Prayer isn’t a gumball machine

Toxic theology in the wake of mass violence

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Last Monday, the day after two consecutive mass shootings—one in El Paso, Texas, and one in my hometown of Dayton, Ohio—Mike Huckabee posited in a blogpost that the uptick in gun violence in the United States is due to a “lack of thought and prayers.”

> Despite all those who are denouncing the idea of prayers for the victims … I will continue to pray for the victims and their families and for an end to this mindless violence, and I hope you will, too.
>
> In fact, … I would posit that the lack of thought and prayers is probably the single biggest factor in what is behind them.

He was responding to the perception that prayer offered as condolence after an attack is an insufficient response to gun violence, but his statement emblemizes an even more disturbing trend in American thinking about prayer.

These days, Christians talk about prayer as if it were simply asking God for stuff, telling God how we want it to be. And this view fails to capture the breadth of what prayer means in the Christian tradition.

Supplication (asking for stuff) was a part of early Christian prayer. But it was just one part of a larger, dynamic process by which people communicated with God, reflected on that communication, aligned themselves with divine will, and spiritually equipped themselves to work for God in the world.

Supplication is mentioned in scripture alongside thanksgiving, intercession, and praise (e.g., Phil. 4:6, 1 Tim. 2:1, 1 Tim. 5:5, Heb. 5:7). When Paul tells early Christians at Thessalonica to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17), he is not suggesting that they should constantly be asking God for things. He's talking about a way of life that is always connected with and informed by God.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray this way too. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), prayer is tightly connected to the activities followers of Jesus can do to make God's "kingdom come" on "earth as it is in heaven" (6:10). The Lord's Prayer is more about aligning one's will with God's than it is about asking for desirable outcomes.

In fact, Jesus cautions the disciples about asking for too many things. "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (6:7).

When we treat prayer like a gumball machine (in goes the prayer; out comes the result), we rob ourselves of deeper relationship with God. We can also do real damage to others.

At its best, this kind of talk about prayer reduces God to Santa Claus: We ask, and if we are good—if we put the right coin in the machine—God gives. At its worst, this theology condemns those who suffer most deeply by judging them to be "not prayerful enough" or "not good enough" to deserve presents from the Santa-God.

This is precisely what Huckabee is doing. He's blaming the victims of a violent crime, their families and friends, a grieving city, and a gun violence-torn nation. In 32 seconds, 9 of my neighbors were murdered. I saw pictures of workers scrubbing pools of blood in the neighborhood where I regularly dine with my family. I heard of heroic neighbors who tried to resuscitate the wounded. The suggestion that this happened because we have not prayed enough is deeply hurtful.

Aside from the additional violence this theology of prayer does to those who are suffering, it also abdicates the praying person of any responsibility for acting in the world. What happens next is up to the Santa-God, and we play no part in bringing about God's will on earth. It is laissez-faire free market capitalism come to reside in American theology—the invisible hand does the work, and our job is to sit back and watch it work.

For the majority of Christian history, this kind of economic thinking wasn't intrinsic to prayer. Early Christian thinking about prayer not only involved asking God for things, it demanded an attentiveness to God's work in the world that would guide all of one's daily activities.

When early Christians prayed for those in prison, they showed up at the prison to feed the prisoners so often that they were made fun of by the Roman comedian Lucian (*Passing of Perigrinus* 12). When they prayed for the sick, they did not simply ask God for healing; they anointed the sick with oil in a healing ritual (James 5:14). Praying in this tradition demands that we not only talk to God, but also that we align our body and our actions with God's will.

Huckabee is not the first person to suggest that prayer works like a gumball machine. He's part of a tradition of American thinking about prayer that judges those who suffer and absolves the praying person of any responsibility to act. It has been thriving for decades.

But applying this theology to gun violence may be the single most dangerous abuse of prayer in our lifetimes. This is a case in which we simply can't afford to pray and walk away. If we need more prayer, as Huckabee posits, then it must be the kind of prayer that is unceasing, the kind that seamlessly transitions into the daily work of bringing about God's kingdom on earth.