

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Speaking With God:
Prayers of Intercession”
I Corinthians 15:35-41
Psalm 17:1-9**

**Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 24, 2019**

I Corinthians 15:35-41

But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.

Psalms 17:1-9

A Prayer of David.

Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry! Give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit! From your presence let my vindication come! Let your eyes behold the right!

You have tried my heart, you have visited me by night, you have tested me, and you will find nothing; I have purposed that my mouth will not transgress. With regard to the works of man, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped.

I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me; hear my words. Wondrously show your steadfast love, O Savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand.

Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings, from the wicked who do me violence, my deadly enemies who surround me.

“Speaking With God: Prayers of Intercession”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This week we are wrapping up our series on types of prayers. We started with prayers of confession. These are the prayers we offer first to God, because we recognize that he is holy and we are not. Before any of us can ever approach his throne, we must first submit ourselves in humility before him. We then looked at prayers of thanksgiving. This represents the logical progression of our prayers. If we first recognize who God is, we must then recognize all that he has given to us—including life, faith, and salvation—and, therefore, we must approach him with gratitude. The third type of prayer we discussed were prayers of supplication. Once we recognize who God is, are thankful for his constant provisions, we are, then, naturally moved to recognize how weak we really are before such an awesome God. Moreover, our weakness and sickness is a result of our sinfulness and the sinfulness of the world. Since we live in a sinful world and are sinful ourselves, we suffer a lot. We suffer a lot of things, at the hands of ourselves, and hands of

our neighbors, and at the hands of the enemy. Yet, in the midst of all this suffering, we also recognize that God is here. He is with us, and what's more, he knows our suffering. Now, we find ourselves facing the final in our series, prayers of intercession: praying on behalf of others.

Before we dive into prayers of intercession, I'd like to take the time to answer a question that I haven't posed yet, but may be one that has flitted across your mind at some point or another. One of the critiques that Calvinists, such as myself, receive, is the question, *If God knows everything, if providence is a true doctrine, why should I pray, is prayer even effective?* To be fair, this is a valid criticism. Indeed, many other world religions use prayer as either a way to change their deity's mind or as a way of individual meditation. So it's not unusual, in this pluralistic society, for these types of questions to seep into Christian circles. Now, I try not to give trite responses, but for most Christians usually Christ's words should be enough, right? Well, Jesus, himself, said to his disciples in Matthew 6:8, do not pray like the Gentiles do, "for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." This isn't a "Calvinist" perspective, this is Christ's own words, from his very lips. God *does* know our every need and thought, and still we are to pray to him. Furthermore, Jesus' words to his disciples weren't some new-age thing he made up. In fact, he was simply echoing the words of David from the 139th Psalm, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me! ... Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether." Jesus is simply seconding David's affirmation that the Lord knows what we need before we ask it.

That answers the first half of the critique, why should we pray? So far the second still stands, is prayer effective? Well, the New Testament is very clear that prayer is, indeed, effective. Much of our personal experiences can affirm this. Still, people ask, does prayer change God's mind? The problem is actually with the assumptions of that question. If we were to think of our prayers as changing God's mind, we might come to the conclusion that we gave him some bit of information that he lacked, or we communicated to him some bit of knowledge he hadn't considered. However, as we just heard from Christ, God already knows everything we are going to ask of him, and furthermore he knows what we need better than we do. The truth is, no prayer of any human being uttered in all of history ever changed the mind of God, because his mind doesn't ever need to be changed. At this point you might be asking more fervently, then, why should I pray? Well, like I said earlier, it's the assumption of that question which is wrong. Prayer does change things. It changes us.

God did not give prayer to the church for his benefit. The Apostle James speaks to this in the fourth chapter of his letter. He's noticed within the church quarrels and fights among believers. He's concerned because he recognizes that this quarreling stem from an internal conflict of the passions. He says, "You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel." Perhaps there were some in the church who wanted things, prayed for things, but did not get them, so they usurped God's knowledge and his will to bring about their own desires through sedition. So, the Apostle has this accusation: "You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."

