

“Why Do We Pray?”

It's interesting, (in the gospels), in those stories of Jesus' life, that many of his teachings come in response to the questions and/or the requests of some of his followers. It's not that he didn't, at times, choose teaching topics of his own. He certainly did, and those same (gospel-stories) are filled with the things he taught. At the same time, many of his teachings result directly from some of the requests.

Two weeks ago, (if you remember) it was the (so-called) “expert in the law” who asked a question. Jesus had just summarized the law that we're to “love the Lord our God with all of our heart and soul and strength and mind, and that we're to love our neighbor as ourselves.” In an attempt (Luke tells us) to justify himself, this “expert” asked the question, “And so, who is my neighbor?”

In response, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, the man who went out of his way to love this one who had been beaten and left for dead, and who would have been easy to pass by. His final words to “go and do likewise” made it a powerful story and lesson, not just for that “expert”, but for us.

Last week it was the story of the two sisters, Mary and Martha, and of Jesus visiting them in their home. Martha was busy making sure everything was ready and in good order, while Mary just sat at Jesus' feet and listened. When asked, “Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to work by myself?” Jesus responds by saying (to Martha) that she was “worried and upset about many things and that only one thing is needed...and Mary has made the right choice.”

Well, today it's a different setting, but the same teaching-response (from Jesus), this time not to a question he was being asked, but to a request. Luke tells us, “One day Jesus was praying...and when he was finished, one of his disciples said, “Lord, teach us to pray...as John taught his disciples...Lord, teach us to pray.”

Why do we pray? That's the question we're asking today. It's a basic question. Many people pray and for a variety of reasons, but why do we do it? You don't have to be a Christian to pray. People from every religion spend time in prayer, even atheists. One of the recent studies says that 17% pray to a God they believe does not even exist.

Why do we pray? What is it we expect to happen when we pray? Jesus prayed. He taught his disciples to pray? Why do we pray? How is it that we are supposed to pray?

Let's turn to our story. It's a familiar one today, at least the prayer we find in it. It's one most of us have committed to memory. It's the Lord's Prayer. It's a prayer given and taught to us by our Lord. And it's one we include in our worship each week, and for good reason.

But when Jesus first taught it, it wasn't a prayer intended for worship or (for that matter) even for repetition, but to serve as an example, as a model for the prayers and the prayer-life of his followers. “Lord, teach us to pray.” That was the disciple's request. The response was a prayer that has been named after our Lord.

Now, the version we find in today's text contains five of the seven petitions we've come to know. Matthew's gospel adds the other two. What's interesting about the prayer (and the pattern) Jesus gives, when it comes to the question, “Why do we pray?” is that in the pattern (and the prayer), we learn a lot.

Look at how it's set up. Of the seven petitions in the Lord's Prayer, what do they deal with? The first three deal with God and what he wants for the world. The next four deal with what's needed and best for us, corporately, as a people. And of the seven, (interestingly) none of them have to do directly with our own individual desires or concerns; not one. (We'll come back to that in a moment.)

Think with me for (a moment) about what Jesus taught, about what he teaches us to pray. How does the prayer begin? It begins by saying, “Our Father, who art in heaven.”

Now, why does it begin that way? It begins that way (one) because that's who he is, (he's our heavenly Father), and, (two), because that's the relationship we have (with him) in Christ. That's what God has made possible for us in his Son.

In other words, the beginning of that prayer makes a theological statement. It's what we teach and believe about God. It's who he is. It's central in our theology. It also makes a relational statement. It's a statement of the relationship we have with God. He is our Father and (as a result) we belong to him as his children. Jesus says we're to begin our prayers with an acknowledgment of that relationship, and with an understanding that there is only One God, and from there (and from only there) do we move into the petitions.

