

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

January 10, 2010 The Privilege and Necessity of Prayer

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Dear Radio Friends,

How is your prayer life? Are you one who prays often? Do you always know what to pray? Are you comfortable in the presence of God? Are your prayers characterized by worship of God and reverence for Him? Or do you only pray when you feel an immediate need for yourself?

I ask those questions because we need instruction in prayer. We not only need to learn what prayer is and how to pray; but it is something that we need to learn to do. No one should be able to say, "I'm satisfied with my prayer life. I pray enough." In fact, the more we pray, the more we will see our need of prayer.

The true measure of a person is his prayer life—what he prays, how often he prays, and so on. We sometimes say, "A man is what he reads." Or, "You can know a man by his friends." The true measure of a man is not what he is before men, his public life. But, when he is alone, in his private time before God, what is he then? Who is he when it is just him and God? This shows us the importance and the necessity of learning about prayer.

Our instructor in prayer is Jesus Christ. He Himself was a man of constant prayer during His ministry. He would pray at night, going into the mountain while His disciples traveled or while they slept. You remember the agony of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane immediately before His death. And He prayed earnestly before God.

The disciples observed that Jesus was a man of prayer. So, in Luke 11, they came to Him and they said, "Lord, teach us to pray." Jesus gave to them the model for prayer in what we now call "The Lord's Prayer," or the "Disciples' Prayer." We want to be instructed out of this model in the coming weeks on the subject of Prayer.

First, today, though, we want to know what prayer is. The answer to that is, first, that prayer is a miracle and a gift of God to us sinners. It is something that we should treasure. It is something that we should use often in our lives. In the beginning, in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve would walk with God day-by-day in the Garden and commune with Him. But Adam and Eve's fall into sin put a separation between them and God. That is what sin does. Isaiah says, "Your sins separate between you and your God."

That is what the sin of Adam and Eve did in the beginning. And God left them. Adam and Eve hid from the presence of God, and God no longer came and talked with them in the Garden at the end of each day. Instead, God gave to Adam and Eve and to us the gift of prayer. God speaks to us now through the Scriptures and through the gospel, chiefly through His Son Jesus Christ. And God makes it possible for us to talk to Him through prayer. We can do this only as we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "No man cometh to the Father, but by me." So it is important for us not only to learn to pray as Jesus prayed, but to learn to pray believing on Him and coming to the Father (to God) through Jesus Christ.

When we pray, we should remember that God is the great Creator. He is a just and a holy God. He is over all. He is the transcendent God. He comes down to us in the revelation of the gospel. And the beauty of prayer is this, that God comes to us in such a way that we can know and experience His presence, and we can communicate with Him through prayer. Prayer is a privilege. Prayer is a miracle. Prayer is a great gift from God.

It is a miracle that God works in us through regeneration—making us desire to come to Him, and making us want to come and talk to Him through prayer. It is a mercy for us to be able to pray, even if we receive nothing from God in prayer. The very fact that we can talk to God in prayer is a great gift.

In the second place, prayer is communion. It is the believer's fellowship and conversation with God. God is a communicating God. He speaks to us through His word. He speaks within Himself as the triune God. The important thing for us to remember is that God's speech must be first. And our prayers should reflect what God says to us. God gives us prayer so that we can talk to Him. He has revealed to us the mysteries and the secrets of Himself and of the way of salvation. His Holy Spirit comes into us and awakens us to these things. And prayer is our return speech to Him in that conversation of salvation.

The Bible speaks of God as a Father, especially in reference to prayer. That conveys the intimacy of God. God is a God of love. We are His children. In prayer it is as though He receives us children onto His lap and we are able to speak with Him.

In the third place, prayer is the act of putting oneself consciously in the presence of God. In prayer, we come into the presence of God with knowledge, with awareness, with a consciousness of who He is. There is a sense in which we are always in the presence of God. In Psalm 139 the psalmist makes plain that there is nowhere that we can go to escape the presence of God. But it is true in our lives that we are very often preoccupied with so many things. God, then, is far from our thoughts. Prayer is the pause in our busy life to bring us back into the presence of God, to bring us face-to-face with God. That is why we sometimes close our eyes when we pray, as a symbol of shutting out the world and bringing us into the presence of God. Prayer is heavenly. Prayer transports us from the earth into God's dwelling place, into the throne of His grace.

