

When You Pray Matthew 6:7-15

You may not have noticed, but over the last few weeks, we have been conducting a study of the means of grace, the different ways in which God's grace is customarily poured out on His people. On the last Sunday of September, we examined the blessing of Scripture as we studied Psalm 19. Using the daily Bible readings in the bulletin along with a devotional to guide your daily study, attending weekly Bible study and Sunday School, and coming to worship are all good ways for all of us to hear God speaking to us through the pages of the Bible. Reading Scripture is one of the best ways to experience God's grace.

On the first Sunday in October, we celebrated the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, another way in which God pours out His grace on us. As we touch and taste the bread and wine, we are reminded that by faith in Jesus Christ, our relationship with Him is just that real, just that intimate. In the person of His Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ is just as much within us as are the elements after we take communion.

On the first two Sundays in October, we enjoyed yet another way in which God blesses us – the blessing of Christian fellowship. At our Grand Gulf picnic, we enjoyed great food and spending time with one another, and with two of our partners in mission in Northeast Brazil: Raimundo and Valdivia. Last week, we were blessed by Gleidson's message and Naomi's translation. We have thus enjoyed the unity of the Church, not just in this congregation, but throughout the world.

Today, we explore yet another means of God's grace: prayer. It should go without saying that this is a critical part of every Christian's life with God. For every relationship involves communication, right? Every relationship involves listening to the other person as well as saying what's really on your mind and heart. So, if it is important to listen to God's Word in Scripture, it is equally important to pray, to tell God what we are thinking and feeling. After all, if Jesus Christ, the Son of God Himself, took time to commune with the Father in prayer, how much more should we?

But prayer isn't easy, is it? I don't know about you, but I find it all too easy to let the busy-ness of the day crowd out time for prayer. And it's hard to keep on praying for things when you don't see any results, or when the opposite of what you pray for comes to pass. How can we pray, and pray more effectively? How should we pray? Let's hear what Jesus has to say on the subject.

In our responsive reading this morning, Jesus told the story of a man who came beating on his neighbor's door in the middle of the night. The man needed some food to set before some friends. But the neighbor was already in bed, and didn't want to get up to give the man anything. Jesus says that when we pray, we should be like the man at the door, persistent in prayer.

But how does this story fit with what Jesus says in our passage? Here, we read, "But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen *do*: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking." Doesn't persistence involve repetition?

Yes, we must be persistent in prayer. Persistence is a hallmark of faith. As we continue to pray for our needs, we demonstrate faith that God will deliver in His time. After all, Abraham prayed for 25 years for the birth of Isaac. The children of Israel prayed for 400 years for deliverance from the Egyptians. And the church has prayed for 2000 years that God's Kingdom would come in all its fullness with the return of Christ. We must be persistent.

But at the same time, we must not fall into the trap of thinking that God will answer our prayers because we go on and on in prayer. If the number of words were all that mattered, then the holiest people in the world would be the Buddhists, who believe that they are saying a whole prayer each time they spin a prayer wheel around. Pagans try to manipulate their false gods with ritual incantations. They try to force the hand of God with their words.

Now, of course, we smile at such beliefs. We know that prayer wheels and incantations cannot move the heart or bind the hands of the living God. But do we ever think that God will hear us because of our many words? Do we take pride in the regularity of our devotions? Do we think that just because we pray faithfully every morning that God will give us what we want? Do we think that we are in charge when we pray?

No, we must be persistent, but we must not put our faith in the fact that we repeat our prayers. Instead, Jesus taught us to begin our prayers, not with that long list of things we want or need. No, we must begin our prayers by focusing on the One to Whom we pray. For how does the Lord's Prayer begin? We pray to Our Father in Heaven. We thus remind ourselves that God is the One who is in charge, so we should not even think of trying to manipulate Him. Instead, we should pray that His name would be hallowed, considered high and holy, not only by us, but by more and more people throughout the

earth. In short, at the very beginning of our prayers, our main concern should be on God and His glory, not on ourselves and what we want.

But in our responsive reading this morning, Jesus also said, "Ask and ye shall receive." Doesn't this mean that we should ask God for things? Doesn't that mean we will get anything that we ask for?

