

Let Us Pray

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Happy New Year to you all. This is the time of year when many of us step back and reassess our lives, reflect on the year that just ended, and look ahead to the coming year. Many will make New Year's resolutions, maybe having to do with diet or exercise.

I want to begin this New Year with a sermon on prayer. Hopefully, above various other resolutions we might make, we would be reminded of the supreme importance of talking to God. I want to call us as a church to be a praying people. I especially want to exhort and encourage every believer to personal, private prayer. This week I read through the short booklet by J.C. Ryle entitled, "A Call to Prayer," and it was very convicting and inspiring. He speaks of prayer as the "spiritual pulse" of a person (34). "Tell me what a man's prayers are, and I will soon tell you the state of his soul." On the one hand, "not praying is a clear proof that a man is not yet a true Christian" (6). Whereas, on the other hand, "of all the evidences of the real work of the Spirit, a habit of hearty private prayer is one of the most satisfactory that can be named. A man may preach from false motives. A man may write books and make fine speeches and seem diligent in good works, and yet be a Judas Iscariot. But a man seldom goes into his closet, and pours out his soul before God in secret, unless he is in earnest."

This is what I desire for myself and for all of us. I want us to be a body of believers who are individually going to the Lord in prayer. It's also so vital that we gather together for prayer. But that will only be authentic if we're each cultivating the discipline of personal prayer. The question that Ryle asks throughout that booklet, and the question I ask you this morning, is this: "Do you pray?" And this doesn't just mean saying a rote prayer before a meal or at bedtime. Do you pray? Do you spend time alone with God, talking to God, pouring out your heart before Him, confessing your sins to Him, pleading with Him for mercy and help, praising Him for the beauty of His greatness? Do you have that kind of relationship with Him?

If not, then you're not a Christian. And maybe this morning you will say your very first real prayer, crying out to Him for salvation. For those who are believers, who do pray, my hope is that this morning's sermon will remind us of what a privilege it

is to talk to God, and that we'll be instructed from God's Word as to how we ought to pray.

To do this, I want to look at three passages. First, the Lord's prayer, and then two prayers in Ephesians. And then I'll close with some practical suggestions for praying the Psalms.

Matthew 6:9-13

Praying to the Father

We'll look at this prayer in three parts. First there is the invocation, where we see that we are praying to the Father. Secondly, there are requests concerning God's glory. And then finally there are requests concerning our needs.

First, we notice that we have the privilege of addressing God as Father, which points to the glorious reality that we are His children. As believers, we are sons and daughters who have been adopted into God's family. One of the great privileges we have as God's children is the privilege of talking to our Father. It should absolutely astound us that Jesus instructs us to pray, "Our Father." This is not a privilege we deserve. As sinful human beings, we do not deserve an audience with God. We deserve to be cast out of His presence forever because of our rebellion against Him. But by the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, and His resurrection, and through repentance of sin and faith in Him, we are brought into this relationship with God in which He is now our Father!

We should also notice that it says, "Our Father *in heaven*." There is the intimacy of approaching God as Father, but there is also the realization that He is in heaven and that He is holy and righteous and transcendent. Therefore as we approach God in prayer we must realize both that He is our loving Father and also that He is the sovereign King who rules on high. We can call Him Father, yes, but that should not diminish our reverence for Him. Hebrews 12:28-29, "let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." Don't think that just because God is our Father that we can treat Him casually or irreverently. On the other hand, neither should we think that because God is so transcendent and so high above us that we can never talk to Him. We need to perceive both of these emphases. He is our Father, and He is in heaven.

Requests Concerning God's Glory

Now let's look at the first three petitions in this prayer, which are requests concerning God's glory. First, "hallowed be your name." Hallowed is the word for sanctify, to make holy, to

set apart. When we pray for God to sanctify us, we are asking Him to make us holy, to purify us. But when we ask that His Name be sanctified, hallowed, we are asking that He will be seen as He is. He doesn't need to be purified. He doesn't need to be made holy. He *is* holy. And this is a prayer that He will be honored as holy. 1 Peter 3:15 uses the same word when it says, "in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy." Honor as holy is the same word used here in the Lord's prayer. Hallowed be your name.

