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Lent 5 – Y PRAY, part 4: ASK

1 Peter 5.7, John 14.10-14, Psalm 37.4, James 4.2c, Matthew 7.7, Mark 11.22-24

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Salem, Bridgeport

“A is for ASK: the Whats and Hows of Asking in Prayer”

This Lent we are delving into the subject of prayer.

We’ve looked at the Y (why) of “Y PRAY?”ⁱ and we’ve looked at the P for Pause.

We’re going to save the R for Rejoice until after Easter,
and today look at the A for Ask.

Specifically we’re going to look at 3 guidelines for determining What we should pray for,
and 3 guidelines for How we should pray.

First, when it comes to asking...

1. No request is too small. *“Cast all your cares on God, who cares for you.”*ⁱⁱ

There have been times when I’ve suggested someone pray about something and the response is,
“I’m not going to pray about that. God’s too busy for that.

God’s got more important things to worry about.”

But I don’t believe that for a minute!

After all we’re talking about a God who created

not only the earth but our solar system and our galaxy

and the whole ever expanding universe which is already 93 billion light years across!

We’re talking about a God who created you - with the equally amazing universe within you,
controlled by your unique DNA code which would fill 600 volumes of 1000 pages each.ⁱⁱⁱ

We’re talking about the God who knit your inmost parts together in your mother’s womb^{iv},
who knows the number of hairs on your head^v and discerns your every thought^{vi}.

So if God made this intricate body of mine, and takes the time to know everything about me,
then why would God not be interested in any request I have no matter how small?

Whether it’s finding my lost phone or keys, or helping me find a parking place,
or getting me to church on time when I’m running late,

I have no problem asking God for help.

Does God have more important things? Of course.

But since God has unlimited time and unlimited power,

God doesn’t have to prioritize and only take care of the more important requests.

God can take care of every single request we ask

and it does not take away from God’s time or energy to focus on other requests.

There’s no request too small to bring to God.

2. And there is no request too large, either.

Jesus said, "...anyone who has faith in me will do the works I do – and greater works besides."^{vii}

I have talked with many Christians—even pastors—who try to explain away what the Bible teaches.

The Bible is filled with miracle stories –

burning bushes that aren't consumed^{viii}, water from a rock^{ix}, manna in the wilderness^x,
a cruze of oil that didn't run out^{xi}, a rod that changed into a serpent and back again^{xii},
water changed to wine^{xiii}, walking on water^{xiv}, thousands fed with a single lunch^{xv},
people speaking in tongues^{xvi}, sick healed^{xvii}, dead raised^{xviii}.

But there are Christians who teach that Moses didn't really part the sea – it was just a strong wind.

And Jesus didn't really feed 5000 – people just shared what they had.

Well, if that's the case, if the God in the Bible can't or won't perform miracles,
then I have no idea why anyone would come to church.

The God in whom I believe has the power to do absolutely anything!

And so of course I believe that miracles still happen.

The staff and children in an orphanage with no food left in their house

thank God for the food that they trust will be supplied

and a baker comes with bread and a mailman shows up with milk.

A congregation lays hands on a woman with terminal cancer

and she feels her whole body tingling, and at her next appointment there's no sign of cancer.

A 27-year-old man is pronounced dead in the hospital, leaving his wife and 2 children behind.

His brother prays and 14 minutes later he comes back to life.

Sometimes, of course, such miracles are exactly what keep people from praying.

They think, "What if I pray for a miracle and God doesn't answer. Then I'll feel even worse."

Of course not every prayer gets answered the way we want,

and certainly not as quickly as we would like, but we must never ever let that deter our requests.

The disciples were unable to cure a boy of his epilepsy,

Jesus' first attempt to heal a blind man was only partially successful,

and his prayer that his disciples be one is certainly a miracle that is still on God's to-do list.

But let me clear. God has the power and the love to work miracles.

There is no request too small or too large to bring to God.

