

REFLECTIONS ON PRAYER

Rev. Dr. R. Edgar Bonniwell

PART I

Every Monday night at 7 PM EST, I conduct a conference call discipling class. We have participants from all over Cincinnati and from out of state. (I would love to have you join us) Last night I dealt with the subject of prayer and here are some of the insights offered!

With respect to prayer, we have multitudes of commands, and myriads of promises. All of which points to the sacred importance and necessity of prayer. Now listen to this very carefully ... "Whatever God has made prominent in His Word, He intends it to be conspicuous in our lives." If Jesus has said much about prayer, it is because He knows we have much need of it. So deep are our necessities, that until we are in Heaven, we must not cease to pray. Someone has said this about prayer, "Prayer is the lisping of the believing infant, the shout of the fighting believer, and the requiem of the dying saint falling asleep in Jesus. It is the breath, the watchword, the comfort, the strength, and the honor of a Christian." John Bunyan said, "Prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge to Satan." Prayer, beloved, is how God makes a house-call on the soul. Prayer is the best commentary on scripture that you could ever have. Genuine prayer closes the door on our worst impulses and brings to life our noblest aspirations.

Moreover, true prayer allows us to see past the present darkness into the light of another day. Through prayer, Christ's peace is strapped to our hearts. Prayer uttered in brokenness fixes what is cracked. Prayer is God's way of holding our hand in the walkways of life. When God leads us to pray, He leads us in the way we should go. Through prayer God orders our steps and calls forth in us a deep conviction that His providences are unfolding in our lives. To surrender to Christ in prayer prohibits inappropriate surrenders to men. We have a proclivity to be amiable when we should be strong, and to be agreeable when we should be contrary; and only through earnest prayer can we find our way in such moments.

Prayer, fervent prayer, is the best way to see yourself through the worst of times. Prayer also affects how we are perceived. Prayer takes the chip off our shoulder, the scour off our face, and the inner darkness out of our souls. Prayer brightens our countenance, enlivens our faith, brings us close enough to the heart of God to feel His breath. In prayer, God never says our time is up; session ended! Rather He says – 'My time is yours'. Prayer doesn't send away the clouds, but it does make the soul soar to them. Prayer heightens sameness, exposes foolishness for what it is, and clearly illuminates the higher ground. Beloved I believe in prayer.

PART II

I want us consider what John Calvin, the Great Protestant Reformer has said about prayer.

Calvin's first rule for prayer is the principal of reverence for the fear of God. For Calvin, prayer was a personal audience and conversation with the God of the universe. Calvin said that there's nothing worse for a believer than to be "devoid of awe." As we anticipate prayer we should be prepared, he said, to be moved by God's majesty, and at the same time, "Freed from earthly cares and affections." Moreover, Calvin taught that as we come to God with a sense of awe, given who He is, that authentic prayer equally produces it. To encounter the one who is wholly other; to be caught up in God's transcendence, as mystical as that might sound, truly reveals His majesty; which ennoble all of life and gives us what we need for going forward.

Calvin's second rule for prayer is, "The sense of need that excludes all unreality." By this he is referring to what we call spiritual humility, that is a strong sense of our dependence on God. In prayer, we must be willing to repent of our own faults. There was a common medieval, and sometimes modern view, of prayer that sees it as a way of putting on our best spiritual clothes. Some have said that prayer is how we dress up for God's presence; prayer is how we impress God with our devotedness. That notion is not Biblical, and God is never appeased by our devotion.

Prayer happens when people are saved. Then it becomes true fellowship. To pray fruitfully, we must be ruthlessly honest about our flaws and weaknesses. In His presence we must void our hearts of all unreality. We should always come to God knowing that our only hope is in His grace and forgiveness. We are to come with the disposition of a beggar. The point is, that we must come to the one of grace recognizing what Calvin calls, "The chaos within us", the sin that causes us to live in unreality. Prayer is how we stop lying to ourselves about ourselves and God. Therefore, for Calvin, lawful prayer always demands repentance.

Now get this; says Calvin, "authentic prayer causes us to abandon all self-justification, to own our sin, and to thoroughly repent of it." The believer abounds unto every good work and the spirit is deployed on behalf of the saint who falls to this humility; turning away from all self-sufficiency, smugness, and surrenders utterly before God. In short, for Calvin, genuine prayer is born of being genuine before God. This means that prayer is not how God hears our hearts, but rather how we hear how God is hearing our hearts. Better pause and reread that!

Calvin's third and fourth rules for prayer need to be paired and considered together. His third rule is that we should have a submissive trust of God. And here he expands his thought ... "Anyone who stands before God to pray ... must abandon all thoughts of his own glory." Calvin commends trusting in God even when things are not going as we wish them to go. This is the "law of prayer" according to Jesus. Because we are to pray ... "Thy will be done" and when God's will is done, it sometimes reflects

things that disappointed us — truth be known. One of the purposes of prayer is to bring our hearts to trust in His wisdom and not our own. So what Calvin is suggesting is to say, 'Here's what I need — but you know best.' So, we leave our needs and desires in His hands, and that is only possible through prayer.

The fourth rule is just as crucial, and is to be kept beside the third rule. We are to pray with confidence and hope. Calvin writes, "Though cast down and overcome by true humility we should be nonetheless encouraged to pray by a sure hope that our prayer will be answered."

God promises to answer our prayers because He is a loving Heavenly Father, and God often waits to give a blessing until we have prayed for it. Then Calvin argues that these two balancing truths are contradictory — we know that we have not because we ask not. There are many goods that God will not give unless we honor Him and make our hearts safe to receive them through prayer. It is because our desires are often "discordantly arranged" that we stammer in prayer and fail to have focus. At the same time God will not give us anything contrary to His will, and His will always includes what's best for us in the long run. Calvin writes, "God so tempers the outcome of events, according to His incomprehensible plan, that the prayers of the saints, which are a mixture of faith and error, are not nullified." Now think of this, "ask and you shall receive". (Matthew 7:7-8) Then know that God tempers the outcome with His incomprehensible wisdom; this means we don't have to be afraid that we will ask for a wrong thing.

And then Calvin also added another kind of coda, or fifth rule, and it is this. He says, "What I have set forth on the four rules of right praying is not so rigorously required that God will reject those prayers in which He finds neither perfect faith, or repentance, together with a warmth of zeal and persecution rightly conceived." See, the point is, no one has ever carried out prayer with the uprightness that was due. Without the mercy of God, says Calvin, there would be no freedom to pray. By the way, Calvin's fifth rule is the rule of grace, and he urges us to not conclude that following any set of rules could make our prayers worthy to be heard. Nothing we formulate or do can qualify us for access to God. Only grace can do that — based not on performance, but on the saving work of Christ.

For Calvin, praying in Jesus' name was never a magic formula. We must never think that if we can literally enunciate the words ... 'In Jesus' name' will our prayers be answered. God can hear and answer the prayers of anyone, even those who do not pray in the name of Jesus. Even Calvin argues that God often hears and answers the cries of the oppressed poor, even when they're praying to a false God. But God's response opens them to the heart of His Son, Jesus Christ, for God always finds a way to bring needed revelation of his Son to those crying out! God does this because He's a merciful God. Moreover, the phrase 'in Jesus' name' is not a magical incantation. To pray in Jesus' name means to come to God trusting in Christ for our salvation and acceptance, and not relying on our own credibility, or our record.

Earnest prayer, brings us to a place of encounter, of surrender, of being shouldered and carried along by our loving Christ. What a gift His presence is and what joy is ours given our acceptance in the Beloved!

PART III

What does prayer give to us or provide?

1. Prayer reorients our view toward God. Prayer brings new perspective because it always puts God back in the picture.
2. Prayer provides spiritual union with God. J. I. Packer, a noted theologian, says that real prayer leads to spiritual alertness, vigor, and confidence in the faithfulness of God. Prayer, he says, is a means to energy. The puritans spoke of prayer as “oiling the wheels of the soul.”
3. Moreover, prayer seeks a heart-sense of the presence of God. Wherever God speaks He is present. So, when we pray and believe Him to speak, He is there.

One of the struggles of the Christian life, as a disciple of Christ, is to sustain a meaningful prayer life. Luther recognized this problem, so he developed a treatise called, ‘A Practical Program to Revive Your Prayer Life’. It was actually published under this title; ‘A Simple Way to Pray’; and it was dedicated to a barber, Peter Beskendorf. His barber asked him for some guidelines on how he might improve his prayer life; in response, Luther wrote a 35-page book that became so popular that 4 editions were printed. To save you the time and arduous task of having to read that voluminous tome of 35 pages, I’ll give that to you and talk about that next time.

But I want to close by offering three powerful prayers that can change anyone’s life. The first prayer is this:

“God, break my heart for the things that break your heart.”

That can be a life changing prayer.

Secondly, “God show me where you are working, and use me in your story.” The story of the Bible is a redemption story — it’s a story of rescue, of God intervening, overcoming the rebellions of men, and restoring many others to His own heart. The program and plan of redemption is going forward. We have a culture that tells us to pursue our dream, and not to let anyone or anything get in the way of that. But in doing so we can give ourselves to things that amount to no eternal substance. Yet when we pray this prayer, it means we’re willing to invest in the work of God where He is working, and offer ourselves for a part in the story He’s telling.

And then, the third life changing prayer is this: "God reveal yourself through me." Praying this prayer allows God to do 'God size' things. Things that are only possible if He is involved. We want our life to pulsate with His life, and we want people to know that God is real because of our walk. Amen.

PART IV

This past Monday night in my discipleship class, via a conference call, we focused again on the subject of prayer. Here are some of those insights:

Our prayers reveal our theology of God. With every petition, certain assumptions are being made about God, i.e. He hears, cares, is close and not aloof! The point is your prayers reveal what you believe about God.

Moreover, F.B. Meyer once said, "The great tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer! Neglect of prayer explains the poverty of our life and the impotency of Christ's Church.

Also, through heart felt, fervent prayer God brings home to our hearts an otherworldly mindset. Prayer is essential because by it God brings the reality of His kingdom to our hearts.

And God over-answers prayer. Hannah year after year went up to Shiloh praying for a child. God then took her desire and matched it with His purpose and Samuel was born to her. But then she gave birth to 5 other children! (1 Samuel 2:21)

Consider both Jeremiah and Elijah; both, at times, prayed through clenched teeth, and were in complete despondency; yet God pampered and doted on them nevertheless! Some people think that if we come to God with an attitude that's less than chirpy, chippy and bright then our prayers will not be heard. God wants us to be authentic in His presence.

A more perplexing problem is why our prayers are not answered at times. Here I'm thinking of a genuine Christian person who is, as Luther once said, both a saint and a sinner at the same time. God has made provision for our sin as believers, for "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." However, no one is a perfect man. Please do not wonder if there is some sin in your life. There is, and if God were to mark iniquity who could stand. Once you begin to connect the dots between an unanswered prayer and some kind of disobedience in your life, out the window goes your Christian joy. Even if you were perfect not every prayer would be answered! Yes, stop and read that again! You will never be able to figure that out because we are finite and He is infinite; His ways are not our ways. We are not capable of getting entirely on the same page with God!

