



Belief & Behavior

Just Pray #4 • May 17, 2026

Introduction

When you teach or preach at church, you end up sharing details about yourself. So, if I were to ask you what my hobbies are, many of you would know some of the answers.



“Watching hockey” would probably be #1 on the list.

Side note: I'd like to point out that the National Hockey League playoffs are currently underway, with matchups almost set for the 3rd round (the conference championships), one step away from the Stanley Cup Finals! Many of you didn't even know that, because...in a remarkable display of self-control... I haven't talked about hockey in my sermons as much lately!



But #2 is a hobby I don't talk about as much, at least not from the stage. I play a nerdy trading card game for fun. A “trading card game” is a game played with a deck of cards – cards that you get from purchasing packs **[SHOW AUDIENCE]** or trading with other people who have purchased packs. (One trading card game is called *Pokémon*, another is *Yu-Gi-Oh!* The game that I started playing with my son when he was in high school is called *Magic The Gathering*...if you play, or if you want to, talk to me after church!)

In a “trading card game,” certain cards are more rare or useful or powerful than others, so your success in the game is impacted by the luck you had when you purchased a new pack (or by your wallet when you just buy that card from another person who found it).

Part of the fun of playing is that thrill of opening a new pack and discovering “the card” that would make a huge difference in your game. “Will it be in there, or will it not?” Those moments of anticipation in advance are filled with uncertainty.

So (and this is where my whole introduction is leading), let me ask you a question.

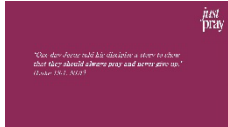
If I prayed for a certain card to be in this pack, would it matter?

If I prayed for God to allow me to pull a _____ from within this foil wrapper, would He grant that request?



This is a real-world (low-stakes) moment where **theory meets practice**. Suddenly, it brings into focus several of the things you and I think about prayer and makes them clear. Our answers begin to show what we really believe.

We know we *should* pray.



“One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show that they should always pray and never give up.” (Luke 18:1, NLT)

But...that teaching from Jesus sometimes faces real-world difficulties. We start to struggle with prayer and ask questions, like...

- “Does my prayer even matter to God?”
- “Can God really answer my prayers?”
- “Will God ever answer my prayers?”



Suddenly, what we believe or don't believe about prayer starts to affect my practice of prayer. In our little example, my beliefs about prayer aren't just theory. They determine what I do. When it comes to a silly little foil pack, those beliefs dictate **whether I pray, or whether I do not!**

Professor Terrence Tiessen says it this way, “*How we understand God's action in the world will determine how and when and why and for what we pray.*”

Recap



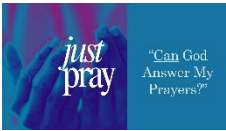
As we come to the final sermon in this series on prayer, we're going to take a slightly different approach than previous messages. I've said from the start that this series is not about *doctrine*, it's about *action*! We wanted to give you a “**YOU CAN DO IT!**” sermon series! We wanted to encourage you and equip you to pray well.

And I really hope that our conversations have helped! I hope that you have been able to see the **example of Jesus**, to trust that you have the **right words to pray**, to focus on **praying for others** (focused on the **One we pray to**, rather than simply results).

If, at the end of the day, you are praying more faithfully and consistently and sincerely, this series has been a success!

But we can't end without talking about belief and behavior. We must touch on our **understanding** of prayer, because our **practice** of prayer hinges on what we believe! Our ideas will shape the kind of prayers we offer.

So, let's test out a few of these questions to see what answers we can find.



“Can God answer my prayers?”

Theory meets practice in this first question: “*Can God answer my prayers?*”

Can God allow me to pull a _____ from within this foil wrapper, if that is my prayer?

If yes, we pray; if not, we don't.

So, *can He?*

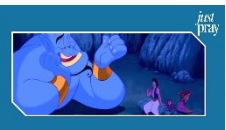
No one with a Bible and a brain has any doubt about *Scripture's* answer to this one:

Of course God can answer my prayers! Jesus himself says,

“And so I tell you, 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.” (Luke 11:9, NLT)

God CAN answer prayers. But...there are a few limits determined by God's nature. Some prayers CANNOT be answered by God. Hear me out!

When we talk about limits to prayer, maybe it helps to have another reference point. Consider the classic Disney movie, *Aladdin*.



In the story of Aladdin, the Genie appears out of Aladdin's lamp and is able to grant any wish that Aladdin has (up to 3, total!). But there are certain conditions.

The Genie (voiced by Robin Williams) says:

- 1. You can't ask him to kill someone*
- 2. He can't make anyone fall in love*
- 3. He can't bring anyone back from the dead (it wouldn't be pretty!)*

You can ask for those things, but the Genie CAN'T do it. It's outside his nature.

So, what about God? Does He have limits? Is there anything outside His nature?

There are interesting theological discussions you could have related to...



- God's **knowledge of the future**, whether He only knows what actually did/does/will happen, or whether He also knows what might have/could have/would have happened (theologians call these "counterfactuals").
- God's **flexibility to change**, whether He is unchangeable in nature, or whether He can chart a new course (doctrine of "immutability")
- God's **granting of free will to humans**, whether we have real, meaningful choice, or whether our path is set by God (Calvinism vs Ariminianism)

I promised this series is about action, so I won't get lost in the weeds here. It is important for you to know that theologians wrestle with God's nature and how that impacts His answers.