Of course God wants us to ask Him for things, but both reason and experience tell us that we don't always get what we want. I would venture to say that there is not a person in this room who has received everything he has ever asked for in prayer. And let's face it: some of those unanswered prayers have been urgent and desperate.

Think of how many prayers mothers have offered up for the safety of their soldier sons, only to have their prayers answered by a telegram of condolence from the government. Think of how many prayers for deliverance from sickness have been offered at bedsides, only to be answered by the death of the beloved.

I can't think of how many times I prayed that my Mom and Dad wouldn't get a divorce, but they did. I can't think of how many times I prayed that they would get back together, but it never happened.

Think of the most heart-wrenching prayer ever offered, the one Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup of suffering away from me!" On the same night Jesus prayed this prayer, he would be betrayed and beaten and abandoned. No, we most certainly don't get everything we pray for.

If we always got what we prayed for, if only we prayed long and hard enough, or if only we prayed in a certain way, we would not need to pray at all. For we would be gods, in charge of our own destinies.

Instead, Jesus teaches us to pray as needy beggars coming before a rich man, and as guilty criminals coming before a mighty king. We do not pray in order to inform God of our needs. God is the all-knowing ruler of the universe. He doesn't need us to tell Him anything.

So, what does Jesus mean when He says that we should ask and we will receive? Our responsive reading goes on to explain: it is God who knows our needs better than we do. Just as earthly fathers know how to give good things to their children, just so, God knows what we really need. That's what He promises to give us, if only we will ask Him.

And what is it that we really need? The Lord's Prayer goes on to tell us: that God's Kingdom would come, that God's glory would be spread throughout all the earth. We are to

pray that God's Will is done, and not ours. In our prayers we are to acknowledge that we don't know what's best – God does. We are to admit that the world would be a whole lot better off if more and more people abandoned themselves to God's will, instead of spending so much time trying to get what each of us wants.

No, it is only after our wills are abandoned to God's will, it is only after we have realized His mighty power and our weakness that we are ready to bring our petitions humbly before His throne. God will not give us everything we want, and for most of us, much of the time that's a good thing. Instead, Jesus commands us to pray for our daily bread, the things we need each day to live. We don't need to go into lots of details because God knows our needs better than we do ourselves. We simply pray for our daily bread, and trust that God knows what that is and will provide whatever it is that we need.

One of our greatest needs is to be protected from temptation. And so we must pray that God would lead us, weak and sinful as we are, away from opportunities to fall into sin. If we ever think we are strong enough to handle temptation, we are sure to fall into its clutches. Instead, we must pray that God would reveal our weaknesses to us and that He would keep us away from them. We must pray that God would deliver us from the power of evil around us and within us, evil that threatens to pull us away from God.

And it is when we think about temptation that we come to realize that we have too often given in to it. In sinning against the Lord, we have incurred a debt to Him. We all owe our God our complete allegiance and obedience. We owe Him all the love in our hearts and minds. Yet who can say that he has paid his debt to God? Who can claim obedience to his King? No, we all stand in need of God's forgiveness, for we have all failed Him.

But to make matters worse, Jesus reminds us that we must forgive others, if we expect God to forgive us. But how can we do this? Some of us have wounds are so fresh that they smart and sting whenever we look at the one who has injured us. Other injuries are old and deep, plastered over but festering below, hidden in the darkness. How can we hope to perform open-heart surgery on ourselves, rooting out the poison of hatred and resentment that dwells therein? How can we forgive others in order that God may forgive us? How can we ever gain the strength we need to be obedient to God?

Look at the conclusion to the Lord's Prayer. We already know we don't make the rules – God is the King, and His is the Kingdom. In the same way, we know we don't have the power to make ourselves pure, but God does. His is the power revealed in the cross of

Christ and in His empty tomb, power to provide all our needs, power to bring justice to the oppressed, and power to make all who trust in Christ share in His holiness.

And so we see that our prayers should end just as they begin, with God and His kingdom and His glory. Our prayers are addressed to God, and our prayers are focused on God primarily so that God might be with us. No wonder prayer is such a means of God's grace. For as we draw close to Him in prayer, He is in fact meeting our greatest need.

431 Come My Soul Your Plea prepare

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit *be* with you all. Amen.