

All we have to do is pray. Because prayer is the means by which we discern the will of God. Prayer's what enables to make good on our choice to do the will of God, because it's through prayer that we're told what it is that God wants us to do. Because, through prayer, we learn what God wants us to give to God in return for the gift of grace.

The Gospel of Matthew reminds us:

*"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven"*  
(Matthew 7:21).

Let us pray—*literally*, let us pray—that God will show us the way—that God will gas up our spiritual engines and send us on our way—to *the* way—in following Jesus Christ.

Yes—or no. Accept—or reject. Do it—or *don't* do it.

The choice is yours. It's entirely up to you.

Let us pray:

Holy God, you have described yourself as merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6), and we know this to be true—that you are indeed a God of grace and God of mercy. Your patience with us knows no bounds; your love for us endures forever.

Help us, we pray, to not take you for granted. Lead us into knowing you, and your will, through our prayer time with you. Help us to know you, and to know ourselves a little better by seeing ourselves as you see us. Open our hearts to receive your grace. Guide us into being the people you created us to be, reflected in your image, made to glorify you forever and ever.

Amen.

## References

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"Let Us Pray"  
Sermon by  
Rev. Nancy Lynch

Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
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Matthew 7:21-29



Trinity Presbyterian Church  
Reverend Nancy Lynch, Pastor  
6081 Ross Road  
Fairfield, Ohio 45014

513-860-4114  
www.trinitypcfairfield.org  
office@trinitypcfairfield.org

"Reaching Up to God ...  
Reaching Out to Others."

## Matthew 7:21-29

I don't know about you, but I find the opening verse in today's passage to be a little scary:

*"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven"*  
(Matthew 7:21).

I find it scary because it goes against the grain of everything I believe in with all my heart—that our God is a God of grace who forgives sins—a God who not only *wants* us to enter heaven, but actually made it possible, through Christ, for us to get there.

But there it is:

*"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven"*  
(Matthew 7:21).

Doesn't that seem a little odd to you? That a God who is so forgiving, a God who reaches out to us, a God who actually came to earth in human form as God *incarnate*—doesn't that seem a little odd to you that such a God would exclude anyone from the kingdom of heaven?

It seems scary to me, because it seems to imply that forgiveness is not automatic—in other words, it's not a given. It seems to imply that we can't just go around sinning and doing anything we want without regard for the consequences of our actions, and then expect forgiveness. It seems to imply, in fact, that God has given us a *choice* to make here. Listen again to that verse:

*"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven"*  
(Matthew 7:21).

There it is, right there in black and white, right there at the end of verse 21—our choice, the essence of which is this: To do the will of God ... or *not* to do the will of God. Or, to paraphrase Hamlet: *to do, or not to do—that is the question.*

During Lent we spent a lot of time studying the life and theology of German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Much of what we studied had to do with this exact same issue—making a *choice* in terms of following Christ, in terms of being obedient to Christ, in order to avoid “cheap grace”—grace that is accepted without our giving anything in return.

This is why we spent so much time studying the “cost of discipleship” during Lent—because what that did was prepare us for where we are now, and where we are now is here—here at this point in our faith journey where we have to make this *choice*:

To do the will of God—or not to do the will of God. To do, or not to do.

It's a hard choice, made all the more difficult because *there's no in-between* with this choice. It's not like you can choose to do the will of God—when you feel like it. Or do the will of God—when it's convenient for you. Or do the will of God—*after* you've finished doing everything else in your life you have to get done *first*, before you can even *think* about doing the will of God.

It's an either/or choice: Yes—or no. Accept—or reject. Do it—or *don't* do it. It's entirely up to you.

That being said, of course, I think it's really a pretty easy choice. If I were to ask you right now to raise your hand if you want to do the will of God, most of you, if not all of you, would raise your hands and choose, “Yes! I accept! I *want* to do the will of God! I'm ready!” You'd be all set to go, engines revved, just *waiting* to get that green light so you could step on the gas and go ...

Except that maybe when you put your foot on the gas pedal—put the pedal to the metal, as it were—when you step on the gas your car won't go. And maybe the reason your car won't go is because you forgot to put gas in the tank. There's no fuel to feed that engine, there's no way to even get the car out of first gear.

So, there's only one solution—put gas in the car.

With a real car, this is relatively easy to accomplish. You grab a gas can and walk to the nearest gas station, fill it up, pour it in the tank ... and away you go.

But what do you do with a *spiritual* car? How do you power up to go on a *spiritual* journey?

As with the real car, this is relatively easy to accomplish. You grab your bible, you find a quiet place, you read some scripture ... and you *pray*. Because *prayer* is the fuel that powers all spiritual journeys. You cannot get to God without it.

Prayer is, simply put, a conversation with God. It's a dialogue in which we talk to God. It's the means by which we listen to God.

Bev McManus, our prayer chain coordinator, sent me a very timely e-mail yesterday morning with a story about prayer. It goes like this:

A woman's daughter had asked the local minister to come and pray with her mother. When the minister arrived, he found the woman lying in bed with her head propped up on two pillows. An empty chair sat beside her bed. The minister assumed that the woman had been informed of his visit.

“I guess you were expecting me,” he said to her.

“No, who are you?” said the mother.

The minister told her his name and then remarked, “I noticed your empty chair. I thought it was for me.”

“Oh yes ... my chair,” said the bedridden woman. “Come in, and close the door behind you, and I'll tell you about my chair.”

Puzzled, the minister shut the door.

“I have never told anyone this, not even my daughter,” said the woman. “But all of my life I have never known how to pray. At church I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it went right over my head.

“So I abandoned any attempt at prayer,” the woman continued, “until one day, about four years ago, when my best friend said to me, 'Betty, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Why don't you try this: Just sit down in a chair, put an empty chair in front of you, and, in faith, picture Jesus sitting next to you on the other chair. Then just talk to him in the same way you're doing with me right now.’

“So I tried it, and I liked it so much that I do it a couple of hours every day. I'm very careful though. When you're *my* age and people catch you talking to a chair, they start to wonder about you!”

The minister was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the woman to continue on the journey. Then he prayed with her, anointed her with oil, and returned to the church.

Two nights later the daughter called to tell the minister that her mother had passed away that afternoon ... and that the strangest thing happened right before the woman died—she leaned over and rested her head on the *chair* beside the bed. “What do you make of *that*?” she asked the minister.

The minister wiped a tear from his eye and said, “She was praying. Would that we *all* could go like that.”

The thing I like best about that story is this: We all *can* go like that. We all *can* lean against Jesus and put our head in Jesus' lap and trust that Jesus will take care of things for us.