

“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”

Luke 11:1-13

Christ gives to us the sure promise: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” What a wonderful promise: the promise that He will answer prayer. However, it is also one of the most misapplied and misunderstood texts in all of Scripture.

We get excited when we see Jesus teaching His disciples about prayer and saying, “For everyone who asks receives.” We hear this one verse and say, “All right, I have got a long list of things I want,” as if God were Santa Claus and every day were Christmas. This time of year, there are numerous prayers offered up on behalf of both the Cubs and the Cardinals. In my sinfulness, I would love to draw some seemingly obvious conclusions. However, that is not how God operates.

He does not bless those He loves and curse those He hates. Our pagan world thinks that God should operate under the rules of Karma. If you do good, good things will happen to you. That is the lie told by many a TV preacher. That is not what Jesus promises.

This is not an attempt to discourage you from offering up frivolous petitions. The Lord often chooses to answer prayers offered on behalf of our sports teams or to give us material blessings that are more than our daily bread. However, those frivolous petitions that we offer to God such as, “Please Lord, let my team win” do not have the promise “ask and you shall

receive” connected to them. Such requests were not what Jesus had in mind when He taught His disciples to pray.

But we ask, what about the prayers that we offer to God which are not frivolous. We pray for a loved one who is sick, or injured, or dying – yet those we love still die. We pray for safety for ourselves and our children – yet tragedy strikes.

Why does God not answer all of these prayers in the way that we ask Him to? He certainly answers some of them. In the Old Testament, King Hezekiah was granted a 15 year extension on his life when he prayed to the Lord [Is. 38:1-5]. Martin Luther prayed vigorously as his young associate Philip Melanchthon was near death from an illness, and Philip’s life was spared at that time.

Never doubt that the Lord hears your prayer, and He often answers your prayers in the way you ask. However, sometimes that for which we pray is not beneficial in the long run and therefore is not God’s will. Remember that “the long run has an eternal aspect.” God is always looking out for your best interest in the long run. Therefore prayers for material or physical blessings are not prayers with the guarantee “ask and you shall receive” connected with them.

Remember St. Paul’s prayers as recorded in his second letter to the Corinthians; how Paul recalls that he pleaded with the Lord three times that He would take away his “thorn in the flesh.” But rather than relieving Paul of his difficulties, the Lord said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness” [2Cor. 12:9].

Rather than giving Paul physical aid, as he had asked, He gave him

spiritual aid, which the Lord never withholds from His people. And those are the prayers to which the promise “Ask and you shall receive” is connected. When teaching us to pray, Jesus tells us that even sinful people like you and me know how to give good gifts to our children; Jesus says, “how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” When Jesus taught us to pray, He taught us to pray for an increase in the strength of our faith. He taught us to pray for the Holy Spirit to play a larger role in our lives.

We see this in the Lord’s Prayer. In that prayer, we pray that God’s name is hallowed. That is, we pray that God’s name remains holy in our lives, that the Word of God is taught in truth and purity, and that God’s Word and God’s name is not profaned among us.

We pray that God’s kingdom would come to us. God’s kingdom comes when God sends His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe God’s holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity (as Luther says in the catechism). And the focus is really on eternity more than our brief experience with time.

We pray that His will, not our will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

We pray “Give us this day our daily bread.” This is the only petition of the Lord’s Prayer that asks for any physical blessings.

Then the Lord teaches us to pray for forgiveness. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. We pray that the Lord would forgive our sins even though we do not deserve to be forgiven. We ask that He would send His Holy Spirit into our hearts that we would have the grace and strength to sincerely forgive and gladly do good to everyone who sins against us – even though they do not deserve to be forgiven.

Finally, we pray that the Lord would guard and keep us, so that through temptation we would not be deceived by Satan, the world, or our sinful nature; that He would rescue us from every evil during our life on earth, and when our last hour has come, that He would give us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrows to Himself in heaven.

These are the things for which the Lord taught us to pray. Christ has given us the promise that He will send His Holy Spirit to those who ask Him. When we are faced with difficult situations, illnesses, family problems, or even the most devastating tragedies, pray to the Lord that those problems will be taken away (although certain events and conditions cannot be fixed). But pray – the Lord often answers our prayers in the way that we want Him to. But more importantly, when faced with these difficult situations, pray that the Lord gives you the strength of Spirit, the patience, the grace, and the comfort that only He can give.

It is our faith in Christ that is our greatest strength when we are faced with the ugliness of sin. We thank the Lord that the kingdom of God has come into our lives, and that we have the joy of the Gospel and the sure hope of the resurrection. We thank the Lord for sending His Son to suffer and die so that our Father does forgive the trespasses of undeserving sinners like you and me, and we have the strength and grace of the Holy Spirit in our hearts to forgive those undeserving sinners who trespass against us. We also pray that the Holy Spirit would keep us in that one, true faith through our dying day that when our last hour comes, He would give us a blessed end and take us from this valley of sorrows to Himself in heaven.

So, like the disciples, we also say, “Lord teach us to pray.” Amen.