

Nice little prayers

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I'm tired of nice little prayers. They dominate my life. I pray nice little prayers at mealtime. I pray them in family devotions and during my quiet time with the Lord. I've become convinced, however, that these nice little prayers may very well kill me. I can feel their deadening effects on my life. I don't ask for much, I don't expect much, and I don't get much.

God is sovereign and can answer nice little prayers, but is that how he most often does things? Are nice little prayers the kind we find in the Bible? Hardly.

Think for a moment about the prayer warriors of the Old Testament. How did they pray? Jacob wrestled with the Lord (Gen. 32:22-32). Grasping God with a death grip, he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." Here was a man who was in earnest with God. He was willing to fight with all of his might for the Lord's blessing on his life. After that night, he was never the same. From that point on God called him Israel, for he had striven with God and with men and prevailed. From that point on he walked differently because God had touched him. Jacob didn't pray nice little prayers.

Neither did Moses. At one of the lowest points in Israel's history, the prophet cried out to God, "Please show me your glory" (Exod. 33:18). In answer to that prayer the Lord passed by and intoned these words: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation" (Exod. 34:6-7). The effect of God's presence was so great that Moses' face radiated beams of light (Exod. 34:29-35; cf. 2 Cor. 3:12-18).

Elijah was a human with weaknesses just like you and me, but his fervent prayer resulted in a three and a half year drought (James 5:17; cf. 1 Kings 17:1). He prayed again, and it rained (James 5:18; cf. 1 Kings 18:45). It's not timid, vapid, nice little prayers that God answers, but "the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working" (James 5:16).

But, you may ask, didn't Jesus teach us to pray a nice little prayer that begins "Our Father who art in heaven"? The Lord's Prayer often seems tame when it rolls off our tongues by rote on Sunday morning. But what are we actually praying for? "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." When we say those words, we're praying for nothing less than the invasion of God's sovereign power. We're praying for the overthrow of the kingdom of darkness and the invasion of Christ's transforming grace and gospel. We're asking the Lord to blast away the boulders of unbelief and to do this on such an extensive scale that his will will be done on earth just as it is in heaven. So much for a nice little prayer!

Jesus teaches us to be persistent in prayer. Like the pesky widow in the parable (Luke 18:1-8), we are to keep after God. We're not supposed to pray nice little prayers; we're supposed to pester God. We are to keep telling him what we need and want and why it's important for his kingdom and glory to answer us.

Christ teaches us not just by parables but by his example as well. When he went to Gethsemane, "he fell on his face and prayed" (Matt. 26:39). He prayed again and again. But like the disciples I yawn and stretch and sleep. "Lord, I want to pray like Jesus." My spirit is willing, but my flesh is so very weak.

Recently I came across a quotation from Scottish theologian, P. T. Forsyth, who wrote, "Lose the importunity of prayer ... lose the real conflict of will and will, lose the habit of wrestling and the hope of prevailing with God, make it mere walking with God in friendly talk; and precious as that is, yet you tend to lose the reality of prayer at last." While I'd be the last person to give a rousing endorsement of all

of Forsyth's theology, here he is on to something. Until we experience this tug of wills, until we wrestle and keep on wrestling, can we say we have prayed? Jesus experienced this conflict of wills. "Father, if it be your will, let this cup pass from me." On that dark night in Gethsemane, he prayed again and again. He prayed with such earnestness that his sweat became like drops of blood (Luke 22:44). These were not nice little prayers.

I'm tired of my nice little prayers. I want to be rid of them once and for all. I want to see God's kingdom come with power and glory. I have family members and friends who are lost and going to hell. I want to see them saved. I don't want to waste my life focusing my energies on money and pleasure. I want to do something that matters for eternity. I need the fullness of the Spirit. I need to be holy, to walk with God in closer intimacy, and I don't think my nice little prayers are going to do the job. I'm going to have to labor in prayer, to wrestle, to bring my will into the arena of conflict and keep after God with a Jacob-like persistence that refuses to let him go until I get his blessing.

Will you join me in praying this way, in asking great things from God and expecting great things from him? If so, then be ready! He may answer "us far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us" (Eph. 3:20).