Now heed this: Prayers are answered not on the basis of perfect performance, but on the basis of Covenant; and the sooner you learn that, the more peace you will have!

Finally, this profound prayer insight that flows from the writings of St. Augustine, the famous 4th Century Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. He taught that our life follows our loves, and that the great benefit of prayer is that our loves are reordered. When God reorders our loves through prayer, which is a continual thing, then we more readily, and easily, set all of our affections upon Christ, and love him more authentically from the heart; and that profoundly affects the direction of our life, as we have new loves and new interest governing within.

There is a great story that comes from Princeton University. One day their most famous Professor, Dr. Albert Einstein, was lecturing and a promising doctoral student asked a question, "What is there left in the world for original dissertation research?" Einstein paused and reflected just a few seconds, then with great conviction replied, "Young man go and find out about prayer." Perhaps it's time to take your Bible and a good concordance and do the same thing.

God is more willing to answer your prayers than you are to ask them! In prayer we hear the approach of soft sandals. In the experience of prayer Jesus Christ brings the reality of His Kingdom to our hearts. In prayer the great verities of the faith become present possessions; truths that own us and which begin to govern in our lives. Prayer removes the clutter from our lives. Prayer is not how we climb up to God, but rather it's how we open the door so that His glory overtakes us. The prayer times can be the best times of all in a believer's life. A loveless marriage, a wayward child, a desperate need for a promotion, wisdom for big decisions or the color of the wallpaper on the wall that must be decided, are all worthy of our intercessions and heartfelt prayers.

My Bible says "pray without ceasing". Prayer creates an audience with God and in our praying, and oh how glorious this benefit, we get to discover the beautifulness of the Savior's heart.

You think about that! Amen!

PART V

This presentation will answer two important questions; namely, why should we pray, and what is the value of authentic genuine personal prayer.

When we pray our relationship with Jesus Christ is strengthened; in other words, prayer builds our relationship with Christ. In prayer we find ourselves focused on the Lord; and thus, we become more transparent before Him. His nearness invites us to believe Him increasingly for great things. Prayer also helps us to overcome temptation. A life that moves towards Christ is fortified against moving away from Him. The issue is

never what tempts us, but rather the direction of our life; that's what makes us vulnerable. Also, God's work is accomplished through us in prayer because authentic prayer softens us, it changes our perspective, and it helps us to give God a green light to move in our lives.

Moreover, prayer is a prerequisite to spiritual awakening. Every documented move of God has always been preceded by fervent prayer. Moreover, prayer is one of the great weapons that a believer wields in spiritual warfare. Prayer calls God into our battle; and thus, He supplies the weapons needed to withstand the enemy. Weapons like the Word of God, a confident faith, praise that's not predicated on the present predicaments.

What is the value of personal praying? These insights will quicken your heart.

Know and understand that prayer conquerors our worst moods. All of us get out of phase from time to time, but how quickly can you pull back? Prayer quickly realigns our hearts with Heaven, producing clarity in our minds, and infusing our hearts with hope. Prayer also brings perspective, meaning that through prayer we begin to look at things with the mind of Christ, seeing things accurately.

Moreover, prayer has a way of disarming things that heretofore had been threatening. You see, genuine prayer makes us aware that God is greater than that thing in front of us that previously seemed to be so ungluing. Prayer is also the answer for fatigue. When we feel used up, genuine prayer brings to us an ability to persevere so that we're able to go forward on His reserves, and not our own. Some of the greatest things that have ever happened in my life took place in my extreme weariness when God took over and carried me through, turning my weakness into His strength.

Prayer amends our emotional crippling. We all have emotional crippling. For example, consider anger. When some people get angry, they can't pull back, and it can go on for two or three days; but for the person who will fall to their knees, knowing their own such proclivity, that emotional crippling may be abrogated.

Also, prayer brightens our lives and helps us to be hopeful about things. Prayer also decimates all self-pity and brings home to our hearts that God is a present help in time of trouble; we have not been abandoned.

Moreover, a growing prayer life facilitates a missional mindset. Prayer is how we hand ourselves over to God, finally saying that we would live for Christ and do His biddings. Prayer also sensitizes us to the nature of God, and thus, has great doctrinal value. Prayer also softens us. In prayer we become more pliable, teachable; less dogmatic, legalistic and opinionated. Through prayer the sweetness of Jesus is brought to our lives.

To paraphrase Luther, 'We do more by our praying than all of our enemies by their boasting.' Through prayer we are able to climb the high places and prevail against great

odds. Prayer dismantles life's shadowy places. And through authentic prayer we are restrained from those decisions that could lead to heartache and brokenness. Prayer doesn't guarantee anyone a longer life, but it does bring the abundant life of Christ to us. Fervent prayer accentuates our ability to keep company with Christ and gives us a surprising gift; namely, the listening ear of God; who when He hears — acts.

Here endeth the lesson.

Part VI

The Rabbinic tradition emerged in Israel after the exile. The temple was gone, there was no Holy of Holies or Ark of The Covenant. And so, there arose the whole synagogue movement with teaching Rabbis. By the time of Christ's earthly ministry, almost 500 years of Rabbinical teachings had, to a large extent, shaped the religious culture of Israel. Many of the Jews held to ideas that were not at all acceptable with the Spirit of God. Prayer had become corrupted and perverted by the Rabbis; and thus, in the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord began to address a number of the faults that had crept into the prayer life and practices of the Jewish people.

Consider the following:

- 1) Prayer had become ritualized. Prayers were said by rote, they were simply read or repeated from memory; little attention was given to what was being said. In effect, prayer became almost a semi-conscious religious exercise. In ancient Israel a faithful Jew would repeat the Shema early in the morning and again at night, "Hear, oh Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord." Another formalized prayer was called, "The eighteenth", which gathered up 18 different prayers that were informed by Old Testament scriptures, and was used for various occasions. Faithful Jews prayed all 18 each morning, afternoon, and evening. These were ritual prayers; and while some said them with sincerity, others offered them with indifference, pride, or by rote, without much attention to the words, saying these prayers in a perfunctory manner. Thus, they had a ready-made opportunity to show off their spirituality; a kind of public way to readjust their halo, and be noticed of men.
- 2) A second fault that crept in was a development of prescribed prayers for every occasion. This made prayer something mechanical. The intent was good in that it sought to bring every aspect of one's life into the presence of God; however, usually the emphasis was more on getting the prayers said and done as opposed to a genuine appeal to Heaven from the heart.
- 3) A third fault which crept in related to the practice of limiting prayer to specific times and occasions. Often those times and occasions were not related to genuine desire or need.
- 4) A fourth fault related to long prayers. Ancient Rabbis maintained that the longer the prayer, the more likely it would be heard and heeded by God. Verbosity was confused with meaning, and length was confused with sincerity. It was actually believed that a person's effectiveness in prayer, and thus, one's ability to move God in prayer, was in direct proportion to its length. In Mark chapter 12:4 Jesus warned of scribes who, "for

appearance sake offered long prayers". A long prayer is not necessarily an insincere prayer, but long public prayers may indeed lend themselves to pretense, repetition, rote, and other serious dangers.

- 5) A Fifth fault is singled out by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 6:7 where He addresses meaningless repetitions, often patterned after those in pagan religions. The idea of repeating a phrase over and over was considered acceptable, and was encouraged; but in fact, it wasn't acceptable.
- 6) Perhaps the worst fault that crept in was the idea of wanting to be seen and heard by other people. Thus, prayer became a way to promote one's own spirituality. This was intrinsically evil, because it was a way to satisfy one's pride. A desire to be seen and heard by men in prayer is nothing short of self-glorification.
- 7) One must guard against hypocrisy in prayer. The word hypocrite originally referred to actors, or pretenders, who used large masks to portray the roles they were playing on stage. Jesus declared saying, "and when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites." Prayer has a means of attracting attention, and honoring one's self is despicable in the sight of our Savior; this has no part in the Kingdom of God. An old commentator once observed that the greatest danger to religion is that the old self simply becomes religious. It was actually believed that by saying certain kinds of prayers one became acceptable to God. Many today seek to dress their old nature in religious trappings, that they are made acceptable to God; and of course, we are not.

Notice that Jesus speaks in verse 5 of the street corners. The word used here for street is not the same as that in vs. 2, which refers to a narrow street (rhume); the word used here in vs. 5 (plateia) refers to a wide, major street; therefore, a major street corner where a crowd was most likely to be found. See where Jesus is going here. He was calling them out. There's nothing wrong with praying at a major intersection; but if you took a calculated approach, placing yourself there to be seen by the most people; then that was considered distasteful to Heaven, and it represents a corrupting spirituality. Such praying is born of pride. Prayer is not to be a tool by which we appropriate the accolades of men. Hence our Lord, when He taught on prayer, confronted things like ritualistic, mechanical, long repetitious, and ostentatious prayers designed to enhance one's spirituality before men, and gain their praise.

Prayer is such a sacred gift. When we pray, we step into God's heart. The only audience that matters in authentic prayer is the presence of Christ Himself. These faults that crept in to the mindset of the first century Jews calls us to address any errors in our minds regarding prayer, and our own practice of prayer.

In my own life as a Pastor, words come easy. I have, admittedly, a glib tongue; and it's easy for me to pray words and yet not really pray. I often speak that very caution into my mind when I'm led to pray. While a felicitous phrase might be nice, authentic speech from the heart is the only thing that carries the approbation of God in the act of prayer. Prayer for many is admittedly quite a struggle. Nothing is more threatening than a prayer meeting where for an hour people might gather together for corporate prayer and intercession. Yet, Jesus has said that apart from me ye can do nothing.

Through prayer, God puts His power on loan. Sometimes through heartfelt prayers we declare things about God that heretofore we did not believe, given the nature of our petitions. We are making assumptions about God. I have several books I am now reading that are basically

titled 'A Theology of Prayer', which magnifies the character of God in light of the intercessions of the great saints of antiquity. While prayer does not brighten the countenance of God, the scriptures do reveal that He delights in receiving our prayers. And with every moment wherein we tarry in His presence, there is an impartation, God coming, warming our hearts, giving us greater understanding, purging out of us our worst impulses. And discovering that His truth governs and restrains; which is a beautiful thing. Prayer often is how God brings favor to us. The person of prayer will wear that in their countenance, and it will bleed through; for that person will have greater certainty, and greater peace, and will have an assurance of God's nearness that might otherwise elude his own soul.

The prayer times really are the best times. Prayer is the best commentary on scripture. And it's the best way to get an honest objective look at our own unfolding lives.

