

Prayer Works

Psalm 121; Philippians 4:4–7; Luke 18:1–8

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Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
27 September 2026

There is something very natural about wanting to know what works. If we want to improve our health, we want to know what works. If we want to grow a business, we want to know what works. If we want to raise children well, we want to know what works. If we want to build a healthy church, we want to know what works.

And I think that is one of the reasons we have been spending time thinking about our Parish Mission Action Plan. We want to be intentional about our ministry. We want to be wise and strategic about the way we serve God. We want to see people growing as disciples of Jesus. We want to see new small groups developing. We want to be a church that welcomes people from different cultures and backgrounds. We want to engage our community and make Christ known. And these are good things.

But this morning I want to ask a very simple question: What actually works? What will make a genuine difference in our lives as Christians? What will make a genuine difference in the life of this church? And my answer this morning is very simple: Prayer works.

Now, I realise that statement needs some explanation. Because when we say, “Prayer works,” we could easily misunderstand what we mean. We might imagine prayer as though it were some kind of spiritual technique. Put right words together, have enough faith, pray hard enough, and we can make things happen. But that is not Christian prayer. Prayer is not magic.

Magic is an attempt to control or manipulate supernatural forces in order to produce a desired result. But Christian prayer is fundamentally different. We are not manipulating a spiritual force. We are not trying to control God.

In prayer, we are speaking to God. We are coming before the living God who knows us, loves us, hears us and acts according to his wisdom and purposes. So when I say “prayer works,” I do not mean that prayer is a technique that enables us to get whatever we want from God. I mean, rather, that God works through the prayers of his people. Prayer matters because God matters. And that is what our readings help us to see.

1. Prayer works because God works.

Let us begin with Psalm 121. It begins: “I lift up my eyes to the mountains – where does my help come from?” And then comes the answer: “My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.”

That is the foundation of prayer. Prayer begins with recognising where our help comes from. The psalmist does not say, “My help comes from myself.” He does not say, “My help comes from having a good plan.” He does not say, “My help comes from being strong enough to deal with whatever happens.” He says, “My help comes from the Lord.” And why? Because the Lord is the “maker of heaven and earth.” The God to whom we pray is not a distant religious idea. He is the creator of heaven and earth. He is sovereign over his creation. He watches over his people.

The psalm repeatedly uses the language of God keeping his people: “He will not let your foot slip.” “He who watches over you will not slumber.” “The Lord watches over you.” “The Lord will keep you from all harm.” “The Lord will watch over your coming and going.” That is why prayer works – because God is there, he hears, he knows, he cares, he acts.

Prayer is not about discovering a secret mechanism for getting God to do what we want. Prayer is about bringing ourselves and our circumstances before the God who already knows us and holds us in his hands. And that changes the way we understand prayer.

Sometimes we pray and God changes the circumstances. Sometimes we pray and God changes other people. Sometimes we pray and God opens a door that we could not have opened ourselves. Sometimes we pray and God provides what we need. Sometimes we pray and the answer is no. And sometimes, perhaps most importantly, we pray and God changes us. Prayer works because God works - and God’s work is not always identical to our preferred outcome.

2. Prayer works in the life of the Christian.

That brings us to Philippians 4. Paul says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Notice what Paul does not say. He does not say, “God’s children will never have anything to be anxious about.” He says: “Do not be anxious about anything.” And then he tells us what to do with our anxiety: “In every situation ... present your requests to God.” That is prayer. Prayer is one of the ways God teaches us to stop carrying everything ourselves.

Think about what happens when we are anxious. Our minds go round and around. What if this happens? What if that doesn’t happen? What will happen tomorrow? How will I solve this problem? What will people think? What if things go wrong? We can be trapped inside our own thoughts.

Paul gives us another way. Take those concerns and bring them to God. And notice the result: “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Paul does not promise that every problem will immediately disappear. He promises something deeper: the peace of God.

Sometimes we think prayer works only if the thing we prayed for happens. But Philippians 4 gives us a much richer understanding. Prayer works when God gives us peace in the middle of circumstances that have not yet changed. Prayer works when we are able to say, “Lord, I don’t know what is going to happen, but I know that you are with me.”

3. Prayer works when we persevere.

Then we come to Jesus' parable in Luke 18. Luke gives us the point of the parable at the beginning: "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." That is remarkably clear. Pray and don't give up.

