

Can We Change God's Mind?
Exodus 32:11-14; Luke 11:5-13
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August 17, 2014

If you've been with us this summer, you know that we've been spending these summer Sundays looking at some of your "big questions" of faith. You asked about the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity; you asked where is God when people suffer; you asked about people who don't believe in God—big questions, deep questions. To be honest, I don't think we've really answered the questions so much as we have tried to give you a framework for thinking further for yourself about these questions. Today's big question is this: Can We Change God's Mind?

One of the things that I have found interesting about these questions that you have asked is that since we don't know exactly who asked the question, we have to do a little guesswork about why the person asked that question. And I've been wondering that about today's question. What prompts someone to ask if we can change God's mind?

Maybe what prompted the question is that there are a couple of instances in the Bible when it appears that a human being DID cause God to change God's mind.

One of those instances is today's Old Testament reading. So before I read it, let me set the stage for you. It comes from the book of Exodus. Here's what's going on: God has miraculously delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt; they have been wandering in the wilderness following God's pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. On their journey they have eaten the manna and drunk the water that God has provided for them. And now Moses has gone up on Mt. Sinai where God is giving to Moses the law, the Commandments, which Moses is to bring back down the mountain to the Hebrew people. The problem is that Moses was gone a long time—forty days and forty nights we are told (Exodus 24:18)—and the people decided that they would take matters into their own hands. So they fashioned a golden calf and worshipped it as their god. When God looked down and saw what the people were doing, God said to Moses, "I have seen how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them, and I may consume them."

Exodus 32:11-14

There it is. Moses pled to God on behalf of the people, and God changed God's mind and decided not to destroy them.

And if Moses could change God's mind, why can't we? Can we change God's mind?

There's a similar story about a time when Abraham was talking to God. This story is found in Genesis, chapter 18. Abraham and God were talking about the sinful cities of Sodom and Gormorrah. God had seen the wickedness of the people of those cities and had decided to destroy the cities. But Abraham asked God, "Will you sweep away the righteous along with the wicked? If fifty righteous people can be found, will you spare

the city?” And God replied, “If fifty righteous people can be found, I will not destroy the city.” Then Abraham got up his nerve and asked, “But what if we’re only five short. Will you destroy the city if 45 righteous people can be found?” And God said, “OK, if 45 righteous people can be found, I will not destroy the city.” Emboldened by this, Abraham pushed on, “God, I know I don’t have any right to speak to you like this, but what if there are only 30...or 20...or ten? Will you destroy the city if ten righteous people can be found?” And God said, “If ten righteous people can be found, I will not destroy the city.”

All through this conversation between Abraham and God, Abraham seems to be begging, beseeching God on behalf of the people, and God seems to be softening somewhat.

If Moses and Abraham could persuade God to change God’s mind, can we?

There’s one other Old Testament story I want to mention because this time—in spite of the pleadings of a human being—God did NOT change God’s mind.

This is the story of Jonah. God sent Jonah to the great city of Ninevah to tell the people there that they needed to repent. The problem was the Jonah didn’t like the people of Ninevah and would be just fine if God wiped out the whole city. So, after a couple of false starts—including spending three days in the belly of a big fish—Jonah eventually got to Ninevah. And there, he gave a rather half-hearted attempt to call the people to repentance: he roamed around the city saying, “Forty days more and Ninevah will be destroyed.” Not the most persuasive call to repentance I’ve ever heard. But it worked. The people of Ninevah did repent. And the Bible says, “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it” (Jonah 3:10).

But this made Jonah mad, because Jonah was hoping that God would go through with the punishment. So Jonah moped about and got angry at God and said, “I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing, so just kill me here and now.” You see Jonah wanted God to show less grace, to be less forgiving, less merciful, and he tried to persuade God to be more wrathful, more ready to punish. But that’s just not who God is.

Now it seems to me that there is at least one thing that these three stories have in common. In those cases when God’s mind did change, God changed from less grace to more grace, from harsh judgment to forgiveness. When Moses and Abraham pled to God on behalf of the people, God’s compassion and love won out over God’s desire to punish. And when Jonah tried to get God to send down judgment, God refused. In each case, God’s love was shown to be stronger than God’s desire to punish. If there is ever any change in God, it is that God always moves from less grace to more grace.

All of this leads me to think that maybe what was really changing here was the people’s understanding of who God is—that God is always more ready to love than we might think. Rather than being the angry God dangling us by a thread over a fiery hell of punishment, ours is a God who always chooses love.