A number of years ago, in the late 70s, I had a friend, an older man who was a postmaster. One Sunday I had preached on prayer and he wanted to meet and talk about it; so, I lunched the next day at a place called 'Geets Diner' out in New Jersey. This man said to me, "Reverend, I take umbrage with a few things you said about prayer yesterday. God has given us a mind and ability, and God is not to be trivialized. We don't need to be bothering Him with mundane matters. We should only pray when we are in real extremity or difficulty." I can tell you the man did not have a lot of victory in his life, his issues were multiple, and many. I wasn't about to allow him to adjust or fix my own theology of prayer.

God cannot be trivialized by our praying. He is more interested than you are in the color of wallpaper on your wall. Many times my wife and I have prayed about a piece of furniture that we needed, then headed out to the right store where we found it.

Life can be fraught with contrary currents, but the hardest paths can be smoothed over by genuine prayer. Moving Heaven is not a matter of time on your knees, but rather a matter of one's heart genuinely before the throne of God. Jesus says we have not because we ask not. Why not take your prayer life to the next level by heeding what has been said here, kneeling down right now? Christ is holding court. The throne of grace is waiting for you to be in attendance, and the ear of Jesus Christ is inclined to you. Isn't it time to pray?

You think about that, amen.

PART VII

Tonight, I want to continue our focus on prayer. To follow Christ presupposes a robust prayer life. Last time we noted that a number of faults had crept into the prayer life of many Jews due to the erring Rabbinical tradition. Prayers had become ritualized, they were often said by rote and there were various memorized prayers for almost every occasion, often said without any heart connection whatsoever. Designated times and specific occasions also called for certain prayers, which too often were said in a mechanical way.

Sadly, it was believed that a prayer's sanctity and effectiveness was in direct proportion to its length, and we noticed that verbosity was confused with meaning, and length was confused

with sincerity. Another problem was meaningless repetitions, and our Lord warned against that. And perhaps the worst fault, which Jesus addresses in the Sermon on The Mount, is the need to be seen by men, making a public display of one's piety in order to be perceived as a person of great faith and spirituality. For such people there was a lot of pretense, they wanted to be seen by others. Jesus talked about those who would stand on the street corners, not the narrow street corners, but the wide major intersections where there was more likely to be a crowd; so that such individuals would stop to pray, and thereby have a much larger audience of onlookers. They did this in order to be seen of men; and that was rooted in pride.

Now to pick up the teaching, there have been those who have grossly misunderstood Jesus' intent, and they try to use what He said to renounce all public prayer. But our Lord taught no such thing. In fact, in Luke chapter 11:1 we find our Lord praying in the presence of His disciples; in Matthew 14:19 our Lord prayed publicly before the feeding of the Multitude. The Bible records numerous public prayers that were offered at appropriate moments, and with great sincerity. On that day when Solomon offered his great dedicatory prayer it was before all the priests, Levites, the leaders of Israel, and the people. Thousands converged round the temple on that day. In fact, Solomon built a special kind of pulpit for the need to be elevated so that all Israel could see it; but again, it was done with the right motive.

When Ezra brought the exiles back home and the covenant was renewed, we are told in Nehemiah 9:5 ff that a group of 8 Levites offered very heartfelt moving prayer of repentance before all the people. You recall in Acts chapter 4 that after Peter and John were arrested, questioned and then released by the Sanhedrin shortly after Pentecost; the church rejoiced and according to Acts 4:24, "Lifted up their voices to God with one accord." So, Jesus here is not renouncing public prayer, but the issue runs to motivation. However, the prayers of the scribes and the pharisees too often were ritualistic, mechanical, inordinately long, repetitious, and above all – ostentatious. We are not to pray for the sake of men's praise. We pray in order to connect our hearts with the heart of God. And that presupposes we come to Him in humility, brokenness, and in yieldedness, acknowledging His holiness and our sin; bringing to Him our needs and fears, confessing our absolute dependence upon the living Christ.

Now note the following:

In prayer our true audience is to be God. Matthew 6:6 NASB, **"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."**

Notice here Jesus says, "When you pray", in other words, 'as you're led', so He's not prescribing a particular time or occasion, moreover, He says when you pray go into your inner room, the Greek word for inner is *tameion* which suggests a small chamber, or something like a storage closet. Many homes of that day had special little utility rooms where valuables were stored. What is being enjoined upon the believer is to find a most private place. It's important to sequester ourselves alone with God. Jesus' instruction here is to call us to have intimacy with God; to tuck ourselves in with God daily, and to come before Him with the right attitude. In other words, go to

the most secluded private place you can find and don't be telling everybody; in fact, don't tell anyone. Just get with God and seek Him.

Notice in vs. 6 He says, "and when you shut the door". Shut out everything else so that you can concentrate on God, and then He says, "Pray to your Father." Make the living God the focus, treasure the intimacy, and do this in secret, He says. You know Jesus regularly went away from His disciples to pray entirely alone. Again, we have to be careful here. Chrysostom commented that in His day (the fourth century AD) that many Christians prayed so loud in their rooms that "Everyone down the hall heard what they said". If people sometimes happen to hear the prayers that we offer when we're shut in with God it should not be by our intention. When we seek the Father in secret, let us remember that He is very present when His children call to Him. Understand that singleness of intention is what wins the day.

True prayer is always intimate prayer. Even prayer in public, if the heart is right and concentrated on God, will shut one up alone in the presence of God. Notice here in Matthew 6:6, He says your Father "sees in secret". Jesus Christ never betrays our confidence. Many things that we share with God our Father in our private prayers are for Him alone to know. Sometimes our friends betray our confidences, but God never does. Happily, our secrets with God will forever be just that. Therefore, we can know that one believer praying in secret with a pure heart has the full attention of the Father. Also notice that when our prayer is directed to the Father in secret, He will repay us. The most important secret He sees is not the words we say in the privacy of our room, but the thoughts we have in the privacy of our heart. Those are the secrets about which He is supremely concerned, and about which only He can know with certainty. (I Corinthians 4-5) When God is genuinely the audience of our prayer, we will have the reward that only He can give.

There's nothing revealed here from Jesus as to the nature of that reward or repayment, but the Word says He will repay us. Which means that time in prayer pays dividends. We can speculate on some of those. Prayer creates awe, faith, peace, a certainty that we have been heard, a certainty that the Lord will answer us. Through prayer conviction is often conveyed, which wells up in our hearts that God will answer. The reward is that God will work on our behalf, that God hears us and knows us and will act on our behalf. That God puts Himself at our disposal in prayer is an incredible reward. When you pray, in the will of God, that the lost will be saved, or His church will grow and prosper; God will give you the financial power to bless others. Wow! That is really something ... "The Father who sees in secret will repay you." Prayer, and I don't want to sound too crass here, pays dividends that are utterly unexpected and undeserved, but we get blessed for it. Praise God.

PART VIII

Following Christ, and being His disciple, presupposes that one constantly abides in the Lord Jesus Christ; and apart from prayer that cannot happen. Beloved, no matter how deep the midnight moment when you find yourself in the sudden arms of extremity, death, difficulty, or challenge; the winged prayer can bring an instant Savior, wherever you are.

Prayer does not necessitate ascending some Pisgah or Moriah. One need not enter some awful shrine, or pull off your shoes on some holy ground. If a memorial were to be reared on every spot from which an acceptable prayer has been received in Heaven, and on which a prompt answer had come down; then we would discover, “Jehovah Shammah — The Lord hath been here”, inscribed on many a cottage hearth, and many a dungeon floor. We would find it not only in Jerusalem’s proud temple and David’s cedar galleries, but in the fisherman’s cottage by the brink of the Gennesaret, and in the upper chamber where Pentecost began.

Whether it be the field where Isaac went down to meditate, or the rocky knoll where Israel (old Jacob) wrestled with the angel of the Lord, the den where Daniel gazed on the hungry lions, or the hillside where the man of sorrows prayed all night; we would easily discern the ladder’s feet let down from Heaven, the landing place of mercies; because the starting place is prayer. Prayer can obtain everything. It can open the windows of Heaven and shut the gates of hell. Prayer can put holy constraint on God and detain an angel till he leaves a blessing. Prayer can open the treasures of rain and soften the iron ribs of rocks till they melt into a flowing river. Prayer can arrest the sun in its course and make it to stand still. Prayer can change the laws of gravity and cause an iron axe head to float. Prayers made and prayers answered alter nature, change hearts, reroute the destinies of nations, and turns the hearts of pagan kings even to the Lord.

The poor man is heard because of prayer. Kings prevail because of prayer. Supernatural provision becomes the believers present possession because of prayer. Prayer that invites God soon produces the most honored guest of the universe. Our prayers put God in 3D, land Him in our circumstances; it calls forth the God of the angel armies, and for the priest, prophet, and pastor. Prayer floods the mind and the soul with the redemptive teachings of Christ, so that Kingdom knowledge is amplified and made clear. In short, prayer makes possible the impossible. The overwhelming task is soon completed because of heartfelt prayer. Prayer delivers peace in the day of extremity and undaunted courage in the praying saint before his most formidable foes. Prayer produces confidence in the living God and in how He is predisposed towards us. Prayer stills our shaking and steps us into a Kingdom that cannot be shaken.

God never just answers ‘a prayer’, but He over-answers it, gathering up what we didn’t ask for, making our cup to run over. We are often blind to His many answers of our prayers, and to the answers of prayers that we never asked. We make so little of prayer. All spiritual impoverishment is due to prayerlessness. All spiritual barrenness is due to prayerlessness. Stupid decisions that decimate the lives of believers, is due to prayerlessness. Prayer anchors the soul in all things eternal; it keeps life in focus and builds into the believer’s heart a great heartedness that is most endearing. Indeed, a rare quality only passed out in Heaven and distributed to the praying saint. Beloved your prayers matter, and praying in the right way, with the right understanding, redounds to God’s greater glory and our own good.

We have been looking at some of the faults that Jesus was pointing out regarding attitudes towards prayer in His day.

Consider the following:

1. **In Jesus' day, and here is another kind of fault, prayers often lacked content.** I don't want people to get hung up on the need to turn a felicitous phrase, because that hardly ever turns the heart of God. We do need to be thoughtful in our praying, and there's certain hackneyed phrases that we might want to get away from. When you pray you need to think about speaking to God in a thoughtful way. It's easy simply to say words, or to pray with a wrong spirit. The scribes and pharisees often prayed prayers that had no substance, no significant content. To be acceptable to God Jesus declared that prayers must be genuine expressions of worship and of heartfelt requests and petitions.

Let me try to illustrate what I'm saying. 'Heavenly Father, we thank you for this opportunity to come together.' Could be replaced with something like this, 'Father, we're here because you're here, and we're here because you have called us to come'. Or, 'How good it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity', or 'Father, thank you for this right now moment, and for your willingness to receive us'. I don't want to hit this too hard, because sincerity of heart, not felicity of speech, wins the day with God; but we can fall into saying, and/or praying the same old way.

