

Prayer That Empowers

Luke 11:1-13

14th Sunday after Pentecost

29th August 2010

A man was sick and tired of having to work every day, and constantly envied his wife the relaxing life she enjoyed at home. So he prayed, “Dear Lord, I go to work every day and put in 8 hours while my wife merely stays at home. I want her to know what I go through, so please allow her body to switch with mine for a day. Amen.” Poof! It happened! His wife was changed into a man and went to his office next day. He was changed into a woman and became a stay-at-home mom for 24 hours.

Next morning, the man awoke and suddenly discovered he had to cook breakfast, get the kids dressed, make their lunches, take them to school – and do a thousand other unexpected things throughout the day. At 11 pm that night he collapsed exhausted into bed, where his mate snuggled up appreciatively beside him.

Next morning, still exhausted, the man immediately prayed to God, “Lord, I don’t know what I was thinking about. I was wrong to envy my wife. Please turn me back into a man immediately.”

God replied, “Yes, my son, I feel you have learned your lesson and I will be pleased to turn things back to the way they were. But there’s only one problem. You’ll have to wait nine months – you see, last night, you got pregnant!”¹

Oh, be careful what you pray for – you may just get more than you expected!

A couple of years ago when Barack Obama was due to make a speech at an outdoor rally accepting the Democratic Party’s nomination, evangelical Christians in the Republican Party were urged to pray for a storm to disrupt the meeting. The Focus on the Family organisation asked supporters to pray for rain of biblical proportions to fall on Denver, Colorado, where 75,000 people were to gather on 28th August to cheer Mr. Obama. One pastor said they were to beseech God for “umbrella-ain’t-going-to-help-you-rain” to prevent his candidacy being confirmed. The storm did come but, unfortunately, it was a few days late and in the wrong place. On 1st September, Hurricane Gustav, which had been travelling up the Gulf, almost disrupted the Republican Convention in New Orleans where John McCain was being confirmed as Republican presidential nominee! Oh, be careful what you pray for – you may get more than you expected!²

Did you see *The Peterborough Examiner’s* recent two part series on the decline of the local churches and the need for change?³ After reading it, a member of a certain declining congregation prays fervently that his church will become just like Christian Victory Church which is portrayed in the series as the model church of the future which has successfully adapted to change.

Suddenly, as if in a dream, the man wakes up and, lo and behold, his church has been transformed into that self-same kind of church and he finds himself attending a completely new kind of worship service. This is exciting, he thinks. Just what he wants his church to be.

But as the man looks around there are some things that take him aback. The sanctuary is certainly full to the gunwales but why is Rev. Turner wearing a golf-shirt and slacks rather than his gown? And why is Douglas, the organist, playing a keyboard with Dave Graham on drums and Rod Smith on sax? Where did the cross and the stain glass windows go? And what’s all this waving of hands and clapping during the hymns? Not only that, the service lasts for an hour and a half, and the sermon is 45 minutes long. And, also, they say I’m supposed to tithe. Give ten percent of my income to the church. Ah, yes, be careful what you pray for – you might get more than you expect!

But not only this. Be careful what you pray for – your prayers might cause harm to other people. This is the thesis of a book entitled, *Be Careful What You Pray For*, by Dr. Larry Dossey who says that prayer can intentionally be used for negative and destructive means. If we pray for harmful things to happen to other people, he argues, adverse things can happen as a result. Almost like putting a hex on people or sticking pins in a voodoo doll. He calls it toxic prayer and he claims it can produce some pretty bad stuff.⁴

Another writer believes you can cause unintentional harm to others as a result of praying for the wrong things. She tells how her brother, a naval officer, served on the battle-cruiser HMS Repulse in the Pacific Ocean during the 2nd World War. When the ship was sunk in December 1941, all her family neighbours and friends prayed for her brother’s survival. “Their prayers were answered,” she complained, “but he went on to spend 2½ years in a prisoner of war camp and then be killed – so be careful what you pray for.”⁵

Can you really harm people by praying intentionally or unintentionally for the wrong things? I don’t think so. True Christian prayer always asks God to do something good for another person. But even if a Christian prayed a toxic prayer, God would never use that prayer, no matter how wrongly prayed or how ill-informed, to harm another person. Our God is a God of love and only ever acts in the very best interests of those for whom we pray. To do otherwise would be against his very nature.

