

Sunday Readings Explained-3

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Power of Intercessory Prayer

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time:

Genesis 18:20-32, Colossians 2:12-14, Luke 11:1-13

Introduction

The main themes of today's Scripture readings are the power of intercessory prayer, the *Our Father* as the ideal prayer, and the necessity for persistence and perseverance in prayer, with trusting faith and boldness. In short, they teach us what to pray and how to pray. The first reading, taken from the Book of Genesis, gives us the model for intercessory prayer provided by Abraham in his dialogue with God. Although Abraham seems to be trying to manipulate God through his skillful bargaining and humble, persistent intercession, God is actually being moved to mercy by the goodness of a few innocent souls. The Responsorial Psalm (Ps 138), with the Psalm Response, "*Lord, on the day I called for help, you answered me,*" is a hymn of hope and trust in the Lord, reminding us that God is close to the humble of heart and to all those who call upon Him in their need. The second reading, taken from the Letter to the Colossians, does not deal with prayer directly, but it provides a basis for all Christian prayers, especially for liturgical prayer: the mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul assures us that even when we were dead in sin, God gave us new life through Jesus and pardoned all our sins. In the Gospel passage, after teaching a model prayer, Jesus instructs his disciples to pray to God their Heavenly Father with the same boldness, daring, intimacy, conviction, persistence and perseverance Abraham displayed and the friend in need in the parable employed. He gives us the assurance that God will not be irritated by our requests or unwilling to meet them with generosity.

First reading: Genesis 20: 18-32

The first reading is the story of Abraham's negotiating for mercy with God on behalf of some innocent potential victims of Sodom and Gomorrah (including his nephew Lot and his family), when God had decided to destroy those cities which were almost entirely inhabited by people who led wicked and sexually-perverted lives. Abraham acknowledged that (1) he was "*dust and ashes*" breathed into existence by the very breath of God (Genesis 2:7), (2) he had been called to become a covenantal partner of God (15:1-18), and (3) he had been blessed with the Divine promise of land, progeny protection and prosperity (12:1-3). But, as a close friend of God, the great patriarch of the Jews felt free to bargain with God when God told him He had decided to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah: "*If you find fifty righteous people in those wicked and immoral cities,*" Abraham said, "*you won't destroy it, will you, God?*" God said, "*No, if I find fifty righteous people in the city, I will not destroy it.*" "How about forty, thirty, twenty? ten?" Although there were not even ten just people in those cities, God went beyond the terms of negotiation and spared the only just inhabitants of the cities, Abraham's nephew and his family, because God is much more merciful than we are. Sodom's destruction, in spite of Abraham's intercession, teaches contemporary believers the valuable lesson that those who tolerate the evils perpetrated in human society and who refuse to protest against them by word, prayer and example leave themselves open to being swallowed up by them.

Second Reading: Colossians 2:12-14

The Christians at Colossae were being exposed to a variety of philosophical and theological teachings, many of which were incompatible with the Gospel. Hence, in his letter to the Colossians, Paul tried to establish that Christ was superior to any other possible mediator between humanity and God. In today's passage, Paul answered the question, "How, then, do we get Christ **to be (?)** in us?" Assuming that the ritual of Baptism obviously simulates burial and resurrection, Paul's declared that when we were buried in the waters of Baptism, we were united with Jesus in his saving death, and when we emerged from the baptismal font we were joined to Christ in his

Resurrection. Long before "confession" came into existence, Paul taught that our sins were forgiven because the person who had committed those sins was no longer alive. That person died when he or she became one with the risen Jesus through Baptism. The new person who had come into existence at that point was not responsible for the dead person's transgressions. His or her sins had been literally wiped out or erased from the mind and memory of God, having been snatched up and *nailed to the cross* (v. 14), i.e. put to death, through the saving sacrifice of Jesus.

Gospel Reading: Luke 11:1-13

Luke's version and Matthew's version: Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer is given in the context of the Sermon on the Mount as part of Jesus' teaching on how to pray, while Luke's version is set in one of those occasions just after our Lord had been at prayer. Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is shorter than the more familiar version found in Matthew's Gospel. However, it teaches us all we need to know about how to pray and what to pray for. It has only five petitions while Mathew adds two more ("Your will be done..." and "deliver us from the evil one"). The first two petitions have to do with praise and worship of God, while the next three petitions present to Him our needs - daily bread, forgiveness and protection from the evil one. The Church uses the longer form of the Lord's Prayer.

The structure of the *Our Father*: The prayer consists of two parts. In the first part, we praise and worship God and express our ardent desire for His rule in human hearts, enabling us to do His will in the most perfect way. In the second part we present our needs before God our Father with filial love and trusting faith. We offer before God our present (*daily bread*), our past (*forgiveness of sins*) and our future (*protection against temptations*). By this prayer we also invite the Trinitarian God into our lives: God the Father, the Creator and Provider, by asking for daily bread; God the Son, Jesus, our Savior, by requesting forgiveness of our sins; and God the Holy Spirit by asking for deliverance from temptations ("*the final test.*")

The Petitions: The petitions cover our present needs, the forgiveness of our past sins, and protection from future temptations. We need not only bodily nourishment, but also daily spiritual nourishment, so that we may be strong enough to forgive those who offend us. In the next petition, Jesus links the giving and receiving of forgiveness. If we expect God to forgive us, we must forgive one another (*"Forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us"*.) The last petition - *"and do not subject us to the final test"* - covers future trials and temptations. We need God's protection both from the evil one (the devil) and from the evils in society that seek to destroy us. It is quite appropriate for us to pray for deliverance from evil for ourselves, our loved ones, our community, our nation, and our world.

