

The year was 1830. A year of revolution. Out in the streets of Paris, a fierce battle was raging. But up above it all, the famous diplomat Talleyrand watched it quite calmly. Then the church bells rang the peal of victory. “Well,” he told his butler, “it looks like we have won.” Confused, the butler asked, “Who are ‘we,’ my lord?” With a sly wink, Talleyrand replied, “Shhh. Not another word! I’ll tell you who ‘we’ are tomorrow!”

Clearly, Talleyrand was a master of survival. And how? Like many before and since, he learned the art of straddling the fence – that is, playing both sides, trimming his sails to the prevailing wind, fitting in whatever way it took to reach his goal. In fact, he was the one famously said that *“treason is simply a matter of dates.”* Well, that may have gotten him to his goal politically – just as it works for some today; also in business, entertainment, and climbing the social ladder – but as we all know, this is a losing strategy when it comes to our spiritual life.

Jesus said, **“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”** The promise is crystal clear, and so is Jesus’ expectation that His followers will follow Him – follow Him wholeheartedly, follow Him unambiguously, follow Him no matter how challenging that might be. And all we know this. We know that faith cannot straddle the fence. We know that faithfulness cannot play both sides. We know that whatever short-term gains such duplicity might win, that’s no way to reach our ultimate goal. For Jesus alone can offer us salvation. Jesus alone can give us eternal life. And since we know it’s just a matter of time until Jesus will come again in power – setting aside every competitor, sweeping away every evil, judging the hearts of every human being, and reigning forever as King of kings – we know where our loyalty must lie: with Jesus. With Jesus alone.

Yes, we know this. But we also know something else, don’t we? That following Jesus isn’t exactly a piece of cake! Especially following Him wholeheartedly. To be honest, we don’t do it as well as we should. Sometimes it’s quite a struggle. And to be *really* honest, we know that the reason it’s a struggle is not just because of outside pressures and temptations. We also struggle in here; perhaps mostly in here – with our selfish desires, our wayward heart, that inborn egotist that wants what it wants when it wants it. And as if that were not enough, there’s still more. To be *really, really* honest, we know that sometimes our inner egotist gets all religious on us and even slips into our prayers.

That shouldn’t surprise us. After all, that inner egotist wants what it wants when it wants it, and who better to turn to than God? It figures: *God could do what I want. And I’m being reasonable. I’m deserving. So God should do what I want. Assuming He loves me, that is. Assuming He cares about me. Yes, He should do what I want. He should do my will. He should!* That’s how the inner egotist likes to think. And oh, how easy it is to let it slip into our prayers without us noticing! Especially when times are tough. Or when our request seems so

reasonable. *Well, of course God should do what I want!* But let's remember: if we let that inner egotist slip into our prayers, they'll no longer be what prayers are supposed to be. They won't be expressions of faith. They won't be expressions of trust. However righteous or pious they may sound, they will be expressions of selfishness; bottom line: *"My will be done."* And that is not how faith talks! So that is why Jesus teaches a second lesson in this model prayer before getting to the part where we ask for things. The lesson is not just to *"remember who we're praying to,"* as we learned last week, but to stay focused on *why* we are praying, *the true goal of prayer* – which is not *"my will be done,"* but quite the contrary: **"Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is heaven."**

Now, this may be a new perspective for us. We may think: **"Thy kingdom come"** – aren't we praying that Jesus would come again on the Last Day to finally set things right? And yes, we are praying for that. But not *just* that. Or we may think: **"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"** – aren't we praying that *until* Jesus comes again, God would at least make things better in this world? And yes, we are praying for that. But not just that.

I mean, think about it. As Luther reminds us in the Catechism, *"God's kingdom will come without our prayer."* And that's true, isn't it? God's kingdom will come in its fullness whenever, however God chooses. So that can't be the main reason to pray **"Thy kingdom come."** And as for God's will being **"done on earth as it is in heaven"** – that's happening some; at least, as much as it can in this fallen world with all our inner egotists running around abusing free will. So that can't be the main reason for this petition, either.

No, before we pray about things being set right on the Last Day, before we pray about things being set right in the world at large, we first want to make sure things are set right *in ourselves* – that our own focus is right; that it's the focus of faith, not selfishness; especially in our prayers. That's the main reason for these petitions. Again, as Luther reminds us in the Catechism, *"God's kingdom will come to us also."* For remember, when Jesus means when He talks about God's kingdom. He's really talking about God's *kingship*, God's *rule*. And when Jesus talks about God's *rule*, He's not just talking about God being ultimately in charge but Him actually ruling people's lives; people actually honoring and obeying Him. One day, that will happen universally. Every knee will bow. Every tongue will confess Him. Everyone will honor and obey God. That's what we're looking forward to in the world to come. But in the meantime, that begins with us here and now. Jesus' followers want to honor and obey God now. We want Him to rule our lives now. We just need help. We need help to keep the inner egotist under control. We need help to keep the focus of faith. We need help to know and do God's will. We need help! So that's what we are mainly asking for in the second and third petitions. Whatever their eternal dimensions, whatever their global implications, we're mainly asking for something practical. *"God, we want You to rule in our thoughts, words, and deeds. Please help make that happen!"*

