

“How To Pray For What You Get....”

Text: “Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat? Or what shall we drink? Or what shall we wear?’ ... your heavenly father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.” Matthew 6: 31-33

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If you have even a tiny drop of tartan blood coursing through your veins; or if you enjoy singing Auld Lang Syne on New Year's Eve; or if you happen to fancy a good Scotch broth on a cold day, (The Scotch are not the people; they are Scots. Scotch is a word reserved for broth and another kind of liquid;) or even if you just like to hear a soft Scottish burr whirring out the Gospel from the pulpit. If any and all of the above induce a warm fuzzy feeling inside your body, mind or soul, shame on you if you do not know that today, the 25th day of January, Anno Domini 2009, is the 250th Anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns, the dashing young Scottish poet who still stands taller than any other in the minds and hearts of God's people. It is a national holiday in Scotland.

Robbie was a hoot. He loved his wine and women, then his songs and poems, then his version of the Presbyterian faith. Back when the Church Session had a formidable presence in the Parish, watchdogs of the minds and morals of the members, Burns was frequently called before the Elders and castigated for his aberrant behavior in the aforementioned categories. It was a heinous sin to play cards or to putter about in your Garden on the Sabbath Day, let alone some of those other things. Robbie didn't seem to care much, or at least he never changed his ways. But, as he ran from or sometimes with the devil, he wrote uplifting poems and songs that help you comprehend and survive in this crazy mixed up, hypocritical world. The intrigue of Burns runs deep. With his tales of everyday people with everyday foibles, he laid bare the games people play and opened up the idea that a person could be different and still find the favor of the Lord.

The reason I begin this sermon with Burns is that one of his most enduring poetical satires is called "Holy Willie's Prayer." Perhaps you know it. I have always loved it. Holy Willie in the poem was an actual elder named Willie Fisher in the Mauchline Parish Church nearby. Willie was the cat's meow of the proper Presbyterians. He was the self-appointed leader of the Session, and always schemed to get his own way. (Now, you and I do not

know anybody like that at Sharon, do we?) Willie circled the Parish to uncover the various misdeeds of the membership. A self aggrandizing ecclesiastical snitch, he filed several behavioral complaints against Burns and Robbie's friend Gavin Hamilton. On the surface Willie was a model of good behavior, but he was a first class hypocrite. It turns out that Holy Willie was eventually expelled from the Kirk for lifting money out of the offering trays in the vestry, having illicit companions of his own; and it is said that one night he died when he fell into a ditch on the way home from an outing and was too drunk to pull himself out.

In one of his complaints before the Presbytery of Ayr, the Court ruled against Willie and cleared Burns and his friend of the charges. It was then that Robert wrote "Holy Willie's Prayer." It is too long to quote it here, but let me share a couple of verses. Holy Willie is speaking to the Lord:

O Thou, who in the heavens does dwell,
Who, as it pleases best Thyself,
Sends one to heaven an' ten to hell,
All for Thy glory.

Yet I am here a chosen sample,
To show thy grace is great and ample;
I'm here a pillar o' Thy temple,
Strong as a rock,
And great example,

Lord, hear my earnest cry and pray'r,
Against that Presbyt'ry o' Ayr;
Thy strong right hand, Lord, make it bare
Upon their heads;
Lord visit them, an' dinna spare,
For their misdeeds

But, Lord, remember me an' mine
With mercies temporal and divine,
That I for grace an' gear may shine,
Excell'd by nane,
And a' the glory shall be thine,
Amen, Amen!

I would not have chosen to begin this sermon on prayer with Holy Willie were it not the 250th anniversary of Robert Burns's birth date; but it is a good starting point none the less. The obvious point of my title is that sometimes we have to learn to pray for what life gives us, "what we get," not what we would choose. There's a huge difference in the two. The problem with Willie's prayers was that he was trying to get what he wanted from the Lord and to prevent others from having it, rather than submit himself humbly to what the Lord wanted for him. Stay with me...