It's also important to realize here that this is an imperative verb, not an indicative verb. It is not simply a statement that the Father's name is hallowed. It is a request. It is a plea to the Father that His name would be hallowed. We are asking Him. We are praying to Him. Please, Father, glorify Your Name. Reveal Your glory so that more people will honor You as holy. May Your Name be hallowed, far more than it is now.

Prayer is God-centered. And the more we pray like Jesus taught us to pray, the more our hearts will be drawn into conformity with the things that God is passionate about. What is God most passionate about? His Name! His glory. God does everything He does ultimately to bring praise and honor to His Name. His purpose in all of His sovereign plans is to show what a great and glorious God He is. Therefore this is such an exciting prayer to pray, because we know that God is going to answer it. We know that He is sovereign and He is orchestrating all the events of history in order to cause His Name to be hallowed.

One of the great blessings of prayer is that as we pray these things it changes us. As we pray that God's Name be hallowed, and as God answers that prayer, it will result in us hallowing God's Name. This is something I want us to observe about each of these petitions. We are not merely asking God to do something out there, disconnected from what is happening in my own spiritual life. We should be saying to God, glorify Yourself, and start right here in my life. Cause me to honor You as holy, and may my life testify to Your greatness and Your grace so that others may see You for who You are.

The next two requests are also requests concerning God's glory, and they are very closely related to this first one. "Your kingdom come." This is a cry to God to advance His kingdom, to save sinners from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. It's a missionary prayer. It's a prayer for the Great Commission to be fulfilled, and for Christ to return and usher in God's kingdom in all of its fullness (like I was preaching about last Sunday). It's the cry of the early church, Maranatha (1 Corinthians 16:22), Come Lord Jesus (Revelation 22:20). And again, we can't pray this

without being affected by it ourselves. As we earnestly yearn for God's kingdom to expand and impact more and more lives, it's going to change us. We will desire for God to use us as a means of accomplishing His great kingdom purposes.

The third request further explains this petition. We want God's kingdom to come, and part of what that means is that we want God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. To understand this, it's helpful to distinguish between God's secret will and His revealed will. Because God's secret will, His sovereign will, is already being done. Even in the sin and evil of the world, God is completely sovereign. God's secret will encompasses even those things in the universe that directly oppose the commands that He has given. But God's revealed will is expressed in the commands of Scripture that call us to live holy lives rather than sinful, rebellious lives. And it's the request of this prayer that God's revealed will be done. It's our prayer that God's commands would be obeyed here on earth just as they are obeyed in heaven.

And so it is really saying the same thing as the previous petition. It's praying that God's kingdom would come in all of its fullness and eradicate sin from the earth and cause people to love God and fear Him and obey Him and worship Him.

Requests Concerning Our Needs

Moving to the second half of the prayer, the Lord instructs us also to make requests concerning our needs. The prayer begins with God-centered petitions concerning God's glory. But then there are also these requests that directly concern us and our needs. "Give us this day our daily bread." Isn't it amazing that the sovereign God of the universe cares about this? He cares about the seemingly small detail of my daily bread! He is our Father. He cares about these things. Some people might think that we're just bothering God with requests like this. When we come to Him asking for the daily necessities of life, this is too trivial for God. He has bigger things to take care of. Why bother Him with the mundane issues of food and clothing and shelter and employment and schooling and transportation and finances? But the thing we have to remember about this prayer is the way it begins, "Our Father." He's our Father! And He wants us to go to Him with all of our daily needs.

One of the profound things that this demonstrates is God's all-sufficiency and our utter dependency upon Him. It's not that God is unaware of our needs, and therefore we need to tell Him in order for Him to know. Verse 8 says, "your Father knows what

you need before you ask him.” And we might say, Well then, why are we instructed here to ask Him? If He already knows, why doesn’t He just respond to those needs? It would be more efficient that way. But that misses a vital aspect of prayer. Prayer is us as children coming to our Father. And we tell Him what we need, and He helps us. And through this we are reminded again and again that God is all-sufficient and we are completely dependent on Him. We are reminded how small we are and how big God is. We are reminded that we are needy and helpless, and God is the One who can help us in our need.

