



Saying the Jesus Prayer
Psalm 95:1-7a & Ephesians 1:15-23
Rev. Thomas G. James
Washington Street UMC
November 26, 2017

O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

Praise the Lord, church! What a joy it is to gather with you on this thanksgiving weekend, to rejoice in the great joy of Christ our King. This is Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of our Christian year, as we prepare to once more enter the blessed season of Advent next week. On this final week of the Christian calendar, we celebrate and rejoice in the greatness of our Lord Jesus, who is King over all.

I remember as a child being told how almighty Christ is – how Christ is Lord of all lords, King of all kings. I was convinced by the scriptures, and I was assured by church leaders of how almighty Christ is. I believed, as my youth director, pastor, and youth counselors taught, that Christ is just as this blessed Psalm claims the Lord to be – the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. With such a conviction, I took the step I was encouraged to take by my mentors and teachers of the faith, I said the Jesus prayer.

I did it, I said the Jesus prayer. I was sixteen the first time I said the Jesus prayer, though I can't remember the exact words I used for that momentous occasion. But, to borrow from the words of John Wesley, the founder of our Methodist denomination, in that moment, "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation."ⁱ

The Jesus prayer often takes on a form similar to that of the tax-collector in Luke 18, when the tax collector says, "Lord, be merciful on me, a sinner." It's a powerful prayer, for sure, which calls us to acknowledge the greatness of God and our own shortcomings. In some traditions, such a prayer is named a prerequisite to receive God's salvation and grace. Such traditions don't necessarily share the same understanding of God's prevenient grace as many a Wesleyan.

Some years after I first said such a prayer, I was working as a youth director and took my youth to a conference near Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. There were a number of Contemporary Christian rock bands who played over a 4-day gathering. The focus was on "INTENSE WORSHIP." The final night, they had an altar call for the youth. They invited these youth, after three days of listening to worship music and preaching, to come forward and accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. I had never been to this kind of conference before, and shy of my home church's summer Campmeetings, I had never seen such an altar call.

I had two students who felt moved to go forward. Not sure that I should be sending my two pre-teen youth into a gathering crowd at the front of the room, which was occupied by over 3,000 youth and youth leaders, I went with my students. As we got to the front, there were pastors prepared to greet the students. The pastors invited to students to fill out a card – providing their name, address, and phone number (perhaps for the heavenly log book?) – and then they were invited to turn the card over. On the back was written the Jesus prayer.

The pastor who stood with them invited them to pray that prayer if they were ready to accept Jesus to be their personal Savior. The students recited, “Jesus, be merciful on me, for I am a sinner.” In that moment, these students were expected to relinquish control of their sinful and mortal ways, and accept that in the receipt of God’s salvation, they would be eternally different people. By saying the Jesus prayer – at least in the tradition of the leaders of this conference – these students had made Christ their personal Lord. When the altar call was over, the MC stood up and praised the number of youth who had just given their lives to Jesus.

Such a practice and theological expectation is common still today. In fact, if you go on Twitter and find the accounts of (generally speaking) evangelical pastors around our country, you’ll see that almost weekly these pastors keep the world updated on how many people said the Jesus prayer each week. For example, I just saw one this week that read, “5 salvations @ NLC! 53 the past 4 weeks! Praise God!”

Now, before you think I’m critiquing the practice of a person dedicating their life to Christ, I am in no way discouraging the practice of a person saying, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” In truth, that is part of our weekly preparation for communion in the prayer of confession. We pray, in some form, “Lord, we have failed, have mercy on us.” And such a practice is praised by Christ. Back in Luke 18, in response to the tax collector, Jesus says, “The man who prayed this way went home justified ... all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

My concern with this practice is not that some Christian traditions are encouraging people to say the prayer. If anything, my concern would be that some of our churches don’t encourage saying the prayer enough. We need to be admitting we are broken and sinful, and we need to be reminded of how almighty God in Christ is! No, my concern isn’t *saying* the Jesus prayer; my concern lies in the understanding of what the prayer means for the person who says it.

Part of the problem for me is that we’re told that simply by saying this prayer, we have secured or earned our salvation. I don’t have enough time to explain why this is antithetical to the Bible in full. For now, let Ephesians 2:8 suffice, which reads, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” ... There is no requirement listed here for a Jesus prayer to be said. Your salvation is not your own doing – no prayer said has earned your salvation – it is the gift of God. Your salvation is a gift of God, received because of the work of God in Christ. Praise be to God!

The bigger problem for me is that many who teach the Jesus prayer say that the prayer is about your **personal relationship** with God. The prayer is named as the entrance into an individual relationship with Christ. We're told that by praying the Jesus prayer, our future should revolve around living like Christ – that is, we (as individuals) are to be like Christ. Trust me when I say this is a major emphasis of saying this prayer, I've taught this doctrine as much as anyone. You've likely heard me preach such a sermon. As Christians – those who have prayed the Jesus prayer – our call is to be mini-Christ. We are to be like Christ.

Without completely refuting my own teaching, I think this Ephesians text calls for us to better understand our role as Christians. If we were successfully living like Christ, perhaps the world would look a lot different. But, I fear we are not so successfully modeling Christ. As Gandhi is well known for saying, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians." Who can blame Gandhi? When Christian leaders speak out in favor of men who are accused of sexual misconduct without giving voice to the alleged victims, it seems we have strayed from being like Christ, for Christ gives voice to the marginalized.