Prayer: Persistent and Persevering: In the second part of today's Gospel, by presenting the parable of a friend in need, Jesus emphasizes our need for persistent and persevering prayer, acknowledging our total dependence on God. In the ancient Hebrew world, hospitality was the essence of one's goodness. To welcome a visitor without food and drink was unthinkable. A traveler who was traveling in the evening to avoid the heat of the afternoon, might well arrive late at night. But the villagers used to go to bed early, as they had no electricity. So in this parable, when a man received unexpected guests late at night and found his cupboard bare, he went to his neighbor and woke him in order to borrow a loaf of bread. In those days, people generally slept in one room, the children bedded down with the adults. Rising to answer the door would disrupt the whole family and hence the neighbor was reluctant to get up. Finally, however, because of the persistence of his guest, he got up and gave bread to his neighbor. This parable does not mean that God is a reluctant giver. Rather it stresses the necessity of our persisting in prayer as the expression of our total dependence on God. Persevering in prayer helps us to purify our prayer, to make clear to ourselves our values and hopes, and to lead us to ask for what is really in our very best interests. St. Paul tells us to *"pray without ceasing"* (Romans), *"pray at all times"* (Ephesians), *"be steadfast in prayer"* (Colossians), and *"pray constantly"* (Thessalonians). Jesus assures us, *"Knock and the door shall be opened."*

The Misconception: The parable teaches us that prayer is not putting coins in a vending machine called God to get whatever we wish. We must not look upon God as a sort of genie who grants all our requests. God is our loving *Father* Who knows what to give, when to give and how to give. This includes not only our daily bread to satisfy our physical hunger but also "bread" to satisfy our spiritual hunger. Prayer is a relationship -- an intimate, loving, caring, parent-child relationship. The Greek text means: "Ask and you will receive something good,"--not just whatever we ask for. The New Testament Greek also instructs us, "ask and keep on asking...seek and keep on seeking...knock and keep on knocking." Hence, we are to be persistent declaring our trusting faith and dependence on God. One thing that is sometimes overlooked in this story is that this, like the story of Abraham bargaining with God for the lives of Lot and his family, is primarily a story about intercessory prayer. One friend goes to another friend on behalf of someone else.

"Prayer Doesn't Change God; It Changes Me." A colleague asked C.S. Lewis if he really thought he could change God with his prayer for the cure of his wife's cancer. Lewis replied: "Prayer doesn't change God; it changes me." William McGill summed it up this way. "The value of persistent prayer is not that God will hear us but that we will finally hear God." Keep in mind that Jesus has taught us to address God as Father. A loving Father listens to his child, but does not blindly endorse every request. Instead, the loving Father provides what is needed, including discipline. Bishop Sheen has this comment on prayer: "The man who thinks only of himself says prayers of petition. He who thinks of his neighbor says prayers of intercession. He who thinks only of loving and serving God says prayers of abandonment to God's will, and that is the prayer of the saints." To pray is not to impose our will on God but to ask God to make us open to his will; in other words, we pray not to change God's mind but for God to change ours. The Our Father is the "summary of the whole Gospel" (Tertullian) and it is the "perfect prayer" (St. Thomas Aquinas). "The Lord's Prayer is the most perfect of prayers... In it we ask, not only for all the things we can rightly desire, but also in the sequence that they should be desired. This prayer not only teaches us

to ask for things, but also in what order we should desire them." (St. Thomas Aquinas, as quoted in **the** Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2763)

Life messages

1. Prayer is essential for Christian family life.

Fidelity is one of the original blessings of married life. To be truly faithful in marriage, spouses must pray, not only individually, but together. Married couples should come together before God every day as prayer partners, thanking God and offering intercessory prayers for each other, for their children and for their dear ones. Daily prayer will help married couples to celebrate and reverence God's vision of human sexuality and honor life from conception to natural death. Here is St. John Marie Vianney's advice to a couple who asked him how to pray: "Spend three minutes praising and thanking God for all you have. Spend three minutes asking God's pardon for your sins and presenting your needs before Him. Spend three minutes reading the Bible and listening to God in silence. And do this every day."

2. We need to accept others as children of God and thereby brothers and sisters

Through 'Our Father,' Jesus is giving us a new vision in human relationship. It is the concept that we all, irrespective of our color, creed or social background, are the children of God and thereby brothers and sisters. When we learn this lesson - if we can learn this lesson - and if we are able to treat God as our father and love him accordingly and if we are able to treat every other human being as our own dear brothers and sisters and love them accordingly, then, and then only, shall we experience the Kingdom of God here on earth and enjoy this in the next life. When we love each other and forgive each other's failings God also will love us and forgive us. This is the foundation of true faith. (Joe Vempeny)

3. Avoid giving lame reasons why we don't pray

Modern Christians give four lame excuses for not praying. a) The first excuse: We are too busy. The richer a culture is, the less time it has for prayer, because money and wealth provide distractions. Researchers say that the average Christian living in a wealthy country prays four minutes a day. Often the first thing given up by a busy Christian is his prayer life. b) A second excuse: We don't believe prayer does that much good, other than giving us psychological motivation to be better persons. Besides psychological motivation, prayer establishes and augments our relationship with God, the source of our power. c) A third excuse: A loving God should provide for us and protect us from the disasters of life, such as disease or accidents, without our asking Him. Prayer expresses our awareness of our need for God and our dependence on Him. d) A fourth excuse: Prayer is boring. People who use this excuse forget the fact that prayer is a conversation with God: listening to God speaking to us through the Bible and talking to God. You can't have a close relationship with anyone, including God, without persistent and intimate conversation. Four minutes a day is not much intimate conversation. Since our society concludes that prayer doesn't work, it turns to sex, violence and unhealthy addictions resulting in broken marriages, broken families, psychological problems, moral decadence, spiritual poverty, law-and-order problems, and prison populations.