

LESSONS IN LIVING

Prayer, Part 4 What Should I Pray For?

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Luke 17: 20-37 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

I always like to begin a sermon hearing the congregation grumbling before I even start. (*laughter*) The passage sounds very strange. Give me a chance here. I think it is going to take some turns on you and you'll realize it for the loving passage it is, but it doesn't look that way at the beginning. But I want to start with condolences. We missed another Rapture (*laughter*) this week and it is starting to get really personal for me anyway. If you weren't really following this, a minister had decided that the world was going to be coming to an end and the good people would be "raptured" in May. When that didn't happen, then, of course, going back to scripture and prayer, he realized it was a test to see if you would still believe if the person was absolutely as wrong as they could possibly be. I'm not sure. I haven't heard yet what excuse number two will be, but I'm getting old enough to realize that this is going to happen every couple of years.

Unfortunately, we are about to go into 2012 when the Mayan calendar comes around, so we are going to hear this [talk about Rapture] all next year. And then, that will all come to an end and at some point, we will have to come to terms with planet Earth. Doesn't look like we are going to be lifted out of it. Looks like we've got some work to do here and maybe we should get at that. Maybe that's what Jesus means, when in teaching people to pray one of the basic phrases – because every phrase is very important in this prayer, the Disciple's Prayer – in teaching people how to pray: Thy *Kindom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. It is talking about making Earth like Heaven, and not getting us up to a different place and letting this place go to Hell. So... We are going to look at this passage [of scripture]. I think one of the problems that we have in approaching a text like this is that most of us were taught such an immature view of religion that the words hurt when we look at them. A couple of weeks ago I said teaching Christianity in the United States in 2011 is like teaching baseball to people who have already been beaten with bats because whatever symbols you lift up very often have negative connotations if not to *this* person, then to *that* person. These words have been used so abusively and so foolishly, that it is hard to trust and listen. Prayer is something that for many [of you], you've been taught it's a variant of wishing. Remember the old wishbone in the chicken and you break the wishbone. Prayer is another version of the wishbone. What Jesus is trying to tell us today is that even if we get everything we want, that would not make us happy.

I want to test us on this by imagining you could go back to some earlier time in your life, ten, fifteen, eighteen, depending how old you are. Some of you can't go further than that, but go back and imagine that you could get a wish granted that you had back when you were that age - something you thought would make you absolutely happy - a relationship, a job, a pony...something that your little immature heart thought would make it happy. Now (today) you are *so* grateful, *so* grateful that this wish did not come true. Even as an adult, what I would like you to do for the background of this sermon is to do that now. I want you to think of a wish that would make you happy and take the first thing that pops

into your head. That's number one, let that pop into your head no matter how inappropriate. And number two, just so you don't forget, start thinking of the lie you are going to tell the people you came with about what that wish was. (*laughter*) Get your story straight. (*laughter*) But I want you to stick with the original wish, immature, inappropriate, whatever it is. Realize if you go into that wish tenderly and gently, and open it up, it will lead you to a wish for universal happiness. That really when you go into your wants and needs deeply enough, you will realize that selfishness is not what you want. Piling up a lot of stuff is not what you want. Beating other people to goals is not what you want. Your happiness, at it's core, includes other people's happiness [as well] and opens up to something like what Jesus means with the symbol "heaven."

Heaven began as simply the phrase, "the will of God." It referred to things like nature. Nature has a certain way to it. If we conform ourselves to nature we tend to be happy and healthy. If we disregard the patterns in nature, we tend to get sick and unhappy or become violent. Even our own bodies have a nature. So the will of God was not something like an invisible person someplace that wants you to do something and you have to figure out what that is. What a maddening thought that is. There is a bus leaving Austin to go to heaven some time today, I can't tell you where it is, but you have to find it. That was my view of finding God for years and years. We've got this book, doesn't make any sense...can't put the pieces together. Everybody acts like they know what it means but you talk to them, and they don't. What do you do? What a relief to realize that Jesus is simply talking about the depth of your experience, symbols that take you deeper into who you are and what you really want out of life.

