



Does Prayer Change Anything?

Goal for the Session

This study assumes that the teens will know what prayer is. The goal is to help teens understand different kinds of prayer as well as theological perspectives of prayer, including ways that prayer may change people, and ways biblical prayer has been shown to change God.

Preparing for the Session

- Make copies of handout.
- Make copies of the appendix, "Some Well-known Prayers," to distribute to each participant. It is found at the end of this Leader's Guide.
- Write the types of prayer (see "Introduction"), biblical prayer passages, and the main character of each passage on newsprint or blackboard for reference (see "Key Scriptures").
- Prepare to show a clip of a rather ridiculous prayer from the movie *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*. Depending on how difficult it is to arrange this you may choose to simply watch it and discuss it with the teens (who have probably all seen it) by memory. If you have a computer or other device you can download the clip or stream it: simply Google "Talladega Nights Prayer" and choose from several version lengths. If you do not have this option and still wish to show it, consider renting the DVD and showing the clip. Set this up before the session begins.
- Create paper slips with the biblical characters written on them for a charades game (see "Key Scriptures").

Teaching Tips

Asking one teenager to bear the burden of praying for the class can be terrifying to her. Keep this in mind as you move through the lesson or year. You can help stu-

Session at a Glance

ARRIVING

- Students complete handout

GATHERING

- Lord's Prayer

OPENING

- *Talladega Nights* prayer

EXPLORING

- Biblical texts
- Person of prayer charades

RESPONDING

- Individual prayer

CLOSING

- Prayer

dents become more comfortable leading prayer with these tips:

- Read prayers aloud as a group.
- Ask if anyone would like to lead prayer aloud. If not, simply go around the room and ask each for a short prayer. Or, invite one person to choose and read a prayer from a book of prayers you like or one from your denomination.
- Ask for prayer concerns ahead of time. This gives teens time to think about who in their life may need prayer or what situations might be helped with prayer.
- Post a prayer list that kids can look at for inspiration at prayer time.

- Have “default prayers.” Remind teens that the world faces ongoing problems that can be helped by prayer. If a student is stumped when it’s his turn to pray, he can always pray for world peace, visionary political leadership, or an end to hunger in struggling nations. Likewise, words of adoration, love, and thankfulness to God are always good “defaults.”

Introduction for Leader

Many of us wonder about the usefulness of prayer. We may have been taught to pray and we may routinely pray in church and in our lives, but what actually happens when we pray? Does it matter that we pray? What difference will prayer make? Does God intervene in the world and bring about favorable results for us in our lives based just on our prayers? Can humans influence God or change God’s mind through prayer? What is the role of prayer?

Christians agree that prayer changes things. Somehow. But no one has the absolute answer about what actually happens when we pray. There are different viewpoints. These different views affect what we believe about what prayer is and what happens when we pray.

In this study we’ll look at some of the different types or elements of prayer and views of prayer that Christians hold. We will explore what happens when we pray according to these viewpoints, which can be divided into two main groups: views where prayer is seen to be focused on changes that happen within the individual who prays and views where prayer is focused on changes that happen with God and affect God’s actions.

Elements of Prayer

There are several different elements or parts of prayers. Some prayers have one element while others may include all of them. The elements are:

- A: Adoration. We express our love for God.
- C: Confession. We confess our sin and ask for forgiveness.
- T: Thanksgiving. We thank God for the many blessings we have.
- S: Supplication. We ask God to do something specifically for us.
- I: Intercession. We ask God to act in another person’s life.

Most Christians would agree that prayer is powerful stuff. It changes people, and the Bible shows us that prayer can even influence God.

Prayer Changes People

In these three views of prayer, despite their differences, the basic perception is that prayer changes people and people change things.

Joining prayer. Some believe that the purpose of prayer is to draw us into a deep spiritual union with God. We withdraw from the world in prayer and enter a spiritual stillness in the presence of God. Prayer enhances us rather than changes things in the world and we can gain spiritual strength.

Understanding myself prayer. One way to look at prayer is that it is of primary benefit to the one who prays. In prayer, we express our needs and hopes and thus come to understand ourselves more fully. This equips us better to deal with our problems. We do not change God’s mind in prayer or affect God’s actions. Prayer is focused on providing us with a new self-understanding.

