

Sermon July 24, 2016 - Pentecost 10

The Privilege of Pleading Prayer

Luke 22:39-45



Brothers and sisters in Christ, may God's grace and peace be with you today.

Our meditation this morning will focus on somewhat common statement phrase: "Prayer gets you nowhere."

Now, imagine if Jesus would have said the same thing? "Prayer gets you nowhere"? "What if Jesus had said, 'Prayer gets you nowhere?'" This is actually the theme of our meditation this morning based on another

Gospel reading, from Luke chapter 22, verses 39-45 where we read that: "Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." ⁴¹ He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, ⁴² "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." ⁴³ An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. ⁴⁴ And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. ⁴⁵ When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. ⁴⁶ "Why are you sleeping?" he asked them. "Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation."

Now or theme "What if Jesus had said, 'Prayer gets you nowhere?'" might carry an insinuation which, at first, we may resent. We seem to hear someone saying, "Are you implying that we Christians ever say, 'Prayer gets you nowhere?'" Isn't this the language of common unbelief? Our topic appears to threaten us and put us on our guard.

However, the text calls our attention to deep honesty to two things, first, to the fact of the privilege of pleading prayer, the privilege we have to communicate, to talk with God through prayer. And second, to see how well we have been taking that privilege.

But before we go any farther, let's ask ourselves an honest question, what do we believe about prayer? Quick answers will not do. Reciting passages about prayer from a hymns or even the Bible will not do. The question has to do with what deep-down in our hearts we believe.

The place to look for the answer is not in our hymnal or catechism although we need to know them, but heart, I would say, but in our practice. And this raises the disturbing question. Do we doubt about the value of prayer? Do we neglect prayer? The answer lies in the empty places of our lives. James says in his letter (James 4:2) "You do not have because you do not ask." Do then our needs reveal a sad neglect of prayer?

Would we be suffering so many defeats in our daily battle with the devil, the world and our flesh if we made full use of the weapon of prayer? Our Lord established this connection when He said to the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, "Watch and

pray-that you may not enter into temptation.” The strength they lacked in the hour of testing was the strength they did not pray for, and the same happens with us.

A Christian congregation often appears to be more like a hospital than a health center. Instead of being healers we are too often patients who need healing. Among many cases, we have passions running low when they should be high and running high when they should be low. You know we get so passionate about our favorite movies or sports on TV, but we don't get passionate about Worship Services.

There are cases of hardness of hearing and faulty vision. Even allowing for the weakness of the flesh, one wonders what would happen if each one of us would fervently pray for the healing of his peculiar sickness—If the sluggish would pray for zeal, the proud and sensitive for humility, the miserly for generosity, and the rebellious for understanding.

Is there no help from God for our stumbling where we have always stumbled before, for our decaying state of living? Well, great is the power of the One, to whom we address our prayers and the privilege He is given us. Are we drawing ourselves to it? The most we can honestly say is, "Lord I believe, help my unbelief."

Our text today helps us to get at one of the roots of our doubts about prayer. When people say "Prayer gets you nowhere," they usually mean, "Prayer does not get us to where we want to go." A person is bound to take a dim view of prayer when the help which God offers through prayer is not the help he is looking for. A man measures the value of prayer in terms of his own short-sighted and selfish goals instead of in terms of God's plan for his life. He regards every prayer that does not bring him what his heart is set on to be an unanswered prayer.

And we Christians are prone to fall into the same problem. When in the measure in which the path we want to walk and the path which God has chosen for us lead in different directions we are prone to complain that our prayers are getting us nowhere. The Small Catechism in answering to the question, "Why do Christians sometimes feel that their prayers are not answered?" It says, "In the hour of trial they do not at once observe the helping hand of God." What we sometimes call unanswered prayers are prayers that our heavenly Father answered in His own wonderful manner rather than according to our own short-sighted expectations.