Do you know why I write every sermon out in full, and have for 150 years, LOL; and why I write my prayers? It's because I don't want to fall into saying things the same old way, and if we're not careful that's exactly what will happen. This is what Jesus warns about in Matthew 6:7, **"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."** Notice the phrase 'meaningless repetition'. By the way, in the Greek that's one word, *battalogo*, and it refers to idle, and/or thoughtless chatter. As in, 'Lord have mercy upon us, Christ have mercy upon us, Lord have mercy upon us, Christ have mercy upon us'; or, 'Lord, we love, we love you Lord, Lord, we love, we love you Lord, Lord, we love, we love you Lord'. The scribes and pharisees used a great deal of repetition in their prayers. They had been taught to do so. What Jesus teaches is that this is not welcomed. In other words, we should just talk with God.

2. **Moreover, there's this emphasis on prayers of many words.** The longer the better, so some Jews felt. ... "They supposed that they would be heard for their many words", said Jesus. Pagans use many words thinking that their deities had to be aroused, then cajoled, intimidated and badgered into listening and answering. You know when the crowds came against Paul and his companions by Demetrius, and the other silversmiths of Damascus, the crowds started chanting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians", and it went on for two hours. The point is, we shouldn't be repeating the same prayers at grace every night, or breakfast etc. My father was a humble Christian man, but he was a rote Christian, he had prepared prayers that he prayed at every meal; 'Kind Father, who died on the cruel cross to save us from our sins, we thank thee for the food that has been prepared, and the hands that prepared it. May it strengthen our bodies amen.' Nothing wrong with that prayer, and I know my father was self-conscious about praying out loud; but I know the Lord would rather hear something straight from the heart. Something thoughtful, something earnest.

3. **Persistence in prayer is a good thing, and in the parable about the midnight visit to their neighbor, the persistent man was praised by Jesus because of his continual genuine request.** However, in the broadest sense our prayers ought to be shaped by sincerity in the heart.
4. **Moreover, with respect to the true content of prayer, our requests should be sincere.** Matthew 6:8, “Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. God our Father does not have to be badgered and cajoled. Our Father knows what we need before we even ask Him. Martin Luther once wrote “By our praying we are instructing ourselves more than we are Him.” Understand beloved, that the purpose of prayer is not to inform or persuade God, but to come before Him sincerely, purposefully, consciously, and devotedly. In prayer we are essentially sharing our needs, burdens, and the hunger of our hearts with our Heavenly Father. And as we come to Him with these needs and concerns, He already is aware, but He wants to hear us, He yearns to commune with us, best of all, God is more willing to answer our prayers than we are to ask them.

Prayer is giving God the opportunity to manifest His power, majesty, love, and providence in our lives. (John 14:13) If we pray with a devout heart and pure motives, we can rest in the full assurance that those prayers will be heard and answered. Our Father repays our sincere devotion with gracious responses. It is reported that D. L. Moody once felt so surfeited with God’s blessings that he had to pray, “God stop!” That is what God will do with every faithful, praying, believer who comes to Him as a child would come to his Father — smother him in more blessings than can ever be counted, or even named.

Now quickly notice the following ‘terse and pithy’ insights. Prayer is an instrument of sanctification, because increasingly it sets us apart from the world, and worldliness; and unto the heart of Christ. Moreover, prayer keeps our life in focus. Life never goes bleary for the praying saint. It is impossible to be a person of prayer and live in confusion. Prayer is how God enhances our sight and perception. Prayer enables us to hear God say, ‘This is the way walk ye in it.’ Prayer keeps us from traveling at the speed of life. Prayer keeps us from being anxious and troubled about many things, and enhances our ability to trust God for all of our tomorrows. Through prayer God turns our hearts into a repository of His peace, and the more we pray, the clearer His voice becomes. Prayer creates heart desire to obey, and turns the Christian life into an adventure. Through prayer the presence of Christ is realized, and the promises become our soul’s delight. Prayer removes the equivocation, banishes shadows and fears, and gives us God’s perspective on everything.

Prayer can give you what you’ve never had, open doors that you never knew existed, and lands you in places of divine appointing that will confound all. Prayer is the means of all promotion, so that you arrive at what others wore themselves out trying to achieve. The praying person is never forgotten by God, but rather adorned with His grace, and it turns the heads of all in hell, and makes the knees of one’s foes bow in complete bewilderment. Prayer is God’s power on loan, and through prayer evil is withstood and the contrary machinations of men are overcome,

all demonic assaults are halted because prayer, from the genuine praying saint, is never ignored by God.

What is keeping you from your prayer closet? Why do you pray so little? Why is it that prayer has not become the delight of your life? Most assuredly you will follow Christ at a distance as a disciple if you fail to cultivate a genuine prayer life. Christ would rather hear six genuine sentences than three hours on your knees trying to prove your holiness and piety before Heaven. My friend, take words with you and go to the Father. You have sin in your life that needs to be cleansed. There is unctioning and rich anointing that has yet to fall upon you, if only you will pray. The sicknesses on your friends will abate if you will pray. Waywardness in your children, discountenance in your marriage, and those who are barriers to the will of God in your life will be relocated if you will but pray.

Prayer can make the Jordan dry up and take you from prison to Prime Minister. Prayer can bring down giants, and deliver you from the snare of the fowler. Your prayers turn the ploys of your enemies on themselves, and it brings an anointing that will break every bondage. Oh, dear disciple of Christ, flee to your prayer room. Cosmic consequences can be affected by your intercessions. The wealth of Heaven is yours by a petition of a bended knee.

Now seek His face. Let not your heart be troubled. Turn from all self-pity. Put your trust solely in the Lord. Thank the Lord for all who will be blessed by your intercessions, and for your own privileged life, that will be dressed up in God's incomparable grace because of your praying.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Part IX

Search out the life of Christ and you discover that prayer had a preeminent place in His life. All of the gospels are in agreement that it was His habit to seek the Father early in the mornings, often hours before daybreak, in order to commune with the Father. In the evenings, when in Jerusalem He would frequently go to the Mt. of Olives to pray, and in other parts of Israel He did the same thing. Prayer was the spiritual air that Jesus breathed every moment of His life.

Sadly, for many people, their theology of prayer is that it is a last resort method. Too many Christians offer their prayers, like sailors use their pumps – only when the ship leaks. But for those who seek to walk with the Lord in the light of His Word, being obedient disciples, the cultivation of a sound prayer life is the very thing that opens the floodgates of Heaven's blessings upon them. Being able to live in a level place, with an ordered life, being anxious for nothing, knowing God's faithful provision, and participating in the unfolding drama of Kingdom activities represent the wondrous benevolences that come back to us from a well cultivated prayer life.

It's equally important that we know how to pray. Knowing how to pray, thereby bringing order to the petitions and concerns we present to the Father, more readily connects us to the divine presence. Martin Lloyd Jones, a great British preacher of more recent times, once wrote, "Man is

at his greatest and highest, when upon his knees, he comes face to face with God.” For the praying person Christ is not distant, the Bible is not difficult to believe, and life never seems, “Like a tale told by an idiot.”

1) Prayer authenticates the divine presence and makes us aware that Heaven has ears, and that God is imminent, as well as transcendent.

Fervent, heartfelt prayer makes God believable, and our own faith is enlarged, i. e. our confidence in Christ, because prayers are answered which could never be the fruit of mere chance or fate. The Bible speaks of effective prayer. In James 5:16 we read, “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” Consider the following. Abraham’s servant prayed and Rebekah appeared. Jacob wrestled and prayed, and Esau’s mind was turned from 20 years of revenge. Moses prayed and Amalek was struck. Hannah prayed, and Samuel was born, then she had 5 more children. Isaiah and Hezekiah prayed, and in 12 hours 185,000 Assyrians were slain. Elijah prayed, and there were three years of drought; he prayed again and the rain came.

Those are but a small sampling of answered prayer, all of which are cited from Old Testament examples. The Jews of Jesus’ day who heard our Lord teach on prayer should have had unlimited confidence in the power of prayer, and yet, they did not. Hence, as we have noted previously, our Lord’s insights about prayer were strong correctives to the Jewish mindset regarding proper prayer petition and intercession. Let us never forget that God does nothing apart from prayer. The desire to do what is right is born of prayer. The will to fast cannot be attained apart from prayer. Systematic tithing will not happen unless prayer has wrestled our greed to the ground. Bearing with sinners, being longsuffering with saints, and suffering fools gladly for the sake of the gospel cannot be done apart from a meaningful prayer life.

To pray faithfully and regularly is to safeguard our hearts from our own carnal proclivities. Prayer is how we climb up to the places of God’s appointing. The world always looks different from the perspective of prayer, rather than by natural sight. Prayer enables us to be compassionate. Prayer challenges our worst impulses and it often restrains us from saying what should never be stated. Through prayer God hides us in the cleft of the rock and someday it’s much better not to be seen or heard as prayer restrains when we’re out of phase.

2) Our prayers need to be radically informed by an awareness as to the supreme purpose of prayer.

The supreme purpose of prayer that goes way beyond all other purposes, is to glorify God. While a believer can obtain many benefits from God through prayer, the purpose in praying must first of all be for the sake of God and not self. Prayer is above all an occasion for the goodness and glory of God to be manifested in our circumstances. Someone has written,

“True prayer brings the mind to the immediate contemplation of God’s character, and holds it there until the believer’s soul is properly impressed.”

The purpose of prayer is well defined by Jesus when He prayed in John 14:13, “... whatever you ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified.” The point is, true prayer centers on God’s glory and not just man’s need. While in prayer we seek to lay hold on God’s promises, the higher duty of prayer is to acknowledge God’s sovereignty, and to behold the display of His glory! In order that our prayers might glorify God, the Holy Spirit has been commissioned to help us. Paul speaks of this in Roman’s 8:26, “We do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes with groanings too deep for words.” Is it not true that you have felt the need to pray, but then when you knelt in His presence words escaped you? Many have been the times of my life when I’ve just moaned before the Lord, for all I could say was, “God have mercy”, “God help”, or “Lord, you know all things.”

Finally, it’s interesting that Jesus makes no mention of where prayer should take place. He simply says “Go into your inner room.” (Matthew 6:6) And He gave that admonishment to stress the singlemindedness of prayer. And the need to block out every other concern, but God. Not only is there no mention of where prayer should take place, but Jesus never specified a particular time to pray. The Jews, as we have noted in this study, had designated times for prayer and special occasions when prayers had to be made; but in the New Covenant dispensation we are free to pray as we are led.

3) And thirdly, no particular attire or posture is specified as being necessary to our heartfelt petitions.

