

JESUS' PRINCIPLES FOR PRAYER

How is your prayer life? If you are like most Christians, there is room for improvement in it. That thought reminds me of a story about a small town some years ago that historically had been "dry," that is, no alcohol was allowed to be sold or consumed publicly in the town. But then a local businessman decided to build a tavern. A group of Christians from a local church were concerned and planned an all-night prayer meeting to ask God to intervene. It just so happened that shortly thereafter lightning struck the bar and it burned to the ground. The owner of the bar sued the church, claiming that the prayers of the congregation were responsible, but the church hired a lawyer to argue in court that they were not responsible. The presiding judge, after his initial review of the case, stated that "no matter how this case comes out, one thing is clear. The tavern owner believes in prayer and the Christians do not."

In New Testament times, no religion ranked prayer higher on their scale of priorities than did the Jews. However, over time, certain faults crept into their habits of prayer not because of neglect in their prayer life, but more

from an over-zealousness. Let us read together Matthew 6:5-8 NAS:

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.

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.

The first fault was that prayer became formalized. You see the Jew was required to recite 2 prayers daily. The first prayer was called the Shema, and it consisted of 3 short passages of Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; and Numbers 15:37-41. The full Shema had to be repeated once every morning before 9 a.m. and in the evening before 9 p.m. If 9 p.m. came, no

matter where a man was, at home, at work, or in the street he had to stop and say the Shema.

There were many Jews that loved the Shema and who repeated it with reverence and love; but inevitably there were still more who went at it drudgingly. The *Shema* eventually became a boring repetition that men mumbled through. Much like prayers today in many churches and in many households.

The second prayer was called the *Shemoneh Esreh*, which means "The Eighteen." It consisted of eighteen prayers, and was, and still is, an essential part of the synagogue service. Most are quite short and very beautiful. Here are just two examples:

1) "Let Thy mercy, a Lord, be showed upon the upright, the humble, the elders of Thy people Israel, and the rest of its teachers; be favorable to the pious strangers amongst us, and to us all. Give Thou a good reward to those who sincerely trust in Thy name,

that our lot may be cast among them in the world to come, that our hope be not deceived. Praised be Thou, O Lord, who art the hope and confidence of the faithful.”

2) “Bring us back to Thy law, O our Father; bring us back, O King, to Thy service; bring us back to Thee by true repentance. Praised be Thou, O Lord who dost accept our repentance.”

The law was that the Jew recite the *Shemoneh Esreh* once in the morning, afternoon, and evening. The same thing happened here. Eventually it became a very tedious and boring ritual for most people.

Before being too critical, we need to think back to the last time we prayed the Lord's Prayer. Did we feel the meaning of each word. or did we just kind of plod through it?

Further, the Jews had specific prayers for all occasions. There was not an event or occurrence that did not have its formalized prayer. There was prayer

before and after meals, for the rain, at the sight of the sea, lakes, or rivers; for receiving good news, and even for buying furniture. This actually was intended to be a wonderful tribute to God because it brought every happening in life into His presence.

But because everything was so formal, prayers tended to slip off the tongue with little or no meaning. Some people think that repeating the same words over and over will insure that God will hear them. It is not wrong to come to God with the same requests; Jesus encourages persistent prayer. But He condemns the shallow repetition of words that are not offered with a sincere heart. Before you start to pray, make sure you mean what you say.

A growing number of Rabbis began to teach that prayer was only effective if it was offered in the Temple or a Synagogue because one was closer to God there. So it became a custom for men to go to the Temple at the hours of prayer. In the early days of the Christian Church even the disciples of Jesus thought in such terms, including Peter and John who went to the Temple at the hour of prayer each day (Acts 3:1). The obvious danger here is that a person might confine their spirituality to places designated as "holy."

There was also a tendency among the Jews toward long prayers. That, however, has been a practice in many church denominations even to this day. Consider that in Eighteenth Century Scotland the length of the prayer was equated with the level of one's devotion. Their services included an hour-long verse-by-verse lecture on Scripture. Then a sermon that lasted for an hour. Then there would be a time of prayer when everyone tried to pray longer than the person who preceded them.

It has been a prevalent attitude that if people beat on God's door long enough, He will answer; that God can be pestered into compliance. How contrary this practice is to what we are taught in Ecclesiastes 5:2: *“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 (NAS).”* This verse encourages us to get to the point in our prayers. It is easy to confuse long prayers with piety and devotion, and the Jews really fell into that trap.

The Jews also had a habit of hypnotizing themselves by the endless repetition of one phrase or even one word. This may remind us today of the many so-called praise songs that are sung in so many churches. Last week

during a conference we attended, a few songs had one or two word phrases that would be repeated 15-20 times.

The Jews would also attempt to pile up every possible title and adjective in addressing their prayer to God. One prayer began, "*Blessed, praised, and glorified, exalted, extolled and honored, magnificent and lauded be the name of the Holy One.* "

The bottom line here is that many of the practices involving prayer centered around man rather than focusing on God. When a man or woman begins to think more of how they are praying than of what they are praying, their prayer dies on their lips. This reminds me of a story involving the famed evangelist D. L. Moody. At the conclusion of one of his services, one of the pastors on the platform with him rose to give the closing prayer. He went on for what seemed to Moody like an eternity. Finally, Moody rose and as the man was still praying, Moody said: "*While our brother continues his prayer, we will close by singing hymn number*"

One final thing that bothered Jesus was that the Jews prayed so that they would be seen by others. The Jew prayed standing with hands outstretched,

palms upwards, and with head bowed. Prayers had to be said at 9 a.m., 12 noon, and 3 p.m. They had to be said wherever a man might be, and it was easy for a man to make sure that at those hours he was at a busy corner, or in a crowded city square, so that all the world might see with what devotion he prayed. It was easy for a man to halt on the top step of the entrance to the synagogue, and pray there for a long time so that all men might admire his piety. It was easy to put on an act of prayer that all the world might see.

Jesus criticized these practices and implied that if there is hypocrisy in a person, it is likely that their prayer is not heard. Many Rabbis even taught that a person could not pray at all unless their heart was right with God. For the most part that is a sound teaching.

The essence of prayer is not what is said or how or where, but rather it is a communication with God. There is a place for public prayer, but to pray only where others will notice you is an indicator that your real audience is not God.

In effect Jesus lays down 2 essential rules for prayer:

- All true prayer must be offered to God. The fault Jesus was criticizing in the people was that they were praying to men and not to God. Whether in public or in private prayer, a person should not have any thoughts or desires in their mind that are not directly focused on God.
- Always remember that the God to whom we pray is a God of love who is more ready to answer than we are to pray. His gifts and His grace do not have to be unwillingly extracted from Him. He does not have to be pursued in order to answer our prayers. His one wish is to give. We only need to pray with the single desire in our hearts for "Thy will be done."

You are all undoubtedly quite familiar with Matthew 6:9-13. This passage contains what most of us know as "The Lord's Prayer", or more accurately "The Disciples' Prayer." Luke tells us that Jesus taught this prayer in response to the request of one of the disciples.

This prayer is one only a disciple can pray; it is a prayer only a true believer can pray with any meaning. The Lord's prayer can only really be prayed when the person who prays it knows what they are saying, and they cannot know that unless they have become a disciple.

Let us look at this prayer and examine it thoroughly. The first 3 petitions have to do with God and the glory of God:

'Our Father who is in heaven:

- *Hallowed be Your name.*
- *10 'Your kingdom come.*
- *Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.*

The second 3 petitions have to do with our needs:

- *11 'Give us this day our daily bread.*
- *12 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*
- *13 'And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

We place God first and only then do we turn to our needs and desires. It is only when we place God in His proper place that all other things fall into their proper places. Prayer must never be an attempt to manipulate the will of God to our desires. Prayer should always focus on submitting our will to

the will of God.

George Mueller, a great man of faith and answered prayer who ministered in the 1800s in England, had this to say about praying to find out the will of God in a situation:

"I seek at the beginning to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter. Nine-tenths of the trouble with people generally is just here. Nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when our hearts are ready to do the Lord's will, whatever it may be. When one is truly in this state, it is usually but a little way to the knowledge of what His will is."¹

The second part of the prayer that brings our needs before God deals with the three essential needs of people, and the three periods of time in which they move. First, we ask for bread, which is necessary to maintain life in the **present**. Second, we ask for forgiveness and thereby bring our **past** into the

¹ George Mueller, *Answers to Prayer*, Moody Press, p. 6.

presence of God. Thirdly, we ask for help in regard to temptation, which thereby connects all the **future** into God's hands. In three brief petitions we learn how to lay our past, present, and future before God and entrust our complete being to His care.

In addition, this prayer brings the whole of God into our lives. When we ask for bread to sustain our earthly lives, we direct our thoughts to God the Father, the Creator and Sustainer of all life. When we ask for forgiveness, our attention is directed to God the Son, our Savior and Redeemer. When we ask for help in future temptation, our thoughts are directed to the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Strengthener, the Guide and Guardian of our way.