For example, we find ourselves weighted down by a burden that is getting too heavy for us—we pray about it and know exactly the kind of help we want. We want the burden, or at least part of it, removed. We want to be rid of the nagging pain or the disturbing problem. We want to wake up the next morning to a cloudless sky. If after we have prayed the same dark clouds still hover above us we are tempted to say "Our prayers got us nowhere"

But doesn't God have another way of helping the petitioner with the heavy burden? Yes! Instead of removing or lightening the load, He may give him the needed strength to bear his burden. Often, the change that occurs as a result of prayer is not in the circumstances of our life but in us. Should we not as a matter of fact, look first into our souls rather than at our circumstances for the answer to every prayer? The question that matters is 'Where is our heavenly Father trying to take us? What is His will for us which we pray may be done? Is it not the development of our character—our courage, patience, trust in Him—in a word our Christ-likeness? He predestined us, St. Paul says, "to be conformed to the image of His Son." Our prayers are getting us

somewhere when the troubles we prayed about are helping us “to attain the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” which means to be the man that He was. And that is a privilege we have been given.

What if Christ had said “Prayer gets you nowhere.” A striking thing about the Gethsemane story is that He might have said this if he had looked outside of himself for an answer to His prayer. His petition was, “Father, remove this cup from me.” And the cup was not removed. He was destined to drink it to the last bitter drops. There was no lightening of His burden. There was no change of His lot in life as a result of His prayers. No plans were altered either on the part of men or God. His enemies did not cease their enmity. The mob determined to take Him captive, kept marching relentlessly toward Gethsemane. His path still led straight to Calvary and crucifixion—no detour, no postponement, no reprieve.

Nevertheless His prayer was gloriously answered. It got Him somewhere. Things were different after He prayed—not in His surroundings but in His soul and spirit. Fear and anguish drove Him to prayer. His courage and strength were failing Him. Agonizing doubt about His ability to walk the last dark and dreadful mile as the world's sin-bearer made Him tremble and sweat. He pleaded earnestly, and look what happened, his prayer was answered, oh the privilege of pleading prayer.

The evangelists say, “There appeared to Him an angel from heaven strengthening Him.” His spirit has been renewed. His agonizing doubts have vanished. His courage has returned. There would be no more faltering, no more seeking a way of escape. It was the will of God. His prayers opened His eyes fully to that. This was what He prayed to see. Now He saw it and the battle within Himself was over.

This is always the crucial battle. Win this battle within you, as our Lord did through prayer, and you will be equipped to face the evils that surround you.

Look now at the man of God whose prayers were answered! He arouses His disciples from sleep and boldly walks out to meet the mob that had come to take Him captive. There is majesty in His bearing. He identifies Himself as the one they are looking for and His “I am *He*” makes them draw back and fall to the ground.

What a great wonder Christ's prayer in Gethsemane accomplished! How far it got Him—all the way through painful way and the site of Calvary to the eternal light of Easter! It speeded Him on His mission as the Redeemer of the world. It enabled Him to accomplish the will of God that all men might be saved. It turned night into day, both for Him and for us.

Such is the power of prayer. It speeds us along the path, over the path our gracious God has chosen for us. It strengthens us to do and suffer His holy will. Prayer is not primarily for telling God what we want but for finding out what God wants. It is not persuading God to change His mind. It is for the changing of our minds to transform to His. It is for asking God to have His way with us.

Here in Gethsemane is the proof of his love for us. How hard it must have been for God to deny the petition of His beloved Son. God gave His son the bitter cup filled with our sins so that He might offer us the sacramental cup with His blood “poured out for the forgiveness of our sins”. By His death we are forgiven and set free by God.

It is to the God who “so loved the World that He gave His only Son” that we pray, “Thy will be done.” In the measure in which this all-embracing petition is answered in our lives our prayers are getting us somewhere.

Prayer gets us nowhere when we walk self-chosen paths, when we do not add to every petition the word which the Lord prayed and taught us to pray. “Thy will be done.” Prayer gets us somewhere when the burden is lighter because we are stronger—when we can fight with the problems about us because God has helped us to solve the problems within us—when patience holds out and courage is renewed—when it speeds us along the path of sacrificial service to men that our Redeemer walked.

May we go diligently about our prayers and rest assured that they are getting us where our heavenly Father is taking us, may you see the power of the privileged pleading prayer. Amen.