

Prayer: Its Problems and Possibilities

6. A Partner's Perspective

John 14:1-14

Danny Massie

First Presbyterian Church
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Communion Sunday

As we continue our Lenten study of prayer, its possibilities and its problems, we will look this morning at yet another instruction from our Lord concerning prayer, one that he shared with his disciples and one that can certainly better inform our prayer life. If this instruction is properly understood it can actually transform our life of prayer and if it is misunderstood, as it is quite often, it can lead to all manner of distortion and disappointment. Failure to grasp this truth and its significance has led many a believer down dead-end streets and even outside the fellowship of the church for the remainder of their lives.

It is hard to know what to call this particular truth and how to describe it. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1940's and a gifted theologian, referred to this truth regarding prayer as "correspondence" for lack of a better word in his little book Christian Faith and Life. I am referring to it today as praying from a partner's perspective. In previous weeks as we have considered our Lord's teaching on prayer. I said that the first purpose of prayer is simply to know God more intentionally. I have said that we should pray with expectation, that we should pray persistently, and now I am telling you that we should pray from a partner's perspective. Well then, what does it mean to pray from a partner's perspective and why is this so important as well as problematic?

If you listen carefully to our lesson from *John 14* where Jesus is preparing his disciples for his imminent death and resurrection and is reminding them of their continuing work once he has taken leave of them, he says to them in verses 13 and 14: "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."

Now if you do not understand what Jesus means here then you are destined for disappointment and possibly despair. If you do understand then your prayer life can be both liberating and transformational. Many people through the ages, some of them very bright and deeply committed persons, have taken these words with a wooden literalness and have

concluded eventually that Jesus is either gravely mistaken at best or intentionally deceptive at worst. At any rate, these words when misunderstood have caused some people to dismiss completely the discipline of prayer and even to give up on Christ and to turn away from God.

Philip Yancey's excellent book entitled Prayer tells of how writers Somerset Maugham and George Orwell prayed expectantly and persistently in Christ's name to be cured of personal debilitating conditions. And when God seemed to do nothing in response, as they felt Christ had promised, they gave up on the faith.

Some people act as if praying in Jesus' name means simply to close one's prayer with words such as "in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." And they believe that these very words legitimize, authorize, and guarantee that Christ will do whatever we ask. And some even believe that apart from including those words, one's prayer is not only ineffective but unheard.

A prominent Baptist preacher from Texas some years ago created a firestorm of controversy when he said that God did not listen to prayers of Jews because they do not pray in the name of Jesus. But to take Jesus' words with the kind of literalness once again makes prayer a right of magic rather than an act of faith. And "in the name of Jesus," becomes little more than a sacred mantra or a magical formula. But the Bible is full of prayers that do not include these words and surely God listens to all the prayers intended for him. God listens as I have said previously, not only to the words we utter but he also reads our hearts and minds and is acquainted with what is in our best interest and with what ultimately serves his purposes.

Well then, if asking for something in Jesus' name is not to be taken in a literal or verbal sense, what then does Jesus mean here? To act in someone's name, to speak in someone's name, is to serve as that person's representative. From a Biblical perspective this is especially true for in Judeo-Christian thought "name" represents the self. To ask "in Jesus' name" is to ask for what Jesus would ask. It is to value what Jesus values, to seek what Jesus seeks, to want what Jesus wants. If what you seek in prayer is what serves the purposes of God as expressed in the person, and hence the name, of Jesus then God will grant that request for God will accomplish his sovereign purposes in the world, in history, in the church, and in your life and mine.

So, to pray "in Jesus' name" is to pray as Jesus would pray and as Jesus is praying even now. To pray in Jesus' name is a means where by we submit ourselves to the perfect will of God, knowing we are not always in a better position to see or understand, what truly is best in a given situation. And so as we share what our fervent hopes and deepest desires are, we can conclude as did Jesus in the garden, "nevertheless, not my will but Thy will be done."

All of this is but a reminder that as disciples of Jesus Christ we are partners in God's service — junior partners to be sure, but partners nonetheless! God shares with us God's work, his wishes, his will to the extent that we are capable of grasping infinite things with finite minds, holy things with sinful natures, and eternal things with temporal and narrow interests. Nevertheless, as disciples of Jesus Christ, as his representatives in the work of God's kingdom, we are partners, ambassadors and we are to pray from a partner's perspective as we seek only those things that serve God's will and God's interests, only as we want what Jesus wants.

Now as disciples we do not always do this do we? Disciples never have and disciples never will completely because we are fallen creatures and we often mistake and often substitute our will for God's will. So, we ask God in Christ for things not only inappropriate but actually contrary to the purposes of God.

