

Chapter 6

Parts of Prayer No. 3

October 20, 1996

We have considered so far, in our examination of the Bible's doctrine of prayer: prayer's importance in the Christian life as the Bible is always emphasizing that importance; the essential nature of prayer as "earnest and familiar talking with God;" prayer's effect in bringing changes in the world; and now, what we are calling the parts of prayer. We have so far considered adoration and thanksgiving, as the first part, and confession of sin as the second. Now we come to the third, viz. petition.

Most prayers in the Bible have petition in them, not all, but most; I suppose most prayers are primarily petition and even the adoration and confession that may also be found in these prayers is leading up to the petition which is the main point of them. The great pictures of prayer given us in the Bible are perhaps universally representing prayers of petition.

- Abraham for Lot and Sodom;
- Jacob at Peniel ("...until you give me your blessing...");
- Moses on the hill above the battle with the Amalekites;
- Hannah for a child;
- Nehemiah for immediate wisdom;

- Christ in the Garden for the removal of his cup;
- Paul for his churches; etc.

The Lord's Prayer, the model prayer the Lord gave us for our instruction in prayer, is, as well, mostly petitions. The Shorter Catechism breaks it down for us into its six petitions: hallowed by thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; give us this day our daily bread; forgive us our debts; and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

What is more, over and over again in the Bible we are taught, no we are commanded, as well as invited and encouraged, to bring our requests to God in prayer.

Phil. 4:6: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

God, so far from begrudging us our requests, so far from resenting our pestering him daily about every little thing, this constant barrage of requests for favors from him, encourages it, commands it, and, so we learn in the Gospels, received it hours on end, especially late at night, from his only Son.

There is the key, I think. It is his father's heart that makes God so ready and willing to hear his children's requests.

Matt. 7:11: "If you . . . though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

You love for your children to ask things from you that they should get from you — not, of course, for things they ought not to seek from you (esp. things that they are responsible for themselves and so such requests amount to a dereliction of duty) and so it is with God (don't ask him to teach you the meaning of the Bible if by that request you hope to avoid having to read it yourself; or to save a person that you will not speak of Christ to; or to help you kill a sin you refuse to hate or to mortify) — but when they ask you for what they should ask you, if you are a faithful and loving parent, you love

that, and you love to grant their requests and you wish only that you could do more for them than you can! Well so God, though he can do all for them that ever should be done, when his children ask him for what they need.

But, let this be clear, there is no virtue in not asking, as if somehow you imagine yourself to be serving God by not bothering him! King Ahaz, you remember, once refused to ask God for a sign, when Isaiah had told him to, and shrouded his unwillingness to deal with God in a veil of piety: “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.” [Isa. 7:11-12] But that was sin and so it always is when God’s people do not ask God as they have been instructed to ask him, invited and encouraged to ask him, and commanded to ask him. It is like children who don’t bother to ask their parents what they have been told to ask them — how this tool works, how to drive the car, what exactly happens when you use a credit card, how to set the burglar alarm, and all sorts of trouble ensues! Why didn’t you ask me first!

Now, if you ask what may we, what should we ask God for, the Bible, now here, now there, gives us a comprehensive answer.

- daily necessities (daily bread)
- special help suitable to particular occasions (Hannah)
- help for others (pray for one another)
- the kingdom of God (the Lord’s prayer)

Nothing can be too small to ask (“for want of a nail, the horse was lost; for want of the horse the rider was lost; for want of the rider the battle was lost; for want of the battle the war was lost.”) but, on the other hand, the Bible does not give us examples of women kneeling before the Lord to receive wisdom to choose the right outfit for the day or men kneeling and pleading to God for help to play well in some football or basketball game. Indeed, if we were to pray as we ought for the great matters that are regularly set before us for our petition in the Bible, there would be little time and, I think, little inclination to pray for matters that are at any particular time or in any particular circumstance too insignificant.

But, if we are to pray without ceasing, no doubt, a thousand things a day are legitimate subjects for petition. That is what Montgomery meant when

he referred to prayer in his great hymn as “the Christian’s vital breath, the Christian’s native air.”

An anecdote is told of Robert Blair, one of the luminaries of the Scottish second reformation and a close friend of Samuel Rutherford and Marian M’Naught, one of Rutherford’s famous lady correspondents. He was travelling from London to Ireland and wanting to see both of his friends, Rutherford at Anwoth and M’Naught at Kirkcudbright — towns not too far from one another but reached by different roads — but not having time to travel to both places, prayed for direction at the fork in the road, laid the bridle on the horse’s neck and let it have its way. The horse took the road to Kirkcudbright where, when he entered Marion M’Naught’s home, he found her deep in conversation with Rutherford. God answers prayers like that, though, not always! All of us, who have been Christians at prayer for some time, have such stories to tell.

I had time on the plane Friday evening, after getting other work done, to go back and read entries in my diary from some years ago. What struck me over and over again was how many prayers I had recorded praying — for all manner of things — and how many of those prayers had been heard and answered, some in the most direct and striking way, some very definitely, but only the perspective of time made that as clear. One has to keep a record, such as a journal, to remember how many such prayers have been prayed and how often God has answered them wonderfully.

