

The Meaning of Praying “in the Name of Jesus”

It is to be lamented the things that people sometimes believe about the Bible. I had a friend in seminary who worked with me in the library who, just for the fun of it, once subscribed to a typical, ranting, raving Word of Faith ministry. Every now and again my friend would receive a little package in the post that contained some item that was intended to bless him in some way or another. He would receive these as long as he paid his monthly subscription fee, of course. I remember how we would all stand around him in anticipation as he unboxed everything from “special anointing oil” to “healing holy water,” and then watch him as he comically read the instructions and put his latest “gift” to the test. On one occasion he even received a little cloth that the self-proclaimed prophet-healer prayed over. He was instructed to place this “special” cloth over his Bible on the floor and then literally stand on his Bible whenever he prayed, because it would of course render his prayers especially effective.

This is sad but true. There are unfortunately many false views of what constitutes as effective prayer. The same applies to those who swear by the “name of Jesus.” These are people who would for instance say that our prayers only become effective when we insert the magic words somewhere along the line, “in Jesus’ name,” or “in the name of Jesus.” You ask them why they say so, they’ll quickly retort by saying that it is because of these “special” words that our prayers become heard in the first place. Along this line of reasoning they honestly believe that God doesn’t hear us if we do not insert the actual words “in the name of Jesus” or whichever derivative thereof. I distinctly remember a school teacher, God bless her heart, who once taught us that if we do not say “in Jesus’ name” before we say amen, that our prayers won’t reach higher than the ceiling.

Sigh...

Wrong views of the employment of the name of Jesus certainly do abound. Sadly, some have opted for an approach to God that is similar to that of Aladdin’s with his genie. Allegedly prayers are only heard or answered when we “say the magic words,” and then voila! God will hear us. But this approach betrays an underlying blunder in biblical interpretation. Jesus indeed did not intend for his disciples to understand him as requiring *the actual words that bear his name* in order for them to be heard when they pray. A survey of Jesus’ instruction to his disciples in John 14 should disclose this fact.

“Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” (Jn. 14:13-14).

Firstly, in order to understand what the Lord meant with these words, it is helpful to know something about the audience to whom he said these words. Interestingly, the Lord spoke these words to men who were each about to receive special means from the Holy Spirit to go out into Jerusalem and eventually the rest of the known world (Ac. 1:8; Matt. 28:18-20), and preach this gospel of Christ and him crucified to the

people who yet have to hear of him. Since the gospel has only been heard in Israel at this stage these men were going to be in need of special enabling to fulfill their calling. And the Lord did just that for them.

Shortly after the ascension of our Lord into heaven these men were specially blessed with the gifts of tongues, healing, prophecy and other signs and wonders which authenticated them as official representatives of Christ who could attest to his life-giving nature (Matt. 11:28-30). In other words, these men became credible sources of the gospel message as they did many signs and wonders in the power of Christ, not their own (2 Cor. 12:9). In this fashion, as for instance men like Peter and Paul mightily preached the gospel and at the same time did great miracles through the power of Jesus (Ac. 3:6-8), their message of salvation to both Jew and gentile became authenticated.

There are no apostles today

This is technically the first stop where people misinterpret Jesus' words. Clearly Jesus meant through his words that the disciples were going to go out into the world with this kind of power as they were empowered by his Spirit. The preceding verse makes this plain. Jesus said: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father." Jesus was in effect telling his 'apostle-to-be' disciples that shortly after the birth of the New Testament church they would be able to go out and do miracles as they were empowered to do so by him.

We get our interpretive 'lines crossed' when we casually apply Jesus words exactly in our own lives as it was intended for the disciples. This is not good hermeneutics. What Jesus intended for the disciples through these words simply does not necessarily apply to us today in the same way that it applies to the apostles and the early church.

The disciples were the first group of men tasked with the responsibility to take the gospel to places where it had never been, thus they were going to be in need of a different kind of authentication. Luke tells us exactly how they went about their responsibility. Firstly, we know that they each received the miraculous ability to speak in human languages that they could never speak before (Ac. 2:8-12). They had the ability to heal the sick and even raise the dead. On one account, Paul raised a boy by the name of Eutychus to life who fell asleep during a late night sermon of his (Ac. 20:7-12). On one occasion Peter was able to escape prison when an angel of the Lord rescued him (Ac. 12:6-11). In a very particular, never-to-be-repeated way, many other miracles like these are characterised the apostles' ministry during the first century after the ascension of Christ. This is why Jesus specified what the nature of their ministry would be like, when he prefaced his instruction to pray in his name by telling them that they would do great deeds in his name.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father" (Jn. 14:12).

So the problem then with the insistence on praying while employing the name of Jesus, is that there is the false assumption that what counted for the apostles in their day is what also counts for us today. So doing, people very personally apply these words to themselves directly, and falsely convince themselves that they, like

the apostles, are called to do “greater works” in *exactly* the same way the Lord intended for the apostles (Jn. 14:12).

