

The Book of Ephesians, Part 2 (1:17-)

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Sermon 11, Real Prayer Is Trinitarian Prayer, Eph. 1:17

Paul indicates very clearly both here and in the next chapter that the Trinitarian route is the *only* route whereby we can approach God.

“Our distance from God must be traced to a deeper origin than the dulness and insensibility of our hearts. The real difficulty of prayer, and indeed the actual inability to pray, arises in many, and probably in most, cases, from an indistinct perception of the way of access. . . . Christ is your only way to God. Faith is the act and exercise of coming to Christ. Faith, therefore, will bring you to God, if you have not hitherto come; or restore you to God, if you have wandered from him. . . . We have not come in the appointed way; and therefore we have not really come at all. Or if the name of Christ has been affixed to our prayers, it has been as a component part of a formal system, not as an exercise of dependence in seeking acceptance with God.” — Charles Bridges

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Proposition: Real prayer calls on God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and takes into account not just the unity of the divine nature but the diversity of the divine Persons.

Introduction

Brothers and sisters, last week we looked together at the vital necessity of prayer. I said some hard words to you all. I insisted that if your life lacks prayer and thanksgiving, then it also likely

lacks faith and love — and that if you don't have these four things, then you are not a Christian at all. I stand by those words. If you claim to be a Christian, and more especially if you really are a Christian, then you absolutely must be a person who prays!

But that brings up a question: what does that look like? How does one begin to pray? What is real prayer, anyway? If it's something so vitally important, then surely we ought to be able to find teaching on it in this book we call the Bible. And so indeed we do. If you can't remember anything I said a year ago as we spent 11 weeks looking at the Lord's Prayer together, I recommend that you go back and listen to those sermons again. We saw at that time that true prayer is made to our Father. We saw that if you are really praying, then you are concerned with God's name, Kingdom, and will. We saw that prayer also asks for God's provision for our daily needs and grapples with the reality of our sins. We saw that prayer needs to also include a recognition of the reality of evil in this world, and a request that God would deliver us from that evil. We also learned to praise God in our prayers.

Well, the Lord's Prayer is obviously the very best basis and model for prayer that can be found anywhere. But it is far from the only thing the Scriptures tell us about prayer. In his letters, the Apostle Paul has included samples of his prayers. These are not merely of historical interest, so that we can examine how one of the very earliest Christians, indeed the man credited by some with inventing Christianity, approached the question of prayer. They are authoritative, approved examples. These prayers are prayers made by someone who really knew how to pray, and who was recording his prayers for the sake of teaching us to pray. The prayer that we have in these verses of Ephesians 1, then, is not only a prayer that we ought to pray. It is also a prayer from which we must learn. We will spend at least three Sundays looking together at this prayer — but for today, we will focus on the majestic truth that true prayer is Trinitarian. Now, up front here I want to head off misunderstanding and error. By saying that true prayer is Trinitarian I do not mean that every prayer must mention the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Obviously this prayer does. But many prayers of the Bible, including the Lord's Prayer and many of the Psalms do not do so. Nonetheless, every prayer in the Bible is a Trinitarian prayer because it is addressed to the Triune God. When I say that true prayer is Trinitarian prayer, I mean that true prayer is addressed to God as He really is and as you know Him to be. Let me put it this way. If you talk to your wife the same way you talk to the gas station clerk, something is wrong there. If you talk to God the same way you talk to any old stranger, something is wrong there. In genuine prayer, you need to know who you're talking to. That's what it means to say that true prayer is Trinitarian prayer.

I. Context: The Root of Paul's Prayer, v. 15

We already saw last week that Paul's prayer was triggered by two things in particular. So let's quickly review that.

A. God's Saving Work in His Son and His Spirit

First, Paul began to pray because he was aware of the what God had done — choosing the Ephesians, redeeming them in His Son, and giving them His Spirit as a seal. Let me just remind

you that knowledge of God's saving work in His Son and His Spirit should drive you to pray. If it does not do so, then you have not understood the good news the way Paul understood it. You haven't absorbed the power of the message the way Paul absorbed it. And for our own lives, we can learn that an understanding of God's saving work in His Son and Spirit will make us more prayerful people. A lack of understanding, a la-de-da attitude, a lack of caring about the truths you do know, will hinder your prayers. But intellectual and heartfelt insight into what God's saving work is will get you on your knees.

B. News About the Church

The other thing that made Paul want to pray was news about the church. And in the same way, brothers and sisters, hearing about how our Christian brothers and sisters in this congregation and worldwide should make you want to pray. Do you have a strong desire to talk to God about the people in this congregation? We all know that prayer is a good thing. We all know that we ought to pray. But the truths that motivated Paul to pray revolved around God's work in the local congregation and God's work in His cosmic plan of redemption. Studying and remembering those two things will make you too desire to pray.

II. The Acts of Prayer, v. 17

But that's all review. What exactly is prayer? What does it do?

A. Prayer Speaks to God

The first thing to see is that prayer is just talking to God. Prayer speaks to God. If you want to pray, then what you need to do is to open your mouth and start talking to God. Yes, God can read your thoughts and it is perfectly acceptable to direct thoughts toward Him silently. But almost all of us talk out loud better than we think. Praying aloud is the best way to experience what prayer is all about.

Anyway, we see that Paul prays and he prays to God. In his prayers he "makes mention" of the Ephesian believers. And so we can conclude that prayer is mentioning things to God — in short, that it is talking to God.

Now, you may say, "If prayer is talking to God, then won't just any God do? Can't a generalized theistic kind of being be an appropriate addressee of prayer?"

The answer is "no." Paul doesn't just pray to God; He prays to a God who is very definitely specified as the God of the Bible, the God of Christianity.

B. Prayer Speaks to God as the God of Jesus Christ

First of all, this God to whom Paul prays is identified as the God of Jesus Christ. Paul's prayer wasn't to just any deity, nor to a vaguely defined "higher power." This God is the God to whom Jesus Christ prayed, the God whom Jesus Christ called "My God," the God whom He called "Father" who sent Him into the world.

1. If You Would Truly Pray, You Must Know Jesus' Relationship to His Father

In short, brothers and sisters, Paul is teaching us that genuine prayer, prayer that is the prayer of someone in close relationship to God, is prayer that acknowledges and depends on Jesus' relationship to His Father.

Right off the bat, then, we know that we're not talking about the prayer of the atheist in the foxhole, or the prayer of the ignorant animist in the jungles of South America. Can God hear everything that human beings say? Of course. Does He sometimes listen to and answer the prayers of people who don't know Him? Of course. But that's not what Paul is talking about in this passage. He is describing prayer ideally, prayer as it should be when someone who knows God well is talking to Him.

This, I think, can be hard for us to appreciate. Why would Paul be so exclusive? Why doesn't he teach on prayer in its most basic form? Why insist that true prayer is Trinitarian, not just by example, as here, but actually by direct statement in the next chapter? Make no mistake, brothers and sisters: There is no access to the Father except through Christ by the Spirit. Ephesians 2:18 says so in so many words. And since that is the case, true prayer needs to reckon with it — not always by saying “Dear Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” but always by recognizing the reality of the interconnected, deeply personal relationships between the divine Persons.

There are couple of examples that may help you follow me here. Think about a book on communication in marriage. It's not going to start by saying, “First, tell your spouse your name. Then say where you're from and where you went to college and then what brought you to this event you're both at.”

Why doesn't such a book say that? Because it assumes that if you're married, you already know those things about your spouse! And in the same way, Paul assumes that if the Ephesians are believers, they already know that when they pray they're talking to a Father and that this Father absolutely adores His Son. They know that the only reason the Father is even talking to them is because of His Son. And they know that the greatest gift the Father can give, aside from His Son, is His Holy Spirit. And that is why true prayer is Trinitarian. True prayer is not you talking to God as a perfect stranger. True prayer is you talking to a God you know well, a God with whom you've spent countless hours, a God whose boundless delight in His Son washes over onto you and is echoed by your boundless delight in that same Son of His.

Let me give a negative example. Some of you have close relatives who once attended Harvest, but no longer do so. Now, as a pastor what would be one of the quickest ways for me to deeply compromise my relationship with you? By acting as though those relatives of yours no longer exist, or calling their integrity into question because they left this church, or by somehow indicating that I vaguely disapprove of you because you are a little tainted by being related to people who have chosen a different path than the members of this church have. Indeed, the closer the relationship, the more possibility there is for error and offense. Or if I make a great show of friendliness to you, talk to you a lot, invite you to my home, etc. — but never make the slightest

effort to learn anything about your children or even get to know their names, you will find that deeply offensive. Who wouldn't?

Well, we know how beloved God's Son is to Him. We know how important this relationship is to the Father. And so when we pray, we need to know what Jesus' relationship to His Father is! It is not enough to say that Jesus is a very powerful person, or a very good person, or similar vague things. We need to know that Jesus is the Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds. We need to know that He is God and that He holds this divine being as a gift from His Father. We need to know that He is light, and that in Him is no darkness at all. We need to know that by virtue of being the natural Son of God, He Himself is the true God and eternally alive. You can't talk to God as someone who knows Him well without knowing this! It simply isn't possible. Obviously the degree of philosophical sophistication will vary. Obviously you don't have to have a theology degree to truly pray. But you certainly must recognize the profundity of the truth that Jesus is the Son of God and therefore God the Son.

In a few months we will see that this even goes a step farther, and that unless we know God's Son as the Mediator between God and man, we have no access to the Father's presence and no promise that He will listen to us if we try to talk to Him. Clearly, then, true prayer is Trinitarian in that true prayer requires an understanding of the truth that God is the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Notice it — that's how the relationship between the Father and Jesus is described in the text. God is the God "of" our Lord Jesus Christ. That *of* has a long and deep history in the Bible. It starts with God promising to Abraham that He would be God *of* Abraham's children. God is related to Jesus in that same way. He is the God of Jesus, the God in covenant relationship with Jesus. In order to truly pray as one who knows God well, you need to know that God the Father entered a sworn pact, a covenant, with His Son, that His Son would give His life for the sins of a particular people that the Father would give Him, and bring those people to Heaven to be God's people forever.

You're not allowed to say "I'm not a theologian. This stuff is too complicated for me!" If you have any thoughts or opinions whatsoever about God, then you are indeed a theologian. As a recent volume by R.C. Sproul put it, *Everyone's a Theologian*. We all have thoughts and ideas about God. The question is not whether we have them, but whether they are accurate. And here we have Paul giving us an example of true prayer and demonstrating in his example that true prayer recognizes God as being in relationship with Jesus Christ. In order to talk to God as someone who really knows Him, you must know that He is the Father of our Lord Jesus and the God of our Lord Jesus too.

You may say, "Well, I've been praying for decades and I've never once thought about that in prayer. Are you saying that I wasn't praying?" Maybe. I can certainly affirm that your prayers have not lived up to the example set by Paul here in this text. You have failed to recognize who you're talking to. And in that light, I would have to say that I do question whether you've really prayed for decades. If I were tell you that I spoke to my wife daily for twenty years before I caught that she's an introvert, would you think that my conversations with her had been very

deep or real? If you're really praying, and especially over the long haul, then you know who you're talking to — or at the very least, you really should.

2. If You Would Truly Pray, Jesus Must Be Yours

But secondly, I want to move from focusing on the “of” to focusing on the “our.” We’re moving from a theology of prepositions to a theology of pronouns. But both are exceedingly important. According to Paul’s example, prayer needs to be made by people who can claim that Jesus Christ belongs to them. He speaks of Jesus as *our* Jesus.

Can you say this? Does Jesus belong to you? Is He your Jesus? Well, what does that even mean? It means that you have believed into Him, that you have been united to Him by faith and by baptism. It means that you are in union with Christ, as vv. 3-14 mentioned so many times using the phrase “in Christ.” So again, does this mean that God doesn’t hear the prayers of people who are outside of Christ? Not necessarily. It means that He is under no obligation to listen. True prayer, which is someone who knows God well talking to Him, can only be made by someone who can claim Jesus as “my Jesus.” If you want to follow Jesus’ example in prayer, you must have God as your Father. If you want to follow Paul’s example in prayer, you must have Jesus as yours. But of course, we know that the two things are ultimately bound together. No one has God for his Father unless he already has Jesus Christ as his Savior.

3. If You Would Truly Pray, Jesus Must Be Your Lord

But Paul adds that Christ must be your Lord as well. He is not just our Jesus; He must be our Lord. If you expect God to hear your prayers, then you need to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Have you ever had a semi-surreal experience like this one? Several years ago, my parents had a young Army veteran over for dinner. I had grown up with this man but hadn’t seen him for years. He proved to be of a philosophical turn of mind, and during two tours in Afghanistan he spent his spare time reading Confucius, Plato, Kant, and Hume. And, we prompted, what about his spiritual life? Well, he told us, chapel on base never appealed to him and there weren’t exactly any churches thereabouts. So he prayed. Oh, yes, he prayed. At least a couple of hours every day, he told us. Prayer was extremely important to him and he credited it, along with the philosophers, for bringing him through his tours of duty.

We were thrilled; we were delighted. How, we asked, was he planning to nourish his spiritual life now that he’s back in the States? The answer, as it turned out, was that he wasn’t going to. He didn’t recognize Jesus as Lord, and he certainly had not the slightest intention of submitting to Him.

This veteran believed that his prayers in Afghanistan had been the real deal — real, honest communication with God. And yet he has not the slightest interest in pursuing a relationship with Jesus Christ. Why? How do we explain such a phenomenon? After years of thought, the best I can come up with is that those prayers weren’t real at all. My buddy may have been talking to something, but he was not having genuine conversations with God. He doesn’t claim to have God for his Father or Jesus for his Savior.

Brothers and sisters, you can “pray” all day long, but at the end of the day, if you aren’t submitting to the Lordship of Jesus, then you aren’t praying — not biblically, not as the Scriptures define prayer and as men like Jesus and Paul practiced it. *True prayer is Trinitarian.* True prayer is based on a genuine relationship to God as Father and to Jesus Christ as God’s Son and your Lord and Savior. Unless those pieces are all in place, your prayers will be as ineffective as those of my veteran friend.

The real question here, I think, is whether we can grant a genuine non-Christian spirituality. Can someone actually be in touch with God, to the extent that he can have a genuine, vital relationship with God, but not in the Christian way? Our whole culture says “Yes, absolutely.” But the teaching of Paul and Jesus on prayer would beg to differ. Indeed, Jesus explicitly affirmed that *no one* comes to the Father except by Him. The only way to the Father is through the Son. I know we all want to believe in the possibility of a sincere, real, non-Christian spirituality that finds God in its own way. But brothers and sisters, such a thing is a delusion. It does not exist, and cannot exist. Yes, God can choose to listen to the “prayers” of unbelievers. But He will not allow them to have a living, growing relationship with Him in any way other than the way of the cross of Jesus.

C. Prayer Speaks to God as Father

And thus, as Jesus insisted too, real prayer calls on God as Father. You need to be a child of God in order to truly pray — and conversely, if you are a child of God, then God is your Father and you are able to address Him as such.

What does it mean to address God as your Father? Some of us have good relationships with our earthly fathers and can, to some extent, model our relationship with our heavenly father on those relationships. To call on God as Father is to recognize Him as your source and authority, as your provider and ruler, as the one who gives coherence and leadership to your family and to all your family relationships. To call on God as Father is address Him as the one who has surrounded you with love and care from the moment of your birth right up to the present time, to call on Him as the one who will never leave you but will always be your daddy. In short, it is to address God with the perfect combination of reverence and confidence, respect and joy. Not everyone is a child of God. It is only those who receive Jesus and believe on His Name who gain the right to become children of God.

