

THE POTENTIAL POWER OF PRAYER

There is a story about a meeting that once took place between Thomas Aquinas, the most influential theologian in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, and Pope Innocent the 4th who was the Bishop of Rome.

After showing Thomas the church's treasury, which was filled with gold and silver, the Pope said: "You see, Thomas, the Church can no longer say: 'Silver and gold have I none.'"

To which Thomas is said to have replied, "True, your Holiness, but neither can she say: 'Rise and walk.'"

The story raises a very real question: Are worldly riches a hindrance to faith and to the prayers that are offered through faith or are they not?

One of the legacies of World War 2 were the "cargo cults" of some islands in the South Pacific.

Some of these islands were populated by Aboriginal natives who had never been exposed to Western civilization.

Strange looking people began to arrive in enormous ships.

They offloaded bulldozers which pushed trees aside in order to make landing strips.

Then huge silver airplanes flew in from out of the sky and unloaded their cargo.

Soldiers built warehouses to store ordnance and erected communication towers.

All of this was to support the invasion of island after island on the way to an eventual invasion of Japan.

Soldiers would give the natives gifts like cigarette lighters that made fire appear magically and cameras that made images appear on paper.

The natives saw modern weapons with terrible destructive power, refrigerators, power tools—all kinds of “high tech.”

It all seemed miraculous to them and they concluded that the soldiers must be gods—gods who flew in from out of the sky and brought magical stuff.

They venerated the zippo lighters and cameras and ballpoint pens they had been given as if they were religious relics.

When the war was over and the soldiers left, some of the natives built shrines to the “cargo gods.”

They fashioned replicas of airplanes out of grass and trees to lure the “cargo gods” to return.

They even gave the god of the soldiers a name: they called him “Tom Navy.”

As civilization began to penetrate these islands, the natives’ fascination with cargo didn’t diminish.

Missionaries who came to preach the Gospel encountered a warm welcome from natives who hoped that they would bring about a return of the cargo gods.

The problem was that they were looking for cargo—not the Gospel—and when the cargo didn’t appear, they lost interest in the Gospel.

Some people pray to God like the Aboriginal natives prayed to the “cargo gods.”

They close their eyes, fold their hands, rub their “prayer-lamp” and hope that the genie-God will grant their wishes.

If this sounds far-fetched, just watch one of the prosperity gospel preachers on TV who promise worldly blessings to those who “get Jesus into their lives.”

Praying for improvement in our personal situations can easily become the chief focus of one's prayer life.

Now don't get me wrong—there is nothing wrong with taking your needs to God.

Paul himself wrote: *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”*

So there's nothing wrong with asking God for things you need.

But if improving your personal circumstances becomes the predominant goal of your prayer life, you are not only missing out on one of the major benefits of prayer—you are seriously underestimating the potential power of prayer.

To see an example of the potential power of prayer, let's take a look at 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 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 doesn’t even pray for the mitigation of his painful personal circumstances.

His entire focus is on the spiritual welfare of his brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul was not praying that God’s will be done in HIS life, but in the lives of others.

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 starts with listening.”*

What did Soren Kierkegaard mean?

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

Go to His word and learn what God wants you to pray about.

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

After all, even Jesus' disciples, who had walked with him, heard him teach and witnessed his miracles *asked him to teach them how to pray.*

God teaches 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 are inclined to end up worshiping gods of our own devising.

And he knows that if we pray that way all we will end up with is a lot of devices!

So before you go to God with your self-gratifying list, understand that the most powerful and effectual use you can make of prayer is ***to pray in a spirit of Christian love 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 Him to get on YOUR side of things.

Through prayer, God can train us to want the things HE wants, to love the things He loves and to hate the things He hates.

The more we use prayer to align ourselves with God in our thoughts and desires, the more we will come to regard the kingdom of this world as unsubstantial and ephemeral and the kingdom of God as substantial and eternal.

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 him and his brothers and sisters in Christ and he exults 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.

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

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 an absolutely 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.

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 Solomon prayed when he became the king of Israel as a mere child.

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 wisdom to govern so he asked to be filled with God’s 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 among His people.

In the same way, Paul prays that his brothers and sisters in Christ in the church at Philippi align themselves with God so that they would become means of grace 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.

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

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

You get a church where the love of the brethren for each other increases every day and overflows to the world outside.

A church that becomes not only a bright beacon of light to its community, but also a force that transforms the lives of the people living in the community.

Imagine a church where God’s goals—the spiritual well-being of His people, the preaching and hearing of

the Gospel, the ongoing service of love to the surrounding community—are the prayers of each individual member.

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

The gates of hell could not possibly withstand the invasion of the Kingdom of God.

It's a whole new way to think about prayer.

We are told by Paul in *1st Corinthians* that "...now we see as in a glass darkly"—meaning that because of the sin nature that dwells in our flesh we don't see things clearly.

Our problem is that we think we do!

And so we assume that whatever WE want at any particular point in time will be the best thing for us to have.

But our judgment is untrustworthy when it comes to spiritual matters.

We can barely keep the two kingdoms—the kingdom of this world and the Kingdom of God—separate in our thinking, let alone in our praying.

We want to serve our SELF, because it is our SELF that is doing the praying.

But Jesus advises us to **deny** ourselves—not to serve them.

True fulfillment doesn't come from self-service, but from self-sacrifice.

That's God's wisdom, and though it may seem foolish to us, it is higher than man's wisdom.

Consider the great joy Paul derived from his prayer life.

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 others.

The source of his joy was his relationship with God and so his joy never waned, even in the worst of circumstances.

God grant us all a prayer life like Paul's!

Amen.