

LD 45 In the School of Prayer (2) The  
Requirements of True Prayer QA 117

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*My Only Comfort*

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**Bible Text:** Psalm 50  
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**Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church**

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Turn with me in the Holy Scriptures this morning to Psalm 50. Psalm 50.

1 The mighty God, even the LORD, hath spoken, and called the earth from the rising of the sun unto the going down thereof. 2 Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined. 3 Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence: a fire shall devour before him, and it shall be very tempestuous round about him. 4 He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that he may judge his people. 5 Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice. 6 And the heavens shall declare his righteousness: for God is judge himself. Selah. 7 Hear, O my people, and I will speak; O Israel, and I will testify against thee: I am God, even thy God. 8 I will not reprove thee for thy sacrifices or thy burnt offerings, to have been continually before me. 9 I will take no bullock out of thy house, nor he goats out of thy folds. 10 For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. 11 I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine. 12 If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof. 13 Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? 14 Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High: 15 And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me. 16 But unto the wicked God saith, What hast thou to do to declare my statutes, or that thou shouldest take my covenant in thy mouth? 17 Seeing thou hatest instruction, and castest my words behind thee. 18 When thou sawest a thief, then thou consentedst with him, and hast been partaker with adulterers. 19 Thou givest thy mouth to evil, and thy tongue frameth deceit. 20 Thou sittest and speakest against thy brother; thou slanderest thine own mother's son. 21 These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes. 22 Now consider this, ye that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver. 23 Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me: and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I shew the salvation of God.

Therein ends the reading of the word of God this morning.

The Psalm that we've read, as well as many other scriptures, are the basis for the Heidelberg Catechism's teaching in Lord's Day 45 Question and Answer 117. Question and Answer 117 this morning.

Q. 117. What are the requisites of that prayer which is acceptable to God and which He will hear?

A. First, that we from the heart pray to the one true God only, who hath manifested Himself in His Word, for all things He hath commanded us to ask of Him; secondly, that we rightly and thoroughly know our need and misery, that so we may deeply humble ourselves in the presence of His divine majesty; thirdly, that we be fully persuaded that He, notwithstanding that we are unworthy of it, will, for the sake of Christ our Lord, certainly hear our prayer, as He has promised us in His Word.

Let's pray together.

*In a moment, heavenly Father, before we hear thy word, we call upon thy name. We pray that thy will open our hearts and minds so that we both understand thy word and believe it, believing thy word make it be a means of grace to us so that we may grow in our thankfulness unto thee especially as we express that thankfulness in prayer. Give unto thy servant all that he stands in need of so that he may bring thy word in its beauty as well as in its power. Forgive our sins, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

One of the most effective propaganda tools that Adolf Hitler created was the Hitler youth movement. At the height of its popularity, tens of thousands of German young people belonged to the movement. At their weekly meetings, the principles of the Nazis were drilled into the youth. Loyalty till death to Hitler was ingrained into them. At some point, after Hitler had gained absolute power in Germany, the members of the Hitler youth movement were informed that they were no longer to pray the Lord's Prayer. They were instructed to stop praying, "Our Father, who are in heaven." Instead, they were instructed to kneel beside their beds at night before going to sleep and pray, pray, "Adolph Hitler, you are our great, Fuehrer. Thy name makes the enemy tremble. Thy Third Reich comes. Thy will alone is law upon earth. Let us hear daily thy voice and order us by thy leadership for we will obey thee to the end and even with our own lives. We praise thee, Heil Hitler." I cannot imagine a greater blasphemy, the ultimate sacrilege. Hitler banned the practice of every religion, but far worse than that, he demanded for himself the worship that was due alone to God, including the worship of prayer. In doing that, Hitler was a type of the coming Antichrist who will also ban every religion except the worship of himself.

Prayer, true prayer, is the spiritual activity of the regenerated child of God according to which he draws near to God in order to worship God, in order to fellowship with God,

and in order to lay before God his needs for body and for soul. "Seek ye my face," says our heavenly Father to each one of us, and our Spirit-filled response is, "Thy face, O Lord, will we seek." And then, behold the child of God on his knees in prayer.

In 1 Corinthians 14:15, the apostle says, "I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding also." It may be that the child of God prays aloud as the Lord Jesus did when he prayed in the Upper Room with his disciples the prayer that we know as the high priestly prayer, John chapter 17. It may be that the child of God prays as Hannah prayed in the tabernacle according to 1 Samuel 1:13. "She spaked in her heart," we read, "only her lips moved but her voice was not heard." Or it may be that we are being led in prayer by others, by one of your parents, by your teacher at school, by the minister or the elder before and after Catechism, no matter when the child of God prays, he must pray with understanding.

