

[Spirituality](#)

[Scripture for Life](#)

[Columns](#)

[Spirituality](#)



(Unsplash/Samuel Martins)



by Mary M. McGlone

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

October 12, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

The Wisdom author says, I prayed and wisdom came to me. Watch out! Prayer is dangerous. Remember Sirach's warning: "If you wish to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for an ordeal" ([Sirach 2:1](#)).

If you want a sense of the danger of prayer, just listen to Jeremiah: "You seduced me Lord, and I let myself be seduced" ([Jeremiah 20:7](#)). Unfortunately, the point of prayer is neither to give God a wish list or assure ourselves a place in heaven. Prayer opens us to the Reigning of God and our part in it.

Take today's Gospel, where a wealthy fellow asks Jesus for assurance that he can earn eternal life. Poor guy, he naively approaches Jesus from an unconscious position of supremacy. His privilege taught him to believe that he can do anything. So, he comes to Jesus and asks, "What is it that I have to do to inherit eternal life?" (Apparently, his upbringing didn't teach him that an inheritance is unearned.) He's among those who fool themselves into thinking they deserve all the goods that come to them.

Twenty-Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time

[October 13, 2024](#)

Wisdom 7:7-11

Psalm 90

Hebrews 4:12-13

Mark 10:17-30 or 10:17-27

In response, Jesus reminds him of some of the commandments — interestingly, not the ones that speak of relationship with God, just the ones that deal directly with human relationships. The fella knows he has that down pat. He replies, "Oh, I've observed all of those since my youth!" Saying that reveals that he sees human relationships as rule-bound: Avoid certain bad actions and all will be well. He's been careful to succeed at not doing certain things.

Then Jesus ups the ante. "How about going beyond the restrictions? How about being godly by giving yourself completely for others?" Ooph! That took it a bit too

far! It was as if Jesus had punched him in the stomach. He must have felt like a kid presenting a good report card whose mom says that grades don't say a thing about what kind of person he is or should become. Being proud of getting all As might be his way of putting down the rest of the class.

The trouble was that the rich guy measured himself by his performance on a severely limited scale. What did he feel like when Jesus looked at him with love? When Jesus gazed at all his loving potential rather than his goods and legalistic accomplishments?

The Letter to the Hebrews describes what happened to the fellow. Jesus, the Word of God incarnate, spoke more sharply than a two-edged sword. Jesus beheld the man's whole and deepest self. Jesus gazed on all he was and all he could become. Jesus invited him to accept and love himself not for what he owned or had accomplished but for the love he could give and receive. In Jeremiah's terms, Jesus tried to seduce him. He did not let himself be seduced.

Advertisement

When Jesus told his disciples how hard it is to be part of the Reigning of God, he explained that it's more costly for those who have much — be it money, prestige, education, etc. Those kinds of wealth are seductive enough to enslave us. They can cushion us from sincere, vulnerable prayer. They can hook us into the delusion that we are self-sufficient and might be worthy of even more.

What then? The Book of Wisdom shows us the way. "I prayed and prudence was given to me." In other words, "Prayer led me to discern the meaning of life, it freed me from the snares of silver, health and beauty. It left me vulnerable enough for God to permeate my very being and accomplish what is impossible for human beings."

When Peter said, "What about us? We've given up everything to follow you!" Jesus responded in a terribly godly way. He told Peter that he would receive more than he expected in ways that he would never imagine — things impossible for human beings.

What does this say to us, people invited into the radical life of synodality while living in the midst of deep divisions? What does Christ call us to pray for and to give away?

Synodality tells us that we can't answer these questions alone. Prayer opens us to God, but it doesn't give us direct and infallible inspiration. Prayer offers us the prudence to discern how God is working among us, and to know that we need all those hundreds of mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers to recognize the promise and the demands of the Reigning of God in our midst.

Prayer is dangerous — it undermines every sort of complacency. But for those who allow themselves to be seduced by a loving God, it offers more than can be imagined — and yes, ordeals that, like the cross, usher us into what only God can give.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 27-Oct 10, 2024** print issue under the headline: The dangerous nature of prayer.