

PRAYER AND ADORATION

MATTHEW 6:9-10

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March 23, 2003

Last week I began a discussion on the topic of prayer. I made the statement that prayer is the centerpiece of the devotional life. By using the word “centerpiece” I not only mean central; I also mean most important. The regular disciplines we have as well as the occasional special efforts we make to abstain from doing certain things—both are helpful in creating a suitable environment for prayer. However, these disciplines and special efforts should never be considered more important or even as important as prayer itself. The same thing is true about the part of the devotional life that comes under the title of “giving to the needy.” While we are praying, God gives us vision and power to help other people. But our efforts to help other people that grow out of prayer should never be considered as important or more important than the prayer itself.

Because prayer is so important and so central to the devotional life, I have planned to spend more time talking about prayer than I did talking about the other two parts of the devotional life. My plan is to spend a total of three Sundays talking about it. Last week we looked at the wrong and right ways of praying taught by our Lord. Today and next week we will take a look at the Lord’s Prayer recorded in Matthew 6:9-15. I know that preaching just two sermons on the Lord’s Prayer hardly seems adequate, but my overall goal is to take us systematically through the Sermon on the Mount, so I am purposely limiting myself to just two sermons. Some preachers will spend months preaching on the subject of the Lord’s Prayer, and it is easy to understand why. It is absolutely the most perfect prayer that has ever been recorded. It includes everything essential for communication with God. The principles contained in this prayer cover every aspect of how one should pray. Nothing is left out.

The disciples of Jesus Christ had watched their Lord and seen how His devotional life was central to everything He was and everything He did. They often noticed Him get up before sunrise to go out to a lonely place to pray. They were aware that he occasionally stayed up all night to pray. They observed Him making special efforts to abstain in order to enter into even deeper communication with God. They saw how He was able to receive revelation and inspiration from God while He was praying. They longed to tap into His secret and become more like Him in prayer. And so they asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). John the Baptist taught people the need to repent from their sins, and He

taught them to prepare themselves for the Messiah, and part of John’s training included teaching his disciples how to pray. Now the disciples of Jesus wanted their Master to teach them in the same way that John taught his disciples.

Concerning our need to know how to pray and what to pray for, we are no different from the disciples of John the Baptist and the first disciples of our Lord. We need to be taught how to pray. For most people, the knowledge of how to pray does not come naturally. We need to allow Jesus to teach us how to pray in the same way He taught His disciples how to pray.

Jesus responded to His disciples’ request by giving them a model prayer containing principles. We have already seen that this is very typical of our Lord’s teaching style. Jesus wants His followers to abide by truth expressed in principles. Jesus is more concerned about principles than rules. And virtually every principle a person needs to know about praying is contained in the Lord’s Prayer.

As a model prayer, this prayer is not meant to be recited in a mechanical way just to make our wishes come true. When I was a child, I was told to recite the Lord’s Prayer several times as penance for certain sins I had committed. The more serious the offenses, the more times I was required to recite the prayer. But the Lord’s Prayer was never meant to be used in that way. I don’t mean to say that it is wrong to memorize and recite the prayer. It is not wrong for a congregation to recite the Lord’s Prayer. Reciting the prayer can actually serve to help us think about the principles contained in the prayer. But to recite the prayer without ever giving thought to the principles is a dangerous practice.

What are the principles contained in the Lord’s Prayer? Basically, there are three. The first has to do with something we talked about last week. It has to do with our approach to prayer. Before we even start thinking about the words we want to say in our prayers, we must focus on the One with whom we are talking. A failure to do this will produce the affect of using prayer to talk to ourselves or using prayer to talk to other people around us. This is exactly what Jesus warned us not to do. So, as we learn how to pray, the first principle we must abide by is to focus our attention on God.

The second and third principles have to do with petition. The second principle is to bring God’s prayer requests before the throne. The third principle is to bring our own prayer requests before the throne. When I talk about the throne, I am using Biblical

language. Hebrews 4:16 talks about the “throne of grace” that makes it possible for us approach God with confidence. God’s grace makes it possible for us to talk to Him in prayer. Now what the second and third principles tell us is this: when we approach the throne of grace in prayer, we are to first think about God’s requests and then we are to think about our own requests.