When we pray, therefore, it is essential that we pray with the clear understanding of how we ought to pray, not only that we pray but how we are to pray. That includes the requisites or requirements of prayer as they are set forth in Question and Answer 117. God does not only require that we pray but how we pray. It is true of prayer what is true of the worship of God generally, God demands that we worship him, that is the first commandment of the law, but immediately after that first commandment comes the second commandment which tells us how we are to worship God. What is true of the 10 Commandments and the gratitude that we show to God by a life of good works is also true of prayer, the chief part of thankfulness. That was Jesus' word too to his disciples. They asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray," and Jesus' response was, "After this manner, in this way, pray ye therefore," Matthew 6:9.

We are back this morning in the school of prayer for lesson number 2, the requirement of true prayer. There are three requirements of true prayer: sincerity, humility and confidence. Those three requirements. When we pray, we are, first of all, called to pray to God sincerely. That's the first requirement of prayer and we cannot go on to requirements 2 and 3 without, first of all, noticing this requirement: sincerity. Sincerity is underscored in Lord's Day 45. That was the teaching already of Question and Answer 116.

Q. 116. Why is prayer necessary for Christians?

A. Because it is the chief part of thankfulness which God requires of us; and also, because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him, and are thankful for them

When we pray to God, we must pray with sincere desires. The literal reading of that 116th Answer is quite striking. In the original German, this is the last part of that Answer, "Because God will give his grace and Holy Spirit to those only who groan inwardly and pray continually." Groan inwardly. To groan inwardly implies that our prayers aren't just words on our lips but that our prayers arise out of the depths of our being. They're sincere. They're the groanings that come from our hearts.

That we are to pray sincerely is also the teaching of Question and Answer 117. That's true even though the Answer does not use the word "sincere" or "sincerely." But we are called, says the Catechism, first of all, to pray from the heart. To pray from the heart is the same as saying to pray sincerely. The seriousness of praying sincerely before God is that God sees and God knows our hearts. We saw that in connection with the 10th commandment which forbids the sin of the heart, and now at the very beginning of our study of prayer, that truth is again underscored. When we pray, God is watching and God is listening. He knows whether I am just saying words without thinking at all about the meaning of those words, maybe the same words and the same phrases that I've used over and over again in my prayers so that without even thinking those words and phrases spill out of my mouth. He sees me during the congregational prayer. He sees whether I am sleeping or whether I'm thinking about other things, things altogether apart from the congregational prayer. He's watching and he's listening when your father or someone else in your family is praying at family devotions. He notices when you're not following the prayer, when you are a million miles away thinking about all kinds of other things. When your teacher is praying at school children, God sees and God looks down from heaven to behold whether or not you are praying with your teacher or with your classmates who's leading devotions before lunchtime.

It belongs to sincerity in prayer that we pray only to the one true God, to the God who's revealed himself to us in Holy Scripture. That's the 117th Answer. If we are sincere in prayer we will pray only to God and to no one or nothing else, certainly not to any man. This is the first commandment of God's law and this is the first requirement of prayer. We must worship God and God alone. When we pray, we're going to come back to this especially in Lord's Day 46 when we consider the address of the Lord's prayer, "Our Father," when we pray we come into God's presence. We draw near to God. We pour out our hearts before God.

The psalmist Asaph in Psalm 50 has a good deal to say about God, the God to whom we pray. He is according to the first verse, the mighty God. God Almighty. Sovereign ruler over all things. He is the God of the church according to verse 2, "Out of Zion," the psalmist says, "the perfection of beauty, God hath shined out of Zion." That's the church. He is the God of righteous wrath against those who hate him and oppose him. Verse 3, "Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence: a fire shall devour before him, and it shall be very tempestuous round about him." Woe to them who do not honor God as the only and true God. He is the God, further of the covenant, God of friendship towards his people in Jesus Christ. Verse 5, "Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice." You could read, "have made a covenant with me by Jesus Christ, the one to whom the Old Testament sacrifices pointed." Verse 7, "Hear, O my people, and I will speak; O Israel, and I will testify against thee: I am God, even thy God."

All who pray to any other God than this God, do not and cannot pray sincerely. Because we are to pray sincerely, God despises the prayer of the hypocrite. That's Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6:5, "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." And that's also the teaching

of the psalmist in Psalm 50, especially verses 8 through 10. "I will not reprove thee for thy sacrifices or thy burnt offerings, to have been continually before me. I will take no bullock out of thy house, nor he goats out of thy folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills." He's rebuking there those who brought their sacrifices dutifully, obediently just as prescribed in the Old Testament law. But they brought those sacrifices not as worship of God but merely to fulfill the letter of the law.

The word for hypocrite that Jesus uses in Matthew 6:5 is a very striking word. Our English word hypocrite is taken directly out of the Greek language. That's the word in Greek and now that Greek word is made into an English word. The Greek word refers to an actor. It refers to someone who's involved in theater, a dramatic production. The hypocrite was an actor. What he was doing was not real. He was all show. He was pretending to be someone whom he was not. He wore a mask, a mask that covered up his real identity. That's the way it is with the hypocrite. Their piety is all outward. Their piety is a sham. They're wearing a mask, a mask that God himself will one day tear away. Their godliness is fake. It's all a show intended to impress an audience. The prayers of the scribes and the Pharisees in Jesus' day were exactly that. That's why they prayed where they did and how they did. They were praying to men and not to God. God despises the prayer of a hypocrite.

One very important part of sincerity in prayer is that when we pray we are walking in obedience to God's commandments. To put it differently, sincerity in prayer is that we are not walking impenitently in disobedience to God while at the same time we're praying. That can't be. This is another important connection between God's law and our life of prayer. You can't separate those two. They're intimately connected. The one who dares to approach God in prayer, well, at the same time, he's walking impenitently, it may be secretly, but impenitently, in sin clutching some sin to his bosom, a cherished sin, a pat sin, he is praying insincerely, his prayer is hypocritical.

The scriptures are clear in this regard. In Psalm 66:18 through 20, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me: But verily God hath heard me; he hath attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, which hath not turned away my prayer, nor his mercy from me." Psalm 145:18 and 19, "The LORD is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth. He will fulfil the desire of them that fear him: he also will hear their cry, and will save them." The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews says in Hebrews 10:22, "Let us draw near [to God] with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water." And Job says in Job 11, it's Zophar that's talking here, verses 13 through 15, "If thou prepare thine heart, and stretch out thine hands toward him; If iniquity be in thine hand, put it far away, and let not wickedness dwell in thy tabernacles. For then shalt thou lift up thy face without spot."

And the scriptures are equally clear on God's judgment upon those who dare to call upon his name while at the same time living in sin. Proverbs 15:8, "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD: but the prayer of the upright is his delight." And in Psalm 109:7, "When he," he is the wicked man of verse 6, "When he shall be judged, let him be condemned: and let his prayer become sin." Let his prayer become sin. And in

John 9:31, "Now we know," this is the blind man healed by Jesus in the synagogue who is going to be cast out of the synagogue by the Jews but is responding to the Jews who are accusing him and says, "Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth."

This is also the teaching of Asaph in the Psalm that we read together this morning, Psalm 50. It's teaching in verse 16, "But unto the wicked God saith, What hast thou to do to declare my statutes, or that thou shouldest take my covenant in thy mouth?" He's talking about prayer there when he says, "and takeeth my covenant in thy mouth," because that's what prayer is. Prayer is covenant communion with God, fellowship and friendship with God. "How dare the wicked take my covenant in their mouth? How dare those who are walking impenitently in sin call upon me in prayer?"

This is practical. There is a warning here this morning that every one of us needs to hear. Woe to that man who is cheating on his wife, or abusing his wife, or is a drunkard, or is addicted to pornography, but dares to approach God in prayer, lead his family in prayer, join the congregation on the Lord's day in prayer unto God. Woe to that woman who is unruly and unsubmitive, who is a busybody and a gossip, who is always wasting her time on Facebook, or texting this one or that one, who isn't faithful in carrying out her tasks in the home and family, her calling as a wife and as a mother, who even resents that calling, but yet dares to call upon God in prayer. Woe to that young person who is involved in immorality, enjoys and amuses himself with worldly entertainment, runs with the children of this world, disobeys and rebels against his parents, skips Catechism, church services, and yet dutifully dares to approach God in prayer. That's hypocrisy and God hates the prayer of the hypocrite.

Sincerity and humility, closely connected. Our coming to God in sincerity of heart is that we humble ourselves before God in prayer. This is the second requirement of acceptable prayer according to the 117th Answer. Secondly, that we rightly and thoroughly know our need and misery, that so we may deeply humble ourselves in the presence of his divine majesty. Humility before God is grounded in at least two fundamental truths that come out in this part of the 117th Answer. First, the Catechism teaches us that we are mere creatures in the presence of the majesty, the majesty of God. His divine majesty. The Catechism says that we must rightly and thoroughly know our need, the need that we have in the presence of God's divine majesty. We are a needy people. That must be the conviction of our hearts. That must drive us to prayer. We are a needy people in prayer. We look to God in our need. In prayer we call upon God, giving expression to our need. And in prayer we beseech God for the supply of our need. This is the very essence of prayer. Certainly it includes our physical need since we do not have anything, anything on account of our own ability. We have not the least ability to care for ourselves. We humble ourselves before the one who cares for us.

