

Beloved, I have good news for you.

Prayer, just like every part of your life in Christ, is God's gracious gift to you.

If there's anything you walk out of this sermon series remembering, let it be this.

Prayer is not a work you perform in order to please God.

Rather, prayer is a gift that you receive.

Prayer is not something you stir up inside yourself.

Rather, prayer is the eternal ongoing fellowship between the Son and Father that you step into by the presence of the Spirit which Jesus has poured out on you.

Pray is a gift you receive, not a work you perform, because you never pray alone. You always pray in and with and through Jesus, the one who prays for you.

Jesus Christ lives forever as our man in heaven, and he lives for this reason — that he might forever intercede for those who draw near to God to him.

For this is the claim of Jesus: *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*

And this is true for our life of prayer, just as it is true for our salvation, and the forgiveness of our sins, and our life everlasting.

For in him, in Christ, all things hold together, including our communion with God in prayer.

This morning, we've heard already from Exodus 2 and 3, where Moses tells us that God heard the prayers of Israel in Egypt, and because of those prayers, God remembered his promise to Abraham that he had made hundreds of years before that he would deliver Abraham's descendants from slavery.

And in the Epistle of James we heard how James emphasizes the power of prayer, instructing the elders of the church to anoint the sick with oil and pray for their healing, and promising that the prayer of a righteous man has great power, that, as the old translation puts it, the prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

And in the Gospel, we heard Jesus give his disciples this remarkable promise regarding their prayers: "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do," Jesus says, "that the Father may be glorified in the Son."

And, in our sermon text this morning, we'll listen again to the words of Jesus as he speaks to his disciples in the sermon on the mount and makes them very specific promises regarding the power of prayer.

Listen now to God's word from Matthew 7:7-11, which is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you'd like to read along.

*7 "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you. Prayer...

Interestingly, there is no teacher in all of the Scriptures who emphasizes the world-altering power of prayer more than our Lord Jesus.

Jesus makes breath-taking statements about prayer. He makes staggering promises about the power of prayer. And he does so without a hint of qualification.

*"If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask,"* Jesus says in Matthew 18, *"it will be done for them by my Father in heaven."*

And in Matthew 21, Jesus says, *"Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith."*

In John 14, he says, *"If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it."*

*In John 15, Jesus says, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."*

*In John 16, Jesus tells his disciples, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full."*

And, as we just heard, from Matthew 7, Jesus taught his disciples to ask boldly of their Father in heaven in prayer, saying:

*"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened."*

Beloved, it is a principle of first importance when we come to interpreting the Scriptures that we must take the words of the Lord Jesus with the utmost seriousness.

You see, Jesus says all kinds of outlandishness things, all kinds of things that we're tempted to brush off, or not take seriously. But this would be a mistake.

*Blessed are those who mourn,* Jesus says. And he means it.

*Blessed are you when people hate you,* Jesus says. And he means it.

*"If you love me, you will keep my commandments,"* Jesus says. And he means it.

*"If you do not forgive others their sins,"* Jesus says, *"neither will your Father in heaven forgive your sins."* And he means it.

*“Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them,”* Jesus says, *“for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”* And he means it.

And so when Jesus says the kind of outlandish things about prayer that he tends to say, when he says, *“Ask and you will receive,”* we must, beloved, take this seriously as well.

What Jesus is teaching us is that our prayers matter, that our prayers actually influence what happens in the world - both in terms of the smallest details of our daily lives, as well as the rise and fall of nations and the course of history itself.

And so, since God invites us to pray, and promises to give us what we ask for in prayer, the implication is that we should pray boldly, in faith, for those things that we desire to see in our lives and in the world.

But one might ask, if everything that happens in the world happens because God has ordained it, then why should I pray?

Isn't whatever is going to happen going to happen anyway?

And that's a good question. It's a reasonable question.

The answer to that question goes something like this. Yes, God ordains all things that come to pass. His will is absolutely sovereign.

And yet, when God causes things to happen in the world, he typically uses means to accomplish his will.

For example, God, in his sovereign will, has ordained for your daily bread today. Whatever meals you eat today come directly from God's hand.

But God does not cause the bread to appear on your table out of thin air. He could, if he wanted to. But that is not his way, not usually, at least.

No, God gives you your daily bread today by means. He uses human industry, he uses the farmer who planted the crops. He uses the sun and water to make the crops grow.

He uses harvesters and truck drivers and bakers and grocery stores — all of this activity is part of the means by which God carries out his sovereign will, which leads to the provision of your daily bread.

And, in much the same way, the prayers of his people are one of the primary means by which God carries out his will in the world.

John Frame, one of my favorite living theologians explains this wonderfully in a quote that is printed on the back of your order of worship.

Frame writes:

*“God ordains prayer as a means to change history. There are things that happen because of prayer, and things that do not happen because of no prayer.”*

*“Now, of course, prayer doesn’t change the eternal plan of God. But within that eternal plan are many plans for means and ends.*

*God ordains that crops will grow, but not without water and sun. He ordains that people will be saved, but (ordinarily) not without the teaching of the Word. And he ordains that we will have everything we truly need, but not without prayer.”*

In other words, our crying out God in prayer is a real and even necessary means for God to work in the world — because he has willed it to be so.