When we think of prayer this way, as a conscious entering into the presence of God, that helps us to be more prayerful. Sometimes we think very narrowly of prayer, as something that we do when we simply fold our hands and bow our heads and speak. But the Bible says that we should pray without ceasing. Paul says, "Praying always, with all prayer and supplication." We cannot always stop to pray. But prayer is something we ought to be doing all the time. We ought to be living day-by-day and moment-by-moment in the presence of God.

Prayer is in a sense a concession to our human weakness, to our forgetfulness, to our sin. God gives us prayer so that we are able to remember Him and come again into His presence. That is what prayer is. It is a gift from God. It is communion between the child of God and his Father in heaven. And it is a conscious entering of the child of God into the presence of God.

It is important that we understand what kind of prayer is pleasing to God. Not all prayer is true and acceptable prayer. In Psalm 66:18 the psalmist says, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the

Lord will not hear me." He is telling us that God does not hear all prayer. God does not hear the prayer of an ungodly and an unbelieving man. And God does not always hear our prayers either, when we approach Him in the wrong way.

So, what are the qualifications of a true and acceptable prayer before God? There are four. First of all, we must pray to God as He has revealed Himself in the Bible. God is not a weak God, unable to answer our prayers. He is not a deaf God who does not hear our prayers. He is not a blind God who does not see our needs. He is not a changing God who will do something once and then change His course of action. He is not a God who is just there for us in times of emergency. But God has revealed Himself in the Scriptures as the all-knowing, everywhere-present, almighty, sovereign, merciful, saving God. And all these things must be in our mind as we come before God in prayer.

Another part of what God has revealed about Himself in the Scriptures is that He can be approached only through His Son Jesus Christ. We must take the gospel and salvation into account when we pray. Jesus says, "No man cometh to the Father but by me." So we must pray in the name of Jesus Christ, believing in Jesus as our Savior.

Second, true prayer is prayer in which we pray to God as He has commanded us to pray. God has certainly commanded us to bring our needs before Him in prayer. He wants us to pray for the needs of our body as well as the needs of our soul. But sometimes God does not answer us when we ask for things concerning our body. The reason is that our great concern in prayer should be for our spiritual needs, for the needs of our soul. And God sometimes will withhold from us what we want for our bodies in order to strengthen our souls.

But our prayers should not only be petitions or even primarily or first petitions. If our prayers were only petitions concerning ourselves, then we insult God. Jesus teaches us, in the pattern of the Lord's Prayer, to pray first for God—for the honor of His name, for the coming of His kingdom, for the doing of His will. Our prayers should also include praise of God and thanksgiving to God for what He has done for us. So many people pray for all kinds of trivial things and nothing more. But God, in true prayer, wants us to pray as He has commanded us in His word.

Third, for our prayers to be true and acceptable to God, we should know our needs and our misery before God. That is, we should be humble in our approach to Him. True humility comes only when we know God and who He is, and know ourselves before Him. When we understand that, that bears on our prayers. Then we will always come in Christ. Then we will never expect from God what we ask of Him, as though God is under some obligation towards us. True prayer is prayer in which the sinner is humble before God.

Then, fourth, in true prayer we must come to God without doubting, that is, we must come with faith. We must not come as sniveling and whining children to God. But we must come confidently through His Son Jesus Christ, believing that as God has given us His Son, He will, with Him, freely give us all things that we need for body and soul. Even a person who is humble can pray that way because He depends not on himself for acceptance before God, but he comes through the blood of the Son of God.

In the book of James, chapter 1:6, James says that we should ask in faith, nothing wavering. In Hebrews, we learn that we should come with boldness unto the throne of grace. God does not hear the prayer of one who doubts whether God is able or willing to answer his prayer.

Another important question in the subject of prayer is this: Why do we need to pray? Perhaps you say, "Well, God is all-knowing. God knows all my needs, so I don't need to pray to Him." It is true, in prayer we do not tell something to God that He does not already know. God is, you might say, the immutable God, so prayer does not change God and what He does. So why do I need to pray. God is the sovereign God. How can I dare to approach Him and ask Him for things? And there is certainly some truth in that. In Psalm 139, the psalmist says, "There is not a word in my tongue but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether." And when Jesus is speaking to His disciples in Matthew 6 He says, "Your heavenly Father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask him." In Psalm 56, the psalmist says, "Thou knowest all my tears." So God knows our situation. The question then is: Why do we still need to pray?

