

### ***For the Sake of the Righteous***

In the name of him who taught his disciples to pray, dear friends in Christ: Of all the gifts our Father in heaven has given us, *prayer* has got to be one of the most consistently underutilized and unappreciated. Either because at some level we doubt that God will really answer our prayers: “*I prayed once real hard, and didn’t get what I asked for*”; or perhaps because we hold to a fatalistic view that says “*God’s going to do what God’s going to do regardless of our prayers*”, we often consign the whole idea of prayer to the category of actions of last resort; like the woman who was told, “There’s nothing we can do now but pray”, and replied, “*Oh no! Has it come to that?*”

On the other hand, there are any number of abuses of God’s gift of prayer that we could name. Today we often hear preachers who tell us that we can pray ourselves well, or rich, or successful, if we just use the right formula, or if we have enough faith, or if we work at it fervently and maybe add a little fasting – and if you don’t get what you ask for, well it’s because you didn’t do something quite right or didn’t believe with all your heart. Then again, maybe you’ve seen those so-called “scientific studies” which attempt to prove statistically that hospital patients recover faster when someone prays for them. They’ll say something like, “There was a six percent higher rate of recovery for people who were prayed for over the control group that no one prayed for”. This, completely independent of the faith of the patient or the people doing the praying – and I’d like to know how they know that no one prayed for patients in the control group. Do you suppose they told their families not to pray for them? And don’t we often pray for the welfare of all who are in sickness and distress? Such studies prove nothing – except that the people who conduct them don’t understand what prayer is all about.

If we want to find the truth about prayer, the place to look, of course, is in the Holy Scripture. There we will find hundreds of examples of people who prayed to God and received from him the desire of their hearts. And St. James assures us that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective – which can also be one of the obstacles, because people will say, “yes I know the prayers of the *righteous* are powerful; but I’m no Daniel, or David, or Esther, or Ruth. Why should God listen to *my* prayer?”

In today’s Gospel we hear the disciples asking Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” They were looking for a method or formula to guarantee the success of their prayers. Jesus responds with a brief example of prayer in what we all recognize as Luke’s edition of the Lord’s prayer; but I’d like to set that aside for another sermon, because I want to focus on what Jesus discusses next: and that is God’s *character*. If we want to know about the true power of prayer, instead of examining methods, formulas, attitudes, postures, statistics, or our own personal worthiness, the best place to start is with God himself; the one who invites us to pray and promises to answer. *Why should God listen to your prayers?* It’s because of who and what he is. This morning’s readings have more to do with revealing God’s character than with teaching specific methods for prayer. The better we understand our Father in heaven and his attitude toward us, the more confidently we will be able to go to him with our requests. With this in mind, let’s look at what God tells us about himself in the readings.

First, God reveals that he is approachable. In teaching us to call God, “Father”, Jesus reminds us that through Baptism we have been made members of God’s own family. While we must never forget that our God is the Holy, Righteous, Judge who is both Creator and King, he

is at the same time our loving Father who earnestly desires to give us the things that we need to be happy and productive members of his household. The same God who came in a dark cloud with lightning and thunder, and shook Mt. Sinai so that the trembling Israelites stood before him scared half to death, is the same God who we heard last week had lunch with Abraham and who, we heard this week, shared his plans with Abraham, inviting him to draw near to offer his intercessions for Sodom and the other cities of the plain. God would have us know that he is interested in our affairs and gladly invites us to come to him on a personal level with our cares and concerns.

Second, Jesus explains that God *wants* to answer our prayers, not just because he loves and cares for us; but also because his own good name is on the line. This is illustrated in the parable of the friend who goes knocking at his neighbor's door at midnight. This story is often misunderstood because of a translation error. Normally the focus is on the one doing the knocking – it's his persistence or his boldness that's commended. The idea is that the man in bed will finally get up to help because he won't get any sleep otherwise. And then we're told to keep knocking until we get an answer – that is, keep praying until God gets tired of hearing us. Now, there's something to be said for persistence; but that's really not what this parable is about. It's about the guy in bed, not the neighbor who has a need.

What it really says is that even though the man won't get out of bed to help his neighbor because he is a friend, yet because of his own "*lack of shame*" he will. In ancient Israel hospitality was considered to be one of the most important virtues. To refuse someone asking for bread to entertain a guest just because you'd already gone to bed would have been considered unbelievably bad-mannered. The idea is that even though this guy doesn't feel like getting out of bed to help for friendship sake, yet because he doesn't want to be instantly known as the grouchiest, stingiest man in town, he will get up and give his friend whatever he needs. He has to protect his reputation. The point is that God answers prayer because he loves us very much; **but even if he didn't** he would still give us what we ask for because his gracious reputation is perfect and he needs to keep it that way.

