

"Coming Boldly to the Throne of Grace"

Our sermon for today is our third and final sermon in our series on the means of grace. We've discussed the Word and we've discussed the Sacraments. Now finally we'll be turning our attention toward "prayer" as a means of grace. Prayer in some sense might seem a bit different as a means of grace than the others. In the Word and Sacraments, the emphasis clearly is on God's initiation. In the Word, God speaks first to us. In the Sacraments, a minister, who is a representative of God, administers the sacrament to us. But in prayer, we come to God. In prayer, according to the WSC, we come to him, "offering up our desires to God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies" (WSC 98). And yet, though there is a sense in which prayer may seem like something we initiate, our passage for today reminds us that even prayer is an ordinance of God. Even our prayer is something that he ultimately initiates, because he has commanded us to pray. Our prayers are even effective because of the work Christ has done in redeeming us and reconciling us to God. And so in the words here of Hebrews 4:16, we are called by God to "come boldly to the throne of grace." And so, even in prayer, we find that this is God's gracious provision for us. Consequently, prayer is both a great privilege but also a duty; an ordinance that individually and as a church we must follow. But what a great duty and obligation this is! In this duty, we are commanded to come boldly and confidently to our Lord that we might receive the help we need in our lives, that we might be forgiven of our sins, and strengthened to overcome the temptations of the devil! What a wonderful duty to have!

And so as we look at this passage, we see that we are called to "come", or to "draw near" or "approach" as some translations say. And so as we look at this "drawing near", we'll look first at how it is to be a purposeful drawing, and second how it is to be a confident drawing. It's a purposeful drawing in that we are being told to draw near to God in prayer for a purpose. And so, we'll look first briefly at what that purpose of our prayer is to be. And it's a confident drawing in that we are told to boldly go to this throne of grace, and so we'll look secondly at what is the source of this confidence in our prayer.

And so first, let's look briefly at the purpose of this prayer. Verse 16 says that we are to come to the throne of grace for the purpose of obtaining mercy and finding grace to help in time of need. So prayer gives us access to God's grace and mercy. You can obviously see already that prayer is a means of grace - this verse tells us that explicitly. It says we are to come to God in prayer so that we can receive mercy and find grace. And so let's consider this mercy and grace mentioned here in this passage. Mercy and grace often are treated as closely related concepts. The two different Greek words in fact share a close semantic range. But the word for mercy is often used in the sense of granting forgiveness for sins already committed, and the word for grace is often used to describe the positive help God gives us in our Christian growth as we struggle in current and future trials and temptations.

And that's how it seems these words are being used here as well. When we pray we are to be seeking the Lord's forgiveness of our sins, confessing our sins to him, and looking for his mercy. We also are to pray for his grace to help us, as its says, in our "time of need." This Greek phrase which is translated "time of need" carries a sense of timeliness; that we are to pray for grace especially for those times when we really need it. This phrase recognizes that there are times in life

where grace is just what the doctor ordered. This doesn't mean that there are times when we don't need grace - sure we always need grace. But what the passage is saying is that we'll have different challenges at different times in our life, and here we're promised that God wants to give us grace to meet whatever specific challenges we have at any given time. In other words God doesn't just give us some general grace; rather he offers to give his grace to meet our unique and specific needs.

So this of course infers that our prayers should not just be general and vague. We should pray specifically for specific things. We will have specific events in our life in which we will need special measures of God's grace. You might have certain temptations to sin where you need God's grace to overcome them. You might have periods of suffering, where you need God's grace to persevere in your faith. You might have various obstacles which you face in your career or your family life, where you pray for God's grace to equip you to the task. You may be coming up on a special milestone in your life, such as getting married, or graduating from college, and will need to pray for God's direction and vision for you. There are all sorts of specific times in your life, where you should be praying for God's grace. The examples I just mentioned are some of the more bigger things in life, but I want to encourage you that God cares about every aspect of your life. Don't miss out on opportunities to bring all your requests to God, looking for his grace.

The same applies even to our confession of sins where we seek his mercy. Don't just pray generally. Seek to confess your sins as specific as possible to him, ask for forgiveness and mercy, and then ask for grace to help you overcome these in the future. With as sinful as we are, surely you won't remember every single sin you commit, but don't let that stop you from trying to remember what you can!

And so this passage shows us that our drawing near to God should be for the purpose of receiving grace and mercy. And it's easy to see that this should be our purpose in prayer when we pray prayers of confession and supplication. But what about our prayers of adoration and thanksgiving, when we praise God and thank God for who he is? Are those also a means of God's grace? And isn't the purpose of our prayers of adoration and thanksgiving more about glorifying God than receiving grace and mercy? Well, it's true that one important purpose of prayer that is not mentioned in this passage is to glorify God. And it's definitely easy to see how our praises and thanksgivings serve that purpose to bring glory to God. But in this passage in Hebrews chapter 4, the emphasis is on the grace and mercy we receive in prayer. And though we may not be explicitly asking for grace and mercy when we offer praises and thanksgiving in our prayer, surely this is still a means of grace. Surely, even when we praise God and thank God in prayer, we still receive spiritual benefits. For how can we go before the almighty God in prayer, praying in the Spirit, and not be blessed? How can we come before his presence, praising and thanking him, and not be changed? When we come before the throne of grace, even to praise God, we can't help but be blessed.

And so, this passage tells us that one key purpose in prayer is to receive God's grace and mercy. This is the case in all aspects of our prayers, in our adorations, in our confessions, in our thanksgivings, and in our supplications. In all the aspects of our prayers, we are coming to that throne of grace, and are being grown spiritually. Set that as your purpose in praying. Yes, pray to glorify God, but know that when you pray, God is using your prayers to grow you and sustain you. Seek that grace and mercy in prayer. This is not being selfish or self-centered. Instead this is being faithful to God's commandment here in Hebrews 4. It's being faithful to what God has given us for our well being. It's kind of like eating vegetables (imagine a vegetable that you really like). We don't feel guilty for eating lots of vegetables just because you know that they are good for

you and will make you healthy. The same is true in prayer. It's not bad to pray with the purpose and motivation of receiving grace. God has intended our prayers for that purpose. He is a loving father who desires to give you good things. So, yes, see that as your purpose in prayer: to receive grace and mercy!

And so that's a look at what this passage says about our purpose in prayer. Now let's look at what it has to say about our confidence in prayer. Verse 16 says we are to pray with boldness, or confidence, as some versions translate it. But what is the reason for this confidence? Why are we to come boldly before this throne of grace? Well our passage says that the reason we can pray with boldness is because of Christ. Verse 16 specifically appeals back to verses 14-15 as the reason why we are to come confidently in prayer. It says in verse 14, "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession." Because Jesus intercedes for us in heaven as the Great High Priest we can have confidence as we pray.

Notice the adjective "Great". Jesus is not just any high priest, he is the Great High Priest. He is the high priest par excellence, the preeminent high priest. He surpasses all other high priests. He is the Great High Priest, first because he is the Son of God. Hebrews chapter 3 says that this means that he is better than Moses, because Moses was faithful in caring for God's house as a servant, but Jesus is faithful over God's house as a son. Because Jesus is the son of God, he has the authority and status of God himself. Surely no high priest before ever was the Son of God! And so because Jesus is the Son of God, he is the Great High Priest.

Jesus is also the Great High Priest because he has "passed through the heavens" as it says in verse 14. This is referring to Jesus' ascension into heaven where he now sits enthroned at the right hand of God. When we think of Jesus' ascension, we typically think of his kingly role, reigning at this right hand of God. But here, the emphasis in the epistle of Hebrews is on Christ's priestly function. Now that Jesus has ascended, he has ascended to the highest heavens making his dwelling with the Father, where he makes continual intercession for us. This far surpasses any former high priest. For the former high priests would come but once a year into the Holy of Holies in the Temple to make intercession for both themselves and the people. Even then the high priests would enter with a sacrifice, lest they come into God's presence without any blood to atone for their own sins. And even then, they would only be before God's presence in the Holy of Holies for just a few fleeting moments before leaving. And even then, of course, they only even entered into an earthly copy of the true heavenly throne room. But Jesus has passed through the heavens, not just to dwell with God for a fleeting moment but once a year, not to just enter a copy of the heavenly things, but Jesus has entered heaven itself, to remain in the presence of God, that he would continually intercede on our behalf. And so for verse 14 to say that Jesus has "passed through the heavens" is to summarize Christ's ascension and his intercession, showing that he is better than any high priest before him.

Jesus is also the Great High Priest because he has been made like us, while still being the sinless Son of God. So, Jesus is the perfect mediator between God and man. Verse 15 says "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin." Chapter 2:17 says that Jesus has become human in every respect so that he could be our high priest. And so as a high priest, Jesus is like us as a human, having been tempted like us in every way, so that he can understand and sympathize with our needs and struggles. Wow - he sympathizes with us! The great God incarnate Jesus Christ sympathizes with us sinful humans. And yet Jesus, as the Son of God, is also sinless, having perfectly resisted every temptation that came upon him. And so Jesus is better than any of the former high priests who were sinful and had to

intercede for themselves as well as the people. But Jesus, being sinless, does not need to intercede for himself. And so, if any high priest understands us, it is the human Jesus. And if any high priest would have an audience with God, it is the sinless and divine Jesus. Of course this is a theological point as well: we affirm that Jesus is both God and Man, and so consequently he is the perfect mediator between God and man, and so he is also the Great High Priest who intercedes for us.

Let me stop and summarize what I am saying about Jesus being the reason we can come confidently before God in prayer. Hebrews tells us here that the main reason why we can pray with confidence is because Jesus is our Great High Priest. He is the Great High Priest who surpasses all the other priests. He is not a mere man, but the Son of God who has ascended up into heaven and now makes continual intercession for us before God the Father. And yet, though he is the Son of God, he became human in the incarnation, so he understands our trials and temptations. Thus, he is the perfect mediator between God and man. And so because we have such a perfect high priest who represents us before God, we can come confidently before the throne of grace because we know we do not go alone, but we come with Christ our priest.

We all know the power of an intermediary. Surely we've all been in situations where we were scared or intimidated to talk with someone. I remember back in junior high school, when a boy liked a girl and wanted to become boyfriend and girlfriend. The boy didn't usually walk right up to that girl and tell her how he felt. Instead, he probably sent a friend to talk to her friend to see what she thinks about him. And maybe if that boy got enough courage up, he would send his friend to talk to her directly for him. And then maybe if he were really courageous, he might give her a note to tell her how he feels. Why would we do that when we were young? Well, we were not confident. We were not confident enough to speak to the person directly. How much more is the case when we want to speak to God?

First, who are we before God? We are mere humans, mere creatures; he is the almighty maker of the heavens and earth. Think how nervous you might get if you could meet the president of the United States or some famous person or celebrity. How much more intimidated should we be when we come before God? Second, because our sin, we made ourselves rebels against God. We made ourselves outlaws, so to speak. If you commit a crime, and the police find out, you probably wouldn't hang out in front of the police station; no you'd probably hide from them. Well, how much more afraid should we be to come before God, when we know how terrifying his wrath against sin is? And so hopefully you can begin to see why we should, under normal circumstances, not think we can come boldly before God.

But because Jesus is our Great High Priest, we can, and we ought, to come before God in confidence and boldness. Because when we come with Jesus, we come with the mediator who is God's own son, who comes with the authority and standing of God himself. And when we come with Jesus, we come as those who have been reconciled to God because of his sacrifice on the cross. And when we come with Jesus, we come with one who understands our needs as he himself has become human, and so he knows how to represent us. And when we come with Jesus, we come with the one who is constantly making intercession to God on our behalf. We come to the throne of Grace clothed in Christ, led by Christ, represented by Christ, welcomed by Christ.

And so as verse 14 commands us, "let us hold fast our confession." Surely, when we pray, we must be people who hold fast to the confession of our faith. Hebrews 11:6 even tells us that faith is a prerequisite for prayer. But our confession of faith is central to our prayer not just because it's a prerequisite. It is in this confession of our faith in which we grab hold of this confidence which comes in Christ. It is by faith that we are united with Christ, our Great High Priest. It

is through faith in Christ that we are reconciled to God. It is our confession of faith - think of the Apostles' Creed - It is our confession of faith that reminds us that Christ has passed through the heavens, and not only that, that Christ first descended from heaven, lived a life of righteousness for us, was crucified, died, and buried, remained under the power of death until the third day, where he arose again from the dead, and has ascended up into heaven and is now seated at the right hand of God the Father. This confession of faith says that our confidence in prayer is founded upon the saving work of Jesus. And even though we know that Jesus will one day come again to judge the living and the dead, we do not come in fear, because we know that we are his, and that his atonement has covered us. Instead we come in boldness and confidence, not fearing his judgment, but seeking his grace and mercy.

That is why we are being called to draw near to the "throne of grace". The throne emphasizes Christ power and authority; that very same authority which he declared at the Great Commission. And yet our passage makes clear that this is not for us a throne of judgment, but a throne of *grace*. Grace. Oh how wonderful that is to us. What amazing grace! How sweet the sound!

