

ASK ANYTHING

Part 5 “Can we change God’s mind?”

Scripture: Matthew 6:5-15

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by Pastor Steven Edelman

(SLIDE 1) Good morning everyone. Thank you for joining us! We are so glad you are with us. Today, we are on Part 5 of the series “Ask Anything?” “Can we change God’s mind?”

INTRODUCTION: As a father, there have been many times that my young kids have crawled up on my lap and said the funniest things. When Halle was around four years old, she was drawing this landscape with markers and crayons. As she was pulling the stars, she looked up at me with her kid’s voice and said, “**Daddy, can you reach up into the sky and give me all the stars?**” My heart melted because it was the most adorable thing I have ever heard. Part of me was flattered. Does she think I am God? In the mind of a three-year-old— Maybe? **As cute as these words are, she didn’t understand who God was. She also didn’t understand my limited humanity.**

Here are some other examples of what children have said to God. “**I bet it is very hard to love everyone in the whole world. There are only four people in our family, and I’m having a hard time loving all of them.**”

“**In school, they told us what You do. Who does it when You are on vacation?**”

“**Thank You for the baby brother, but I think you got confused because what I prayed for was a puppy.**”

“**Please send me a pony. I never asked for anything before. You can look it up.**”

“**I want to be just like my Daddy when I get big, but not with so much hair all over.**”

“**Thank you for the nice day today. You even fooled the TV weatherman.**”

This is immaturity at its best. Right? I am sure God has a sense of humour about it too. In their immaturity, a child lacks the understanding of who God is. They also don’t understand who they are. It’s connected to how they talk to God.

Today, I want to show you that our understanding of who God is directly connected to how we pray. It’s also connected to how we view ourselves.

At times, when we pray, we may feel like God is not listening. God may feel distant. Our prayers don't seem to be helping as the world around us just seems to be getting worse. Hate, dysfunction, and problems just seem to on the increase. We personally may suffer from great disappointment. We may feel like we are drowning in our sin. **Why is God not answering our prayers? Can I change God's mind?** We may even feel like there is no point in prayer at all. Why didn't I get everything that I asked for? I prayed for it!

Here is a summary of the questions that you submitted:

(SLIDE 2)

1. **CAN WE CHANGE GOD'S MIND THROUGH PRAYER?**
2. **IF GOD KNOWS AND CONTROLS EVERYTHING, WHAT'S THE POINT OF PRAYER?**
3. **WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE PRAY?**

As you are going to see, prayer, when done right, will change your life.

(SLIDE 3) QUESTION #1: CAN WE CHANGE GOD'S MIND THROUGH PRAYER?

(SLIDE 4) Let's start with what is prayer? R.C. Sproul says, "***Prayer is personal communication with God. Prayer is not magic. God is not a celestial bellhop ready at our beck and call to satisfy our every whim.***"¹

(SLIDE 5) Look with me at Matthew 6:9-10, which says, "Pray then like this: ***Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.***"

I want you to notice that the primary concern in the text is God. It's for God's name. It's God's Kingdom coming. It is God's will being done. In other words, **(SLIDE 6) the focal point of prayer is the praise and concern for God.** If we keep reading, the second petition is that God's reign or God's Kingdom will increase. The third petition is that God's ways will be accomplished.

To borrow from R.C. Sproul, we need to remember **two rules or matters** when we pray:

- a) **To whom are you speaking? (SLIDE 7)**

¹ Sproul, R. C. (2009). [*Does Prayer Change Things?*](#) (Vol. 3, p. 80). Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing.

b) **Who is doing the speaking?**

The first rule of prayer is that you are talking to the almighty God. The King of the universe. The God who knows the beginning and end.

The second rule of prayer is that you are not God. You are not the King of the universe. You do not hold the world in your hands.

(TITLE SLIDE 8) Question: What would induce God to change his mind? If God is planning to do something, what would change his mind? Did He get the plan wrong? Did God need your help in improving His plan? Perhaps new information that you and your brilliance came up with? *“Hey God, I would like you to consider my educated thoughts on this matter. I don’t like the way things are not going my way! God, I know something that you don’t know!”*

HERE IS THE ANSWER: The Bible says he knows our needs before we ask (Matthew 6:8). He knows our prayer before we even pray it. **God is omniscient. Which means he is all-knowing.** In other words, God is not going to get any new information from you. **SO, WHAT IN THE WORLD WILL CHANGE GOD’S MIND?** The answer is nothing.

