

To God Alone Be Glory

Recently, my daily devotions took me through the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel according to St John, a chapter commonly known as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. It's marvelous to see how Jesus didn't simply assert His own authority as the Son of God when He wanted something. Instead, Jesus went to His Father and asked for the things He needed and the things we need. That's not just a Jesus thing; that's something that every believer in Christ can do.

In this particular prayer, Jesus prayed for Himself, as His hour of suffering approached. He also prayed for His disciples, and for "those who will believe in me through their word" – that is, for the whole Christian Church, including you and me. Two thousand years ago, Jesus prayed for our faith, prayed that we would be guarded against temptation, prayed that we would be sanctified in the truth.

Reading through this chapter once again reminded me of several conversations I have had recently regarding prayer. Over and over again, even among my fellow pastors, people talk about "the power of prayer." And over and over again, I wonder why we talk so much about "the power of prayer," focusing on something we do, rather than talk about "the power of God," which is where the credit really belongs. After all, prayer is just the asking, the request. God does the doing.

This misplaced focus was part of the battle that Martin Luther fought in the Reformation. When people wanted a sense of security about their eternal salvation, the Roman Catholic Church at the time pointed them to their own "holy works": the penances they did, the pilgrimages they went on, the holy orders they joined (becoming a priest, a monk, or a nun), the indulgences they purchased.

But Luther knew, from personal experience, that these things offered no lasting comfort. As a young monk, Luther was keenly aware of his own shortcomings. Every time he tried to "be holy," his own imperfections got in the way. He understood that his own sins only angered God, inviting God's punishment rather than God's peace.

Then, through extensive study of the Bible, Luther came to realize that his own works could not secure his eternal salvation, in whole or in part. He came to understand and to apply to his own life what St Paul wrote: "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23); "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Luther learned, and began to teach, that our eternal salvation doesn't happen because of anything we do. It happens by the mercy and power and doing of God. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. When Luther rediscovered this comforting good news in the Bible, he did not take credit for his discovery, nor in any way for his own salvation. Rather, Luther gave all the glory, thanks, and praise to God. Luther made it clear that he had done nothing for God; rather, God had done everything for him.

I'm not sure when the practice started, but I know that, years later, the composers J.S. Bach and G.F. Handel inscribed the letters SDG on their musical compositions. Those letters stand for the Latin words *Soli Deo Gloria*, "To God alone be glory." In this small but significant way, they deflected credit from themselves and gave credit to whom the credit belongs: to God.

So today, as we come to God with our prayers, as we receive his gifts, as we depend upon him in all things, we take no credit for ourselves, for our involvement, for our actions. Rather, *Soli Deo Gloria*: To God alone be glory!