Now, we're not going to walk through each of the seven here this morning, the detail found in each, but, again, think about what Jesus taught. He said, "Our Father, who art in heaven," and then he said (and here are the first three), he said, "hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

What's Jesus teaching us about why we're to pray? What's the pattern he wants us to follow? (Just think about it.) Seven petitions, the first three dealing with the will and desires of God. What's the lesson? It's simple. The primary purpose of our prayers, the first and most important reason we're to come to God, is not to bring God's mind into alignment with ours, but to bring our minds and our desires and our wills into alignment with his.

In our first lesson today, the apostle Paul is writing to the church in Ephesus, to a group of believers who were facing all kinds of troubles. The world (in that first century) was less welcoming of those who were followers of Christ than is our twenty-first century world today. There was opposition from every direction.

And yet what does Paul write? What's his prayer? He says, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better," (that you may know him better).

He goes on to say, "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe."

Now, stop for a moment and think about what we just read. That's his prayer; not that they might be able to face the troubles of the world, as significant (in those days) as they were, but that they might know God better and hang on to the hope and the power that belongs to us in Christ. It's the reason we pray. It's what we need more than anything.

E. Stanley Jones, a Christian missionary to India puts it this way. He says, "Prayer is surrender – surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boathook from the boat (he says) and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to his."

Too many Christians have a dissatisfying prayer life because they start out with the wrong objective. Rather than praying for a deeper understanding of God and what he desires for our world, too many prayers begin by sharing with God what we think is best for him to do. And then off we go with one petition after another, listing the desires and wills and ideas we have for him.

Now, there's a place for that, and we'll get to that in a moment. But Jesus' prayer (in the model he gives us) it was exactly the opposite. He prayed, "Hallowed be your name...your kingdom come...your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Now, do you think Jesus had ideas for this world? (Sure he did.) Do you think Jesus had ideas for his own life? (Probably better than we have for our own.) But the pattern he used in his own prayer life sought first and foremost to know the will and the desires of God.

Billy Graham says "The main purpose of prayer is not to put God into a position where he can be used by us, but to put us into a position where we can be used by him."

The first three petitions deal with the will and desires of God; the last four deal with what's needed and best for us. (You know the prayer.) "Give us this day our daily bread...and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us...and lead us not into temptation...but deliver us from evil..."

Two things about these last four petitions. One is (and we've already alluded to this) that it's a corporate prayer. It's a prayer that even though including our own individual needs, looks far beyond our own individual desires. What's best for us as a community is more important than what's best for me in my life situation. And two, it's a prayer in which there is a movement from our physical needs to our spiritual needs, from the things we need to live in this world to the things we need to live in relationship with God.

Now, I don't want to spend too much time with this, but in our world today, they come as important correctives. On the one hand, in what is increasingly becoming a "me-centered" approach to life, ("What's best for me? What's in it for me? It's all about me."), Jesus teaches us to pray for us.

And on the other hand, in a world in which there's a tendency to focus our prayers on what's material (on the physical and temporal and immediate needs of our lives), Jesus teaches us also to pray for the spiritual and the eternal and the much farther-reaching needs we have.

In the passage today, Jesus is teaching his disciples how to pray. He's teaching us how to pray. And he gives us an example, a model to follow. Three petitions seeking to bring into alignment our will with God's, and four seeking what's needed and best for us. And all to our Father who loves and cares more than we know.

"Why do we pray?" In the second part of our lesson, Jesus tells a parable. It's a story designed to encourage the disciples in their prayers to God, and one (Jesus told) to encourage us as we pray.

Remember the story? It's the story of a man going to his friend at midnight and waking him up and asking him for some bread, because another friend has shown up at his house and is waiting back home for something to eat. Jesus says that "even though the man will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs."

Now, perhaps that story seems a bit strange to us living (as we are) in the year 2016 in California, and perhaps it is. (In fact, I'll be honest.) If you come to my house at midnight and ask for a piece of bread, I'll probably think you're a bit strange. In fact, what I'd most likely do is send you over to Pastor Judy's house and let her deal with you!

