

“Bart Gets and F” - A Message on Prayer

by John VanSloten

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[Opening Video] [SERIES INTRODUCTION] Today’s message will be based on an episode entitled “Bart Gets and F”. This story deals with two related themes; prayer and the nature of God. Let’s start with the first two minutes of the show...

[opening clip from episode - Bart fails book report... Failing a lot in school]

So Bart goes home with another failing grade. He tries to study, but Homer entices him to watch TV instead. After a few wasted hours he finally gets around to hitting the books, but it's too late. Exhausted because of the late hour, he quickly falls asleep, face first, into his history book. The next morning Marge wakes him up and he begins to panic! Knowing that he is not prepared he tries to get out of writing the exam. First, he attempts to bribe the bus driver into crashing the bus, then he tries cramming with a couple of egg heads (who end up giving him all the wrong answers!), finally he goes for the fake stomach ache in class. It works and he gets a reprieve... A day at home with ice cream and some more time to study! So what does he do? Instead of studying he phones Millhouse and gets his answers for the test. But that didn't work. Apparently Millhouse didn't know his stuff either and Bart ends up with an F!

Now Bart's got a problem. The school psychologist is brought in. Parents are brought in. Teachers are consulted, and finally, they all conclude that Bart will need to repeat grade 4! Stunned and broken by the thought of this possibility, Bart vows to do better. **“As God is my witness I can pass the 4th grade!”**

At this point he realizes that if he's going to pass he needs some outside help. First he tries making a deal with the class brainer, Martin, but he doesn't work out. Then, in a moment of extreme desperation, when he had no where else to go... He does this>> [PRAYER CLIP... 16:15- 18:36 Lisa says> **“You owe him big”**] And so Bart struggles through the temptations (to play) of the snow day and studies as best he can. But the result, after all his honest hard work, was still failure. He got another F. Then he breaks down in tears before his teacher (real tears). “I did the best I could this time... really!... Now I know how Washington felt at Valley Forge...” He went on to show he did know history. The teacher was so overwhelmed with his applied knowledge she gave him a ‘D minus’. Bart had passed his test! Elated he made the announcement to his parents later that day, and his test got pinned up on the fridge. In the episode’s closing words, Bart concedes, **“A part of this ‘D-’ belongs to God!”**.

When I finished watching the show earlier this week I then sat down and asked myself, what does this episode teach us about us, about how we pray and about God? And how do the lessons of this episode fit in with a biblical understanding on these matters? (I'll be honest, my expectations were not met! I expected to have to correct the Simpson's theology of prayer. But that was not the case!) As I reviewed the program I realized that it hit the nail right on the head in terms of depicting people's understanding on prayer. I think a lot of people view prayer the same way Bart did! I also had to admit that the show also wasn't too far off in showing how the God of prayer works! Overall I think the show covered the topic quite admirably. But it did leave me feeling short in a few areas. I'd see the point being made, go 'Ya...', and then think "...but..." "Ya, that's true, but there's more to it ... more that needs to be said!"

So for the rest of this message, I want to cover both the '**ya**' parts and the '**but**' parts. (I need to be careful with phrases like 'but' part with show that made the phrase 'eat my shorts' common parlance!)

The Simpsons Theology of Prayer!

1. Ya.... Prayer is often a deal made in desperation!

But... It doesn't have to be that way

In this episode, and in many others, prayer is most often an act of desperation. When Bart had no where else to go... When he had come to the end of his rope... after trying all the options he could think of... he goes to God. His God is a god of last resorts. When in a time of crisis, God is the go to guy. And most often going to him involves making some kind of deal! As you watch the show you discover that this view of prayer is not just Bart's. Listen to how his mom prays.

One time, when a hurricane is bearing down on Springfield, Marge prayed this prayer,  "Dear God, this is Marge Simpson. If you stop this hurricane and save our family, we will be forever grateful and recommend you to all our friends." Or when the nuclear plant was having a melt down, "Dear Lord, if you spare this town from becoming a smoking hole in the ground, I'll try to be a better Christian. I don't know what I can do.... Hmmmmmm.... Oh, the next time there's a canned food drive, I'll give the poor something they'll actually like, instead of old lima beans and pumpkin mix." Prayer happen most often in times of crisis, and will often involve making some kind of deal with God.

