

When You Pray, Forgive

Mark 11:12-25 (ESV)

March 16, 2003

“Have faith in God... whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it... And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone.” “Have faith... Believe... Forgive.” Here are the basics of the Christian life. Here are the basics of the Christian church. Here is what Jesus lived and died and lives again for us to be able to do: “Have faith... Believe... Forgive.”

How can we do this? How can we have faith in God? How can we believe in prayer? How can we forgive each other? None of these is easy. None of these is natural. None of these is a simple, human accomplishment. And yet, these are what we are called to do. These are what are made possible for us to do. These are what are given to us to do, that is, these are what are given to us. Faith. Belief. Forgiveness. These are three great treasures. Have you received them? Would you like to?

How can we have faith in God? There is much in the world which counts against faith in God. Sceptics point to pain, suffering, death, disorder, disease, decay, decline, despair, war, bigotry, terrorism, and the awful silence of the heavens. We are all too familiar with these. They are hard points.

In the face of these, what counts for God? It will not be enough, though it may be important, to counter these point for point. Although there is pain, there is also joy. Although there is suffering, there is also comfort. Although there is death, there is also life. Although there is massive disorder, there is also overarching order within which it occurs. Although there is disease, there is also health, apart from which disease would be unknown and unrecognizable. Although there is decay, there is also growth. Although there is decline, there is also advance. Although there is despair, there is also good hope. Although there is war, there is also peace. Although there is bigotry, there is also love. Although there is terrorism, there is also mutual caring and assistance.

Philosophically, even though the reality of evil is a very hard problem, it is just as hard if not harder to try to explain the origin, presence, and reality of good. This is especially true if the universe is thought of as neutral or as having come into existence without God. How then would good have emerged? What would be its source? How would we have minds that could recognize good, perceive beauty, and wonder about all these questions? In fact, it would seem easier to understand decay and decline without God than it would be to account for growth and advance

without God. It makes sense that the world would run down. But how was it made? How did life emerge? How did good, real even if limited, come into existence? So, just as much as evil counts against God, so does good count for God. In fact, I would say more so, though some would see it as an even tie.

And yet, there is something more. Although the heavens are silent, we have also—and this is the main point—we have also the word of God, spoken from heaven into this world, the very Son of God, Jesus Christ. He tips the scales. He ends the balanced argument. He is the reason we can and do have faith in God.

You see, in today's reading Jesus Christ walked into Jerusalem to die. He walked into Jerusalem to give his life for you and me. He walked into Jerusalem knowing that the religious and political authorities would conspire to execute him. And yet, he still walked into Jerusalem. That is not merely human. That is not natural. Most people would have gone the opposite direction. Christ's entry into Jerusalem, his determination to save us even at great personal cost, is an indicator of the divine.

It is also a redefinition of the divine. The God and Father of Jesus Christ does not fit our preconceptions. God did not come with great armies of angels. God did not speak with a deafening roar. God did not appear in blinding glory. He came, instead, in this one man willing to lay down his life for others, even for us. And this is how he won the victory. If Jesus had struck back at the forces of evil, they would have won, for he would have become evil. If Jesus had become like those who hurt him, they would have won, for he would have become one of them. But Christ's strange victory was won in reverse, under the sign of the opposite, by suffering apparent and humiliating defeat in a shameful death on the cross.

He conquered evil by suffering under it. He conquered sin by bearing its guilt, our guilt. He conquered death by allowing it to kill him. Only in this way was evil undone, was sin forgiven, and was death defeated. So, it is not simply because of good in the world that we have faith in God. We are grateful for that, in and of itself and as a confirmation for our faith, but it is not enough. It is, instead, precisely because of Jesus Christ that we have faith in God. We have faith in God because Jesus had faith in God. We have faith in God because the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ reveal God to us. We have faith in God because Jesus Christ said for us to do so. "Have faith in God."

"Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it." Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have *already* received it. It is as good as yours. To pray otherwise is not to pray at all. To pray otherwise is simply to be wishful or, perhaps, to be despairing. But to pray is to act on our prior faith in God. Not to pray, or to refuse to pray, is an act of faithlessness. But to pray indicates, and builds upon, the prior and already existing foundation of faith in God. That is the only way

it makes sense. We do not ask something of one who is not there. We ask something only of the one who is. We pray because we have faith in God. Therefore, Jesus says, believe also in prayer. You already have faith in God. Believe also in prayer. That is the only way it makes sense.

