

## **“Let Us Not Lose Heart in our Desire for Justice”**

Rev. Dr. Bill Ekhardt

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I'm a parent, and my children describe their questions and their emotional challenges; their relationships with others, sometimes the fights that they have, or something that someone steals off their phone and sends, or something like that. I could be lifting that to God in prayer.

There are opportunities for us to be concerned about our work, about what is happening in our jobs – or our lack of jobs. We could be offering to God our concerns about our struggles, or questions for direction. Our own concerns or struggles with our habits, or just trying to be better people. All of these things we could offer to God.

As we shared in prayer today, we see around us struggle and injustice. I joined in concern with most of our congregants who condemn the treatment of the Kurds in this last week, and this concern that these people have come under new persecution, and have lost a protector and are seeking new protection, and we offer these in prayer out of concern.

There are so many things we could be in prayer for. The question is: What keeps us from praying? What holds us back from prayer? One simple thing could be that we are distracted from the *idea* that God is listening to us, or that God wants to participate in our lives. But another is the concern that we may not believe that God will act.

Does God answer prayer? It is a simple question, but a complicated one to figure out. We see things happen in our world. We have concerns and, yet, we pray to God and, sometimes, what we ask for isn't granted to us. We talked about God's work in our world in the Predestination Class that I was teaching a few weeks back, and we were asking this question of, "How does God act in our world? Are we completely controlled?"

I am working with our Confirmation Class and when we were looking at this question, there was this picture of a puppet master with strings down to the people on stage. We asked the question: Does God determine everything that we do? Is all of our sense of choice a falsehood? Do we not actually have choice? There are some who propose that theology. That is not my belief; not my understanding of the story of God's relationship with us. Then, there are some on the opposite end of the spectrum. Some of you may have heard, or are maybe familiar with Ben Franklin's theology of Deism. It was the theology of a clockmaker. Someone who set up our world and let it run, and sat back and watched; someone who would not interact, and someone who would not make changes, or come and interpose.

Does God act in our world? If so, *how* does God act? *Where* is the space for God to act?

I neither follow the determinism of someone like John Piper, a theologian or a popular Christian writer today, nor the Deism of Ben Franklin, I believe that God is at work in our world. There is a middle-ground in between these two, when we ask the question, “How much do we do, and how much does God do?”

C.S. Lewis posed this middle-ground between these two. Lewis described a God who created us and gave us the opportunity to choose freely to worship and unite with God – the opportunity to truly love.

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These I perceive as hard limits to what God wishes to do and the world God created. But if God does not determine us, if God does not choose our own action, and God does not supernaturally supersede in every material thing around us, then where is there room for God to answer prayer? How does it happen?

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Does God answer prayer? For Jesus, the answer is an emphatic, "Yes!" Emphatic, "Yes!" God will answer prayers." So, what does that mean for us? Jesus has asked his disciples to pray. He has commanded us – or taught us – to persist in prayer, in the trust that God is at work in our world; in the trust that God works through us and; so, as we see injustices in our world, and we pray for them; be prepared for the opportunity for God to work through us; for God to right the

wrong around us, through our actions, through our love, through our assertion. And, also, in and around us, in the great arc of time, God is at work, righting the wrongs in our world.

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Let us pray.



## **“Let Us Not Lose Heart in our Desire for Justice”**

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There are so many opportunities for us to be in prayer. So many things in our lives that we might bring to God. Just contemplating my own life and experiences that others have shared with me, I would have concern for my elderly mother and her health, and her finances. That is something I could be offering in prayer.

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There are opportunities for us to be concerned about our work, about what is happening in our jobs – or our lack of jobs. We could be offering to God our concerns about our struggles, or questions for direction. Our own concerns or struggles with our habits, or just trying to be better people. All of these things we could offer to God.

As we shared in prayer today, we see around us struggle and injustice. I joined in concern with most of our congregants who condemn the treatment of the Kurds in this last week, and this concern that these people have come under new persecution, and have lost a protector and are seeking new protection, and we offer these in prayer out of concern.

There are so many things we could be in prayer for. The question is: What keeps us from praying? What holds us back from prayer? One simple thing could be that we are distracted from the *idea* that God is listening to us, or that God wants to participate in our lives. But another is the concern that we may not believe that God will act.

Does God answer prayer? It is a simple question, but a complicated one to figure out. We see things happen in our world. We have concerns and, yet, we pray to God and, sometimes, what we ask for isn't granted to us. We talked about God's work in our world in the Predestination Class that I was teaching a few weeks back, and we were asking this question of, "How does God act in our world? Are we completely controlled?"

I am working with our Confirmation Class and when we were looking at this question, there was this picture of a puppet master with strings down to the people on stage. We asked the question: Does God determine everything that we do? Is all of our sense of choice a falsehood? Do we not actually have choice? There are some who propose that theology. That is not my belief; not my understanding of the story of God's relationship with us. Then, there are some on the opposite end of the spectrum. Some of you may have heard, or are maybe familiar with Ben Franklin's theology of Deism. It was the theology of a clockmaker. Someone who set up our world and let it run, and sat back and watched; someone who would not interact, and someone who would not make changes, or come and interpose.

Does God act in our world? If so, *how* does God act? *Where* is the space for God to act?

I neither follow the determinism of someone like John Piper, a theologian or a popular Christian writer today, nor the Deism of Ben Franklin, I believe that God is at work in our world. There is a middle-ground in between these two, when we ask the question, “How much do we do, and how much does God do?”

C.S. Lewis posed this middle-ground between these two. Lewis described a God who created us and gave us the opportunity to choose freely to worship and unite with God – the opportunity to truly love.

I was joking with our confirmands two weeks ago about having a magic wand, and pointing at one of them and saying, “OK, Maddie loves me now.” Puff! She loves me. Is that love? Is there anything true about a relationship that is determined like that? No, that would not be love. That would not be something that God would desire for us; or, our opportunity for happiness and joy and unity with God.

Rather, God gives us an opportunity to choose God, an opportunity to freely *come* to God. But if God gives us this choice, then how does God act? Does God manipulate everything around us?

There is an analogy from C. S. Lewis that brought in the problem of pain, to the world of chess. He said, “imagine playing chess with an opponent, and you could give them – if you wished – you could allow them to take a move back. You could take one of your pieces off the board to give them an advantage.” Say, if I were playing with my kids, I could give them a lot of freedom to see a move, and I’d point out what the consequences were, and they could take it back. But ultimately, if there were no rules, if I let them take any of my pieces off whenever they wished, we wouldn’t be playing a game; and, in the same way with God – if God took away all of what we understand in life that we like to be – if God were to intervene for any prayer we have, and supernaturally change physics and the world around us, in what sense would we still be alive, in what sense would reality look like what we understand as reality?

These I perceive as hard limits to what God wishes to do and the world God created. But if God does not determine us, if God does not choose our own action, and God does not supernaturally supersede in every material thing around us, then where is there room for God to answer prayer? How does it happen?

When I posed this question to our 8<sup>th</sup> graders, one of them piped up [with], “through us.” That is such an obvious answer: How does God work? God works *chiefly* through us. God works when we come before God and voluntarily say, “God, I want to be part of what you are doing. Work through me. Move in me by your Spirit. Allow me to be your hands and feet in this world.”

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