What is of supreme importance is our attitude and the content of our prayers. In short, any posture, any attire, any time of the day, in any place, or under any circumstance, prayer is always appropriate. Prayer is how we abide in Christ and maintain constant communion with God. (Ephesians 6:18; I Thessalonians 5:17)

As we move into the Lord’s prayer, we will see that despite a number of erring ideas the Jews had about prayer, Rabbinic tradition was truer to scripture in its teachings about prayer than perhaps anything else. They understood that God wanted them to pray. Their own history was inexplicable apart from answered prayer. Our Lord’s life, as experienced by the disciples challenged them to become people of prayer, and hence they asked, “Lord teach us to pray.” Notice that in our Lord’s petition He introduces the Lord’s prayer with these words, ‘Pray then in this way,’

In Luke’s account the disciples didn’t ask Jesus to ‘teach’ them a prayer, but rather to teach them “how to pray”. (Luke 11:1) In the Greek it reads, ‘then in this way’. He carries the idea of ‘along these lines’, or ‘pray in the following manner’. The Lord’s prayer was not given as something that we were to recite, but as a model prayer to help us shape our petitions. Jesus, here in Matthew 6, has been warning all along about praying meaningless repetitions, or prayer as something done by rote. To pray one prayer over and over, reciting it verbatim, would have been an obvious contradiction to what He was teaching. Now, is it inherently wrong to recite the Lord’s

prayer? No, it isn't. Just the other day a person confessed that they knelt down on their knees and decided to recite the Lord's prayer and realized they forgot the words. The Lord's prayer has not been said in schools since the early 60s, and in so many churches with the 'free worship' approach, the Lord's prayer is never recited. It does have value. In those 70 words, Jesus magnificently approached the Father in a deeply, humble way, turning felicitous phrases and bringing petitions that captured the mind of His Father. While we should memorize the Lord's prayer, it is more important to allow it to form and shape our own petitions.

Let me close our teaching by asking you to rethink your entire prayer life. Of all that you have learned thus far in this study, how has it amended your prayer journey? No one can follow Christ successfully, experiencing daily renewal, apart from heartfelt, abiding prayer. If we are too busy to pray, then we are too busy. If we can go three or four days without any prayer time at all, and dare to call ourselves disciples, we are then functioning quacks.

Prayer is how God puts His power on loan. Prayer gives us a way of looking at life which others will never see in the natural. Prayer causes Christ's doctrine to come alive in our hearts. Prayer is how God makes a house call into the inner sanctums of our hearts. Isn't it strange that we sometimes prefer to travel at the speed of life rather than taking time to spend time with the one who is life and life eternal? I could never manage the sudden adversities of life, the undeserved hurts, and bitter disappointments apart from prayer. When I pray and am engaged by Heaven, I invariably come away with a new resolve, knowing that Christ is fully alive, governing in my circumstances, and that He is indeed my dread warrior.

Many years ago, on August 31st, 1987; I went to Mason Beach, which adjoined my Grandfather's property, it was a public beach then and no one was there. We were wading in the water, "Gramps", I said, "you're almost 90.", what a precious moment that was; "What's the most important thing life has taught you?" "Oh", said my holiness Methodist grandfather, "God answers prayers." I can still see his face in the beautiful sunlight of that very warm day. He prayed on his knees twice a day, and often in between. He then related the following story.

A bright, but cold March day in 1944, his son, my daddy, was in the South Pacific, and the combat was heavy. Gramps was in the fields, working on irrigation ditches. He felt led to lay down his rake, and he went up by the barn, which sat by a little gut of water from the Chesapeake Bay, tall grass and marsh grew up around the barn. He sat down on the ground with his back leaning against the weather-beaten boards of the stable. He said that he took out his little New Testament and began reading, then stopped as the tears were flowing, and all he could say was, "Help my son, Lord; help my son." Suddenly a strong witness emerged in his heart, stronger than anything he had ever experienced, for the Lord told him that his son was indeed being protected, and that he would come home to have a long life.

Fast forward 18 months, and now Granddad Bonniwell, and my grandmother, are at the Newport News train Station, and off of that train stepped my dad in his sailor's uniform. His ship came in under that famous bridge in San Francisco Bay. Pop then boarded a train, courtesy of the United States Navy, and came all the way across the United States. And there he was, whole and without a scratch, home from a great World War. Standing there in the water at Mason Beach,

Gramps related that story, and affirmed his profound confidence in the God who hears and answers His redeemed.

Here ends the lesson.

Part X

IMPRECATORY PRAYERS ACTUALLY HEARD?

Will God actually answer imprecatory prayers prayed by believers? An imprecatory prayer is a prayer which petitions God to take vengeance on their enemies. On this side of the New Covenant such a question sounds antithetical to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Indeed, it seems scandalous to think that in the name of Jesus we might pray vengeance on those who have done us great harm. This is no small conundrum, for Jesus said that we should pray for our enemies and do good to those that despitefully use us.

David prayed some pretty fierce imprecatory prayers. Check out some of those prayers in Psalms 5, 6, 35, 69; all of which are actually cited in the New Testament. One such example, which is stated in different ways by David, is that he says, “May the pit they dug for me be something they fall into.” Does such a prayer have any place in a believer’s life? There are those who argue that such prayers are contrary to the Spirit of Christ, but here’s the scandal of it all; all of David’s Psalms for vengeance on his enemies were answered. David himself never took vengeance.

In this world injustice happens. In a world that has been so desecrated by sin, bad things are going to happen to good people, Godly people, spiritual people; and sooner or later, as Christians, injustice will be perpetrated upon us. Unbelievers in the worldly system injure Christians, and sometimes other Christians, through their slandering, seek to destroy other believers. Experientially, I can tell you that God has answered my imprecatory prayers, though I have myself never lifted a finger to take vengeance on anyone, not even an anonymous letter. Often, I have shared my hurt and anger at the injustices that have come to me in life, I have cried out to God, and then sometimes months, or years, later I have seen the Lord taking those people apart, exposing their folly and evil motivations.

Praying for God to punish the wicked is neither unloving or vindictive as it is an expression of faith in the God who judges justly. (I Peter 2:23) Some people want to limit the imprecatory Psalms to the Old Covenant of Israel. Many of the evils that were perpetrated against Israel are today directed at Christ’s church, and Christ never takes that sitting down. Jesus pronounced a number of woes of judgement against religious leaders in Matthew 23. Paul himself pronounces an anathema on anyone who would preach another gospel. (That’s Galatians 1:8-9) And the martyrs in Heaven, in the book of Revelation, are seen petitioning God to avenge their blood. (Revelation 6:10)

It is in the book of Psalms that we see many imprecatory prayers. The Spirit allowed them to be placed there; for the Psalter is God’s divinely inspired prayer book and Hymnal, which

preeminently contains the language of Heaven in petition and praise. Yet in the Psalms, voice is given to those victimized by evil, crying out that God will avenge them of the injustice done. It is neither evil or sinful to look at those who have done great harm and woe to us, thereby asking God to deal with them. This is a matter for the prayer closet only. The important thing is that we never take vengeance ourselves. “Vengeance is mine saith the Lord, I will repay.”

It is possible to pray imprecatory prayers and not fall into the gall of bitterness. Anger can be a toxic thing in our lives, corrupting not only our hearts but our perceptions. The Bible says “be angry and sin not.” Alone in our prayer closets we can express this to the Lord. And if indeed, we are praying amiss, the Holy Spirit will show us; but that’s where we must leave that imprecatory prayer, namely right with the Lord.

Do you realize that every time we pray, ‘God’s Kingdom come, and His will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven’, we are, in fact, praying an imprecatory prayer? That cannot happen without vengeance, divine vengeance, falling on people. There are those who hate God, and any expression of Kingdom nearness is something that they will oppose with all of their strength, resisting those advances in every conceivable way. Case in point: In the last days we see the nations of the earth standing against God until the final hour. Moreover, when we pray that the Kingdoms of this world will become the Kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ, that too is an imprecatory prayer, for that would mean destroying all opposition to our Lord’s second return.

We as Christians want all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. We lift our voices, not as swords, as we pray to the God of Heaven, who died for the sins of the world that all might come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. However, loving our enemies, in the New Testament, never comes at the expense of foregoing appeals to divine justice. Praying for God to punish the wicked who have brought great harm to us and Kingdom causes, is neither unloving nor vindictive, but it is an expression of faith in Him who judges justly. (I Peter 2:23)

In this life we’re going to get ruffed up, and it does little good to send an imprecatory prayer up to Heaven every time we get the short end of the stick. Imprecatory prayers should be infrequent, carefully thought out, and should flow from the lips of those who have carefully searched their own hearts, and who are broken before God; “for all of a man’s ways are right in his own eyes”. Nevertheless, there are evils that can befall believers, perpetrated by unscrupulous people who with malice and clear intent strategize to execute an evil plan on those they oppose.

The scriptures tell us that “No creature is hidden from His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” Thus far in my life, the few imprecatory prayers that I have prayed, have just been that, few – and far between. But all of those prayers in time were answered. We must live our lives uprightly, never lifting our hands to manipulate or hurt anyone, always seeking to make Christ known and to show forth the places of Him who has redeemed us.

The supremacy of Christ’s Kingdom rule in our hearts should cause us to pause and give serious thought to any imprecatory Psalm that might flow from our lips. Many are those people who might slight us, but that’s because they’re in darkness; knowing that we should pray for their salvation, and we should not do that praying through clenched teeth. However, evil, deliberately

focused, planned, and executed against us, gives legitimacy to an imprecatory prayer, and the praying of imprecatory prayers.

Now before you adjust your halo and dismiss all of this out of hand, sit with your Bible and search it all out for yourself. Ask the Holy Spirit to unclutter your mind regarding this matter. Not once do we find David or the saints in glory of repenting of having prayed an imprecatory prayer, and neither have I.

Following this teaching, and the ensuing discussion, Scott Walts, one of my deacons, shared some material that he discovered in preparation for this teaching. The following insights have been listed from some information that he sent to me.

1. When we offer imprecatory prayers we are simply asking God to keep His covenant promises to Abraham and His offspring, “I will bless those who bless you, and Him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” ... “and if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”
2. The conduct of Christ should be indicative of our behavior with respect to imprecatory prayers. “When He was reviled, He did not revile in return. When He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly.” (I Peter 2:33) While Christ did not take vengeance for Himself, He trusted that the Father would indeed do so on His behalf.

How To Pray Imprecatory Psalms

1. First, pray them against Satan
2. Pray them against your own sinful nature
3. Pray them against the world systems of corruption and oppression
4. Pray them lastly, against enemies, God’s enemies, and your enemies

Noted theologian, Walter Brueggemann, in his book, *Praying the Psalms*, on pg. 63 has written, “The Psalms explore the full gamut of human experience from rage to hope, indeed, it would be very strange if such a robust spirituality lacked such a dimension of vengeance, for we would conclude that just at the crucial point, robustness had turned to cowardice and propriety.”

Reflections, Again from Pastor Ed

When imprecatory prayers are asked and answered it drives us as intercessors more radically into the fear of God. The conviction, that God punishes, and can take vengeance, challenges us to maintain a daily walk on the straight and narrow. Few people will ever get it right regarding the issue of imprecatory prayers. If anything is to be gleaned from this study it must be that we never go any further than praying judgment on our enemies. Which must be left to the cross, not lifting our hand in any way to avenge ourselves. God’s justice is perfect, and our

perception of what justice should be is often imperfect. Caution must rule. But always ... always the taking of vengeance is for God to do, and even then, if our hearts are right, its execution will not delight us, but prove to be most sobering.