Now let’s look at these principles again, taking them one by one. The first principle is revealed in the words, “Our Father in heaven”. These words call us to focus our attention on the One with whom we are speaking. If we fail to do this (and many of us often fail), then there is little point in going on. If we ignore this first principle, then the rest of what we say will do little to touch the heart of God.

One thing that really aggravates my wife is for me to be typing at my computer while I am talking with her on the phone. I have not learned how to cover up the sound of my fingers hitting the keyboard. And even if I could cover up the sound I think she could still tell that I wasn’t giving her my full attention. The important thing I need to remember when I talk to Janiene is that she wants me to notice her. She wants me to notice her so bad that, when she is aware that I am not noticing her, she doesn’t even want to hear what I am saying. She will say “goodbye” and hang up the phone. You would think that I would never forget this, but I still do.

Now God always knows when we are not paying attention to Him. There is no way we can cover up the fact that our minds are on something else while, at the same time, we are trying to talk to Him. We cannot put one over on God, so we shouldn’t even try. We should notice Him even before we start talking. This is what the first principle is telling us.

Expressing this thought in another way, we can say that God is more concerned that we notice Him than He is concerned about the actual words we use. If, in our prayer times, we do nothing more than to recollect who God is, then we will have made glad the heart of God who desires our attention more than anything else.

What I am saying is really a repeat of one thing I told you last week. Last week I emphasized the need to approach God in a way that will produce in our minds a reverence for God and a realization that this awesome God is our Father. Now the first line of the Lord’s Prayer is doing the same thing. It is drawing our attention to the fact that we are talking to an awesome God in heaven who is our Father: “Our Father in heaven...” Both of these thoughts must come to our minds when we think about the one with whom we are speaking. We must have reverence, and we must understand and believe that this all-holy and all-powerful God is approachable, because He has used His own blood to adopt us as His children. He is our Father.

We notice these two thoughts coming together when the letters written by the Apostle Paul. In his letters he often wishes grace and peace to be poured out upon those who will read his letters. Ten times He addresses God—not only as God—but also as Father. He did this when he wrote to the Romans and to the Galatians and to the Ephesians and to the Corinthians and to the Philippians and to the Colossians and to the Thessalonians and also when he wrote to Philemon. In all those letters, we find these words, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”. Jesus said, “Our Father in Heaven.” The apostle Paul said, “God, our Father.” The words are a bit different, but they both do the same thing. They call our attention to the fact that we are addressing an awesome God who has a special love relationship with us.

Let me again emphasize this important principle by coming at it from a slightly different angle. Let me say that the first step in praying is to put our hands over our mouths. I take this thought from the Book of Job. When Job met up with disaster, his first reaction was to do a lot of talking to God. He voiced his questions and his complaints. He made various pleas to God. He did a lot of talking. But then, toward the end of his ordeal, God finally caught Job’s attention. And what was Job’s response when he finally really noticed the One with whom he was talking? In Job 40:4 we discover that Job puts his hand over his mouth. Now that is what I call adoration—a vision of God that causes us to become speechless. This is how prayer should begin.

I know this is very difficult. Our environment does not encourage us to follow this principle. We have to work hard at thinking about the One with whom we are speaking before we open our mouths. When I was a child, I set up an altar in my room and placed candles on the table and put a cross on the wall. That helped me to enter into a state of mind where I could think about the One with whom I was talking. I patterned that altar after the one I saw in the church I attended. Unlike the modern-day sanctuaries that most of us are used to, there was something about the sanctuary of that church that made it easy for me to think about God. Nowadays I have no such altar to which I go, but I find that being in a place where I can see the handiwork of God’s creation helps me to notice God. That’s one reason I like to pray when I am running. Maybe getting into the habit of putting our hands over our mouths whenever we begin our quiet times of prayer with God would help to remind us of our need to enter into a state of consciousness where we realize that we are in the presence of the almighty God in heaven who is our Father. Whatever method we use, the principle is the same. The first step of praying is paying attention to the One with whom we are talking.

Before I go on to the second step, I must say something about non-Christians praying. Some of

you know that I allow and even encourage non-Christians to pray in our small groups. Some of you have asked me how it is possible for someone who is not a Christian to pray. Once a person asked me, "Is it possible for God to answer the prayer of a non-Christian?"