Outlook prayer. For some, prayer serves as a way of looking beyond ourselves to reflect on others and on the needs of the world. The act of prayer is to orient us to a wider vision and lead us to look to human situations, both personally and in the world, as a whole. It’s not self-centered or selfish. We do not pray to God to change anything. Rather, we are changed as the realities of the world around us make us realize actions we can take to influence our human community.

Again, in these three views of prayer, the basic perception is that prayer changes people and people change things.

Prayer Changes God

In these two views of prayer, the basic perception is that through prayer, God is changed and God’s actions are affected because of our prayers.

Prosperity prayer. For some, prayer is seen as a kind of transaction in which, if we pray and let our requests be made known to God, God will answer and give what is requested. This approach to prayer appeals to those who believe God needs simply to be asked in order to tap into God’s blessings which are both spiritual and material. Well, Jesus said to ask and it will be given, didn’t

he? Prayers are usually focused on our specific wants and desires, especially in the material realm. In this view, prayer is gauged to change God's mind by requesting blessings and things from God and laying hold of God's willingness to give all manner of blessings to those who ask in prayer.

Pleading prayer. Many Christians view prayer as the pouring out of one's heart and soul to God, seeking the divine will, petitioning God, and making our needs and requests known to God. This view emphasizes prayer as active pleading with God in relation to that which is being prayed for. Those following this view believe prayer has a definite role to play in the carrying out of God's purposes in this world, and that God desires prayer to be the medium by which the needs of God's people are expressed. The emphasis here is both on seeking the will of God through prayer and on striving with God in prayer, believing that God chooses to carry out God's purposes in cooperation with those who pray.

Jesus believed that the God to whom he prayed was involved in this world, that God acts in the world, and that God can affect the world. Jesus knew that all things are possible for God.

What Can We Expect in Prayer?

So what really happens when we pray? As we've seen, some Christians emphasize the effects of prayer on those who pray while others emphasize prayer as effecting a change in God and God's actions. Do we have to choose between these two main features?

A balanced approach to understanding what happens when we pray and what we can expect can include dimensions of both the groups above. In prayer, we can believe that both those who pray and also God are changed. There is reciprocity here. Prayer has an impact on the one who prays, and in prayer, something also happens with God. There are several places in the Bible where we see different kinds of prayer at work:

Jesus prays in the Garden (Mark 14:32–42). Here, on the eve of his crucifixion and just hours before his death, Jesus withdrew from his disciples in order to pray. The record in the Gospel of Mark is that "he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for

you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want'" (14:35–36).

Here we see Jesus struggling with his situation. He is facing death and calling on God to save him. Ultimately though, Jesus bent his will to the will of God, seeking with all that was in him to follow God's will—even when it meant he would die a gruesome death. Jesus himself was affected by his prayer in that he acknowledged that above all else, he was seeking God's will and not his own.

Ninevites repent and pray in the Jonah story (Jonah 3:6–10). God sent Jonah to the city of Nineveh to warn its inhabitants of impending judgment. But when the Ninevites cried to God, repented of their sins and sought God's mercy, "God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it" (3:10).

Moses prays for the Israelites. Moses prayed on behalf of the people of Israel many times, asking God to take away fires (Num. 11:1–2) and provide a cure for snakebites (Num. 21:6–9). God turned away from his wrath and did not destroy the nation (Ps. 106:23).

David asks for a blessing (2 Sam. 7:18–29). After a prophet tells David he doesn't need to build a temple for the Lord and that God will bless him, David prays, adoring God and asking for his blessing upon his house.

Hannah prays for a son (1 Sam. 1:3–20). Hannah was a depressed woman. She had no children and her rival had many (don't forget men had multiple wives). Her rival would provoke her and bring her to tears. Hannah cried and wept. Finally, she prays so passionately for a child the priest at the temple thinks she is drunk. Soon afterward, her prayers are answered and she becomes pregnant.

Mary honors God (Luke 1:44–56). When Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, the baby that Elizabeth is carrying (John the Baptist) jumps in her womb. Mary senses the holiness of the situation and prays a prayer honoring God.

