

Prayer & Fasting – Matthew 6.5-18

*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,
ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (John 15.7)*

Prayer is one of the great definers of a Christian's Christ-likeness. I suppose that there is no other activity which so aptly fits the believer for heaven nor brings heaven so near to the soul as Spirit-motivated prayer. Unfortunately, some think the power of prayer comes from prayer itself, rather than from God. Nevertheless, true power in prayer comes from God (cp. E. M. Bounds, *The Power of Prayer*). Although the Christian is encouraged to pray, indeed is often prompted by the Spirit to pray, it is God's gracious response that is the wonder of prayer.

Many have emphasized the eschatological nature of prayer. That is, the believer knows that Christ has established His kingdom on earth and that at some point in time He will bring this inaugural work to its full consummation. Consequently, when the Christian petitions God to advance the work of His church and to grant the requests of His children, he does so for both a present and a future effect. Such a work (prayer) is prophetic in its nature. That is, like the Old Testament prophets or the New Testament saints, godly men and women seek God's favor in order that God's glory will be manifested in the present age (because the kingdom has been inaugurated) and it will be to God's honor in the future kingdom. Such was the case with Moses as he pled with God to forgive Israel for her many sins, *So Moses went back to the Lord and said, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written"* (Exodus 32.21-22; cp. Romans 9.1-3).

Such prayer has no room for self-aggrandizement. Thus, private prayer is out of place in the public forum. It is an isolationist kind of prayer. It is intimate and earnest. It will tolerate no interruption or distraction. There are some things about which the Christian needs to speak privately with his heavenly Father. No other ears but God's should be privy to the cries that ensue from a heart struggling with Him in that holy place. The Father longs for His children to seek a private audience with Him where in confidence the most secret things of the heart might be revealed. It is a place where the hot tears of shame might be wiped away and the implorations of a broken heart might find succor and consolation. It is a secure harbor where intercessory cries are uninhibited by an audience.

The Lord's Prayer may be outlined in two sections. The first section: *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* May be outlined as follows:

When Christians pray it is often in preparation for some sort of spiritual "battle;" **when Jesus prayed it was the battle.** His life was characterized by prayer. Luke makes over twenty-five references to prayer and on eleven different occasions he mentions that Jesus

departed from the disciples to pray. Indeed, on one such occasion he mentions that the disciples were so taken by the quality and character of Jesus' prayer life that they asked Him, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11.1-13). What Jesus shared with his disciples was **not what they must pray but how they must pray**. So it is not surprising that there is some minor difference between the Lukan and Matthean account. It is quite probable that Jesus frequently repeated these truths about prayer in various settings.

Father: Your name	Person/Praise
Your kingdom	Purpose
Your will	Program/Sovereignty

The second section: *give us today our daily bread, forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one*, may be outlined thus:

Family: Give us	Provision/Providence
Forgive us	Pardon/Proving grace
Lead us	Protection

The Lord's Prayer begins with the address, *Our Father in heaven*. Matthew makes over twenty-five references to "Father in heaven." Clearly he intends to convey an understanding that the disciples have a special relationship with God as their Father. Such an address to God in prayer reinforces a radically different pattern for prayer than that which was practiced by the Pharisees. Jesus wanted to engender in his disciples a confidence in God, so that their prayers would be like that of a child asking his earthly father for something he knows he will receive (Matthew 7.9-11). Indeed, in his upper room discourse, he reinforces this truth when he tells the disciples that their confidence in prayer will be based on his redemptive intercession (cp. 1 Timothy 2.5-6). Such a work as that ought to give them extraordinary confidence in prayer. *In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete* (John 16.23-24).

Of course, there is an obvious filial obligation suggested by the intimacy of the address. He who speaks of God as his Father must presume to be his child. Such an assumption may lead one to suppose that this person will then behave as God's child. I stress this, because James indicates that success in one's prayer life is related to one's desire to please God. Although he phrases it somewhat negatively: *You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures*. (James 4.2-3). Nevertheless, there is in the believer a heart's desire to please God in everything (cp. Colossians 1.10; 1 Thessalonians 4.1; 2 Corinthians 7.1; Hebrews 13.21). This is, of course, only possible through knowledge of Scripture (Romans 8.7-8). Prayer without knowledge of the Word of God will inevitably be a disappointment.

