Lesson 43: What Is Prayer?

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God's provision for our spiritual growth — studied in recent weeks in the topics of baptism and the Lord's Supper — raises a practical question: how do needy sinners draw near to Him? We need more than ***instruction*** about God. We need ***fellowship*** with Him, ***forgiveness*** for our sins, ***help*** in weakness, and ***grace*** to obey. Prayer belongs to this life of dependence. Yet ***familiarity with*** prayer does not necessarily mean ***understanding of*** it.

This is the first of five lessons devoted to prayer. We begin with its nature before considering more fully how Christ teaches us to pray. The catechism gives an integrated definition: believers approach God ***through*** Christ, ***by*** the Holy Spirit. We bring desires governed by ***His will***, with ***faith***, ***confession***, and ***thanksgiving***. This definition both corrects superficial prayer and encourages those who fear that their weakness disqualifies them from praying.

Question 105: What is prayer?

Q. What is prayer?

A. Prayer is an offering up our desires to God, by the assistance of the Holy Spirit, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, believing, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgments of his mercies.

FIRST, "prayer is an offering up [of] our desires to God". It is more than religious speech or inward reflection. In prayer we address the living God, acknowledging our dependence upon Him and presenting what concerns us.

> *Trust in him at all times, O people;*
> *pour out your heart before him;*
> *God is a refuge for us. Selah (Psalm 62:8, ESV)*

The psalm calls God's people to pour out their hearts before Him because He is their refuge. Prayer rests upon ***His*** trustworthiness, not upon ***our*** ability to express ourselves impressively. We may bring grief, fear, perplexity, and longing to Him without pretending that our circumstances are easy or our hearts composed.

Sincerity, however, does not make every desire righteous. We bring our actual desires before God so that they may be ***examined*** and ***corrected***, not merely ***satisfied***. We may honestly acknowledge resentment while asking Him to replace it with love. The God Who ***receives*** our burdens also ***rules*** our hearts.

Prayer therefore involves the whole person. The ***understanding*** attends to God's truth; the ***affections*** respond to His goodness; the ***will*** submits to His authority; the ***body*** carries out our obedience. Words serve this approach of the heart rather than substitute for it. Since ***prayer is worship*** (full stop), it is directed to ***God alone***, not to ***saints***, ***angels***, or ***any creature***. Neglecting prayer means neglecting the refuge He has graciously opened to us.

SECOND, prayer is offered "by the assistance of the Holy Spirit". Bringing our hearts to God exposes how weak and disordered those hearts can be. We need help not only with our circumstances but also with praying about them.

> *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. (Romans 8:26, ESV)*

Paul places this help within the suffering and hopeful waiting of God's children. Believers do not yet see the fulfillment of everything God has promised. We often cannot discern what outcome to request or how to express the burden we carry. The Spirit's assistance meets us in this weakness.

His help is personal and effective. He is not merely a religious influence that makes us feel more prayerful. He intercedes for God's people when their own understanding is inadequate. Paul does not promise that we will always find perfect words, nor does he require us to identify some extraordinary audible experience. His emphasis is upon the Spirit's gracious action, not our verbal achievement.

We must distinguish this assistance from Christ's priestly mediation. Christ secures our access to God through His saving work and continuing intercession; the Spirit helps us in our weakness as we approach. Their ministries are distinct but harmonious. Christian prayer is therefore ***ordinarily*** directed ***to*** the Father, ***through*** the Son, ***by*** the Spirit.[1]

The struggling believer should therefore not wait until prayer feels easy. Weakness is a reason to seek God's help, not a reason to remain silent.

THIRD, prayer seeks "things agreeable to his [God's] will". The desires we bring must be governed by the God to Whom we bring them.

> *And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything **according to his will** he hears us. (1 John 5:14, ESV, emphasis mine)*

John grounds confidence in asking according to God's will. God's revealed will teaches us what to desire: His glory, the advance of His kingdom, forgiveness, holiness, wisdom, and the good of our neighbors. Scripture does not merely furnish ***phrases*** for prayer; it reshapes our ***priorities***.

God has not, however, revealed every detail of His providential purposes. We may earnestly ask for recovery from illness or relief from hardship without claiming that He has promised that particular outcome. ***Confidence*** that He hears His children is not ***certainty*** that He will grant every request in precisely the form they imagine.

> *And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints **according to the will of God**. (Romans 8:27, ESV, emphasis mine)*

This verse continues Paul's account of the Spirit's help, but adds a distinct assurance: His intercession accords perfectly with God's will. ***Our understanding*** may be confused and our desires mixed, but ***the Spirit's intercession*** is neither mistaken nor opposed to the Father's purposes.

Submission is therefore neither fatalism nor a phrase added mechanically to our requests. ***God ordains prayer as a real means through which He accomplishes His purposes.*** We ask earnestly because He commands and welcomes prayer; we submit because His wisdom exceeds ours. We do not pray to alter His eternal decree or persuade Him to become gracious. μὴ γένοιτο! (God forbid!)

FOURTH, prayer is offered "in the name of Christ". Neither sincere desire nor growing obedience supplies the ground of our acceptance before God. Our access rests upon a mediator.

> *In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. (John 16:23, ESV)*

As Jesus prepares His disciples for His departure, He directs them to ask the Father in His name. His coming death, resurrection, and return to the Father establish the setting for their confident approach. They will not be abandoned when His visible presence is withdrawn.

To pray in Christ's name is to approach the Father on the basis of Who Christ is and what He has accomplished. He is the only mediator through Whom sinners have acceptable access to God. His righteousness and atoning sacrifice, not our spiritual performance, ground our confidence.