(SLIDE 9) R.C. Sproul says, “**God has invited us to come freely into His presence, but we must realize that we are still coming before God. When confronted with the Lord God Omnipotent Himself, who would speak as if to a friend at a baseball game? We may come boldly, but never arrogantly, never flippantly, as if we were dealing with a peer.**” When we begin our Prayer with adoration and praise, we acknowledge the One to whom we are speaking.”²

What about all the verses in the Bible that talk about God changing his mind?

(SLIDE 10) For example, Exodus 32:14 Moses says, “**Then the LORD relented and did not bring on His people the disaster He had threatened.**”

Note: God never desired to destroy his people (the Israelites) in the first place.

Some translations even say the words here, “changed His mind.”

² Sproul, R. C. (2009). [*Does Prayer Change Things?*](#) (Vol. 3, p. 51). Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing.

(TITLE SLIDE 11) In Jonah's story, God had told Nineveh He would destroy the city in forty days (Jonah 3:4). However, Nineveh repented of their sin (verses 5–9). In response to the Assyrians' repentance, God relented: "He had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction He had threatened" (verse 10).

This narrative seems to make it clear that God does change His mind from time to time. Correct? Is this a contradiction in Scripture? How are we to understand this?

ILLUSTRATION:

Scripture frequently describes events in terms of how they appear to the observer. For example, the Bible does not "teach" that the sun revolves around the earth, but it does speak about sunrises and sunsets. **Here is the thing, even modern scientists do this when they are using ordinary language.** Even the weather person is saying on your local TV station says about the sun's "rising" and "setting."

However, if we were to speak literal or get technical, a scientist would say, "that the sun stays in its position at the center of our solar system. It doesn't rise and set. But it *appears* to rise and set because of the earth's rotation on its axis."

Also, the Bible is God revealing himself to us so that we can understand who God is. One of the ways we can explain this is through what we call **anthropomorphism (SLIDE 12).** Anthropomorphism is giving human characteristics to God, animals or objects. In this case, human terms to describe God. The Bible speaks of God's hands, arms, face, and His coming and going! He is described as having arms, hands, face, and feet. Yet, the Bible tells us that God is not a man and does not have human arms, hands, and a face like us.

(SLIDE 13) R. C. Sproul rightfully points out, **"The biblical narratives in which God appears to repent, or change His mind, are almost always narratives that deal with His threats (warnings) of judgment and punishment."** These warnings are then followed by the repentance of the people or a consequence. **God is not talked into "changing His mind."** God only does what He has promised to do all along – not punish sinners who repent and turn from their evil ways. He chooses not to do what He has every right to do. The point of these narratives is to encourage us to repent and turn to God.

As you can see, prayer does not change God's mind.

Secondly, if God knows and controls everything, what's the point of prayer?

(SLIDE 14) QUESTION #2: IF GOD KNOWS AND CONTROLS EVERYTHING, WHAT'S THE POINT OF PRAYER?

(SLIDE 15) Look with me at Matthew 6:10, which says, "¹⁰ Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

(SLIDE 16) WHAT IS GOD'S SOVEREIGN WILL?

It's God's rule over creation, history, and the future. It means He is the all-powerful creator who preserves and steers everything in the universe. God didn't just create the world and then essentially abandoned it. God is actively related to and involved in the creation at each moment; creation is distinct from him.³

This is God's sovereign will. This is what we mean **when we say God knows and controls everything.**

(SLIDE 17) *Isaiah 46:9–10* says, "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.'"

(SLIDE 18) *Psalms 139:16*: "Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them." Notice that the Psalmist says that God wrote and knows your story before it even happened.

So back to the question, **if God knows and controls everything, what's the point of prayer?**

There are a number of reasons we need to pray. Jesus prayed regularly and was an example to us all.

- "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." Luke 5:16
- "One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God." Luke 6:12
- "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." Luke 18:1

³ Grudem, W. A. (2004). *Systematic theology: an introduction to biblical doctrine* (p. 315). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

The Bible gives us many reasons to pray, and I don't have time to develop each one:

(SLIDE 19)

- a) Prayer is how we communicate with God
- b) Prayer allows us to participate in God's work
- c) Prayer gives us power over evil
- d) Prayer strengthens relationships between believers
- e) Prayer gives us the ability to intercede on behalf of someone else
- f) Prayer keeps us humble before God
- g) Prayer grants us the privilege of experiencing God
- h) Prayer does change things
- i) Prayer changes us

(SLIDE 20) Prayer changes us

Prayer helps us to become more like Jesus. As we pray, our spiritual life will grow and mature. Why? It's because, through prayer and Scripture, we draw closer to God as we continuously communicate with Him. It's through prayer, we acknowledge who God is. It's through prayer that we discover God's infinite love for us, and we are reminded that we are not alone.