*We want to seek Your will, not our own. Please help make that happen! Especially make it happen when we come to You with whatever is on our hearts.*” Yes, that’s mainly what we’re asking for when we pray, **“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is heaven.”**

And do you see why it’s so important to pray like this *before* we ask God for *things*? If we start out focusing on what we want *from* God, it’s easy to slip into “*my will be done.*” If we start out focusing on what we want *for* God – *for* Him to rule, *for* His will to be done – we’ll have a better chance of keeping the focus of faith: that is, trusting God enough to yield to His wisdom, even if we don’t understand it; trusting God enough to want what He wants, even if it clashes with our desires. We believe God knows what is best and will give what is best. So *the true goal of prayer* is to seek what God thinks best. And we’ll have a better chance of keeping that focus if we start out praying like this *before* we ask God for things: **“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is heaven.”**

Not that even this makes it *easy* keeping the focus of faith. There are situations in life where *nothing* could make it easy. For instance, some of us here know all too well what it is like to sit in a hospital room by the bed of a loved one, and pray and pray, “*God, please make them better!*” Some of us here know all too well what it is like to be out of a job, have no money even for the basics, and pray and pray, “*God, get me through this! Please make things better!*” But as some of us know too well, our loved ones don’t get always better. Likewise, our situations stay the same or get worse before they get better. And it just doesn’t make any sense, does it? So it’s natural to think: “*Why doesn’t God say ‘yes’ to my prayer?*” Yes, it’s natural! But here, most of all, where push comes to shove, we need to let God rule; we need to want what God wants. So here, most of all, instead of asking, “*Why doesn’t God say ‘yes’ to my prayer?*” we need to ask a deeper, more fundamental question: *What is my faith made of? In this situation, do I trust God or not? Facing this challenge, will I let God be God or not? In the midst of things I cannot understand, will I yield to God’s wisdom or not? What is my faith made of?* It’s easier to let God rule when life is going well. It’s infinitely harder when life is miserable and we don’t understand why. But then, most of all, we need to let God rule. We need to! Like it or not, understand it or not, we need to let God rule! And not just because Jesus said to, by the way – though that should be reason enough. No, Jesus also showed us why we need to.

Think back to Maundy Thursday, the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is struggling in prayer – in fact, sweating blood in prayer as the time comes closer and closer for Him to suffer and die. Theologically, we see Jesus’ human will struggling to align itself with the divine will. But there is nothing theological going on there. You don’t sweat blood struggling theologically! No, a very flesh-and-blood Jesus knows that He is about to be taken off, beaten, whipped within an inch of his life, spit upon, crowned with thorns, nailed through hands and feet to a cross – and as if that were not enough, punished for every sin that ever was or ever would be. So of course He wants there to be some other way to complete His mission.

Of course He hopes that, God being God, will come up with some other plan. And of course He prays for this: **“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but Your Will be done.”**

So there is Jesus, struggling in prayer, sweating blood. Now, let's ask ourselves two questions. Isn't Jesus' prayer reasonable? Yes, it's very reasonable. And does Jesus deserve to suffer and die? No, He does not deserve to suffer and die. And yet, God says “no” to His prayer, doesn't He? Clearly, definitively, indisputably, God says “no.” And with our 20/20 hindsight, we know why. Without Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, our sins would not be forgiven! Without Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, we would have no hope of eternal life! This was the price of salvation by grace through faith. This was what it cost for us to be sure of going to heaven. In short, this was what was ultimately best, God did what was ultimately best, even though it meant God saying “no” to what was reasonable and deserving prayer. And what can we say but “Thank God!”? Thank God! And thank God Jesus kept the focus of faith, praying, **“My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”**

And isn't that our cue? One day, you and I will stand in eternity and look back on *our* lives with 20/20 hindsight. In that moment, we will understand God's reasons for saying “yes” or “no” to various prayers. In that day, we will recognize God's perfect wisdom and infinite love, however hidden it may seem to us now. For as Paul reminds us, **“Now we know only in part; then we will know fully, even as we are fully known.”** But in the meantime, the question remains: How are we to pray? Are we to insist on what we now think is best or trust God to do what He knows is best? Faith says, *“I'll trust God.”* Faith says, *“I'll yield to God.”* Faith says, *“I'll defer to God and let Him call the shots.”* That is also how faith prays: **“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”**

So what do we take home with us this evening? Alan Redpath once said, *“Before we can pray, ‘Thy Kingdom come,’ we must be willing to pray, ‘My Kingdom go.’”* We might add, *“Before we can pray, ‘Thy will be done,’ we must be ready to pray, ‘even if it means my will is not done.’”* And there is such value in praying this way before we ask for specific things. Remember, prayer is essentially an expression of faith; and faith first, last, and always means trusting God; so the true goal of prayer is to open ourselves to God, open ourselves to what God wants give, open ourselves to what God wants to do. It's best to get this goal in focus early on, before we go on to ask for specific things. That is why Jesus teaches us early on in the second and third petitions, **“Pray then in this way...Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”** Amen.