Next, we also ask for forgiveness. “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Our sin is spoken of here in terms of debt. We have rebelled against God and therefore we owe a very serious debt, an eternal debt, an infinite debt, to a Holy God. The wonderful news of the Gospel is that for those who repent of sin and trust in Christ, God has “forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:14). Jesus paid our debt on the cross. He died in our place to pay the infinite debt incurred by our sin. When we pray we should talk to our Father about our daily sins. We talk to Him about our daily bread, and we talk to Him about our daily sins. We should confess specific sins to Him and seek His forgiveness.

The final petition of the prayer is in verse 13. “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” The last phrase could be translated simply “deliver us from evil,” or “deliver us from the evil one,” speaking of Satan. And, of course, we need deliverance from both. We need God to protect us from the attacks of Satan, and we also need protection from the evil that is present in the world and in our own flesh.

Just like the first three petitions concerning God’s glory will have an impact on us and even involve us in the fulfillment of them, also these last three petitions concerning our needs will change us and involve us. It’s not that we pray these things and expect that God is going to respond in a way that is entirely disconnected from our lives.

We ask for Him to give us our daily bread, and He will often do this by allowing us to work and earn the money we need to pay for the necessities of life. And when he blesses us beyond our need, He will use us to answer this prayer in the lives of those who do not have the necessities of life. We ask God to forgive us, and as that happens it makes us into forgiving people. We ask God to keep us away from temptation and deliver us from evil. And as God answers this prayer He will transform our desires so that we

have a greater desire for Him and a decreasing desire for the things of the world.

Next, I want to go to Ephesians and look at a couple of Paul's prayers there.

Ephesians 1:15-23

Praying to See God

The first thing I want to note is that Paul is praying that the Ephesians would see God. In verses 17-18 Paul intercedes for the readers of his letter, making a request to God on their behalf. In verse 16 he says, "remembering you in my prayers," and then verse 17 begins with a word indicating purpose. The purpose of his prayer, or the content of his prayer, is "*that* the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him." This is what Paul longs to see happen in their lives. It is a God-centered request. Paul thanks God for their faith and love, and now he asks God to give them "a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him." There is a continual recognition here that God is the one who acts and works and changes us, and God needs to give us understanding. We need Him to reveal Himself to us.

There are five words in verses 17-18 that relate to the knowledge that Paul is praying for. First of all, in verse 17 he asks that God may give you a spirit of *wisdom* and of *revelation* in the *knowledge* of him. Then in verse 18, "having the eyes of your hearts *enlightened*, that you may *know* what is the hope to which he has called you." Wisdom, revelation, knowledge, being enlightened, that you may know. This is Paul's prayer, and we can sum it up as "praying to see God."

It is similar to Moses' prayer in Exodus 33, where God threatens to withdraw His presence from the Israelites because they're a stiff-necked people. But Moses pleads with God to reveal Himself and not to withdraw His presence. He says, "Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please *show me* now your ways, that I may *know* you in order to find favor in your sight" (Ex 33:13). And then he says, "Please *show me* your glory" (v. 18). Moses wanted to see God. He wanted God to reveal Himself. And Moses knew that this is what he needed and what God's people needed. They needed, and we need, to see God.

Paul goes on in verses 18-19 to cite three purposes of this enlightenment, of this illumination, of this knowledge. First, in verse 18, that you may know what is the hope to which he has

called you. Second, that you may know what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. And third, in verse 19, that you may know what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe. I want to focus on this third one, the immeasurable greatness of God's power, and to do so I want to turn now to Paul's prayer in chapter 3.

Praying for Power (Ephesians 3:14-21)

Paul's request in verse 16 is for power. He is asking God to strengthen these believers with power. This strengthening will happen "through the Spirit" and "in your inner being," meaning it is a spiritual power that Paul is asking for here. This is a prayer for spiritual empowerment. It is a plea for God to work in their inner being. Verse 17 continues, "so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . ." These two things are intimately bound together—the Spirit strengthening and Christ indwelling.

Then he goes on in verse 17 to ask that, since as Christians you have been "rooted and grounded in love," [agricultural and architectural metaphor] you "may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge . . ." Again he's asking for strength, for spiritual power. And what is it that we need strength for? To comprehend the love of Christ. The dimensions here (breadth, length, height, depth) are used to highlight how vast Christ's love is. And verse 19 states this even more clearly. The love of Christ "surpasses knowledge." So the prayer here is for the strength to comprehend and know Christ's love which is so big it surpasses knowledge.