And so we must come confidently and boldly in prayer. Confident in our intercessor and Great High Priest. Confident in his authority to grant the requests. Confident in his sympathy to understand our needs. And we come in confidence in our standing before God because of the salvation we confess. And we come in confidence because he has told us to, because he has told that there is grace to be received.

Saints of God, we have seen today how prayer is a means of God's grace, both for our salvation and for our growth as Christians. And because prayer is a means of God's grace, we ought to come humbly before God, because we know that the results of our prayers rest outside of ourselves. We cannot provide for ourselves the things we ask of God in prayer. We have to come to him, trusting in his fatherly love, relying on his paternal care, seeking his daily provision. Our prayer is not about what we do. Don't pervert your prayers as if it's about you. Don't take pride in how much you pray or how you pray. That's not what our confidence is to be in. Instead, as we come humbly to God in prayer, we come confidently knowing that we have Christ who intercedes on our behalf and who loves us and takes compassion on us.

And so saints of God, I urge you, come. Come near, draw near, approach, this throne of grace. Do so with confidence and boldness. Do so with faith. Do this looking to Christ for everything, in all your needs. Pray for grace. It's is God's blessed provision for you, and it's his command to you. He commands you to come and to be fed. What a wonderful command. It would be silly to disregard it. Most of us don't miss a meal when we are called at dinner time. Why should we do anything less when we are talking about our spiritual nourishment? Why should we not draw near to this fount of grace which has been set before us! And yet we know that we so often forfeit the grace that could be ours because we neglect this duty. Don't miss out this grace. Come. Draw near to God in prayer.

And as we apply this to our ministry here at Trinity, we must ask ourselves, how should this means of grace, prayer, be present in our church? We'll, I hope that it will be present in many ways! We need to be zealous as a church to come to the Lord in prayer. We often think of the importance of preaching and teaching the word in the church. And yet in Acts 6, it says that when the 12 apostles in the early church became too busy with the diaconal work, it says that they appointed deacons to assist them, so that the apostles could devote themselves to two things: the ministry of the word, *and prayer*. Both the ministry of the word and prayer are

two essential aspects of ministry. That is true for the apostles, it is true for pastors and elders, and it is true for everyone in the church. As much as we attend ourselves to God's word, we must also attend ourselves to prayer.

So what does this look like in the church? Does it just mean more prayer meetings? We'll, I do think prayer meetings are important, and we certainly will have them. But this is more than just about having regular prayer meetings. First, we must be calling people to pray. That includes new converts, who we call them to pray to God for the first time, and existing Christians, who we call to continue regularly in prayer. Second, we must be praying: individually and corporately, all the time and for all sorts of things. When we pray, we should be praying for our individual growth as well as for others. When we pray for ourselves, we should pray that we overcome temptations and that we would live lives of godliness. When we pray for others, we should see ourselves as part of a ministry of grace, where we are interceding on others behalf. And we should pray not only individually, but also corporately. Yes, that comes at our prayer meetings, and it also comes every Lord's Day during our corporate worship. But I would encourage you as well, as you fellowship with each other, don't be afraid to pray together. Take advantage of the opportunities to pray together that you will have. And then go back home and keep praying for those people. Keep a prayer journal, or prayer cards, or find some system so that you can keep track of people's prayer needs. As you hear during our Sunday School time, and during our congregation prayer, there are various needs which the saints have.

And I would especially ask that you pray for the leaders of this church. Pray for our elders and deacons, and pray for me. Pray that we would be faithful to fulfill the responsibilities which Christ has entrusted to us. Please pray especially for me as I strive to faithfully proclaim God's word, week in and week out. I'd ask that you strive to pray for me each week, and dare I even impose to ask that you pray for me each day? Please pray for me. I covet your prayers.

And all this praying for one another in the church and for the church, means of course that you will have to be involved in the life of the church. You can't be effectively praying for people and for the church, if you are not sure what is going on. And so my appeal to you today to be praying also means that I am asking you to be intimately involved in the life of this church and its ministry. I know many of you are already. I would ask that you keep it up, and strive to invest yourselves even more into the life of this church and this church family.

And so I want to see your prayers as part of the ministry of the church. We'll continue to talk about ways in which each of you can use the gifts God has given you to get involved in the ministry of the church. But one thing we can all do is to be serving the church through a faithful ministry of prayer. Pray for the church and pray with the church.

And as we pray, as we approach this throne of grace, look forward to Christ's return. On that day, when Christ returns, this throne which we call the throne of grace, will become for us a throne of glory. That is our hope and prayer: to God be the glory, and Lord Jesus come quickly, amen.

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