

Seton Hall University

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Petition as a Form of Prayer

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil., *Seton Hall University*



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Petition as a Form of Prayer

**Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ**

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Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday Readings for October 27, 2013 for Cycle C:

Sir 35:12-18; Ps 34; 2 Tim 4:6-8, 16-18; Lk 18:9-14

PETITION AS A FORM OF PRAYER

Lawrence E. Frizzell

I asked for strength that I might achieve;
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.
I asked for health that I might do greater things;
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.
I asked for riches that I might be happy;
I was given poverty that I might be wise.
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men;
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life;
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing that I had asked for,
but everything that I hoped for.
Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered;
I am, among all men, most richly blessed.

Prayer of an unknown Confederate soldier

The writer of this text learned a valuable lesson: the important element in prayer is not to ask for the "right things" but to commune with God in the right way. Of course, we find the same lesson in the Gospel. "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Mt 6:8). Many people do not sense the need for prayer throughout their lives. All seems to be going well and they can manage on their own!

Drawing on the Law of Moses, the sages of Israel taught that the poor and oppressed are heard by God. "God is not deaf to the orphan's wail, nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint" (Sir 35:14, see Ex 22:22). They knew that a sense of emptiness leads a person to seek help from God. The poor cultivate the habit of acknowledging their dependence on divine help, whereas the self-sufficient may not recognize the importance of God in their lives.

"The one who serves God willingly is heard; his petition reaches the heavens" (Sir 35:16). Life takes on new meaning as one serves the Lord; this constitutes a higher level of maturity than that of a person who turns to God only when in need. The prayer of petition should be grounded on a relationship that perdures and in which the order of creature to Creator is respected. Further progress is made when the person thanks God for the numerous gifts that enable one to accomplish something for God and neighbor during the course of daily life.

The parable of the Pharisee and the publican indicates a high level of sophistication regarding prayer. The Pharisee is portrayed as knowing that the fundamental prayer is the blessing (an act of thanks and praise). Thanksgiving for what we have received should be the basis for an ever deeper union with God. Unfortunately, this story depicts a man who used the blessing to review his own accomplishments and to make an invidious comparison with the tax collector. An examination of conscience should indeed end on a positive note; after confessing our sins we should express gratitude for the abundant graces that are signs of God's love in our lives. However, failure to notice any faults or bad attitudes may indicate laxity or shallowness on our part. A self-righteous attitude may afflict people belonging to any religion or none; those listening to the Gospel should ask if they harbor this manifestation of pride in their hearts. It would be unfortunate to label this attitude as "Pharisaical"; it is a general human failing. The tax collector exhibited a salutary humility as he entered the Temple. He knew that an act of contrition should follow the self-examination that prepares a person for worship (see Psalms 15:1-5; 24:3-6). His penitential attitude was expressed in the act of beating his breast and in a simple prayer for forgiveness. "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" This admission showed that he needed to turn from some forms of selfishness or other sins. An act of humility disposes a person for reception of the divine strength that is essential for spiritual progress.

Listeners to the story of Jesus would have been startled, perhaps, to learn that a despised tax collector might be capable of conversion (see Zacchaeus in Lk 19:1-10). However, the principle of reversal enunciated by Jesus echoes the teaching of Ezekiel. "Up with the low and down with the high!" (Ez 21:31). Self-exaltation is a danger for Christians who take their faith seriously, so they must make their own the prayer of the first and foremost disciple of Christ. "The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty" (Mary's Canticle in Lk 1:46-55).