You think about that, amen.

REFLECTIONS ON PRAYER

THE LORD'S PRAYER

"Our Father who art in Heaven"

Part XI

(A synopsis)

For the last eleven weeks in the Monday night discipling class I have been teaching on the subject of Prayer. Printed below is installment Part 11.

In Luke chapter 11:1-2, the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. They did not ask Him to teach them a prayer. The Lord's prayer was given to us as a model prayer, though I do not believe it is wrong to recite it in a liturgical way in a morning worship service. Recently a person said to me that they sat down to have their morning devotions and decided to pray the Lord's Prayer and forgot the words! Admittedly we are not as familiar with the Lord's Prayer as we once were.

The Lord's prayer was given to us as a model, showing us how to structure prayers that carry the approbation of Heaven. Let us consider the first phrase from Matthew 6:9b.

"Our Father who art in Heaven."

God is the Father of all people in that He is their creator. As Paul said in his Mars Hill address, "We are all His offspring". (Acts 7:28) God's Fatherhood over unbelievers is true only in the sense that He is their creator, but it goes no further. We know God as our Father because He is both our creator and Redeemer. Every time we pray, "Our Father", we are acknowledging a transaction that has occurred, which turned us into new creatures, thus born to a living and lively hope! To pray "Our Father", is to acknowledge a divine transaction wherein we were quickened and made alive in our spiritual death, and brought into saving faith in and through Jesus Christ. And when we pray "Our Father", we are acknowledging that this saving work done in us, was also wrought in many others. We are a part of the church universal, God's remnant called out ones, and thus have the same affection for the Lord. We pray, "Our Father" because that is our experience of God; He relates to us as a loving Heavenly Father, and that is the experience of all who have been redeemed by Christ.

While we are grateful for the intimacy that allows us to say “Our Father”, He is not ours alone. That means that when we pray this opening sentence of the Lord’s Prayer, we must see ourselves as one among a vast host, who even now are anticipating the appearing of the Lord on that appointed day.

Noted German theologian, Joachim Jeremias (died in 1979) was a renowned New Testament scholar known throughout the world with books taught and read in almost all seminaries. He did a study wherein he searched the Old Testament writings and existent Rabbinic writings from ancient Jewish sources. He could not find a single example ever of a Jewish writing, or author, addressing God directly as ‘Father’ in prayer until the tenth century AD. He found examples of God being referred to as “The Father”, but the word ‘Father’ was never used in a direct form of personal address.

The Hebrews did in fact know God as their Father. Isaiah declared God as Father of Israel ... “Thou art our Father”, Isaiah 63:16, Exodus 4:22, Jeremiah 31:9. Once upon a time they saw God as their spiritual Father and Savior. Psalm 89:26, Psalm 103:13.

Sadly, the history of Israel is one of apostasy; and thus, many of the Jews, century after century, lost any sense of God’s intimate Fatherhood. When they thought of God, they did not think of Him as a Father, but rather a God who is transcendent, remote, distant, judicious; who once guided their ancestors in the deserts. By the time of Christ our Lord jolted the Jewish community by praying in that manner. For He taught them to pray saying, “Our Father”; and it’s likely that Jesus used the Aramaic, ‘Abba’ when He gave this prayer, which is the equivalent of our word ‘Daddy’, which carries a very intimate and personal connotation. For the Jews of that period, such language was nearly scandalous.

To call God “Our Father”, means that we are His children and indeed, we are, because the Bible calls those who have believed on Christ, God’s own dear children. Thus, when we pray “Our Father”, we are reminding ourselves that we are in the family of God and accepted in the beloved, and that Christ is predisposed towards us in Fatherly love, and acts towards us in a Fatherly way.

When we pray “Our Father”, understanding His incomparable goodness it abrogates and ends all fear. Pagan’s fear their god and seek to appease Him; but we know ourselves to be loved by God; thus, we worship Him with thanksgiving and praise, and we live in awe of such a glorious Savior.

Secondly, God’s Fatherhood over our lives settles our uncertainties, fills us with hope and glorious expectation. Earthly fathers do all in their power to provide and protect their children, and the Heavenly Father could never do less. In fact, the scriptures teach us that our Heavenly Father loves, protects, and stands with His children in the daily round and all the more so when facing the vicissitudes of life.

Thirdly, to pray “Our Father” means that we are never alone. It doesn’t matter who walks out of our lives, the friendships that get abrogated, or the unfairnesses that befall us; God never turns His back on us. In Fact, John chapter 14, Jesus as our loving Father, promises that if we love Him and seek to keep His commandments, that He will love us, and that we will be loved by the Father. Paul says, nothing can separate us from the Father’s love.

Fourthly, God as our Father, is addressed as being in Heaven, which means that all the resources of Heaven are available to us when we turn to our loving Heavenly Father. God never runs out of what we need. His love, grace, mercy, and help are always in abundant supply and it is inexhaustible! Indeed, Paul says in Ephesians 1:3 that our Father, “has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

Fifthly, to pray “Our Father”, calls us to delight in obedience. We want to please our Heavenly Father and when God is our Father, we delight to live in submission to Him. Obedience to God is one of the supreme marks of our relationship to Christ.

Finally, when we pray “Our Father”, it brings to mind the listening ear of the great God who dwells in refulgent glory, who is eager to lend us His ear, His power, and to offer us Himself that we may know of His goodness and live as His chosen people in whom He delights. When I pray “Our Father”, it means that I can count on God to act towards me as a loving Father.

Recently a person shared the following; at 37 years of age when she came to know Christ, having been raised in a home where she was abandoned as a young child by her father, that upon accepting Christ, the first thing she received, in an overwhelming way, was the ongoing experience of God as her Heavenly Father. When we cry ‘Abba Father’, saying “Our Father”, we are declaring before Heaven our willingness to submit to Him, and that we yearn to please Him. The story of the Bible in many ways is the story of a God seeking His people, yearning to be their Father.

In our church age we speak of the seeker sensitive churches and of worship services devised for seekers, “but there are none that seeketh after God” according to the Bible! People do however seek after the Lord's benefits, but they do not seek after Him. But the one who seeks us is the ‘Daddy God,’ wanting to be loved as a Father! Much of the Bible is about God taking the initiative, as He did in the incarnation, sending His Son to show us the great glorious heart of our ‘Daddy God’.

To pray “Our Father”, is a most settling thing. It is to acknowledge and affirm that there is a God, and that this great God delights to be our Father, and who daily seeks to guide, bless, preserve, lead, and prosper His children. This ‘Daddy God’ leads us in the way of truth. As a good Father He imparts wisdom, ordering our steps and stops, for when He speaks His Words are words of life.

I frequently tell people that I had a good daddy. Indeed, he was. And the God that I know in Christ is also the 'Daddy God', so beautiful, so available, who is the altogether lovely one, who every day calls me to His own heart.

When I was a little boy on the farm, I would wake up and I would call out to my granddaddy, (My father's father, and I've often told people I had two daddy's, meaning gramps and my father) and Granddad would come up the back staircase and I would ride down piggyback, being ferried to the kitchen table where this chubby little kid enjoyed an awesome southern breakfast.

That's what our 'Daddy God' does. We call for Him, and He ferries us to the best places where we sit and enjoy His delights as He dotes on us, calling us His own dear children. Our Savior is so wonderful and beautiful. There is none like Him. Do you know that your 'Daddy God' loves you with a Fatherly affection? Is that your experience of God? If He is only your Father by creation, you will not be able to answer in the affirmative. But if He is your 'Daddy God', your redemption in the name of Jesus, then you are His child because you have been born again. Christ will carry you to the end of your days as His child. If you're young, be warned, and know that over the course of your life people will walk in and out of your life; but dear friend, in this decade, maybe far into the next, misunderstandings, jealousy, envy, indeed, many things can end a relationship. Sadly, some people who mean so much to us are present in our lives one day, and then gone the next. But always, abiding faithful, there is one who never leaves or forsakes His own, namely, 'Abba', 'Daddy', "Our Father".

Some day that will mean more to you than anything. But whether you're young or old, begin to delight in His Fatherhood, treasuring up the insights that have been shared, and knowing that your loving Heavenly 'Daddy God' will never give you up or write you off. In Christ you are His and His forever, loved eternally, with a doting, caring, nurturing love of a God with a Father's heart.

Here endeth the lesson.

REFLECTIONS ON PRAYER

THE LORD'S PRAYER

"Hallowed be thy name."

Part XII

"If God only answered the prayers of perfect people there would be no prayers answered in the Bible"

Tonight, our focus will continue on the Lord's Prayer, and I'll ask you turn your Bibles to Matthew 6:9-15; but first I want to say a few things about prayer that perhaps have not been sufficiently punctuated.

- 1) **In this statement by the great American preacher Phillips Brooks, a noted preacher from Boston, and in many ways considered the father of the homiletical method; he once said, “Prayer is not conquering God’s reluctance, but taking hold of God’s willingness.”** Whatever our theology of prayer, that needs to be at the top of the list. For too many of us, our view of prayer is that of struggle, as if we’ve got to wrestle down God’s unwillingness to hear and answer us, but that is a lie straight from the pit and it smells like smoke. Prayer is only a struggle in the sense that the enemy gets us too pressed, or too busy, to pray; and if you’re too busy to pray, you’re just too busy.

There’s a man named Herbert Lockyer, and for years and years there was a set of books available, and I wish I still had that series. All the men of the Bible constituted one book, all the women of the Bible, all the judgments of the Bible, all the prayers of the Bible etc. etc. There’s a sense in which the entire Bible is the story of God responding to the prayers of the saints.

- 2) **The second thing I want to say about prayer is that it’s now time to fix our prayer life.** It’s the best commentary you’ll ever have on scripture. Through prayer, the lens of Christ refocuses the unsearchable riches found in God’s Word. **The praying saint will see more, and receive more from the scriptures, because prayer is the passport that lands us in the knowledge of God; and more particularly, the knowledge of God’s heart.** A notebook filled with Biblical teaching doesn’t mean a heart with understanding. Prayer is what produces that.

Someone has rightly said that prayer on the fly captures flies – but not the great issues of life. The old Methodists used to talk about ‘praying through’. We keep thinking that God is like a slot machine; we drop in our quarter, pull the lever, and out should come the answer. It’s never worked like that. If you read the writings of the Pietists, like Ian Watson, or Great Puritan Divines like Matthew Henry, you discover that prayer often is a warfare, and that we have to stay at it “walking by faith and not sight”, and beating on Kingdom doors for our answers; Jesus called it the prayer of importunity; we ask and keep on asking. Few people are willing to go the distance, to really get on their knees and pray fervently for a thing until there is breakthrough. When we’re praying in the will of God for someone to be saved, and two or three years go by, yet it hasn’t happened; don’t stop praying.

