

## A Theology of Prayer

### Luke 11:1

The life of Jesus was characterized by prayer. I think it is safe to say, the disciples had never encountered anyone who prayed like Jesus. So impressed were they with Jesus's prayer life that *when [Jesus] finished [praying], one of his disciples said ... , Lord, teach us to pray...* (Lk 11:1).

Jesus lived in close, personal, communion with the Father. While we, perhaps, are prone to neglect prayer, avoid prayer, forget to pray, not pray much at all, and must work to discipline ourselves to pray, Jesus seemed to relish prayer, pursue prayer, need prayer, want to pray, and be drawn to prayer. Whereas for us prayer mainly seems to be a discipline and a duty in every sense of the word, to Jesus it seemed to be a place where discipline and delight merged.

Hopefully, this series of lessons can stir in all of us a desire to pray, a longing for prayer, and delight in prayer. To paraphrase a quote from John Owen, *What we are on our knees in secret before God Almighty, that we are and no more.*<sup>i</sup>

Prayer is the greatest privilege and, often, the most glaring negligence of the Christian and, even, of the church. We have a need to pray, and, yet perhaps, a reluctance to do so. There can be many reasons for this neglect and reluctance.

- One, prayer, consistent prayer, can be hard because it seems to require time and discipline.
- Another reason is, we may feel uncomfortable and unprepared to pray. If we don't feel competent to pray, if we can't do it perfectly, we simply neglect prayer.
- A third reason for neglecting prayer is, we may feel that prayer does not work and makes no difference in life. We've tried it and seemingly had no results.
- Fourth, we may bring the wrong expectations—ill-formed or ill-informed—to prayer.
- Finally, we fear the abuses of prayer. Some may approach prayer as if God owes them certain rights.<sup>ii</sup> People can have a “name it, claim it” mentality or a speak it into being ideology. God is reduced to a “genie“ whose purpose is

to grant our wishes on demand. We don't want to appear to belong to that camp.

The reality is that we get to pray because God has invited his people, as un-schooled as we are, to come into his Presence to commune with Him in prayer.<sup>iii</sup>

Prayer is a discipline to study, to learn, and to practice. The more we study, learn, and practice prayer to more delightful the time of prayer becomes. Every time we pray, we are going to the school of prayer. God teaches us to pray as we pray.<sup>iv</sup>

Andrew Murray wrote:

Reading a book about prayer, listening to lectures, and talking is very good, but it won't teach you to pray. You get nothing without exercise, without practice. I might listen for a year to a professor of music playing the most beautiful music, but that won't teach me to play an instrument.<sup>v</sup>

We learn to pray as we pray. In a sense, Christians need to be taught to pray no more than a baby needs to be taught to cry. Crying for basic needs is, however, minimal communication. We hope our children develop better communication skills than crying. As we learn and grow, we come to see prayer is both natural to the Christian and a discipline to be learned and delighted in.<sup>vi</sup> The more we pray, the more we are around prayer, the more we, like the disciples, will want to be taught to pray.

## **1. The Necessity of Prayer**

Prayer is as necessary for the Christian as air is to sustain human life. The prayerless Christian is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.

### **A. All Christians pray**

I've always been struck by the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Every believer had heard of Saul and knew of his mission to stamp out the Christian faith (cf. Acts 8:3; 9:1-2).

After Saul was converted on the Damascus Road and brought to Damascus, the Lord spoke to a disciple there, named Ananias, saying, *Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for*

*behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight (Acts 9:11-12).*

Notice the purpose clause and its emphasis in the text, *for behold, he is praying....* The Lord knew Ananias and the church would be spooked by the presence of Saul (cf Acts 9:13-14). Saul, however, was no longer *breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord (Acts 9:1)*. He was breathing out prayer to the Lord.

All Christians pray. Some are better at it than others. Some do more of it than others. Some are sinfully negligent of it. But somewhere, sometimes, someway every Christian prays.