Charles Bridges wrote, “prayer without study is presumption, and study without prayer is atheism.” George Mueller, who was noted for his prayer life as much as for his work with the orphans in England, placed an even greater emphasis on Scripture reading than he did on prayer. Knowing what we do about his prayer life, we can only imagine what his knowledge of Scripture must have been like.

God’s “name” is a reflection of who he is. God’s “name” is God himself as he is and has revealed himself, and so his name is already holy. Holiness, often thought of as “separateness,” is less an attribute than what he is. It has to do with the very godhood of God. Therefore to pray that God’s “name” be “hallowed” (the verbal form of “holy,” recurring in Matt only at 23:17, 19 [NIV “makes sacred”]) is not to pray that God may become holy but that he may be treated as holy (cf. Exod 20:8; Lev 19:2, 32; Ezek 36:23; 1 Peter 1:15), that his name should not be despised (Mal 1:6) by the thoughts and conduct of those who have been created in his image (D. A. Carson, *EBCNT*, pp. 169-170).

The Jews looked forward to the coming kingdom, but the believer reading Matthew’s Gospel understands that the kingdom has already arrived, though it is not yet fully consummated. God in his sovereignty rules over all the affairs of mankind, and the universal message is to repent because the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matthew 4.17; cp. 13). So then, the believer petitions God that He bring in the fullness of His kingdom. Those who submit to the reign of their holy Father focus on His holy name, His kingdom, and His sovereign will.

The last three petitions reflect the needs (not the greed, cp. 2 Kings 5, or Acts 5) of the believer. There is in the request for daily bread a reminder that the life of the Christian may well be precarious, a day to day survival (cp. Matthew 6.25-34). All good things come from the gracious hand of God, including the ability to work (Deuteronomy 8.18; 1 Corinthians 4.7; James 1.17). The Christian is reminded that God desires that he be daily dependent upon Him for all his provisions.

The second petition, regarding forgiveness, is central to everyone’s life as none is free from its affect (Isaiah 59.2; Romans 3.23). The text must not be misread as suggesting that one’s forgiveness is in any manner contingent upon his or her ability to forgive others. One does not merit pardon because he is merciful. To the contrary one is gracious because one has received grace. John Stott writes, “Once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offense against God, the injuries which others have done to us appear by comparison extremely trifling. If, on the other hand, we have an exaggerated view of the offenses of others, it proves that we have minimized our own” (Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 149-150).

Finally, the believer petitions the Lord not to be led into temptation. While there are those tests of the faith that are a consequence of one’s identity with Christ, the believer may nevertheless, ask to be spared such temptations as the Lord underwent in the

wilderness, and to be delivered from the Devil's power and deception. Though Jesus was able to stand against the evil one, Paul warns the believer that he should not presume to be able to do so unaided (Ephesians 6.10-13; 1 Peter 5.8; cp. 2 Corinthians 11.14).

The doxology – “for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen” – is found in various forms in many MSS. The diversity of what parts are attested is itself suspicious ... and the MS evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of omission – a point conceded by Davies (*Setting*, pp. 451-53), whose liturgical arguments for inclusion are not convincing. The doxology itself, of course, is theologically profound and contextually suitable and was no doubt judged especially suitable by those who saw in the last three petitions a veiled allusion to the Trinity; the Father's creation and providence provides our bread, the Son's atonement secures our forgiveness, and the Spirit's indwelling power assures our safety and triumph. But “surely it is more important to know what the Bible really contains and really means, than to cling to something not really in the Bible, merely because it gratifies our taste, or even because it has for us some precious associations” (Broadus). (Carson, p. 174)

As with prayer and almsgiving, fasting is to be done in secret. Jesus assumes that His disciples will fast; however, there is no specific enjoiner to fast at any prescribed time as under the Mosaic legislation on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16.29-31; 23.27-32; Numbers 29.7). During the exile fasts of remembrance were conducted (Zechariah 7.3-5). Fasting seems to emanate from a strong desire to seek God's deliverance from danger or as a result of personal or corporate sin. When the Lord's favor becomes the pressing issue in life, concern about the lesser things, such as food, are ignored. Apparently the Pharisees fasted two days a week (Monday and Thursday), but Jesus excoriates those who make a public display of their “piety.” One Christian noted that mortification of the flesh “can be better attained by habitual temperance than by occasional abstinence.” The heart of the matter is certainly summed up in Matthew 6.33, *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*