

May 22, 2005

Sunday of the Paralytic

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Quoting select Bible verses to prove a point of theology is usually, at best, a risky business, because what the Bible may say on a given subject is, as often as not, difficult to reduce to a single proposition. Let me cite the example of petitionary prayer in order to illustrate this risk and also to initiate a reflection on the subject of such prayer.

Times out of mind I have been told by sincere Christians that the promise given by Jesus--the promise of His Father's granting us whatsoever we ask in His name (John 16:23-24)--is absolute and "allows of no exceptions." Some folks, citing this text, often enough go on to remark that even the addition of "if it is Thy will" bespeaks a want of sufficient faith, inasmuch as it suggests that the person making the prayer is failing in confidence that his prayer will be answered. That is to say, a prayer containing an "if," because it is ipso facto hypothetical, expresses an inadequate faith. What the believer should do, I have been told, is simply "name it and claim it."

Although I think this notion very distressing in principle, sometimes the claim is made in circumstances that render it more distressing still. For instance, years ago when I was counseling a young woman severely and permanently injured in an accident, she quoted this biblical promise to me on many occasions, along with the comment that God, in not granting her the healing for which she so earnestly pleaded, was shirking His promise. By no amount of reasoning, I found, was I able to persuade the lady to look at the matter from another angle, an angle equally biblical. She felt that she had in hand all the empirical evidence she needed to think herself abandoned by God, who, if not insouciant to her pain, was at least reckless of His pledge.

What the Bible has to say about petitionary prayer, however, is contained in many biblical verses, all of them worthy of careful regard. For example, should we say that the Apostle Paul, when he prayed three times that the Lord would remove from him the thorn in his flesh, the angel of Satan sent to buffet him (2 Corinthians 12:8), was wanting in faith because this severe affliction was not taken away?

If this was the case--if the Apostle to the Gentiles really was so deficient in personal faith--it is no wonder that he was obliged to leave Trophimus sick at Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20). Poor ailing Trophimus, languishing there on his sickbed; he should have been prayed over by a person with a sounder, fuller, more unfailing faith, not that slacker Paul, a man apparently deficient in the art of naming it and claiming it.

The truth here, however, is quite different. The addition, "if it is thy will," is neither an hypothesis imposed on our confidence nor a restraint placed on our prayer. It expresses, rather, a constitutive feature of genuine prayer and an essential component of genuine faith. The purpose of prayer, after all, is not to inform God what

we want, but to hand ourselves over more completely, in faith, to what God wants. The goal of prayer, even the prayer of petition, is living communion with God. The man who tells God, then, "Thy will be done," does not thereby show himself a weaker believer but a stronger one.

After all, was Jesus, "the author and perfecter of our faith," weak in faith when He added the "Thy will be done" to the petition "Take this cup from Me"? Did He not, rather, give us in this form of His petition the very essence of true prayer and true faith?

"If it is Thy will," then, is not a limiting of our trust, but an expansion of it. It does not denote a restriction of our confidence but an elevation of it. It is an elevation, because in such a prayer--"Thy will be done"—we grow in personal trust in the One who has deigned, in His love, to become our Father. Indeed, when Jesus makes this prayer in the Garden, the evangelists are careful to note exactly how He addressed God—namely, as "Father." Indeed, they even preserve the more intimate Semitic form, "Abba."

The "will of God" in which we place the trust of our petition is not a blind, arbitrary, or predetermined will. It is, rather, the will of a Father whose sole motive (if this word be allowed) in hearing our prayer is to provide loving direction and protection to His children. "According to Thy will" is spoken to a Father who loves us because in Christ we have become His children.

All of this theology was contained in Jesus' prayer in the Garden, by which His own human will was united with the will of God. Jesus, in praying that for the doing of God's will, modeled for us the petition contained in the prayer that He gave us in the Sermon on the Mount. This prayer, which significantly begins with "Our Father," goes on to plead that His will may be done.

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