So, amazingly, in these three short petitions Jesus takes the past, present, and future, the whole of a person's life and presents them to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to bring the whole of life to the whole of God, and to bring the whole of God to the whole of life.

This prayer can be a pattern for our prayers.

- The first thing we should do is praise God; praise and worship Him before we begin to pray.
- Pray for His work in the world
- Pray for our daily needs
- Pray for help in our daily struggles.

The phrase, "*Our Father who art in Heaven,*" indicates that God is not only majestic and holy, but also personal and loving.

One dominant theme we learn from missionaries is that one of the greatest reliefs that Christianity brings to people around the world who have not been exposed to Christianity is the truth that there is only one God. Most people believe there are many gods. That every tree, river, and stream is a god. They live in a world crowded with gods, and all of those gods are jealous and hostile. They all demand that they be given their proper honor. A person is never sure if they may have omitted an honor that a god demands and consequently they live in terror of their gods. They are terrified rather than helped by their religion. Consequently when they find out that the true one-and-only God has the name and heart of a father, it makes a tremendous difference to them. They can rest in a father's love.

By addressing **God as Father** it also helps us to see that the world is structured for our training and not our comfort. Also by referring to God as Father, Jesus is saying that if God is Father, He is the Father of all people. This prayer does not teach us to say “my Father.” It is significant to note that in the Lord's Prayer the words *I*, *me*, and *mine* are never used. Jesus has replaced them with *we*, *us*, and *ours*. The very phrase *Our Father* involves the elimination of self. The fatherhood of God is the only possible basis for the brotherhood of man. When Jesus refers to God as Father He helps us to accept ourselves and live with ourselves for what we are. **There are times when we despise and hate ourselves, and often for good reasons**. No one knows how unworthy we are better than we do ourselves. But when we can see God as our Father during these painful moments, we know that even if we matter to no one else, we matter to Him. Despite His might, majesty, and power, He is still approachable to His children.

There is a story told about a Roman emperor who returned to Rome after a great military campaign. The city welcomed him with an enormous victory parade. As the emperor's chariot went by the palace, the emperor's young son saw his father and ran out to meet his chariot. One of the guards stopped the

boy and said, "*You can't do that boy. Don't you know that's the emperor?*"

The boy looked up and said, "*He may be your emperor, but he's my father.*"

That is exactly the way the Christian can feel about God. The might, the majesty, and the power belong to One whom Jesus taught us to call **Father**.

But not only is He our Father, but He is our Father who is in Heaven. That is important because it emphasizes His holiness. If we simply considered God as an easy-going, loving father, we would miss the point. The love is certainly there, but the holiness is most certainly there also.

It is significant to note how few times Jesus uses the word *Father* to refer to God. For instance, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus only refers to God as Father six times, and only when addressing the disciples. The word Father was very sacred to Jesus, and He never used it except among those that could understand the meaning of it. We must hold the term Father in equal reverence. We must remember that God is not an easy-going parent who tolerantly shuts His eyes to all sins, faults, or mistakes. He is a God whom we approach with reverence and adoration, with awe and wonder. Never lose sight of the fact that God is the One who has control over your life. He alone has the power to fill it with joy or with trials.

Because our Father is in Heaven, we are also reminded of His power. We can therefore connect His love with His power. We can be assured that His love is backed by His power, and therefore all that He intends for us will be accomplished, Psalm 138:7-8 NAS:

7 Though I walk in the midst of trouble, You will revive me;

You will stretch forth Your hand against the wrath of my enemies,

And Your right hand will save me.

8 The LORD will accomplish what concerns me;

Your lovingkindness, O LORD, is everlasting;

Do not forsake the works of Your hands.

What exactly does it mean for God's name to be hallowed in Matthew 6:9?

The Greek word for *hallowed* is translated, "*To treat a person or thing separately or differently than anything else.*" So this petition means to let God's name be treated differently from all other names. Let God's name be given a position which is absolutely unique.

There is also something further to consider. In Hebrew the word “name” does not mean the name by which a person is called, such as Ed or Dallas or Mike or Kathryn. Rather it means the nature, character, or personality of the person that is revealed to us.

To understand this better, let us look at Psalm 9:9-10 NAS:

9 The LORD also will be a stronghold for the oppressed,

A stronghold in times of trouble;

10 And those who know Your name will put their trust in You,

For You, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You.

