

## **“We Pray in Jesus’ Name”**

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Part of an occasional series about why Christians do peculiar things.

John 14.8-14

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Philip said, *“Lord, show us the Father; that will be enough for us.”*

Jesus replied, *“Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been with you all this time? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I have spoken to you I don’t speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me does his works. Trust me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe on account of the works themselves. I assure you that whoever believes in me will do the works that I do. They will do even greater works than these because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask for in my name, so that the Father can be glorified in the Son. When you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it.*

John 14:8-14

*The Common English Bible*

When we follow Jesus, we end up doing some peculiar things.

One peculiar thing we Christians do, quite often, is sign off our prayers with *“in Jesus’ name.”* Or, *“in Christ’s name.”* Usually, without thinking much about it. It becomes a habit, like automatically writing *“Sincerely”* at the end of a letter. Today, I want to think about it.

Why do we pray in *“Jesus name?”* Most simply, it’s because he told us to. In the first reading, you heard Jesus make a promise: *“When you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it.”* So we do it. We pray in his name. But, what does that mean? And why is it important?

II

First, let me say what praying *“in Jesus’ name”* does not mean.

It’s Mothers’ day. My Mom taught me manners. Like once when I asked, *“Can I have a cookie?”* Mom asked, in return, *“What’s the magic word?”* You know the answer. But did I say *“Please?”* No. I said, *“À la peanut butter sandwiches.”* You see, I had been formed by Sesame Street, and learned from The Amazing Mumford the magic phrase when doing a trick. *“À la peanut butter sandwiches.”* Mom had a good laugh . . . then she made me say *“Please.”*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Sesame\\_Street\\_Muppets#A](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Sesame_Street_Muppets#A)

When we pray “*in Jesus’ name*,” it is not magic. It’s not a holy version of “open sesame”<sup>2</sup> that reveals some treasure cave of divine blessings. Nor is “*in Jesus’ name*,” a sweetener we add to make our prayers extra delicious for God. Nor a bow we put on top to pretty them up. It is not even like “please,” a polite way of talking to God.

Let’s think of it normally. When do we do something in someone’s name?

- An assistant might write a letter on behalf of his boss and sign for her. He should write “p. p.” before the signature, which stands for the Latin phrase meaning “on behalf of.” He is acting in the boss’s name.<sup>3</sup>
- When I take Barb out for dinner, the staff who are serving us are representing the restaurant. They are serving “in the name of” McDonald’s.
- A police officer yell’s out “Stop! In the name of the law!” Actually, I don’t think they really say that. If you are arrested, it’s in the name of the Queen. So you are really in trouble.

This idea of acting in someone’s name, then, is one we understand. Keeping this in mind, what does Jesus mean when he tells us to pray in his name?

Praying in Jesus’ name gives shape to my prayer, claims a welcome for my prayer, and is a great privilege we receive when we belong to him.

### III

First, praying in Jesus’ name shapes my prayer.

When someone asks you to act in their name, they are giving you a trust. They are counting on you acting as they would act. For instance, if you give someone Power of Attorney over your finances, you are expecting them to make decisions for you as if you were making the decisions. You are giving them that responsibility to act like you.

So when Jesus says, “*ask in my name*,” that means pray as Jesus prays. Ask for the sorts of things Jesus asks for. Desire what Jesus desires. Make your priorities Jesus’ priorities. Praying in Jesus’ name shapes my prayers, so they become more and more consistent with who he is, what he is all about.

Jesus said, “*I will do whatever you ask for in my name, so that the Father can be glorified in the Son.*” Does what I’m praying celebrate who God is, God’s glory? If what I ask for were to happen, would it show what God is really like: God’s compassion, God’s majesty,

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open\\_Sesame\\_%28phrase%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Sesame_%28phrase%29)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/pp>

God's justice, God's love, God's truth?<sup>4</sup>

When I pray *"in Jesus' name,"* I'm saying *"God, whatever I've asked, shape it to conform to Jesus. Listen to my prayer in such a way that fits with Jesus' prayers, that it shares his heart's desire to bring glory to his Father."*

#### IV

Praying in Jesus' name shapes my prayers. It also claims a welcome for my prayers.

Just as we do, the writers of the Bible used images and experiences that were familiar to people. When they talked about coming to God in prayer, they said it is like having an audience before a great ruler. You enter the royal throne room by invitation only. If you barge in, you will be thrown out, or worse! You only come if you are asked. And you come carefully: wearing your best clothes, bowing, speaking only when spoken to. And we can see our praying as like that. Think of the "Holy of Holies" in the Temple, where only the High Priest could go. It was imagined as the throne room of God.

But then we hear a remarkable teaching from the New Testament's Letter to the Hebrews. I wrote this morning's "Invitation to Worship" with part of it in mind. It is in your bulletin.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is the High Priest with access to the Holy of Holies, who invites us to come with him. With him, we are welcome to come right up to God and ask. You are welcome. You are welcome, just as you are. You do not need to dress up or put on a show. Wearing your worst rags, speaking your most poorly, ignorant of the rules . . . none of it matters. You are welcome. You have a standing invitation. You are always on the honoured guest list. Because of who you are coming with. Using this ancient imagery, we might say Jesus is the Heir of the Almighty, the Crown Prince of Heaven. And you are his close friend. So you are welcome in his name.

#### V

So, by praying in Christ's name, I'm asking that God shape my prayers to be like Jesus'. Also, that God welcome my prayers as God welcomes Jesus'. Thirdly, praying in Jesus' name evokes what a tremendous privilege prayer is.

I think we take prayer for granted. *"Of course we can pray to God,"* we imagine. But stop and think about it for a moment. Why should prayer be possible? God is the Creator of all that is. God commands the farthest expanses of the Cosmos. God is entirely good, perfectly pure, wonderfully just, absolutely glorious. God is entirely sufficient for God-self: God has absolutely no need for us, nor is in any way dependent on us. God is so unlike

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther asked, *"What does it mean that the Father is to be glorified in the Son? Nothing else than this, that the Father is to be known and acknowledged as a merciful and compassionate Father, who is not angry with us and does not want to condemn us to hell but remits our sin and grants us all His grace for His son's sake. . . ."* Quoted in Bruner, 831.

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 4.14-16.

us in so many decisive ways. Why should we — puny creatures, who exist for only a tiny snap of time, dwelling on a speck of a planet in a mediocre solar system moving through the frozen emptiness of space — be able to ask anything of God? Why should we — folks who do such a spectacularly awful job of messing things up, starting with ourselves — have any expectation of approaching God?

Well, we can.

Because God has generously created us in God's image. Because when we are a mess, God gives mercy and forgiveness to us. Because God heals the divine image that is each of us. Because while we were God's enemies, God came in Jesus and was willing to die for us. Because God, by the Holy Spirit, lives in us. Because of God the Trinity's overflowing love for us, we can pray.

We can come to God in prayer. We can ask God with the confidence of a trusting child who knows their generous mother. Such a privilege we can enjoy. For in Jesus, God has come to us.

Prayer is a gift from him, a gift we claim when we pray in his name.