

## *Does Prayer Change the Weather?*

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Teach us, O God, to pray as we ought: for grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed; for courage to change the things that should be changed; and for wisdom to distinguish the one from the other; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

1. There are doubtless questions that only professional theologians are competent to answer. But I'm quite certain the question I've proposed for our discussion today is not one of them. Any of you is every bit as qualified as either I or any of my fellow professionals could possibly be to answer the question for yourself. And if your experience has been at all like mine, I'm confident that the same will be true of your answer: No, prayer does *not* change the weather—not, at any rate, consistently enough to be relied on as an effective means of achieving that end.

2. But if this is so, and if honesty compels us to say much the same thing about petitionary and intercessory prayer generally, how are we to understand the point of such praying? If it's not effective as, in William James' words, "an effort to lobby in the courts of the Almighty for special favors," what, exactly, is its point, and why do we continue to engage in it—and to enjoin one another (not to mention raising our children!) to do so? If it's not an effective means of getting what we want, what good is it?

3. There's an old answer to this question that I take to be—or, at least, to point to—the right answer; and the purpose of these opening comments is very briefly to develop this answer by way of focusing our discussion. Simply put, the answer I'm prepared to defend is that *prayer generally, and petitionary and intercessory prayer in particular, are a means of salvation, or, if you will, a means of grace.*

4. The difficulty with this simple answer, of course, is that there are so many things that have been said to be "means of salvation." If the term is most commonly applied to such things as preaching the word and administering the sacraments, it has also been applied to the faith by which the grace mediated by both word and sacraments alone becomes effective in our lives. But then it is also often applied to the representative ministry of the church and, by further extension, to the visible church itself, which, in the well-known formula of the Second Vatican Council, is defined as *sacramentum salutis totius mundi*—"sacrament of the salvation of the whole world." More than that: in much contemporary theology, the application of the term has been extended even further to Jesus Christ himself, who is said to be the *primal* sacrament, or means of salvation, the church then being distinguished as the *primary* means, and all other such things as word, sacraments, and ministry being distinguished as *secondary* means. My own way of making essentially the same point is to say that faith in God through Jesus Christ, although in its own way a *means* of salvation

and therefore representative of it, is nonetheless the *constitutive* such means for us as Christians—which is to say, the means that constitutes anything and everything else as properly Christian—while all other so-called means, be they the primary means of the visible church or the secondary means that the church in turn constitutes, are in no sense constitutive but rather *representative* means of salvation.

5. Now, clearly, "prayer," as we ordinarily understand it, is—if a means of salvation at all—one of many representative means that we as Christians recognize and use. I say, "as we ordinarily understand it," because the term "prayer" can also be used in extended senses—so extended, indeed, that Paul can exhort the Thessalonians, "Pray constantly," or, as the KJV has it, "Pray without ceasing." In the same vein, the great theologian of the ancient church, Origen, can say that "the whole life of the saint [is] one great unbroken prayer," and Bishop John A.T. Robinson can write in our own time, in *Honest to God*, "Prayer is the responsibility to meet others with all I have, to be ready to encounter the unconditional in the conditional, to expect to meet God in the way, not to turn aside from the way. All else is exercise towards that or reflection in depth upon it." (And in this, as in so much else, Bishop John Shelby Spong in our day simply reiterates Bishop Robinson.) Clearly, "prayer" is being used in all these cases in so broad a sense that it covers the whole of our Christian existence as an existence in faith working through love and, as such, our proper worship, or service, of God. But, as we most commonly use the term, it has the much narrower meaning illustrated paradigmatically by what goes on, or should go on, in the corporate worship of the gathered church. Far from referring to the whole of our existence and activity as Christians, it refers to one activity alongside others, the significance of which—as of all such special "religious" activities (which, of course, are the "all else" of which Bishop Robinson speaks)—is to re-present the reality understood and responded to in different ways through Christian faith and witness. In that sense, prayer is the re-presentation through appropriate concepts and symbols of the understanding of God, our neighbors, and ourselves to which we are brought insofar as we understand them in the light of God's word to us through Jesus Christ. Prayer in this sense, in other words, is our response or "Amen" to the truth disclosed to us through God's decisive revelation through Christ as mediated through the visible church and its other means of salvation. It is our acknowledgement in an outward visible way of the reality of God, our neighbors, and ourselves as this reality is decisively re-presented to us through Christ and the church.

6. Thus our prayers of adoration primarily re-present our understanding of God, while our prayers of confession primarily re-present our understanding of ourselves before God, in face of God's liberating judgment against our sin. On the other hand, our prayers of thanksgiving explicitly express both—our understanding of God as the primal source of all that we are and have and our understanding of ourselves as the grateful recipients of all God's gifts—while our prayers of petition further re-present our understanding of ourselves, and our prayers of intercession re-present our understanding of our neighbors. In the second of the two evangelical commandments, you'll remember, we're charged with loving our neighbors as ourselves. Well, petitionary prayer, in the usual

sense, is one of the ways we go about fulfilling the commandment to love ourselves, even as intercessory prayer—which is really only petitionary prayer for others—is one of the ways we go about loving our neighbors.