Let me begin with some important philosophical reflections on the topic. Prayer is classically defined as "communion with God," although most of us in the Christian faith would prefer to call it "a conversation with God." If you think about it, prayer is based on some important presuppositions. We bow our heads to talk to Some-one, not to toss an odd idea out into the emptiness of space.

First, prayer presupposes that God is there. Elementary, for why would you speak to a God who was not there to listen? Prayer begins in the belief that the Creator God who made the universe and all, still controls it from the heavenly realm. That might sound so obvious to those of you who are listening to this sermon, but begin with the thought that it is remarkable. Even organized religions such as Hinduism, Shinto, Buddhism, etc., while having their own enlightened constructs of the universe; do not allow for a personal God who cares about his creation. And then, only the enlightened priest and prophet can speak to the deity.

Some of you will recall that spirited but short-lived theological diversion and debate in the 1960-70's when some otherwise sane and intelligent Christian theologians developed the "death of God" theology. In fact William Hamilton, one of the most enlightened of them, still lives here in Charlotte. They said that while the universe was created by a purposeful act, the Creator departed the scene and has abandoned it to be run by its

own rules and regulations. Once here as Creator, he has gone away. That's scary, even if from time to time most all of us have had something of that feeling in our most difficult moments: "If God is there, why doesn't he do something?" To pray assumes first that there is someone to pray to. God is personal.

Two, the second assumption goes a step further: Prayer presupposes that God is not only there but that he is willing and able to listen to us and to all the other six billion human beings on the earth, any or all of whom could conceivably be speaking to him at once. How phenomenal is that! The One who made the starry heavens knows you and me and everybody else on earth by name. Somehow he is able to distinguish the individual voice of any one of us; and what's more, he responds to each one.

There are those who try to affirm such a belief, but in the end, they walk away from it. Like Mark Twain put his disbelief in the words of Huckleberry Finn: Huck was quite disgusted with his adventures in prayer. "Miss Watson, she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fish line, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I set down one time back in the woods, and had a long think about it. I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver snuff box that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, says I to myself, there ain't nothing in it."

Now, of course, there are those who have joined Huckleberry Finn in that blunt conclusion. Many have been frustrated because their prayers have not been answered. The point here is that the practice of prayer assumes that God is willing to do something to change things when we pray.

The third assumption is that this creator-personal God has the power to change things; and that He is willing to use that power for us when we ask.

Implied here is that God can and will override the immutable laws of human nature and biological concourse to respond to the requests of His children. Easy as it is to state, that is a tough one to comprehend. Does God ever change his mind because we ask him too? What kind of an immutable Creator would be so malleable? Well for sure the Bible says it's so: like the day the earth stood still in Joshua, or the decision to rescind his vow to destroy Nineveh, and surely the miracles of Jesus while he was here on earth. God has the power to change things or prayer is senseless.

The amazing thing about prayer is the simple fact that God listens to them. We are all looking for someone who will listen to us. If you have a friend or spouse or child who cares about you enough to listen, and sets aside his needs or her needs for yours, you are truly blessed. God knows how to listen and he responds to our prayers. For a quick moment now, think about an incident of where you have experienced an answer to your prayers. What did God do that impressed you that he intervened for you? I will share a widely known example.

Some of you no doubt remember or have heard of Captain Eddie Rickenbacker. During World War II, eight men went down in a plane in the Pacific Ocean. For eight days they drifted at sea in the scorching tropical sun. All they had for sustenance was four small oranges. No other food. No water. They were close to the breaking point. But Rickenbacker the commander encouraged them and never gave up. The Lord will help us.

One of the airmen had a pocket Bible. They took turns reading from it each day and they all prayed, all day. But day nine some were beginning to show signs of delirium. That evening, they read from Matthew, "Take no thought of what to eat or to drink. Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be added unto you."

Then, before long a seagull flew in out of nowhere and landed on Rickenbacker's head. (True story.) He reached up and caught it. In a little while a rainstorm came up and brought them fresh water. They came to believe that God was with them, in answer to prayer. They drifted two weeks longer. On the twenty first day, they were spotted by search planes, and miraculously rescued.

Former television late show host Jack Parr, loved to tell the story of how, later on, he lived next door to Rickenbacker on the Coast of Southern California He said he would sometimes go out in the morning and see the Rickenbacker out on the sand, feeding the seagulls. "I used to wonder," Jack said, "if somehow he was trying to repay them for the one they lost to him."

The words of our text are the same verses the airmen were reading on Rickenbacker's raft marooned in the Ocean. "Seek first the kingdom of God and everything else you need, will be given to you." What a promise! It means that as disciples of Jesus we have to keep the priorities straight and in order. Jesus cautioned them not to be anxious about their lives, about what to eat, drink or wear. The birds of the air and the flowers of the field are cared for by God and Solomon in all his splendor was not arrayed like one of these. "Are you not more valuable than they?" If God takes care of them, will he not also take care of you? Of course he will.

We can get it wrong. We deep down assume that we are entitled to a long and lovely life without troubles or woes or loneliness or depression or illness. The Bible never promises that. Human life is fragile; it zigs and zags, and one day ends. That should not be surprising. Christ promises that God will still be there and will hold us in the hollow of his hand and in the center of his heart. We all must face the battles, but he will always be there and we will never face an ultimate defeat. "Nobody knows the

troubles I've seen; Nobody knows my sorrows. Nobody knows but Jesus."
If you have to walk through the darkness, it sure helps to have someone strong and powerful there to hold your hand.

Professor William Barclay once wrote: "God is always listening, more ready to hear than we are to pray. We never need to force our way into His presence or compel Him to pay attention. He is waiting for us to come. We all know how we wait for the knock of the postman, or the ring of the telephone, or the return of a son or daughter, or to wait for a message from someone whom we love. In all reverence, we can say that God is like that with us." (Commentary on I John)

He is waiting to hear from you and me. The conversation does not have to be erudite, fine and fancy; the words can be simple. He is pleased when he hears your voice. Oh sure, prayer has a place in the formality of worship, dignified, stately and reverent. But I sometimes think that God likes it more when we just plop ourselves down and chat, unexpectedly, like the a child from far away coming back to visit.

Let me give you a personal example: Back when we were still living in Florida, our first grandchild, Madeline, then two or three year's old, was living up here in Charlotte. She and her brother Wil soon wooed us to move up to North Carolina. But in those days I was still actively at work in our busy Florida Church. But every evening I could when I got home from the office, I called to talk to Madeline. In time, she began to call me back. Now she and her brother are both getting busy. But, I loved to hear her voice and still do: hers and Wil's. Sometimes I was not exactly sure what she was saying, however carefully I listened. She had not yet learned the intricacies of sentence structure and pronunciation. (By now, they both know more than Peggy and I do about grammer and almost everything else.) At times, her sentences took shortcuts. The objective case was sometimes used, instead of the nominative. She would omit verbs. "Me

fine. Nana good?" etc. But, do you think I cared, or corrected her? No, I was content just to hear her voice.

Years earlier, I asked an older man I was visiting in a hospital room to pray with me. Things were not good. "Out Loud?" he asked. "Sure" I said, "God will listen to you." He turned sheepishly to me and said, "But Rev. I don't know any prayers." I said, "You don't have to know any prayers, just talk to God." He said "Please teach me how to do it. God doesn't care about what I have to say. "Sure he does" I said. He said "Well, the only prayer I know is 'Now I lay me down to sleep.'" I taught him some, but in his mid-seventies he was amazed to learn that he could talk to God in his own words and know that the Lord would listen and care about what he had to say.

Prayer to the Lord is like that, too. As his child, you don't have to worry about flowery words and proper sentence structure. He does not require fine and fancy sentences and paragraphs. There is no right or wrong way for a small child to talk to a loving grand-father, and there is no right or wrong way to talk to God. Just say how you are and what you feel and need. Mumble when you can't find the right words. Paul makes reference to "Sighs too deep for words." Let God decide what to do. He already knows what you need.

St. Paul is helpful in Romans 8:26: "Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And He who searches the hearts of men knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." The Spirit translates our prayers into the language of God. It is for us to present our petitions, then let the Lord decide what to do with them. It is His decision whether it is wise to grant this particular request or not.

There are some accompanying conditions laid down in the Bible as to how to make prayer more effective. We are to pray "In the name of Jesus Christ." Jesus always prayed, "Not My will but yours O God be done..." Can you say, "Lord, give me this or not) for your sake, not mine." Guide me into your will, not let me try to coerce you into mine.

A second condition for effective prayer is that we keep His commandments. That was the problem with Holy Willie in Robert Burns's poem. He refused to live in the commands and conditions of the Lord, or even try to, although he demanded near perfection in others. His prayers were futile. He used them to ask God to condemn others; and he treated prayer as a little get-well, get-rich formula when things went wrong. Another Burns poem ends: "Oh wad some power the giftie gie us; to see ourselves as ithers see us."

It is a long road to prepare yourself for the presence of God. If you spend your life chasing after personal, material or financial goals and refuse to reach out in friendship and concern for others; then later you will feel lonely and afraid because you have no one to turn to. You can still keep on praying, and miracles can happen, but your loneliness is related to all the ways you have veered in upon yourself.

A third condition for answered prayers is that we must abide in the Lord and have His words abide in us. . John 15:7 says, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you." We have to be involved in the prayer and what comes after. God is not willing to toss out favors willy-nilly, unless we seek to relate them to his way and follow it. We must follow through on our prayers, as well as God. We must be faithful before we can expect that God will be faithful to us. His mercy is everlasting and his grace supersedes even our stupidity; but God is not mocked, whatever we sow, that will we also reap.

So many times in my ministry I have heard people complain that their prayers were not answered: "No matter how hard I pray or how fervently I ask God for the pain or grief or illness or loneliness to go away, and it seems to get worse." But I want to ask them, "What are you doing to help God to answer your prayer? Are you trying to do new things and meet new people? Are you looking for help in support groups? Are you trying to minister to someone in need? Are you doing your part?"

Prayer is communication with God, but it is also a summons to action. Sometimes God's answer is in the negative or temporarily, anyway. But that doesn't mean it will still be a negative in your life when all is said and done. We all love the sunshine, but we learn who we are in the darkness of the night. You might be familiar with the following summary written by a Confederate soldier during the Civil War. It could do for any of us.

Prayer

**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 that I asked for – but everything I had hoped for,
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am among all people most richly blessed!"
(Prayers Answered The Other Way)**

I close with another personal illustration: One evening long ago, when our youngest daughter was tiny, it was my custom when I was home to tuck her into bed at night and to tell her a Bible story before she went to sleep. We routinely said our prayers, sometimes prolonged, not out of any particular spiritual need or religiosity, but to keep the sandman away and

to keep her father nearby. I never minded. She was my daughter, even if sometimes, when the thirteenth request came up, I was ready to give up.

One night, the little girl who, like her two older sisters, could then and now, wrap their father around their little fingers, decided she would stretch it out a bit further before she would finally concede and let me turn out her light. A theological conversation was about to commence.

It went like this: "Daddy, does God give you anything you ask for?" "Yes," I replied, "of course."(After all that was what I had preached the previous Sunday.) "Will he give me anything I want?" she said. "Yes, honey, he will give you anything you ask for" ... "Will you?" she asked. "Will I what?" "Will you do anything I want?" Not realizing where she was going, I said, "Yes, indeedy, I sure will!"

"You will give me anything I ask for?" "Yes, honey, of course I will. I love you." Her eyes lit up. Then, she said with a cautious twinkle, "Let me have some ice cream and let's stay up all night and read stories." I said, "Sure, honey. I will do anything you want or need." She looked up and smiled. I think she even winked at me, although I can't be sure...Then, as I reached for the switch to turn off her lamp, she said, "You always give me everything I want, Daddy, I love you. Good night." I leaned over, kissed her and said, "Good night, I love you, too, dear." Then, I turned out the light. She rolled over happily and went right to sleep.

That's the story – try not to miss it. Your loving heavenly father will give you anything and everything you need. For now, and for evermore, Amen.