Dr. Louie Andrews was my Pastor from the time I was five years old, and we continued to have a relationship long after I was in ministry. This Presbyterian minister prayed for his brother for 30 years. His brother was a consummate alcoholic. He went through two marriages, the loss of many jobs, and he lost the affection of his children. One Sunday morning down in Texas, sitting in a Presbyterian worship service destitute and broken, the light shined through a stained-glass window and Christ spoke to his heart. He was saved and called to the ministry in a moment, he enrolled in Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia and was ordained at age 60. He took a church of about 200 people and in ten years it grew to 9,000. Dr. Andrews, never preached to more than 200, yet he prayed

for his brother and in the autumn season of his life he did great things for God. **Beloved listen to this, we never know how far one obedient prayer will go.**

- 3) **The third thing that I want to lift up is a thought that comes from Charles Stanley, he has written, “Remember the shortest distance between a problem and a solution is the distance between our knees and the floor.”** He actually has a little book called *Problem Solving Through Prayer*. When is the last time you had a nasty problem and you decided to go to God and really pray, then while others were telling you do this and do that, you got a sure word from Heaven and saw that answer with a magnificent clarity? I’m telling you that Dr. Stanley is right on. The shortest distance between a problem and a solution is the distance between our knees and the floor. Why do we hesitate to do that?

Sooner or later we have to examine our own hearts, and ask if we really believe that God will answer our prayers. Let me remind you of the words of the Psalmist, “This poor man, (and the word poor in the Hebrew, in that context, meant wretched man, a struggling man, a broken man, a frequently defeated man) ... this poor man cried and the Lord heard him.” Listen to me carefully. **If God only answered the prayers of perfect people there would be no prayers answered in the Bible.** The Bible says, “Cast all your burdens on the Lord because He cares for us.” God knows how to take our problems from us and give us answers.

- 4) And then I want to remind you of something I have said, I think several times in this study, and the quote itself actually comes from John Wesley, **“God does nothing but by prayer”**, if that is true, and I’m convinced it is, **save yourself from a life of vanity; pray, pray, pray. Christ will not grow Hillside Church by faithful preaching, but by faithful praying.** Promotion from the Lord will not come through hard work, but through prayer. Great understanding of God’s Word doesn’t come just through study, but by prayer. Desperately needed open doors, heretofore closed, are opened through prayer. So often we have not because we have asked not, and then when we did ask, we asked amiss, however, if we’re asking God to do something so that He can be glorified, or it will allow us to glorify Christ, then we need to pray because dreams come true when we pray, platforms of opportunity come to us when we pray, things we never imagined flow towards us when we pray. God does nothing but by prayer.
- 5) **And then the final thing I want to say by way of these sideroads to tonight’s lesson, is that it’s a noisy world.** Ever try to watch a TV program with a bunch of people around you talking and you’re straining to hear? The Bible says “be still and know that I am God.” Prayer requires quiet time. And prayer is not always us talking, but it’s us listening. In my own sermonizing I do what I call the brooding period. I’ll often take a yellow tablet, sit on the floor, close my eyes, and just say, ‘Lord I’m listening’, and I’ll write down thoughts, ideas and insights every time the Lord speaks. Our prayer life will take a quantum leap if we’re willing to tell the Lord that we yearn to see happen in our journey of faith.

Now there's something else that I want to point out, which often mitigates against a life of prayer. And its going to sound very strange; having a zeal which is according to knowledge, we tend to travel at the speed of life thus, we give ourselves to wonderful things with a prayer life that's almost nonexistent. Busyness has become the new Holiness. Without prayer we wear down and not up. **Prayer slows us down redemptively. Through prayer God puts substance into our labors!** That is a nugget if there ever was one. Pause and reflect on that statement.

A few times in my life I've been able to speak to Pastors, and this is what I say ... "The minister who is always available, avails very little." Too often the so-called proverbial tea and crumpets Pastor knows everyone very well, except God. Admittedly I think it's easy to be lazy as a Pastor; you can hide from people and no one will know it if you're smart about it. But I believe that ministry, and the call to ministry is a call to a reflective office. The most important thing a minister can do is pray. Insight into God's Word, a zest for life, genuine love for people, an ability to be unruffled by those who would be our nemesis; to be able to pull back from conflict, to trust God in the day of sudden adversity, to be strong in moments or seasons of loss; or to go forward when adversity advances against us, is all born of prayer. **Prayer gives us the fortifications of God. His defense of our soul is established through prayer.**

Prayer in a minister produces confidence that he stands before his people with a sure word from Heaven; and prayer does the same thing in our lives. Best of all, prayer keeps us from traveling at the speed of life! Satan wants you to run, spin, be over-extended, to be like the proverbial cowboy who jumped on his horse and rode off in all directions at once! Prayer brings focus to our lives. It keeps us on track. It's the cure for anxiety, the secret of peacefulness, and it produces within us a loving heart, and not a pugnacious spirit. **Prayer enables us to contend without being contentious, and to prevail without having to be savage.** For the minister who carries on a strong prayer life, he will not wear down, but he will wear up, and mount up in the Spirit.

I worry about the minister who runs hard with a 'light' prayer life. Heavy engagements require heavy praying. Thorough study without engaging prayer will lead to ambiguity in the presentation, and a fog in the pew. Fervent prayer in the life of a minister, or anyone for that matter, is the best safeguard we have for managing our time wisely. **In fact, fervent prayer is a time saver because through prayer God shows us what's important, helping us to know what needs to be done now, and what can be done later.**

Now let's jump to the Lord's Prayer.

"Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name."

God's name represents all that He is, His character plan and will. To know God's name is to know His character, and thus, to trust in Him. In Psalm 9:10 we read, "Those who know thy name will put their trust in thee, for thou oh Lord hast not forsaken those who seek thee." God's name is seen in His faithfulness.

In the Bible many Old Testament names and titles of God reveal to us a different facet of His character and His will. *Elohim* — refers to God as the creator God, *El Elyon* — possessor of

Heaven and earth, *Jehovah Jireh* — the Lord will provide, *Jehovah Shalom* — the Lord our peace, *Jehovah Tsidkenu* — the Lord our righteousness. Those names speak of God's attributes. In other words, God's names not only tell who He is, but what He is like. Now hear this carefully; **Jesus Christ is God's greatest name.** John 17:6, "I manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world." Everything the Son of God did on earth manifested God's name. Jesus Christ was the perfect manifestation of God's name.

Now you'll notice in this prayer. Jesus taught His disciples saying, "hallowed be thy name"! Hallowed is an archaic English word rooted in the Hebrew word which means to make Holy. Words from the same Hebrew root are translated Holy, saint, sanctify, sanctification, etc. We don't make God's name Holy; His name already is hallowed, as in Holy is your name, your being, your character. And thus, when we pray "hallowed be thy name", we are attributing to God a Holiness that is already His, and which has always been His. To hallow God's name is to revere, honor, glorify and obey Him as singularly perfect.

John Calvin has observed that men should never think or speak of God without the greatest veneration.

- 1) **To hallow the name of God begins in our hearts.** The Word says 'sanctify' the Lord Christ in our hearts. (I Peter 3:15) And again the Word sanctify is rooted in this word hallowed, which in the Greek is *hagiazō*. Note the following; we hallow God's name when we acknowledge that He exists, Hebrews 11:6 says, "He who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is the rewarder of those that seek Him."
- 2) **We also hallow God's name by having a true knowledge about Him.** Discovering and believing truth about God from His Holy Word demonstrates reverence for Him. We cannot revere a God that we do not know. God has revealed Himself in His Word, and while we cannot know God thoroughly, for the finite cannot comprehend the infinite, we can know God truly through His Word. Our true knowledge of God based on His Word is one significant way in which we hallow His name; when you and I do what David did, namely setting the Lord before ourselves continually, drawing Christ into every daily thought, every daily word, every daily action, is to hallow the name of God.
- 3) **Then thirdly, God's name is hallowed when we live in conformity to His will.** To live in disobedience to God is to take His name in vain. When we eat and drink and do everything to the glory of God, that is hallowing the name of our Savior!
- 4) **And then, this final thought; to hallow God's name is to attract others to Him by our commitment.** Jesus commended us to let our light shine before men in such a way that they would see our good works and glorify our Father in Heaven.

Now as a model prayer how might we pray, "hallowed be thy name", given what we've just learned? We might say, 'Father, you are the altogether Holy and lovely one', or we might say, 'Father you have met me in the daily round and magnified your presence to me.' Or, 'Father, you

are righteous and perfect in all of your attributes, dwelling in refulgent glory, and I thank you for all of your perfections.’ Or we might say, ‘Father, how complete my joy is that you’ve honored my witness and brought others to yourself’ — you see in those ways the name of God is hallowed.

One day my late Father-in-law, Dr. Edgar Reid, (went on to Heaven in 1994) pulled into a gas station and as he started to pump gas, the man on the other side apparently couldn’t get his credit card to work, and he let loose with GD this, and GD that ... GD, GD, GD; Dad stepped between the pumps and said to the man, “Did God just do something to you? Apparently, you don’t like Him very much.” And this man said, “I beg your pardon.”, Dad said, “You’re using God’s name in vain, why are you so angry at God?” The man said, “How dare you correct me?” The man scoffed off inside. It was a little convenient store so Dad also went inside and went right up to the same man and said, “Sir, I wish you would just tell me why you curse God so much.” The man grabbed my father-in-law and pushed him over a shelf. He drew his fist up as if he was going to punch Dad in the face. And the man said, “Why do you care if I say, GD, GD, GD?” Dad answered, “Because only that God, that you are cursing, can save you, and He died for you on the cross, so why do you hate Him so?” The man let go of my father-in-law and simply said, “Sir don’t talk to me anymore.” To which Dad replied, “Then talk to God, and start by repenting!” The man quieted himself and walked out.

The proprietor said, “Shall I call the police sir; are you alright?” “Indeed, I am,” said Dad, “I’m perfectly fine. And please don’t call the police. Did you see what I just did? I hallowed the name of God.” Indeed, he did! Indeed!

Here ends the lesson.

Part XIII

The Rest of the Lord’s Prayer

Tonight, we’re going to complete our emphasis on prayer, and it’s my intent to be brief. I’m going to ask you to give thought to what I’m going to share, and then at the end I want us to ask our questions and share our experiences.

It’s never easy to admit that we are deficient in any area. The truth is, prayer is a struggle. My entire ministry I have struggled to cultivate a prayer life that would not leave me feeling guilty. George Barna postulates that the average evangelical Pastor prays less than three minutes a day. I can tell you what that means; that type of prayer life produces little illumination of the Word, diminishes spiritual power, and will not allow us, by faith, to “put on the full armor of God.”

Prayer is how we ready ourselves for battle. The Kingdom of God cannot be taken forward, nor Kingdom purposes for one’s life ... but through prayer. Prayer is how we abide in Christ. Prayer keeps us from running past God’s heart. And here’s something I have never said before, only genuine heartfelt prayer can help us see our hearts as God sees them, because everyman’s

ways are “right in his own eyes”. Prayer produces a focus and delivers us from the folly of getting misspent.

