

9th Sunday after Pentecost
August 2, 2020
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Romans 8:26-27
The Spirit Helps Us When We Are Weak

Dear Friends in Christ,

Have you been in a situation when you just didn't know the correct decision to make? Maybe you didn't even know the right questions to ask to arrive at a good decision. Maybe it was buying your first car. Do you actually kick the tires or is that just an expression? How do you know if it is a good car or a good deal? What do you look for and listen for on the test drive? If you have the experience and the knowledge, buying a car becomes easier. But you might not make the best decision if you buy your first car by walking onto the car lot and picking out the shiniest one.

In the epistle lesson for today, the apostle Paul teaches us about prayer. We have lots of things we could pray about and pray for. But how do you know what you should pray for? How do you know what is best for you and for others? Sometimes we think we know what is best and pray for that. But there are times when we don't have any idea what to pray. The Holy Spirit helps us with this weakness. When we are weak in prayer the Holy Spirit intercedes.

Romans 8:26–27 (NIV84)

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

We are Weak in Prayer

If we were to list all the weaknesses we have, it would take more time than we have today. Therefore we will only consider a few weaknesses we have in regard to prayer. One set of weaknesses is due to our sinful nature. But other weaknesses are due to our human nature. In other words, we are weak because we are not God.

Sinful weakness shows up in our prayers when we think we know better than God what should be done about a situation. This is sinful pride showing up when we pray before the all powerful and all knowing God of all creation. It is a bit foolish to think that we could run things better than God. We might ask God to heal a loved one's disease or influence a national or local leader to implement a certain policy or send rain on the earth. Those can all be wonderful prayers and we pray them often. How do I know if I am praying with sinful pride? We get upset when our prayer is not answered in the way we asked. We are frustrated with God because our loved one is still sick. We accuse God of not caring about us because a certain government policy was implemented. We are angry that God allows a drought or pandemic to continue.

On the opposite end of the prayer spectrum but still a sinful weakness is the prayer offered in despair. What I mean is that the person praying to the Lord doesn't actually believe the Lord wants to help or is

able to help, but I might as well pray and see what happens. Prayer is the last resort. I've tried everything else and even though it won't do any good, I'll pray to God for help in this situation. Often, this attitude will lead to no prayers being offered to God at all.

Still another weakness in the area of prayer is the arrogant prayer. This person believes that God will have to do whatever they pray for because they have been such a good Christian. God owes me a favor for how great I've been. Or the person believes that if they pray in just the right way God will do what they want. They just have to find the right combination of words to control the Almighty. Or they believe that if they pray long enough or get enough people to pray the same thing, God will have to do what they pray. This is arrogance to think that any number of sinful humans can bend God's will to their own.

We can all repent for the sinful attitudes we have had when praying to the Lord.

But there are the weakness we have in prayer because we are a creation of God and not God himself. We don't know everything. We don't know the full plan. We don't know what is good for us in the eternal plan of God.

Maybe you've made a decision based on the best information you had at the time and the next day find out that you made a poor decision because new information was available. If we only had all past and present and future knowledge in our heads, we would know what to pray for.

Is it better for our loved one to be cured of their disease or to go to heaven quickly or some other option? We might not know what to pray in this situation. It might be a career problem, a family crisis, or something else that completely puzzles us. We don't know what we ought to pray for. Maybe our prayer is just "Help!" Maybe we can't even form that simple word and our prayer is a groan towards our God.

The good news is that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us when we are weak. Be assured that your Father in heaven hears and accepts your prayers, no matter how weak and confused we may be.

The Holy Spirit Intercedes

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

The Holy Spirit knows exactly what to pray because the Holy Spirit knows the will of God. The Holy Spirit is God and is united with the Father and the Son. The Father knows the mind of the Spirit and the Spirit knows the will of the Father. Therefore, the Spirit will never intercede for us with the Father and ask for something that is against God's will. His intercession is perfect and is acceptable to the Father. When we send our weak and even our sinful prayers to God, the Spirit helps us by making those prayers acceptable to the Father.

Even better, the Holy Spirit makes us acceptable to our Father in heaven. We are the saints in the verse. We are those who have been cleansed of sin by the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

We are the ones who have been brought to faith in Christ through the working of the Spirit in the water and Word of baptism. Christ prayed perfect prayers to his Father in heaven. Through the working of the Spirit, we are credited with Christ's righteous prayers. Christ suffered and died to pay for our sinful attitudes of pride, despair and arrogance while praying. His innocent suffering and death is credited as full payment for these and every sin. Through Christ and the Holy Spirit we are acceptable to our Father in heaven.

Our prayers are heard and acceptable to our Father in heaven because the Spirit has made both us and our prayers acceptable. Yet, we still may not know what to pray because we are not God. Pray anyway. For the *Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.*

Do you see how Paul's words in these short verses encourage all believers to pray? Many of our hymns make wonderful prayers but you don't have to be an accomplished poet to pray. The Spirit brings your stumbling prayers to the Father. You don't need to have all the answers when you pray. The Spirit intercedes for you. You don't need to be perfect to pray. The Spirit forgives you through the means of grace and presents you as holy and blameless before the Father.

So pray. With words or without. Written by others or from your heart. Long prayers or short. Eloquent words or barely understandable. Pray when you think you know what is best and when you have no idea. Pray with confidence that our God hears the prayers of his people, his saints. Pray in faith that our Triune God will do what is best for the eternal future of his people. Pray because your Father in heaven has asked us to pray and promised to hear us, and because the Spirit intercedes with the Father on your behalf.

Amen.