In 2016, it might seem a bit strange. But in Jesus' day, it wasn't at all. In fact, in Jesus' day, it was an accepted practice, that if someone came to your house unexpected, it was expected that you offer them something to eat. And if you didn't have anything (like the man in the story), then it was acceptable to ask your neighbor.

How come? (Why did they do that?) They did that because hospitality was a community responsibility. It was the responsibility of the community to provide something to eat for the stranger in their midst. And so when Jesus told the story, it was a story that wasn't strange at all.

And so, what's the point? The point is that if the persistence of the man in the story (who didn't have any bread) would cause the man in the story (who had some) to get up and give him what he needed, how much more will our persistence cause God to give us what we need.

And that's why Jesus follows (that story) with those familiar words. He says, "Ask and it will be given." He says, "Seek and you will find." He says, "Knock and the door will be opened to you."

I still remember a question I asked my advisor in seminary during my first year. (And I still remember his answer.) I asked, "Apart from some of the more obvious things like good theology, and the preaching and teaching and people-skills I'm going to need, what's the single-most important quality I need to develop in my Christian life?" (Do you know what he said?) He said, "Be persistent." He said, "Don't give up." He said, "No matter what, don't ever quit."

Now, the disciples didn't ask that question. They only asked, "Lord, teach us to pray." But the response Jesus gives was the same. He taught them to pray. He teaches us how pray. And then he says, "Keep on asking. Keep on seeking. Keep on knocking."

Maybe this is obvious, but the words Jesus uses to encourage us to never give up are all verbs. He says we're to ask, and we're to seek, and we're to knock. We're not just to pray and then sit around and wait for the answer to come. Sometimes it happens that way; more often than not, it doesn't.

How many times have I prayed a prayer that seems to go unanswered, and then after searching for an answer, the answer becomes clear? Jesus says, keep on asking. No matter how many times you've asked. If an answer hasn't come, don't stop. Don't sit around and wait. Seek to find out. Search until it becomes clear. And then knock, Jesus says, and be persistent, and don't ever give up, and the answers God chooses to give (whenever he chooses) will come.

Bill Hybels puts it this way. He says if the request is wrong, God says "No." If the timing is wrong, God says "Slow." If you are wrong, God says "Grow." But if the request is right, the timing is right, and you are right, God says "Go!" (I like that.) The answers will come.

“Why do we pray?” Jesus closes his teaching on prayer, his response to their request, by asking a question. He says, “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake? And if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?” (“That’s ridiculous,” Jesus says. “It doesn’t make any sense.”)

Then he says (and just think about the contrast), “If you who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask!” The answer is obvious. We wouldn’t do that to our children. There’s no way God would do that to us.

I still remember when I was in the 4th Grade. (Maybe I’ve told you this before.) I remember asking my dad for a motor scooter and he said “No.” He said, “You’re not old enough.” I couldn’t figure out why, because (a friend in my class, the same age) Johnny Sunvold had one.

I remember going over to Johnny’s house and riding his scooter. He showed me how to turn it on, but forgot to tell me how to turn it off. I remember riding around the block five times, more afraid every time around, before I finally slid it into a pile of dirt not far from his house. I remember walking home that night (limping home that night), thinking maybe my father was right. I really don’t need one of those things.

William Barclay says that when we pray, we need to remember:

- The love of God that wants the best for us
- The wisdom of God that knows what is best for us
- The power of God that can accomplish it.

And then he says, “Keep praying, but be thankful that God’s answers are wiser than your prayers!”

My friends, it’s a simple lesson today. This is nothing new. But it’s one we need to remember. As followers of Jesus, we don’t pray to bring God’s will into alignment with ours, but to bring our will into alignment with his. We don’t pray only for our physical needs and for ourselves, but also for our spiritual needs and the greater and common good. And we don’t pray because that’s what Christian people do, and so we should. (You don’t have to be a Christian to pray.) We pray because that’s what Jesus taught, and that’s what our Father wants, and it works. Amen.