So maybe that's one reason someone asked this question—Can We Change God's Mind? It's because since it happened in the Bible, might it still happen?

But I think there may be another reason a person might ask this question. Many people—as they look at the circumstances of life in which they live—believe that this is a hand that God has dealt them. And they don't especially like the hand they have been dealt. I'm poor and I want to be rich...I'm hungry and I want food to eat...I'm sick and I want to be well. Is there anything that I can do to persuade God to change the circumstances in which I am living? Is there something I can do or say to persuade God to change God's mind about this hand that I have been dealt?

See, I think that this question is really about prayer. What is prayer? How does prayer work? What happens when we pray? There are people who would tell you that prayer is a way to get God to do for you what you want. They say that prayer is a way to pull God's strings and to get God to do the things that you want God to do for you.

A few years ago I clipped a little classified ad out of the newspaper. It read:
Need a miracle? Say this prayer nine times a day for eight days then publish. May the sacred heart of Jesus be adored, glorified, loved and preserved throughout the world now and forever. Sacred heart of Jesus, pray for us. St. Jude, worker of miracles, pray for us. St. Jude, help for the hopeless, pray for us.

There you go. Pray that prayer nine times a day for eight days (Or is it eight times a day for nine days?), and you will get the miracle you want.

Actually in the paper that same day, a couple of ads later was this notice, "Thank you, St. Jude, for prayers answered. M. W."

Apparently M. W. must have gotten whatever miracle he or she prayed for. And so, they say, can you.

Some people would tell you that the Bible says exactly that. And that brings us to our second scripture reading for today—from the Gospel of Luke.

Luke 11:5-13

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

It begins with a pretty strange story about a guy who goes pounding on his neighbor's door in the middle of the night to borrow a loaf of bread. The neighbor—sound asleep—keeps telling the guy to go away and hush up the knocking. But eventually, the neighbor gets up and gives the persistent guy some bread.

It is an odd story, but that's the story Jesus told his disciples when they asked him a question about prayer. I think that the lesson this story teaches about prayer is this: just as that man was persistent in knocking on his neighbor's door, so we can be persistent in knocking on God's door. Jesus is inviting us—encouraging us—to be persistent in our requests to God. We do not need to be reluctant or fearful or hesitant to take to God whatever is on our minds. So Jesus says, "Ask...seek...knock."

"Ask and it shall be given to you...seek and you will find...knock and the door will be opened to you."

It sounds like all we have to do is to ask and God will give us whatever we ask for.

But that's not where this scripture ends. Jesus tells this story about being persistent in prayer, but then Jesus goes a step farther. Can you imagine, Jesus says, that a father, when his son asks for a fish would give him a snake? Or if a child asks for an egg would give him a scorpion? No father would do that. Fathers who love their children can, at the very least, be counted on not to be mean.

But read those verses more closely. It says that a father whose son asks for a fish will not give him a snake. But it does not say that he will always give him a fish. The promise of this scripture is not that whenever we ask God for a fish, God is honor-bound to give us a fish. The promise is that under no circumstances will God give us a snake. Which is to say that God can be counted on to do what is good for us, even if that means that God does not always give us everything we ask for.

And here's the way Jesus ends this teaching about prayer. If a human father, whose love is imperfect, will answer his child's prayer, then "how much more will the heavenly father give...." We might expect that sentence to end like this: "How much more will the heavenly Father give you what you ask for." But it doesn't say that. Instead Jesus says, "How much more will the heavenly Father give...the Holy Spirit." That is God's universal answer to prayer—the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit: the comforter, the advocate, the guide, the spirit of the living Christ, the spirit of love. That's God's answer to our prayers.

There's a drought and you pray for rain, and God answers that prayer by giving the Holy Spirit, so that if it does rain, the Holy Spirit fills us with thankfulness; and if it doesn't rain, the Holy Spirit deepens our faith to trust in God no matter what.

Or someone you love is sick, and you pray to God that the person be healed. And in answer to your prayer God gives the Holy Spirit. So that whether the person gets well...or even if the person does not...we can still trust in God whose will for all God's children is good.

So back to the big question: can we change God's mind? My answer is, "I hope not." Because I believe that God who is all loving and whose wisdom surpasses all human wisdom knows what is best for me and for all God's children, and God is working to bring about that good will. My place, as a child of God, is to trust in God, praying that God's will be done, always thankful for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Amen.☪