But I think it is more helpful to point out the main thing that **Scripture says** God CAN'T do in our prayers.

God can't answer when He can't hear, and the Bible is clear about what hinders our prayers making their way to Him.



"It's your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore." (Isaiah 59:2, NLT)

If we are pursuing something other than Him, He can't answer our prayer! It's not His nature! Such prayers are gibberish!

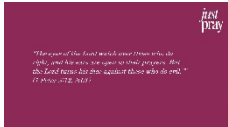


- *God, I don't want you at all. I'd rather pursue something else. So please listen and give me _____.*
- *God, I reject your Son, Jesus. So please grant me _____.*

God CAN'T answer a prayer like that, because it isn't really a prayer. It is an insult.

But if you have humility? If you confess your sins? If you trust His grace and mercy instead of trusting yourself?

Then ask away! God can and does hear!



“The eyes of the Lord watch over those who do right, and his ears are open to their prayers. But the Lord turns his face against those who do evil.” (1 Peter 3:12, NLT)

If you aren't willing to pursue righteousness through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, don't bother praying. God **can't** work with that.

But if you humble yourself, God **absolutely can** answer your prayers.

So, just pray!



“Will God answer my prayers?”

Theory meets practice in this next question: “*Will God answer my prayers?*”

Will God allow me to pull a _____ from within this foil wrapper, if that is my prayer?

If yes, we pray; if not, maybe it's not worth asking.

So, *will He?*

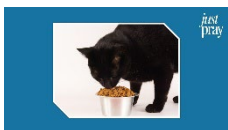
No one with a Bible and a brain has any doubt about *Scripture's* answer to this one, either:

Of course God will answer my prayers! For a prayer asked with the right heart,



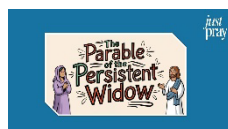
“... we will receive from him whatever we ask because we obey him and do the things that please him.” (1 John 3:22, NLT)

A prayer heard by God will be answered!



Sometimes I have been guilty of tuning out requests from loved ones in my life. Currently, it's my cat Henry. Do I hear him asking for food each night? Yes. Of course I do. Only the deaf cannot! Henry is loud and persistent. And it gets earlier and earlier each night, so I tune him out! I'll feed him when I'm good and ready, and I just don't care what he says until then.

But God isn't like that! Jesus told a parable to help us know that God responds to his children's prayers.



“There was a judge in a certain city,” he said, “who neither feared God nor cared about people. A widow of that city came to him

repeatedly, saying, 'Give me justice in this dispute with my enemy.' The judge ignored her for a while, but finally he said to himself, 'I don't fear God or care about people, but this woman is driving me crazy. I'm going to see that she gets justice, because she is wearing me out with her constant requests!' ” Then the Lord said, “Learn a lesson from this unjust judge. Even he rendered a just decision in the end. So don't you think God will surely give justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will grant justice to them quickly!...” (Luke 18:2–8, NLT)

If a *bad* judge responds, how much more so will a *good* God respond?

God *will* answer. And He might say one of several things.

- **“No.”** God might not give you a thing, because He knows it isn't what you'll ultimately want. Or maybe it conflicts with a better thing that He wants to say yes to. His answer might be no.
- **“Yes.”** God might just say, “Okay.” He loves to bless us, and each day is filled with things we can enjoy. Sometimes He just answers our prayers and heals the cancer, provides a new job, introduces you to Mr. Right (before, not after you are married!).
- **“Not Yet.”** In other words, wait. He might give you the desire of your heart, but first he wants you to learn to depend on Him – protecting you from idolizing the gift instead of the Giver.

You can look at the Scriptures and find person after person whose prayers were answered: Abraham, David, Moses, Hannah, Solomon, Hezekiah, Ezra, Peter, Gideon, Paul...

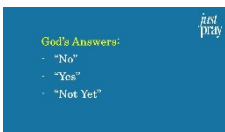
You can look around our church and person after person whose prayers have been answered: (examples in front of me...myself included)

So, just pray!

Ask God for whatever you need, even whatever you want. And then trust that His wisdom will sort out whether it happens now...or then...or never.

The lack of your desired outcome is not an indication of God's silence.

Trust that God WILL answer.





“Does my prayer matter to God?”

Theory also meets practice in this final question: “*Do my prayers really matter to God?*”

Does God really care what is in this pack?

If yes, we pray; if not, we don't.



There's a ride at Disneyland called “Smuggler's Run.” It's a Star Wars ride where you and a crew of five others get to “pilot” a ship in a digitally-rendered adventure. Each person has one of three assignments:

- **Pilots** – steer the ship
- **Gunners** – fire at enemies
- **Engineers** – repair systems and other tasks

Here's what I find amazing: Despite having no experience with flying spacecraft, every crew somehow makes it through the ride. Whether they steered the ship poorly, shot enemies with zero precision, or just sat there and never touched a button, the ride nevertheless arrives at the base.

