

## Prayer - Playing It Jesus' Way

It is a most wonder - full thing - and strange; exciting and exhausting; grim and Joyful - Life is. This gift of life, of the lives we have been given to live. And - there really are only two ways for us to play in the game of life. We can play it our way. Our way - by grit and guts and guile. We can depend on ourselves to get us through the years as best as possible.

And - most of the human race is running the race of life that way. Surviving, or barely getting by, or not getting by at all - relying on their own wits and wills and wisdom. And even a quick look around us tells us - too clearly, and sadly, - that trying to run the human race on our own doesn't cut it for long. We slip, we sin, we sicken, we die. Our little systems have their day and cease to be - the poet said.

Yes - there is another way to live. Not according to our wits and wills and wisdom, but according to Jesus' way. Relying on, depending upon, turning to Jesus for the guidance and the grace we need to find in life and receive from life, the best life has to offer. There is a better way. Haven't you found this to be true in your life - in some ways - simple or even stunning ways - that there is a way, a truth, a way of life worth trying to live?

Please pray with me. Lord of love and light - may the light of your truth be found in Your Word to us this day - and may the words of my mouth, and the thoughts of these your faithful and loving people, be acceptable in your sight and your good word to us in Christ. Amen.

If we were fortunate we learned the simple truth of this sermon's message as children - at - so to speak - our mother's knee. That was true for me - and truth be known - I am still learning about faith and what faith in Jesus Christ means, at my mother's, well - may be now its at her side.

Some of you have had the same experience. Childhood experiences of faith. Simple words of grace at meal times, for example. God is great and God is good, and we thank God for our food... And my grandson often adds to this prayer.... And for Mommy and Daddy, And Grammy and Grampy, and my dog Rocka, and my toys, and my friend Billy - and.... Amen - -- his mother finally contributes.

Prayer. Simple and true learning. And bed times, too. Even the now politically incorrect prayer of my childhood. Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Thank you Jesus. Amen.

Too scary some say. Or - an early lesson in the deepest meaning of faith? Our only comfort in life and death is that we belong to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Prayers - simple prayers. And not so simple at all. And we know it. And the disciples knew it. And we study it all with careful experiments. Is there any power in prayer?

And some say yes, because of the tests. People - not even knowing they were being prayed for, recovered faster from illnesses than those not prayed for. And some say yes - not because of any tests, but because of what they have experienced answered prayer.

Answered prayers. And - yes - unanswered prayers. And there is the rub. The heart of the issue. A major piece of what we either believe about God, or don't, is wrapped up in what we think about Prayer. Because - for us - it's the results that really count, isn't it? Not so much how you play the game - but win or lose. Why pray - why believe - if it isn't obviously effective, if it doesn't work for you?

And I suspect most of us can trace our doubts about faith, about God, back to some time, some occasion of what we experienced as unanswered prayer. Something little - a toy we wanted and didn't get. A perfect day planned and prayed for - and it rained on our parade. And doubts shadowed our forming faith. And deeper doubts when more desperate prayers were denied, or, did we think, not heard at all.

A crucial test we needed to pass. A parent gravely ill we could not imagine living without. The job we needed. And life not producing many if any answers to our prayers.

Maybe we just need what the disciples needed. Good Jewish boys, all, they knew the prayer routine. The Shema to begin and end each day - Marjorie taught it to you again last week... The Lord is one - You shall love the Lord your God with all your mind and heart and soul and strength

The disciples knew the formula - and yet - they came to Jesus and asked him to teach them how to pray. And I suspect it was really a much more significant moment in their lives and in our lives, than the Bible story seems to say.

In Luke it seems just a simple little thing that came up. Prayer. Jesus - John's disciples seemed to do it differently. Can't you teach us how to do it - do it so it works for us like it seems to work for them? And - without missing a beat, Jesus, in Luke's account, gives them the template, the Model, the prayer to pray as practice for all our praying.

Father - Father - Hallowed by your name. Your kingdom come. Give us our daily bread. Forgive us our sins. Do not bring us to trial... make life easier than hard. And the model, if it's a model, has become the Christian prayer - said this day in virtually every language in the world, and in every Church.

And some say all this makes for a sad affair. For all too many Christians, this little prayer, powerful model that it is, and yes, I believe - was intended to be. This prayer has become the only prayer many many people ever pray. And because this is true, prayer has not the deeper meaning or effect in people's lives. It's a motion at best, and a superstitious little habit at its worst.

And such praying does not invite God into our lives, but even closes God out. The disciples had something very different in mind - for they had seen the central and powerful role prayer had played in Jesus' life. They sensed, they knew, that Jesus had a bond, a tie, a living relationship with God that empowered and graced and infused with dynamic energy, everything Jesus did.

And they sensed it had something to do with Jesus' discipline of prayer - every day, and every week and for extended periods of time. And they asked - and Jesus answered - in a simple elegant powerful way. Pray - this way.

In the simple prayer Jesus laid out, too, a game plan for life for his disciples. For all who would learn to live by faith and not by their strength alone. The prayer - the pattern for prayer, the model for the practice of praying - is in fact Jesus' invitation to his disciples, and to us, and to all God's children, to live by faith.