7. But how so? *Why* do we pray for ourselves and our neighbors? *To what end* do we pray? Here is where I always remember one of my favorite theologians, Martin Luther, who was the first to help me answer these questions, although I have since learned that the same teaching is to be found already in Augustine (from whom Luther may very well have learned it) as well as in the sermons of the Anglican priest who figures so significantly in my own church tradition as a Methodist—namely, John Wesley. In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, and specifically on Mt 6:7-13, Luther writes (and I quote him at length):

Therefore Christ says now: 'Your heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask for it' [vs. 8]. It is as if he would say: 'What are you up to? Do you suppose that you will talk [God] down with your long babbling and make him give you what you need? There is no need for you to persuade him with your words or to give him detailed instructions; for he knows beforehand what you need, even better than you do yourself.' . . .

But you may say: 'Since [God] knows and sees all our needs better than we do ourselves, why does he let us bring our petitions and present our need, instead of giving it to us without our petitioning? After all, he freely gives the whole world so much good every day, like the sun, the rain, crops and money, body and life, for which no one asks him or thanks him. He knows that no one can get along for a single day without light, food, and drink. Then why does he tell us to ask for these things?'

The reason [God] commands it is, of course, not in order to have us make our prayers an instruction to him as to what he ought to give us, but in order to have us acknowledge and confess that he is already bestowing many blessings upon us and that he can and will give us still more. By our praying, therefore, we are instructing ourselves more than we are him. It makes me turn around so that I do not proceed as do the ungodly, neither acknowledging this nor thanking [God] for it. When my heart is turned to him and awakened this way, then I praise him, thank him, take refuge with him in my need, and expect help from him. As a consequence of all this, I learn more and more to acknowledge what kind of God he is.

...

You see, a prayer that acknowledges this truly pleases God. It is the truest, highest, and most precious worship which we can render to him; for it gives him the glory that is due him. . . . [A] Christian heart is one that learns from the word of God that everything we have is from God and nothing is from ourselves. Such a heart accepts all this in faith and practices it, learning to look to [God] for everything and to expect it from him. In this way praying teaches us to recognize who we are and who God is, and to

learn what we need and where we are to look for it and find it. The result of this is an excellent, perfect, and sensible [woman or] man, one who can maintain the right relationship to all things.

8. "By our praying, therefore, we are instructing ourselves more than we are [God]. . . . [P]raying teaches us to recognize who we are and who God is, and to learn what we need and where we are to look for it and find it." Or, as Mr. Wesley puts it, "[T]he end of your praying is not to inform God, as though he knew not your wants already; but rather to inform yourselves. . . . It is not so much to move God, who is always more ready to give than you to ask, as to move yourselves, that you may be willing and ready to receive the good things he has prepared for you." In sum: we pray because we are human beings who, as Paul says (Rom 8:26), do not know how to pray as we ought. We pray because in this way, through the means of salvation that prayer is, we may be saved from the unbelief—or, if you will, the unfaith, the lack of obedient trust in God and loyalty to God and to all to whom God is loyal—to which we are continually tempted by our life in the world.

9. But here I would remind you that the primary emphasis in the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is not that we are each our own priest before God, but that we are each to be priests of God to and for one another. Therefore, when I say—following Luther and Wesley—that we pray to instruct ourselves, I mean also, and primarily: *we pray to instruct one another*—wherein, incidentally, the reason is to be sought for learning how to pray in the church's school of prayer, through her prayer book and her treasury of prayers. In this sense, *we pray to bear witness*—to re-present to one another the truth decisively disclosed to us through God's word, so that we can each again and again make this truth our own through faith. We pray for ourselves and our neighbors, then, to witness or to re-present to one another the truth about our existence disclosed to us through Jesus Christ. God gives us both ourselves and our neighbors to love, and, in God's word to us through Jesus, God discloses both ourselves and our neighbors in the light of God's love, under its gift and demand. By means of our prayers of petition and intercession, then, we re-present our reception of God's gift of ourselves and our neighbors, so as to make it really ours, so as to take full responsibility for it, so as also to obey God's demand.

10. But if prayer is rightly understood, not as an ineffective means of lobbying with God for special favors, but as, in this sense, a means of salvation, how effective a means is it? Otherwise put: is prayer used as such a means answered? I deeply believe it is; for when we learn to pray as we ought, making use of prayer as the means of salvation it properly is, it is bound to be effective for us as the pray-ers, and we have every reason to hope and pray that our prayers may also become an effective witness, and so an effective means of salvation, for others.

11. Some of you may already be familiar with the witness that has come down to us simply as the prayer of an unknown Confederate soldier. In point of fact, it is a "prayer" only in the broad sense in which, as we've seen, any Christian

witness can be said to be such. Even so, I want to conclude with it because both its honesty and its wisdom on the whole question of prayer remain, in my experience, unsurpassed.

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve  
    I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey. . .  
I asked for health, that I might do greater things  
    I was given infirmity, that I might do better things. . .  
I asked for riches, that I might be happy  
    I was given poverty, that I might be wise. . .  
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men  
    I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God. . .  
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life  
    I was given life, that I might enjoy all things. . .  
I got nothing I asked for—  
    but everything I had hoped for  
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered  
I among all men, most richly blessed!

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church  
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