To follow what Jesus is saying, we are going to have to set aside three things that most Christians believe about heaven. One of the biggest obstacles to understanding Jesus is Christianity. The things that immature people have taught about Jesus can be the greatest obstacles that one finds in trying to get to the true depth that Jesus is calling us to. Three beliefs about heaven and if these are things you want to hold onto that is fine. What I'm asking you to do is like cooking. Theology is like cooking. Take the ideas that you like and put them on the back burner for a moment, and look at something different. Then at the end of it, if you want to go back to the back burner, then take it back.

Three ideas:

One idea that I think has hurt people is the idea that heaven is a place. We'll get to that in a moment. It can feel like a place, it can feel like you are being wrapped in a blanket, but what we need to come to terms with is time and change. That's what the symbol needs to make us come to peace with. The first mistaken idea about what Jesus is talking about is that it is a place.

The second is that you have to be Christian to go there. We'll look at this in a second.

The third is that you have to *die* before you can get in. Those are the three ideas about heaven that many Christians have that I think keep us from understanding the mystical awareness that Jesus is talking about in this passage.

In the passage, Luke is writing this up and he has the Pharisees asking the question. When the Pharisees ask the question, Luke is a dramatist. He's not going to give them good lines, right? Luke is using the Pharisees to talk about the way a fundamentalist would talk about something. Not bad people, but that is not what Jesus is trying to get us to be. You cannot understand the Sermon on the Mount, or at least you cannot *obey* the Sermon on the Mount and be a fundamentalist. That is completely incompatible - completely.

Listen to this: The Pharisees asked Jesus when the reign of God would come. Jesus replied [something like this], “The reign of God does not come in a visible way. You can’t say see, *here* it is, *there* it is.” (Listen to this next line) “No, look, the reign of God is already in your midst.”

Now I think Jesus should get some say in what Christianity is going to be. (*laughter*) When people talk about the Second Coming and the Rapture, this little line is kind of hard to harmonize. “The reign of God does not come in a visible way. You can’t say *here* it is or *there* it is; No, look the reign of God is already in your midst.”

The way I wanted to translate that when I was in college was that the Kingdom of God is within you. It works great for narcissists, right? Hey, it’s in there, (*points to chest*) you know. I just have to love myself. This is true, you do have to love yourself, but the word here is plural and I didn’t like it. Maybe you don’t like it. The idea is this takes place in our relationships with one another. What Jesus is going to say, as horrifying as this is, *you are not here permanently*. This thing that you point at, that you call a “you” is ephemeral, fleeting, impermanent. What Jesus wants you to find is that [which is] within you that is not fleeting and impermanent. The only thing you are going to find is change, time, the river of life, the fire of life. He wants you to think of that as your home. It’s not a place, but it can feel like a place. It’s your home, it’s where you belong. Jesus was trying to teach a version of enlightenment. Jesus was a mystic. He was trying to have us see the world universally, in universal love and compassion. What he is saying is when you understand this it will pop like lightning across the sky. You will see it everywhere but if you are lying in bed with someone who doesn’t get it, they are not going to see anything.

There are different ways to take this passage. One is the bungee jump. One person in bed is going to be there, you look over and there will be empty pajamas. (I knew I should have been nicer to Grandma - she’s gone). When you understand what the parables are talking about, what the teachings are talking about, it will illumine your life like lightning across the sky. You are not going to be able to say, look here is what I am talking about, right here. See this miracle, see this healing, see this blank. You are not going to be able to do that. I like what one minister said: that what Jesus is saying is, the point is not to get people into heaven, the point is to get heaven into people. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven means embodying this love, this compassion.

When you pray, you are not praying to give advice for something you want, you are going to start there, you will start with your wish, but what the prayer does is find the petals and the folds within that little view of happiness, and it opens up until it includes your family. Well, you say, I kind of want them to be happy, too. I thought I just wanted my happiness, but I want them to be happy, too. I won’t be happy if they aren’t. And then...they like some people I don’t like and they are not going to be happy if I don’t love the people that I don’t like. *When you keep doing the math, it opens up to include everybody*. One end of it is your little prayer, your little wish. It opens up to what’s called Heaven, but it’s a view that embraces all being. It’s the common life of things. The first mistake that can keep us from seeing that is thinking heaven is a place we are supposed to get to. It’s here. It’s in our midst, but we don’t see it.

