

Every Christian, no matter how young or how old, needs to learn how to pray. It is a basic principle of discipleship. You can't be a disciple of Jesus Christ and not know how to pray.

And so I teach prayer a lot. This past week, I just started teaching the Lord's Prayer to our school children. Because they need to learn how to pray. Our youth confirmands are also currently learning about the Lord's Prayer from the catechism. Because they need to learn how to pray. Gordon and Penny learned more about prayer when we went through adult instruction together. Because they needed to learn how to pray. And this next Wednesday, our Lenten service will deal with one of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. Because all of you need to learn how to pray too.

Every Christian needs to learn how to pray... including Jesus' first disciples. And that's what today's Gospel lesson is about: two disciples, James and John, learning how to pray. That may come as a surprise to you. Because it doesn't seem like it is. They don't discuss prayer. The word “prayer” isn't even used, actually. No one does what looks like praying in this lesson.

And yet, they do. Because when James and John walk up to Jesus and make their request of him, that's a prayer. No different than when we bow our heads and say, “Our Father, who art in heaven.” They are talking to God. And they are learning how he will respond to them.

And at first glance, you might also think that what we learn from James and John must be what not to do when we pray. I mean, look at what they ask of Jesus. First, they approach him by saying, *“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”*

Now, I don't know about you, but I never, ever walked up to one of my teachers – whether in grade school, high school, college, or seminary – and said anything like that. It sounds so ridiculously arrogant. So completely lacking in the humility that Jesus so often taught.

And, of course, Jesus doesn't go along with it. He's not going to blindly agree to a request they haven't made yet, without even hearing it first. But he also doesn't seem particularly upset about the way they've approached him. *“What do you want me to do for you?”* He asks. Alright, try me. Let's hear it.

So they ask him. *“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”* And we thought they were arrogant before. Now they're not just displaying their ego for Jesus. They're lording themselves over their fellow disciples too. We want to be better than rest of them. Make it happen.

Once again, Jesus refuses them. But once again, he's not angry with them. The rest of the disciples, they're furious with James and John. “Indignant” as the text says. They know an insult when they hear it. But Jesus? Jesus is patient with them. He doesn't chastise them for making the request, even if he does instruct them about what they're asking.

Truth be told, James and John are demonstrating a rather admirable faith and practice when they make this outlandish request. One that Jesus will encourage in his disciple just a chapter later. In Mark chapter 11 we read, *“Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”*

That's exactly what James and John have done. They have prayed with faith and confidence. They have told the mountain to be thrown into the sea. They have asked in prayer, believing that they will receive it. And Jesus has no problem with that, whatsoever. His only fault with them is in what they've asked for.

We can learn a lot from James and John about how to pray. And the way I see, there are three key lessons to take from this incident.

First, pray. Just pray. The very first thing that James and John got right in this whole situation is that they went to Jesus with their request. Before Jesus even said it to them, they recognized that if they had a request to make that only God could provide, they should ask Jesus to do it.

And how many times in the Gospels do the disciples actually do that? Not very many. When the disciples can't drive out a demon from a young boy, they don't pray. They don't go to Jesus for help. They just tell the boy's father he's out of luck.

When there's a crowd of people to feed and not enough food to do it, they don't pray. They don't go to Jesus for help. They just try to send the people away. This lesson is a rare example of a disciple actually understanding what his relationship with Jesus is supposed to be.

Second, pray boldly. It doesn't matter if you're asking for a mountain to be moved. Ask for it anyway. The invitation to prayer has no limits. In fact, it's not even just an invitation. It's a command.

God invites, expects, and requires that we go to him with our wants and needs. No matter how big or small. No matter how selfish or selfless. Even if your deepest desire is to sit beside God's throne at his right hand. Ask it.

But third, always understand that the answer to your prayer might be "no." And it's not that God says no because he's not able to do it. It's not that God says no because he doesn't care or he's angry that we asked.

Generally, God says no for one of two reasons. And they actually both apply in this lesson. Sometimes, God says no because it's not in his will for his kingdom. Look at how Jesus responds: *"to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."*

It has been prepared. There's a plan here. A divine plan of salvation. And that plan is for our good. For our good in this life. But also for our good in the next. It's an eternal plan. And the ultimate answer to every prayer is Christ's return. There's a reason why we pray things like, "Thy kingdom come," and "Come, Lord Jesus."

Sometimes our requests fit into that plan. And sometimes they don't, as James and John found out. But that doesn't mean that God isn't still working for our good.

Which is the other reason why God sometimes says no. *"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"* Are you willing to be condemned to death and mocked and spit upon and flogged and killed? Are you willing to put yourself in God's hands and have the faith that you will be raised again?

You see, the disciples thought they were asking for something grand and glorious. To sit by the throne of God. But they didn't realize that the lamb sitting on the throne was slain for us. They didn't realize that you only sit on that throne - or beside that throne - by suffering terribly first.

Sometimes, we don't know what we're praying for. Sometimes, God says no to our prayers because it's for our own good. And sometimes, God says yes to prayers that we probably would have preferred that he refused.

Because that's actually what happened here. James and John thought that Jesus was completely refusing their request. But he wasn't. Not entirely.

We don't know whether James and John are sitting at Jesus' right and left hand right now. But we do know that James was the first of the disciples to stand with Jesus in his glory. He was the first of the twelve to be martyred. And John did stand before the throne of God. He described it in his revelation. That he wrote while in prison on the island of Patmos, after being tortured by the Roman emperor.

James and John did drink the cup that Jesus drank in his death. They were baptized with his baptism of suffering. Maybe you will be to. Thankfully, however, standing with Jesus in his glory doesn't require martyrdom and imprisonment.

Because you don't need to drink the cup that Jesus drank. You only need to drink the cup that he gives you. The cup of his own blood, poured out for many for the forgiveness of all your sins.

And you don't need to be baptized again with the baptism that Jesus is baptized with. A baptism of suffering and martyrdom. Because, like Gordon this morning, when you were baptized the first time, you were baptized with Christ, into his crucifixion. Called as God's child. And given new life in his resurrection from the dead.

We can ask any prayer of Jesus, but to sit at his right or left hand is not for him to grant. Those places are reserved for those for whom they have been prepared. And yet, take comfort from that. Because if those places have been reserved, then your place in God's kingdom has also been reserved. You are a part of God's plan of salvation. And when you pray, he hears and he answers according to that very plan. Amen.