

“WHILE HE WAS PRAYING”

Luke 3:15-22

If you have a problem like finding someone to shovel your walks because of your bad back or a car that won't start on these cold mornings, people can make suggestions to you. Perhaps they can even help you. But when someone really bad happens, like when you are diagnosed with cancer, the only thing they can seem to offer is, “We will pray for you.”

It can seem like the easy way out to offer prayer. It takes work to shovel a driveway for someone who has a bad back, time to help charge a battery, and an expense to us to help them pay for a new car. But to offer our prayers? What big deal is that? Can't anyone pray?

Yet what do we see Jesus doing as He is baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. Luke in his Gospel specifically tells us:

When Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased.”

It is in the act of praying that Jesus is shown to be the Messiah by the presence of the Holy Spirit as a dove and the voice of God the Father.

Luke notes other times when Jesus prays. He is praying when the devil comes to tempt Him. He takes breaks from teaching and healing to pray. He is praying when His body is transformed and Moses and Elijah appear with Him on the mountain of transfiguration. He teaches the disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer. He is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane when He is arrested. And Jesus' last words before He dies in the Luke's Gospel is the prayer, “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.”

Here is the God's Chosen One, the Messiah, the One sent to save the world, the One sent to do something about the mess of our world. And what does He do in those critical situations? He prays!!

Praying is something most people do. Well less than half of the population in this country go to church. Fewer go regularly. Yet, the vast majority still say they believe in God and they pray. But so do non-Christians. Millions of Moslems regularly stop work in their countries several times a day to get on their knees, face Mecca, and pray to Allah. Millions go to Hindu, Buddhist, or pagan temples to pray to their gods or ancestors. So what big deal is it for us to pray?

In the Old Testament we see how people prayed to their pagan gods. But why? They did it to get something from that god. When it came to things you could control like sharpening a plow or moving water from a well to a garden plot, you depended on your efforts. But to get rain, heal from sickness, or have the safe delivery of a child, things that people could not

control, you turned to the gods. In dealing with those gods you dealt with them as you often did with humans who had power. You did what you could to get them to give you what you wanted. So prayer involved flattery, rituals, sacrifices, and promises. You did what you could to get what you wanted. We call that manipulation.

But with God that was all different. God could not be manipulated. All you could do is ask and trust that God would give. And that trust lay not in what you did or offered, but solely in His goodness and mercy. If people tried to manipulate God, like the people of Israel so often did, then God rejected them just as He did when they prayed to pagan gods.

I had a social studies teacher who gave a somewhat cynical, but often true way to look at history. He told us if you want to look for a reason why people did what they did, look for a dollar sign. We are told that the threat of German oppression led the United States into World War I and that we were going to make the world “Safe for Democracy.” But that ignores how industries and agriculture made fortunes supporting Britain and France during the war, something they couldn’t do with Germany because of the British naval blockade. After World War II the United States sent much aid to our former enemies in Germany and Japan. But what sold that aid to Congress was not charity, but warnings about the threat communism could take over in those countries, a communism that spoils trade and economy. Remember what God told Adam and Eve after they sinned. He told the man that He would “lord” over her like a tyrant. And He told the woman that she would seek to manipulate him.

When we try to manipulate, then we treat people like vending machines or computers. We do what we do to get them to respond the way we want them to. Instead God wants a relationship with us, one based not on what I can get out of you, but out of love.

That is what we see in Jesus as He is baptized. His baptism was not like ours to take away His sins. His baptism was to fulfill the Old Testament promise that God would “pour His Spirit on His chosen Messiah.” It was the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. But notice that Jesus did nothing special to receive this gift. He went to the Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist, the prophet His Father chose. Baptisms were common among Jews, but John’s baptism was unique because of entering the water by yourself, John did it to you. Your role was passive. Jesus was endowed by the Holy Spirit not because He convinced His Father to give the Spirit to Him, but by the will of His Father.

A typical hero story of ancient mythology is to have a hero do something brave like slay the dragon, or a cyclops, or a hydra like Hercules. Then they are acclaimed as heroes. But before Jesus does anything miraculous He hears the words, “You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased.” Only after that do we see Jesus fight the temptation of the devil, then go on to heal the sick, chase our demons, calm the storming sea, and feed the 5,000.

It is as Jesus is praying that He is blessed. The praying does not “earn” the blessing; it is what He does because He loves the Father. When you love someone then you want to be with that person. Do we call our spouse or children just to pass on information? Or do we do it

because we also want to “hear” them, to be in a relationship with them? That’s why Jesus prayed. That’s why we can pray.

We are taught to bow our heads, close our eyes, and fold our hands when we pray. Yes, this does show respect to God. Yes, this helps to avoid distractions. But we don’t do it because the more humble we are, the more He is liable to listen to us. Anything we try to do to get anything from God is manipulating. Instead we do those things to help us remember that God blesses out of His love, with nothing for us to offer Him. He created the world and us. To create means to make out of nothing. It is something we cannot do. As God He needs nothing from us. We have nothing to offer Him that He doesn’t have already. But He offers us Himself in a relationship, in a way we can understand through His Son, Christ Jesus.

Jesus’ baptism equipped Him with what He needed to do the ministry He was given to do. Our baptisms give us what Jesus didn’t need—the forgiveness of sins and eternal life with God. But just as Jesus received His baptism in prayer, we can daily receive the blessings of our baptisms which we respond to in prayer. It gives us the attitude expressed in Luther’s explanation to the words, “Our Father who art in heaven:

With these words God invites us to believe that He is our true Father and we are His true children, so that with all boldness and confidence, we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father.