When we intercede in prayers, whether on behalf of others or ourselves, we must be open to being changed by God, not trying to change to his mind. I remember praying to God for silly

things. “O Lord, if you only give me an A on this test... If you only let such-and-such go in my favor...” I asked and did not receive, because, as James says, I asked wrongly. Perhaps if I had asked God to change me and not the situation, then maybe things would’ve turned in my favor. But this truth isn’t limited to trite prayers. Even the more profound and challenging prayers fall under this rubric. “God, if you can cure this cancer... God, if you can give her one more day... God, if you can bring peace between so-and-so...” We cannot understand the mysteries of God and why he allows things to happen; bad things to good people. But that’s not the purpose of prayer. Prayer is not given to us so we can probe God’s mind and perhaps change it. Prayer is here to change us. Perhaps we should be asking, “God, how can I help my friend through his treatments? How can I support my friend in her final moments? What can I do to bring peace between us?” You might be surprised at how many of these prayers get answered.

Now, I will say, this might be an easy thing to change in our prayers. But something that I think is a little more challenging comes to us, again, from the lips of Jesus. In his sermon on the mount, our Lord preached, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Indeed, our prayers of intercession are comfortable and easy when we pray for family and friends. It’s also easy to intercede for the stranger and the amorphous “poor” because God knows who they are and he knows their needs. But it is a challenge to pray for our enemies. The truth is, our enemies are many and varied. Religious radicals who seek to destroy the church. Corrupt dictators who aim to suppress God’s people. Political systems whose goals are to minimize or even vilify the Christian faith. In this current political climate, it is easy—so easy—to label this person or that party our enemy. Here, again, we might pray, “O Lord, if you only prevent so-and-so from being elected. O God, please keep such-and-such party out of Congress.” Beloved, you ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly.

When Christ tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, he’s not disagreeing with his brother James. We are not to pray that God magically intervene to change our persecutors. That God strike down this person or that one with some lightning bolt from the heavens. Rather, the prayer should say, “How can I affect change on my enemy? How can I show them the way of Christ so that they, too, may seek his forgiveness and join me in everlasting bliss?” You see, Jesus defines for us why we pray for our enemies. “So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” True heirs of the Kingdom are disciples of Jesus Christ. And what do disciples do? Bible study class, you should know the answer. Disciples go out into world, making other disciples, baptizing them into the fellowship community, and teaching them to obey Christ’s commands. Isn’t that how prayer changes us? Christ calls us to be different from the world. The church is holy: unique and set apart for God’s service. When the church intercedes on behalf of others, we pray that God transform us, so that we may be the change God desires in this world.

My friends, prayer does change things. It changes us. As David says in our Psalm today, “I have purposed that my mouth will not transgress...I have avoided the ways of the violent. My steps have held fast to your paths.” This is how prayer changes us. It makes us more like Christ. Prayer aligns us more and more with God. When we pray rightly, we can call upon him and he will answer us. He will show us his steadfast love. When we pray wrongly, we do not receive. Our

petitions go unheeded when our hearts are not in God. Jesus has a lot to say about prayer. This ends our series on types of prayer. Next week, we're starting a six-week series on the Lord's Prayer. Because prayer is so foundational and so transformative, Christ even gives to us a formula for it. As we continue our discussion on prayer, my prayer for you, Church, is that we can be drawn closer to God, and in so doing, draw others to him, as well.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, hear us as we pray for our loved ones, our community, the church, and for the world. You know our every thought, and you call us to pray to you. You know our every need, and you charge us to rely on you. Help us as we direct our prayers toward you, not for selfish passions, but for the glory of your name. Help us to pray for the enemies of your children, that the church might bear witness to your calling. May our obedience to your commands strengthen us to stand before our oppressors and love them with the love of Christ. For his glory and in his name we pray. Amen.