

Prayer is a wonderful gift from God. It is a great comfort to be able to cry out to God in the day of trouble, asking him for mercy in whatever it is that you need. But why is this a comfort? The devil, the world, and our sinful flesh portray prayer as either a hopeless attempt to seek the aid of a God whom you cannot even see, or even a manipulation of God to give all sorts of riches and worldly treasures. But prayer is a comfort, because the very fact that you can pray to him means that you have access to him. It means that you can approach him. You can speak to the God who created heaven and earth, who destroys and builds up, and who judges in righteousness.

Righteousness, holiness, and blessedness only come from God. He is all powerful, all knowing, and he sees the deepest secrets of every heart everywhere. So only those who are truly worthy can pray to him. In fact, if you were not able to approach God on his throne, blameless in his sight, you would not be able to utter even a single word to him. Sure, those who are not righteous can certainly say words. But there is no certainty that God hears them, because God only promises to hear the prayers of those who love and believe in Jesus.

It is a popular belief among some churches that if you want to have God as your Lord, you must first give your heart to Jesus in a prayer. They often call this the so called “Sinner’s prayer.” But this is completely backwards. First of all, no one can give his heart to Jesus. The Bible says that no one seeks God; all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Ps 14; 53; Rom 3:10 ff.). We are all by nature enemies of God (Eph 2:1 ff.). Secondly, how can someone, who does not yet know God, pray to God? He can’t! Only those whom Jesus invites can pray to his Father.

Jesus invites his disciples to pray to his Father, and he clarifies his words to them. He is not saying that he will ask the Father for them, but that they themselves will ask the Father. Jesus is not saying, however, that he will never pray for them again. Of course Jesus prays for us! He is the one mediator between God and man. In fact, in the following chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus does that very thing. He prays to the Father to protect his disciples from the evil one. And he still pleads for us today as he shares the Father’s throne, sitting at his right hand. Jesus says “I am not saying that I will ask the Father for you . . .” Here he is emphasizing to his disciples that they have access to the Father. The Father loves them because they love Jesus and they believe in Him.

Jesus is not saying here that our love for him motivates the Father to love us. Rather, he is explaining that our communion of faith and love with Jesus is the same communion he has with his Father. Our faith and our love do not come from us. Our love for Jesus isn’t just that we really like him. No, love flows from faith in Jesus (1 Tim 1:5), because it is the love the Holy Spirit has poured into our hearts (Rom 5:5). It is the very love of Jesus Christ himself. It is the love he has shared with his Father from eternity. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. Love is therefore something we share with Jesus through faith in his name. To love and believe in Jesus is to share what he has with his Father. It is to hold onto what he gives us in his Word of truth. As Jesus also said to his disciples (John 14:23), “If you love me you will keep my Word.”

Loving Jesus proceeds from faith in him, and faith in Jesus only comes from him loving us. This is why the Apostle John writes in his first epistle: “We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19)” The sinner cannot prompt Jesus to come by inviting him into his heart. No, it’s the other way around. Jesus invites us. He says “Ask, and you will receive, and your joy will be complete,” and by the authority of this invitation, we have all confidence that his Father is our Father, and that our Father will hear us for Christ’s sake.

So we pray. We pray for our bodily needs. We pray for our family. We pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs. And God answers. Sometimes, we see the results of God answering prayers. Maybe you recover your health. Maybe you obtain more financial security. Maybe a war ends or the economy picks up. On the other hand, it often seems that God does not hear us or that he simply said “No.” But Jesus says, “Ask, and you will receive.” These words are your confidence. If you find that God has answered your prayers, praise God! He is merciful! But our confidence that he hears us – our confidence that He answers us – does not come from what we physically experience. Our confidence that God answers prayers is found in Christ and his promise. He is God’s Yes to us.

With the Holy Spirit, the Father and the Son have a perfect communion with one another. God’s joy was always complete. And this is what is so wonderful about his love. He who has always had the perfect love with the Father was driven by that same love to save us, poor and miserable sinners. When he cried out on the cross, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” this is God’s desire for you. Hidden in the cross, that cry of utter despair from the sinless Son of God, is reason we may pray to God and call him our Father. If we look at how often we are unwilling to enjoy the fellowship of his Word, we must admit that we deserve to be forsaken by God and to not have him hear us. After all, why should you expect someone to listen to you if you don’t listen to him? It is impossible for natural reason to grasp why Jesus would bear the silence of God we all deserve. It is just as much a wonder that God did not stay silent. He answered his beloved Son’s cry for help when he raised him from the dead. And when we hear the Word of our risen and ascended Savior, we can have confidence that God hears us and answers us.

God doesn’t want you to hear him merely because it gives him glory. He didn’t create us merely for his glory. Sure, he was glorified when he created us, but he also created the animals, and he is glorified even by that. God created you to be with him. This is why he sent his Son. Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners. The Father sent him because he wants you for his own. He wants to share with you everything that is his. He desires to have mercy on you. In his infinite wisdom he knows all your needs, yet he still desires to hear all your prayers. He is immovable, yet he still desires to be persuaded by your requests. And for the sake of his Son, he has an answer for all of your cries for mercy. If God did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, then certainly he will with him give to you all good things.

Jesus said that the time was coming when he would speak plainly about the Father. He had spoken in veiled speech, talking in parables to hide the truth from those who were wise in their own eyes. This shows that we cannot understand God’s promises by our own reason. If we tried, then we would only despair. If we judged purely by what our eyes can see, that the sickness doesn’t go away, that wars continue to displace people, that fears on earth only increase, then we would conclude that God doesn’t answer prayers. We might imagine that our grasp of God’s Word is strong enough by itself. But once we are tested by various kinds of trials and afflictions, then our faith doesn’t seem so strong. The disciples said that they believed Jesus because he was speaking plainly. But by the end of the evening they would all be scattered as their Lord would be taken away from them. Then where would their confidence be? It’s easy enough for us to say that God answers prayers. But when we go through fierce trials, then we see how difficult faith is. Prayer is easy enough when everything is going well. But when the blessings of this life are taken away, then God truly teaches us the power of prayer.

It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that we can believe. It is only by his plain words that we can have the confidence that as surely as the Son has returned to reign with the Father, the Father hears our petitions for the sake of his Son. So Jesus said in these plain words: “Now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.” These words of Jesus strengthen faith, restore the joyful hope of prayer, and rekindle the flame of love even in the darkest moments of your life.

If the power to believe is only in the Word, then the power to pray is only in the Word. Jesus does not need to be questioned. His words are Spirit and Truth. And by this Word he gives you everything he shares with his Father. So when you pray, listen to his Word. He says “The Father himself loves you.” He says “I came from the Father,” and “I go back to the Father.” If Jesus is with the Father, then the Father is with you. If you have the words of Jesus, then you have the words of the Father. If you believe in Jesus, if you love Jesus, then you have the same love the Father has.

So pray to the Father who loves you! He hears, and he answers. Pray in Jesus’ name. This is the name given to you in your baptism, the name that saves you. It is the name by which your sins are all forgiven, the name by which you receive all good things in this life, the name by which you die in peace. It is the name by which all the troubles of this world are conquered and overcome.

When afflictions sore oppress you,  
Low with grief and anguish bowed,  
Then to earnest prayer address you;  
Prayer will help you through the cloud,  
Still to see your Savior near,  
Under ev'ry cross you bear;  
By the light His Word doth lend you,  
Prayer will joy and comfort send you.

Amen.