

“GOD ANSWERS PRAYER”

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Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12)

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Zion Lutheran Church

Fort Wayne, Indiana

TEXT: *“Everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks it will be opened.”* Luke 11:10 (ESV)

One of the most important and most “regular” activities for the Christian is prayer. It is expected that Christians will pray every day. When it comes to asking people to do things for us personally or for the church, we might hesitate or be a little timid if we’re asking someone to commit to a work project, a congregational office, or a financial obligation, but we don’t blush at all when we ask people to pray for us or about a particular issue that may be confronting our congregation or church-body at the moment. I hope that’s not because people are only giving lip-service when they agree to pray. I say that because I have had the sad experience in my life of asking someone to pray for me and hearing them respond: “Oh sure, I can handle that. It’s not like you’re asking me to actually do something.”

Since prayer is so important, I think it is also important that we recognize that there are a lot of misunderstandings about prayer, even among Christians. For example, prayer is a great privilege and should not be looked at primarily as a duty. Martin Luther entered the monastery in order to get closer to God through prayer, but because he saw prayer primarily as a duty that he was hopelessly unable to perform adequately, it became for Him a source of pain and fear rather than a source of comfort. Another common misunderstanding about prayer is that when we pray for something and don’t receive it, it’s because something is lacking in our prayer: Maybe we didn’t pray hard enough or often enough. Perhaps our request would have been granted if we had had more people praying for the same thing at the same time, or if we fasted while we prayed to show God that we were really serious. Or it could be that the reason why our request wasn’t granted was because there is some secret unconfessed sin buried deep within our heart. God is not a politician. He doesn’t determine His will on the basis of the latest public opinion poll taken among likely worshipers. He determines to do what He does because in His infinite wisdom He knows what is best for us, believe it or not, even better than we do ourselves. So that we might understand prayer a little better, let’s examine Jesus’ words concerning the subject in this morning’s Gospel.

One thing that we need to understand as we look at the passage before us is that these words of Jesus are descriptive of prayer rather than prescriptive. What I

mean by that is that here the Lord is giving a description of the person who receives good things from the Lord; He is not giving instructions on how to make sure that your prayers will be answered in the way that you want them to be. Sometimes we see even in “Christian” literature the suggestion that God wants to do all kinds of wonderful things for us but He can’t unless and until we allow Him to by asking Him to. But the truth of the matter is that God is almighty. He doesn’t need our permission to act, nor does He have to wait for us to make the first move before He can bless us. In fact, we wouldn’t be able to pray at all were it not for the fact that He first reached down to us in the Person of His Son Jesus Christ to make atonement for our sin and thereby restore the Father/child relationship between Himself and us.

Neither should we approach prayer with the idea that we can control or manipulate God or, as one of my friends puts it, “tug on God’s nose ring.” He owes us nothing. In the beginning He gave Adam and Eve everything that they could possibly need or desire and they rejected it all, together with the loving Creator who had given it all to them. Their descendants have followed in the same path generation after generation. In spite of this, God in His mercy and grace has provided the remedy for sin by sending His Son to do everything for sinners that needed to be done in order to acquire for them the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of God’s love and favor. Surely after all of this we must realize that God knows what is good for us better than we do--that what He gives us may not necessarily be what we want but certainly is what we need. In today’s Gospel the Savior makes it clear that if human fathers know how to give good things to their children, certainly God can and will do at least as much for us.

By now you may begin to wonder: If God’s gifts to us are not initiated by our prayer and if we cannot by our prayer “win God over,” as they say, then why in the world should we bother to pray at all? First of all, prayer makes us mindful of our needs and of who is it that supplies them. When we pray we are reciting the things of which we are in need. Why should we do that? Do you really think that we have to let the omniscient God know what we need? --of course not! “Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him” (Matthew 6:8), Jesus says. But we do need to be reminded each and every day that we are not self-sufficient--that we have need of various things that we can neither create nor acquire for ourselves--that we have to look outside of ourselves for the satisfying of our physical and especially our spiritual needs.

And where do these things come from--these things that we need? They come from God and from Him alone. This brings us to the other reason why we should pray: so that we, knowing that all good gifts come from God, will be motivated to appreciate the gifts of God and to give thanks to Him for all that He

gives us and does for us. In explaining the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer ("Give us this day our daily bread") Luther writes: "God gives daily bread indeed without our prayer, also to all the wicked, but we pray in this petition that He would lead us to know it and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving" (Small Catechism, explanation of the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer). We don't have to tell God what we need, as we have already stated, but we do need to be reminded that what we need is provided freely by our gracious and merciful God.

Does God answer our prayer? Does He always grant our requests? No matter what you may think, these two questions are not the same. God always does answer our prayer, but He doesn't always grant our requests. Sometimes He answers our prayers with a "yes," sometimes with a "no," and sometimes His answer is: "Wait a while." He doesn't always grant our requests for the same reason that parents don't always grant the requests of their children: because what we request is not always what is best for us. Praying with faith is not necessarily believing that we will get what we ask for; in reality it's believing that what we get is what is best for us. The God who became human and laid down His very life for us, only to take it up again, is able and willing to give us all that we need. He not only answers our prayer; He inspires our prayer as a response to all of His gifts--especially His greatest Gift: the Savior who has invited us to pray and has guaranteed us a hearing before the Father's throne of grace.

Amen.

May the Lord bless your hearing of His Word, using it to accomplish in you those things for which He gave it. May you be enriched and strengthened in faith that you may leave here today to go out into our world armed with the whole armor of God, prepared to be able ambassadors of your Savior Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and He will do it. Amen.