Then the second thing which probably isn’t controversial anymore here, but there aren’t too many churches where I would be able to say this, and have a job at the end of the sermon. (*laughter*) I wouldn’t get to the third point before the “divine hook” would come out. Jesus is saying it is not about me, and he says this throughout his teaching: “I’m not talking about myself.” All these people who put Jesus on a big pillar and appoint themselves Jesus’ lieutenants. It’s a clever, clever ploy. They put Jesus up high and they become the bullies who protect Jesus. Look what he is saying. When the realm of God comes into the world, if someone comes up to you and says I’m Jesus, follow me. Don’t listen. Have you realized this? What I was taught was after all the Hindus and the Buddhists are burned, and

then Jesus would come down and we get to ride up in the beautiful elevator lined in gold and we just don't listen to the muffled cries of the masses being tortured. We just eat the divine Hostess Cupcakes and...*(laughter)*. See, all you have to do is clarify the picture and it is so repulsive that nobody would want to go there... nobody. But Jesus is saying, it is not about me, it is not about a person. I am embodying something that I want you to express. When Jesus says *I am*, that's a mystical saying and the way to understand it is that it means the very ground of life and being is trying to have you experience yourself as a branch on that tree. Jesus is speaking as the trunk of the tree of which you and I are the branches. So the second part of "on earth as it is in heaven" is to see everybody, everybody, with Christ-like love – to see the person sitting next to you as the expression of God. That's what Jesus was wanting us to be able to do. Do you realize that if you get to Heaven angels are going to be really boring? If you live next to an angel right now, it's like the wings and stuff are really impressive, and the harp music, too. The next day you've got those feathers shedding on the carpet and the harp music gets old pretty fast. If you don't see the sacred here and now, how are you going to see it there? How is it going to be different where you are going to be happy? The way we are taught is: we are going to lift our egos up and put us in mansions and we will be fine. Look at Donald Trump. Look at any reality show there is. That's not what we really want. We have to let go of that...which leads us to the third thing.

You don't have to die to go to Heaven. It may feel like that sometimes, because you have to let go of the past. You have to stop identifying [yourself] as your stuff. The way Jesus says it is, if you are on a rooftop and you remember you have some stuff downstairs, forget it – leave it behind. That's what the story of Lot's wife is about. It has nothing to do with homosexuality. The fire and brimstone is just the way they are talking about time...what time does to us, and the horrible things people are doing are shopping, taking care of their homes, just ordinary everyday stuff, but their life is ticking away and they don't realize it. That's how we lose life, not in doing heroin, (I don't know, maybe some of you do, I don't know). I'm not aware of anybody doing anything that interesting. It's the tasks we give ourselves to, that swallow us. It's the habits we do. Jesus says that those who try to save their life will lose it. What he is saying is: that part of your life that you hold back to be safe, to be permanent, is the part that's killing you, that's hurting you. You are the river of life, you are the fire. To hold anything back from living every day is a terrible mistake. So when you are hurting, instead of pulling back and trying to be permanent, go into the depth, go into the change, go into the fire and say "yes" to it.

It's not easy. [It's not some] Buddhist meditation, [where] you are renouncing your stuff, then your clothes, then your body, then your mind. If you have ever been somebody who lost your mind slowly, it's very comforting to know there is something deeper than that. That's not saying to hurry to that moment, that's not saying to give up things you don't have to give up. Jesus lived at a time right before a great revolution. Rome was falling. You live in a time right before a great revolution. The American empire is tottering. It cannot last. Personally, spiritually, politically, and in every sense, this prayer transforms how we interpret things. Thy Kindom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. You don't need to worry about what *is* happening if you tune yourself to those principles *by which things happen*.

Jesus is teaching us to pray. He puts a very strange little passage in here, but I think very important for us to find our bearing. Prayer can start as a wish and it can be as immature and selfish as you need to be authentic. If you don't do that, it is just going to pop up when you least expect it. Accept who you are. Love it, embrace it, deepen it, broaden it. Prayer can be the bridge between your little self that is so afraid, and this huge view of the world. What Jesus is inviting you to is an exciting depth of living that includes every aspect of your life, the whole circle of life and all beings. Learning to pray would not be complete if we did not have this verse: "Thy Kindom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven."