

CHAPTER 8

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THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER

Prayer for the disciple of Christ is like breathing. It is essential for maintaining a vibrant and healthy spiritual life. Any good relationship needs regular and honest communication. Prayer is one of the primary ways in which we build our relationship with our heavenly Father. A simple definition of prayer is “talking with God.” That implies a two-way conversation in which we are both listening to him and sharing our thoughts with him. And the good news is that the Lord desires to be in a communicative relationship with us. The bad news is that our own sinful nature, the pressures of life in this world, and the evil one conspire daily to hinder our prayer life. The intent of this study is to both encourage us to enjoy the gift of prayer daily and to battle all the forces that would try to prevent us from growing in our relationship with the Lord.

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If prayer is talking to God, who is this God we talk to? At the level of our human experience, we can assert the following: how we talk to people, and what we say, will to a large extent be governed by how well we know them.

—Graeme Goldsworthy, *Prayer and the Knowledge of God*¹

Prayer has been defined very concisely as “personal communication with God.”² While most people say that they believe in prayer, many have never given much thought to how their practice of prayer relates to their beliefs about the One to whom they pray. Since prayer is about communication with God, it only makes sense that how we pray, what we expect from prayer, and what we experience in prayer are directly related to our understanding of who God is, who we are as human beings, and what kind of world we live in. Jesus taught about prayer on a number of occasions but our focus will be on what is commonly referred to as the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13).

Jesus purposefully begins by focusing our attention on the character of the One whom we address in prayer. He says that we are to pray to “*Our Father in heaven*.”³ In the Old Testament, God is referred to as a Father in relationship to his people (Deut.; 32:6), and Israel is called God’s son in several places (Exod. 4:22; Hos. 11:1), but it is most significant that the fatherhood of God is directly connected to the relationship between God and Israel’s promised Messiah (Ps. 89:27–28). Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the son of David (Matt. 1:1; 16:16) who comes to “save his people” (Matt. 1:21) and usher in God’s rule.

It was virtually unheard of to address God as Father in Jesus’ day. Our privilege of knowing and communicating with God as Father is based on our union with Jesus the Son. Through being united to the Son, we experience new birth (John 1:12) and are encouraged by the Holy Spirit to call out to God as Father (Gal. 4:4–7). Andrew Murray says:

The knowledge of God's Father-love is the first and simplest but also the last and highest lesson in the school of prayer. Prayer begins in the personal relationship with the living God as well as the personal, conscious fellowship of love with Him. In the knowledge of God's Fatherhood revealed by the Holy Spirit, the power of prayer will root and grow. The life of prayer has its joy in the infinite tenderness, care, and patience of an infinite Father who is ready to hear and to help.

—Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*⁴

The fatherhood of God is revealed most clearly through the words and actions of his Son, Jesus the Messiah (John 14:7–9). The apostle Paul tells us that the Spirit of the Son moves us to pray to God as Abba-Father (Gal. 4:6). Having grounded prayer in the context of familial relationship, Jesus in Matthew 6 moves on to teach us about the God-centered motives that should shape our requests.

We should pray, “*Hallowed be your name.*” The word *hallowed* is the verbal form of the word holy, which means to set apart. God is *holy* because he is unique. The prayer that God's name be made holy is not a request that God would become something that he is not, but that we might recognize him for who he is. The prayer for God's name to be hallowed is a prayer for people to become aware of the greatness and goodness of God. Too often spirituality is just another tool for realizing our self-potential, but Jesus reminds us that our lives are most in line with reality when we develop a God-centeredness that places his glory at the center of reality.

We can see the same kind of adjustment of priorities in the prayer “*Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” Jesus knew that our ultimate hope must lie in the coming of God's kingdom, his rule. It is only through God's liberating presence (word and spirit) that the effects of sin and corruption are overcome. Though we know that the full realization of God's promises will not come until Jesus returns, we pray in faith and persevere in hope, asking God to overcome sin and darkness in and around us. (See Jesus' parable about persistent prayer, Luke 11:5–13).

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“Give us today our daily bread.” Bread was a daily necessity for Jesus’ early followers. This request for “daily bread” put them in touch with the reality of which we all need to be reminded regularly: God’s gracious provision for our daily existence. God’s grace comes to us from the very beginning of the Bible’s story when he creates the physical world and provides for all of the needs of Adam and Eve.

Another way to phrase this request is, “Give us what we need for today.” This is very similar to the proverb which reads, “Give me neither poverty nor riches; give me only my daily bread” (Prov. 30:8b). Abundance can be dangerous to us because it can blind us to reality. Jesus knows how easy it is for us to be blinded by our self-centeredness, so he graciously gives us a God-centered prayer that works to refocus our vision.

