

Does Prayer Change God?

Intro: In our lesson this morning we talked a little bit about the importance of daily prayer as a part of a plan for spiritual clarity. But our commitment to prayer probably depends more than anything else on to what degree we think prayer truly affects God.

Consider two Biblical verses:

"I the Lord do not change." (Malachi 3:6)

"My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused." (Hosea 11:8)

Those two statements, both recorded in the Bible as the words of God, frame a major theological dispute. How can these two statements be reconciled? And what implications does this have for our prayer life?

If God doesn't change, then what use is there to praying to Him?

If God does change, then who's running the world and how can there be any consistency in it?

We're not the first to grapple with such questions and it might be helpful to look at how the subject has been addressed by others.

Some have believed that God's unchanging nature prevents men from influencing Him

Church Father Origen

Early church father Origen was the first Christian writer known to mull over the paradox of praying to a God who does not change:

"First, if God foreknows what will come to be and if it must happen, then prayer is in vain. Second, if everything happens according to God's will and if what He wills is fixed and no one of the things He wills can be changed, then prayer is in vain."

Origen came down on the side of a changeless God, concluding that God from the "foundations of the world" could see in advance all that a person would freely choose, including the contents of their prayers.

John Calvin & those he influenced

Calvinism, with its emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of God, likewise shifted the emphasis of prayer from its effect on God to its effect on the pray-er.

As Matthew Henry put it, "It is true, nothing we can say can have any influence upon him, or move him to show us mercy, but it may have an influence upon ourselves, and help to put us into a frame fit to receive mercy."

Jonathan Edwards questioned whether petitionary prayer had any effect. He wrote, "God is sometimes represented as if he were moved and persuaded by the prayers of his people; yet it is not to be thought that God is properly moved or made willing by our prayers"; instead, God bestows mercy "as though he were prevailed upon by prayer."

Influence of the Enlightenment

As discoveries in science provided explanations for phenomena that people had always considered part of providence, modern sons and daughters of the Enlightenment saw less reason for prayer. The natural world became more predictable, apparently less subject to the whims of God or those who prayed to God.

God appeared to have less to do since the world moves by predictable laws. Deism becomes more attractive.

Why pray for rain when we can watch a weather forecast and see that a front is coming our way?

Why ask for healing when we know the biological function of an antibiotic and its effect on bacteria that almost guarantees successful treatment, or in contrast, why ask for healing of a cancer that has almost no survival rate beyond a few months?

Consequently not a few Christians perhaps have decided that it is all “que sera sera” (what will be, will be). Why pray about it? God is going to do what He is going to do or the laws of nature will run their course. But before we commit to this idea we should consider another point of view.

What about all the verses that appear to be saying that prayer can influence God?

The Bible presents God as a personal being who listens attentively to prayers and responds to them.

The Bible is filled with prayers that occur right before amazing divine actions! One can hardly read the Bible and not be confronted by how fervent prayers preceded some of the great moments in OT history. For Jesus, God's sovereignty was no deterrent to prayer but a positive encouragement to pray. We do not have to work to gain God's attention through long words and ostentatious displays of religiosity. We don't have to convince God of either our sincerity or our needs. We already have the Father's ear, as it were. God knows everything about us, and still God listens. We can get right to the point. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray.

The disciples took up praying right where Jesus left off, asking God for such things as physical healings, liberation from prison, and safety on missionary journeys. Paul interceded for churches constantly, and did not hesitate to make personal, specific requests.

Those who had so prayed speak confidently of His response.

"Ask and it will be given to you." (Mt. 7:7)

And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive."
(Matthew 21:22)

and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be

forgiven him. ... The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. (James 5:15-16)

“For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, And His ears attend to their prayer, But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” (1 Peter 3:12)

You do not have because you do not ask. (James 4:2)

Such verses seem to suggest that God is influenced by our prayers and because of our prayers. Perhaps the contradiction in the first two verses is only apparent.

God’s unchanging nature actually causes Him to be influenced by the prayers of His people.

The revivalist Charles Finney, who moved away from the strict Calvinism of his youth, grounded his confidence in prayer in God's unchanging character: "If you ask why he ever answers prayer at all, the answer must be, because he is unchangeable."

The contemporary theologian Clark Pinnock follows a similar line of logic. Because God's nature is love, he says, God must be impressionable and sympathetic: "Because God's love never changes, God's experience must change."

Pinnock contrasts two models of God's sovereignty.

We can picture God as an aloof monarch, removed from the details of the world, unchangeable, an irresistible power.

Or we can picture God as a caring parent with qualities of love, generosity, and sensitivity, an infinite Being who personally interacts with and responds to those he has created. In that view, God considers prayers much as a wise parent might consider requests from a child.

This then leads to the conclusion that "God does indeed allow Himself to be decided by prayer to do what He otherwise would not have done."

(Andrew Murray)

But perhaps the most intriguing question is “why?” Why would God choose to be influenced by humans?

From one standpoint this arrangement may seem inefficient and risky

Isn't there an obvious redundancy in “letting your requests be made known” to a God who “knows what you need before you ask”?

And what if people don't pray? Doesn't this very fact in one sense tie the hands of God? Does it not put Him in the awkward place of being unable to do what He might have done because we didn't ask Him?

C.S. Lewis wrote: “For He seems to do nothing of Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blunderingly what He could do perfectly in the twinkling of an eye. He allows us to neglect what He would have us do, or to fail.

Perhaps we do not fully realize the problem, so to call it, of enabling finite free wills to co-exist with Omnipotence. It seems to involve at every moment almost a sort of divine abdication.”

So again we ask, why does God choose to act in this way?

It is not because He needs information or doesn't already know what is best for us.

It is not because He is incapable of accomplishing everything that He might like to do without us. In fact, in every case He could do it better by Himself with perfection.

It is because He seeks a method that maximizes the freedom He has given us.

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." (Genesis 1:26)

Just as we have the freedom to rebel or do ill, we also have the freedom to cooperate with Him, to seek what is good and become participants in the accomplishment of it.

It is because He wants us to be a partner with Him in the work of love. Just as He is a being of love, so He has made us in His image to be being of love and to be so is to will and to do good. It is to seek what is best for others. Love is the motivation of prayer as it seeks what is best for others.

It is because He wants us to see our ultimate need of Him. Prayer is not only motivated by love; it is motivated by need.

It is because He wants us to have the joy of watching Him work.

It is because He wants us to align our plans with His ultimate purposes.

Conclusion: And so what I want you to see is this. What if we leave off that extra 20 minutes I've been talking about today. Will it make any difference? It will indeed. We will have surrendered a bit of the freedom God gave us to do good. We will have passed on an opportunity to show the love we are capable of. We will have lost some of our sense of need for Him. We will have missed the joy of seeing Him work in our lives and the lives of others. We will have lost clarity of vision in what our life's mission should be.

Several quotes from this lesson are taken from an article by Philip Yancey in Christianity Today called "Does Prayer Change God"?