

Proper 20 B
September 23rd, 2018
Mark 9:30-37
James 3:13-4:3; 7-8a
St. George's Episcopal Church
Fr. Chris

“You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”

I do not always pray to God for what I want. I know that what I want is different from what I need. And sometimes, when I ask God, I do not get what I want because what I want is not what I need, and I am merely focused on my pleasures, just like James says.

Not much has changed over time. One of the biggest things people ask for help with is their debts. Lord, let me win the lottery so that I can pay them off. And if you help me, I will do all these nice things for others and the church. I can tell you in my 40 years in the priesthood, that I have never seen this prayer answered, whether for myself or the church, either by my prayers or anyone else's. No lottery winners that I know of have won this way. Not that it could not happen.

James is getting at our motives in prayer. It is one thing to ask for a specific “need,” but we must also examine our motives in asking. God already knows what we need before we ask. Remember Matthew 6:8: “your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” My experience of God almost every day is of the many small things God does to bless our lives. Last Tuesday during our Foodshare visit, when the guests came up for their food, the rain let up while the bulk of the people picked up their food. Volunteers got drenched later as the rain poured down. However, the first 60 folks were able to get through the line without getting soaked. I do not believe this was an accident. I sense God's goodness and mercy in small moments like this.

As the rains continued Tuesday, we had some leaks in the basement, but our two retired Bob's were there to prevent the water from doing more damage. This is no accident. Many of us prayed there would be no more damage. The answer was the answer of these two Bob's to God's call. What we needed was provided, and God watched over them so they would not get hurt. Pete was also there bailing water in the evening. I believe this is God at work through our hands.

There are so many prayers answered every day. Many things are provided without our prayers. “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” It is important for us to open our eyes and see this hand of God at work in our lives, and to give thanks to God whenever we notice an answered prayer or God’s presence in our lives. Friends, we have much to be thankful for.

Examining our motives in our prayers is important. Being honest with ourselves about why we are asking for something. Sure, it is nice when it works out that the answer to a prayer gives us some pleasure we wanted. Sometimes that happens. But it is important to ask for what we really need. Sometimes the answer is no, at least not now, maybe later.

But sometimes God will answer the prayer by giving us the tools to do it ourselves. For example, if you are in debt, and you want help paying off that loan or credit card bill, the answer to your prayers might just be that God will point to the tools you already possess to answer the prayer, and God will grant you the resolve and the support to do so. One of the main tools here is discipline. Stop buying things you do not need with money you do not have. Start paying down the debt. That simple practice will help you get ahead of your debts and eventually pay them off before things get worse. God will provide all that you really need in terms of food, clothing and shelter. There will even be room in your budget to practice generosity with others in need. The question here is motive and whether your eyes are open to the truth about seeing yourself and your motives as they are, and seeing the needs of others around you.

As James says, “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.” The gentleness of God’s wisdom is a blessing to us and often the answer to our prayers. God is always walking beside you, always there to pick you up when you stumble.

I remember when I was a child and my mother would go shopping at the grocery store, I would make a beeline for the area where they sold a few toys. Pretty soon I saw what I wanted and then the want burned hot like a passion within me. I would take the toy and find her and make a plea that I needed the toy. The only reason I did this is that I was spoiled and sometimes she would give in and answer my plea favorably. However, many times the answer was: “No. Go put it back.” I sense that many times my prayer is like that. Instead of focusing on the theological understanding I was gracefully given about God, I can tend to live with a “Santology” of God. Have you ever found yourself doing that too?

Finally, many of our prayers are driven by anxiety, whether fear at work or about work, fear of what the mail will tell us when we open it, fear that we won't get something in time and miss out. Several weeks ago I wanted to buy a best selling book for a summer read that had been touted for many weeks as the best read of the summer. I wanted to race into the bookstore first thing in the morning when it became available, but I was at work. I waited all day, and finally raced over to the store after I got out of work. My anxiety told me it would be sold out. Why bother to drive over, I thought to myself. And then I said a prayer, please let there be a copy left for me, as I really want to read this book, God. Sure enough it was there when I arrived. Thank God! But do we remember to thank God for such small blessings?

And there is the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10. Martha is busy playing the host. Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to his teaching. Martha prays to Jesus to get her sister to help her out. It seems only fair. But listen to the Response of Jesus: "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." It is clear that sometimes what we want or think we need, is clashing directly with what we really need, only we do not see it at the time. Hopefully we see it before it's too late.

Sometimes God says no, like my mother in the grocery store. And even though we may be disappointed, no is what we need to hear and life will go on from there.

So don't pray out of anxiety. Pray for God to lift your anxiety. Put your trust in God. Watch out for your motives in prayer, as James cautions us in his letter this morning.

A wise mentor and teacher once taught me 40 years ago when I was a young priest in my first parish, [he was the Church Sexton to be clear] when he said to me, "Be careful what you pray for, because you just might get it." I have never forgotten his wise advice all these years! I suggest you take it in also.

Interestingly, the collect for today put it so well as a prayer for all of us at the beginning of the service this morning: [Proper 20, BCP p.234]
"Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever, AMEN."

Again, to lift your hopes and prayers, it says in Mark 11:24: “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

Ask and you shall receive Jesus says. Believe this. Believe that God is with you always, and will always answer your prayers. AMEN!