

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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When the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, he starts with a *specific* prayer, but *more* than that he's explaining to them *why* we pray because we *often* get it *wrong*, without even *realizing* it.

So why *do* we pray?

- ❖ Prayer is not *therapy*, though aspects of it *can* be *therapeutic*.
- ❖ Prayer is not about achieving a *higher* state of *consciousness*, though it's not at all *uncommon* for people to have mystical *experiences* in prayer.
- ❖ And even though God *answers* our prayers, prayer is not a *magic formula* for *getting* what we *want*.
- ❖ In fact, prayer is much *more* about learning to *want* what we *get*.

Prayer is a *conversion* of our *hearts* because it's a *turning* our lives over to God and becoming *like him*.

- ❖ We're made in *his* image and so we find our greatest *fulfilment* when *his* will becomes *our* will; when we love what *he* loves and *desire* what *he* desires.
- ❖ We find our deepest *purpose* when we let him *lead* us to the acts of *love* that bring *about* those desires on *earth*.

That's why in the more developed version that *Matthew* gives us, we start by praying, "hallowed be *thy* name," "*thy* kingdom come," and "*thy* will be done."

- ❖ It's not a *passive* staying out of God's *way* or simply being *resigned* to him *doing* what he *wants*.
- ❖ That's not *conversion*; it's *oppression*.
- ❖ If we want to be *truly* free, we have to *surrender* our lives, with *all* of our cares and concerns, to *him*, which is why Jesus reminds us from the *start* that God is our *Father*.

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If we *always* remember that God is our *Father*, we'll have the *humility* to know what we are *children*, with needs that we *can't* meet on our own.

- ❖ So through all the petitions, Jesus is encouraging us to bring *everything* to *him* – God *wants* us to come to him with our *material* need.
- ❖ He *wants* us to bring him the pain of broken *relationships* and the seemingly *irreconcilable debts* we have with our brothers and sisters.
- ❖ He wants us to *run* to him when we're *tempted* and faced with the *evils* and *dangers* of this world.

So we come to God humbly as children in need, but also with the *boldness* and *confidence* that comes from being *his* children.

- ❖ Who but the prince or princess can wake up the king in the middle of the night to demand a glass of water?
- ❖ And if we're not ready to believe in God loving us that much, Jesus assures us with the image of the man's imperfect response to his friend's midnight request for bread.
- ❖ Jesus *even* goes so far as to say that *everyone* who *asks, receives*; that he who *seeks, finds*; and to *him* who *knocks, it will be opened*.

Now, you don't have to think about this *too* long before you say, "Wait a second, Jesus – *how* can you say that God always hears *and answers* our prayers, when we *don't* always *get* what we *pray* for?"

- ❖ Because God is our *heavenly* Father who *always* gives *good* gifts to his *children*.
- ❖ Jesus points out that when hungry children ask for *fish* and *eggs*, we *don't* turn around and give them *snakes* and *scorpions*.
- ❖ We give them what will *sustain* them and help them *grow, not* something that will *kill* them.

Of course, *children* don't always *ask* for *good* things like *fish* and *eggs*.

- ❖ In fact, *hungry* children *rarely* ask for the kinds of things that will *best* sustain them and help them *grow*, and *younger* children try to eat *all kinds* of things that aren't even *food*!
- ❖ So then, no matter *what* you're doing, raising children *always* comes back to *some* combination of *protecting* them from *themselves*, *teaching* them what's *best*, and *showing* them how to *get* it.
- ❖ But while *my* goal is for Everett and Mattie to *grow* up and be *free* from relying on *me*, *God* is doing the same *things*, but with the *opposite* goal – *he* wants us to get *better* at being *children*, and become *totally* reliant on *him*.

For just a *glimpse* of what that *looks* like, take the *first* verse of today's *psalm*: "I will give *thanks* to you O *LORD*, with my *whole heart*..."

- ❖ He's saying, "Even when I'm *uncomfortable* or *suffering*, no matter the circumstances, I will *praise* and *thank* you with *everything* that I *am*."
- ❖ We *don't* always get what we *want*, so the only way to give thanks with our *whole heart* – not *compromising* or *hedging* our bets, not holding *anything* back – is by *learning* to *want* what we *get*.

Then, he shows us *why* we would even *want* to do this, when he adds, "before the gods I will sing your praise."

- ❖ What's *that*? That's the natural *consequence* of *wanting* what we *get*.
- ❖ When he says "the *gods*," he means *all* of the *other* things that we might turn to as *needy children* – the things that aren't *best* for us, but *will* take the *edge* off of our *sadness*, *hunger*, *loneliness*, and other *suffering*.
- ❖ When he *hasn't* gotten what he *wants*, instead of *sulking*, *wallowing*, or *trying* to get it somewhere *else*, the *psalmist* will *stand* up, *look* those *lesser* things in the *face*, and *praise* God for loving him *better* than *he* could love *himself*.

That's what begins to happen when we get prayer *right* and our *hearts* are *converted*.

- ❖ We'll begin to see how we *need* circumstances that *challenge* us because they *strengthen* us to receive greater *joys*.
- ❖ We can't just be *handed all* that God wants to *give* because the *greater* something *is*, the *more* it *demand*s of us.
- ❖ And *whenever* something demands *more* of us than we have to *give*, it's *crushing*, no matter *how* good it might *be*.

With *converted* hearts we can *always* praise God because we can trust that our suffering is *never meaningless*, but *always* a *preparation* for something *more precious* and *beautiful*.

- ❖ What seemed like a *serpent* becomes a *fish*, a *scorpion* becomes an *egg*.
- ❖ What seemed like *oppression* becomes *freedom*.
- ❖ What seemed *hopeless* becomes a *promise*.

That's why we *pray* – because learning to *want* what we get from *God* is the *only* way to *give* our *hearts* what they really *want*.