



able Talk

College Hill Lutheran Church

Prayer: Does it work? Does it matter?

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On Tuesday night in the University of Northern Iowa's Center for Multicultural Education, Hector Avalos, a philosophy and religious studies professor at Iowa State University, presented a lecture for Darwin Week on religion. In his lecture he asked the question, "Can science prove that prayer works?" **Avalos explained that people believe in prayer because they believe miracles happen as a result of prayer and that God will intervene if they pray.** He defined a miracle as "an event that defies natural law, directly caused by God." (my emphasis)

Really?

Do we really "believe in prayer *because* we believe miracles happen as a result of prayer and that God will intervene if we pray"? Perhaps Hector Avalos is capturing a common *false* belief about what prayer is. As much as people may believe prayer to be a tool to get God to intervene and perform miracles, that simply is not what Scripture teaches. Avalos' misunderstanding of what prayer is makes his entire paper meaningless to us, EXCEPT that he exposes what many people wrongfully think prayer is.

Avalos concludes that it is impossible for science to prove that prayer works. The problem here lies with believing that prayer is a tool to get what we want from God.

Is God a Puppet?:

The blessed Holy Trinity is not a puppet God waiting somewhere out there unwilling to dispense his grace and mercy upon us until we pull His string. God gives us what we need even when we don't ask for it. As St. Paul says, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." He gives it to us even when we don't ask. The Scriptures teach us that Jesus is always interceding for us (Rom. 8:34) and the Holy Spirit is also praying on our behalf (Rom. 8:26-27).

Prayer is NOT cause and effect: "*If* only I pray that God gives me _____, *then* He will give it." To put it another way, prayer is not an instrument which we use to get something from God. God richly and lavishly bestows the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation on sinners for the sake of the atoning death of Jesus Christ—NOT because of our prayers. This means that when we are troubled and tortured by our sin and the hellish attacks of Satan, we do not take comfort in the strength and sincerity of our praying but in rock-solid gifts won for us on Jesus' cross and delivered to us in the means of grace.

What Is Prayer?

I believe that it was John T. Pless who wrote the following description of prayer:

“Prayer is speaking to God in words and thoughts (cf. Ps. 19:14; Acts 7:59-60). To use the words of Eugene Peterson, “prayer is responding speech.” That is, the Christian speaks to God in prayer because he or she has first listened to the Holy Trinity in His Word. Prayer has been described as conversation with God. This is a helpful image if we keep in mind that God always has the first word. We speak to God in prayer only because God has first spoken to us in His Son. Jesus said, **“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”** (John 15:7) Abiding in the Word of Christ, we learn to pray. We pray in response to what God tells us in His Word.

The Psalmist says, ***O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.*** It is only as God opens lips locked by sin that mouths are free for the full-throated prayer that delights the ears of our Heavenly Father. When we sinners try to open our own lips in prayer, we know what happens. Instead of praise and thanksgiving, intercession and supplication, out come petitions of self-justification and attempts to bargain with God. Prayer then becomes a tool of unbelief that is used in a vain and self-serving attempt to pry from the hands of God the answer that we want rather than the gifts that our Father would give us. When prayer becomes unglued from the Word of God, it is transformed into a weapon that sinners would use against God in a foolish attempt to have their own will done on earth.

Why Pray then?

We pray because God commands and invites believers in Jesus Christ to pray (cf. St. Matt. 7:7-8; 1 Thess. 5:16-18). It is a privilege and God promises to hear us. In prayer we can approach God as children approach their earthly fathers. Jesus teaches us to call God, “Father” when we pray. Then He continues saying: **“What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”** (Luke 11:11-13.)

Just as any father will know what’s best for his children, our Father in heaven knows what’s best for us (i.e. the Holy Spirit who gives faith). When we pray for anything temporal which He has not already promised to give us (i.e. health, wealth, good grades, etc.), we simply say as Jesus prayed, “Thy will be done.” Our Father will always do what’s best for us. He loves us and wants us to be with him forever. Sometimes this means that He will not answer our prayers the way we want. He knows better than we do. Thanks be to God!



+ Rev. John H. Wegener
College Hill Lutheran Church

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