3. And...no request, made with the right motivation, is wrong.

Some people worry that if they pray for something for themselves

they might actually be praying that someone else's prayers not be answered.

Obviously if I'm praying for my team to win, I'm praying for the other team to lose.

If I pray that I win the bid on that new house or that I'm the applicant accepted for that new job
then of course I'm praying for the others to lose,

but that doesn't mean I can't let God know it's what I want.

Maybe God has a particular reason that I should get something or that someone else should instead,

but maybe it's a case in which it doesn't really matter to God either way and God just wants

to give it to the person who'll be the most excited and eager to proclaim God's grace and glory.

When it comes to the things we desire, remember that the things that will bring us the greatest joy
are the passions that God planted in us in the beginning, & has nurtured within us over the years.

I think of it this way: God and I are partners in creating my life,

just as if we were writing a book together, or painting a picture together.

If we're on the same page, then of course God will want to give me what I want.

"Delight in YHWH, and you'll be given the desires of your heart."^{xix}

So in terms of what we should pray for,

there's no request too small, too large or too selfish to bring to God.

So that's the What of Asking. And now we turn to the How.

How should we ask? Three things to remember....

First, we must pray with intention.

"The reason you don't have what you want is that you don't ask for it in prayer."^{xx}

In that single verse, James makes it clear that wanting or wishing is not the same as praying. Some people ask, "If God already knows what I want or need, why must I ask?"

The answer is: It's the rule of the kingdom. Even Jesus asked!

But why?

Because the whole reason for prayer, in fact the whole reason for our lives, lies in our relationship with God.

Simply wishing or wanting something keeps it about me;

asking brings it into my relationship with God.

Asking acknowledges God's presence and shows my respect and appreciation for God.

Asking demonstrates who I am in relationship to God.

It requires me to acknowledge that I am a creature not the Creator,

that everything that I am and that everything that I have comes from God,

that as much as I may deceive myself into thinking I am in control of my life,

God is the one in control.

Asking brings my request into the light of God's wisdom and will,

reminding me that everything isn't about me,

and that my request must be in accordance with God's will,

because only God can see the long-term consequences for me

and for other people if I get what I think I want.

And asking also makes it easier for me to recognize the answer.

If I just wish for something and it happens, then how likely am I to give God credit?

Asking puts it on the record, and makes it easier to give God thanks and praise.

Second, we must pray with persistence.

Some people may feel that if they've already asked God for something and didn't get it, then there's no point asking again.

But the Bible tells us we need to be persistent.

You probably all remember Jesus' parable of the persistent widow^{xxi}.

And you probably also remember what Jesus said about ask, seek, and knock.

But what you may not know is that the common translation of those verbs is incorrect.

When we translate the present active participle verbs accurately, here's what Jesus actually says,

"Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find.

Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you."^{xxii}

In other words, persist!

We must remember that answers to prayer are like a traffic light.

Sometimes we get an immediate green light or yes, sometimes we get an immediate red light or no, and perhaps more often than not, we get that amber light that says not yet.

And it's when we get that amber light of not yet that we need to persevere in prayer.

Being persistent demonstrates our commitment.

Sometimes it may not matter in the whole scheme of things

whether we or someone else wins a particular prize.

And in those cases, who do you think God is going to give the prize to? To the one who persists.

So we must pray with intention and with persistence.

3. And we must also pray with faith.

Jesus said, "Put your trust in God. The truth is, if any of you say to this mountain, 'Get up and throw yourself into the sea', and you don't doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will happen, it will happen. That's why I tell you that whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have already received it, and it will be done for you. ..."^{xxiii}

It's not enough to ask; we must ask with faith that we will receive that for which we've asked.

If we ask, and then doubt, the doubt in essence cancels out the ask.

And so often we ask, we doubt, then we ask again, and then we doubt again, and then we're disappointed, and maybe even surprised, that nothing happens.