I personally believe that it is possible. There are Biblical examples where non-Christians talked to God and God answered their prayers. It is important that we are aware of this. One of the most striking examples is that of a man named Cornelius in Acts 10. Prior to hearing the gospel and prior to receiving the Holy Spirit and prior to being baptized, we read that Cornelius prayed to God and God listened to his prayers and answered his prayers.

I have heard the testimonies of many non-Christians who say that they call out to God, especially in times of crises. And it can be argued that every Christian used to be a non-Christian. At one point in time these people who became Christians called out to God as non-Christians, and God answered their prayers and saved them. If we say non-Christians can't pray, then we make it impossible for them to call out to God for salvation.

I have been praying to God for as long as I can remember. But I don't think that I have been a Christian for as long as I can remember. And I do believe that God listened to my sincere prayers, even when I was still a non-Christian.

So I don't believe it is right to tell non-Christians that God will not hear their prayers. However, I do believe there is a special communication that takes place between a Christian and his God that non-Christians cannot experience. Non-Christians can pray to God, but they cannot pray to Him as Father. The Lord's Prayer is a teaching that is meant for Christians.

"Our Father in heaven" is not a phrase that a non-Christian can say and really mean what they say. That fact should drive them to God for salvation. Those who really desire to have a love relationship with God will seek salvation as a means of obtaining that relationship. Those who have no such desire may continue to call out to God when they feel the need, and they may even recite the Lord's Prayer. But when they recite the words, "Our Father" they will not really know what the words mean. And because they have never experienced the Father/child relationship that comes through salvation, they will have trouble understanding the other two principles that are found in the Lord's Prayer.

Those of us who do profess to be Christian should have the capacity to understand all of these principles. Our problem does not lie in our inability to understand. It lies in the fact that we have never been taught how to pray or have forgotten what we have been taught or we have neglected to apply what we have been taught. Whatever the particular situation you find yourself in as a Christian, I urge you to make adoration the first thing you do in

prayer. Think about your God and your Father before you even begin to speak.

Once you have done this, then you will be in a much better position to follow the second and third principles. These principles guide us as we speak out our requests. Altogether, there are seven petitions mentioned in the Lord's Prayer. Some Bible teachers will say there are six, because they count "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" as being one petition.

As I have already mentioned, these petitions are broken down into two categories. For the sake of teaching, I will call the first category 'God's prayer requests'. And the second category I will call 'our (or man's) prayer requests.' Actually, both categories of petitions are things that both our heavenly Father and we, his children, are agreeing to. So, in that sense, all of the petitions belong to both the heavenly Father and his children.

Nevertheless, the distinction is needed. The first three petitions (which represents about half of the petitions, depending on how you count them) all begin with the word 'Your' or 'Thy'. So when we are looking at the order of petitions, we notice that the first three focus only on God and His glory. This is a very important point, and the second principle is built upon this point. Simply stated, the second principle Jesus teaches us about prayer is that our petitions must give first place to God and His concerns. It does not matter what our circumstances are or what our work may be or what our ministry may be or what our desires may be; we must never start with ourselves. We must never start with our own petitions. That is the second principle.

So what are God's prayer requests with which we are to agree before we go on to our own prayer petitions? The first request is this: "Hallowed be Your Name". God desires that His name be hallowed or honored. And He desires it to be honored everywhere, and among every people group on the face of the earth. God wants everyone and everything to honor His name by giving Him the glory He deserves. When we say "Amen" to this desire, we are agreeing with the heart of God as it concerns missions.

The main point of missions is to help everyone, regardless of their ethnic and religious and cultural backgrounds, to honor God's Name. God is not only concerned about people who show interest by visiting our church, He is concerned about everyone in our community and in our world, even those who have no inclination to visit a church. He even wants them to honor His name, and His desire must become our desire. The main emphasis of this request is not salvation; rather, it is proclamation. The truth must be proclaimed to everyone whether or not everyone accepts it. It must be proclaimed even to people who do not want to hear. We do dishonor to God's Name when we fail to proclaim it.

It is God's second desire that makes us think more about salvation. "Your kingdom come..." are the words that immediately follow the petition for God's Name to be honored. There is a problem that prevents God's Name from being honored in all creation. It is the problem of rebellion. Satan has rebelled against God's authority and he is in the business of persuading people to also rebel against God's authority. God's kingdom is present wherever there are people who submit to the authority of the King of heaven. If everyone were submitting to the authority of the King of heaven, there would be no need for us to request that God's kingdom come. So the request itself implies that there is a problem. And when we say "Amen" to this request, we are agreeing with God that people need to be released from Satan's authority so they can submit themselves to the authority of God.