There is not very much humility in prayer today. That becomes evident in the posture of prayer. That becomes evident in the language of prayer. Undoubtedly one reason for that lack of humility is the loss of the sense of our need, that we are a needy people. Pride, unbelievable pride, the arrogance of those who are independent is the rule. In our day there is no sense of the majesty of God anymore. The explanation for that is largely the

teaching of evolution. Man is independent. Man has no need of God. We have ourselves, brought ourselves to where we are today. And so we pat ourselves on the back. That teaching is destructive, utterly destructive to humility and that's what's happening as a fruit of that teaching in the churches today.

But secondly, the reason for humility is not merely the sense that we are dependent creatures, have nothing in ourselves, but that we are sinful creatures. That's the thing that must drive our humility. The Catechism says, secondly, that we rightly and thoroughly know our need and misery, and anyone who's acquainted with the Heidelberg Catechism picks up on that key word in the Catechism, misery, for from the very beginning, the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism is that our misery is our sin and the guilt of our sin before God. That's what makes us such miserable men and women. A humble prayer, therefore, is a prayer that recognizes our sinfulness. It is a repentant prayer.

Whenever we come to God in prayer, we must come as those who are truly sorry for their sins, as those who are broken over sin. Not to be sorry for our sins, to come into God's presence with pride of heart, that's the extreme form of a lack of humility. In Psalm 138:6 the psalmist says that the proud dare not approach, dare not draw near to God. One who prays to God while deliberately going on in sin, not only prays insincerely, but he prays without the necessary humility. Only the sinner broken over his sin, like the publican in Jesus' parable who could not lift up his eyes even to heaven, prays, prays in humility.

This is one of the most serious deficiencies in prayer today and that, again, is evident in posture, in language, lack of humility, and then add to that, listen for that in all the prayers that you hear, the complete lack of the petition for the forgiveness of our sins. It's missing. It's missing in 90 percent of the prayers that I hear, I mean, thankfully outside of our own churches and people. But there's a reason for that and that reason is, of course, the teaching that prevails in the churches that, "I have some good in me. I am a good person. At the very least, I have a free will so that I can choose my own salvation." And so man is not cut down and humbled as he ought to be, instead he's lifted up in pride, and that has its fruits in prayer.

Although we are to pray in humility, that humility is not destructive to confidence. This is the last requirement of prayer: we are not only to approach God humbly but with confidence, and that clearly is the teaching of Asaph in the Psalm that we read. That's verses 14 and 15, "Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High: And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will, I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me." The last verse of the Psalm, "Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me: and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I shew the salvation of God." Confidence in prayer, number 1, because God has commanded us to pray. Confidence in prayer in the second place because he's promised in his word that he'll hear our prayers and answer them. Confidence in prayer because the one to whom we draw near is our Father, the God of the covenant, who loves us as his own dear children. He's going to answer our prayers. And then forth, confidence that God will hear and answer our prayers for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Savior. That's the reason for confidence. Not at all in ourselves, not in our prayers, but our confidence in prayer is in Jesus Christ, the confidence that although we

are altogether unworthy of it, for Christ's sake, God will certainly hear and answer our prayers.

And that's the last part of the 117th Answer. That ought to motivate us to pray. We ought to be motivated to pray because God requires us to pray. We ought to pray because in prayer we enjoy communion with God. We ought to pray because prayer is the chief part of the thankful life of every Christian. We ought to pray because God will give his grace and his Holy Spirit only to those who with sincere desires ask them of him. And now we ought to be motivated to pray because God promises that he will hear and he will answer our prayers. In Psalm 34:15 the psalmist writes, "The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry." Cry, people of God. Cry out to your heavenly Father in prayer. Cry out to him in the confidence that he will hear you, that his ears are open to your cries. Cry out to him in the confidence that for Jesus' sake he will answer your cries. Amen.

*Our Father who art in heaven, we thank thee for the gift of prayer and for the privilege that we have to draw near to thee as our God and our Father for Jesus' sake. Give us sincerity of heart when we pray, humility knowing who we are and thy greatness and glory, and give us the confidence that for Jesus' sake thou wilt hear us and thou wilt answer our prayers. Amen.*