

**Theme Study: Prayer**  
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When Karl Barth came to the section in his massive *Church Dogmatics* that dealt with the Christian life, he considered various options. His most basic question was, “What does a Christian life mean?” Various ideas were then considered as the central concept integrating them all. Some of these – freedom, repentance, faith, thanksgiving, faithfulness – were all given serious consideration, then for various reasons dismissed. The one Barth chose as the central concept was “invocation” – prayer – calling on His name. Then Barth proceeds to discuss the Christian life by using each petition of the Lord’s Prayer. Some 250 pages later, he had only covered up to “Thy kingdom come.”

It is reasonable to say that invocation – calling on the Lord’s name – is the center of our spiritual lives. Without it we have a faith of mere mental assent, an intellectual faith without power or life. Prayer is central in both the Old and New Testaments.

From the time of creation there was an intimate relationship to God – with Adam and Eve in the Garden (Gen. 3.8). From Enoch, who by faith walked with God and didn’t die, to Abraham, who pleaded with God to spare Sodom, we see intimacy with God and the ability to approach Him with requests emphasized. In Abraham’s case, God kept giving into Abraham’s requests as long as he kept asking (Gen. 18.22-33). We see the people of faith (listed in Hebrews 11). Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, David, Samuel and the prophets are all noted (despite profound weaknesses) for being people of prayer. The book of Psalms is a model for prayers of praise, thanksgiving, and confession, etc. There are great pattern prayers in Daniel 9, Ezra 9, and Nehemiah 9. The promise in Zechariah

12.10 is that the Lord will pour out on the house of David and on Jerusalem the “Spirit of grace and supplication.” (Notice the close relationship between the two.)

In the Gospels we see Jesus’ life saturated by prayer. From the time of temptation in the wilderness to times alone early in the morning to pray, Jesus’ life was always oriented towards His Father. This same Jesus who knew vividly how to pray, (John 17) was the one who taught us the Lord’s Prayer.

Jesus first teaches the necessity to pray with our hearts oriented towards God not men. It is very easy to pray in order to appear more spiritual or to build a reputation in the community. Jesus stresses that we should not pray to be noticed by people; we are to pray in private, pouring out our hearts to the Father (Matt. 6.6). We are also not to think that the eloquence of our prayers, or the length, or the number of repetitions of certain phrases make our prayers more meritorious to God. We don’t need to inform Him about the details of our circumstances; He already knows (Matt. 6.7-8).

Jesus’ great prayer – the Lord’s Prayer – shows us the pattern we all need to follow. First, we are to orient ourselves toward our Father rather than on our own needs. Note “thy name,” “thy kingdom come,” “thy will be done.” Our first concern is to focus on who God is and what He asks of us (“Thy”). Second, we are to ask for our needs: “give us,” “forgive us,” “lead us,” “deliver us.” Our whole lives are to be lived in dependence on the Father’s gracious provision.

The prayer starts by addressing God as Father. We take this for granted. The Judaism of Jesus’ time would not even use the name for God but only use the consonants, YHWH. Often, even these consonants were too holy to be written, and Jewish Targums used “word of God” anytime “Yahweh” was used in a text. Even today some Jews refer

to the Deity as G-d. In other words, they were so concerned about His holiness that they never addressed God in a familiar fashion. Jesus' use of "Our Father" in prayer would have been very offensive to the religious establishment of Jesus' day. In fact, there is no instance of any Jew before, during or after Jesus' time addressing God as "Father" in prayer until 974 AD in Italy. Jesus was crucified, in part, for His use of "Father" in prayer.

Although Jesus addresses God as Father and sometimes as "Abba" (a child's form of addressing a father), He also upholds God's Holiness – "Hallowed be thy name." Our Father is to be revered, worshipped, and given honor and glory. Our passion is that His kingdom (His rule or reign) will be established on this earth as fully as it is in heaven.

Even though we may work for our daily bread, we can never take it for granted. It is God who gives us life, health, gifts, and opportunities to work. Any or all of these could be taken away at any time. There is a Psalm that says, "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain" (Ps. 127.1). We will only succeed in our endeavors if the Lord gives us His blessing. We always need to pray: "And do confirm the work of our hands; yes, confirm the work of our hands."

We are to pray for forgiveness for our sins just as we have forgiven others, which is assumed. In the passage right after the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says, "If you do not forgive men, then your Father in heaven will not forgive your transgressions" (Matt. 6.15). In other words, one sure sign that you are forgiven is that you are willing to forgive. On the other hand, refusal to forgive causes God to withhold forgiveness. Persistent refusal to forgive raises questions about whether one has ever received God's grace.