If you want above all else whatever pleases God and serves God's purposes, then you can ask for anything you desire with the confidence that God's will trumps your own and you can live content with that. St. Augustine understood this. One of his better known and beloved quotes was, "Love God, and do as your please." By that he was not saying that so long as you love God you can do anything you'd like. No, he meant that if you truly love God then what you would like above all else is whatever pleases God and serves God's purposes.

A good example of this occurs as Jesus is making his way toward Jerusalem and the cross. Mark tells us that he has just told his disciples for the third time what was about to occur when they would arrive in Jerusalem. It would not be a kingly coronation but rather a gruesome, unjust crucifixion. And then, as incredible as it may seem from our vantage point on this side of the cross and the empty tomb, James and John the sons of Zebedee and two of the inner circle among the disciples, two of the three who should have been in the best position to know the Father's will and be acquainted with the Son's values, have the audacity to ask Christ for something unimaginable — for positions of honor when Jesus enters his glory. You see, they are thinking of earthly glory, of kingly glory, they are seeking preferential treatment among their colleagues. But when Jesus speaks of his glory in the gospels, and especially as he does so often in John's gospel, he is speaking of the cross and resurrection. Jesus is thinking of God's glory and not man's earthly glory.

Of course, this request from James and John cannot be granted, even though it is made personally and privately to Jesus. The request itself runs counter to what Jesus said and did. Had these disciples not been listening when Jesus said that the last would be greatest in the kingdom? Where were they when Jesus said that it was one who serves sacrificially who displays childlike trust who will be first in the kingdom. No, this request was not granted, nor

should it have been. It was beneath the dignity of disciples to make such a request. Matthew must have understood this, for when he recorded his gospel and told this same story in *Matthew 20*, he puts the requests, not on the lips of the disciples James and John, but rather on the lips of their unnamed mother. I think their mother gets a bad rap here.

My friends, it is a mercy that God does not answer our prayers as we pray them. Many of them are narrowly self-serving at best and even diametrically opposed to the purposes of God at worst. We cannot see what is even in our own best interest, much less the best interest of the church or the world.

No doubt you are familiar with that great theologian, Garth Brooks, and his hit song “Unanswered Prayers,” the chorus of which is:

*“Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers.
Remember when you’re talking to the man upstairs,
that just because he doesn’t answer
doesn’t mean he don’t care,
Some of God’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.”*

To pray in Jesus’ name, therefore, is to remind ourselves and others who is really in charge. It is to submit all of our requests and all of our petitions to the better wisdom and the greater glory and the higher purposes of our sovereign God.

I said several weeks back that the first purpose of prayer is to know God, not to get what we want nor to advise God how to govern the universe. Perhaps then the second purpose of prayer is to submit our wills and our wishes to God’s inscrutable purposes and perhaps in the process even to better to discern what those purposes are as his partners and co-workers.

In my study of prayer for this series I have read the combined wisdom of many spiritual giants through out the centuries. And while it may just be my perception, it does seem to me at least that earlier generations grasped much better than ours the truth of what I am talking about his morning. Therefore, they could accept God’s silence and even God’s denial of their requests with a grace and humility often lacking in our lives. I wonder why that is so. It is because we as a people have grown more self-absorbed, more self-assertive, and less humble? Is it because, despite what we say, we really have come to believe that life is all about us and that the faith is or ought to be about us as well? [The Purpose Drive Life](#) by Rick Warren got the attention of countless readers a few years ago when in his first chapter he drives home the point “It’s not about me.” And it isn’t! It is all about God. Life is about God and our faith is about God. As you read the prayers found in today’s bulletin, the prayer of confession by W. E.

Orchard and the other prayer in the bulletin cover by Henry Ward Beecher, you might see as I did, that it is not simply the language that sets them apart from our age, but also their theological outlook and their humble, self-effacing posture before God.

So, having encouraged you in recent weeks to pray with expectation and to pray persistently, I now encourage you to pray as Christ would pray, to pray as a partner of his in the work of God's kingdom. If it is God's will that you truly want, and that you are seeking, and not your own, then rest assured that in God's time and in God's own manner it will be accomplished.

And how might you know if your prayers are consistent with God's will. I can only encourage you to study and reflect on the life and ministry of Jesus. Immerse yourself in Jesus' words and in his ways. There is no better way to understand the nature and work of God than to focus on and follow Jesus. And so, this morning I close with the words that called us to worship today: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, (two critical conditions) ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." And why? Because as Christ partners your wants, wishes and God's wants and wishes will be the same — nothing less than the good, loving, sovereign and eternal purposes of God. Amen.