Next, God wants us to know that he knows *how* to bless us. Jesus hypothetically asks, "*Which of you fathers would give your son a snake if he asked for a fish?*" The obvious answer is "none". His point is that God knows much better than we do how to bless us, and he is not about to give us something that will harm us. We can be absolutely sure that he wants to give us the things that will be good for us. It's important to remember, however, that God always blesses us with a view to improving our eternal welfare; it has a higher priority than our temporal well being. Consequently, we can be sure that those temporal blessings that would interfere with our attainment of the heavenly goal will not be granted. I'm reminded of the comic strip character *Calvin*, an often naughty little boy whose Christmas wish list always included things like flame-throwers and hand grenades. In the same way, we often pray for things that are just as damaging in a spiritual sense – and we can be grateful that God declines to give them to us. Instead, Jesus suggests what we should be asking for, and that's God's Holy Spirit; because with the Spirit come all the things we need in this life and to see us through to the next.

The readings for this morning also inform us that God answers prayers because he does what is right. That is the basis of Abraham's plea for the cities of the plain in today's Old Testament reading. He says to the Lord, "*It wouldn't be right for you to destroy the righteous people with the wicked*". He appeals to God's perfect justice. Each time Abraham lowers the number of righteous required to preserve the cities, God readily agrees. Oddly enough, it's Abraham that seems unsure God's commitment to doing what is right. You have the feeling that Abraham thinks he's walking on thin ice each time he opens his mouth. It's like he's saying,

*“Please don’t vaporize me for mentioning it, but aren’t you going to be fair?”* The simple truth is that God *has* to be fair, and when we pray we can appeal to God’s justice.

But far beyond what is just and fair, it turns out that God is even more gracious than Abraham supposes is possible. God could easily pick and choose among the people, and just strike down the wicked ones and spare the righteous, but he happily agrees to *preserve the wicked* for the sake of the righteous. For just ten righteous people he would save thousands of people who richly deserve his condemnation. And here God reveals the most fascinating part of his character that we can appeal to when we pray: *that God saves the wicked for the sake of the righteous*. That stretches well beyond simple justice. In fact, it lays him open to the charge of being unjust: because by not destroying the wicked who deserve it, he ends up treating them the same as he does those who are righteous. That’s not fair either. Which is why Abraham’s comment is so interesting. He says, *“Far be it from you to do such a thing ... to treat the righteous as the wicked”*. What’s translated “far be it from you” literally says, *“it would pollute you”* or *“it would defile you”*. Abraham is thinking it would defile God to destroy the righteous, which is true; but he neglects the equal truth, that it also defiles God not to destroy the wicked.

What Abraham doesn’t realize is that his comment is prophetic, because that is exactly what the mysterious Gospel of God is all about. He says, *“Lord, it would defile you to treat the righteous as the wicked”*; yet to save us, that is exactly what he must do – treat us, the wicked ones, as if we were righteous – which isn’t fair, and so that would defile him. The wicked *have* to be punished for justice to be served; but that’s where our Savior steps in – the Son of God – who became defiled and polluted with our sin. To treat the wicked as if they were righteous, and still maintain his perfect justice, God had to treat the only Righteous One as if he were the wicked.

And now I’m going to risk confusing you with a linguistic argument, but it turns out that the primary meaning of the word Abraham uses for “defile” or “pollute” is “to *pierce*” or “to *puncture with a sharp object*”. Abraham’s words could just have correctly been translated, *“Lord, it would pierce you to treat the righteous as the wicked”*. Abraham’s unknowing prophecy was fulfilled when our Savior, bearing the filth and pollution of our sin, was pierced through with nails and with a spear. When he was crucified as the wicked one, divine justice was served. And so, by the death and resurrection of his Son, our heavenly Father secured the right to treat the wicked as if they were righteous.

And now we who are Baptized into that death and resurrection are counted righteous. In fact, because we are united with Christ, when we go to God in prayer, we go to him as Christ, the Righteous One. The Father receives our prayers offered in the name of Jesus as requests from his only Son – that’s why we offer our prayers in his name. That is the true power of Christian prayer. And that’s how we know our requests are heard: they come to God from Jesus himself.

It’s an amazing thing; but like I said before, the answers to questions concerning prayer do not lie in us and in the way we pray. They are found in God and his attitude toward us. So, understanding who God is and what he has done for us in our Savior, let us go to him boldly and make our requests known. And God who already gave us his only Son will surely give us all things for his sake – the sake of the Righteous One, Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***