

What Jesus Thinks About Prayer, #4

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Bible Text: Matthew 6:7-8
Preached on: Sunday, November 14, 2010

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Good morning Grace Life. Glad that you're here and glad that you're awake and I know that you're here because you want to receive the teaching of the word of God and that's the best thing of all when we gather together every Sunday morning at 8:30 at Grace Life, is that I know that I step up in front of people who want to hear the word of God and want to do it and that is a wonderful privilege for all of us to be able to do. I thank God for you and I thank God particularly for what this morning is going to mean for us in our own prayer lives and how we communicate with God and how we talk with him.

Last week I started a two-part series, I actually thought I was starting a one part series. I didn't get too far and so it turned into a two part series, but Matthew 6 is where we're at. Matthew 6, I invite you to turn there. We were talking about how we pray, we were talking about what Jesus says about prayer in the context of a simple matter, the simple matter that we are working to improve our Grace Life prayer list that we pass out each week. When you get a bulletin, you will find a little beige prayer insert and over the past few weeks as I was looking at that I thought, and someone asked whether I was complaining about the way our people pray. No, not at all. I was complaining about my own oversight of this aspect of our ministry. Our prayer list was stale, it was static. We weren't doing much other than just repeating the same things over and over again and that was my responsibility. We weren't directing your thoughts to Scriptures that would apply to how you pray and I realized there was so much more that we could do to make that better and so we are trying to do that and so I encourage you week by week to get this, to read through it because we are making an effort to make it fresh and to be something that you can use as you pray throughout the week, and also to extend the sense of family at Grace Life. I mean, this is a big group and through this little means to make things known so that the people in Grace Life can be praying for you, we can be praying for one another. There is a spiritual focus, a spiritual emphasis, there are spiritual reasons why we are doing this. It's not simply a matter of formatting it so that it's easier to read, we are trying to be proactive and glorify God in our prayer lives. That's why we're doing that with this little list and what last week and this week is about from a teaching standpoint, is to give you the biblical focus, the biblical impetus, the biblical reasons on why this is important. It's about more than a prayer list, it's about how each one of us pray when we are alone with God. That's what I'm wanting to cultivate more than anything and the prayer list is simply, you know, almost incidental to that.

I want to pray well, don't you? I want to transcend the mediocrity that has marked so much of my Christian praying over the past 27 years of my Christian life. And I know that you do too, and even just this morning, earlier this morning someone stopped me and said, "Why is it that when I'm in a prayer group I can pray so much better than when I do in private?" And I think we all know something about that. If you've ever been in a prayer group, you have a way of turning it on when you are with other people, some of us anyway. You know, we can get pretty good and sound really good but if you were to take that and then play it against a tape of how you pray in private, a lot of us would see there is a gap there and there is an inconsistency there and that's frustrating for those of us that want to honor God with our praying. So all of that to say that today's message is designed to strengthen us, strengthen you and strengthen me, in the true knowledge of prayer and to help us know how to approach prayer in an effective way.

So we come to the teaching of Jesus Christ this morning to help us bridge the gap between what we profess about prayer because all of us would say prayer is important, yes, we need to pray and prayer is important, prayer is the nerve that moves the muscle of God. We would all say that kind of stuff at one level or another, but look, we know the truth of the matter is that we fall short in prayer and we want what we profess to be more of what we possess; to be a reality in our lives; something that when we go to God and get alone with God, we know how to pray and we pray that way because our hearts are drawn toward the one who saved us, who set his eternal love upon us and is going to bring us to glory. Our hearts are drawn to him and so we want to know how to pray well and to pray in a way that is consistent with what he has instructed and Jesus in this passage in Matthew 6 has really laid it out for us in pretty clear, compelling and concise ways for us to grasp.

Look at chapter 6, verse 5 in Matthew. Jesus says,

5 When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 6 But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Those are the two verses that we looked at last time and basically what we said from these two verses is that we need to examine ourselves, we need to consider, we need to reflect on our practice of prayer and purify our motives in prayer. Jesus is addressing the motives for which we pray and he tells us that when you go through the motions of prayer simply to be noticed by men, simply so that men would praise you, acknowledge you, applaud you for being a good prayer or a good Christian person, when you are going through Christian life trying to call attention to your religious devotion so that men will acknowledge you, Jesus says, "That's it. That's the reward that you get." There is nothing pleasing to God about that. If your aim is to have men praise you and they praise you, they say, "Wow that was some prayer you prayed in prayer group last week. You know, I love it when you pray in Bible study," and that's what you're aiming at and people praise

you for it, Jesus says you have your reward. There is no eternal significance, there is no blessing of God on us when we pray that way. He says that's as good as it gets. You wanted the praise of men, you got the praise of men. We've said that when you compare that to having the power of God at work in your life and having God pleased with you and having God reward you, you realize that that's so empty. It's so empty and I would venture to say that for many of you, you look at your prayer life and you say, "Oh, it's so empty. I want it to be so much more but it's just empty." Well, Jesus is teaching to help us overcome that and to make it fruitful and meaningful and that's why we're looking at this.

Jesus switches over to the positive in verse 6 and he says, "Here's how you start. Here's where you begin to purify your motives in prayer." He says in verse 6, "go into your inner room, close your door, pray to your Father who is in secret." Get alone with God. And we recognize that for some of us that's a logistical difficulty if you've got a lot of little kids running around or something, but somehow in your mind if you're able to geographically get alone with God even if you're just picking up a few minutes here and there, to focus on that private devotion to God. Men can't praise you when they can't see you and so when you take the conscious effort to separate yourself and to get alone, even if you're just going into a little closet for a short time just so that you can be alone with God, Jesus says that has the favor of God upon it. As you seek that kind of privacy, you're showing that you're seeking the approval of your Father. "Lord, let me get alone someplace where no one can see me so that I am sure that no one will praise me for it and therefore I won't have mixed motives in why I'm praying to you." And he says, a direct promise to his disciples, he says, "When you pray privately, God is there in his omnipresence in order to bless you." This is no empty exercise. This is not going through the motions. And we begin to make our prayer lives meaningful, we begin to pray in a meaningful way when we get alone and when we are conscious of the blessing of God, we are conscious that this is what he has ordered, this is what he has promised to bless and you say, "Okay, now we're in a position to go somewhere with the way that we pray." So when you remember God's presence, when you remember God's love toward his children, when you remember his intention to bless, prayer turns away from being a duty to be fulfilled into a delight that you want to pursue. That's a basic summary of what we talked about last week. Purify your motives in prayer.

Now, moving on to today's portion of that, second point if you will, is that we want to purify our practice of prayer. Purify your practice of prayer and that's what we're going to look at in the next two verses, verses 7 and 8. Look at them with me, if you will. This is so practical and helpful and I trust that it's going to be very constructive for you as you seek to grow in your life of prayer before God. Jesus says, verse 7,

7 And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.
8 So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. 9 Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.'

We'll just kind of stop there for this morning. Purify your practice in prayer. There are three things that I want to give you, very practical, very useful things that you can take and put into practice today for the way that you pray. The first one is a negative, what not to do; the following two after that are the positive things that you do want to pursue in prayer.

So first of all, how do you purify your practice of prayer? First of all, understand that Jesus tells you to avoid meaningless repetition. Avoid meaningless repetition. He says in verse 7, "when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words." When he says this meaningless repetition, he's referring to, the verb literally means to babble, but it really has the idea here of speaking without thinking. Speaking without thinking. You pray and you're saying words but your mind is really running someplace else; you're engaged in something else while you're saying words. Or you have a set pattern of prayer. You have words that you use over and over and over again. Those of you that come from ritualistic backgrounds, come from Catholicism, you were taught to pray the same prayers over and over again, this is what Jesus was addressing and saying don't pray that way. Don't use the same words over and over. It just becomes repetition. It's meaningless. You're not thinking about it as you pray. Ultimately what Jesus is condemning here is a mechanical approach to prayer that is marked by thoughtless speech; speaking that is not engaged with the character of God, that is not engaged with the word of God, that goes through the motions and simply piles on prayer in the hope that God will somehow hear.

He says they suppose to be heard in their many words there in verse 7, "they suppose that they will be heard for their many words." He says the Gentiles, the pagans, pray and pray and pray but it's meaningless. They think that a quantity of words is somehow going to badger God into doing what they want. Jesus says they have it all wrong. It's not that sheer length will not cause God to answer you. God doesn't answer thoughtless prayers and so don't pray that way. And I'll leave it to you to examine your own heart on where you line up with that. Before you enter into the presence of God to pray, whether you stop and think about what you are doing. I'm approaching the holy one of the universe. I am approaching the God and Father of my Lord Jesus Christ who sent him to be the Savior of the world. I'm approaching one who sees and hears, who knows my heart, one who rebukes my sin and yet promises to bless me when I confess and seek him, and so I need to take this seriously. I need to sober up, as it were. I need to address him as an intelligent person who is interacting with me, who is hearing me.

When I preached on this passage a few years ago, I gave the hypothetical example of how irritating it would be if you had a person in your life who said the same thing to you every time they saw you. Every time they saw you, they just mechanically said, "Hello, Ralph. It's good to see you. How are you? I am fine. Have a good day." Next day, same thing, "Hello, Ralph. It's good to see you. How are you? I am fine. Have a good day." Wednesday, "How are you, Ralph? Good to see you. Have a good day." That would drive you nuts. You would detest that kind of relationship and say, "Oh, here he comes again." Well, understand that on an infinitely greater scale, the God who knows all, the God who knows every word on your tongue before you speak it, is not interested in that kind of

engagement from you in prayer. Understand that that is an insult to his intelligence. It's an insult to his holiness. It's an insult to the Spirit of God that searches our hearts and knows all things. We can't go through prayer like that. That's an insult to God to pray with meaningless repetition in a mechanical way.

So don't get the thought in your mind if I just pray for 30 minutes or 45 minutes or 15 minutes or whatever your standard of greatness is in prayer, don't get the sense that time means anything when you pray because if it's just babbling thoughtless words that you're saying over and over again, it doesn't matter. Get this: Jesus sets up many words in prayer as a bad example. This is really searching but it's right there on the surface of Scripture. Jesus says, look at verse 7 with me again, he says, "do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words." Their many words, quantity of words in and of itself means nothing and Jesus was not the first person in the Bible to say this. In Ecclesiastes 5:2, King Solomon said, "Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few." Let your words be few. Before you go in and just start flapping your tongue, step back and stop and think about what you're doing and let an economy of words, in many cases an economy of words would be an expression of taking prayer more seriously than simply multiplying the things that you've been saying all along. This is very challenging but it's also very helpful.

Now understand this, understand this, that you walk on a razor's edge on some of these biblical themes and it's so easy to be misunderstood. Understand that repetition, per se, is not the problem. Making the same prayer request again and again by itself is not a problem. Jesus and the Apostle Paul both repeated some of their prayers. That's recorded for us in Scripture. The problem is not repeating prayers. Since the day my children were born, I've been praying for their salvation day after day after day after day. The Lord has seen fit to honor that prayer and answer that prayer for many of them and I thank him for that, but the repetition in that was not driven by a mechanical meaningless thing. That's the desire of my heart is to see my children know Christ. So when you're repetition is driven by a heart motivation, a heart animation that says, "God, this is really important. I know I said this yesterday, I know I said it three hours ago but I'm bringing it to you again," that's different from the mindless thoughtless repetition that we're so easily drawn into when we pray. It's when you are speaking words of prayer while your mind is thinking about something else that you need to be on guard for. Saying things without thinking about them, that's the problem. That's what makes it meaningless and that's what Jesus calls our attention to.

You see, when you're praying, it is designed to be thoughtful words addressed to the God of the Bible. Running through your prayer list when your heart is not engaged is a problem. That's not a right way to pray. That's a wrong use of a prayer list if you're simply just running through mindlessly going through it. That is the wrong way to pray. That is meaningless repetition. Jesus says the blessing of God is not upon that. And as I've come to understand this and embrace it more and more over the prior years, I've been so glad for this because it just releases you from that sense of guilt and obligation that

some list tends to put upon you. Again, it's not that the prayer list is the problem, it's what it produces in your heart and makes you think simply going through the motion is actually real prayer when it's not. God does not want long prayers simply for the sake of long prayers.

So we're left with the question, "Okay, what does he want then? Okay, if that's not it, what does he want? If it's not meaningless repetition, if it's not the same thing over and over, if he doesn't want the rituals that I was taught as a kid, what is it that he wants then? Tell me, Jesus. Tell me how to pray then in a way that honors God and engages the affections of my heart? That's what I want to know." He does that. Jesus gives us that in the second point for today's message. You avoid meaningless repetition, on a positive side, second point here: aim for simplicity. Aim for simplicity.

Look at what Jesus says in verse 8, "So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." He says, "I've been talking to you about these Gentiles who multiply words in prayer, by contrast what do I want from you? Don't be like that." Contrast that. Forget about the multiplicity of words. It's not like you need to inform God about your situation because he knows what you need before you ask. You can skip over all of that, if you want to. You don't have to help him with the facts. He knows your needs. He knows how to meet them. He has promised to reward you when you pray. So that greatly simplifies everything. Now understanding the way Jesus teaches on prayer, understanding how God the Father views prayer, enables you to pray clearly, to pray simply and then to trust God to bless you.

Many of the great prayers of the Bible were extremely short. If you go through and calculate this, 78 of the 150 Psalms in the Old Testament are 12 verses or less. You can go through those in 90 seconds, 60 seconds. And yet in their brevity, God saw fit to include them in the canon of Scripture as being a model for us on how to pray. Look at some of the great prayers of men in the Bible in the Old and New Testament. Moses in Exodus 32 speaking to God said, "I pray you, show me your glory." The simplicity of that and yet think about what that says about his heart. "I want to know you. I want to see your glory, so show it to me." You can't get to that kind of heart through a lot of ritualistic prayer. The dying thief on the cross looking over at the placard that was above Jesus, "This is Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews," and seeing how Jesus was dying on the cross, hearing him speak in his seven sayings on the cross. The dying thief looked at him and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." The power of that prayer. "Jesus, I believe the testimony that you are the King of the Jews. I believe that you are a King. I believe that your kingdom is yet to come. I just ask you, Lord, remember me when you enter into your kingdom. Would you have grace and mercy on me when you enter in?" All of that heartfelt affection, all of that motivation wrapped up in the simple words, "Jesus, remember me when you enter your kingdom." He didn't need to discourse for 30 minutes about it. In 15 seconds he expressed a prayer of eternal worth. I say this to encourage you, beloved. I say this to encourage you. It's not long prayers, per se, that are pleasing to God, and to see that even thoughtful short prayers are worthy. The Apostle John at the end of the Bible at the close of the book of Revelation simply prays, "Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus."

Aiming for simplicity and what I want you to see from all of that is that this doesn't have to be complicated. All of the wonderful books that have been written on prayer and the many sermons that have been written on prayer, I just have a burning concern for the people in Grace Life that all of that would make you think that there is a complex structure to this that has to be met, and by the power of the Scriptures, I want to liberate you from that, unshackle your heart from those kinds of expectations so that you would pray clearly, pray simply, and realize that kind of thoughtful prayer engaged with the character of God interacting with the word of God is acceptable to God. God will bless your simple private prayers. Your responsibility is to honor his love and his wisdom with a thoughtful approach to prayer that is worthy of the living person to whom you pray. Engage your mind. Think about what you're doing. Reflect on the character of God. Think about what you're asking him for. We have a tendency to focus on our physical circumstances in their different manifestations but man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. You see, for a lot of you it's probably not that you need to pray longer and try harder at what you're already doing, some of you need to recalculate your whole approach to prayer and that should be an encouragement. Say, "Oh, oh, you mean I've been doing it wrong and there is a better way to do it that is more engaging, that is more a reflection of the affections of my heart? I want that, yeah!"

Here's a final way that you can purify your practice in prayer. We'll spend more of our time here this morning, I guess. We've said that you avoid meaningless repetition, that you aim for simplicity, thirdly, as you pray, appeal to God's character. Appeal to God's character. I'm going to give you a lot of biblical illustrations on this to help you see this. After showing us what prayer should not be, Jesus teaches us what prayer should be. That's the point of verses 9 through 13. He gives this model prayer. He gives this pattern of prayer that is to be the kinds of themes that should engage us when we pray. Having just said avoid meaningless repetition, he's obviously not giving us a prayer that we would just repeat over and over again until it became second nature and we didn't have to think about it when we pray. That's not the point of this is just to recite this prayer over and over again. Rather he's giving us themes in prayer, he's giving us a way to think about prayer.

Look at what he says in verse 9 that I read earlier. He says, "Pray, then, in this way." You have to love the negative and positive approach to Jesus' prayer. On a negative side he says don't pray like this. Don't pray like the Gentiles do, to be noticed by man with a lot of meaningless repetition. Don't pray that way. But he doesn't leave it there. In his grace and his mercy and his genius as a teacher, he says, "Okay, now here's how you do pray. This is the way that my disciples pray. I am commanding you, I am directing you to pray in this manner," he says. And for those of us that have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ crucified, buried and resurrected for our salvation, those of us that have surrendered our lives to him as Lord and said, "I receive you for salvation. I commit myself to you. Your word is now my law." Jesus comes and says, "This is the way that you pray. This is what I want from you in prayer."

Look at what he does in verse 9, he says, "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.'" We're not going to look at the entire Lord's Prayer this morning. I only want you to see one thing from this verse. I say that and then I'm going to have like a lot of different things to say about it, so I don't know how that works. But I want you to see this one thing at the beginning of this point: your primary goal, your primary affection, your primary desire when you pray, should be that your prayers, that you when you pray would be an agent of the spread of God's glory. You pray so that you would be an agent of God's glory on earth. You look around, you assess what you see going on, and when you come to prayer the first thing on your mind, "Our Father who is in heaven, my loving gracious Father sovereignly rules from the throne room of the universe, glory be to your name. Hallowed be your name. Let your name be revered. Let your name be exalted." And understand this: that is the entranceway into the rest of the teaching from Jesus on prayer. This is what frames the totality of your approach to prayer is the glory of God, to see his name advanced, to see his name exalted. So you pray always always always going back, touching back to the fact, how does this deal with the glory of God? How does this affect the glory of God when I pray? What is it that I'm engaging? Lord, what is it that I most want at the fundamental bottom part of my heart? I want your name to be glorified.

So our Lord Jesus teaches us from the start in this fundamental foundational teaching about prayer, he teaches us to frame it, frame your praying through God's fatherly love, "Our Father"; his heavenly sovereignty, "Our Father who is in heaven reigning over all"; and the totality of his character, "Hallowed be Your name," his name being a representation of all of his character. That is what frames your prayer, beloved, and for most of us, certainly all of us at one point or another, we need to step back and with contrition and humility of heart realize and recognize and acknowledge that too often we have come and we have simply come to prayer trying to get God to do what we want him to do for us and to fulfill our desires on earth. "I've got this problem. God, fix it. God, I want this. Do it." Praying that way without any kind of corresponding sense, any kind of corresponding concern for the glory of God when we pray that way. That is upside down. That is mixed up. That is all wrong and it's no wonder when we pray that way that we find that our prayers lack power, we find that it's hard to sustain that, because God isn't blessing that selfish approach to prayer.

I think we sometimes fall into an unspoken trap of thinking that God exists to further our interests. What I'm trying to bring to your conscious attention for you to reflect on and embrace in your heart is that it's just the other way around. We exist to be agents of God's glory on earth and that preeminently starts in the way that we pray. "God, my desire here is to see you magnified, to see you honored, to see your principles upheld, to see those that love you and uphold you to be honored and the wicked put in their place. For your sake, Father, not for mine." And so you start with that fundamental recognition. You empty yourself, as it were, of your selfish ambitions in prayer and say, "Lord, the most important thing as shown by the first thing that Jesus lays out here in this model prayer, the most important thing is the reverence and the exaltation of your name. That's what I want, Lord, and everything that I say in prayer flows from that," is the way that you should approach it.

Now, how do you do that then? How do you pray? You say, "Okay, I embrace that. I see that as the desire of my heart. How then do I pray when I bring requests to God? How do I pray? What is it that I ask him for?" Well, the whole rest of the Lord's Prayer there through verse 13 is really an answer to that question. I want to just really kind of focus and kind of flesh out this concept in verse 9, "Hallowed be Your name." What does that look like when you pray? And I want to put it to you this way: you appeal to God's character when you pray. You appeal to God's character as the basis upon which – follow me here – you appeal to God's character as the basis upon which he should be disposed to answer your prayer. This presupposes an awful lot. This presupposes an awful lot. This presupposes that you actually know the character of God as it has been revealed in his word. It presupposes that you know him in order to be able to appeal to his character and your knowledge of him has to be shaped by an understanding of his word, not by your own thoughts and reasonings and rationales. You appeal to God's character as he has revealed it in his word as the basis upon which he should be disposed to answer your prayer.

Turn back to the Psalms with me. I just randomly chose some examples because the truth of the matter is that when you're sensitive to this, it is woven throughout all of the Scripture in the way that men pray, in the way that God's people pray, in the way that God's leaders pray. It's woven throughout and I just want to stimulate your thinking with a couple of examples and trust the Spirit of God to help you work it out in your own prayer life.

Start in Psalm 51, for example. Psalm 51, David's prayer of confession after his sin with Bathsheba. He comes and he frames his prayer of confession with these words, "Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions." "Father, here I am, I come to you burdened in guilt, burdened with the reality of the conviction of my sin, and I ask you to relieve me of that sense of guilt. Why? Why? Not because I want to feel better primarily but, Lord, according to your lovingkindness, according to your faithful love, according to your compassion. I ask you based on your faithful compassion in my life to relieve me of this guilt." He appeals to God's character as he prays right from the start. "God, your character is one of faithful love, one of compassion, and I know I have sinned against you and I ask for relief from my guilt because you are a compassionate and gracious God, not because I have any merit in requesting this at all. I appeal to your character, Lord, as the reason that you should be favorably disposed to respond to my prayer."

Turn over for another example to Psalm 57. Psalm 57:1, "Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me, For my soul takes refuge in You; And in the shadow of Your wings I will take refuge Until destruction passes by." "I will cry to God most high, to God who accomplishes all things for me. Lord, I appeal to your sovereign providential care over my life as the basis upon which I ask for your help and protection. I appeal to your character. God, God, you have revealed in your word to be the protector and the shield of your people. You love us. You are faithful to us. And it's on that basis, I appeal to your faithfulness, Lord, to respond to my request."

In the New Testament, the martyrs in Revelation appeal to the character of God for justice with these words as they prayed. They say, "How long, O Lord, holy and true," Revelation 6:10 if you want to write it down, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" "Lord, you're holy and you're true and wicked people have slain us. How long will you wait until you avenge our blood? I appeal to your justice. I appeal to your holiness. I appeal to your knowledge of this crime against your people. How long, O Lord? Bring about justice."

The Lord Jesus Christ even in Mark 14:36 as he was contemplating the cross said, "Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me." He appeals to the sovereign prerogative and says, "God, it's all possible for You; remove this cup from Me." "I appeal to your character. I appeal to your attributes. I appeal to your power and I ask you to grant my request."

What I'm saying here for you to think through and to appropriate, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is this: is that true prayer, true biblical prayer following the model of countless examples in Scripture of which I have only given you the briefest of samples, true prayer takes the time to actually articulate God's character. Actually takes the time to say these things. It slows down. It doesn't jump over his character to say, "God, let's get down to business. Here's what I need right now." What an insult to the majesty of God to pray that way; to rush into the presence of the King with no recognition of his majesty and his honor and his character and his goodness and just say, "This is what's on my mind today." What's the matter with us that we pray that way to our Savior? To our gracious God? Have we no concern for fellowship with him? To recognize and honor him above our own desires? What's wrong with us, I ask you?

So what I'm saying is that part of your discipline in prayer, this is so much more than saying, "Okay, 30 minutes." Please. What I'm saying here is that you discipline your heart, you discipline your mind to think that the character of God and the glory of God is more important when I pray than anything that is happening to me and I am going to take time to recognize that, I'm going to take time to truly honor that, not to rush through that so that I can get to what I want to talk about because what I want to talk about first and foremost is the glory of God when I pray to him. So you take time with God's character and you think through God's character and consider whether that would endorse the things that you want to ask for, or whether it would contradict it and you shouldn't even waste your time. But you train your mind to appeal to the character of God as it is revealed in the Bible and then you bring his own character to him as that which would motivate him to respond favorably to you.

For a more extended example of this, turn back to 2 Chronicles 20. It's a big long book. You'll be able to find it even if you haven't read it for years. You'll be able to find it simply by flipping slowly through the Old Testament prior to the book of Psalms. 2 Chronicles 20. I want you to see this in an extended way. We're going to look briefly at the prayer of King Jehoshaphat when his kingdom was about to be invaded by foreign armies and the threat was very severe. Let's set the context in chapter 20, verse 4. The

whole idea of this is to lead you up to the way that Jehoshaphat prayed and we'll see if I can properly pronounce these names that I worked on before I came in here.

"Now it came about after this that the sons of Moab and the sons of Ammon, together with some of the Meunites, came to make war against Jehoshaphat. Then some came and reported to Jehoshaphat, saying, 'A great multitude is coming against you from beyond the sea, out of Aram and behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar (that is Engedi).'

Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. So Judah gathered together to seek help from the LORD; they even came from all the cities of Judah to seek the LORD." This was a crisis of national proportions and what I want you to see is how a good king of Judah, Jehoshaphat, prayed under that distress. It was not, "Lord, we are about to be attacked, help us." Look at how he frames his prayer. Look at how he appeals to the character of God as the grounds upon which God should respond favorably.

Verse 5, "Then Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD before the new court, and he said, 'O LORD, the God of our fathers, are You not God in the heavens?'" He's appealing to God's character. He's appealing to God's position as the grounds upon which God should respond to him and he doesn't rush through this. "And are You not ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations? Power and might are in Your hand so that no one can stand against You." He reminds God of the past history of the nation of Israel. "Did You not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel and give it to the descendants of Abraham Your friend forever? They have lived in it, and have built You a sanctuary there for Your name."

Skip down to verse 10 for the sake of time, he says, "Now behold," now he lays out the problem before God. Having recited God's character and power in the history of his dealings with his people, now he introduces it. He says, "behold, the sons of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom You did not let Israel invade when they came out of the land of Egypt (they turned aside from them and did not destroy them)," meaning that Israel didn't destroy them when they were taking over the Promised Land. Look at verse 11, "see how they are rewarding us by coming to drive us out from Your possession which You have given us as an inheritance. O our God, will You not judge them? For we are powerless before this great multitude who are coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are on You."