As a result of these studies, I want us to be drawn deeper into prayer, be quicker to pray, come to relish the activity of prayer, and be delightfully disciplined in our praying, only so delighted in it that it doesn't seem like a discipline.

More than a command, the assumption of the Bible is that we will pray. (I think I could argue that prayer is a mandate.) When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, Jesus said, *When you pray, say ... (11:2)*. The assumption is, you will pray. You may do it badly, you may struggle with it, you may wait until you are desperate, but you will do it.

### **B. Prayer is a global reality**

It is true that a lot of people in the world besides Christians pray. I had an uncle who was penned down for 40 days in the Battle of An Loc during the Eastern Offensive in the Vietnam War. The few times we ever talked about God, he would always say when he was in his foxhole at night praying, he would think that the enemy was across the way in his foxhole praying. Who would God hear was what he was asking or arguing.

Brothers and Sisters, it matters not that many people across world religions pray, the only thing that matters is the God to whom you pray. The prophets of Baal prayed to Baal on Mt. Carmel to no avail. They credited Baal with the rain and the harvest, but when Baal was called upon there was no response. Elijah said, *How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God,*

*follow him; but if Baal, then follow him* (1Kgs 18:21). The God who hears and answers prayer is the LORD.

That most people across the world pray shows that prayer is a necessity for mankind. He feels his need and the need for divine intervention. The global reality of prayer does much to argue the existence of God and testifies to his eternal power and attributes. That pagans pray does not argue against the reality and efficacy of prayer but for the necessity of prayer and the necessity for gospel proclamation. You can be sure that wherever and whomever you share the gospel, God has already been speaking to them about himself and their need.

Christian prayer is markedly distinct from the prayers of hypocrites and heathen. When Jesus gave his disciples instructions on how to pray, he instructed them not to pray for show like the hypocrites (Mt. 6:5-6) and not to pray like pagans who think they need to inform God of their situation and advise him on how to remedy it (manipulation of deities) (Mt. 6:7-8).

The prayers of non-Christian peoples are tainted by their sinful natures and often become idolatrous and meaningless psychological crutches, wishful musings, and selfish desires but not prayer in the Christian sense. Are we impacted psychologically by prayer. Yes. But prayer is much more than therapy. It is not simply coming to terms with reality. Prayer that lays hold of the will of God effects objective change.<sup>vii</sup> Does it change me as the pray-er? Yes. I need change. It also effects change in the world, in individuals, in situations, in the church—to transform all of these to alignment with the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God.

One of the clearest texts, although there are many, is in James as he holds up the prophet Elijah as an example of the power of prayer:

*Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*

*Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit (Jas 5:13-18).*

Prayer is a necessity.

## **2. The Foundation of Prayer**

The foundation of all prayer is the sovereignty and character of God.<sup>viii</sup> Two questions arise from such an assertion. First, if God is sovereign, why pray? A second question might be, does prayer change things?

### **A. Why pray?**

The question, if God is sovereign, why pray?, seems to view prayer as one-dimensional, relating only to requests. So, the reasoning goes, “if God has already determined all things already and has the power to bring about his sovereign determinations, prayer has no point.?”

Obviously, sovereignty does not negate praise, it invites it. Sovereignty invites the giving of thanks and the confession of sins. It serves to make all those aspects of prayer necessary and fitting. But how does petitionary prayer play in?

God’s sovereign, immutable will does set the bounds of our asking. John said, *And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him (1John 5:14-15).*

God’s will is good and perfect. It cannot be improved upon. We not only don’t have better idea, but we can’t have a better idea. We can, however, have the same will in a matter.

The same God who ordained all things, is the same one who ordained prayer and invites us through prayer (an other ways) to meaningfully participate in activities of eternal significance.<sup>ix</sup> Think of it, the sovereign God who rules over all things invites us to participate in the working out of his will in our asking.

Sometimes we know the will of God in a situation from our study of Scripture and our personal knowledge of the character of God. Sometimes we don't know God's will in a matter.

Paul addressed that:

*Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Rom 8:26-27).*

It is remarkable that God would invite us into the working out his will, even when because of our weakness we don't know what to pray, we just know prayer is needed.

Nothing is out of the reach of prayer, except that which lies outside the will of God. Prayer in God's will is always answered. Some may respond, *Am I restricted to the will of God in my praying?*, as if that hems us in and restricts our asking. To say that my finite mind is limited by the infinite wisdom of God is a contradiction. This would be like a minnow complaining that his swimming is restricted by the shores of the ocean.

*Limited* and *restricted* are simply not the right words to us. Asking is as open as the infinite wisdom of God. The field of play is the mind of God. Would we say praise is limited by the majesty of God, confession by the willingness of God to forgive, thanksgiving by the goodness of God, and asking by the kind purpose of God. These are glorious limitations that in no way stifle prayer, but enhance and encourage it.

Some may be of the mind that prayer is to change God's will. That assumes God's will is not perfect, that his goodness is in question, that my idea is better than his will. Some would argue that prayer is like a father who picks his children up from school. The kids muster up the courage to ask if their Dad will stop and get them an ice cream cone on the way home. The Dad says, *You know I hadn't thought of that. I think I am willing to do that.*<sup>x</sup>

Prayer is not to get our will done in heaven but to participate in God's will being done on earth. It is not my attempt to overcome God's reluctance but to lay hold of God's willingness.

### **B. Is prayer effective?**

A second question that arises about prayer in light of the sovereignty of God comes from a misunderstanding of the nature of prayer.<sup>xi</sup> Some may reason, if prayer does not change the mind and will of God, is prayer effective? Do petitions really have meaning and significant impact? Something is amiss in the assumptions behind the question of prayer changing the mind and will of God.<sup>xii</sup> The purpose of prayer is misunderstood.

If you have learned of the sovereignty of God and this truth has worked in you to lessen your praying and witnessing, you have misunderstood God's sovereignty. His sovereignty is the foundation of praying and witnessing and worshiping, etc.

The purpose of prayer is not rebellion against God, but rebellion against the fallenness of the world. God is not the problem. God's will is not the problem. The problem is his will is not being done on earth as it is in heaven. Prayer is the refusal to accept as normal that which is contrary to the perfect will of God.

David Wells commented:

Petitionary prayer flourishes where there is a twofold belief: first, that God's name is hallowed too irregularly, his kingdom has come too little, and his will is done too infrequently; second, that God himself can change this situation. Petitionary prayer, therefore, is the expression of hope that life as we meet it, on the one hand can be otherwise and, on the other hand, that it ought to be otherwise. It is therefore impossible to seek to live in God's world on his terms, doing his work in a way that is consistent with who he is, without engaging in regular prayer.<sup>xiii</sup>

Prayer is the declaration that God and his world are at cross-purposes. Resignation to the way things are is to act as if God and his world are one in purpose or irreconcilable, i.e. God can do nothing about it. Prayerlessness has its root in faithlessness.<sup>xiv</sup> God's mind and will are not changed by things. God changes things according to his sovereign will, which he so often exercises through

secondary means and activities, like the prayers of his people. Prayer is one of the means God uses to change things or to bring about his will in the world. Prayer changes things. Prayer does not change the will of God.<sup>xv</sup>

### **3. What is prayer?**

Wayne Grudem defines prayer simply as, *personal communication with God*.<sup>xvi</sup> I like the way question 178 of The Larger Catechism defines prayer: *Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, in the name of Christ, by the help of the Spirit; with confession of sins, and thankful acknowledgements of his mercies*.<sup>xvii</sup>

Ole Hallesby captured the most moving biblical definition or description of prayer by looking at Revelation 3:20, *Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he will me*.

Hallesby said, *To pray is to let Jesus come into our hearts. This teaches us, in the first place, that it is not our prayer which moves the Lord Jesus. It is Jesus who moves us to pray*.<sup>xviii</sup> Prayer is communion and communication with God.

#### **A. Prayer is communion and communication with God**

R.C. Sproul illustrated the necessity of communion and communication with God in prayer:

*My wife and I are as close as two people can be. Often, I know what she's going to say almost before she says it. And the reverse is true. But I still like to hear her say what is on her mind. If that is true of man, how much more true is it of God? We have the matchless privilege of sharing our innermost thoughts with God. Of course, we could simply enter our prayer closet, shut the door, let God read our mind, and call that prayer. But that's not communion, and certainly not communication*.<sup>xix</sup>

Communion and communication with God is bi-directional, consisting of the human person speaking to God and God speaking to the human person.<sup>xx</sup> In the process of communion and communication with God, some themes of prayer emerge, some of which we will explore in this course: praise/adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication/intercession, lament, solitude/meditation, etc.

## **B. Prayer confesses some things about God**

When we pray, we confess some things about God. The act of prayer confesses the presence of God. Often when we pray, we feel a distance or absence of God ( eg. Job 23:3; Psalm 10:1; 13:1; 22:1; 74:1; 83:1; 88:14), but the need to pray argues for God's presence.

Prayer confesses God is wise. He knows better than me. He knows my needs, my situation, etc., before I ask. I don't pray to inform him of things he does not know. I pray because he not only knows, he is powerful and can do something about my circumstances.

Prayer also confesses that God approachable, interested in me, and cares for me. Peter says, *Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you* (1Pet 5:6-7).

## **C. Prayer confesses some things about me and you**

Prayer confesses that God is sovereign, wise, powerful, and present. Of all the things prayer confesses about us, it confesses we are helpless. It is true that prayer confesses we are dependent creatures, we are believers, we are children of God, we trust the goodness of God, we are sinful creatures, we need guidance and protection, and we are worshipers of God.

But we can summarize all of these characteristics into one: we are helpless. Again Hallesby said, *Only those who are helpless can truly pray.*<sup>xxi</sup> When we have a sense of our own helplessness, we will pray and find sweet communion with Jesus. Perhaps, then, we will hear his voice.

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<sup>i</sup> Tim Keller, *Prayer*, 22. Keller quoted this from John Owen, cited in I.D.E. Thoams, *A Puritan Golden Treasury*, (Banner of Truth 1977), 192.

<sup>ii</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Effective Prayer*, 6-8.

<sup>iii</sup> Sproul, 10.

<sup>iv</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *The Spiritual Disciplines of the Christain Life*, 66-67.

<sup>v</sup> Quoted from Don Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines of the Christain Life*, 67.

<sup>vi</sup> Don Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines of the Christain Life*, 66.

<sup>vii</sup> Grenz, 33.

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- <sup>viii</sup> T.W. Hunt, *The Doctrine of Prayer*, (Nashville: Convention Press, 1986), 8.
- <sup>ix</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed, 377.
- <sup>x</sup> I first heard this posited in a NT Theology course at NOBTS.
- <sup>xi</sup> David Wells, "Prayer: Rebelling against the Status Quo," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, eds., 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (Pasadena: William Cary Library, 1999), 143.
- <sup>xii</sup> Sproul, 13.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Wells 143.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Wells, 144.
- <sup>xv</sup> Sproul, 13.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Grudem, ST, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed., 376.
- <sup>xvii</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith: Together with The Larger Catechism and The Shorter Catechism with the Scripture Proofs, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 137.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Ole Hallesby, *Prayer*, (Ausborg, Minneapolis 1994), 13.
- <sup>xix</sup> Sproul, 15.
- <sup>xx</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Prayer: The Cry for the Kingdom*, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 20.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Hallesby, 18.