Jesus tells the story of a widow who repeatedly comes to an unjust judge asking for justice. The judge does not care about justice. He does not fear God or care about what people think. But eventually he gives her what she asks for - not because he has suddenly become good, but because she keeps asking. And Jesus makes the contrast. If even an unjust judge eventually responds to persistent pleading, how much more will God respond to his people who cry out to him?

This is not saying that God is like the unjust judge. It is an argument from the lesser to the greater. If persistence gets a response from someone who is unjust and uncaring, how much more can we trust the response of the God who is perfectly just and who loves his people?

Jesus is teaching us about perseverance. There are times when we pray and nothing seems to happen. We pray for someone who does not seem to change. We pray for a situation that does not seem to improve. We pray for our families. We pray for someone to come to faith in Jesus. We pray for our church. We pray for God's kingdom to advance. And sometimes we wonder: Is anyone listening? Jesus says, "Keep praying - don't give up."

4. Prayer is essential to the life of the church.

And this brings us back to the subject of our church. Over the past few weeks we have been thinking about our vision for the future of this church. We have been thinking about our Mission Action Plan. We have been thinking about small groups. We have been thinking about our church being a multiethnic community of faith. These are important things, and we should plan and we should think carefully. We should be intentional, we should use our resources wisely, we should ask what ministries we need to develop and what changes we need to make. But there is something that must come before all of this.

We must pray – because the church is not ultimately a human organisation trying to achieve human goals. The church belongs to Christ. Christ is building his church. The Holy Spirit gives life to the church. The gospel is the power of God for salvation. And therefore we cannot accomplish the purposes of God through human effort alone. We need God. And if we need God, we need to pray.

5. Prayer is the engine of our mission.

This is why I have come to think of prayer as the engine of our life together as a church. Let me illustrate this by telling you the story of the Hebrides Revival in Scotland, which took place from 1949 to 1953.

In 1949, on the Isle of Lewis in Scotland, the spiritual life of the Barvas community was very weak. Two elderly sisters, Peggy Smith, aged 84, and Christine Smith, aged 82, became deeply

burdened about the spiritual condition of their community. They began praying regularly, reportedly spending hours in prayer in their small cottage. They urged their minister to gather the church leaders for prayer, and the leaders began meeting regularly to pray.

According to accounts from the revival's participants, the prayer meetings continued for weeks before what became known as the Hebrides Revival began. Prayer meetings became a significant feature of the movement, and large numbers of people came to faith during the subsequent revival. The revival began with people praying.

Now, I'm not suggesting that if we hold enough prayer meetings, God is obliged to give us revival. Prayer is not a formula for controlling God. But this story reminds us of something we easily forget: when God's people pray, they are placing themselves before the God who alone can do what they cannot do.

So I want to encourage you, St Augustine's Church, to become increasingly a praying church. Not simply a church that has a prayer meeting. Not simply a church that includes prayers in our services. But a church whose life is permeated by prayer. A church that prays for its children, a church that prays for its young people, a church that prays for the elderly, a church that prays for the sick and struggling, a church that prays for those who don't yet know Christ, a church that prays for our community, a church that prays for our small groups, a church that prays for our leaders and volunteers, a church that prays for our nation and our world, and a church that does not stop praying simply because the answer has not yet come.

Conclusion

This morning I want to leave you with one simple conviction: prayer works. Not because prayer is magic, not because we have discovered the right spiritual technique, not because we can persuade God to give us everything we want. Prayer works because God works. The God who made heaven and earth hears us. The God who watches over his people invites us to call upon him. The God who tells us not to be anxious invites us to bring everything to him.

So when we think about our own lives, pray. When you are anxious, pray. When you are thankful, pray. When you don't know what to do, pray. When you are discouraged, pray. When you are rejoicing, pray. And when we think about the future of St Augustine's, pray. Because ultimately, our help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.

And so, brothers and sisters, let us be a people who pray. Let us pray for ourselves, let us pray for one another, let us pray for our church, let us pray for our community, let us pray for the advance of the gospel, and let us pray without giving up. Because prayer works, prayer brings us before the God who cares and who is at work accomplishing his good purposes in our lives, in our church and in his world.

Amen.