

Grace and peace to you . . .

Many Christians are confused about prayer. There was a movement a while back that argued anything you asked for in Jesus' name, if you prayed hard enough or often enough, that you would get it, no matter what. Another version of this whole idea is the so-called Prayer of Jabez idea from several years ago. The basic idea was that God always wants the believer to prosper, even here in your earthly life, that God conforms His will to yours if you say this prayer three times a day. God thus would become your butler, doing whatever you ask, if you only ask with the right words. Right? Wrong.

So how is the Christian to understand prayer? Why does God want you to pray, and what is the benefit you receive from such prayer? First of all, prayer is a conversation that God starts. That's what Jesus means when He says, "Whatever you ask in My name." When you pray in Jesus' name, you pray as one of God's children. Furthermore, when you pray, you are never alone in your prayers.

Do you remember when Jesus gave the disciples the Lord's Prayer? The disciples went to Jesus because they saw others praying, and they rightly wanted to learn how to pray. Now Jesus could have said to them: go off on to a mountain by yourself and pour your heart out. Tell God everything you want in the world! And if you're sincere enough, or persistent enough, then maybe God will hear you. That's how many falsely think of prayer.

But Jesus didn't do that. What He said was, "When you pray, pray like this: 'Our Father who are in heaven...'" and so forth. Jesus gave them the very words to pray, so that by praying in His name, with His words, they would learn how to pray and for what to pray. God would shape their hearts and minds to His will, not the other way around.

Think of it this way: when you ask someone for something, you are saying that you need something they have. By praying, you are confessing to God and to the world that you can't do it alone, you need Him for all things; for in the Lord's Prayer you pray for all things. By praying, you are confessing that you need God, and that is something only God Himself can teach you. This is why you pray both the Lord's Prayer and the Psalms, which are the very Word of God cast in prayer.

But there's a downside to this. I can talk to you until I'm blue in the face about the benefits and value of prayer for your soul, but the fact of the matter is that your prayer life stinks. How often do you pray? Do you pray before and after meals? Do you pray when you get up in the morning or when you go to bed?

Do you pray at all during the day? For many, the answer is no. You are, too often, like the two year old that insists, "I can do it MYSELF!" That's what you're saying to God when you refuse to pray. You are telling God that you don't need Him, and that you are in this alone, be it good or bad.

Satan continues to seek to drag you away from Christ and His work for you. Satan wants you to believe that prayer is a useless waste of time. Satan wants you to believe that real Christians don't pray, they do. They get work done. But to set good works against prayer, as if you cannot do both, misses the point entirely. Martin Luther once said that he had so much to get done during the day that he had to pray for two or three hours, by which he meant the traditional hours of prayer such as Matins & Vespers. Now for Luther, prayer didn't mean presenting God with a laundry list of things to do. Rather, prayer meant conversation with God, where God speaks in His Word, and you in faith and trust respond to that Word of God in prayer.

But Satan doesn't want you to believe that. He wants you to believe that in prayer, you're on your own. So either you don't pray, which is usually the case, or you turn God into a divine butler that is supposed to respond to your every whim. But God will have no part of this false piety and prayer. So how are you to pray?

The great message of the Gospel, and the foundation of all Christian prayer, is that you are not alone. You are never alone. Perhaps you've noticed this thread running through the readings this Eastertide. It's very deliberate on our Lord's part. He died for your sins and rose again from the dead for you. This Thursday, you will celebrate His ascension into heaven, but this is not a time of mourning for the Christian. Your Lord does not leave you alone. He sends the Holy Spirit to you, who preaches to you, baptizes you, forgives your sins and gives you the very Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because of that great work of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, you are bold enough to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven." Hard to believe, isn't it? But notice that first and important word: Our. When you pray in Christ's name, you are never alone. There is no such thing ultimately as private prayer, as if you are having a super secret conversation with God. All of the hosts of heaven pray with you. Think of it! When you pray the Our Father, the whole Christian Church prays with you. Your voice is added to the myriad voices of all time and throughout the world. Struggling with temptation? You are not alone. All of heaven watches out for you and prays for you. Long for forgiveness? The angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner who repents. Need to hear the comfort of God's Word? There is no greater rejoicing than over the sinner who recognizes His need for God's mighty hand.

Think again to the words of the catechism:

“Our Father who art in heaven. What does this mean? God would by these words tenderly invite us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that we may with all boldness and confidence ask him as dear children ask their dear father.”

So have no fear! God is your Father, and He will hear you. He has promised to hear your prayers. He will keep you and hold you in the palm of His hand. As Jesus Himself said, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” Because your God has overcome this world of tribulation, you have nothing to fear. You can join in the conversation with your Father, and pray in the strong name of Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes . . .