

There is an old joke that actor Dick Van Dyke liked to tell. It was about a little girl who was asked by her mother if she had said her prayers before going to bed. "Yes, mother," she replies. "But when I got down on my knees, I began thinking that God hears the same old stuff every night. So I told him the story of The Three Bears instead."

Perhaps that little girl had great insight into the purpose and power of prayer. I believe most people's prayers are little more than a long list of this thing and that thing that they want from God. Perhaps some people's list is very selfish, like a person praying to win the lottery. Many people's are less so, like praying for the health and strength of others, but it is still a list of requests.

Some people attempt more of a balance in their prayers - a list of requests and a list of thank yous. Many a great theologian has recognized that their prayers are little more than, "Help me, help me, help me." And, "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

As we look at Jesus' teaching on prayer in the gospel reading we realize that there is no right or wrong way to pray. Well, I suppose if you asked God to build hatred in your heart, or if you asked God to help you premeditate crimes so that you can get away from them, we could call them improper prayers. But prayer is your time to be fully yourself and consciously share whatever is on your heart and mind with God.

As Jesus begins to teach his disciples he gives what we recognize as the beginning of the Lord's prayer. This is the most common prayer formula that we have. Almost all of us can say it from memory with little difficulty. What we may overlook is that it is really a statement of what Jesus has been doing all along. Jesus teaches it in Luke chapter 11 and it's really a summary of his ministry in chapters 1 through 10. The prayer starts off, "Father, hallowed be your name." And in indeed he's honored the Father's name. "Your kingdom come..." Jesus has announced many times that the Kingdom of God has come near. "Give us each day our daily bread." Jesus himself and his followers have often lived day to day in their ministry work. "Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." Jesus has been proclaiming forgiveness everywhere he

went, and his willingness to welcome sinners and do things with them has shown that the forgiveness isn't just lip service. It's being put into action. "And do not bring us to the time of trial." You'll remember Jesus public ministry begins with Satan tempting and testing him for forty days in the wilderness. That passage ends by saying that Satan departed from him until an opportune time. We know that opportune time - the ultimate trial - is going to come at the crucifixion when Jesus is truly tested to see if he will use his divine power apart from God in order to save himself.

And so while the Lord's Prayer is a prayer it is also a summary of Jesus ministry. The Lord's Prayer isn't just something you say, it is something you live. Something you embody.

Jesus teaching on prayer then go on to talk about persistence in prayer and the way persistence guarantees results. If there's a list of teachings I sometimes wish Jesus hadn't given this would make that list. Any number of times I've heard people come to me joyfully and say their prayers have been answered. Perhaps they were struggling with a medical

problem but with constant prayer from themselves, their family, and perhaps the prayer chains from a church or two, they received the miracle they asked for. But while I want to rejoice with them in their prayers being answered, and I'd love to use their story to prove the power of prayer, my mind also says, "But what about all those unanswered prayers? What about those people who prayed for a miraculous recovery and it didn't happen?" Sometimes I've heard denied prayers dismissed as, "Well, perhaps you didn't pray hard enough." Or, "It must not have been God's will to do it." Or perhaps, "God knows better. God didn't answer the prayer because if he would it would have ultimately brought about something that would hurt you."

I want to scream in fear at all of those answers. Any one of them could possibly be valid, but that doesn't help much when someone's life is ruined - when a young person prays for recovery from an accident caused by a drunk driver and the recovery never happens - or they live the rest of their lives disabled. Those answers don't cut it when it comes to a mother in a third world country crying for her starving child. They don't work when a person is trapped in an abusive relationship and can't get out.

Perhaps a comical way to look at it is from the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. Loveable citizen George Bailey, played by Jimmy Stewart, selflessly seeks to help everyone he meets. He covers for the mistakes of others. But when he is in crisis he prays to God for help. If you know the movie you'll remember that right after his first prayer for help he gets punched in the face. Later when he's contemplating jumping off a bridge to kill himself he meets his guardian angel - Clarence Oddbody, AS2 (Angel, Second Class). When Clarence tells George that he's come in answer to his prayer George says he's not surprised. Clarence is about the kind of angel George would get, a fallen angel. He asks Clarence if he's an angel where's his wings and Clarence replies that he hasn't gotten his wings yet. He has to earn them.

Now the movie is fraught with really really bad theology, but sometimes the way prayers are dealt with you wonder how competent heaven's prayer answering staff really is.

Prayer doesn't always work out the way we want it to. Persistence in prayer as Jesus calls for isn't a guarantee that your prayer will be answered. But a little girl who prays the

story of The Three Bears is on to something. Persistence - badgering God - can be an essential part of prayer. Jesus' teaching almost suggest that you can wear God down until God gives in to your prayer. If that's all Jesus taught about prayer we could indeed reach that conclusion. But he goes on to explain.

Persistent prayer means that you keep the dialog open with God. You return to the same issue over and over again. And you open yourself over and over again to being shaped by God.

If it is a dire need in your life that you are praying about it means that over and over again God is a part of your struggle with that issue.

Some people may conclude that in prayer God doesn't necessarily change the situation but God changes the pray-er. Perhaps correct, but I think it is more correct to say that through the prayer God and the pray-er change and grow together. They become companions in a struggle. Ultimately prayer is about building relationship with God.

In conclusion, imagine for a minute a stereotypical family on vacation. Dad is driving the car. Mom is sitting in the

passenger seat up front. And the two and half kids are in the back seat saying repeatedly, "Are we there yet?" There are times when mom and dad may want to ring the necks of their two and a half kids, but it's a family on a journey. They are together.

Certainly many family vacations are total disasters. But in the journey of life God wants good things for you. Pray always so that you keep in touch with God and have our Lord constantly as a companion - a helpmate, a savior. Amen