How many of us haven't prayed these kinds of prayers? (Not the hurricane part per se... but the desperation/deal making part) Part of it is very natural and right isn't it? God should be the go to guy when there is no one else to go to. You can't read the bible and not come across dozens of stories of people praying in desperation. The OT

king David is recorded as doing it many times in the psalms. Many have cried out to God in desperate times. And some have even tried the deal making gig! **[RETELL Abraham/sodom/gomorrah bargain making story]** ... Desperation and deal making seem to be integral part of what prayer is. While this is true, that's not **all that prayer is!**

True, there are no atheists in foxholes or at funerals. But prayer is not only for times such as these. God is not only a God of last resorts. He can also be a God of first resorts! God is not just a 911 kind of God, he's also a God that you can talk with, meet with daily. This week, as I was thinking about this truth about God, an old hymn from when I was a kid popped back into my head. Referring to God it goes like this, **"And he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own...."** I thought, that's what prayer really ought to be. A daily communion with God, like walking with a friend. And yet so much more! Yes, God is omnipotent, and omnipresent... (but not omniverous as Homer once noted), he's the God who made it all. But he's also the God who cares for it all. He cares about the big things and he cares about the small things. He's not just a far away God, but he's also a near by God... Like a brother... like a friend.

And another important point is that he wants to be in relationship with us. He desires to talk with us and walk with us! He wants you to hear him whisper that you are his own! "You belong to me... I love you" He wants to be involved in your life... and his desire is that you involve him! His desire is to help you with your life.... in all its details. And he need not be coerced or bargained with, as though he really wasn't **for you**. He's more for you than anyone is! He wants to help. He wants you to know how much he cares, and how much he can help. That's what the God we pray to is like. That why the communication tool of prayer is so vital! We need to know the God who loves us like this so that we can have the strength and hope to live out this life we're living. The Apostle Paul wrote, **"If God is for us, who can be against us?" Romans 8:31** That's true! But how can we know it if we don't stay in contact with him? And that can be a daily thing, not just an emergency thing.

2. Ya... God does answer prayer!

But... We don't always get what we want One fact that is affirmed in this Simpsons episode and in most others is that God answers prayer. And as a Christian church we would, of course, agree with that! God does answer prayer. But not always in the way depicted in the Simpsons. It seems there are two things that characterize the Simpsons theology of how prayer is answered

1. The answer comes immediately (Maybe you have to do that for an half hour program!) But the inference is always that God will answer our prayers in accordance with out timing (which is always right away in my life!). So when Bart prays for snow, he get it that night! This premise on prayer is seen in many other episodes. If you watch the Simpsons, you know this is true. "God saves Todd Flanders who is playing the role of baby Moses in the basket but is swept away by the rushing river. He knocks down a bowling pin for the all-Christian bowling team, the Holy Rollers" And God also answers when Homer prays for football tickets in one episode. "God, if you really are a God you'll get me tickets to that game." Right away the doorbell rings and there is Ned Flanders; "Heidely - ho neighbour, want to go the game with me? I've got two tick...." Homer slams the door and says, "Why do you mock me Oh Lord?"

The message on how prayer works is clear. You pray for it and God answers (snap fingers) immediately. Its like you've got a cable modem connection and he is online waiting for you're order! Now, those of us acquainted with prayer know that this is not always the way it works with God. Yes, he always answers, but the timing is often different that what we expect. "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you." 2 Peter 3:7 [PETER IMAGE] You read this book you see that some prayers aren't answered for years, or even decades, or even centuries. God, in his wisdom, answers prayer in his timing. Timing that is always right for us, even when we don't understand.

It seems like once a month I meet with someone who is struggling with God on this prayer, "God, please help me be more patient!" God when are you going to answer me? Could you please make it snappy? How long must I wait God? Please...please ... please make me more patient! PAUSE... Sometimes there is wisdom in God's timing.

2. The answer is always positive The second teaching in the Simpsons theology of prayer is that God not only answers **when we want** but he also give us **what we want!** This view of prayer asserts that prayer is only answered when God gives us a positive response to our request.

While this might seem logical in some circumstances, answered prayer is not always defined by a positive outcome. Sometimes God's answer is no. PAUSE... He answers all right, but not with the answer we want. Again, this happens all the time in the Bible, and its happened many times over in my life. And sometimes I come to understand why God said no... and sometimes I don't. Some things I come to understand in retrospect, others I will only understand when I'm with God and see and

understand life with his retrospective wisdom. Truth is that sometimes God says no. And I think this is a truth that many people who pray refuse to allow.

They see God as a divine Santa Claus, and prayer as lap time where we ask for anything we want. And the expectation is that we get what we want. And if we don't get it, God must not have heard... Or he hasn't answered yet... Or I must not have prayed right... Or maybe I've been too naughty a boy this year... whatever! And because God does say no sometimes and we want to avoid that answer, we manipulate our prayers to get what we want... Listen to Homer's interesting slant on prayer when he finds out Marge is pregnant with their third child. As Marge is telling him the news, Homer interrupts, **"Can't talk now, praying. Dear Lord, the gods have been good to me and I am thankful. For the first time in my life, everything is absolutely perfect the way it is. So here's the deal; you freeze everything as it is and I won't ask for anything more. If that is OK please give me absolutely no sign.... PAUSE.... OK, deal! In gratitude, I present you this offering of cookies and milk. If you want me to eat them for you, please give me no sign. PAUSE... Thy will be done!"** [HOMER IMAGE] And he eats the food. Now we laugh at that because we do that! (Maybe that's one reason Christians don't like the show, it reveals too much of our hypocrisy!) Now we may not be as transparent as Homer is here, but we do the same thing... I do.