Even so, the literal words of praying in his name was not what Jesus had in mind when he instructed his soon-to-be-apostles about prayer and asking him things. When Jesus instructed them to pray in his “name” he did not mean that they should simply conclude every prayer they prayed with this phrase before they said amen. For this matter, no where in Scripture are we specifically commanded to even say the word “amen” in order to conclude every prayer. And this is where the true meaning of phrases like these lie. For the apostles to have prayed in Jesus’ name, they had to acknowledge his authority in their lives and the fact that they were totally inept to handle anything in and of themselves. Interestingly, all the New Testament writers, i.e. the apostles, used the word “amen” at the end of their epistles. However, this was the typical way in which they concluded their writings and it was simply a way to affirm the words that went before it (in the epistle).

In it’s strictest sense “amen” means to “agree” or to say “let it be so.” But even this word speaks of a heart’s attitude that should be present in the individual before the actual word “amen” is even spoken. For this reason, both “amen” and “in Jesus’ name” must be understood as expressions of what is true of the person’s heart when they come to the Lord in prayer. Nowhere in Scripture are we commanded to say the actual word “amen” to conclude every prayer, much in the same way we are not commanded to say the actual phrase “in the name of Jesus” when we request things in prayer.

With Jesus’ words to his disciples placed in its proper context it is now possible to probe the meaning of Jesus’ encouragement to pray in his name. Now that we know that it is not some magic formula that we speak, not that we could expect the same results that the apostles experienced, it is important that we know what it means to pray “in Jesus name.” The Lord’s own model of prayer will be our guide in this regard.

1. To pray “in Jesus name” is to acknowledge his SOVEREIGNTY

Insightful to our study is that the Lord Jesus gave his disciples the model of prayer. When he did so, he likewise gave them some reasons as to why they should pray in the way that he instructed them. Pertinent to our discussion is the fact that Jesus instructed his disciples not to “heap up empty phrases” when they pray (Matt. 6:7).

"And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

So what Jesus was requiring his disciples to do were for them to be careful of being superstitious when they pray. Pagans in the first century after Christ were extremely superstitious about everything. They mostly got their cues from nature and read into everything within the created realm, things which were simply not there. Something silly, like the way an egg breaks, could spell “bad luck” and so they were tethered to a certain expectation for outcomes for whatever affairs they were engaged in. In the same way the pagans also believed that the gods would *not listen* to them if they didn’t use high-felutant phrases and terms when they prayed. So to them, praying was clearly about the “magic words” and the abundance of these “magic words” that caused the gods to hear them.

Jesus would simply not allow for this, even if it involved the mention of his own name during the conclusion of each prayer. And the reason for his protest against such praying is this: "...for they think that they will be heard for their many words." This is where it boils down to a question of God's sovereignty. Is it possible for us to doubt God's sovereignty during prayer because of the lack of certain phrases or words? Absolutely. Especially as it involves insistence on saying the name of Jesus before saying amen. But God does not all of the sudden become more powerful, or sovereign in our lives just because we now said these "magic words." He neither allows us more privilege nor blesses us more because of our employment of these words.

Rather, what our Lord requires of us when we pray is the actual heartfelt acknowledgment of his sovereignty. Sure this needs to be expressed in words as the Lord spells out to the disciples when he finally gives them "the Lord's prayer." But more so than being verbal it is indicative of the heart attitude which belies it. Christians believe that God CAN do something about our situation and therefore, we can say:

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."*

To pray in Jesus' name therefore is to agree with all the saints of old that God is the one who sits on the throne and who is in control of everything. To require a mad repetition of Jesus name in prayer is really to doubt his sovereignty. Maybe like the pagans we falsely think "he will not answer us because we didn't repeat it enough," or "he will not even hear us because we haven't said it before we said amen." I hope it sounds as silly as it really is.

Rather, the believer prays knowing that our Lord holds everything in his hand. We can agree with the Lord that his kingdom will come as we beacon it on. When we pray in Jesus name then we are in fact not being selfish in prayer. When we think about God's plan for this planet, the people whom he has redeemed, the work that he has started in us and has promised to complete (Phil. 1:6), all of these are expressions of our reliance on him.

2. To pray "in Jesus name" is to acknowledge our DEPENDANCE ON HIS FINISHED WORK

Something that is closely linked to our faith in God's sovereignty in prayer is our reliance on his finished work of redemption in us when we pray. Christians are people who not only believe that God exists and that he is powerful and sovereign, but we also believe that he established our relationship with him through the person of his Son. If this was not true of us, then no amount of praying would avail to anything (Prov. 15:29).