Joy Douglas Stone says it this way in *Christian Century* - *prayer is for those who are willing to stake their lives on the belief that God will open the door when they knock.*

Prayer is for those willing to stake their lives on the belief ... Prayer is for those willing to live by faith.

Because... because - the facts of life, and of prayer, are not easy to swallow. The prayer is simple. But for many, sometimes, too often, it's simply hard to keep praying. Jesus says, Your kingdom come. And by all I read in this morning's paper, the kingdom of God seems light years away. And peace is more a passing thought than a real possibility.

Jesus says, Give us each day our daily bread. And the truth is people die of hunger every day, and the rich getting richer seem to care not a wit.

Jesus says, forgive us our sins, but do we really, or aren't we now deeply entrenched in a war of revenge, of eye for an eye? And Jesus says, do not bring us to the time of trial. And you and I know people who endure such pain and suffering we can hardly speak about it - to say nothing of the trials of war that burden so many...

So - for so many - this simple prayer seems to be simply - pie in the sky. Proof not of the power of faith, but of its powerlessness. Words without weight.

And yet.... And yet... still ... I think we know, we know, the disciples had it right, they had seen right to the heart of Jesus - of who he was, and what he offered to them and to us all, in his life of faith and his practice of prayer.

Because - if we judge faith and prayer on what it produces in the good things and the good outcomes for us right now - faith and prayer fail this test. Prayer is no genie in the bottle - rub three times and all is well. No, prayer is instead the persistent practice of God's presence in our lives - and of our dependence upon and need for trust in God and God's good will for us.

Prayer is the heart of faith. It is believing where we cannot yet see. It is trusting outcomes we Anne Schaefer; Betsy Telford; Andy Hendy; Bill Sturgeon; Bruce Snyder; Chris Cosnowski; Chuck Keppel; Connie Bernhardt; Dan Forhan (danforhan@ameritech.net); David Robertson; Debbie Clixby; Dennis Rybicki; Don Lucking; drcarpenter25@aol.com; Greg Matthews; Griff DeMare; Jan Forhan; John Gilgallon; Karen Cosgrove; Kathy Yessian; Laurie VanSwearingen; Linda Eldridge; Marjorie Wilhelmi; Mark Sassak; Pat Miller; Sandra Crane; Scott Hobart will never see until the shadows lengthen, the evening of life comes, and the fever of life is over, and our time of rest has come.

Then we will see for sure what now we can only hope and believe to be true. ... That God is Good, all the time. And God's will, God's good will for our lives is being done... on earth as it is in heaven.

But can we really live by such faith, can we trust God this much? Can we play the game of life Jesus' way.. by faith? Is there enough in life to give us this hope? Isn't there? Isn't there?

Mother Teresa like people in every corner of the world, giving themselves in the cause of Christ like love - caring for the least, and lost and last in life. Gulf Coast rebuilders, Habitat for Humanity hammerers, Aids workers in Africa, and tithers at home supporting missions to inner cities and distant dangerous places. Stephen ministers, and Hospice volunteers.

God worshippers at this time in society, with corporate crooks and sport's cheaters, and vow breakers... People who kneel and pray and then practice what they say - who have compassion for all.

People, God's people, who see the wonders of creation, the truth of the creator, and who, as Paul says, continue to live their lives in Christ, rooted and built up in him, and in faith.

People, God's people, who know, don't you know, that in Christ's life, death and resurrection, and in the caring, loving presence of his living body the Church in the world, is the evidence of the power of prayer.

Tom Long tells the story of the power of prayer and faith, the story of a church in the inner city of Trenton New Jersey, They prayed about what they could do about all the hungry people they saw every day. They decided to take up an offering of money and food every Sunday to share with the hungry.

But after many weeks they became deeply discouraged at the huge size of the problem and what little impact they had. Until one Sunday, when at the end of the service a old bag lady came slowly down the Church aisle right up to the front, not to take food, as some thought - or to bring anything. She simply knelt down and prayed. Thank you Jesus.

And the members of the church remembered the words.- If you serve one of the least of these my brothers and sister, you serve me.

Yes - prayer works. If we have hearts and eyes to see. This day, even in this time, the prayers of the faithful are power full.

My son Andy, on a short term medical mission team in Togo, wrote this week of his experience. He prays for healing for the terribly sick children for whom he has no surgeons or even medicines to effectively treat. He prays God will spare them, and then he watches often the little children die. And he wonders, he writes, if God doesn't hear his prayers. Or - he wonders - if God does, but answers in ways he cannot fully understand.

If I pray, he writes, not my will but yours be done, O God. Then ought I look beyond my will to see the answer to my prayer. My prayers can't be conditional - dependent on the outcomes I want. I can't pray to God only if God is going to do just what I want God to do. No - God's will not mine.

And in it all I wonder what it means when the parents of the child I worked so hard to save, but who died, seek me out to thank me, sincerely, seriously, thank me for my care. Is God not there, if I am there, for God, in my prayer and in my effort to care?

And is not God present in your life, and mine, when we pray, and then, in our efforts to care, to be witnesses of God's love, ambassadors for Christ.

And, then isn't prayer, really, simply, our best efforts to play out our lives, Jesus' way. Committing our lives into the hands and the heart of our God, in Jesus name and Spirit?

Let us pray. Lord, this day, every day, we pray, not our will, but your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. In Christ's name. Amen.

David W. Robertson, Pastor