

Genesis 18:20-32.

20 Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous 21 that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know." 22 The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. 23 Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" 26 The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." 27 Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, 28 what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?" "If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it." 29 Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it." 30 Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?" He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." 31 Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?" He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it." 32 Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?" He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."

"PRAY BOLDLY!"**I. With great confidence in God****II. With great humility toward God**

"Thy will be done." In the prayer we affectionately call the Lord's Prayer that is the Third Petition. Remember that a petition is a request. Also recall that there are seven petitions in the Lord's Prayer. After addressing God as our Father in heaven, we ask that his Name be kept holy among us, and that his Kingdom come. Then we go on to ask that the will of God be done on earth as it is done in heaven. As I read the Gospel lesson earlier in the service you may have wondered why that part of the Lord's Prayer seemed to be missing in Luke's Gospel. The simple answer is that the Lord's Prayer as we pray it is actually a combination of the prayers Jesus taught in Matthew 6 and Luke 11.

So what exactly are we asking when we pray, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"? In his *Small Catechism* Martin Luther wrote, "God's good and gracious will certainly is done without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may be done among us also." And how is God's will done? Luther went on to write, "God's will is done when he breaks and defeats every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh, which try to prevent us from keeping God's name holy and letting his kingdom come. And God's will is done when he strengthens and keeps us firm in his Word and in the faith as long as we live. This is his good and gracious will." Using the Scriptures Martin Luther got to the heart of what it means to pray, "thy will be done."

But doesn't it seem like the very nature of prayer fights against that statement? When we come to God in prayer aren't we often asking him to do what we want, in other words, our will? We may

not say those exact words but it seems that many of our prayers could be summarized with the phrase, “my will be done.”

So is there an answer to this apparent contradiction in our prayer life? Why on one hand are we invited to ask God to do something our way? But then in the same prayer we ask that God would do what he wants and not what we want.

We find some answers to this question in the Old Testament lesson for this Sunday. Abraham asked God to do what he wanted instead of what God had planned. He boldly stood before God and asked that what he wanted to be done instead of what God had declared would happen. As we direct our attention to the example of Abraham praying for the city of Sodom we will find encouragement to:

“PRAY BOLDLY!”

I. With great confidence in God

II. With great humility toward God

The events in the Old Testament Lesson for this Sunday came on the heels of some big news that God had shared with Abraham. It was so important that the LORD took on a human form to deliver it. Accompanied by two angels, also looking like humans, the LORD stopped at Abraham’s tent for a visit. He told him that within a year he and his wife, Sarah, would have a child in spite of their old age.

After what must have been an enjoyable visit with Abraham and Sarah, the LORD and the two angels got up to leave. They headed toward Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham walked with them for some distance to see them on their way. But the LORD stopped and shared his plans with Abraham. The Old Testament lesson that I read earlier began with these words, *“²⁰ Then the LORD said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹ that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.”* Abraham was able to read between the lines. He understood what the LORD was going to do. The wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were about to be destroyed. But Abraham’s nephew and his family lived in Sodom so they too would be destroyed. So Abraham challenged God’s will with his own will through a series of bold prayers. He prayed with great confidence in God and great humility toward God.

I.

Like a man bartering for the best deal at a Middle Eastern market Abraham prayed to God. *“Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”* That is a pretty bold prayer, don’t you think? Abraham was making the claim that God’s plan to destroy Sodom wasn’t fair. If there were even a few believers living there how could God destroy them along with the city? And Abraham’s boldness didn’t stop there. Five more times he asked God to do what he wanted instead of what God had planned.

To fully understand the source of Abraham’s boldness in his prayers we have to go back to the promises that God had made to him. In Genesis 12 God made seven promises to Abram, as he was called at that time. The LORD said, *“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”* Later God repeated those promises. And just moments before Abraham started his bold prayer the LORD had said, *“Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. ¹⁹ For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”*

(Genesis 18:18-19) Ultimately it was God's promises that made Abraham so bold to bargain with God in prayer. He prayed with confidence in God's promises. He could even be so bold as to argue with God's plan and in a way assert his will over God's will because he knew God would patiently listen to his prayers and bless him.

Although we have not been given all of the same promises that Abraham was given many of them do apply to us. The Bible says that God has made us children of Abraham through faith in Jesus. Now we too have the privilege and power of prayer. After reminding us of the fact that we are God's children the Apostle Paul went on to state in Romans 8:15, "*For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'*" Jesus said in Matthew 21:22, "*If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.*" And as we heard in our Second Lesson, "*The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*" (James 5:16) You and I are righteous through faith in Jesus. God has credited Christ's holiness and perfection to us. So we can pray boldly with great confidence in God's promises. In Psalm 50:15 we are encouraged with this promise, "*Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.*" And in Zechariah 13:9 the LORD says, "*They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.'*" Friends in Christ, bold prayers like the one Abraham prayed stem from great confidence in God—in who he is and what he has promised us. May we pray all our prayers with such boldness! God promises to hear our prayers, to bless us, and to work everything out for our eternal good. Those truths will inspire us to pray boldly!