Jesus says, if you ask for something huge and miraculous and you don't doubt but believe it will happen, it will happen.

Jesus says that whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have already received it, and it will be done for you.

Again, there are plenty of Christians – and even plenty of pastors – who immediately shift from this verse in Mark to similar verses in other gospels that add things like, "in my name", and try to ignore this clear promise, but whether you are comfortable or not with the literal reading, I think it's clear that we must ask in faith.

Now that doesn't necessarily mean that if your prayer goes unanswered it is because you lacked faith;

God may have other reasons for not answering it.

But I do believe that the more faith we have, the more likely it is that our prayers will be answered.

And yet, it's important that the focus not be on our faith, but on the one in whom we have faith.

If all our prayers were answered right away, we wouldn't really need faith.

But when our prayers aren't answered right away and we persist in prayer, our faith is exercised and stretched and it grows in strength and flexibility.

The more we pray, the more we get answers, so the more we dare ask for, and the bigger miracles we may get.

So what is it that you want for your life?

What is it that you want for your family and friends, your church, your community, your world? Whatever it is – no matter how small, how large, how personal your desire, Jesus urges you to Ask. Ask, trusting that God is loving enough to care about the smallest detail of your life.

Ask, trusting that God is powerful enough to accomplish the greatest thing you can imagine.

Ask, trusting that between God and you there are no secrets, and that discussing what you'd like with God is always a good thing.

Whatever it is – no matter how small, how large, how personal your desire, Ask.

Ask with intention. Ask with persistence. And Ask with faith.

And when you receive your answer, then give God thanks and praise – not just privately, but publicly.

Tell your family, tell your friends, tell us, tell the world,

that because of God's power, because of God's love, we can put all our trust in God above.

Amen

ⁱ The concepts associated with the letters PRAY come from the book, How to Pray by Pete Greig.

ⁱⁱ 1 Peter 5.7

ⁱⁱⁱ Answers for “The Hope That Is in You: Direct, Simple Christian Answers to the World’s Hard Questions by Charlie Liebert. “DNA is a language system that shows intelligence that could not occur by chance. It is words, sentences, and paragraphs using only 4 letters in its alphabet. If we wrote out human DNA it would fill 600 books of 1000 pages each. Let me illustrate why it couldn’t develop by chance. The letters that have meaning must be in a specific order. If we try to select them from the four it is 1 chance in 4. But as we add letters to the DNA it becomes 1 in 4 times 1 in 4 times 1 in 4.... Mathematically it looks like this: $\frac{1}{4}$ to the nth power, n being the number of letters required. This figure very quickly becomes enormous odds against a specific order. Only 15 letters will take us to odds on 1 in 2.6 billion. There are several billion letters in human DNA, so the odds are numbers we can’t even comprehend.”

^{iv} Psalm 139.13

^v Matthew 10.30, Luke 12.7

^{vi} Psalm 139.2b

^{vii} John 14.12

^{viii} Exodus 3.1-4.17

^{ix} Exodus 17.5-6

^x Exodus 16

^{xi} 1 Kings 17.16

^{xii} Exodus 7.1-12

^{xiii} John 2.1-11

^{xiv} Matthew 14.22-36, Mark 6.45-56, John 6.16-24

^{xv} Matthew 14.13-21, 15.32-39, Mark 6.31-44, 8.1-9, Luke 9.12-17, John 6.1-14

^{xvi} Acts 2.1-12

^{xvii} There are 22 stories of healing by Jesus recorded in the synoptic gospels, plus many other healings in the New and Old Testaments

^{xviii} In the Old Testament at least 3 people were raised from the dead; in the New Testament, Jesus raised 3, Peter 1, Paul 1, plus Jesus was raised.

^{xix} Psalm 37.4

^{xx} James 4.2c

^{xxi} Luke 18.1-8

^{xxii} Matthew 7.7

^{xxiii} Mark 11.22-24