It is important for us to understand that when God gives to us the gift of prayer, He is not giving us something that He needs, but something that we need. Does God need prayer? No. Does prayer change God? No. But do I need prayer, as a Christian in this world? The answer is, Yes. Imagine a life without prayer. In prayer, God, as it were, ties Himself to my human need of communication, of knowledge, and of trust in Him. He says, "I don't need these people to pray to me to make Me to change My will. But because they need it, because they need a sense of dependence and trust and the knowledge of My dealings with them, I will give them the gift of prayer. I will tie them to the means of prayer in their life." This is why God gives us prayer. Prayer changes us, not God. Prayer is a way for us to come into subjection to the will and the dealings of God with us in our lives.

In that way, prayer is the way in which we receive God's blessing in our life. God, as it were, ties Himself to the means of prayer as the way in which He will give us the things that we need.

What is it that God gives to us in prayer? What are we really asking of God when we pray? Sometimes we pray and we are asking for things for our earthly needs, for our body and for our life here in the world. We ask for health. Perhaps somebody asks for a husband or a wife. There are other good petitions that the children of God make. But God does not always answer us by giving us those things.

Still, we must understand that God *does* answer our prayers. What we need in answer to our prayers is not necessarily the things that we ask, but the grace of God and His Holy Spirit to give us contentment in our situation in life. This is the teaching of Jesus in Luke 11 when He is talking about asking of God things that we need. He says, "Everyone that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened." And He uses an illustration. He says, "If a son shall ask bread of him who is a father, he won't give him a stone, but he will give him bread. If he asks for a fish, he won't give him a snake to eat. But he'll give him the fish that he needs." And then Jesus adds this: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children; how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" (v. 13).

Notice how Jesus says God answers our prayers. Not always by giving us the thing that we ask

for, but by giving us what we need. We need grace and the Holy Spirit. And God has determined to give His grace and Holy Spirit to those who make this petition of Him.

This means that when we come to God in prayer we should always pray as Jesus prayed, "Not my will, but thine be done." And we should pray that God would help us to have contentment and submission to His will for our lives.

Another reason that we need to pray is this, that God has commanded His people to pray. The Heidelberg Catechism, a Reformation creed, calls prayer the "chief part of thankfulness" in the life of the Christian. It is important for us to understand what that means. We show our thankfulness to God in many ways. We show our thankfulness to God in our worship of Him. We show our thankfulness to God in our godly living. We show our thankfulness to God by believing in the gospel of His Son. But prayer is an important part of our life in which we show that we are thankful to God for what He has done for us. Prayer is the response of the saved sinner to God's work for him, for God's grace in his life.

When we call prayer thankfulness, we are confessing that God has done something for us. He has not only spoken to us, but He has revealed Himself to us as our Savior in His Son, Jesus Christ. Our prayer is a simple acknowledgment to God and gratitude to God for what He has done for us. When we are negligent in prayer, then we are not recognizing God and we are not recognizing what He has done for us in Jesus Christ. In prayer we offer ourselves up to God. Prayer is praise. Prayer is worship. Prayer is an active dedication, an acknowledgment of our commitment to God. And so prayer must be primary in the life of the Christian.

And so, as we finish today, let us understand the importance and the necessity of prayer in our life. Prayer is a calling. And prayer is something that we need to do. A person who does not pray is not saying, "Well, God is sovereign, so I don't need to pray to Him. He already knows my needs." But a person who refuses to pray is saying, "I don't need God, and I don't need to trust and depend upon God." Prayer is an acknowledgment of the sovereignty of God and of our trust in Him. In prayer we give God His proper place. We acknowledge Him as the Creator and the Provider. And we look to Him to help us and to supply our needs.

In true prayer we do not hope to change God. But we hope that He will teach us to submit to Him. God is God. He does not need to change. But we do. That is why we pray. And God, through prayer, shows us His way, His will. He gives us the grace to submit to Him and to be thankful. In prayer we worship God as God.

Let us pray.

Our Father in heaven, Thou art God. Thou hast given us a marvelous gift in prayer. Thou dost speak to us and allow us also to come and to speak to Thee. This is all possible through Thy Son Jesus Christ. We thank Thee for Him. We pray, Lord, that we may be diligent in prayer and show the genuineness of our Christianity and our faith by living before Thee day by day and moment by moment, trusting in Thee and acknowledging Thee as God. We pray it for Jesus' sake, Amen.