

Praying to the God Who Already Knows

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

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Bible Text: Matthew 6:5-15
Preached on: Sunday, November 2, 2014

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Matthew's gospel, 6, beginning in verse 5.

5 And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 6 But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. 7 But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. 8 Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him. 9 After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. 10 Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread. 12 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. 14 For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: 15 But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

We're going to end our reading at verse 15 and let's pray together and ask the Lord to give us his help this evening.

Father, we thank you tonight for your lovingkindness and your mercy and, Lord, if we had any other place to appeal to, we would have hopelessness in our soul but we thank you that even as David came conscious of the fact that he had committed murder and adultery, he could come and cry that you would according to the multitude of your tender mercies, you would hear him, that you would cleanse him, that you would restore him, and that you would give him again hope that you would give him again usefulness in your kingdom and so, Lord, we appeal unto you tonight not because we deserve any of your lovingkindness but because you are a gracious God and you have covenanted with your people, even Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and we thank you, Lord, that you have covenanted with us in Christ, and we praise you, Lord, he has kept covenant on our

behalf and therefore all those promised blessings are ours not because we have obeyed but because Christ has obeyed on our behalf and therefore it's his blood and righteousness that is our hope tonight. And so as we come to the word and then to the table, would you encourage us again, Father, as we lift our own sinful state and as we look at depravity around us that would cause us to be in a constant state of turmoil, and I pray from that turmoil we would look again and see your mercy and your grace and see the objective reality of the gospel and stand in hope because of what has been accomplished on the behalf of those who love you. So Lord, draw near and help us tonight in our study of the word, first of all, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Luke's gospel, 11, verse 1, we read these words, "And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples." And so there was something about the life of the Savior and his prayer life, the connection between his power and the way he prayed provoked the disciples above all other things to say, "Lord, teach us how we might pray." And you recall the Savior's response because we saw that in our last study here in Matthew's gospel, 6, "When thou prayest thou shalt not." In other words, the Lord said to them, "Look, let me tell you how you shouldn't pray before I tell you how you should pray," and then he went on to warn them against two kinds of praying, first of all, hypocritical praying, that type of praying that is nothing more than offering words to be seen of men, and then he warned them against heathen praying, that type of prayer that is heard not for its content but for its length. But after the warning, Jesus went on to say in this eighth verse of Matthew 6, "Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him." And it seems that in these words the Lord echoes the thoughts of David back in Psalm 139 where David said, "O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether." And so when Christ said, "Look, I don't want you to pray like the hypocrite or like the heathen, and here's the reason why, for your Father knows the things that you have need of before you ask him." And so Jesus is simply affirming the Psalmist's words that the Lord knows the things that we have need of even before we ask.

Well, that statement provokes a whole lot of question within us, especially as it relates to the matter of prayer. What is the purpose of prayer if God already knows the things that we're going to ask? And if he's sovereign, then why pray at all? I mean, if he has foreordained before the foundation of the world everything that happens in time, what is the sense of prayer? And more personally, do my prayers really have an impact upon my life and do my prayers really have an impact upon the lives of other people? So these are some questions and I could not pretend to answer them to your satisfaction tonight but let's take time and consider what it means to pray to the God who already knows, and I want you to notice one of the first things here is that the Lord is not, he doesn't shy away from the subject that sometimes we shy away from, right? You've got the coming together of God's sovereignty and responsibility and he says, "I don't want you to pray

like the hypocrite or the heathen for this reason, for the Father knoweth the things that you have need of before ye ask him."

So the Lord doesn't shy away from the subject and therefore we must not shy away from it either. Let me suggest to you two lines of thought as we think about praying to the God who already knows. The first line of thought is this: that prayer is for God's glory, not ours. When we pray, "Lord, teach us how to pray," one of the things we must be instructed in is that prayer is for God's glory, not for our glory. Arthur Pink once said this, "In the great majority of the books written and sermons preached upon prayer, the human element fills the scene almost entirely, it is the conditions we must meet, the promises we must claim, the things we must do in order to get our requests answered."

And so he draws attention to the fact that prayer oftentimes is all about us. One of the first things you encounter when the Lord begins to share this model prayer in his gospel is that prayer, in fact, is not all about us. Alright, notice verse 8 says reference to "your Father." Right, and immediately after that phrase, then I want you to notice the word "thy," how it appears three times in verse 9 and 10 because the Lord goes to give this prayer, notice how it starts, "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." So you've got three statements made here. You've got, first of all, "thy name." The very first thing the Lord draws our attention to as we pray is the name of the Lord, "Hallowed be thy name." How are we to understand the name of the Lord? Well, look in this ninth verse, his name is further described, "Our Father which art in heaven." We're going to look at this in a little greater detail in days to come but notice the combination of two thoughts. Our Father, here is an intimate term. Here is a term that we can identify with. This is not something that is altogether otherworldly, right? We can identify to the concept of fatherhood whether our experience has been good, bad, or otherwise. We can understand what he's saying but when he says, "Our Father which is in heaven," right now he brings a familiar term that we can identify with to with something that we can't identify with, a Father who is in heaven. Notice the term "Father" speaks of God's imminence, that he's near us, but the fact that he's in heaven, that talks about his transcendence, that he transcends all of creation, and the very first thing he brings our attention to is the fact that he is both imminent and transcendent, "and thy name, hallowed be thy name."

Right, well, the next thing we learn here in terms of this word "thy" is his sovereignty, "Thy kingdom come." Thy kingdom, the kingdom of the Lord is that realm where he reigns in grace and we are praying here, "Lord, teach us how to pray." When you pray, give attention to the Lord's name, give attention to the fact that he's sovereign, "Thy kingdom come." Well, then you come down in verse 10, the next statement is made here is, "Thy will be done." Now you've got his will. So, Lord, teach us how to pray. When you pray, here's three things to think about: the Lord's name, the Lord's sovereignty, and the Lord's will. Alright, so far this prayer is all about God, not about us. But finally when you get to the fourth petition down in verse 11, you've got this phrase, "Give us this day our daily bread." It takes you to the fourth petition before you have anything that is actually about us and so we've got a long way to go into this prayer before we find any

attention or concern given to us. So the attention at the beginning of these petitions is clearly in the exaltation of God and his concerns, and so in the initial phrases of the Lord's prayer, Jesus fixes our gaze not upon us or our needs but upon the Lord himself.

So when we ask the question, "How should we approach God in prayer? What's the right way to pray?" Perhaps the two most important rules to keep in mind when you pray, number 1, remember who you're addressing; and number 2, remember who it is that is doing the addressing. Alright, remember in prayer who you're talking to because nothing will condition your prayer life more deeply than remembering that the God you're speaking with is, in fact, the sovereign Creator, the Ruler of the universe. And then remember not only who you're speaking to but remember who it is that's speaking. You are not God. You're at best a creature and so prayer is not a conversation between equal peers. R. C. Sproul said it's not a fireside chat among equals, although that's sometimes the way we pray. This is the creature speaking to a sovereign Creator and sometimes we come into his presence far too casually, we come into his presence kind of with a, "Hi, God. How are you doing?" Or as some has said, "Look, it's me again." I understand what people are trying to emphasize in that, they're trying to emphasize the familiarity that we can have with God, but you notice the combination of attributes here, "When you pray, pray in this fashion, our Father which is in heaven."

Alright, sometimes we pray, "Our Father," but we forget the fact that he's in heaven, that he's transcendent and therefore when we come into the presence of the Lord, we should stand in awe of him, we are coming into the presence of king, not just a king but the King of kings and the Lord of lords, and so the first thing we learn about prayer, "Lord, teach us to pray," is that prayer is not all about us but rather in the first instance prayer is all about him, his name, his sovereignty, and his will. But then we learn not only prayer is not all about us, but we also consider the fact that prayer is not all about changing God. One of the most common asked questions when it comes to the theology of prayer is that does prayer actually change things? Does prayer change things, and the New Testament makes it clear that prayer changes all kinds of things, but the next question is then does prayer change the mind of God? Does prayer change the mind of God? Is that what we do when we pray, we're trying to change the mind of God? Well, ask this question: what would induce God to change his mind in the first place? And in answering that you might ask why is it that you change your mind from time to time. Sometimes you and I, we have a mindset and we want to do a certain thing, and then we find out some new information, some new knowledge and then we say, "Well, you know, that's probably not the best course of action." Well, when we come to the Lord, we learn in this eighth verse that the Father knows the things that ye have need of before we ask him.

So when we come to pray, we're praying to a God who already knows, we're praying to a God who is omniscient and therefore he has nothing new to learn. Sometimes we change our minds and we realize that, you know, that was a bad plan, and maybe we should take another course, but is that what happens when we come to the Lord in the place of prayer? I mean, in essence are we saying, "God, you've planned to do something that's not good. Let me counsel you in the right thing." And that's almost blasphemous to think

that way, but God doesn't do anything except he does that which is perfectly good and we are in no position to counsel him whatsoever.

So does prayer change things? Yes, but does prayer ever change the mind of God? We'd have to conclude that prayer never ever in any instance changes the mind of God because we're praying to a God who already knows. Well, that provokes the question then, "If prayer does not change the mind of God, then why pray? I mean, what good is prayer if we can't change God's mind? Why should we even engage in this exercise? It seems to be an exercise in futility." But we've got to remember that prayer does change things, all kinds of things, but the most important thing that changes in prayer is actually us. Prayer changes us more than we understand and more than we sometimes want to admit, and as we then engage in communion with God more deeply and we come to know the one with whom we are speaking more intimately and our knowledge grows in this God, we are more aware, we are more enabled to see who we really are, we're more enabled to see how much change needs to take place in us, and so prayer actually changes us profoundly and sometimes we're not even conscious of what is taking place, but prayer does not change the mind of God. What need is there for God to change his mind? Prayer changes things and we're going to think about that in a moment, but profoundly prayer changes us.

So prayer is for God's glory, not for ours; prayer is not all about us, neither is it us conforming God to our will but rather us conforming to his will. So the first line of thought in prayer is for God's glory, not for ours, but the second line of thought is this: prayer is for our benefit, not God's. Prayer is for our benefit, not God's. As soon as these two ideas come together, the sovereignty of God and the prayers of his people, when you put these side-by-side, it puts us in a very difficult theological position and questions and objections are raised from every quarter. People say, "Wait a minute, if God is sovereign and he's ordained every single detail of our life, then why even things that are taking place in the future, then what is the meaning of prayer and why bother?" And some people say, "If Romans 8:28 is true, that all things are working together for good to those who love God, shouldn't we be just content for the Lord to work out things the way he says he's going to do? And wouldn't it be a matter of presumption to tell God to do things the way we think he should do even when he tells us that he's going to work them all together for good? If he ordains all things and everything that is best, what is the purpose of praying to him?"

John Calvin wrestled with that question deeply and he discussed the usefulness of prayer in light of God's sovereignty in his "Institutes of Christian Religion." Listen to what he said, he said, "Some will say, 'Does He not know without a monitor, both what our difficulties are and what is meet for our interest, so that it seems in some measure superfluous to solicit Him by our prayers, as if He were winking or even sleeping until aroused by the sound of our voice.' Those who argue in this way attend not to the end or the purpose for which the Lord taught us to pray. It was not so much for God's good, as it is for our good." John Calvin saw prayer as being for our good. Yes, it's for his glory but the Lord says it's for our good.

So let's think about in what ways, then, prayer is actually ordained for the good of his people. Well, number 1, prayer is beneficial to our spiritual growth, and we can think about that from a few different angles. Let's think of it, first of all, from the aspect of humbling. Prayer is designed by God to humble, and think of how that is in this prayer before us here as we come down to the phrase that now pertains to our needs, "Give us this day our daily bread." What type of language is that? That's the language of a beggar, "Give us this day our daily bread." And this language, then, is language not to be prayed by those who are true paupers but this is language to be prayed by all who profess the name of Christ. This is language for the rich and for the poor, and it is language that puts every man essentially on the plane of a beggar and that's, in fact, where every man ought to be because as we learned this morning everything we have belongs to him. And thou say in thine heart, remember he said to the Israelites, "My power and my might of mine hand have gotten me this wealth but thou shalt remember the Lord thy God for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth." God has given us everything that we have and so prayer is even the means whereby a man day-by-day comes into contact with the sovereignty of God in this little phrase of daily bread.

I'm convinced that the Lord teaches us all one way or another of the importance of daily bread. Now you may not need daily bread physically but have you not been brought to the place from time-to-time where your needs are so profound emotionally, spiritually, physically, financially, one way or another the complexities of life get you to the place where you feel that man cannot live by bread alone but by every word? You're hanging on the word of God and you just need and you crave and you're as a beggar. "Lord, would you give me a word?" You've come to the house of God and you're just so anxious to hear something from him, you know, some crumb that falls off the table, as it were. You begin to see that God is in control of your daily food ration, but then why would you doubt that he reigns supreme over all things? So prayer brings you into the presence of the living God and it gives you a sense of his awful sovereignty.

Now why do so few pray and why do those who pray pray so little? Probably because we all have a greater sense of our self-sufficiency than we ought to. But when do you pray? You probably pray whenever you feel that you're in some situation that's beyond your control. The Lord reduces you through some circumstance where you're beginning to feel that things are slipping out of your control and that brings you to the place of prayer, but you know what the Lord does then? In prayer he causes you to see that, in fact, you were never in control in the first place and he drives us to prayer. And so praying is all about God's glory but it's all about our good. It's a part of our spiritual growth, and the first thing he does is he humbles us to that place where we are inclined to flee to this sovereign God who controls all things and to ask him to do something that we can't do.

So he teaches us humility but in prayer as we're going to learn in the next number of weeks, he also teaches us how to praise. Let's always remember that God does not need our praise. God is eternally blessed in himself. He does not need the praise of his people. He's eternally blessed. God's existence is not dependent upon our praises. He can get along without them but we can't. We can't get along without praising him. Adoration is a necessary part of our spiritual growth and if we are to develop an intimate relationship

with our heavenly Father, it is essential that we come to that place of expressing reverence and adoration and love. Do you know that when the Lord teaches you to praise his name, that it's a part of your spiritual growth and the Lord brings you low and the Lord provides in remarkable ways so that you praise his name, and as you praise his name your soul is lifted and your heart is strengthened?

You see, prayer is beneficial for the people of God not only because he teaches us how to be humble but he teaches us how to praise, but he also teaches how to confess. Now when you come to pray, is confession just a briefing to the Lord? You know, because we're told here that he knows the things that we have need of and, of course, implicit in that is that he knows the sins that we're guilty of, he knows our thoughts afar off. Alright, are you conscious tonight of your sin? He is more comprehensively and clearly aware of your sin than you are. I can't stand my sin. It grieves me, constantly frustrates me and I only see it from my pathetic perspective, but he sees it in comprehensive nature. So why do I have to pray? Because he knows that not only is humility good for me, praising is good for me, but confession is good for me. Remember what David said, "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin." Do you know that confession not to a man or to a system but confession to God is good for your soul? It's a release. It's a release of the guilt of your heart and you know that if you go on in habitual sin and you will not let go, you will not confess to those who you have sinned against either to God or to those that you love or to those that you don't know but perhaps have sinned against, there's a heaviness in heart and the moisture, right, the vibrancy of life is sucked right out.

So why do we pray? Because he teaches us humility. We're dependent. He teaches us praise. He alone is worthy. He teaches us of the importance and the blessing of confession. I think sometimes we look at confession as being a depressing thing. It's a vibrant thing. It brings us back, "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation." Do you know that that was a prayer that followed on the heels of the confession, "Lord, my heart is filled and I am born in sin and shapen in iniquity"?

So prayer is all about God's glory, not ours but it's about our benefit, not God's, and one of the first things we learn, then, is that through prayer we grow spiritually and the Lord then gives us this blessed thing that it might be so. And prayer is also beneficial because it is efficacious or because it is powerful. So let's get back again to this thought does prayer change things, and it's an important question because it's very easy to adopt a fatalistic view of prayer but when you read the New Testament, you cannot escape the fact that there is a deep emphasis on prayer, there is a deep emphasis on supplication, intercession, praying for people, praying for those that we love, and furthermore, the Lord himself is the supreme model in all things and he clearly made prayer a huge priority in his life. So you've got to reconcile these thoughts together. Right, fatalism takes one truth and it runs but sometimes you have to take a truth like the sovereignty of

God and say, "Yes, but prayer is encouraged, prayer is emphasized. The disciples prayed, saints of God prayed, Christ prayed."

Well, let me give you three examples, then, of the fact that prayer is efficacious and prayer does change things. Let's think, first of all, of the prayer of Christ himself. Do you remember in Matthew's gospel, 26, and verse 34, the Lord made this statement unto Peter, "Peter, Verily I say unto you, truly, Peter, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice," or three times. And do you remember how Peter responded? "Thou I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee, likewise also said all the disciples." So Peter here makes a stand and he expresses his devotion, "Lord, it's not going to be as you say but if I have to die, I will gladly die rather than deny you." Now you might have expected the Lord to say, "Peter, that is great. Thank you for your devotion." But he says something very different and the parallel narrative over in Luke's gospel, 22, gives this a little additional information here. Luke's gospel, 22:31, "And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat." So Peter was unaware of the fact that even at this moment in his life Satan had an intention of evil toward him that he would shake his faith so severely and alas his faith would be found to be total and utter unbelief. And yet the Lord said something to him verse 32, "But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not." So you know how that incident transpired, how Peter denied the Savior three times, and now it seems that Peter the trusting disciple, has become Peter the unbeliever, and it seems that his heart is filled with suspicion and doubt, now his heart is filled with guilt later on, but what we learn a little later on is that Peter's faith did not fail and why didn't Peter's faith fail? Because Christ makes it, "I have prayed for thee."

So when we come to understand prayer, we have to look at examples like this and see that the prayer of Jesus Christ was an effectual fervent prayer and it availed much, and thank God Jesus Christ as our great intercessor prays for us, and the petitions of Jesus Christ are not vain attempts trying to change the mind of God. The prayers of Christ are effectual prayers and you think, "Well, that's a good example but that's Christ and how can I relate to the prayer of the Son of God who is perfect in all of his ways?" Well, let me draw your attention, then, to another instance where prayer clearly changed things. Think of Acts 12, the early formative days of the New Testament church. There is a series of persecution has broken out against the church. Herod, the king, stretched forth his hand to vex certain of the church. He's killed James, the brother of John, and his intention is to kill Peter as well, and Peter is taken into captivity and immediately we read these words in Acts 12:5, "Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him."

So here you have one of those remarkable prayer meetings of the early church, Acts 12, and so there was a room of people praying and that room was populated by men, by women, by older and by younger, and they prayed and they prayed earnestly and the next part of that chapter tells us that the angel of the Lord in a remarkable way frees Peter, "behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals.

And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me. And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision." So Peter's in a trance-like state and he doesn't even know if he's in a dream or if this is a reality. "When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord." And so now they're coming up against an impossible situation. "And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews." So he can't believe it. He sees that this is the hand of God. "And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying." So here they are, they're in the middle of this prayer time, Peter's just come to his mind, he understands that the hand of God has clearly been demonstrated. "And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda. And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate. And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel. But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished."

Here's the New Testament church praying that the circumstances that they were facing would be changed, and is it a coincidence that the church is recorded here praying without ceasing, praying unto God for him, that the angel of the Lord comes unknown to Peter? It's so remarkable that Peter can't even comprehend what's taken place. It's almost as if it's a dream and he arrives at the house and they think it's a dream, and they've got excuses as to why it could not be an answer to their prayers. So when I think about the sovereignty of God and the fact that prayer is not for my glory but God's, I have to also say prayer is for my benefit, not God's, and prayer is effectual, and not only the prayers of Jesus Christ but the prayers of the saints in Christ's name.

You say, "That's okay. That's okay for the New Testament church, the Spirit of God was upon them in a unique way, but he could not be a part of my life in that way." Well, then think of a third example over in the book of James, James 5. There you've got these words, "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms. Is any sick among you? 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 shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." Then this statement, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." And then perhaps the most encouraging phrase is verse 17, "Elias," Elijah, "was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months."

Elijah was a man subject to like passions. "Oh yeah? In what way?" Well, Elijah had suicidal thoughts and Elijah became so hopeless as to the purpose of God that he thought, "You know what? There's no point going on." Elijah became so frustrated with what he saw as being the purpose of God that he said, "You know what, Lord? Just take me. It's

better that somebody else serve in my place." So here's a man of like passions. Everything that you struggle with, Elijah would have struggled with, and yet he prays and, of course, it wasn't the strength of his prayer, it was the fact that in obedience to the command of God he called upon the name of the Lord to do a mighty thing and God did a mighty thing.

Now I cannot pretend for an instant to understand all that takes place in James 5 on the subject of prayer but we can step away from all the intricacies and at least confess the fact that prayer is efficacious, it's powerful, and although we will never be found changing the mind of God, who would want to change the mind of the infinitely wise, gracious God? Prayer changes things not the least of which is to us, but prayer changes circumstances. So God gives prayer to the church and he gives it to each of us not only that we may grow spiritually but that we might see the power of his hand manifested in a great way.

Well, then notice prayer is also a beneficial thing because it is a means to God's end. James makes a statement that's vital to our practical understanding of the relationship of God's sovereignty in prayer and it's a statement that should haunt each one of us. In James 4:2 you've got this statement, "you have not because you ask not." But the reason you don't have is because you have not asked, and that statement teaches us that God does not work alone at center stage with puppets all around him who have no active involvement in the plan of redemption, but rather it teaches us that God is in the center of his purpose but the center of God's purpose includes the church, it includes people, it includes individuals, it includes movements. So the idea that God is in center stage and we're puppets, that's not Christianity nor is it Calvinism, it's a distortion.

God brings to pass his sovereign ends always by the virtue of human means. We're not surprised by that in the physical realm. I mean, what would you think of a farmer who when spring comes just sits on the porch in a rocking chair, he's got his arms folded, he says, "Well, I sure hope we have a great harvest this year and I hope it's God's plan to give us abundant crops." And concluding that God is going to do this, he just sits there, doesn't plant the field, doesn't sow the seed, doesn't weed the rows, and he sits there and he waits for God to deliver. You know that's not how the farmer works. That's not how he thinks. But if a farmer ever tried to farm that way, I think it would be clear what would happen. There would be no benefit. There'd be zero reward. The Lord calls us to plow our fields and he calls us to plant and he calls us to water, and if that's true of the physical realm, is it not equally true in the spiritual realm?

Now people have quoted many times that the Bible says God helps those who help themselves. Well, it's actually not a biblical statement but there's a certain sense in which it's correct. God calls us to work. God calls us to plow. God calls us to plant and he calls us to read and to study and to prepare, and when we do these things, he brings the growth. What does Paul say? "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase." And there's a sense in which, then, intercessory prayer, prayer of supplication, it's work. It's labor, laboring in the place of prayer. Sometimes that labor is a tremendous pleasure but in any case it requires energy and it requires work.

