

Date: January 25, 2026

Texts: Psalm 27. 1, 4-9 / Matthew 7. 7-12

Title: "Petitionary Prayer"

Intro -

do you have any needs...?

ever needed to ask for something...?

have you had the sense that as you grow, you should not
need help...?

that you can / should be able to 'do it by yourself'?

relate per a vintage Anacin (aspirin) commercial (c. 1960's) -

young wife is cooking... mother is offering

"advice"... young woman has a headache, and
snaps that "she rather do it herself..."

fortunately - Anacin to rescue, and the mother - daughter
relationship is saved...

cf. - to some - this may all be a part of the rugged American ideal

(not snapping at your presumably well-meaning mother, even if she
seems to be overlooking the health risks of more salt...)

but...

cf. - when it comes to our life with God...

to our understanding and embrace of prayer...

this "go it alone" mindset can lead to a false spirituality where

we think we must "move past" crass requests

and adore God - somehow -

for who he is alone

and yet...

God loves to answer prayers (if we but ask...)

Foster address this in terms of how we might ask -

differentiating between 2 forms:

Petition... and - Intercession

Petition = ask for ourselves (as modeled in the Lord's Prayer
which is mostly petitionary...)
which reflects the most basic relationship:
a child to a parent...
asking and receiving...
let's consider how we practice making petitions to God -
not as a lower form of prayer / spirituality, but -
as our staple diet...

I) Two Common Problems

but - let's start that consideration by looking at two common problems
people sometimes face when thinking about... engaging in...
this kind of prayer - the prayer of "asking for oneself"

1. Why did we need to ask...?
doesn't God already know all our needs...?
isn't it a waste of his time, when he could actually be doing something
about my needs... right here... right now...
without any delay?

well... sure - sort of...
but it seems God likes to be asked
in the same way as we like our children to ask of us
(most of the time... regarding most things...)
God likes to be asked -
kind of an important part of the relationship...
an act that actually deepens the relationship
and - it involves us more directly in that relationship
- God invites us... eagerly desires for us...
to be engaged in authentic dialogue
in that as we speak what it is that is on our hearts,
we are sharing real information that God is
deeply interested in

2. And then - some folks feel that they shouldn't bother God with
the seemingly small and petty details of their lives
cf. - there are wars that rage around the world...
there is conflict in different parts of our country...
children are dying of hunger - not just on distant shores, but -
right in our own back yards...
people are sick... facing grave health concerns...
dealing with loss...
- the list (alas...) goes on
how can I even think about wasting God's time
on matters that don't stack up
when he's got that much on his plate?
but here...
we need to look to the heart of God
for nothing is more important to him than what weighs us down...
than what lifts us up...
than what we can share with him -
as a child shares with a parent
if it matters to us...
it matters to God
cf. - as one of the great affirmations of the nature and character of God -
a nature and character that looks for us, and - meets with us -
in love and grace

II) One Big Problem

so - with these two common problems dealt with...
let's move on to "one big problem"
namely - what about "unanswered prayer" ...?
cf. - per C. S. Lewis:
"Every war, every famine or plague, almost every death-bed, is a monument to
a petition that has not been granted."

key - this is a genuine (not imagined) problem...

attempts to address it might satisfy...

and - might not

but let's look at few of those attempts -

1. If we can look for - and, find - what Foster calls "the vantage point of the age to come" - we find a first hint at a solution...

P. T. Forsyth has written:

"We shall come one day to a heaven where we shall gratefully know that God's great refusals were sometimes the true answers to our truest prayer."

i.e. - sometimes... (we can probably admit) ...

we ask for things that are not truly in our best interests

at other times, what we ask for might be to the detriment of others

in such cases - perhaps -

we can ultimately see that it is God's grace and mercy to prevent
our prayers from being answered

or - as C. S. Lewis comments elsewhere-

"If God had granted all the silly prayers I've made in my life,
where should I be now?"

2. Alternately...

consider the simple fact that many times our prayers are answered,
but we lack the eyes to see it...

Foster beautifully puts it this way:

"We may ask for greater faith so that we can heal others, but God,
who understands human need far better than we do, gives us
greater compassion so that we can weep with others."

or...

sometimes, our prayers are misdirected -

as when the disciples of old asked for fire to fall from heaven
on God's enemies (conveniently, also my enemies...),

which is not God's preferred pattern of action

i.e. - sometimes...

we get in the way of our prayers being answered, because...
we pray from a faulty foundation

now...

these few comments will not likely deal fully with this dilemma
of unanswered prayer, but...

they do - I believe - offer some hope that we can yet approach
our prayers with confidence even if...

we don't always understand how it all works - ...

III) The Paternoster

... - with a quick look at the Lord's Prayer (Our Father / Paternoster...)

to hopefully guide us on our way

Foster posits that the Paternoster is really a total prayer -

from the coming of the kingdom...

to our daily bread

and all of it offered up in the form of asking:

asking for God to give...

to forgive...

to deliver...

Foster notes that -

"If we were not so familiar with the Lord's Prayer, we would be
astonished at the petition for daily bread... "

...it seems an intrusion of materialism upon the refined world of prayer
but then...

when we think about it for a moment...

this is completely consistent with Jesus' pattern of living
he provided wine for those who were celebrating...

he provided food for those who were hungry...

and rest for the weary...

he transfigured the trivialities of everyday life...

he made it "okay to ask for the little things..."

and - it's good to remember that God cares about
our daily needs...
that God delights to give to us...
what meets those needs

this is followed by the petition to forgive -
forgive us our debts...

(as we forgive our debtors...)

cf. - a balanced prayer...

a reminder that we are forgiven (God's deepest delight...)

as we forgive (God's deepest desire to see in our hearts...)

cf. - as the very nature of the created order -

per Augustine: "God gives where he finds empty hands..."

God forgives not where he finds vengeance, but -
where he finds reconciliation

cf. - offering forgiveness does not mean we will cease to hurt...

it does not mean we will forget...

it is not pretending that the offense did not really matter...

it is a miracle of grace whereby the offense no longer separates

it is a miracle of grace that lives out in our lives what it means to us

that we are no longer separated from the love of God our father...

Foster notes that the third petition -

lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

is the most important to understand aright

in that - we pray for deliverance not from some amorphous...

generic and changeable sense of "not-rightness..."

but - we pray for deliverance from an active... personal...

"evil one" - who means us harm...

personally...

cf. - per Helmut Thielicke - preaching in Stuttgart at the end of WW II

The question was posed, Is temptation real? Is evil real, is the devil real?

Here is what he said:

“Dear friends, in our time we have had far too much contact with

demonic powers; we have sensed and seen how men and whole movements have been corrupted and controlled by mysterious, abysmal powers, leading them where they had no intention of going...

Year by year we have seen an increasingly poisonous atmosphere settling down on our globe, and we sense how real and almost tangible are the evil spirits in the air, seeing an invisible hand passing an invisible cup of poison from nation to nation...”

have we seen any less in the years that followed...?

do we see any less in these years in which we find ourselves...?

should we not actively seek God’s deliverance -

for us... personally...

so that we can begin to bring the light of that deliverance
to bear upon the world where live...?