

“REJOICE ALWAYS, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you!” AMEN+

As you may know, I have been leading an Advent course based on the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. A group of about 20 of us have been gathering on Wednesday evening to explore this popular film from a Christian perspective. I know not everyone can come to the class, but I bet most people have seen this movie. So, this morning I want to give you just a short course entitled “A Wonderful Life is a Prayerful Life.”

William James, in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, made the following observation: “Here is the real core of the religious problem: HELP, HELP!” Frank Capra, in his film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, provides a slight elaboration, with his character George Bailey (James Stewart): “God, I’m at the end of my rope!”

Released in 1946 to mixed reviews and only modest attendance, *It's a Wonderful Life* has become for millions of Americans the consummate cinematic expression of the spirit of Christmas. Far from being “a figment of simple Pollyanna platitudes,” as one reviewer put it, *It's a Wonderful Life*, I would argue, is a complex and profound portrayal of Christian faith and divine grace. Although much can be said about the religious significance of *It's a Wonderful Life*, I would like to focus on the film’s depiction of prayer. We will consider three aspects of prayer: **intercession** (prayers for the needs of others), **petition** (prayers for our own needs), and **divine response** to prayer.

The very first scene of *It's a Wonderful Life* is of intercessory prayer. The film opens with a snowy, aerial shot of various homes and other places in the fictitious town of Bedford Falls. Then we hear the voices of people praying; they are praying for a man named George Bailey. It’s clear that George is in some sort of trouble; later we learn that he is considering taking his own life.

The first thing to notice is simply that these people are praying. Sure, they’re family, friends and neighbors, people who know George and care about him. Still, it’s noteworthy that their response to someone in need includes prayer. Secondly, the quality of these intercessions is one of simplicity and humble earnestness. Although, none of these intercessors know that George is contemplating suicide, many do know that his crisis stems from a bank debt of \$8,000. If only George had a large sum of money available, his problems would be solved. And yes, practical things are being done on George’s behalf to raise the money needed—but, nobody prays for money. Instead, they pray simply, “God, watch over him,” “Give him a break,” and “I love him.” A child prays, “Bring Daddy back home.”

When we intercede for others in prayer, typically we pray for them in terms of our perception of their needs. But how do we know what another person truly needs in life? The fact is, ultimately, we don’t. But, God knows. And so when we pray for another, and pray we must, finally, all we can do is simply and humbly open our heart to God, with or without words, so that God may know our loving concern for the other who is in need.

The other type of prayer depicted in *It's a Wonderful Life* is petition. Petition is praying for our own needs. Now, I know there are many Episcopalians who feel uncomfortable praying for themselves (and I'm one of them). They feel it is somehow selfish, especially when we are routinely taught not to think of ourselves, only others. Nonetheless, petition is and always has been the basic mode of prayer.

In the movie there are two petitions, both made by George Bailey. The first one was referred to at the beginning of the sermon. Like the intercessions, it is simple and humble. In fact, it begins with what amounts to a modest confession. George tells God, "I'm not a praying man." He continues, "But if you're up there and can hear me, show me the way. I'm at the end of my rope. Show me the way, God." This, George prays, not from a church or a chapel or from his home, but from a bar.

George is aware of his lack of piety. The important thing is his sincerity. With prayer that's the key. A cynic might argue, "Come on, the guy's desperate. He's ready to grab at anything!" Which is to say that he doesn't know what he's doing. I would argue that—if only for a moment, an instant—George knows, in his heart, exactly what he's doing: he is trusting God. He is trusting God to show him the way out of despair and death, and the way into hope and new life. This trust, this faith only takes a moment—in eternity.

The other petition comes after George has been given a miraculous vision to see what the world would be like if he had never been born, if he had never existed. He believes he's a failure; that his life is worthless; and therefore everyone would be better off without him. The choice George Bailey must make is between life and death in the fullest sense of these terms. In believing that the world would have been better off without him, George is denying the vital and graceful influence that he in fact has been in the lives of so many. What the audience sees as it witnesses George grow-up and proceed through life is that he truly has been a life-giver, as we as a life-saver, to all those around him.

Then, in a miraculous vision George sees the horrific picture of life in Bedford Falls without him: decadent, mean, barren. In response to this vision George passionately voices his second petition: "I want to live. Please God, I want to live!" Actually, George Bailey's two petitions constitute a most fundamental piety: "Show me the way/I want to live." In fact, these prayers are two sides of the same coin. Pray to God, "Show me the way" and in one form or another God will answer, "The way is Life, so choose Life." Pray to God, "I want to live" and God will show you the Way.

For George, God's grace comes with the opportunity for him to choose his life in its *eternal validity*.

And so we now turn to the third aspect of prayer this film presents to us: divine response to prayer. The centerpiece of *It's a Wonderful Life* is the fantasy sequence in which George Bailey is granted his wish to never have been born. George is guided through a shocking tour of his hometown by his guardian angel, Clarence Oddbody, "AS2" (angel 2nd class), who tells him, "You've been given a great gift: a chance to see what the world would be like without you." The people of Bedford Falls, who before had been neighborly and generally good-natured, now without George Bailey are given over to vice, meanness and strife. Not that George was any saint himself. He has his selfish and dark side, too, as the film clearly demonstrates. But his positive influence was enough to tip the balance in peoples' lives to good from evil, to life from death.

Clarence queries George, “Each man’s life touches so many other lives. And when he isn’t around he leaves an awful hole, doesn’t he?” Can any one person make that much of a difference? Who knows? Who can really know what effect one’s life has on the lives of others? There’s so much in life we don’t see. And often our best laid plans lead to misfortune, while our apparent failures turn out for the good in the long run. Who knows? *God knows.*

This is the gift George Bailey is given: a divine vision. To see, in a moment beyond time, what God sees. This is the divine response to George’s prayer and the prayers of those who care about him. A transforming vision. Before he was blind to all the everlasting goodness in his life, but now he sees. And it is this God-given vision that is the answer to his prayer.

Petition, Intercession, and Divine Response. “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus *for you.*” AMEN.