

A Few Shekels And Some Food And Clothing

(Judges 17:1-17)

The story of Micah and the Levite in today's reading from the *Book of Judges* has much to say about how many contemporary Christians view the purpose of prayer.

Micah an Israelite, had eleven hundred shekels of silver and at his mother's suggestion used part of it to buy some pagan images and idols made out of silver.

He built a small shrine to put them in and appointed one of his sons to be the priest.

He and his mother were, you might say, "covering all the bases": if Yahweh didn't give them the things they prayed for, they could always see what pagan gods might do for them.

They worshipped Yahweh, but kept pagan religion in their back pocket as a backup plan.

One day a young Levite from Bethlehem who was traveling in search of whatever fortune might hold for him, came to Micah's house.

When he identified himself as a Levite Micah invited him to live with him and become his personal priest.

In payment for this he would give him ten shekels and food and clothing for a year.

This suited the young Levite so he agreed to stay and execute Micah's religious policy of praying to pagan gods as well as Yahweh.

Micah was delighted with the arrangement because he thought that between having a Levitical priest in his house along with some pagan idols, his chances of getting whatever he prayed for were pretty good.

Religion, for him, was a means of persuading the Lord to "be good to him."

This view of Christianity is more common than one might think.

It's called "pragmatism" or "utilitarianism" and makes God out to be a "useful" or "compliant" God whose chief desire is to make us happy and successful.

All we have to do is rub the magic prayer lamp and ask God for what we want.

The correlative of this theory is that if a Christian is happy and successful, he must be a good Christian.

But if happiness and success are to be the standard of being a good Christian, what does that have to say about some prominent people in the Bible?

Noah was good at building boats, but he was a dismal failure as an evangelist.

After all, only seven converts in 125 years isn't much of a record.

Jeremiah was a fearless preacher but a total failure when it came to drawing people to God.

The people hated him, the rulers hated him, no one took his advice and he ended up being thrown in a well.

Judged by the standard of success and happiness, even our Lord and Savior was a failure.

He was man of sorrows who never organized a church, never built a school, never wrote a book.

He left all that to the people who followed him and went off to be crucified with two thieves.

Old Testament prophets were routinely abused and eleven of the twelve New Testament Apostles died violent deaths.

Not much success and happiness there by worldly standards.

The first question is, does God want us to be happy and successful, and the second one is, is prayer the means of our letting Him know how He can to do that?

Is God a means to achieve our purposes or are we a means to achieve God's purposes?

Micah mixed paganism in with Yahwism to optimize his chances of being happy and successful.

And when the Levite showed up he fell right in with Micah's plan because a few shekels and some clothes and some food met his requirements for a happy life.

And I fear that you and I are susceptible to being infected with the same way of thinking.

The desire for improvement in our personal circumstances can easily come to dominate our prayer lives.

And when improving our personal situations becomes the major focus of our prayers, it represents a gross misunderstanding of what God intended prayer to be—as well as a serious under-estimation of its power.

To discover what prayer can be, let's look at our Epistle lesson for today—Paul's letter to the members of the church at Philippi.

This passage takes us deep into Paul's prayer life and furnishes a wonderful example of what prayer can and should be.

Just listen: "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus...." "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God."

Did you notice that Paul's prayer has NOTHING to do with himself.

He might well have prayed for the mitigation of his personal circumstances which were painful and frightening—far beyond anything you and I have ever experienced.

Even so, his entire focus is on the spiritual welfare of his brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul was praying that God would be at work in the members of the church at Philippi.

A famous theologian once wrote: “A man prayed and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until he learned that prayer is listening.”

What did Soren Kierkegaard mean by that?

He meant that before you talk to God—listen to Him.

Go to His word and let Him direct your prayers.

Godly prayer doesn't come naturally; we have to learn how to pray.

Jesus' disciples, who had walked with him, heard him teach and seen him perform miracles asked *him to teach them how to pray*.

And God does teach us in Scripture how to pray just as he teaches us how to worship.

That's because he knows that if we are left to our own devices, we will end up praying for just that—**a lot of devices!**

So before you go to God with your self-serving list, understand that the most powerful and effectual use you can make of prayer is **to pray for things God wants—rather than things YOU want**.

Prayer can be a way of “getting on God's side of things” rather than asking God to get on YOUR side of things.