The focus of God's desire is on the destruction of evil and not the destruction of people. 1 Peter 3:9 tells us that God does not want anyone to perish, but He wants everyone to come to repentance. That is what God wants, and God's petition must become our petition. It is a mistake to think that we can destroy evil by destroying people who have submitted themselves to evil. I do not stand in criticism of a nation fighting in self-defense, but to think that we can do away with evil by killing off the bad guys and replacing one regime with another is a mistake. We cannot make God's kingdom come with the sword. And we cannot use politics to make God's kingdom come. These two approaches of doing away with evil will never defeat Satan. The devil is defeated only when men and women voluntarily surrender to the cross of Jesus Christ. Agreeing with God's desire for His kingdom to come is to agree to the only way for that to happen. Aside from the cross of Jesus Christ, there is no other way for men and women to submit themselves to the authority of the King.

Following the desire to see God's kingdom come is the desire to see God's will be done here on earth just as it is in heaven. God's prayer request is for this world to become a better place than what it is. And God's standard for a better world has little to do with technology. It has to do with how people behave. God wants people to do His will. Think about what it means to say 'Amen' to this request.

On the one hand, we are obliged to desire and even work toward constant improvement of our world's state of affairs. As Christians we have a moral obligation to work for improvement here upon this earth which is our temporary dwelling place. We must never give up working to improve things.

On the other hand, we read the prophecies of the Bible, and we realize that things are not going to improve. The moral behavior of mankind is not going to get better as the days go on, and this will bring about judgment. The world as we know it will

be destroyed. This is the paradox of the Christian life.

I once heard the story of a woman who lived in a house that was scheduled to be demolished by the government to make room for a new road. Even though she knew her house was soon to be destroyed, she never stopped doing her best to make improvements upon her house. She kept up the repairs and washed the windows and made sure that everything was in order. She refused to leave her house and lived in it and worked to make improvements on it right up until the day when the bulldozers arrived and she was forced to leave.

There is a sense in which we are called to be like that woman. We are never to give up working at making this world a better place. The final outcome does not matter. That is out of our control. God desires that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven, even when we know it is certain that the earth is going to be destroyed. We do what we can until the end and we never stop. This is what it means to say 'Amen' to this third petition.

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." These words reveal two precious principles about prayer. The first principle calls us to adore God by recollecting who He is even before we begin to talk to Him. The second principle calls us to adore God by saying 'Amen' to His prayer requests. We are to be so enamored by who He is that our first response is to seek what He wants, despite the fact that we have our own desperate needs. We come before His throne, notice Who it is that we are speaking to, and say, "What is it that you want Lord."

He responds by saying that He wants His name to be honored by all and He wants the evil one to be defeated so that people will submit themselves to the authority of the King of heaven and He wants people to behave in a way that is in harmony with His will. We hear what our God wants, and we say 'Amen'. This is adoration. And adoration must be the initial focus of our prayers.

If you are like me, you will be thinking to yourself, "I have blown it. I have never prayed that way or I often do not pray that way. That means all my praying has been in vain."

Now you would be right to come to that conclusion if the Lord's Prayer was a set of rules to be obeyed. If the condition for being heard by God were abiding by the rules of the Lord's Prayer, then such thinking would be correct. However, the Lord's Prayer is not a set of rules. It is a revelation of principles that are given to help us. If we fail to abide by the principles, it does not guarantee that God will not listen to our prayers. God receives us as we are. He understands us, but He wants us to improve in our ability to communicate with Him. This is why He has given us this teaching.

It takes time to put principles into practice. In fact, it takes a lifetime. We will never become perfect at praying on this side of the grave. Only Jesus was perfect all the time when He prayed. Our responsibility is to be committed to the principles and never quit.

Use the Lord's Prayer as a teaching tool to help you in your quiet times with God. Even before next Sunday when I share the final principle, try to apply these first two principles to your time alone with God. If you are not used to doing this, don't be discouraged. Keep trying anyhow. Over time, your prayer life will become rich and meaningful. May God bless all of you this week as you approach the throne of grace and talk to your Father who is the awesome God in heaven.