The idea that all things are possible with God means God's will or plan or purposes for this world can be combined with our prayers to God which, we can believe, do have an effect both on us and on the God to whom we pray. God can incorporate our prayers and our actions into God's own will so that God can be affected by the

prayers we offer; and we ourselves can be changed by our experience of praying. How can this be? We cannot explain it, perhaps, but this is where faith comes in. It is something we trust. As Jesus said of God: "For you all things are possible" (Mark 14:36).

Does Prayer Change Things?

Perhaps now we can think about some of the questions about prayer posed earlier.

Does it matter that I pray? Yes, it does. If prayer changes us and prayer changes God, then sharing our joys and sorrows and requests in prayer is important. When we do, we are opening ourselves to God. We can find new ways that God may want us to act; and we are telling God what is most important to us, seeking to do God's will and petitioning God with those things that are very significant to us. Our prayers may become the means by which God's will is carried out, either directly within us, or by other ways.

What difference will prayer make? If God desires our prayers and uses our prayers, we never know in what ways this might take shape in our lives. We never know the people, events, or relationships that might become the means God uses to guide and direct us and to answer our prayers. Our prayers to God are not transactions to gain God's automatic favor or blessing—"We pray/God blesses." They are our open, honest expressions of our concerns before God and the expression of our desire to do God's will. These prayers can make a tremendous difference in our lives since they orient us toward carrying out the will of God. So prayer does make a difference. It can change us and change God. Through prayer we find ourselves watching for the ways in which God is at work within us and in our lives every day.

Does prayer change things? Yes, prayer changes things. Prayer is a mystery. We cannot fully understand what happens in prayer since we do not know the mind of God or even understand ourselves completely. As we've seen though, prayer is important and has a key role to play in our Christian lives since prayer changes us and changes God. So in very real ways, prayer does change things. "All things are possible" for God, said Jesus (Mark 10:27). The relationship between the divine and the human, between God and us, is also a mystery. It is also constantly changing as we live our lives. The old

advice about prayer is still helpful: "Pray as if everything depends on God. Live as if everything depends on you." As we entrust ourselves to God through our prayers and then seek in all things in life to carry out the will of God as we understand it, we will find that our prayers will be answered. They may not be answered in the ways we expect but our experience in prayer enables us to see what we might not have seen before. Prayer enables us to see ways in which God is at work in our world and in our lives. And in seeing God's work, prayer helps us find new ways of being a part of God's purposes.

Arriving (5 minutes)

Students Complete Handout

Provide students with handout of various prayers (found in the appendix of this Leader's Guide). Ask them to circle the prayers they have prayed or heard and answer the question, "What is this prayer saying to or asking of God?"

Gathering (10 minutes)

Lord's Prayer

Pray together the Lord's Prayer (on handout for those who may not know it by memory). Ask the students what the prayer is saying in their own words.

Explain: Prayer has incredible power. Our prayers can change us and some people's prayers have even changed God. Each time we seriously pray, we deepen our relationship with God. Sometimes it's because we get to know ourselves better and sometimes it's because we get to know God better.

Discuss: Ask students to describe their responses to the prayers from the "Arriving" handout. Use this time to learn and reinforce the names of students if the group doesn't know each other. Be sure to use the teen's name each time. For example, "Donna, would you like to share what you think?"

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Talladega Nights Prayer

Watch the "Baby Jesus" prayer movie clip from *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (PG-13, 2006) on either YouTube or DVD. (Note: the clip can be shortened to

just the second half of the prayer to avoid any language concerns.) Ask the students if they think this “prayer” changed anyone. Why do we laugh? Do you see yourself or anyone you know in this clip (no names please)? Is God present during this prayer? What are they asking of God? Who is expected to act or change?

Explain: Prayer comes in many forms. Sometimes we are asking God to do something and other times prayer creates changes in us. Describe the kinds of prayer and the two views of prayer. Reference the newsprint or board.

Exploring (20 minutes)

2. Biblical Texts

Read the passages about prayer in the Bible. Depending on class size, you can read them independently, in small groups who then summarize or retell the story to the rest of the class, or you can read them aloud as a group. Use as many that you think time will allow for. After the students know the basics of each story you are using, let the games begin!

3. Person of Prayer Charades

Divide into teams of two and pass out the slips of biblical characters found in the biblical texts provided in this study or others you may know. When it is a team’s turn, one person will play God and the other the character praying. If your class is small, you can play the God character each time. They must act out the scene without words while the other students try to guess which person is praying or passage is being acted out. At the end of each turn, be sure to ask who changed whom the most in the passage. Did the character change God? Did God change the character? Was it equal?

