

The decisive battle against evil has already been fought and won in this world. Christ fought it and won it on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. That's why Paul said to the Church: **Take your stand against the devil's schemes. Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power** (Ephesians 6:10-11). The power that raised Jesus from death unto life is the same power at work in the Church to do abundantly, above all we ask or think. Let no evil intimidate us, even **when what is vile is honored among men** (Psalm 12:8) or make our hearts hard and our love grow cold. Let us never, never, never give up.

Let us be strong with strength God gives. Let us **put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.** Our armor is truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, scripture, and prayer. Today, we reflect on prayer.

Here is what the apostle wrote about prayer. Ephesians 6:18-20: **And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.**

The Meaning of Prayer

I can count on one hand with fingers left over the number of people in my lifetime, who have said, "No," when I asked if I could pray for them. Our "Christ-haunted" culture still retains vestiges of a real knowledge of God. I speak to you for whom prayer is more than a vestige of the past. It is a living reality. I want to encourage many of you to continue your discipline of prayer. I want to encourage others of you to develop this discipline and make it central to your spirituality. Let's begin by reflecting on the meaning of our act of praying.

When we pray, before we ever say a word, the act of praying says, "We acknowledge an unseen world that is greater than the world we experience with our five senses and our intellect." It is good to remind ourselves of that fact from time to time. It gives gravity to our act of praying.

When we pray, before we ever say a word, the act of praying says, "We believe that the God at the center of that unseen world is good, and we can entrust our lives to Him." It is good to remind ourselves of that fact from time to time. It reassures us, when evil causes someone to sneer at the idea that God is good.

When we pray, before we ever say a word, the act of praying says to this good God, "I need you, and I believe you work in our world and in my life in ways that bless, though I do not always understand how or why you do what you do." It is good to remind ourselves of that fact from time to time. It reassures us if we feel overwhelmed by our speck-like existence in this universe whose scope is beyond comprehension.

When Christians pray, before we ever say a word, the act of praying says, "We believe that at the center of that unseen world is the God we read about in the Bible." We believe that, because our parents, teachers, and mentors in the faith have taught it to us. It is good to remind ourselves of that from time to time. The Bible reassures us. It reassures us that many others have traveled this road of faith and prayer before us, and their wisdom can guide us, when we don't know how to pray, and when doubt troubles us.

Caveats

With that in mind here are some cautions. First, when we pray, we do not inform God about anything He doesn't already know. The Prophet Isaiah put it this way: **Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him?** (Isaiah 40:14) One of the great prayers of the Church says, "Almighty God, you know my necessities before I ask and my ignorance in asking." God is not asking us for information. He is waiting to see if we have enough humility and contrition to push back the tyrannical demands of the "madding crowd" long enough to speak to Him. **A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.** (Psalm 51:17) **God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.** (James 4:6)

Second, **we don't know what we ought to pray.** (Romans 8:26) We may know what we want to say, but it can be so far removed from the will of God that we weary Heaven with our chatter. That's why the praise and prayers of the Bible and of the Church can help us. You won't go wrong by reading the Psalms and letting them put words in your mouth, when you pray. That's why I write these short Prayer Guides that we use each Sunday. They teach us how to speak to God.

Third, it is good to ask God to give us what we think we need. When we do that, let's learn to live between the tension of God's limitless power and His unfailing justice. Jesus said, **"Everything is possible for him who believes."** (Mark 9:23) That is an invitation to be bold, to ask for big things. On the other hand, **will not the Judge of all the earth do right?** (Genesis 18:25)

Carole and I once wrote a catechism for children. One question asked, "What does it mean that God is all-powerful?" The answer: "It means that God can do anything His love and justice permit." It is a good lesson to remember, as people ask God for favors. The more years we pray, the better we understand His ways. And by the way, watch yourself when you ask for favors: how long do you pray before you give up? That tells us a lot more about our faith than it tells us about God.

Action!

So, pray daily. Find a regular time and a regular place, and pray daily. Praise and thank God more than you ask for favors. When you ask God for a favor, stick with it until He gives it, or until you see why He withheld it. Be encouraged to pray by these words from our Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 6:6: **"When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."**

Communion

And now we come to the Church's great act of prayer: The Lord's Supper. Here, holding in our hands the visible representations of His broken body and shed blood and all they mean, we commune with Jesus Christ, whom never having seen, we love, and in whom, though we don't yet see Him, we believe and are filled with inexpressible and glorious joy. (See 1 Peter 1:8)

If you are outside the Christian Faith, would you come inside today? Start by praying. Say in your heart, "Jesus is Lord." Say in your heart, "God raised Him from the dead." If you want to speak to someone about your faith, tell us on the Connection Card, and someone will follow up with you. If you are inside the Christian Faith but outside the church, would you come inside with us here? It's a good place. Tell us on the card.