In James 4, the apostle writes to the church and he says, *“You do not have because you do not ask.”*

That's a fascinating sentence in the Scriptures. You do not have because you do not ask.

And, if we take it seriously, the same thing applies to us.

There are things in our lives that we do not have because we do not ask God for them.

There are injustices in the world that are the way they are because we have not asked God to change them.

Beloved, I am convinced that what Jesus is inviting us to do, what the Scriptures are inviting us to do, is to pray boldly, with faith, expecting that God will actually use our prayers as a means to carry out his sovereign plan in the world.

To make this very practical, I want to ask you this question. What is the impossible prayer in your life today?

What is the thing that you haven't asked God for because it seems too hard or too unlikely?

It might be something in your personal life.

It might be something in your family.

It might be something in the broader world.

As the year of 2022 draws to a close, I would encourage you to take a few moments and consider what the seemingly impossible thing is that you might ask the Lord to do in 2023.

Actually write it out. Put it on paper. And go to your Father boldly in prayer, trusting that all that Jesus promises about prayer is true.

Of course, even thinking about doing something like this, daring to ask God for impossible things in prayer is a deeply vulnerable thing to consider.

And it's vulnerable because praying for big things in this way is risky.

To pray for big things, impossible things, to really pray for them, to really ask and cry out for them is to place ourselves into the hands of God in a new and deeper way.

What if God answers our prayers, but not in the way we expect?

What if God doesn't answer our prayers in the time frame that we desire?

What if God doesn't give us the thing we want in the way we want him to?

To pray in this way, to dare to pray for impossible things, requires *faith*.

It requires faith to trust that God is actually good — not just in some abstract, theoretical way, but that he is actually good toward me. He actually cares about my life, about my desires, about my heart.

And it requires faith to put our desires into the hands of God and say — this God, is what I long for.

But I trust you enough to surrender it to you, to put myself at your mercy.

If we're honest, the reason we don't ask God for big things, the reason we don't bring before him our deepest desires and put them into his hands is because we lack the faith to do it.

It's easier to stick to small prayers. Reasonable prayers. Incremental prayers.

Faith, hope and love abide, says the Apostle Paul.

But our faith is often weak and frail. We're afraid to offer God our desires because we don't know exactly what he'll do with them, and we're not totally sure he's trustworthy enough to commit our whole selves to him.

But here is where our union with Christ makes all the difference, Beloved.

Because there is, as it turns out, one man who always trusted his Father with his deepest desires.

There is one man whose faith never wavered, but was always steadfast.

There is one man who believed, by faith, that his Father was always good, and that he always heard him.

Do you remember the words of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus? Do you remember what he said?

John tells us: *And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me."*

Even at the tomb of his friend, even in the face of death, Jesus' faith did not waver. He knew that his Father heard him. He knew that his Father would listen to his prayer. He knew that Lazarus would come out of that tomb.

And it was that same faith that is reflected in Jesus' last words, as he cried out before his own death to God, saying: *"Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit."*

Make no mistake, beloved.

Our Lord Jesus died with a prayer on his lips, knowing that his Father would not abandon him to grave, and that he would be raised on the third day in glory and power and victory.

And even this moment, as Jesus prays in heaven on our behalf, he is praying with that same kind of faith and trust in his Father, a faith that does not waver, a faith that abides forever.

And what is Jesus praying for?

He's praying for you. He's praying for me.

He's praying for our daily bread. He's praying that we will be protected from the evil one. He's praying that we would be delivered from temptation. He's praying that we would forgive our enemies.

And more than that, he's praying that God's will would be done, that God's kingdom on heaven would come on earth. In other words, he's praying for his Father to make the nations his own possession.

In Psalm 2, God the Father says to God the Son:

*"Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession."*

And that is exactly what Jesus is doing now in heaven. He is asking his Father for the nations.

And what the Scripture says is true. The prayers of a righteous man availeth much.

The prayers of our Lord Jesus will be answered.

And so as you pray beloved, in the weakness of your faith, know this.

You never pray alone.

Remember, prayer is not a work we perform, it is a gift we receive.

And when we pray with our eternal high priest, when we enter into his intercession for us, we are invited to rely on his faith, to depend on his confidence in his Father as we join our prayers to his.

What would it look like, beloved, for you take your impossible prayers to God — those prayers you hardly dare speak aloud — depending not on the strength of your own faith, but rather on the confidence and trust and faith that Jesus has in his Father?

That's exactly how I would encourage you to pray in your own lack of faith.

To go to God and say, Father, I am offering you this prayer not on my own, but I am giving it you in the name of Jesus.

And by giving it to you in the name of Jesus I am depending on his faith in your goodness where my faith is weak.

I can't pray this impossible prayer on my own. My faith isn't strong enough. But I know that I never pray alone, and I so am going to pray this big, huge, impossible prayer in the name of Jesus, who perfectly prays for me.

What if we prayed like that?

Beloved, I am convinced that it is only as we pray depending on the strength of Jesus that we will pray with the boldness and confidence and faith that God invites us to embrace in our petitions.

And it is only as we pray in union with Jesus, with the one whose prayers are always heard, that we will come to believe that what he promises is actually true.

Remember what Jesus says:

*“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.”*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.