

THE JESUS PRAYER

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A few weeks ago at our Wednesday night Confirmation Class, we talked about prayer. The class members dictated the Lord's Prayer as I wrote it down on newsprint. Then the seven members of the class, some of their elder mentors, and I compared the Lord's Prayer that we say each Sunday with the versions in Matthew 6 and Luke 11. After that, I changed all of the second person plural pronouns to first person singular pronouns and encouraged them to try praying the Lord's Prayer that way every once in a while. You have to think about what you're saying, rather than just repeating the familiar words by rote. Instead of "Our Father, who art in heaven . . . Give us this day our daily bread . . . Forgive us our debts . . . Lead us not into temptation," try praying "My Father . . . Give me this day my daily bread . . . Forgive me my debts as I forgive my debtors . . . Lead me not into temptation."

We also took a picture of our prayer life by answering eleven yes/no questions about prayer. I didn't tell everybody you could put your answer in between yes/no – such as maybe or sometimes – until they had all finished. But several of the folks did just that. Even though I don't have a printed copy of a "Picture of My Prayer Life" for each of you this morning, I do want to invite you to think about how you would answer these eleven questions. I'll read each question and give you just a bit of time to think about your answer. And, yes, you can answer "maybe" or "sometimes."

- Do you believe everyone prays?
- Do you believe God answers all prayers?
- Do you have a daily time of prayer?
- Do you usually experience an awareness of God when you pray?
- Do you feel a need to grow in your prayer life?
- Do you feel comfortable praying aloud?
- Do others ask you to pray for them?
- Do you ask others to pray for you?
- Do you pray for people in need beyond your community?
- Do you think prayer changes God's mind?
- Do you think praying for another person can make a difference in that person's life?

We had a great discussion about prayer the other night, based on our answers to these questions. Let's go back to question #8 – Do you ask others to pray for you? I think I'm going to revise the list and add this question – Do you ask Jesus to pray for you? In light of today's gospel reading from John 17 – sometimes called "Jesus' High Priestly Prayer" – that's an appropriate question. Do you ask Jesus to

pray for you? Besides John 17:20, there are several places in the New Testament where we learn that Jesus prays for us:

- 1 John 2:1 – “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”
- Romans 8:34 – “Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.”
- Hebrews 7:25 – “Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”
- Hebrews 9:24 – “For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.”

To that list, I would add Romans 8:26-27, which talk about the Spirit praying for us, but the Spirit is the Spirit of the risen Lord Jesus Christ – “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

“The Jesus Prayer” usually refers to a prayer believers pray to Jesus. It is a very simple prayer – “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The simple prayer is based on the tax collector’s prayer in the temple in Luke 18:9-14: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”

“The Jesus Prayer” has a long history in the church, dating perhaps from the fifth century among monks in the Egyptian desert. The prayer is especially well-known and well-used in the Eastern Orthodox Church. “The Jesus Prayer” didn’t really make an appearance in the Western Church until almost the 20th century. Many times prayers of “The Jesus Prayer” use a prayer rope, a knotted cord of 33, 50, or 100 knots, similar to rosary beads. “The Jesus Prayer” is a simple and helpful way to fulfill the apostle Paul’s admonition in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, “pray without ceasing.”

I spent last Monday at the St. Francis Springs Prayer Center in Stoneville, NC, north of Greensboro, near Eden. It is a beautiful retreat center that I plan to visit again this summer. The beauty and simplicity of the grounds and the hospitality of the staff certainly reflect the life and ministry of St. Francis himself. As I walked down the hallway to my room, I enjoyed looking at the paintings of scenes from Francis’ life. He was, indeed, a man of prayer.