Now let’s jump into the Lord’s prayer. Matthew 6:10, “**Thy Kingdom come**”. Let me begin by saying that the King is inseparable from His Kingdom. When we pray, “Thy Kingdom come”, we are praying that the program of the eternal deity will be fulfilled. The scriptures are unequivocally clear that Christ came to reign as “King of Kings and Lord of Lords”, and right now He is reigning. If He were not reigning, right now, evil would engulf the earth, the natural laws would dissipate, and the hope of eternity put in the hearts of men would not exist.

In the average evangelical believer, the affairs and cares of this world often plow our supreme concern for God’s Kingdom. Every day in the eternal Kingdom of God all things unfold in conformity to the perfect will of God, and that perfect unfolding will, which is done in Heaven, is something that we should covet for this earth. To pray, “Thy Kingdom come”, is in effect to pray for the hastening moment when Christ will be exalted in the consummation of history, and rule and reign as the Son of God with His Kingdom authority. There is a Jewish Talmud which says, “That prayer in which the Kingdom of God is not named, is no prayer at all.” And that my friends, is truth.

Now the Kingdom of this present world which Satan rules, is in complete opposition to God’s Kingdom and God’s people. It’s interesting that the word Kingdom here in the Lord’s prayer (*basileia*) does not refer to a geographical territory, but rather to sovereignty and dominion. If we pray “Thy Kingdom come”, we are in effect praying for God’s rule through Christ’s enthronement to come.

Remember, God’s Kingdom is indeed God’s Kingdom. Now pay attention to this, when we pray, “Thy Kingdom come”, we must keep in mind what Jesus said before Pilate, “My Kingdom is not of this world.” Thus, we do not advance God’s Kingdom by trying to improve human society. There are many wonderful causes that deserve support, but when we do, we are neither building the earthly Kingdom of Jesus Christ, or even bringing it closer.

The Kingdom of God, or of Heaven, runs to the very heart of Christ’s message. You recall “He came preaching the Kingdom of God”. There is no other gospel but the good news of the “Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ.” Jesus was very intent on preaching the message of salvation as the prerequisite for entering the Kingdom. He even stated that He must preach that Kingdom, “for I was sent for this purpose.” (Luke 4:43)

The Kingdom of God comes by way of conversion. We must be born again in order to enter the Kingdom of God, and this Kingdom is of infinite value ... the Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, or a pearl of great price which causes a person to go and sell all that they have in order to buy it. Moreover, the Kingdom of God comes through commitment. All Christians who are truly born from above want God to rule supremely in their lives. A King should have total authority over His subjects. Ours is a democratized consciousness ... those who govern do so with the consent only of the governed, we like it that way in government, and we run our churches that way.

We feel we have a right to vote on everything, and this makes our understanding of the Kingdom very difficult. We are subjects to the eternal King. To put it bluntly, our vote with Him carries no weight. God does not reign by consensus, but by sovereignty. This has radical implications. **First of all, what God says is non-negotiable. Secondly, if we don't bow and submit, we will rebel and be destroyed.** The Kingdom of God is where the will of God is done, and home in Heaven would never be comfortable for those who would like to dispute His directives. To ready ourselves for life in the eternal Kingdom we must certainly know Christ, but we must also learn to be quick submitters.

Notice also the phrase in vs. 10b, **“Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven”**. This statement indicates that God's will is not always done on earth. It is not inevitable. Lack of faithful prayer inhibits God's will being done. In God's economy, fervent prayer is essential to the proper working out of His divine will on earth. Moreover, to be dedicated to doing God's will is, by definition, to be opposed to Satan. And to pray, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven”, is to rebel against the worldly idea that sin is normal, inevitable, and should be tolerated.

Beloved, hear me carefully, impotence in prayer leads us, however unwillingly, to strike a truce with wrong. A genuine Christian view of God, and His plan for redemptive history, presupposes that in the eternal Kingdom God's will unfolds as the supreme delight in glory; and we ought to pray that that same delight will be the believer's present experience. The coming of God's Kingdom, if we dare pray it, will be opposed by men and devils.

There are three distinct aspects to God's will, as this theme is unfolded in the scriptures.

- 1) **First there is the will of purpose.** God's will of purpose is that vast, comprehensive and tolerating will of God expressed in the unfolding of His sovereign plan, and embodies all of the universe, including Heaven, Hell and the earth.
- 2) **Secondly, another aspect of God's will may be called ... God's will of desire.** God's will of desire is not always fulfilled. Jesus greatly desired that Jerusalem be saved. He prayed, preached, healed and ministered among it's poor to that end. But few believed in Him; most rejected Him, and some participated in crucifying Him. Note Luke 13:34, “Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... I wanted to gather your children together just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it.”
- 3) **Thirdly, there is what may be called, God's will of command.** This is for the true children of God, because only they have the capacity to obey. The “will of command” is the ardent desire of the heart of God, that we who are His children obey Him completely and immediately with a willing heart. The Apostle Paul has written, “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?”

The great enemy of God's will is pride. Pride caused Satan to rebel against God, and of course pride does despot to a believer's life. Self will has to be forsaken in order for the will of God to go forward in our lives.

Note this next petition, **"Give us this day our daily bread."** Bread not only represents food but it is symbolic for all of our physical needs. It's amazing to me that God would be concerned about our needs, given the fact that He created the entire universe, and yet He is concerned with singular devotion to our most fundamental needs. This petition reveals that God is most caring, and that His care extends over the totality of our lives. Every time we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread", we're saying something profound about our theology of God. In effect we're announcing that He's not indifferent or remote, but that He is a God intimately concerned for us. The one thing that we cannot say is that God doesn't care, nor can we say, God may care but He won't do anything; for it is impossible for God to know a thing and not act.

Moreover, vs. 12, and **"Forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors,"** Or "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." I love the story of the family with little children. One Sunday afternoon after church and lunch, the children, with neighborhood children, went downstairs to play, these were little four and five-year olds, and apparently, they were playing church. The man's little son had built himself a little makeshift pulpit and had beaten his congregation into submission; so, when this dad came down the steps to the basement, there was his little boy with arms flailing in all directions, leading his little flock in saying the Lord's prayer. "And forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets." That is not too far afield.

As an old wise sage once said, 'He who has never struggled to forgive may not be really alive.' We have an obligation to always forgive, because the Father in Heaven has forgiven us more than we could ever be sinned against and thus, offended. When anyone comes to us in repentance and asks for our forgiveness, I find no basis in scripture for withholding ourselves. Beloved, people are going to put trash in your basket, and have fun doing it. That will leave us wadded up with bitterness growing within, cultivating cynicism and a toxic personality. And the only antidote that can keep that from happening is forgiveness.

Now note vs. 13, **"And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil."** My father was a great athlete, a major track star in High School. But by the time I came along, he was more like the proverbial dough boy of the Pillsbury commercial. We'd be eating and my father would have exhausted himself eating. He used to say he worked out three times a day with a knife, fork, and a spoon. My grandmother would say "Son you're falling off to nothing, here have another pound of cake, and as my dad would look at me reaching his hands to take it, he would say, "I can resist anything but temptation."

It's not sin to be tempted, but it's sinful to give into the temptation. Beloved, "if any man thinks that he stands, let him take heed lest he fall." Temptations are sure to come. Here we must be careful not to boast that we are immune from any temptation, we are not. And when we pray,

"But deliver us from evil",

we are praying to be delivered from the evil one, Satan himself.

Now look at the last phrase, **“For thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever, amen.”** In more modern translations this phrase is a footnote often placed in brackets, because in our most reliable manuscripts this text is not to be found. So, some say it was a later addition. The fact is that it is a magnificent doxology which declares the preeminence of God, affirming that the Kingdom does belong to Christ, and that it’s a Kingdom characterized by great power and glory, for “Christ dwells in refulgent glory”. This reminds us of the sovereignty, the set apartness, and otherliness of our God.

Now note verses 14 and 15.

“If you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” Here’s what it’s not saying. Your salvation, and my salvation, is not conditional on forgiveness. Lots of people get saved and struggle with forgiveness issues their whole life. When I got saved, I didn’t know a thing about forgiveness, and you cannot understand the struggle of forgiveness until you’ve been deeply wounded. The warning here is not to hold stuff in our hearts against people. Do not hold aught against any, because that gives the devil an open door into your soul. A fast forgiver is a fast liver. The quicker we forgive, in other words, the faster we really live. To live an abundant life is to live forgiving those that have sinned against us. If you want your forgiveness with God imprinted on your soul, then forgive others. When people wound us, we have every right to tell them that we’re disappointed or hurt, and if there’s a pattern we must practice detachment. But we must keep the doors open, and even though they may not repent to us, or ask our forgiveness, we have to be careful with our hearts lest they fall to a strong reticence about forgiving, so that we no longer want to forgive; really that’s the corrective here, namely, God against a heart that hates to forgive. We are to cultivate the exact opposite. “In as far as it lies within us, live peaceably with all men.” When we sin, we want the Heavenly Father to give us all that is passed when we ask for it, and the Lord has made provision for us to both ask and receive forgiveness. God doesn’t keep any of us in the doghouse, and we have no right to keep anyone in the doghouse either.

Close your Bibles. One can know all about prayer and not have a prayer life. One can know all about prayer, yet take it very lightly. One can know all about prayer, and yet not truly pray. One can know all about prayer, and not experience the benefits of prayer; but know this, prayer is the cure of many ills, the fast track to sanctification, the best way to open a closed door or prepare a hard heart for Christ. Prayer lifts us up when the world has its foot on our throat, prayer puts our shadows to flight and makes a way when there is no way.

The man who bows to God in prayer will not bow to the demands of men. The praying soul will be a singing soul, having a song in his or her heart. Prayer will stop the hands from shaking and the heart from racing. Prayer that produces a great theology will lead to the best theology. Prayer takes the mind of Christ and puts it on paper. Prayer calms storms, calls forth the resources of Heaven and brings us into the very presence of God. Prayer gives shape to our attitudes and moves our moods beyond the mountains. Prayer takes the power out of our regrets and puts hope into all of our tomorrows. Prayer hotwires us to Jesus Christ; prayer is the stethoscope by which we hear the great heart of God. Prayer brings God near when we have drifted far away, and thus, prayer is the bridge to the great heart behind the universe.

Prayer is endemic to all men. But prayer answered is a privilege of those who only know the God of the Bible. Prayer is for the least worthy and the most broken. It brings victory to the defeated man, hope to the struggling preacher, healing to the rejected, and gives peace instead of anxiety to those who stand on the precipice of life's uncertainties. Prayer says it will be ok when the world says it will be devastating. A strong prayer life will open your eyes to see the strength of Christ and His glory in unparalleled ways. Prayer will bring you to places you never thought possible, to heights unknown and to glories heretofore never experienced. Prayer will put the fragrance of Christ on you, the anointing of the Spirit on you, and deliver the beautifulness of Jesus' heart to you. Become a praying saint, amen.