Using His name is therefore more than adding familiar words at the end of a prayer. Those words ***can*** express genuine faith, but they ***cannot*** make a selfish or disobedient request acceptable. We come under Christ's authority, seeking what accords with His character and purposes.

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1. All three members of the Trinity may properly be addressed in prayer. However, we should be careful to ***distinguish their persons and roles*** when we address or speak about them in prayer.

This corrects both presumption and fear. We cannot invoke Jesus while refusing His rule. Yet we need not withdraw because our prayers are halting or our conscience is burdened. The Father receives His children through His beloved Son. ***We*** are not worthy; we come through the One Who ***is*** worthy.

FIFTH, prayer is offered "believing". Because our access rests upon Christ, we approach with trust rather than treating prayer as an empty religious exercise.

> *"And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith." (Matthew 21:22, ESV)*

Christ's promise, given in connection with the withered fig tree, calls His disciples to genuine confidence in God's power. It must be understood alongside His teaching about the Father's will. Faith is not a force by which sufficiently confident people compel God to give them whatever they desire.

The object of faith is God Himself: His character, wisdom, power, and promises. We may be certain that He is faithful while remaining uncertain whether a particular temporal request will be granted. A sick believer can trust God wholeheartedly without knowing whether recovery will come.

> *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. (James 1:5-6, ESV)*

James addresses believers who need wisdom amid trials. His warning concerns the instability of a divided heart that asks God while refusing to rely upon Him. It is not a condemnation of every anxious feeling or every struggle to understand providence.

Faith can coexist with tears, trembling, and the honest acknowledgment of weakness. Its opposite here is not emotional distress but divided allegiance and distrust of God. We should neither excuse unbelief nor burden suffering Christians with the claim that unanswered prayer proves insufficient confidence. The question is not, "Have I generated enough certainty?", but, "Am I looking to the God Who has promised to hear?"

SIXTH, prayer includes "confession of our sins". Trusting access to God does not remove the need for repentance; it enables us to acknowledge our guilt honestly.

> *I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah*
> *Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. (Psalm 32:5-6, ESV)*

David describes the relief of acknowledging sin rather than concealing it, and the mercy of God's forgiveness. He then directs the godly to seek God. Confession is not an attempt to inform God of what He does not know. It is our agreement with His judgment concerning our sin, joined to a genuine turning from it.

Believers do not repeatedly earn forgiveness or regain justification by confessing successfully. Their righteous standing rests upon Christ. Nevertheless, sin disrupts their communion with God and calls for repentance. Grace gives us reason to come into the light rather than hide.

> *I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules." (Daniel 9:4-5, ESV)*

Daniel begins by acknowledging God's greatness and covenant faithfulness before proceeding into confession of his people's sins. Confession is therefore more than private self-examination. We confess our own transgressions and may also acknowledge the sins of the people to whom we belong. God's faithfulness makes such honesty possible: we seek mercy from the God against Whom we have sinned.

SEVENTH, prayer includes "thankful acknowledgments of his [God's] mercies."
Confession turns us from ***self-justification***.
Thanksgiving turns us from ***entitlement***.
We approach God as recipients of undeserved kindness.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7, ESV)

Paul instructs believers to bring their requests with thanksgiving amid circumstances that provoke anxiety. Gratitude does not require us to deny suffering or feel constantly cheerful. Biblical prayer has room for lament and urgent cries for help. Thanksgiving remembers that present need has not erased God's past and present mercies.

Above all, we remember His mercy in Christ. Forgiveness, adoption, the Spirit's presence, and the hope of resurrection remain grounds for gratitude when circumstances are painful. We may also thank Him for daily provision, the care of His church, and particular answers to prayer.

If our prayers consist almost entirely of requests, this clause calls us to attend to what we have already received. What mercy are we overlooking because our attention is fixed upon an unmet desire? Thanksgiving does not purchase another blessing. It acknowledges that the God from Whom we seek help has already been gracious to us.

Conclusion

This introduction to prayer showed us that it is the dependent approach of God's children ***to*** the Father, ***through*** the Son, ***by*** the Spirit. In coming weeks, we will be continuing the study on prayer by examining the model of prayer given to us by Jesus: the Lord's Prayer.

We bring our actual needs and desires, submitting them to His wisdom rather than making our wishes the measure of His goodness. Christ's mediation gives guilty sinners access; the Spirit's assistance gives weak believers reason to approach. Neither guilt nor weakness should drive us into silence.

105. ***What is prayer?*** Prayer: 1) offers our desires to God 2) with the Spirit's help 3) according to God's will 4) in Christ's name 5) believing 6) with confession 7) and thanksgiving.

These seven clauses describe one integrated life of worship, not a mandatory sequence. Our confidence rests upon God's gracious provision, not our eloquence, emotional strength, or ability to secure a particular outcome.

Take This Lesson With You

1. ***Bring one sinful desire to God in prayer:*** Name a present fear, resentment, or longing that is clearly sinful. Acknowledge what Scripture teaches you to seek in that situation, and ask the Father, through Christ, by the Spirit, to help you be faithful and obedient.
2. ***Let conviction lead to confession.*** Identify a sin in your life plainly, without excuses. Seek mercy through Christ, then let your prayer life issue forth in repentance: apologize, repair harm, or turn from a cherished sinful practice.
3. ***Join an unanswered request to a remembered mercy.*** If you are struggling with an unmet request of God, remember how many times He has shown you mercy and answered your prayers. Read **Romans 8:26-30**, then pray those Scriptures back to God, thanking Him for His goodness and provision.

Christ has opened the way; the Spirit helps us come. Bring your needy heart to the Father.