You read on later in the chapter and you see how God answered the prayer and destroyed those invading armies. Our point for now is how Jehoshaphat prayed to the Lord. He framed it all by appealing to God's character. He says, "God, you're the ruler of heaven and earth. All of sovereignty, all of the nations are in your hand so you have the power to do this. You made promises to our people. You acted and you delivered, Lord, in the past and it's on that basis, the fact that we are your people, that you are all-powerful, that you have a history of blessing us, that you promised us this land, it's on that basis, Lord, that I ask you to undertake for our need." And you pray that way and when you appeal to God's character like that, it is so much different than simply seeking deliverance and help on your terms because it will be more comfortable for you if God helps you. When you take

the time and devote the mental effort to recall and recite the character of God when you pray, listen, you have transitioned away from meaningless repetition and you have purified your practice of prayer into something that is acceptable to God which he will bless and which he will reward because it is obvious that God would bless that which is seeking his glory.

Let me give you a practical example of how this would work out that affects each one of us. We all pray for God, those of us that are Christians anyway, we all pray for God to somehow save our loved ones, to save them from sin, to deliver them from hell and bring them into his kingdom, and it's well and it's good that we should, but what we're talking about here today takes you beyond, "Lord, save my loved one so that he doesn't go to hell." The way that you pray for your loved ones in light of these things is so much different. You take the time, you slow down, you trust the Lord and you pray something like this, you say, "Lord, you are merciful and gracious. The entire reason you sent Christ into the world is so that he could seek and to save the lost. You sent him to be the Savior of the world, Father, and you've had mercy on me. O God, surely in light of your eternal purposes, surely in light of the purpose of the Incarnation, surely you could extend that mercy just a little bit further for So-and-so. I'm only asking you, Lord, to extend that mercy like you extended it to me. Just a little further, Lord, just a little more mercy which is all consistent with what you say salvation and the purpose of Christ was anyway. God, remember your character. Remember your purposes. That is the basis on which I pray. More than his deserving, I know he doesn't deserve it, I know he is a stench in your nostril. He's a stench in mine sometimes. But Lord, Lord, look past his sins and look to the purposes of Christ and have mercy."

And then to wrap this up, when you have poured your heart out that way, engaging the character of God, engaging his purposes, and you have poured out your way, in the end you yield just like our Lord did after he prayed, "Father, it's possible for you. All things are possible for you. Take this cup from me." In the end he prayed, "Nevertheless not my will but thine be done." You yield in blessed resignation to the greater wisdom and purposes of God and you say, "Not my will but thine be done," Matthew 6:10. "Father, thy will be done, as in heaven so also upon earth."

We've covered this so quickly, I can't believe the time has gone by as fast as it has. Let me just wrap up with this. What we're talking about here is radically different than just mechanically going through a prayer list, isn't it? You see that, don't you? You see that? It's radically different than being seen by men or achieving some kind of artificial time limit that someone else has given you in some book on prayer that you read. "You've got to pray X amount." Forget that! I mean it, forget that because what we are talking about here is such a profoundly different matter that the Lord's word leads us into. What we are talking about here is the Christian soul in understanding intimacy with its Father. Understanding intimacy. Seeking his glory above all else and intersecting your temporal life with the eternal purposes and character of a sovereign God. When you see prayer in that perspective, no one has to tell you how long to pray. No one has to push you to pray because you want to and that's the point. A proper understanding of prayer leads you to want to pray in a realm where the clock makes no difference to you. Short or long doesn't

matter. "Father, I'm engaged with your character and I ask you to act in accord with that on this particular request that I have."

All of this, beloved, all of this is designed to be the privilege, the prerogative and the responsibility of every true Christian. This belongs to you. This belongs to every Christian who will simply seek that private audience with his God and his heavenly Father.

Let's pray.

Father, take these things, seal them to our hearts, give us understanding, and then let it work out in the way that we pray. May we never pray the same again as a result of considering these words of our Lord Jesus in whose name we pray. Amen.

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