

What is the Purpose of Prayer?

I have some ideas of what the purpose of prayer could or should be, but I want to begin with what I think the purpose of prayer couldn't or shouldn't be, and precisely because I believe prayer is in dire need of a makeover.

In the first place prayer isn't simply and only a repertoire of words that we learn in church and then repeat throughout the rest of our lives. As Anglicans, because of our tradition of 'common' prayer, we are especially susceptible to this; to praying always and only 'by the book'. Now this is not to suggest common prayer is faulty or wrong – I continue to believe that the Collect for Purity found in our Eucharistic liturgy is a prayer that perfectly captures and articulates the purpose of our worship – but common prayer is just that, the prayer we hold and express in common. This is not enough; prayer must also have a personal component, and more on this later.

Secondly prayer is not transactional. Many people approach prayer in a way that makes God into a cosmic vending machine: insert prayer into slot, make your selection, and if you're good, the answer you desire pops out! In this case prayer can be confused with magic; passionately stringing together the proper words into incantations in hope of conjuring up the power to realize our desires. Indeed there are verses in the bible that would suggest this transactional approach is the case:

Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive. (Matthew 21:22)
Ask, and it will be given you. (Luke 11:9)

The problem lies in taking these verses, and others like them, out of context. Far from being guarantees of getting whatever it is you want, they are instead about making the way of God, the gospel of Christ, real on earth through acts of healing, reconciliation, and justice. For instance when the disciples ask Jesus how to pray he gives them the "Lord's Prayer". Rather than a prayer on how to get your own way it is a prayer that invites them to be engaged in doing whatever work is necessary in bringing about the kingdom 'on earth as in heaven'. In this sense we can see the prayers of the people as a call to action.

A variation on the transactional theme are what are called intercessory or petitionary prayers; intercessory is where we ask for things on behalf of others, and petitionary the prayers we pray for ourselves. Although they are the type of prayers people pray all the time, they can be problematic. As many people still perceive the Divine to be in the reward and punishment business, when the prayers aren't answered, people can experience guilt because they're obviously not good enough or faithful enough for God to answer in the affirmative. On the other hand people also point to the lack of an answer to prayer as evidence that prayer doesn't work and is a waste of time. Both these responses are predicated by a belief that this type of prayer assumes the existence of a malleable deity obliged to change the direction of the whole world just to please the desires of a supposedly righteous person or two.

So if prayer isn't transactional then what positive purpose can be found in prayer? In the first place there is a whole new branch of science called psychoneuroimmunology which

explores the effect that one's emotional and spiritual well-being have on your immune system. Studies have indicated that people who pray, and are prayed for, recover more quickly than those not prayed for. So by all means pray for healing; not because you or others will always get well, but so that you and they can connect with the still mysterious and natural power of healing. Pray for safe travel – not because God will necessarily protect your plane, but so that you can be prepared for whatever happens. Pray for the end to a drought, for a job, for whatever you desire – not because prayer is going to control the weather, a future employer, or anything else, but so you can avoid the temptation to despair of God's goodness in times of difficulty. You may ask, isn't that defeatist? No, it's acknowledging the reality that life is what it is and that God walks alongside us whatever the circumstances of our life, good or bad. Personal experience confirms that the rain falls on both the good and the bad. And for many, prayer helps in raising an awareness of the divine who shares in both the joys and sorrows of life.

And so being in relationship with God does not create some sort of divine force-field protecting us from harm. Being in relationship with God strengthens us for living life, come what may. In difficult times when our most heartfelt petitions seem to go unanswered and we feel abandoned by God, people often wonder what they've done to deserve such a fate. Even Jesus is said to have cried out from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" The experience of faithful people over the ages suggests instead that God is not, in fact, in charge of fixing our problems. Instead, the Spirit that gives us life longs to be recognized as an intimate companion on our life's journey. We are in covenant with the Spirit that remains with us whatever happens along life's journey.

Perhaps then the benefit of prayer rests in our ability to liberate it from simply being an exercise in begging, asking, or informing God of anything. In an apocryphal story, Mother Teresa is asked by a reporter: "When you pray, what do you say?" She replies, "Nothing; I listen." "What do you hear?" asks the reporter. "Nothing. God listens." Seeing the puzzled look on the reporter's face, she assures him, "If I have to explain it to you, you won't understand." Deeper than a conversation with God then, perhaps prayer is best understood as simply being *open* to the Divine.

As such the purpose of prayer is not to let God know what we need or want but to intentionally be in God's presence. Like any pursuit of intimacy, prayer is intensely personal. In all its many forms, prayer defies analysis and superficial systems for implementation and success. Prayer is a life-long courtship – testimony to humanity's striving toward a relationship with that unknowable yet inescapable sense of the divine, in such a way that our lives reflect that relationship. As I like to say we should pray as if everything depended on God, and act as if everything depended on us.

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