

The Misplaced Comma

Lessons: Colossians 2:6-15; LUKE 11:1-13

Max Weber, one of the founders of modern sociology, was the first to write definitive examinations on the different major religions of the world. Sociologists look at group beliefs and behaviors and how they relate to each other. Our beliefs - obvious or unconscious and automatic - shape our behaviors. Group beliefs may not be so apparent to each member, but we learn behaviors in groups and sometimes don't think about the beliefs behind our group behaviors.

One of Weber's examples of this group-learning in behavior was prayer. We learn to pray by praying. We sometimes don't think about what prayer really might be, because we already pray the way we learn about prayer - whether or not it makes sense. We pray the way they taught us in a group - a congregation or a family. With me so far?

Sometimes our prayer life does not make much sense, but we keep on praying in spite of the contradictions. Or, we quit praying except when some need and helplessness overcomes our confused idea of prayer and its power. Are you thinking what I am thinking? ...Have you headed down that path of prayer confusion some time or other? Have you had a time when you wondered why you pray?

Let me start this way. I grew up in church where I heard that scripture about asking for anything in Jesus' name and I would receive it. I wasn't too sure what it meant, but I prayed for a red bicycle "in Jesus' name, Amen" for a long time. I got a bicycle eventually, but it wasn't red ...and I thought it was more from my parents than from answered prayer. They wanted to give me good gifts. The point is that we teach children how to pray by leading them in prayer. And maybe we pass on our misguided ideas that misguide them.

Let's take another confusion with prayer - a little more serious one: our loved one has cancer. Our Catholic friends are lighting candles, and our Baptist "prayer warrior" friends are putting us on every church prayer group list they can find, ...and our Presbyterian friends tell us they are "thinking about us."

We Presbyterians get really uncomfortable with intercessory prayer. Why? We are in a sanctuary and we may as well say out loud what we have been thinking for a while. Why do we have trouble with praying for others? Having to bug God to do the obvious does not seem to make sense. Having God do something for people who pray and not do the same thing for people who cry does not make sense. Selective miracles from a God who loves us all do not make sense. God saying "yes" to the prayer of one person and "no" to the same prayer from another person does not make sense. And if God is "in control" anyway - like we Presbyterians are always saying - and already knows what is going to happen, why pray to try to change God's mind?

Ever asked questions like these? It's OK to admit we are confused about prayer. We have good reason. Maybe the way we have prayed and the way we have been taught to pray for a

long time has us confused. Have you ever thought that the problem might be with what we were taught about prayer instead of what is wrong with the way God answers prayer?

Remember Max Weber? Looking at religious life through history and looking at beliefs and behaviors in very different religions, Weber saw a common recurring pattern in all of them: a conflict with who is God and who is the servant. Either people worship a god and try to sync their lives with the divine will and power, or people worship and pray to try to get a god to do their will! Weber describes this difference in belief and behavior, especially in prayer, as the difference between religion and magic.

Magic is saying the “abra-ka-dabra” - saying the right words and doing the right things to cause powers beyond ourselves to align and comply with what we want done. Say “Presto-changeo” or “hoc-est-pocus,” and by smoke and mirrors and mystery it happens.

The best example of magic in a society was Greece -temples all over everywhere, and people making sacrifices and saying prayers and going through rituals and doing all the right things to get what they were after - good health, good crops, good harmony, good government, good sex. Good “whatever-good-they-desired” was just an incantation, a ritual, a prayer away. Do the “abra-ka-dabra” with all the correct moves, all the correct thoughts, all the correct motives, and ...magic. People could get their gods to do their will.

On the other hand, Weber said that when people are the servants instead of trying to become gods, we replace magic with religious obedience. Worship becomes tuning the human will to the divine desire, and prayer becomes asking what God wants from me more than telling God what I want from God.

I had a short friendship with a wonderful expert on prayer in the Presbyterian Church - a pastor-professor-writer named Ben Campbell Johnson. He wrote lots of books on prayer and taught lots of people - including me - how to change my prayers. I remember Ben saying, “You know, David, we have spent most all our time in prayer talking, telling God what to do. What would happen if we gave God equal time to talk in our prayers? What if we got quiet for a while and just listened?”

How much of our praying is really just magical incantation, “...in Jesus’ name. Amen”? How much is listening for what we should do in Jesus’ name?

How much of learning to pray - even in church - has been a contradiction to what Jesus taught the followers to pray? They knew that his prayer life was different from the patterns of prayer they had heard before. They knew that whatever the difference, it made a huge difference - mostly that he seemed to be in complete sync with the divine Spirit. He seemed to be able to do things for God and things from God in ways that no other person could. So, they wanted to know his secret, his magic. They wanted to know how to do the incantation so they could have the magic, too. They asked, “Jesus teach us to pray.”