The next verse (Matt. 6.13) contains parallel thoughts. Lest we think that “lead us not into temptation” means that God tempts us, we are given the same thought in other words: “deliver us from evil” (or the evil one) : the evil in our hearts – evil in the fallen world – the evil schemes of the devil. We all live on the edge of falling into sin – confirming bad habits or breaking the chains that bind us by setting a new direction in our thoughts and acts.

### **Parables about Prayer**

In the “friend at midnight” passage (Luke 11.5-8), Jesus tells the story of a village member who has an unexpected guest arrive at midnight. Hospitality demands that the guest be offered some food, but the host lacks bread. It is inconceivable that a neighbor would offer lame excuses like “my children are in bed” or “the door has been shut.” Even though the neighbor may not particularly like the host, he will get up and give him bread because otherwise he would be shamed in the village. The message is that how much more will your heavenly Father give when you ask.

Jesus’ parable of the “Unjust Judge” (Luke 18.1-8) tells about a judge that didn’t fear God or man but is bombarded by pleas for justice from a widow. Even though he didn’t want to listen to her, he gave in because she was wearing him out. Again, the point is that if even an unjust judge will give in to the persistence of this widow, how much more will your heavenly Father bring justice or vindication to those who cry out for it. However, to believe that God will listen and answer our prayers when injustice is seeming to triumph is a test of faith. Jesus asks, “. . . when the Son of Man comes, will He find [this kind of persistent/persevering] faith on the earth” (Luke 18.8).

In yet another parable, “the Pharisee and the Publican” (Luke 18.10-14), two men go up to pray – the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. It is reasonable to suppose that they were “going up” for the morning or evening sacrifice. The morning sacrifice was offered regularly at dawn, and the evening sacrifice at three o’clock in the afternoon. The lamb was offered in sacrifice, followed by public and private prayer. The Pharisee prayed “to himself,” during an opportunity for private prayer, thanking God that he was not like tax collectors, who were notorious for being “swindlers” and “unjust.” He also threw in adultery for good measure. He then went on to show why he was holier than others: he fasted more than required – twice a week, in fact. The Old Testament law required fasting only on the Day of Atonement (see Lev. 23.29). More than that, the Pharisee tithed on everything he got, rather than just tithing on grain, wine and oil, as mandated (Lev. 27.30). He did *more* than the Law required and was proud of it.

It is of interest to note that the phrase “stood and was praying this to himself” (Luke 18.11) might also be translated “stood by himself praying.” If this were the case, then it would underline the standoffish attitude of this Pharisee. He did not want to come close to the people of the land, because contact with them was thought to produce ritual defilement. That this holier-than-thou attitude was sometimes present among observant Jews is testified to indirectly by the great rabbinic teacher Hillel (a contemporary of Jesus), who said: “Keep not aloof from the congregation and trust not in thyself until the day of thy death, and judge not thy fellow until thou are thyself come to his place.” This attitude was being condemned in that time by some leaders of Judaism.

The tax collector, it seems, understood the cultural conventions enough to “stand some distance away” (Luke 18.13). He could only look down, perhaps in contrast with

the Pharisee's looking up to heaven. The tax collector also "beat his breast." This was an unusual sign of humility, sorrow and grief. "Beating the breast" appears only twice in the entire Bible, here and in Luke 23:48. According to the latter verse, after Christ's death, the crowds who had observed "this spectacle" went away "beating their breasts." It was especially unusual for men to "beat their breast." This action underlines the tax collector's sorrow for his sin.

The tax collector also said, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" (Luke 18:13). The word translated "merciful to me" is, in the Greek, *hiasthetimoi*. The root from which this word comes, *hilaskomai*, is the word used for "atonement, "sacrifice" or "propitiation." Another translation indicated in the margin of some Bibles is "God, be propitious to me, a sinner," or "Make atonement for me, a sinner." The tax collector pleaded that the atonement sacrifice for sin offered before God's eyes be effective (propitious) to deal with his sin.

His prayer was granted, the Bible tells us. He "went to his house justified rather than the other" (Luke 18:14). Two had "gone up" to the temple to pray. Both went down, but only one was "justified." The word used here, *dikaioo*, is a root word for justification. Joachim Jeremias thus said, "Our passage shows . . . that the Pauline doctrine of justification has its roots in Jesus' teaching."