Perhaps our striving to be like Christ *is* our problem. Perhaps our problem is that for too long, we have been trying to be *like* Christ, instead of fulfilling the role given us by Christ. Perhaps in accepting Christ and saying the Jesus prayer, we long for the glory of Christ, without accepting the sacrificial and reconciliatory nature of Christ. Come on now – stay with me. Christ doesn't really teach us to try and be like him – Christ calls us to be faithful witnesses to God's love – to be the body of Christ. Today, Paul's got something to say about that.

Look at the text in Ephesians. Paul is writing to a church community in Ephesus. As he does in almost all his letters, he opens in verses 1-14 with a greeting. Here in verse 15, Paul's greeting is elongated to include a work of thanksgiving. "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus ... I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers." ... This pastor is saying that when he prays for his church, when he prays for this community of faithful persons, he gives thanks for them! Following this, Paul names his prayers: "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know [Christ], *so that*, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which Christ has called you, which are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power"

Don't forget, while there is a lot of "you" and "your" language here, this prayer is not written to any individual – or even to a collection of people to hear it as individuals. Paul is writing to the community at Ephesus. Paul is writing to the conglomerate – to the church body. Too often we read Paul's letters as if Paul is speaking directly to me – to my individual person. As such, we misunderstand what Paul means when he calls us to faithfulness.

If we replace the "yous" and "yours" with "the church," Paul's prayer would read this way, "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give the church a spirit of wisdom and revelation as the church comes to know Christ, so that, with the eyes of the church

enlightened, the church may know what is the hope to which Christ has called the church, which are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for all who believe, according to the working of his great power.”

When we read the prayer this way, in the context of Paul – a teacher – speaking to his entire congregation, we find that this “prayer is not a victory dance for those who have arrived but a clarion call to live a life worthy of the calling to which [we] have all been called, to exhibit the body of Christ as God’s called-out people for the world.”ⁱⁱ

When we think of the Jesus prayer as some personal invitation into relationship with Christ, we miss the Biblical definition of what it means to be a Christian. The invitation of the Jesus prayer is not an invitation to the club of the saved where we celebrate our personal salvation ... it is rather, “an invitation to a role in Christ’s ongoing work of salvation and reconciliation.”ⁱⁱⁱ In the acceptance of our brokenness and in Christ’s great mercy, we find ourselves as just one among many who make up the great body of Christ. As those who can with humility pray such a prayer, we find ourselves not invited to become like Christ, but to take our place in the body of Christ.

And perhaps this is where we find the rub of this prayer. To the disappointment of many who say the Jesus prayer with the hope that they too can become Christ-like, it must be named, we are not called to be Christ. There is a Christ, and I am not he – neither are you. Praise the Lord the salvation of the world doesn’t rely on us!

In our acceptance of Christ’s almighty glory, we are not to strive to become the King, we are to take our place as the living body of the King. And herein lies the good news. “The risen Christ gives life to the [body], making it an agent, empowering it to serve God’s cause. ... The church is blessed and called to make Christ manifest, to be filled with Christ and to serve the Christ who brings all things to their completion and perfection in the good future of God.”^{iv} ///

As we keep reading in Ephesians, looking at verses 19-25, “[Paul] reminds [the community] that they have now found identity with the winning team. No matter what is going on in the world, all the world is truly under the power of God in Christ, and when they come into their inheritance, they will see and experience it to be so.”^v This is not a delayed empowerment. Christ sits on the heavenly throne NOW – ALREADY – “and so even now, in spite of all temptation to surrender, Christians [are invited to claim their] trust [in the] Lord Jesus.”^{vi} We don’t have to wait for the eternal kingdom to be made known, we can start now by loving one another here and now!

This is what Paul suggests in Ephesians, “that Christ’s exclusive reign leads to inclusive hope – to truly good news that envelops the whole cosmos and all of humanity.”^{vii} Oh, how I wish that pastor who greeted those two youth would have said it this way. Imagine how much more we would look like the body Christ has called us to be if those pastors had said, “By saying this prayer, you are joining in the body of Christ that is empowered by the King of all kings, and as part of this body, you are invited to share the good news of inclusive hope that offers peace to the conflicted, reconciliation to the outcast, and healing to the hurting.”

See, I think the problem is, we have too many people who have said the Jesus prayer thinking that it gave them the power to become Christ. Which is why we find praise being given to kings that are not Christ the King. “*If in fact [we believe] God has made Christ the King, then no other power on this earth is sovereign and deserves [our] ultimate obedience: neither the United States nor its Democrats, Republicans, or Tea Partiers; neither K Street or Wall Street nor Goldman Sachs; no social or economic construction by this world’s wise or well-headed, however high-minded or mean spirited. Before Christ the King, all our idols collapse beneath his feet as rubble before the One who has subjected all things to his Messiah.*”^{viii}

The Jesus prayer is no small prayer, because it is not simply about you and your relationship with Christ. The Jesus prayer is magnanimous, because under the glory of Christ the King, such a prayer humbles you to become part of the ranks of the faithful who have come before you, and who will come after you, and who walk now beside you. For in the naming of our brokenness, and in the praising Christ for his glory, revealed through mercy, we join in the body of Christ, that through our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness, we can be lead by the head who fills all in all. For the glory God, may we pray, “Christ our King, have mercy on me, for I am a sinner.” And may we be joined as one in the great witness we call the body of Christ. Amen.

ⁱ John Wesley. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.ii.xvi.html>. Retrieved November 24, 2017.

ⁱⁱ John E. Cole. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 4*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cole.

^{iv} Allen Verhey & Joseph S. Harvard. *Ephesians: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} C. Clifton Black. workingpreacher.org. Retrieved November 22, 2017.

^{vii} Jennifer M. McBride. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 4*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

^{viii} Black.