And Jesus said simply,
Start your prayers remembering that God is God, and quit trying to be gods.
Focus on what God wants done and how you can help God get it done.
Seek God’s will; don’t try to impose your own.

Be content to ask for the needs everyone has, like bread for the day. (And if you have those needs, you don't have much reason to add to your asking for things).

Ask for forgiveness for the ways you have not done God's will after you have forgiven the people who have done you wrong. Try to do God's will before you go asking for forgiveness when you fail.

Finally, know that being a servant will put you to the test and ask for faith enough to pass through the test. The tests don't come from God, but God will get you through them.

How do our prayers sync with the pattern Jesus set in his prayers? How much does our "prayer list" look like a "to do" list for God to do? How little of our prayer life is stopping our incantations long enough to listen to the Spirit's voice? How much of our prayers are genuine asking what God wants from us more than what we want from God? How much are we trying to sync our lives to the divine will, our doings with God's willing?

If we come here every week thinking that God will give us what we want and need because we have gone through the right motions and said the right words and paid attention and had the right motives, then we are still playing at magic more than experiencing worship. If you think that coming to worship will solve your problem or make you financially stable or keep you healthy or guarantee your happiness somewhere down the way, then I am glad to disappoint you with some bad news. We are not here for the magic, because there is no such thing. Putting your hope some spiritual "abra-ka-dabra" is an illusion, just like the artful tricks that magicians do.

But I have good news for you, too. If you are facing the real difficulties of life, if you are in the middle of the tests that life brings, and you are trying to be faithful in the middle of it all, ...if you just pray simply to be a good servant, and you ask for the faith and strength and power and insight to do what God wants you to do, God will answer your prayer. You will hear that still, quiet voice of God's Spirit remind you, "...nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus your Lord." God will answer your prayers, and you will say a glad "yes."

After all, one night in a garden a long time ago when Jesus saw through the dark that the darkness of the test was in front of him the next day, he did not try to play God or call on magic. He just prayed, "If you can get me out of this, please do. But whatever is coming – ...not my will, but our will be done."

Our confusions with prayer start with the ways that we confuse wanting our will to be done in the world with wanting Christ's will to be done in our lives. We all pray the way we are taught, both in words and by habits and behaviors through the years. But we can change the prayer, and change the patterns. It is a hard prayer to pray, but it is the main prayer in the prayer he taught us to pray.

Back when they translated the King James Version, they assumed the world was all kings and kingdoms. Luke's version just says, "Your kingdom come." They just wanted Christ to be king, instead of Caesar or the Pharisees to rule. We no longer live in kingdoms or have kings telling us what to do. We no longer think that "kingdom" means God's rule should come. We just pray to get to heaven someday. Those 17th century translators also were in love with a new language, and thought about poetry and phrases. So they put this prayer in

poetic form, to make it easy to remember and pretty to say, ...and they put a comma in the wrong place. We have publically repeated their mistake for centuries until we have lost the obvious, central point the Lord's Prayer. We pray together in phrases, "Thy kingdom come, ...thy will be done, ...on earth as it is in heaven.

In Greek, the text is not cut up into paragraphs or verses with numbers. There is no punctuation at all to help the reader, and no way to lead the reader by periods and commas. They put a comma in the wrong place, and taught us to pray the wrong way. We need to move the comma, and pray the prayer the way our Lord taught us to pray.

He did NOT pray, "Thy kingdom come, ...thy will be done, ...on earth as it is in heaven."

He taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done on earth, ...as it is in heaven."

Placing the comma in the right place means we put ourselves in the right place. Praying for God's will on earth is the first step to solving all of our confusions with prayer. We become servants of God's will, and we pray Christ will to be done in our lives, in our days, and everywhere on earth beneath our feet and even beyond our reach.

The Prayers of the People

So let us pray and listen for the places where Christ's will can become our will and way.

Oh Lord, we gather as a people who belong to you as your servants. Help us to learn to live and pray as your servants. Help us to learn to listen more than tell, to ask what you want more than tell you what we want. In silence, help us open our lives and empty a spiritual space for you to fill. ...

Let your rule guide the world; let your will be done on earth, and let it begin with my life. Where is a place I need to exchange my will for yours? ...

Re-form my wants when I have more than bread. Where can I clear the surplus stuff that gets in the way of serving you with all I am and have? ...

Keep the people I need to forgive in front of me, so that I will remove the only barrier between me and your forgiveness. Who do I need to forgive? ...

The tests of faithfulness just keep coming. Help me to recognize them, ask for help with them, see my way through them, and grow because of them. ...

And if you can get me out of some of the tests and messes that life and I put me in, please do! But in everything big and small in my life, your will be done.

May all the prayers of God's people today sound more like he taught his followers to pray when he said, ...