It's interesting to notice the way Paul words his prayer in verse 19, "to *know* the *love* of Christ." He doesn't say, "to know facts about Christ." Therefore, we can't think of this knowing as a merely mental knowledge. This is an experiential knowledge. This is personally knowing and experiencing Christ's love for us. Like we saw recently in our study through Romans—in 5:5 it says, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." What an amazing thing to experience.

The clear implication of Paul's prayer here in Ephesians is that we need the very power of God to comprehend Christ's love. His love surpasses knowledge, so it is a supernatural, miraculous work of God to illumine our hearts in such a way that we experience this infinite love that Christ has for us. To be loved like this is to be changed. As we pray for God to give us power to know the love of Christ, we will be changed. The final purpose of

the prayer, at the end of verse 19, is “that you may be filled with all the fullness of God,” which is a prayer for spiritual growth, spiritual maturity. The prayer is that we will be given power to have a deeper grasp of Christ’s love, and as a result that we will be radically changed and transformed, being filled with all the fullness of God.

Praising God for His Power

Lastly, we see that Paul not only prays for power, but then he concludes by praising God for His power. Look at verses 20-21. “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Paul’s language in this doxology shows the limitations of our requests. We don’t even know how to ask for the things that will most glorify God. And so we simply acknowledge that He is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.

This last point about praising God for His power should really become the ground and the purpose of all our prayers. We saw in the Lord’s prayer how it begins with three petitions concerning God’s glory. We see here that Paul’s prayer culminates in a doxology. Our delight is in the glory of God. Our prayers ought to center around the glory of God. We pray for His Name to be hallowed. And we say, “to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Praying the Psalms

The last thing I want to do in this sermon is give you a simple method for praying the Psalms. I would certainly encourage you to use these prayers we’ve looked at this morning, and many other prayers you can find throughout the New Testament, as a guide for your prayers. But I would also point you to the Psalms as a great place to find inspiration for your prayers.

Some of you attended the seminars led by Don Whitney last February, and this is part of what he taught on. He said that one of the reasons our prayers get dull and boring is because we say the same old things about the same old things. The problem is not that we pray *about* the same old things. There are naturally going to be certain things that are always at the forefront of our minds: family, future, finances, work or schoolwork, church, ministry, the “current crisis.” This is the stuff of life, and these are the kinds of things we’ll always be praying about. But if we’re

always saying the same things about these life issues, that's when prayer can become very boring. That's when we get in a rut.

So here's a simple suggestion that I believe is extremely helpful, and I've been very excited about this ever since Dr. Whitney was here. Read through a Psalm, slowly, line by line, and let the words of that Psalm guide your prayers and prompt your prayers and be the expression of your prayers about the things going on in life, the things that are on your heart. As Dr. Whitney says in his handout on praying Scripture (which was attached to the church email this week), "The Psalms are the best place in Scripture from which to pray Scripture. This is because of the original purpose and usage of the Psalms. The Psalms were songs inspired by God for the purpose of being reflected in song back to God. Moreover, there's a Psalm for every sigh of the heart. The entire range of human emotion is recorded in the 150 Psalms."

So, for instance, just to take the very first two verses of the Psalms, from Psalm 1: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked [and you may then pray for yourself, that you would not walk in the counsel of the wicked, you may pray for God to give you discernment in choosing friends, you may pray for your children, you may pray for family members who are walking in the counsel of the wicked], nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord [and then you may begin praising God for His Word and thanking Him for the delight of knowing Him in His Word; you may ask that God would stir in you a greater delight in His commands], and on his law he meditates day and night [and you may thank God for the blessings of meditating on His Word, and pray that these blessings would spread to the unbelievers around you]." Use the Psalms as a prayer book. Let the Psalms shape and express the things in your heart. Let these inspired prayers be a help to you in your daily prayer life.

So this is my exhortation to you at the beginning of a new year. Let us pray. Let us be a praying people. Let us know the joy of communing with the Almighty God of the universe, calling Him Father, praying for His glory to be known, expressing our needs and desires to Him, and demonstrating our absolute reliance on Him. May each of us grow this year in our authenticity and fervency and consistency in personal prayer.