I am glad that he did *not* say, “Pray and pray and pray, and if you pray hard enough and believe hard enough your work and faith will be rewarded and your prayer may come true.” That would be horrible. That would make it all depend upon us. That would make our faith in God depend upon the strength and success of our belief in prayer. That would reduce the whole thing to magic. But that is not what he said. And he did not say that because that would be wrong and backward.

It is *not* that our belief in the power of prayer leads us back to faith in God. It is the other way around. Faith is our prior knowledge and conviction of the goodness of God toward us as made known in Jesus Christ. It is because we have faith in God, and only because we have faith, that we are made bold to believe in prayer. If we did not have faith in God, we would not pray. If we did not have faith that God is good, we certainly would not pray. And the power of prayer depends not upon our goodness but on the goodness of God.

It is, of course, also profoundly significant that the scriptures portray Jesus himself as repeatedly turning to God in prayer. If this is something that he needed, how much more do we need it! Jesus was not asking us to do anything he did not do himself. In fact, he leads the way for us.

“Have faith in God...whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it...And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone.” Here is the third step. “Have faith...Believe...Forgive.” This may be the hardest. It depends upon and grows out of the first two. And yet, without this third, there would be serious question about the first two. Just as a lack of prayer would indicate a lack of faith, so would a lack of forgiveness indicate a lack of both prayer and faith. Forgiveness is the goal. This is the purpose of it all. God forgave us *not* so that we may forgive God—that makes *no* sense at all, because God does not *need* forgiveness, so this is *not* about reciprocity—God forgave us so that we could and would forgive one another. There is where this whole thing is heading. We are the ones who need to be forgiven. And we are the ones who need to be forgiving.

It is no accident, I suppose, that we stand for the Prayer of Confession. “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone.” We are unfit to ask for forgiveness, or rather, we do not yet know what God’s forgiveness is, if we are still unforgiving of others. And it is hard to forgive others. Some people have done terrible wrongs. But when I remember the wrongs I have done to Jesus, the little things other people have done to me look smaller all the time. Jesus paid a terrible price to forgive me. And it may cost me something to

forgive someone else. But not forgiving them would cost me a whole lot more.

One of the wise elders of this church has shared with me on several occasions his observation that if people were praying for each other, they would not be attacking and hurting each other. That makes a lot of sense. Too often, perhaps, we pray just for ourselves. Give me strength, give me courage, give me health, give me forgiveness. And we need to pray for all of that. But at the same time, whenever we pray, we need to pray for strength, courage, health, and forgiveness for each other, and, just as importantly, we need to forgive each other. Whenever we stand praying, which is to say whenever we pray, whatever our posture, let us forgive one another. I know it is hard to give us those hurts and grudges. We like to hang onto them. We remember them for years. They keep us warm at night. But they twist our souls. They eat out our hearts. They distort our minds and emotions. Let us forgive each other.

It is not insignificant that Jesus delivers this teaching within the context of the cleansing of the temple which in turn was in the context of the cursing of the fruitless fig tree. The clear implication is that the old temple religion was dead and fruitless, no longer serving or nurturing the people, and that he was bringing something new in its place. But that is old news to us, two-thousand years old now. We have no joy today in remembering that judgment against ancient Israel. The only point of remembering it today is that it raises the question for us as to whether the church of Jesus Christ today has become as dead and fruitless as that ancient temple had. Are we sharing the word of God? Are we leading people in true and joyful worship? Are we producing people whose lives are turned around? Are we leading people into faith, prayer, and forgiveness? Or have we become a comfortable little club of like minded and similar looking people? That is always a danger for the church.

What is its antithesis to this temptation? “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations.” That is what the new church of Jesus Christ should look like! That is why he entered the temple and demonstrated that he presides over the true worship of God. People from all nations, all races, all ethnicities, and all languages should gather together in one time and place to worship God. And when they gather to worship, they will pray to God. And when they pray, they can forgive each other. That is the goal and purpose of it all. And that is what we do here. Thanks be to God!

“Have faith....Believe....Forgive.” Here are the basics of the Christian life. Here are the basics of the Christian church. Here is what Jesus lived and died and lives again for us to be able to do: “Have faith in God....whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it....And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone.”

When You Pray, Forgive

5

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Minister
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org