

“When You Pray”

And he said to them, “When you pray, say: Father...” (Luke 11:2).

Last week was Eggold Family Vacation. It’s a summer tradition that my mom and dad started nearly 25 years ago with their newly married sons and spouses, and it has grown to include 19 people from four generations. The week is a combination of chaos and camaraderie, marked by lingering conversations and continuous competition, yet, no matter what each day brings, the one constant in our schedule is a time for family devotions. We typically take turns preparing a reflection on a Bible verse that leads to a rich and lengthy discussion, and when the conversation has run its course, we conclude by praying for each other. It’s a uniquely intimate time when we can connect and care for each other, and as we listen to each other’s prayers, the Lord’s presence is tangibly felt.

Perhaps at some point you’ve also felt this same intimate connection with God; knowing that however bad your day or big your failures, you could approach the Lord in prayer with the certainty that He was there to hear. But vacations end and mountaintop experiences fade, and when the pressures of life bring us crashing back to earth, we often don’t feel the same certainty about our prayers.

The truth is, every believer goes through times when prayer seems pointless. And I know that for many people, a regular prayer life doesn’t exist. Maybe you’ve been disappointed by God’s answer to a past prayer, or perhaps you’ve simply given up on the whole idea of prayer, thinking that God certainly couldn’t be interested in the mundane details of your life. Whatever the circumstances may be, an honest discussion of prayer is always accompanied by a mountain of questions.

In today’s Gospel reading, it’s hard to know what may have motivated the disciple’s question in verse one, but I think it’s fair to say that his question about prayer was posed because something was missing in his own prayer life. The disciples had followed Jesus throughout His ministry. They witnessed His miracles, they heard His teaching, and, in their time with Jesus, they had also watched Him pray. Now, it’s important to understand that for good, first-century Jewish men, prayer would have been a part of everyday life. Prescribed, liturgical prayers would have been offered three times a day, and the disciples would have recited these assigned prayers at sunrise, in the middle of the afternoon, and again at sunset. This was part of their daily ritual, and these predetermined prayer times would have been as routine as any other chore. The point is *these guys prayed a lot...* and that’s what makes the disciple’s question so interesting.

The disciples must’ve noticed something different in the way Jesus prayed. While He almost certainly joined His disciples for their prescribed prayer times, Jesus also prayed at other times, and this unique and vital part of His life wasn’t lost on the disciples. So, after watching Jesus pray day after day, one bold, possibly struggling disciple finally implores Him: “Lord, teach us to pray...” and what Jesus provided in response to this simple request still guides and inspires our prayers today. In today’s reading, Jesus not only teaches us to pray, He also encourages us to be persistent and expectant in our prayers – not because of who we are or how we pray, but because God loves to give good gifts to His children.

Prayer is mysterious and prayer is miraculous, and the reason Christians are people of prayer is because Jesus told us and taught us to pray. Think about this, the perfect, holy life of God’s own Son included prayer, and Luke records more of Jesus’ prayers than any other Gospel writer. He shows the Son of God talking to His Father, and when the disciples came to Jesus asking, “Lord, teach us to pray,” Jesus immediately answered their request by teaching the way and very words to pray. In these

words we all know, Jesus invited us to pray, and every time we pray “The Lord’s Prayer” we can be sure this prayer pleases God and that it covers everything we need. Our Savior who suffered on the cross for us, and shed His blood to cover our sins, and rose again from the grave to give us life also gave us this prayer to pray. And the first word He taught us to pray says it all: “Father.”

Our understanding of the word “father” is always colored by our own experience with our earthly fathers. I had a great dad who cared for me and kissed me, who loved me in word and in deed, and made sure that I had what I need...but that’s not true for everybody here today. Some fathers are cruel and harsh and unfair. So, an earthly father may be absent or uncaring and, at the very least, every earthly father is sinful. Those images can influence how we think about God as our Father and, at times, they might even keep us from praying. But Jesus knew this about us, and He even addressed this problem by using a parable that at first glance seems a little odd. Jesus said, “What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?” (Luke 11:11-12). These questions are so ridiculous that the answer doesn’t even need to be spoken. Of course, no normal human father would ever do such a thing! And here Jesus has made His point: Even sinful human fathers give good gifts, *but what we’re talking about here is our perfect and holy, and loving, heavenly Father!* If weak and sinful human fathers wouldn’t willingly give harmful things to their kids, but would typically give them good gifts, then “how much more...” Jesus says, “will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13).

Notice the punctuation at the end of our reading. This is not a question, and it’s not a point left open for debate. This emphatic statement from Jesus is a promise. The heavenly Father gives much more, even the gift of the Holy Spirit, to His children! The Father’s nature is to give His children heavenly gifts, including the forgiveness of sins and the promise of heaven, all for the sake of His own Son. And the Holy Spirit makes these gifts known to us through the words of the Gospel and in the waters of Holy Baptism and at the table of our Lord’s Supper. Through these tangible gifts, the Holy Spirit creates and nourishes and sustains our faith. And this true saving faith changes the way we look at our Father. You see, faith removes the scales of sin and helps us to see that our heavenly Father gives us everything, *even His Holy Spirit*, to keep us to the day when faith becomes sight and heaven becomes our reality.

When we pray, our prayers go straight to our heavenly Father, and just as human fathers wouldn’t give their hungry children scorpions or snakes, we can be absolutely sure that our heavenly Father will not give us what is harmful. Instead, our Father answers our prayers for our good, even pouring out His Holy Spirit, who brings life and salvation and the faith to wait and pray and trust that our heavenly Father will only give us what is ultimately best for us.

Luther once wrote, “Whenever a Christian prays, ‘Dear Father, let Your will be done,’ God speaks from on high and says, ‘Yes, dear child, it shall be so’ (Large Catechism, III, 32). My friends, you are a redeemed and precious child of God! And this means that you have all the privileges a child can expect. It means that the Lord will provide, and that the Lord will protect, and that at any time and in any place you can come to Him in prayer as a son or daughter would draw near to their loving father.

So, today, you can pray persistently, expectantly, boldly, and with faith-filled confidence because in Christ Jesus, God has made you His own child...and He loves to answer the prayers of His children. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God’s people say, “Amen.”

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