So, do the riders' actions matter?

In theological terms, we can ask the same question. If God is going to do something whether I pray or not, why pray? If He has a plan that I can't change, isn't prayer a waste of time?

So, does my prayer really matter?

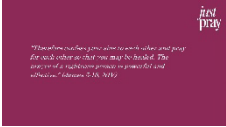
I'll skip straight to the answer. **Yes.** I don't fully understand how. I don't fully understand why. But I do understand what I read.

Scripture says that our prayers **make a difference**. For example, Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthian church:



*“And you are **helping us** by praying for us. Then many people will give thanks because God has **graciously answered so many prayers for our safety.**” (2 Corinthians 1:11, NLT)*

There is an effect! James says so in his letter, too.

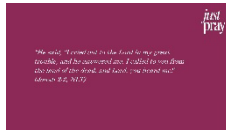


*“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. **The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.**”*

(James 5:16, NIV)

Somehow, in some way, God uses our prayers. They do matter!

Not only are they **functional for results**, but they are **relational in nature**. Our prayers connect us to God, just like Jonah’s prayer during his marine adventure.



“He said, “I cried out to the Lord in my great trouble, and he answered me. I called to you from the land of the dead, and Lord, you heard me!” (Jonah 2:2, NLT)

Our prayers come to God and please him. In Revelation, as we see the heavenly scenes described, we read this:

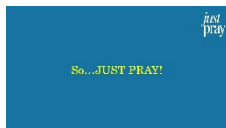


“Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God’s people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God’s people, went up before God from the angel’s hand.” (Revelation 8:3–4, NIV)

Our prayers rise up like a pleasing aroma (like the best perfume you’ve ever smelled, or walking past a bakery). God is pleased to receive our prayers!

So, does prayer matter? Yeah! It matters. And because it matters, we need to do it.

So, just pray!



Conclusion

If I prayed for a certain card to be in this pack, would it matter? If I prayed for God to allow me to pull a _____ from within this foil wrapper, would He grant that request?

[OPEN PACK]

- Well, I can tell you that **God CAN** make sure it is in there. He has the power and the ability. And if I was asking without sin hindering my

prayer, He certainly hears what I say.

- I can also tell you that **God WILL** answer that prayer. He wants what is best for me, and that might be an instant yes...or a no...or a stop spending money on those silly packs because I have something better to invest in. [\[SHARE RESULT\]](#)
- But more important than the outcome, I can tell you that **God wants** me to pray about it. Well, maybe not a trading card game pack specifically...but for all sorts of issues! For salvation, for strength, for patience, for health, for daily needs, for big decisions, for small concerns, to praise, to plead, to be faithful, when you're strong, when you're weak, when you are confident, when you doubt.

He wants me to come to Him in prayer all the time! Because it **matters** to Him...and He uses it to make a difference.

Do you believe that? I hope God's truth from Scripture will help you believe.

Your **beliefs** (your answers to these questions we asked today) will impact your **behavior** (whether or not you actually pray). If you don't believe prayer works, I know you won't pray. But I want you to know and to trust this about prayer...

God answers. God hears. God cares.

And if that's the case, Church, just pray!



Prayer

Invitation

If there's something you really want...

If you are concerned about an upcoming result...

If you care about God's Kingdom advancing...

If you are waiting on results...

If you just want to share your heart with God...

Then let me say something I said in the very first sermon:

Let us pray. Let us pray! Everywhere. In every way.
Every moment of the day, it is ***the right time***.
For the Father above, He is **listening** with love
And He **wants** to answer us. So? Let us pray.¹

If you would like some help lifting up that request, we invite you to share on your connection card, or to come forward during the song.

Church, just pray!

¹ *Song by Steven Curtis Chapman*
©1996 Sparrow Song (BMI)

Sermon Notes

Theory meets practice (Luke 18:1)

“Can God answer my prayers?”

(Luke 11:9; Isaiah 59:2; 1 Peter 3:12)

“Will God answer my prayers?”

(1 John 3:22; Luke 18:2-8)

“Does my prayer matter to God?”

(2 Corinthians 1:11; James 5:16; Jonah 2:2; Revelation 8:3-4)

Sermon Discussion Questions

- Read Luke 18:1. Jesus taught that people “*should always pray and never give up.*” What are some things that cause people to stop praying consistently?
- Where have you seen that connection between belief and behavior in your own life?
- Read Luke 11:9. What do Jesus’ words about asking, seeking, and knocking teach us about God’s openness to prayer?
- Why is repentance important in a healthy prayer life? (See Isaiah 59:2)
- How would you explain the difference between praying for something selfishly versus praying with humility and dependence on God?
- The sermon described three possible answers from God: “Yes,” “No,” and “Not Yet.” When might each of those answers be challenging?
- Think about a prayer God answered in your life. Looking back, how did His timing or method differ from what you originally expected?
- Read 2 Corinthians 1:11 and James 5:16. According to these passages, how do our prayers make a difference?
- Beyond simply getting answers, how does prayer strengthen your relationship with God?
- Do your prayers matter? How will your actions show it?