What is true of any Christian is that they are saved not based on any good thing that they have done, not even mentioning of Jesus' name during prayer time. No, they are saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). Once faith is expressed in the Lord Jesus alone, the sinner is no longer seen as unjust, but rather as just and righteous (2 Cor. 5:21). Therefore, when Christians pray we come to the Lord's throne of grace not because of our own merit, rather we come to him through his Son, who bore our burden on the cross (Col. 2:14).

So how does this apply to praying in the name of Jesus? In more ways than one might think. As was already pointed out, no amount of asking Jesus “in Jesus’ name” would have amounted to anything if the person praying this way wasn’t truly saved to begin with. It would be like asking someone whom you don’t love, care for, give ear to, honour, or live for, for something, even while asking “please.” It is for the obvious reason that we belong to Christ, that we are in him and he is in us (Jn. 15:4) that we can ask what we will, according to his will. It’s no coincidence that John launches into his passage of Jesus as the vine and the disciples being the branches shortly after Jesus words about asking in his name. This picture is so suited for anyone trying to understand our reliance on Christ in prayer. It speaks of the actual fruit which the vine eventually produces, i.e. people who are saved and involved in an obedient relationship with their Lord. Commenting on verses 5-6 specifically, D.A. Carson explains the drive of this passage in the following way:

“There has been considerable dispute over the nature of the ‘fruit’ that is envisaged: the fruit, we are told, is obedience, or new converts, or love, or Christian character. These interpretations are reductionistic. The branch’s purpose is to bear much fruit (v. 5), but the next verses show that this fruit is the consequence of prayer in Jesus’ name, and is to the Father’s glory (verse. 7, 8, 16). This suggests that the ‘fruit’ in the vine imagery represents everything that is the product of effective prayer in Jesus’ name, including obedience to Jesus’ commands (v. 10), experience of Jesus’ joy (v. 11 – as earlier his peace, 14:27), love for one another (v. 12), and witness to the world (vv. 16, 27). This fruit is nothing less than the outcome of persevering dependence on the vine, driven by faith, embracing all of the believer’s life and the product of his witness.”

What Carson highlights to our understanding is that prayer “in Jesus name” is largely the product of absolute reliance on him for everything. The very fruit that is being produced by the branches is the product not only because of the obvious stability that the branch enjoys in the vine in a passive sense, but also because of the very active “reliance’ of the branch on the vine for its entire livelihood. Some have looked at this passage and have concluded the Christian life to be a kind of a passivity as the branch gets all it needs form the vine. However, John does not paint this kind of picture of the Christian life. He insists that there must be an active effort from the branch to rely on the vine for everything, hence the Lord’s command in verse 4, “Abide in me...” This involves much more than the actual regurgitation of stock terms and phrases that we are all so familiar with. Rather, it is the expression of our reliance on God as we are actually willing and committed to living a godly life before him — THAT’S TRUE PRAYING IN THE NAME OF JESUS!

But just in case there is someone who is wondering about this...Does this mean that we absolutely cannot say “in Jesus name” or “amen” anymore? The simple answer is “no” for two reasons:

- a. Obvious irreverence and unbiblical prayer aside, since there is nothing “magical” or “extra powerful” about saying any specific words when we pray, we can therefore still employ these terms as long as there is the life to match it up, because only then will it be meaningful. As was already pointed out, no Christian can say that they are praying in the name of Jesus if they do not honour God through their time, activities, finances, behaviour, etc. As long as there is the willingness to continually conform our lives to his sovereign will then we can say the actual words “in Jesus name” or “amen” and not be guilty of saying it in vain.

- b. If we disallow certain phrases or terms, we can ironically commit the same error as the pagans that Jesus talked about (Matt. 6:7) who are superstitious about the actual words that they pray. However, we can commit this error in the inverse as well. When this occurs — instead of effective prayer being defined in terms of the life and heart's attitude of the one praying, as such a person submits to the will of God during prayer — it is defined as effective, or that God is specially hearing us, because of our *refraining* from certain words or phrases. Both vain repetition and unnecessary refraining would therefore be of no use in prayer.

A Daily Struggle

To conclude, praying in Jesus' name will be a daily struggle for us all. There will be times when our obedience will be fluctuating. There will be times when we don't mean the words that we say during prayer. But here is a comforting thought. Our Lord knows what we need even before we say the words.

"...for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matt. 6:8).

Our Lord knows exactly what we need and he is entirely aware of all our shortcomings even as we come to him in prayer. So what we must do from our side is to simply ask. We should not ask with the wrong motives (Jas. 4:3) but we ask our Lord to assist, change, stop, start, improve, allow, heal, give, all the things that we need, without doubting. When we do that he listens to us, the same Lord who promised Israel:

"Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear" (Is. 65:24).

Recommended Reading:

Paul E. Miller. *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a distracting world*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.