Jesus makes this point very clearly in Luke 11 when he likens God answering prayer to a human father replying to the request of his son. “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, as bad as you are, give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"⁶ So, we need never hesitate in prayer, worrying that something bad will happen as a result. True prayer can only ever be a vehicle of good.

But, having said that, we really should always be careful what we pray for, praying prayers that God would want us to pray, prayers filled with love and caring, and prayers asking for good outcomes to situations. We obviously want our prayers to be successful and these are the prayers that have the greatest chance of being effective.

But there is another way in which we should be careful with our prayers. We should be careful, not just what we pray for, we should also be careful how we pray.

Let's, for instance, be careful to pray with conviction. So often our prayers are prayed in a mechanical, ritualistic way without any real expectation that they will be answered. So much so that we are taken aback when they do get a response.

Professor Fred Craddock of Atlanta's Candler School of Theology tells the story of visiting a dying woman. When he arrived at the hospital, the woman was lying motionless in her bed. Thinking that she was not too long for this life, he prayed a perfunctory prayer that the woman be returned to health and given the gift of new life. Suddenly, without warning, the woman sat up in bed, swung her legs on to the floor and stood up. The family was amazed at this most unexpected turn of events and immediately hailed the young pastor as a miracle worker. Craddock said that he was so shocked by the immediate result of his prayer that, when he got back to the parking lot, he leaned, shaking, against the car, looked up to heaven and said, "Lord, don't ever to do that to me again!"⁷

Let us be careful to pray then with conviction and expectation. Not only do we want to avoid being taken by surprise when a prayer is answered. But we also need to remember that a prayer prayed in faith is a prayer more likely to be answered. Simply because God is much more able to work through prayers that are filled with faith and trust.

Also, though, let us be careful to pray with an open mind. Open to what the answer to our prayer will be. So often we prevent God from answering our prayers because we decide in advance what that answer should be. We limit God's action because we close our ears and our minds to anything other than what we want to hear. Completely forgetting that God always answers our prayers in his way, according to what he knows is best for us.

Do you remember that prayer of a man serving in the Confederate army during the Civil War? It is the

epitome of openness. "I asked for strength that I might achieve; I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked for health that I might do greater things; I was given infirmity that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy; I was given poverty that I might be wise. I asked for power that I might have the praise of others; I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing I had asked for but everything I had hoped for. Almost despite myself my prayers were answered. I am ... most richly blessed."⁸

Let us be careful, therefore, not just what we pray for but how we pray. Let us pray with conviction. Let us pray with openness. When we do, we can be sure these will be prayers that empower us. Empower us to be better human beings. Empower us to be better Christians. Empower us to better serve God and better do his will.

But when we pray with conviction and openness, let's remember our prayers will also empower God. Empower him to work through us. To use us as instruments of his purposes. So he can change our lives and the lives of people around us. And, even more, so he can make this world a better place and usher in his Kingdom upon this earth.

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¹ www.ajokeaday.com

² Tony HJarnden, "Evangelicals asked to pray for rain at Barack Obama nomination", The Daily Telegraph, 13 Aug 2008, www.telegraph.co.uk; Michael Moore, "A Open Letter to God", August 31st, 2008, www.michaelmoore.com

³ Elizabeth Bower, "Change and Empty Churches", p. D1, August 21, 2010, and "What's the Future for Churches", pps. A1 & A6, August 23, 2010, *The Peterborough Examiner*

⁴ Larry Dossey, *Be Careful What You Pray For, You Might Just Get It: What We Can Do about the Unintentional Effects of Our Thoughts, Prayers and Wishes*, HarperCollins Canada, 1998

⁵ Elsie Jackins, "Be Careful What You Pray For", BBC WW2 People's War Stories, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/37>

⁶ Luke 11:11-13

⁷ Fred Craddock, *Workshop on Preaching the Lord's Prayer*, Toronto School of Theology, 1992

⁸ *Living Prayers for Today*, ed. Maureen Edwards, Christian Education Publications, 1996