

# The Role of Relationship

## *How Prayer Works:*

Matthew 6:1-18  
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My experience at church camp this year was profoundly moving; but there were challenges. I had to discipline someone else's child, and I also had to care for some needs and win some trust. It was beastly hot, and I wanted the child well-hydrated, so I paid for a sports drink and some salty beef jerky. At least, a dozen other children became aware of my gift and hit me up for something. Not all got something, and none got anything as expensive as I had provided the one child; but if I had provide that sports drink and beef jerky to my son, one or two at most might have asked for something, just to test me. They, however, would not have felt unfairly treated. They would reason that as a father I'm caring for my child as expected.

For Jesus, relationship means everything. We're discussing *How Prayer Works* because this is the greatest resource God has given his creation. Bar none, there is no greater resource than communicating with the creator and redeemer of all things.

I realize some of you might nod your heads in agreement because you experience answers to prayer and network with people who experience that. I also know that some of you feel passed over. You launch prayers like SCUD missiles, hoping one or two may hit the target; but it seems futile. Some of you may be nervous as I speak of prayer. You are afraid that we will substitute cheap words for important actions, that we will shirk our responsibility in making a difference. The Bible does say, "***The highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to man***" (Psalm 115:16, NIV)

We do have dominion over the earth God created; but in prayer we cultivate a relationship with a good father who acts on our behalf when asked. Jesus gave his listeners a call and promise. He called his listeners to *keep on asking*, to *keep on seeking*, to *keep on knocking*; and he promised that everyone who *asks* receives, that everyone who *seeks* finds, and that everyone who *knocks* experiences an open door. Those actions, *ask*, *seek* and *knock*, are important. In asking we grow a relationship, in seeking we pursue a vision, and in knocking we open a dialogue. No responsibility is shirked, no duty is dumped, and nothing is presumed. Instead, *we ask God to work with us in the work he has given to us.* In prayer, we ask God to work with us in the work, in our governance of his creation, which includes our health, vocation, relationships, communities and land.

Prayer doesn't release us from our responsibility to govern. It helps us fulfill it. We were meant to govern with divine wisdom. The problem is that sin made us dead to God, spiritually disconnected from our divine Father. As a result, the human race has lost its way; it's learned to depend on and believe harmful things. Since God loves his creation and is sympathetic to it, he hears its cry for justice. God said to Cain who murdered his brother Abel:

***What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.*** (Genesis 4:10-11, NIV)

Did that blood cry out to God's heart like a baby needing comfort, like a plant needing water, or like an injustice needing judgment? Did it cry in all those ways to God who is love?

Isaiah prophesied:

***The earth mourns and dries up... The earth suffers for the sins of its people...***  
(Isaiah 24:4-5, NLT)

What must that do to a God who is love? What must it do to our heavenly Father to see the effects of our rebellion and unbelief on all that he loves? The Apostle Paul wrote:

***We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*** (Romans 8:22, NIV)

All creation, including our own bodies, groans for release from our sinful dominion. Our adversary, the devil, asks for our judgment, even as he sought to test Job and sift Peter as wheat. However, in Christ Jesus we have an advocate before our Father. Jesus not only took our judgment on the cross; but through our faith he baptized us into him, so that we like him are employed in the restoration of God's creation.

Consequently, Jesus gives us both a call to do and a pattern for prayer – a pattern for relating directly to God. The most important thing in Christ's call and pattern is our relationship with God as father. However, every time that we pray, our heavenly Father hears the other cries of creation, whether it is an offended spouse or inanimate victims of our words and actions. Consequently, God never answers our prayers in a vacuum. When our relationship is soured by our attitudes and actions, then our prayers are affected.

Parents, how do you treat your children when they harm people and things you love? Do you speak and refuse to make their requests your agenda until they finally listen to you? Do you withhold privileges? Do you provide logical consequences?

Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:48 that we are to be perfect like our heavenly Father. He's our standard, not our neighbor, or the latest study. Our Father is our standard and employer. Our focus in prayer and life needs to be our relationship with him. We are not to give, pray or fast "to be seen" by others. We are to be seen by our Father. Three times Jesus declares:

***Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*** (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18; NIV)

Jesus is not talking about corporate giving, prayer and fasting. There is a time for that. There is a time when a family or church deliberates what to give. There is a time when a church

assembles to pray and fast over concerns. However, Jesus in this case spoke of individual actions that are clearly focused on the father as the audience and no one else.

I've heard and uttered prayers that are more intended for others than God. As a pastor I am tempted to use prayer as a people-recruitment or influence tool. For example, churches need money, leaders and workers all of the time. Sometimes the needs are critical, and I'm tempted to offer prayer requests that amount to recruiting calls.

I remember working as a college student one summer for a Lutheran Church in Hawaii. They had many ministries. Occasionally, the church or ministry would face financial deadlines with no money in sight. I never heard the pastor speak of these crises in the worship services, even though they concerned most worshipers. Instead, he gathered every Saturday night all who would come for communion and prayer. There we prayed for workers and leaders. We prayed for those who would worship the next day. We prayed for a specific amount the next morning in the offering so the church wouldn't default on a payment. The next Saturday evening, we, who prayed, learned how God our Father answered our prayers.

Today, I voice few of our church's concerns here unless specifically led, but they all are prayed for by a team on Tuesdays each week. I wouldn't lead a church without such a gathering or without prayer partners who individually cover me in prayer each day. The point is that God our Father, and not anything else we are tempted to rely on – our strength and wit, programs, doctors, educators, the military, a spouse, is our protection, provision and health.

That's why I call you to pray. You need to discuss everything with your Heavenly Father. He loves you and plans for your success and significance. Your relationship with him means everything. Therefore, prayer is never formula. It is fellowship... and no one's prayers are more effective than yours if you keep on asking, seeking, and knocking with your Father.