There is a story about Francis and his devotion to prayer. Bernard of Quintavalle was a rich and important man who was impressed by Francis early in Francis’ ministry. He invited Francis to his home to test him. As they were going to sleep in the same

room, Francis pretended to be asleep. Bernard also pretended to be asleep by snoring loudly. When Francis thought that Bernard was sleeping, he got out of bed and began to pray. Bernard was convicted by what he saw to 'leave the world and follow you in whatever you order me to do.' He saw Francis looking up to Heaven and raising hands. He prayed with intense fervor and devotion, saying, 'My God and my all.' He kept repeating this with devout persistence until [morning prayers]."¹ Francis' persistent prayer was in the spirit of the simple "Jesus Prayer."

As it is written and prayed, "The Jesus Prayer" is us sinners praying to Jesus for mercy. But today's sermon title – "The Jesus Prayer" – certainly fits John 17, about Jesus praying for us. The entire chapter is Jesus praying on the night before his death. That's why he begins his prayer this way – "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him." In John's gospel, as counterintuitive and paradoxical as it might seem, Jesus' hour of glory is when he hangs on the cross.

John's gospel doesn't have a story about Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Instead, Jesus' prayer as he faces death is for his disciples, the world, and for you and me – those who believe in him through the word of his disciples and apostles. It is remarkable and humbling to know that as he faced death on the cross the next day, Jesus spent some of his final hours praying for you and me . . . and he still prays for us. So, in a sense, "The Jesus Prayer" gets turned around from "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner" to "Pray for me, a sinner, dear Jesus."

Last Sunday I led the elders and some other church members in some pastoral care training in preparation for this summer. When we talked about visiting someone in the hospital, I suggested they ask the patient and his/her family if they would like to have prayer. I also encouraged them to ask, "What would like for me to pray for?" That feedback can help the prayer be more specific and personal.

Imagine Jesus asking you, "What would like for me to pray for?" At first glance, that might sound like the same thing as us asking God about different needs and joys and concerns. But think about it – imagine Jesus asking you, "What would like for me to pray for?" I know that sometimes when I pray, I don't even know what to pray for or how to pray. That's when I really depend on the promise that the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. At such times, it's certainly encouraging and humbling to know that Jesus is praying for me.

In some remarks about Jesus praying for us, Pope Francis said this: "It seems a little strange that He who came to give us salvation, who has the power, prays to the Father. Jesus is the great intercessor. He stands before the Father in this moment, praying for us. This is our strength: to be able to say to the Father, 'But if you, Father, will not consider us, consider your Son who prays for us.' From the first moment Jesus prays: He prayed when He was on earth and He continues to pray now for each of us, for the whole Church."²

On October 28, 2013, Pope Francis delivered his homily at the St. Martha guest house of the Vatican. Again, he spoke about Jesus praying for his people. At the end of his homily, the Pope said, "We often say to each other: 'Pray for me. I need prayers. I have so many problems,' but this is good, eh? Because we brothers must pray for each other." When we think about this, said the Pope, we must thank God for giving us a

brother who prays and intercedes for us, saying, ‘Lord, you have saved me. And now pray for me.’” Francis finished his homily, “It is to him we must entrust our problems, our life and many other things, so that he may take them to the Father.”³

Let’s go back to question #7 of “Picture of My Prayer Life” – Do others ask you to pray for them? I think everyone answered yes on that Wednesday night. Then I asked, “Do others ask you to pray for them, you say yes, and then forget to pray?”

Thanks be to God that we have more than just a brother in Christ – we have Christ himself as our brother – whom we can ask to pray for us. And we can be assured that Jesus will never forget or cease to pray for us.

Just think about that . . .

Let us pray: O God, who always listens to us, who breathes new life into us, call us forward to resurrection. Call us to follow in the footsteps of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

NOTES

¹Ken Norian, “The Jesus Prayer,” at www.norian.org/jesus_prayer/html

²“Jesus Prays for Us,” Wednesday, September 10, 2014, found at www.olamnuns.com/blog/inspirations-blog/60-jesus--prays-for-us.html

³Elise Harris, “Jesus Christ Intercedes for Us From Heaven, Says the Pope,” Tuesday, October 29, 2013, National Catholic Register at www.m.ncregister.com.