

Introduction

I begin with the confession of widely published author Joel Hoffman: **"I have decided I don't believe in prayer. I don't believe that God hears us when we speak to Him. I don't believe the time I devote talking to God makes any difference whatsoever. It is a waste of time and I would rather do just about anything else."** There's a term for what he describes. It's **"dead prayer."**

Hoffman goes on to write this about his confession: **"Before you cry out 'heresy!'"** I would ask, **'Do you really believe in prayer?'** Of course you do, you would probably say. Well, so would I, even though I still don't believe in prayer. **Most of the time I really don't believe that you do, either."** Do you grasp what he's saying? It's that most of us think and feel the way he does about prayer but are too ashamed to admit it? I don't think it's most of us but it is likely some of us. Some of us may be experiencing dead prayer. If we are, the good news is that we don't have to. We can experience living prayer instead and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

We Should Pray

In Mark 11, Jesus passed by a fig tree and looked for fruit on it. But it didn't have any since it was **"in leaf"** and thus **"not the season for figs"** to quote verse 13. Yet, He cursed it anyway in verse 14, **"May no one ever eat fruit from you again!"** When His disciples and He passed it again the next day, Peter was astonished by what he saw. It wasn't just dead but according to verse 21, withered as well. Dead wood takes six to nine months to dry but here it miraculously dried in a day.

This action of Jesus raises a question. Why would He curse a fig tree for not bearing fruit out of season? It's because He was acting out a parable for His disciples. The fig tree represented Israel. Just as He looked for literal fruit on the tree, so He looked for spiritual fruit in Israel. And just as He found none on the tree, so He found none in

Israel. It, therefore, like the tree would be judged by God and perish. The Roman general Titus destroying Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D. was the first installment on that judgment.

Our text doesn't record that Jesus explained this to His disciples. It does record that He used the occasion to teach them about faith and prayer in verses 22-25. He doing so demonstrates that prayer was a primary preoccupation of His. His teaching and life reflected that. He frequently spoke about it and habitually practiced it.

That implies something all of us know but that bears repeating. Suppose I asked 1000 regular attenders of Bible-believing churches this question. Should we pray? How many would answer "**Yes.**" It's probably all of them. My point is this. Everybody knows we should pray.

Why We Should Pray

Jesus explains why we should in verse 23. It's because prayer is powerful. It "**changes things.**" Jesus notes here that it can remove mountains and cast them into the sea. Removing a mountain was a commonly used first century idiom. It meant to solve a problem or meet a need. That's what prayer does. It solves problems and meets needs.

Jesus explains why it does in the word "**granted**" in verses 23-24. That word expresses what occurs. We're confronted with a problem we can't solve or a need we can't meet – ours or someone else's. So, we ask God to solve or meet it. He then hears our request and grants it. He does or gives what we ask Him to do or give.

Listen to a testimony of C.S. Lewis in that regard: "**I have stood by the bedside of a woman whose thighbone was eaten through with cancer and who had thriving colonies of the disease in many other bones as well. It took three people to move her in bed. The doctors predicted a few months of life; the nurses (who often know better), a few weeks. A good man laid his hands on her and prayed. A year later the patient was walking (uphill too, through rough woodland) and the man who took the last X-ray photos was**

saying, 'These bones are as solid as rock. It's miraculous.'" The anecdotal evidence is overwhelming. Prayer changes things. Responding to our requests, God solves problems and meets needs that we can't.

Dead Prayer

But do you and I believe that? Jesus addresses just that issue in our text. He identifies two postures that we can have toward prayer.

The first is found in verse 23. We **"doubt"** in our **"heart."** Jesus defines what that means by way of contrast in that same verse. We don't believe that God will do or give what we ask. In reality, we believe that He probably won't. We anticipate that our request won't be granted. A young man told me about not getting a job he had prayed to get, after which he commented, **"But I didn't figure I would."** He illustrates a common posture toward prayer. We doubt. We pray for something but, for one reason or another, don't expect it to happen.

Whatever the reason is though, the result is the same. Prayer is burdensome to us and we do one of two things because it is. We just tack it on to our lives here and there where we think we should. Or we set a regular time to pray whether we like it or not. Either way, our hearts aren't really in it. We're only praying because we're supposed to not because we want to. There's a name for that. It's **"dead prayer."**

I speak from experience. When I was in college, I had a regular prayer time from 6:00 – 6:30 every morning. I have to confess though. I thought my pray time wasn't doing anyone any good. But I observed it anyway because I knew I should and felt guilty if I didn't. That's why, I'm sure, I dreaded it and was always glad when it was over.

Verse 23 defines the posture that I had toward prayer. I doubted in my heart, which made my prayer dead prayer.