This parable contrasts the spiritually proud and self-righteous with the sinner who has been brought low by the sight of his own sin. Righteousness comes not by trusting in our own righteousness but through looking outside of us to an objective atonement. Those who trust in this "alien" righteousness are justified. Those who trust in their own works are not justified. The unrighteous are forgiven when they humbly plead for

atonement. The self-righteous are not forgiven for their sin because they trust in themselves, not in the atoning sacrifice. This parable is first of all about spiritual pride, which looks down with contempt on others (“sinners”), something that is a perennial temptation. It also gives insight into the attitude of heart that is fundamental for those who are truly justified/forgiven by God.

### **Jesus’ Prayers for Us**

It is a great encouragement to know that Jesus is, even now, praying for us. Romans 8.34 says, “Christ is He who died, yet rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.” In other words, Christ died for us, was raised for us, reigns in power for us and prays for us. Another passage says, “Hence, also, He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7.25). Yet another, “And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous” (I John 2.1). There is one specific example of Jesus praying for one of his disciples – Peter (Simon): Jesus says, “Simon, Simon, Satan has demanded to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail, and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22.31-32). Jesus’ double repetition of Simon’s name is most likely an indication of intimacy with him. Even though Satan seeks to test Peter, Simon can be encouraged because Jesus has prayed for him. There is a strong hint that he may fall down (once you have turned again), but there is assurance that he will not stay down because of Jesus’ prayer. Jesus says not “if” you turn, but “when” you turn, carry out the ministry of

strengthening the people of God. Jesus' prayer for us is regular and it is invariably effective. That should be a comfort to us and a truth on which we often reflect.

### **Asking**

Jesus encourages us to pray with persistent faith, giving strong promises along the way. We are told that if we ask, we will receive. If we seek, we will find. If we knock, the door will be opened. It might be, though, that we ask for things that are bad for us. Jesus says if a son asks for a fish, a father is not going to give him a snake or if asked for an egg, the father will not give a scorpion. But what if the son were to ask for a snake or a scorpion? Of course, the father would say "no" and give something good instead. Jesus promises that the Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask" (Luke 11.9-13).

At times Jesus seems to promise that whatever we ask will be given on demand (Matt. 21.21-22; Matt. 17.20) where we are promised to be able to "move mountains" by faith (probably a rabbinic metaphor for a problem solver). James 1.5-6: "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without any doubting . . ." Yet lest we think that this constitutes a blank check for any absurd desire we might have, James later says, "You ask and do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4.3).

Jesus Himself, in the Garden, seems to qualify or amplify His teaching by praying, "Father, if Thou are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will, but Thine be done" (Luke 22.2). Jesus naturally desires to avoid the suffering of the cross, but even more the cup of wrath that will be poured on Him when He bears the sins of the



world. More than anything, He desires to have no separation from the Father (such as happened on the cross – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). The apostle Paul prayed three times for his thorn in the flesh to be removed, but God said no – “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Perhaps the most succinct qualification is given in I John 5.14 “. . . if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.” Saturating our minds in Scripture, which teaches us God’s will, is foundational. In this context, we are to pray in faith for what we want, remembering that God has three possible answers – “Yes,” “No,” or “Wait.” If our prayer is grounded in Scripture/character/will of God, we should persevere until God answers or shows us a different way to pray. Knowing what to pray for can be in part solved by considering the role of the Holy Spirit in prayer.

### **The Holy Spirit and Prayer**

When you pray for things, the key is to discern what to pray for. The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness to pray according to the will of God. Note Romans 8.26-27: “And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” Sometimes we don’t know what to pray for in a particular situation. We need help to pray rightly. When we pray “in the Spirit,” the Spirit will cause us to pray for the things that God wills to do. By the Spirit, our will and God’s will are the same.

The key to praying is to pray “in the Spirit.” The difference is between cold, formal, repetitive prayer and prayer that is inspired by and flows from the Spirit’s indwelling presence. Perhaps you have seen the difference when you are just “priming the pump” and when (in an individual or group) you are flying a few feet off the ground. There is a change in the flow, intensity, and passion in prayer. Ephesians 6.18 says, “With all prayer and petition, pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance, and petition for all the saints.” The key to prayer is “in the Spirit.” Then, “with all prayer and petition – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication (ACTS). We are to persist in prayer for believers all over the world “for all the saints,” not just in our own locality.

Prayer is the central indicator of where we are spiritually. It is a barometer of our spiritual life. Let us learn from Jesus and let the Spirit guide us in prayer.