

or

What is the most unusual thing you've ever prayed for, and what happened as a result?

Discussion Questions

These questions are designed to stimulate thoughtful discussion and deep reflection on the themes of persistence, faith, and the transformative power of prayer, as depicted in the parable of the persistent widow.

1. How do you interpret the widow's persistence in Luke 18:1-8? What does this teach us about our approach to prayer?
2. In what ways do you think persistent prayer can impact our relationship with God?
3. Do you think the judge in the parable represents God? Why or why not, and how does that influence your understanding of prayer?
4. How does the concept of justice in the parable relate to our expectations when we pray for something?
5. What are some barriers you think people face when being persistent in prayer?
6. How does the parable challenge or reinforce your own beliefs about the effectiveness of prayer?
7. How do you reconcile the idea of persistent prayer with situations where prayers seem to go unanswered for a long time?
8. In what ways might our prayers be shaping us, even if they don't seem to be changing our circumstances?
9. What role does faith play in persistent prayer, according to Luke 18:1-8?
10. How can we maintain hope and perseverance in prayer when we don't see immediate results or change?

Case Studies

Here are four case studies that delve into various aspects of the complex relationship between our prayers and God's plans. Each scenario is designed to be relatable and to prompt deep discussion.

These case studies are designed to provoke thought and discussion about the intricate and sometimes unexpected ways our prayers might align with, influence, or reveal God's plans.

Print out copies of the case studies. Divide your group into smaller groups (or use the Cafe Service format) to tackle the questions. Depending on your group or service size, you might not use all of the case studies. Remember to get feedback afterwards on how the groups approached the questions and how their discussion impacted their viewpoint on these tricky questions.

Case Study 1: Healing and Acceptance

James had been praying for years for the healing of his wife, Sarah, who suffered from a chronic illness. He attended every prayer meeting, sought prayer from his church community, and even explored various medical treatments, all in the hope that Sarah would be healed.

Despite their efforts and persistent prayers, Sarah's condition remained unchanged. Over time, they both grew to accept her condition as a part of their lives. They began to focus on what they could do within the limits of her health, finding new ways to enjoy life and serve others. Their relationship strengthened, and they found a new sense of purpose in advocating for others with similar health issues.

What does James and Sarah's journey suggest about the role of acceptance and how it might be part of God's response to our prayers?

Case Study 2: The Prodigal Son

Linda had been praying fervently for her son, Mark, who had drifted away from his faith and was involved in destructive behaviour. For years, she prayed that Mark would return to God and turn his life around. Despite her prayers, Mark's situation seemed to worsen.

She felt discouraged and began to wonder if her prayers were being heard. Unexpectedly, Mark decided to join a community service project in a remote area, seeking a change of environment. He met a mentor during this time who helped him rediscover his faith and purpose. Mark's life began to transform, not directly through Linda's continued prayers but through an unforeseen series of events that led him back to faith.

How does Mark's transformation challenge our understanding of how and when God answers prayers?

Case Study 3: The Lost Opportunity

David had always dreamed of owning his own business and prayed for years for the right opportunity. When a chance finally came to buy an existing business, he felt it answered his prayers.

However, the deal fell through at the last minute due to unexpected complications. David was devastated and questioned why God would let him come so close to his dream, only to see it fail.

Six months later, the area where the business was located experienced severe economic downturns, causing many businesses to close. David realised that he would have faced significant financial loss if he had invested in the business. Eventually, a new and more promising business opportunity emerged, which David could pursue with much better results.

How does David's experience illustrate the idea that God's timing and plans might differ from our immediate desires?

Case Study 4: The Unanswered Prayer

Sophia had been part of a small church community for many years and had always prayed for its growth and impact in the local area. Despite her prayers, the congregation remained small and struggled to make a significant difference in the community. Sophia felt disheartened and wondered why God wasn't answering her prayers for growth.

Over time, she noticed that the church's small size allowed for deeper relationships and more meaningful support among the members. They provided personalised care and created a tight-knit community that deeply impacted each member's life.

New people who visited often commented on their unique sense of belonging and care, which led to a slow but steady increase in attendance.

What does Sophia's situation suggest about the potential for God to answer prayers in ways that differ from our expectations but still fulfil a greater purpose?

These case studies are designed to provoke thought and discussion about the intricate and sometimes unexpected ways our prayers might align with, influence, or reveal God's plans in our lives.