Living Prayer

But there's a second posture we can have toward prayer. We **"believe"** that **"what we say is going to happen"** (verse 23) or that

“all the things for which we pray and ask will be granted (verse 24).” That means we believe that God will do or give what we ask. We anticipate that our request will be granted. A husband and wife I knew, who were leaving town, sold their house to a cash buyer the first week it was listed. When a friend of theirs asked if they were surprised to sell it so quickly and easily, they answered, **“No”** and explained why. They had prayed about it. They illustrate a second posture toward prayer. We believe. We pray for something and expect it to happen.

That kind of belief is profoundly affecting. Prayer is no longer a burden that we tack on to our lives here and there. It’s a joy that we do automatically and enthusiastically, first thing. It’s **“in our bones”** as we say it. The practical difference is this. When we doubt, we do first and pray second. We do everything we can about a problem or need and when that doesn’t work, we pray as a last resort. But when we believe, we pray first and do second. We pray and then do everything we can, praising God when it happens. There’s a name for that, **“living prayer.”**

Again, I speak from experience. I’ve morphed over the years – from dead prayer to living prayer. Prayer is no longer boring or burdensome to me but exciting and enjoyable. I don’t just do it regularly at night. I also do it all the time, first thing, whenever a problem or need arises. I don’t do that because I have to, but naturally, automatically. I was in a long line at the bank when a man angrily scolded the teller because he waited so long. I immediately prayed for the man, whose soul must be damaged to behave that way, and the teller, who was feeling demeaned. That’s living prayer.

Those then are the two postures we can have toward prayer and their inevitable results. Posture #1 – We doubt that it changes things. Result – dead prayer. Posture #2 – We believe that it changes things. Result – living prayer.

Faith in God

Jesus of course calls us to the posture of belief and in verse 22,

reveals how we attain it. We must **“have faith in God.”**

Let's define what faith is. It's the readiness to act, without thinking about it, as if something is so. I sit down on that chair every Sunday morning without contemplating whether or not it will support my weight. I act, without thinking about it, as if it will. I have faith in the chair. That clarifies what faith in God is. It's the readiness to act, without thinking about it, as if three things about Him are so.

First, He is near. I used to think or say that **“My prayers don't seem to be getting beyond the ceiling,”** as if God is beyond the ceiling. But He isn't. He's right here not way out there someplace. He always fills the space around us and everyone and everything else and it's from that space right here that He hears and answers our prayers.

Faith acts as if a second thing is so. God is able. The Bible articulates this in various ways. One is that **“Nothing is too difficult for God (Jeremiah 32:17).”** The word **“nothing”** is all-encompassing, and thus, includes whatever the problem or need is that's before us. It isn't too difficult for God to solve or meet it. It isn't **“beyond Him”** so to speak. When we solve problems or meet needs, we have to work within the parameters of natural realities. But God doesn't because natural realities don't govern Him. He governs them. So, He is able.

Faith acts as if a third thing is so. God is good. As 1 John 1:5 says it, **“God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.”** That means there is nothing evil or bad about Him in even the slightest degree. Literally everything that He thinks, feels, wills, and does is good. He always seeks the well-being of everyone and everything. When my wife had colon cancer, I didn't entertain the thought that He willed what was bad for her. I knew and believed that He willed only what was good for her, and prayed accordingly. He is good.

We now know what faith in God is. It's the readiness to act, without thinking about it, as if He is near, able, and good. That's faith in God and as Jesus clearly teaches in our text, it's inseparably linked with prayer. Many Christians think and talk as if we need to have faith in

prayer, but that isn't so. What we need isn't faith in prayer. It's faith in God that He's near, able, and good. We can't believe in prayer by having faith in prayer as if it's some kind of magic or hocus pocus. We can believe in prayer only by having faith in God. That means if we don't believe in prayer, it's because we don't have faith in God.

When I learned that my son Moses wasn't reenlisting in the Marines and would need a good job, the first thing I did, automatically, was pray and ask God to give him one. Something compelled me to do that. It was my faith in God. I was at the ready to act, without thinking about it, as if He's near, able, and good. That in turn prompted me to pray.

There's no doubt about it. Faith in God is the context of living prayer. Living prayer cannot exist apart from confidence in His nearness, ability, and goodness. Living prayer is the natural consequence of having faith in Him. Dead prayer is the natural consequence of lacking it.

So, let's have faith in God. To have that, we must follow Jesus, which requires getting rid of life as usual. We don't arrange our affairs around the things most people do. We arrange them around the things He did. Those things were practices that connected Him to Father God, like solitude, silence, fasting, study, worship, practicing His presence, and more. Jesus gave priority to engaging Father God and so must we. When we do, we come to know Him both intellectually and experientially, which in turn creates faith in Him. **"The First Aim"** study under the **"Disciples 'R' Us"** tab of our church's website will assist you in doing that – www.bethelfriendschurch.com. It identifies and explains the central practices of acting upon and interacting with the triune God.

Conclusion

You can see from what I've said today that living prayer is part of a process, which is this: engaging God > knowing God > having faith in God > believing in prayer > living prayer. So, let's arrange our affairs around engaging God. Our prayer life will be living if we do and dead if we don't.