When you talk to God, how do you do it? Do you speak to Him as a peer? As an inferior who needs to be schooled and corrected? Or do you speak to Him as one who is immeasurably your superior and yet is your Father who loves you and who will never break His relationship with you? Do you speak to God with absolute confidence in His indissoluble Fatherhood? He is originally and eternally a Father. In other words, the necessity of calling on God as Father that we see both here and in the Lord’s Prayer is only another way of phrasing the truth that true prayer is Trinitarian. We recognize that God is eternally and inescapably *Father* precisely because He has eternally begotten His dearly loved Son. So you can plead with God for your children because He’s a Father too. You can ask Him to take care of you the same way you ask

your parents to take care of you. Brothers and sisters, it is this key insight into prayer which is repeated over and over in the New Testament. God is Father, and to truly pray you need to address Him as such.

D. Prayer Recognizes God's Glory

Following Paul's example, though, you need to recognize God not just as Father, but as Father of Glory. What does that mean? It means that glorious is what He is. The sum total radiance of His being and attributes is what we call His glory. God is glorious! Maybe the easiest way for us to think about glory is by looking at the Hebrew word for it: *kabod*, or "weighty." Is God weighty to you? Or do you take Him and His thoughts lightly? Paul's example shows us that in prayer, we must not take God lightly. We must not regard Him as the Father of silly songs with Larry. He is a heavyweight — the ultimate heavyweight. All His words should be to you like a neutron star. The neutron star is like a lesser version of a black hole. It is so dense that a teaspoonful of neutron star weighs 900 times as much as the Great Pyramid of Giza. Is that how heavy God's words are to you? Does a single verse of Scripture weigh more than the entire earth and the opinions of all your friends? Brothers and sisters, that's why we need to think of God as the Father of Glory when we speak to Him. He is weightier than a neutron star; He created the neutron stars.

If you take your friends too lightly, pretty soon they're no longer your friends. If you take God lightly, then you aren't truly praying. You must speak to God recognizing, or at least doing your best to recognize, that He is indeed the Father of glory, the one who outweighs every other thought and consideration, the one whose glory fills the entire universe.

E. Prayer Seeks God's Spirit

Well, finally, prayer seeks God's Holy Spirit. As I mentioned, true prayer is Trinitarian. True prayer is made to the Father recognizing His relationship to His Son. And true prayer, following Paul's example here, seeks the Holy Spirit. Do you ask for the Spirit? Do you pray for God to grant you His Spirit as the Spirit of Wisdom and Revelation?

We talked a couple of weeks ago about being sealed with the Holy Spirit — about how every Christian possesses the Holy Spirit. So why does Paul ask for the Ephesians to receive the Holy Spirit? The answer is that we always need more of the Spirit of God. No matter how Spirit-filled you are, you could always stand to be more Spirit-filled.

When is the last time you asked for the Holy Spirit? Remember, it has become a cliché to say that Christianity isn't a religion, but a relationship. But when we neglect the Spirit's role in our lives, we are ignoring a fundamental dimension of the the relational nature of the Christian faith! You don't become a more holy person by simply trying harder; you become a holier person by spending more time with the Holy Spirit. How do you get love, joy, peace, patience, etc. in your life? They are produced only by the Holy Spirit. If you don't have Him, you will never produce His fruits!

Once again, then, we see that true prayer is Trinitarian. You can and must approach God as Father. You must do it because of who Jesus Christ is. And you must seek the presence of the

Holy Spirit through your prayers. There is no other way to come into God's presence. There is no other way to connect with Him or enjoy a relationship with Him. You must come to God through Christ by the Spirit, and in your prayers the thing you must seek above all else is the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life.

So that's your homework for this week: Pray. Imitate Paul's prayer. Pray its very words. Pray based on its words but in your own words. Pray to your Father in the name of your Jesus asking for the promised Holy Spirit. Brothers and sisters, if you don't have the Spirit you don't belong to Christ. If you don't belong to Christ, you can't talk to the Father. And if you don't ask the Father, you will not receive more of the Spirit, who in turn will teach you to know Jesus Christ better. It's a feedback loop both directions.

Motivate yourself by remembering God's saving work in Jesus Christ and by seeing His work in your local church. That's what motivated Paul to pray. Follow his example, I beg you. Get to know this God who saved you. Approach Him in the path of the Christian faith. Amen.