Not only did Abraham's bold prayer show his great confidence in God's promises it also showed Abraham's faith in God's patience. Abraham knew that God would never get sick and tired of his praying. So he kept on praying.

It is that same confidence in God's patience that gives us the ability to pray again and again. In the Gospel Lesson for this morning we heard Jesus compare prayer to someone going to a neighbor to borrow three loaves of bread. Although the neighbor was in bed told his friend to get lost he kept knocking. Jesus summarized the comparison by saying, "*I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.*" Then Jesus went on to say that prayer is asking, seeking, and knocking. "*So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.*" In light of what God's Word says it would be fair to say that bold prayers come from great confidence in God—in his promises, his plans, and his patience.

So we have found a partial answer to our question about the paradox of prayer. In the example of Abraham we see how a child of God can ask God to do what he or she wants even though we also pray that God's will be done. God invites us to ask that our will be done in certain situations and circumstances. We can pray boldly as Abraham did with great confidence in God.

II.

And yet we see a stark contrast in Abraham's prayer. Yes, he was bold but he was also very humble. He expected everything and yet demanded nothing. As a child of God he realized that ultimately the right thing to say to God was, "Thy will be done." And all he could do was humbly accept God's will. So in addition to praying boldly with great confidence in God he also prayed with great humility toward God.

Did you notice how Abraham described himself in the second part of his prayer? "*Then Abraham spoke up again: 'Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, ²⁸ what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?'*" The LORD said that he would not destroy the city if he found forty-five believers there. Abraham counter-offered with forty. God agreed to that number. Then Abraham continued, "*May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found*

there?” Again the LORD agreed and again Abraham prayed, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?” God said, “For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.” Finally Abraham prayed, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?” Once again God agreed. Yes, Abraham was bold. But he was also humble toward God. He prayed assuming that God would change his plans because Abraham asked him to. And yet he prayed respecting the fact that God had every right not to do what he asked. In the end God could follow through with what he had planned. And Abraham was ready to accept God’s will.

Just as it is a challenge for us to have the faith of Abraham when we pray it is also a challenge for us to show his kind of humility toward God when we pray. Perhaps Abraham’s heartfelt words can guide us. We too can say of ourselves that we are dust and ashes. Other than the Creator’s undeserved love toward us we would have no hope that he would listen to us. After all he made us out of dirt. What right does dirt have to demand anything from the living God? And like Abraham we can only plead that God will not be angry at us for taking up his time with our requests.

To see another side of Abraham’s great humility we have to look at the rest of the story. God didn’t spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as Abraham had asked him to do. And yet God did do what Abraham wanted. The LORD sent two angels to rescue Lot and his family from the city of Sodom before it was destroyed.

Again this is a challenge for us. We pray boldly and yet we may not see God doing what we ask. But do we still trust that his will is always best? Even if God’s answer to our prayer isn’t obvious do we still believe he hears and answers us? Basically our prayer life can go one of two ways. We can continue to pray boldly with great humility or we give up praying because we don’t think God answers our prayers. James 1:6-7 addresses this, “*But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord.*” The foundation of prayer is faith.

“Thy will be done.” We respectfully offer that prayer to God every time we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray. And yet we routinely set our will before God and ask him to do the things we ask. That is the nature of prayer. So in all our prayers there is tension between our will and God’s will. We are invited to pray boldly fully expecting God to do what we ask. And yet we humbly acknowledge that his will must take priority of ours.

Like any good teacher Jesus not only taught his disciples how to pray he also showed them how to pray. On the night that he was betrayed he asked his Father to do his will. He asked that the cup of suffering he was facing for our salvation be taken away from him. And yet, do you remember how he ended his three prayers? “Your will be done,” Jesus said. And he humbly accepted his Father’s will. Just as he did everything else without sin Jesus prayed the perfect prayer. For all the times we failed to balance faith and humility in our prayers Jesus took our place. He let himself be punished for the sins we have committed in our prayer life. And he also gives us his holiness in their place by always praying to his Father with humility.

So have we answered our question about prayer? How do we reconcile “thy will be done,” as we say in the Third Petition with “my will be done” as we are also invited to pray? Like so many other teachings in the Bible, prayer brings together two great truths. God’s will is always best and it will be done with or without our prayers. And yet God offers to bend his will at times in answer to our prayers. He may let our will be done. In this example from the life of Abraham we see both truths. We also learn how bold prayers are possible for us. We can pray boldly as Abraham prayed going again and again to God in prayer. Like Abraham we can pray with great confidence in God—confidence in his promises, patience, and plans. And like Abraham may we pray with great humility toward God. Amen.