Prayer is not like that. Its not manipulative tool to get what we want, when we want it. Its more a tool to discern what God wants, and how he wants you to follow his lead. And again, what he wants is what's best for you. Even when we don't understand it.

3. Ya... God can intervene in a powerful way!

But... He still insists we do our part

Often in the show prayer is answered in the form of a miraculous intervention by God. Sort of like a superman kind of thing, where God makes the scene, saves the day, and then flies off. Prayer in this way, almost takes on a fatalistic kind of understanding. Like you pray and then wait for God to do his thing. And while there are some things that only God can do, there is often, a part for us to play.

In this episode where Bart gets and F, we see this reality at work. Bart prays for snow and gets it... But now his part clicks in. He's now got a day to work at studying himself and he's got a choice to make. Will I do my part or won't I? Bart chooses to do his part and he does end up passing, by the skin of his teeth. Here the show got it right. Prayer is not just about asking God to do it for us. Often its answered by God working through us. We ought never be people who pray and then sit on our butts

waiting for the answer. Prayer is an active thing as well.

So many times I've had friends come to me in a bit of a panicked state. "I've been praying to God for months about this issue in my life and I just can't seem to get an answer." And so I'll ask, "Have you been researching the issue? Reading on it? Doing something about it?" "No..." "Well, get out there and work on it!" God may bring his answer in concert with your sweat and hard labour. PAUSE... As a wise man from my old church used to say. Prayerful living is about having both oars in the water. When you row a boat you have two oars... One represents prayer... the other your own work... And you need both to keep your boat going straight! Don't be fatalistic by praying and never working hard. And don't be humanistic by doing the opposite (all work and no pray!)

A prayerful life needs both. Live in faith and use your head! [Pray and work verse Col 1:10?...] And Bart had it right in this episode!

4. Ya... God deserves some credit in our lives

But... We need to get the proportions right!

At the end of the episode I mentioned that Bart's concluding words were, "**A part of this 'D-' belongs to God!**". Not very often you see anyone on primetime TV giving God any credit at all. So it was good to see some credit being offered... But at first, I was a bit put off by Bart's proportions. But then I saw the irony of his statement. Maybe that's what the writers were really saying... that a big part of the 'd-' did belong to God! And maybe they knew that people of faith often forget this part of the equation.

What I find amazing about prayer in the lives of many Christians (me included) is our capacity to forget what we've prayed for. In desperation we pray for something. Some time in the future that prayer is answered and God takes care of us, and then we either forget to see the answer for what it is, or we take credit for the answer our selves. Here's Bart, at the end of his rope, nowhere to go but to God.... this miracle happens... And then when he gets the pass, he steals the spotlight and takes the credit. As I saw it in the show, I thought, "What a fool." But, then I thought, "Am I honest with myself when I do the same thing?"

I have a confession to make. I do the same thing Bart did all the time. "Great message Pastor John..." And I forget the maker of messages for just a moment. And I'm sure it happens in your life as well. "You are really a kind person..." PAUSE... "I admire you for your wisdom..." "You really pulled that one out of a hat!..." "You've got such great kids..." "You've done really well for yourself in you life..." And when this happens most of us become pretty self congratulatory. And we forget about the maker of all things... about the sustainer of all thing. We forget about the God who made us

and through who we have our being! And whether we're prayerful people or not, we take credit where credit is not due. And we forget about who we really are and where we'd be without God.

Did you catch that line of Lisa's when she walked in and overheard Bart's prayer.... {LISA IMAGE} "Prayer.... the last refuge of a scoundrel"

That's Bart to a T!... He's manipulative... He's very selfish... He's a bit proud and arrogant... And mischievous.... a bit of a smart aleck... And if I'm honest about me, I'm the same. The bible teaches that all of us that that kind of streak in us. Its called sin. And the Bible is filled with Bart like characters, and much...much worse.... with whom God is in relationship. Murderers, adulterers, hookers, liars, cheats.... When I read those stories I shake my head at a God who would put up with such insolence... Such stupidity. The same way I often react to the Simpsons.... especially Homer and Bart. They are just so messed up! But aren't we all? And isn't the humour in their messedupedness exactly what draws us to a show like this. If we're willing to laugh at ourselves.

But thank God he doesn't laugh at our situation. Thank God he doesn't just hit the remote and turn us off because of our dysfunction. Seeing our need, he responded in grace. He doesn't give us what we deserve but instead... Just like the teacher did in Bart's case, he has compassion on us and passes us anyway! Not because we got a great grade... Not because we had it all together.... But because of he does... and he's willing to love us despite our shortfalls... Despite our final grades He did that all through Christ [GOSPEL]... Christ makes prayer possible! Only way we can come into this loving relationship with God. Became the telephone line...