

A Helpful Guide to What You Can and Cannot Pray For

“I say to you, though he will not rise and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as much as he needs” (Luke 11:8).

For many months, I had been spiraling downward into a severe autoimmune disorder that two famous teaching hospitals could not diagnose. A few close friends and I pleaded with God for relief, but instead of getting better, I was getting worse.

One day I read Jesus’ words, “Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be removed, and be thrown into the sea,’ it will be done. And whatever you ask in prayer, if you believe, you will receive” (Matt. 21:21-22).

I said out loud, “That’s not true.” Immediately I asked God to rehabilitate my theology of prayer.

The teaching of Jesus on prayer could not be more clear: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you” (Matt. 7:7); “And whatever you ask in prayer, if you believe, you will receive” (Matt. 21:22).

So why is it that when we ask, sometimes we get what we pray for, but sometimes we don’t? Do our prayers alter outcomes, or do they only align us with what God was going to do anyway?

The first rule for understanding a text is that “Scripture interprets Scripture.” In that vein, I was drawn to 1 John 5:14-15, which says, “This is the *confidence* that we have in Him, that if we *ask anything* according to His will, He hears us. So if we know that He hears whatever we ask, we know that we have whatever we asked of Him” (emphasis added).

This rounds out the meaning of Matthew 21:21-22—God will give us “whatever we ask” when it aligns with the larger perspective of His will, purpose and plan. But there’s more.

In Luke 11:5-8, Jesus told a parable about a man who asked a friend for three loaves of bread at midnight. But the friend told him he couldn’t help because he and his family were already in bed. Jesus concluded by saying, “I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your *shameless audacity* he will surely get up and give you *as much as you need*” (Luke 11:8, NIV, emphasis added). “Shameless audacity” (“shamelessness” in Greek) is variously translated as “persistence, boldness” or “keep knocking long enough.”

But what if “as much as you need” is not as much as you want? When Paul prayed three times for God to take away his thorn in the flesh, Jesus told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9a, MEV).

The abundant life is not without hardships. I still have an autoimmune disorder. To date I haven’t received “whatever you ask for in prayer.” Yet, like Paul, the grace of Jesus has been “as much as you (I) need.”

So, what is the definitive guide for how we should pray? Ask God for anything with shameless audacity, then trust Him to give you as much as you need.

And what is the definitive guide for how God will answer? God will grant whatever you ask if it’s in His will, but never less than as much as you need. {eoa}

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