1 Peter 5:7 says, "And we can lay our worries to Him because He promised to take care of us, as is written, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

We are to ask according to His will we will receive.

1 John 5:14 says, "This is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us."

Look with me at 1 John 3:22, which says, "Whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him."

(SLIDE 21) WHY DOES GOD NOT ANSWER ALL OUR PRAYERS?

As these passages reveal, **the request must be made in accordance with the revealed will of God and in accordance with His nature and character.**⁴ Prayer is about receiving from God and then releasing what is not from Him. There are

⁴ Sproul, R. C. (2009). *Does Prayer Change Things?* (Vol. 3, p. 81). Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing.

things in our life that must die through prayer, fasting, and submission to God. Sometimes we need to get healthier before everything else around us get healthy.

ILLUSTRATION:

(TITLE SLIDE 22) We just celebrated our 20th anniversary. If I was to go back 20 years, I could tell you that we thought we knew everything about marriage. We felt like we were in love! Looking back, I now understand that it was also a marriage of two strong willed people. We are both firstborn children. At times, we would have a battle of the wills as we wanted different things. I wanted to spend more time with friends playing sports. She wanted me home more to help support her. The list goes on. In order to have a good marriage we both had to learn to give up our wants and desires to put each other first. I had to become a student of Megan to love her well. She has to become a student of Steve to love me well. When you start to put the each other first, both people feel loved and are changed by that love.

I see this tension with couples all the time. One person will say, "I feel loved when you are doing these things." The partner will say, "but I am loving you by doing different things." The response is, "but, that doesn't make me feel loved." But, "I love you!" If a change isn't made, the relationship starts to break down.

APPLICATION:

That is what happens to us in our relationship with God. We tend to hold on to what we want. Our pride, our pet sins, our selfishness, and convince ourselves that we are loving God. But we really love ourselves. This is why we need to become students of God to love Him well. God gives us direction on how we should live. It's what we call **obedience in which is connected to knowing Jesus in order to enter into the kingdom of heaven.** It's following the example of Jesus regularly. When we do our own thing, our relationship with God breaks down.

Here is how we learn and apply God's will for our life.

(SLIDE 23) QUESTION: How do you know if what you want is in God's will?

Your desires? Your decisions? What does God say about my thoughts and desires? **Use scripture** as God's Word revealed to us to understand what is good and what is damaging. Then, bring your thoughts and desires to God in prayer. **Does this line up with God's will for my life?**

(SLIDE 24) George Mueller says, “I will seek the will of the Spirit of God through, or in connection with, the Word of God. The Spirit and the Word must be combined. If I look to the Spirit alone without the Word, I lay myself open to great delusions also. If the Holy Spirit guides us at all, He will do it according to the Scriptures and never contrary to them.”

(SLIDE 25) Richard Foster says, “As we are learning to pray, we discover an interesting progression. In the beginning, our will is in struggle with God’s will. We beg. We pout. We demand. We expect God to perform like a magician or shower us with blessings like Father Christmas. We major in instant solutions and manipulative prayers... In time, however, we begin to enter into a grace-filled releasing of our will and a flowing into the will of the Father. It is the prayer of relinquishment that moves us from the stuffing to the releasing.

(SLIDE 26) Do you know what the great freedom this crucifixion of the will is? It means freedom of the self-sins: self-sufficiency, self-pity, self-absorption, self-abuse, self-deprecation, self-exaltation, self-indulgence, self-hatred, and a host of others just like them. It means freedom from the everlasting burden of always having to get our own way. It means freedom to care for others, to genuinely put their needs first, to give joyfully and freely... Remember that we are dealing with the crucifixion of the will. Crucifixion always has resurrection tied to it.”

Once again, to answer the question, **IF GOD KNOWS AND CONTROLS EVERYTHING, WHAT’S THE POINT OF PRAYER?**

As you can see, prayer changes us.

Lastly,

(SLIDE 27) **QUESTION #3: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE PRAY?**

(SLIDE 28) Look with me at Matthew 6:11, which says, “¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread, ¹² and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. ¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

When you pray, you also learn to be dependent on God, “give us our daily bread!” When you pray, you learn to live a life of repentance, **“forgive us our debts!”** When you pray, you learn to battle temptation and find freedom through Christ, **“lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil!”** When you pray, you learn to forgive others, **“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you”** This is what is accomplished through Christ in prayer and so much more.