Now God knows what we have need of before we ask but it is his purpose that we would work, if you understand what I'm saying, that we would be humbled, that we would learn praise, that we would confess, but we would labor in the place of prayer, and even as we labor in the place of prayer, we find out that the Lord comes in answer to those prayers and he does a great work and he encourages our hearts in a most remarkable way. Child of God, you know that there is nothing as exhilarating to your faith that when you are backed into a corner and you begin to pray and you understand the sovereignty of God and you get to that place where you desire the advancement of his kingdom and his will becomes greater than your will, and you've got no place to move and you cry to God, and when he comes and he comes at the right time, not always at our time but when he comes and he manifests that mighty power and that strength, there's a sense in which there's nothing more beneficial to the child of God than to see the hand of God and people can say, "This is God's hand and it's marvelous in our eyes."

And so there's a sense in which prayer will always be a mystery to our finite minds, and yet it's significant that one of the first things Christ wanted his disciples to comprehend was the connection between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Don't be like them. Don't be like the hypocrite or the heathen because your Father knows the things that you have need of even before you ask.

Let's conclude looking at this little statement here very briefly, "what things ye have need of." Child of God, what could you fill into that statement tonight? What are the things that you need? What are the things that his sovereign purpose and his providential dealings have brought you to see, "This is what I really need"? Maybe that's what he's teaching you. Maybe that's what you're learning in the place of prayer that, "There are so many things I thought I needed but, in fact, I don't need those but, Lord, you know I need this." So the thing that you have need of, what is it that you need? Do you need cleansing? Do you need strength? Do you need quickening in your soul? Has the Lord brought you to see what you need rather than what you thought you need?

What you need the Father knows. "Be not therefore like unto them for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of." The Lord knows. The Lord knows tonight the things that you have need of. There's a sense in which we don't need to come into his presence to inform him but he invites us to come and he invites us to cry to him, he invites us to open our heart unto him, he invites us to come with a familiarity but never without a reverence understanding that he's a Father in heaven.

But your Father knoweth what things ye have need of even before you ask him. Notice implied in the statement is the habit of asking him. Are you in the habit of asking him for the things that you have need of? Maybe you say, "Yeah, but he's not changing my situation." Well, maybe what needs to really change is you and maybe the change that needs to take place is a change that's an ongoing work and the Lord, in fact, is working all things together for good, and if today he were to answer your prayer it would be the worst thing possible for you. Perhaps he's in the process of changing you and bringing you into greener pastures and causing you to lie down beside still waters. If that's the case, what might we be encouraged? We are to pray on. Right, labor in the place of

prayer. Luke 18:1, "Men ought always to pray and not to faint." And as we continue to pray, let's remember that prayer is not for our glory but for God's, but at the same time prayer is for our benefit, not his. If the Lord is calling us to pray, our God is too good to call us into something and to engage in an activity so holy to mock us. He's encouraged us to seek his face and how he works and when he works we cannot fully understand but the Lord does all things well. We on this side of glory may never understand all the complexities of prayer nor will we fully understand how his sovereignty and our responsibility go side-by-side, but when you go through your Bible, you will understand that both these things run side-by-side.

So let's not grab the sovereignty of God to the point where we're crippled in the place of prayer because Christ was not crippled in the place of prayer, he sought to pray for men, and not only did the Savior do it but the disciples did it, and the New Testament church, and the church ever since, and they've seen answers to prayer and we have seen answers to prayer but at the same time, let's not make prayer such a personal subjective thing that we lose an awareness of the fact that it's really something that's about his glory, not ours. May the Lord teach us, may he help us, and may we go on from strength to strength as we pray week after week, "Lord, teach us how to pray."