Through prayer, God can teach you to think HIS thoughts and to want what HE wants, to love what He loves and to hate what He hates.

The more you use prayer to line yourself up with God in your thoughts and desires and loves and hates, the more you will come to regard trivial things as trivial and eternal things as precious.

You will become a person after the Lord's own heart.

What is the content of Paul's prayer?

"I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion...."

Paul rejoices over the work-in-process that God has made of his brothers and sisters in Christ at Philippi, and he rejoices in his confidence that God will finish what He has started.

This is not a "natural" way to pray—any more than faith itself is "natural."

Nobody starts out having faith in Jesus Christ and nobody starts out praying in a Godly way.

I'd be willing to bet that when the urge to pray hits you, it's not usually prompted by joy over other people's spiritual prosperity.

I hope I'm wrong but I doubt that I am.

Speaking for myself, desperation over my personal circumstances and thankfulness over blessings God has bestowed on me have driven me to prayer far more often than thankfulness over blessings that God has bestowed on other people.

Paul had learned to pray along God lines rather than human lines, and that's a way of praying that has to be learned.

And the way we learn it is by listening, not by talking.

Paul continues: *"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God."*

What a beautiful prayer!

Paul prays that God will grant his brothers and sisters in Christ active, dynamic, fruitful faith-lives that will abound in deeds of love.

And he promises that those faith-lives will produce knowledge and depth of insight in them, so that they will be able to discern what is best for them and remain pure and blameless in God's sight.

His prayer is reminiscent of the prayer that Solomon prayed when he became the king of Israel at a very young age.

When God said to him, *“Ask for whatever you want me to give you,”* Solomon replied, *“...O Lord my God...give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and distinguish between right and wrong.”*

Solomon knew that he lacked the strength or wisdom to govern so he asked to be filled with God's strength and wisdom so that he could rule in a Godly way.

He wanted to align himself with God so that he would be a help and not a hindrance to God as God worked through him among his people.

It was not a prayer for his own benefit, it was a prayer for the benefit of his people.

In the same way, Paul prays that his brothers and sisters in Christ in the church at Philippi would align themselves with God so that they become blessings to each other.

That by discerning what is best and striving to act accordingly, they would be kept pure and blameless and be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes from Jesus Christ.

And all *“...to the glory and praise of God”*—not to themselves.

What Paul AND young king Solomon understood is that whenever we put ourselves rather than God in the driver's seat of our prayer life, we're going to miss the real point of prayer.

What we should pray for is for God to help us get on HIS side rather than for Him to get on OUR side.

To align ourselves with His goals so that we love what He loves and want what HE wants, rather than try to get him to give us what our flesh cries out for.

You know what happens when you get a church full of people praying this way?

You get a church where the love of members for each other overflows to the world outside.

You get a church that brings showers of blessing and seasons of refreshing to the community around it.

You get a church where God's goals—the spiritual well-being of His people, the advance of the Gospel, and the ongoing service of love to the surrounding community are the passion of each individual member!

There would be nothing a church like that couldn't accomplish!

It would transform the lives of its members as well as those of people in the community around it.

In the eighth chapter of the *Book of Romans*, Paul says an amazing thing.

He says: *"The Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit prays for us with groanings that lie too deep for words. For He who searches the heart knows the mind of the Spirit, for the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."*

Do you realize what these verses are saying? *They are telling us that God the Holy Spirit is praying to God the Father for His people! God is praying to God for you and for me!*

How can we possibly lose our way when God Himself is praying for us?

Paul knew this and it gave him immeasurable joy.

For him, to live **was** Christ and to die **was** gain.

He had allowed God to fashion him into an instrument of transforming power to those around him.

And since God's work was the source of Paul's joy, his joy never ceased, not even in the worst of circumstances, because God is still working.

Such is the true and inexhaustible power of Godly prayer.

C. S. Lewis was once asked if he thought God wanted to make His people happy.

He replied that in his estimation, God wasn't so much interested in making his people happy as he was in helping them grow up.

That's why I prefer the expression, "growing old" to "getting old."

We don't normally associate aging with growth.

But when you define "growth" as a result of God's action in and through us to make us blessings to one another, we can keep on growing until the day we die.

Micah and the Levite sold out God for a few shekels and some food and clothing.

They could have gotten a much better deal than that.

Amen.