Jesus then goes on to say, **“but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses!”** Why? Because if you have not forgiven others, it shows that you are not changed by grace and the gospel. It shows that you have not recognized what it cost for your own forgiveness. This how prayer and applying God’s Word changes you. Prayer puts God in his rightful place. On the throne as the King of your life.

(TITLE SLIDE 29) So, what happens when you pray? Worship happens when you pray. Prayer is about praising him. Prayer is about learning to develop a life that honours God. It’s moving from immaturity to maturity in our faith. It’s learning to insert truth into your life and having it sink in, so we are changed. It’s learning to understand the fear of the Lord that produces wisdom. It’s ultimately, knowing God and all that He has done for you.

STORY: Meeting with God.

I was going through a difficult time and had to go pick up something at the local mall. I was standing in the middle of a parking lot, and I suddenly felt this overwhelming sense that God is so much bigger than me. I felt like a tiny ant or a blip time in comparison to God. I fell to my knees and started to pray. It was a critical moment when I was reminded of who God is and that I can find peace knowing that he is in control.

Honestly, we don’t really learn to pray and trust God until we’re drowning. We need to come to the end of ourselves. The question is: are you desperate enough to call on God for help? Are we desperate enough? What will it take?

CONCLUSION:

Here is the good news. Do you know where Jesus prayed the Lord’s Prayer? It was a critical point in history. “In the garden of Gethsemane. In the garden of Gethsemane, sweating blood, knowing that he was going to have to die, he fell to

the ground. He prayed the Lord's Prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. **But did you know that Jesus didn't finish the Lord's Prayer?** Because on the cross, he finished the Lord's Prayer when he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34)."

This is why we need to understand who God is. God loved you and I so much that he sent His son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. Yes, God is Holy, and we are not. Which means that was relational and spiritual separation between God and us. But God made a way. A way that the wall comes down between God and us when we turn our hearts and minds to Christ. A way in which we can approach the King of the universe in prayer because Christ loving died in our place because we were a disaster. This was God's plan.

God does not change His mind. God is not Santa Clause; God is not a puppet who can be manipulated; God is not your boss at work. He is the King. He is the King of Kings who invites you into a relationship for your benefit.

To summarize:

- 1. CAN WE CHANGE GOD'S MIND THROUGH PRAYER?**
- 2. IF GOD KNOWS AND CONTROLS EVERYTHING, WHAT'S THE POINT OF PRAYER?**
- 3. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE PRAY?**

2 Chronicles 7:14 says, "if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

Worship happens when we pray! I end the service with a time of worship. The pattern will be personal prayer, congregational prayer, a worship song, and we will repeat that.

a) Tell God who He is! Praise Him.

b) What do you need to confess and repent of?

c) Thank God for all he has done.

- We pray to adore God, to praise Him, to express our wonder at His majesty, His sovereignty, and His mighty acts.
- We pray to confess to God our sins, so we can have freedom in Christ.
- We pray because it prepares our hearts for what we will receive from Him.

PRAYER OF PRAISE (SLIDES)

(SLIDE 30)

God is holy. His character is perfect in every way. His moral excellence is the absolute standard of integrity and ethical purity. God's supreme holiness infinitely sets Him apart from His creation.

(SLIDE 31)

“So obey God because you are His children. Don't slip back into your old ways of doing evil; you didn't know any better then. But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God—who chose you to be His children—is holy. For He Himself has said, “You must be holy because I am holy.”

(SLIDE 32)

As we meditate on God's supreme holiness, we cannot help being overcome with a sense of awe. The Psalmist tells us, “Worship the LORD in the splendor of His holiness; tremble before Him, all the earth”.

Prayer of Confession (SLIDES)

(SLIDE 33)

God of everlasting love,
we confess that we have been unfaithful
To our covenant with you and with one another.
We have worshiped other gods: money, power, greed, and convenience.
We have served our own self-interest
Instead of serving only you and your people.
We have not loved our neighbor as you have commanded, nor have we rightly loved ourselves.

(SLIDE 34)

**Forgive us, gracious God,
and bring us back into the fullness
of our covenant with you and one another.**

**I will devote myself to You in purity, worship, and service.
Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.**

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING (SLIDES)

(SLIDE 35)

The world is filled with the glory of God, and we say,

Thank you!

The hills and valleys are filled with colour, and we say,

Thank you!

The vines and trees are filled with fruit, and we say,

Thank you!

(SLIDE 36)

Because we have food to put on the table, we say,

Thank you!

Because we have this community that loves us, we say,

Thank you!

We fill this house of God with our voices, saying,

Thank you!

(SLIDE 37)

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable to you, O God,
as we enter into this service of thanksgiving and praise.