Responding (10 minutes)

4. Individual Prayer

Ask students to think about how prayer has worked in the biblical passages they read. Which character or approach to prayer was most meaningful to them? When they pray, do they discover more about themselves and their world or do they find themselves asking God for things? Invite students to spend time in silent prayer, intentionally trying a different kind of prayer than they typically pray.

Closing (10 minutes)

5. Prayer

Pray together a prayer of your choice from either the handout, the Bible, or something you especially like.

Teaching Alternatives

- **Prayer journal.** Give each participant two half-sheets of plain paper. Have them fold the two halves together to make a booklet with eight pages. The booklets can be stapled, if you wish. Or, many dollar stores have cheap and colorful journals and notebooks. Ask participants to look again at the handout. Invite them to rewrite one or two of the prayers in their own words and share them. After participants have finished sharing their reactions, explain that a prayer journal, a booklet to record our prayer concerns, is often helpful as we pray for others and ourselves. It helps us remember our concerns as well as encourages us to note what has happened to these concerns. One way to use the prayer journal is to list your prayer concerns as they come up and then refer to the listing as you pray.
- **Picture response.** Gather pictures that represent praying. Display them around the room. After the opening prayer, have participants stand by the picture they found most engaging. The participants gathered at the same picture can discuss the questions:
 - What is happening in the picture?
 - What does this picture tell you about prayer and people who pray?
 - What kind of prayer do you think they are praying?
 - Who is being most affected by the prayer?

If you go to www.google.com and click on the “Images” link on the top left of the page, you can search for the titles and authors of these pieces and they will appear. You may print out copies of them for the session. Some art to look for: *Girl Praying* by George Tooker, *Study of Hands in Prayer* by Albrecht Durer, *The Thankful Poor* by Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Infant Samuel* by Joshua Reynolds, *The Praying Jew* by Marc Chagall, *Giving Thanks* by Horace Pippin, *Old Man Praying* by Vincent van Gogh, or *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane* by Heinrich Hofmann.

Key Scriptures

Numbers 11:1–2, Moses

Numbers 21:6–9, Moses

1 Samuel 1:3–20, Hannah

2 Samuel 7:18–29, David

Psalms 106:19–23, Moses

Jonah 3:6–10, Ninevites

Matthew 6:9–14, The Lord's Prayer

Mark 14:32–42, Jesus

Luke 1:44–56, Mary

For More Information

The Thoughtful Christian has a few studies on prayer. Consider using these if there is interest.

Youth Study: How to Pray (2 sessions)

The following adult studies are all in the adult format, meaning they consist of four-page narrative handouts on the subject. Some youth groups do use these, but it requires more reading than most groups want. However, leaders might consider reading them and adapting the Leader's Guides for your youth group.

Prayers in the Bible (2 sessions)

Praying the Psalms (1 session)

Reflections on the Lord's Prayer: A Lenten Study
(6 sessions)

About the Writer

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Some Well-known Prayers

Circle the prayers that you think you may have heard or prayed. Underneath each, write down in your own words what you think each prayer is asking for or doing.

For example:

Now I lay me down to sleep.
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake.
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

I think this prayer is asking God to keep the person alive or protect him or her.

God is great.
God is good.
Let us thank him
for our food.
Amen.

Our Father, in heaven,
Hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done,
On earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
As we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
And deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen
—The Lord's Prayer¹

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.
—commonly attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr

God be in my head, and in my understanding;
God be in my eyes, and in my looking;
God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;
God be in my heart, and in my thinking;
God be at my end, and at my departing. Amen
—Maria Ware²

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.
Amen.
—St. Francis

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.
—attributed to St. Patrick of Ireland

I confess to God Almighty,
Before the whole company of heaven,
And to you, my brothers and sisters,
That I have sinned by my own fault,
In thought, word, and deed;
Wherefore, I pray God Almighty to have mercy on me,
Forgive me all my sins
And bring me to everlasting life.³

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart;
I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.
I will be glad and exult in you;
I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.
Psalm 9:1–2

Endnotes

1. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 73.
2. Daily Prayer, *Book of Common Worship*, 20.
3. *Book of Common Worship*, 53.