

**MORNING PRAYER
ROGATION SUNDAY
05.09.21**

I once heard someone say, perhaps it was one of my professors, that there are passages in the Bible that are not hard to understand but that are easy to misunderstand. The New Testament lesson for today is a case in point. In the story, a man doesn't want to get out of bed in the middle of the night and disturb his entire household in order to do a favor for a neighbor, but he eventually does it because the neighbor pesters him until he does. We can all understand that and perhaps identify with that.

People read that story and think that's what it takes to get God to answer their prayers. If we pray long enough and hard enough, God will eventually do what we want Him to. But the subsequent analogy makes clear that God is not at all like that. This is an analogy of contrast. Jesus says, "I say unto you, ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened."

He then goes on to offer an analogy that reflects the true nature of God: "If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

The operative word here is "good". The man who had an unexpected visitor in the middle of the night was asking for something that was good and something he really needed. A friend had come on a long journey, and Middle Eastern hospitality demanded that he be fed regardless of the time. But the man that the host woke up was undoubtedly annoyed that his neighbor had not anticipated his friend's visit and was not prepared for it. Everybody in that culture was expected to keep food on hand for such a situation.

But the man who was asked for a loan of food was not as understanding or forgiving as God. He had to be nagged into doing the right thing. Jesus says that God, by contrast, is like a loving Father who is anxious to give good things to His children and will surely respond to our requests. “Everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him who knocks, it shall be opened.

The only thing is, we have to ask for the right things. God is a wise as well as a loving Father. He is not a magic genie at our service, and prayer is not a vehicle for wish fulfillment. God wants to give us what we need, and He wants us to ask for what we need, but we have to understand that what we need is not necessarily what we want.

St. Paul asked God three times to heal what he called “a thorn in the flesh” and “a messenger of Satan”. God’s response every time was not what the Apostle wanted to hear: “My grace is sufficient for you.” God was not going to remove Paul’s problem. He was going to help Paul deal with it. After three times, the Apostle stopped asking.

Jesus asked only once to be relieved of the burden of His Passion and death. He did not persist in that request but quickly added, “nevertheless, not my will but thine be done.”

God has a way of taking evil things and using them to accomplish good. That is what God was doing with Jesus on the Cross and it is also what he was doing with Paul in his affliction, whatever it was. I can speculate that perhaps God intended for Paul to have to travel with a personal physician. That physician happened to be St. Luke, who undoubtedly learned from his travels with St. Paul and eventually gave us both the book of Acts and the Gospel that bears his name.

Now I don't mean to read things into Scripture that are not there, but I'm trying to make a point. God sometimes allows things that are evil to remain in our lives, even when we pray to have them removed, but He always has a very good reason and we benefit in the long run from what He does not give us as well as from what He does.

There is a Collect in the Prayer Book that goes like this: "Let thy merciful ears, O Lord, be open to the prayers of thy humble servants; and, that they may obtain their petitions, make them to ask such things as shall please thee." Another Collect says: "Grant unto thy people that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou doest promise." Our prayers are always answered when we learn to ask for the right things.

So how do we know what are the right things? What are some of the blessings that God wants us to ask for? Surprisingly, they are some of the very things we think we need to offer to God. Such blessings as faith, piety, and virtue are gifts that God is most anxious to give us, but so often we do not think of them as gifts that God gives in response to prayer. We think of them as things we need to develop on our own so we can offer them to God in order to obtain from Him what we really want, such as a better job, a recovery from sickness, or success in whatever venture we have decided to undertake.

There is really nothing wrong with praying for those things, but there is something wrong with thinking that the more pious and virtuous we are, and the more persistent we are in our prayers, the more likely it is that God will hear our prayers and give us what we want. I am often asked to pray for people who seem to think that my prayers are likely to be heard because, as a priest, I am presumed to be holy and have influence with the Almighty. Wrong on all counts.

Virtue and faith and piety are among the many good gifts that God gives to those who ask for them. They are not things we offer to God. They are blessings He bestows upon us. The same is true of forgiveness, and love, and salvation, and hope, and all the other things that make for Godly character. Those are the gifts we really need but often think we can do without.

God does want us to pray for our daily bread, because by so doing we acknowledge that it comes from Him. But he wants us even more to pray for the gift of holy spirit (and the Greek text, by the way, does not include the definite article.), because by asking we acknowledge that we need the holy breath of God, in order to live.^v “If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly father give holy spirit to those who ask him?”

One more thing and I will close. The ability to pray is itself a gift of God. St. Paul says, “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sounds too deep for words.”

If you need to learn how to pray, then ask God to teach you. It was in response to that very request on the part of His disciples that Jesus gave them what we call “The Lord’s Prayer.” He gave them the very words to say, and you too may use those words. You may also use the words of the Prayer Book, for those prayers have been tested over time and proven to be effective in drawing us closer to the Father who is waiting to bless us.

“If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly father give holy spirit to those who ask him?”

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