

Jesus teaches us how to pray, because we learn best often by example, by watching other people and how they do things. And last week, Jesus showed us what it means to pray for others, what it means to pray for them in their times of trial and of tribulation so that their faith would not fail. But now we are moving forward in his passion to where he is praying again, and we meet him in the garden of Gethsemane.

Now, Jesus was not alone when he entered the garden. He had taken his disciples with him. But he told most of them to stay behind as he went further to go and pray, taking along with him only Peter and James and John. But he separated himself from them as well, "about a stone's throw" we are told in our reading, because Jesus wants to be alone to pray for himself in his own hour of need, to pray for himself in the face of what is to come. And he says in our reading: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."

Why does Jesus pray this? Think about what he's going through, Christians. Jesus is facing all of the sorrows and pains and troubles that he is about to endure. Do we not feel a similar kind of distress whenever we're facing something that we have to go through, especially something painful or something dangerous? Who among us hasn't felt unsettled waiting for something we know was going to happen? We know that there is no way to get around it, that we're going to have to go through it one way or another, and we can't avoid it. It's like sitting around in a hospital waiting for something to happen, or maybe waiting for our own major medical procedure. Yeah, we tell ourselves it's going to be fine, that there's nothing to worry about, but there's always that little nagging feeling that we can't quite shake. That little nagging feeling that we really don't know what's going to happen, and that causes us to be distressed. Jesus is feeling a similar kind of distress here, a distress over his coming passion, a distress over his coming suffering. He knows that he must drink the full cup of the wrath of God.

But there's a way in which Jesus' distress is different from ours, because ours comes from not knowing. We're not really quite sure what's going to happen, and that causes us to be upset. We want to know what's going to happen, and we think that maybe that would make us feel better. But Jesus is just the opposite. Jesus knows everything that's about to happen, because he is God, after all, and he knows the future perfectly. He told Peter that he was going to deny him three times, and he was right. Jesus knows everything that is about to happen down to the last detail. And that means that in a very real sense, he is already suffering these things. Jesus knows every pain that he's going to have to feel. Jesus knows every slap that's going to strike him against the face. Jesus already knows what it's going to be like to be crucified. It's as if he could feel it already. In a way, he's suffering all of this twice, once when it actually happens, but also before it happens. Can we even imagine what that would be like? To feel these things twice over, to know everything that was about to happen. Who has ever felt a grief like his?

And so, Jesus, not surprisingly, asks the Father to take this suffering away from him. Jesus is fully human, after all. He feels all the same feelings we do. He feels all the same pains that we do. And we would not want to suffer if we didn't have to. And Jesus is about to suffer in a way that no one else ever has. Because all of the weight of sin is about to be laid on his shoulders. He is about to bear the sins of every man, every woman, every child who has ever lived or ever will live. And that's all going to be on him in the coming hours. We can barely imagine what it would be like to suffer for our own sins. It should cause us distress thinking about how we would suffer to pay for the things that we have done. But Jesus hasn't done anything, and yet he is about to

suffer for the sins of all. Jesus will drink the full cup of God's wrath, undiluted, down to the very dregs. Is it any wonder that he asked for the cup to be taken away?

But maybe we want to ask: well, was Jesus wrong for asking this to be taken away? After all, this was the whole reason he came, isn't it? He's supposed to suffer. He's supposed to go to the cross. Why would he ask the Father to take this away? Was it wrong for him to pray this? Not at all. There is no sin, Christians, in asking God to take something away from us. There is no sin in asking him to change it or to bring it to an end. Because I think we get this idea in our heads that submitting to the will of God means ultimately doing nothing. That it means we just sort of give up, that we just grin and bear it, and do the best that we can. We can't change it anyway, so let's just live our lives as best as we can, and we'll deal with it that way. We think that maybe that's what it means to submit to God's will.

But this isn't true, Christians. There is no sin in asking God to change things. And there are so many examples in the Bible of God changing things in response to the prayers of his people. Let's just use one for an example: Numbers chapter 11. Verse 1 says this: "And the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, and when the Lord heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp." So Israel in the wilderness here is grumbling about the stuff that they're going through. Something they did all the time. They were always grumbling. But that was a sin for them to do it, because they were speaking against the Lord. And so the Lord very justly sends a judgment upon them: a great fire which is burning parts of the camp. What do the people do? Verse 2: "Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down." So Moses does not just grin and bear it. Moses does not say that there's nothing that he can do. Moses does not just give up. Moses prays to the Lord to take away the judgment, and the Lord listens to his prayer. The Lord puts out the fire, even though the people of Israel deserved it, in response to the prayer of Moses. He stops the judgment. He turns away his wrath because Moses prayed. So it is not wrong for Jesus to ask the Father to take the cup away from him, just as it is not wrong for us to ask God to do the same.

But maybe we still want to ask: well, does saying, "Not my will, but yours, be done," mean that there's no point in praying? God's going to do what he wants to do anyway, so why should we even ask? Is Jesus just giving up when he prays this to the Father? Not at all. "Not my will, but yours, be done" is not an expression of defeat, Christians. Rather, Jesus is praying to make the Father's will his own. Whatever the Father wants, that's what Jesus wants too. If that means no cup of suffering, then that's what Jesus wants. If that means that he has to drink the whole cup, then that's what Jesus wants. He wants the Father's will and his will to be one and the same, whatever that may mean. So saying, "Not my will, but yours, be done," is not giving up. It is running after the will of God, seeking to be like him in all things.

So Christians, when we pray, do we want God's will to be our will? Or do we want our will to be God's will? We are so often convinced that what we want is right, that what we want is the best possible thing that could be done. And so we very quickly become frustrated when it's not done. I think this is exactly why we think that "Not my will, but yours, be done" sounds so much like giving up, because we want our will to be above all.

But God's will is always best, Christians. Whatever he does, he does it well. And even if that's really hard for us to understand right now, God is leading us to good. Because as Paul says in Romans 8: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose." So it is good for us to make God's will our own, whatever that may mean right now, because God is leading us through all of these things, whatever they may be, for our good.

So Christians, it is not wrong to ask God to take something away. God answers the prayers of his people, after all. But the great aim of our prayers should be to make God's will our own. Not God's will in spite of ours, but that God's will and our will would be one and the same. If that means taking away whatever I'm going through, then that's what I want. If that means that I have to go through it, then that's what I want. Because whatever God wants is good, and whatever God does is good, and through it I become like him in all things.

Let us pray. Almighty Father, what you ordain is always good. Lead us in the ways that you would have us go, knowing that you will care for us through them all. Shape our will to be one with yours, so that we would follow where you lead. We ask all this in the name of Jesus. Amen.