If someone simply knows that God is called *Jehovah*, that does not mean that they will trust in Him. What it means is that those who know what God is like, those that know the nature and character of God will put their trust in Him. Look also *t a*Psalm 20:6-8 NAS:

6 Now I know that the LORD saves His anointed;

He will answer him from His holy heaven

With the saving strength of His right hand.

7 Some boast in chariots and some in horses,

But we will boast in the name of the LORD, our God.

8 They have bowed down and fallen,

But we have risen and stood upright.

This can be interpreted as saying that some will put their trust in human and material things, but we can put our trust in the nature and character of God. So when we pray, "*Hallowed be Thy name,*" it means, "*Enable us to give to You, Lord, the unique place which your nature and character deserve and demand.*" The word for such a unique place is **reverence**. We are asking God to enable us to reverence Him as He deserves to be revered. And in order to reverence God, there are four essentials we need to understand:

1) In order to reverence God we must believe that He exists.

We must be sure in our hearts of His existence. Have you ever wondered, as I have, why there is no attempt in the Bible to prove the existence of God? I wonder if it might be because they experienced the presence of God every moment of every day of their lives and never even gave a second thought to having to prove His existence. Just as you and I have no reason to prove that we exist. We meet each other every day, and they met God every day.

But suppose that we did need to prove that God exists. How would we begin? Well, let us assume for a moment that you had never seen a watch before, and you were walking along a beach and came across something in the sand. You bend over and pick it up and have no idea what it is. You observe, however, that it has a metal case, and inside the case is a complicated arrangement of wheels, levers, springs, and jewels. You note that all components are working in an orderly way. You note that the hands are moving around the dial in a predetermined way. What would you think? That all those metals and jewels came together by accident, and assembled themselves into such a mechanism, and by chance wound themselves up and set themselves going? I doubt it. I believe you would know that you had found a watch and think that somewhere there must be a watchmaker.

Order presupposes a mind to create that order. We look at the world and we see a vast machine that is working in order. The sun rises and sets in a consistent succession day after day, year after year, and century after century. Tides come in and go out on a consistent timetable. Seasons follow one another in an unvarying order. We look at the world and we must say. "Somewhere there must be a worldmaker." The fact the world

exists points us to God. As someone once said, "*No astronomer can be an atheist.*" The order of the world demands that God is behind it.

We also might look at mankind itself to prove the existence of God. The one thing man has never created is life. We can alter and rearrange and change life, but no one has ever created a living thing from something that was not living. Therefore we need to ask where life began. At some time life must have come into the world and it must have come from somewhere outside the world for we have already acknowledged that man cannot create life. So who else could have done it other than God? When we look in at ourselves and out upon the world, it is impossible not to recognize a creator.

2) Before we reverence God, we must not only believe in Him, we must also know what kind of God He is.

It was impossible for people to reverence the gods of the ancient world because of their jealousies, immoralities, and impurities. But in God, as we know Him, there are 3 great qualities: 1) Holiness; 2) Justice; and 3) Love. Therefore we can reverence Him not only because He exists, but

because He is the God we know Him to be.

3) A Constant Awareness of God

Now a person may believe that God exists, and they may be convinced that God is holy, just, and loving. They could feel these things for God and still they might not have reverence. To have true reverence one must have a constant awareness of God, to live life in a way that we never forget God. It is an awareness that must exist everywhere and at all times. Whether you are driving in your car, walking in the park, shopping in the supermarket, or playing golf on the golf course. **That is reverence.** The problem with most people is that their awareness of God is spasmodic, intense at certain times and places, and totally non-existent at others. Reverence means the constant awareness of God. Now there is one additional requirement for reverence.

4) Obedience and Submission

We must believe that God exists; we must know what kind of God He is; and we must be constantly aware of God. Yet we may have all these things but still not have true reverence unless we add obedience and submission. How is God's name hallowed among us? When both our life

and our doctrine are truly Christian. When our thoughts and our actions are in total submission to the will of God.

To know that God exists; to know what kind of a God He is; to be constantly aware of God; and to be constantly obedient to Him. That is reverence and that is what we pray for when we pray, "*Hallowed by Thy name.*" Let God be given the reverence that His nature and character deserve. That is how to ask God to change our lives and to change the world. Do you have what it takes to do it? Most Christians do not and that is the reason there is so much pain and suffering in the world. Are you willing to do your part even if others do not? Remember, the only one watching our performance and behavior is the only One that really counts.