Unless we pay close attention, we might miss the fact that Jesus instructs us to pray for our daily bread. None of us exists on our own; rather, we are born and live within a web of relationships (parents, relatives, friends, coaches, teachers, co-workers, etc.) that are necessary for our well-being. Jesus’ prayer reminds us that if we are aligned with reality (the kingdom of God), we will regularly speak to our Father about the practical well-being of ourselves and others.

“Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.” If you have a large debt that you cannot pay, receiving forgiveness of the balance by the one to whom you are indebted is good news! The Old Testament tells of a Jubilee celebration (Lev. 25–26) held every fifty years when people were forgiven all their debts, and those who had been enslaved were liberated. Jesus may have been thinking of just such a time when he taught his disciples about prayer.

Most religions believe that prayer brings us into contact with a force beyond humanity. But Jesus, in his instructions about prayer, is not teaching us to address just any god. The God that Jesus proclaims is the One who enters into our world to wipe away our debt and liberate us from the power and penalty of sin (John 3:16).

If we take the time to consider it, we will admit that we often fail to love God with our whole being and fail to love other people who are made in his image (Matt. 22:34–40). The truth is that no matter how often we have tried to be true to our calling as God’s representatives on earth, we have fallen short. Our great debt means that on the final day of reckoning, we will find ourselves so far overdrawn that we will have to declare complete bankruptcy. When we ask God to forgive us our debts, we count on his being as he has revealed himself to be in Jesus. He is the “Father in heaven” who has sent his Son to wipe out our debt through his death and fill us with the Spirit who causes us to cry, “Abba, Father.”

Some people are deeply troubled by Jesus’ teaching about forgiveness in these verses, because he seems to base forgiveness on our having forgiven others. It is easy to see why someone would have this concern in light of Jesus’ comments just a few verses later, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matt. 6:14–15). This is a troubling passage that is hard to fit into the biblical notion of God’s unconditional offer of forgiveness.

There is no clear resolution to this tension, but it is always helpful to look at things in light of the entire biblical story. As receivers of God’s free gift of salvation in Christ, we have been radically forgiven. Likewise, we are called to be like Christ in our forgiveness of others. It seems Jesus is saying that to be his disciple is to have entered into a whole new liberating reality that is experienced through our identification with Jesus the Messiah. If we have embraced this new reality, we will be the kind of people who forgive others. If we do not extend forgiveness to others, we have not truly grasped the good news ourselves.

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“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” This last request zeros in on the fact that we presently experience opposition to walking in the way of the Father. Moreover, contrary to what we might assume, our Father in heaven is not first of all committed to making our life journey as easy as possible.

“Lead us not into temptation” might appear puzzling since it seems to imply that we need to request that our Father not lead us into a situation where we will be tripped up. What kind of father would be motivated by a desire to see his kids tripped up? Here we need a little understanding of the original language to make a subtle but important distinction. The word that is translated temptation (*peirasmos*) can refer to testing or to temptation—as a trap.

We know that God does not tempt us because he wants us to stumble (James 1:13), but he does sometimes lead us into and through trials as he did with Jesus when God led him, “into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matt. 4:1). Jesus, our example, prayed to be delivered from the agony of the cross but entrusted himself to the Father. Likewise, we should pray to be delivered from the testing brought about by living in an evil world; yet we should recognize that whatever God plans or allows comes from the hand of our Father in heaven.

We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they say, ‘liked to see young people enjoying themselves’, and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, ‘a good time was had by all.’

—C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*⁵

In conclusion, the Jesus Prayer is centered on knowing God as Father. It also teaches us that the experiential knowledge of God as Father is a privilege that is open to all who come to him through Jesus our mediator. Jesus then teaches us that knowing God's fatherly love should motivate us to desire that the Father's goodness and greatness be known throughout the whole earth. Having experienced the blessed rule of our loving Father, we want others to experience the kindness, mercy, and love of God.

Jesus, being the truth-teller that he is, also discloses that the coming of the kingdom of God in this age does not do away with disappointments, pain, temptations, and injustices. Because of unfulfilled hunger (physical and spiritual), we are told to pray for ourselves and others, that the Father would give us today our daily bread. Because this age is also filled with sinful actions (our own and those of others), we must pray that the Father would forgive us our debts, and we must forgive others'. Finally, Jesus teaches us to recognize the providence of God in the trials we experience. Prayer is the cry of God's children who live in the tension that is created by our experience of God's fatherly care and the frustration of our human experience in this broken world. Thus it is in the context of prayer that we are made more like our Savior who taught us to pray.

NOTES

¹Graeme Goldsworthy, *Prayer and the Knowledge of God* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 2004), 10.

²Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 376.

³Unless otherwise noted Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*, 1984.

⁴Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (1895; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

⁵C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (1944; repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 31.