Now, in a previous study we already dealt with the question of prayers power to effect changes in the world. We have not because we ask not. So, it is not that aspect of petitionary prayer that I am chiefly interested in. Rather I want to speak of the effect of such praying itself on us.

Thesis: God has put all our life — its parts, its issues, its circumstances, its purposes — into the life of prayer. Prayer thus becomes the best way to practice of Christian life — not merely in the sense of asking and receiving, but in the sense of the method of that life in every way. Prayer, and petitionary prayer hallows our lives in many different ways, sanctifies them.

This is what Bishop Temple calls “the reflex effect” of prayer, by which the very act of prayer — if sincerely performed — purifies the heart, purges our attitudes and our motives; melts away our self-centeredness and self-sufficiency that we are always bringing to our lives as the sinners that we are. [B29]

Let me show you what I mean.

I. In the first way, it is particularly easy to see that the life of prayer, that petitionary prayer faithfully offered to God about many things every day, must both purify and strengthen our faith.

Prayer is, in the nature of the case, an act of dependence upon God, a turning to God, a looking to God for what he can supply you and you cannot supply yourself.

If we live our lives every day asking God for things, turning to him for help, for aid we are simply putting that faith into action — the belief that God hears and answers, that he rewards those that diligently seek him.

But if we do that a great deal, faith becomes more and more our way of thinking about all our life and all its aspects: God is always near to our active consciousness, his presence, his help always just a prayer away. That conviction changes the way you live in more ways than simply in increasing the number or the fervor of your prayers.

When something happens to you, it becomes your instinct, your immediate tendency to turn to God. Rather than to stew or to be embittered or worried or angered or discouraged by what happens to us hour by hour, it all gets sent to God in petition. What will God do about this; how can he help me with this; what should I ask him in regard to this.

And the man or woman who thinks that way about daily life, is a man or woman who is living by faith!

But that is the reflex effect of prayer in the most obvious sense.

II. In a second way, faithful, frequent, sincere petitionary prayer changes our hearts toward things. It purifies our perspective toward the world.

A good example of this is the prayer that Jesus explicitly taught us to pray: “give us this day our daily bread.”

You see, if you are always praying to God about the material substance of life, about your earning, about the acquiring of things, about your bills and your income, you must finally have a very different and much better, much more godly attitude about all of those things.

Indeed, the Bible says as much in its own commentary on that particular petition of the Lord’s prayer, which we find in the prayer of Agur in Proverbs

30:8-9. Perhaps you have not noticed this before, perhaps you did not realize that this was, in fact, what you were to be meaning when you prayed, as you so often have, “give us this day our daily bread.”

Agur puts the prayer this way:

“... give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal and so dishonor the name of my God.”

And there is the phrase the Savior takes so cryptically up into his model prayer and which any faithful reader of the Bible will recognize as harking back to Agur. That is what you are, in fact, asking God, if you will think about it. Why did he say “for daily bread.” Why not pray for the whole amount right now. Lord, stack it up in a huge pile, and I will come and get some whenever I need it. Lord, in other words, make me rich and I won’t have to bother you about this again. Give me a big house, Lord; a fancy car.

No, you are asking God only for what you need, and need today. You are asking him to give you no more than you need for fear that prosperity might become a snare to you. (Why, after all, does God make so few of his children wealthy, to be beyond worrying about paying their bills?)

No, turning our financial affairs into petitions every day, our material situation into prayer every day, brings those important parts of our lives — so often tempting and so often stumbling blocks to us — under the direct and active judgment of our faith. It is impossible for a real Christian to pray to God to be rich and to enjoy the life of material prosperity and ease. However much we might wish for that in our thoughts, and day-dream about it, we cannot pray for it. We cannot utter those words to a holy God without denying everything we know to be true and everything we deeply and genuinely want for ourselves as Christians. No, by making these matters matters of prayer, we reassert our faith in regard to them, we bring them into submission to the truth, we clarify our minds about those things, we see such musings about riches for what they are, the foolish and dangerous forgetting of the real interests and real blessings of the kingdom of God.

No man or woman who is always praying to God about money and possessions, who is always making them a matter of conversation with God, will

have an unholy view of them. They will, in those many prayers, take their rightful place in the judgment of faith. If God gives you little in answer to your prayer for daily bread, then that is his wisdom for you; if God gives you more, it is his gift to you which you must prove a faithful steward of. But, in any case, having made it a matter of your prayer to God, it is bathed in your relationship to him and the principles and the convictions that belong to that relationship.

III. Then, in a third way, prayer has a reflex effect, namely on our relationships.

When you pray to God for someone, it must finally change the way, purify the way you think about that person. This is, of course, a common recommendation that you will find among spiritually minded people. They have found, through the centuries, and many of you have found, and I certainly have found, that there is no better antidote to the envy, the ill-will, the actual hatred, that you feel for others — especially others who seem to you to be getting more of what you want yourself, or others who in some way displace you or excel you, others who by their goodness or their giftedness or the measure of blessing God has given them seem to make you smaller in comparison. We know, God help us, we all know that we can hate even goodness in another person if that goodness serves to lower us in comparison, or we think and feel that it lowers us in comparison. Ministers know to pray for other ministers! McCheyne: envy is the special sin of the ministry.

General Charles Gordon, the English military hero of the 19th century, the commander of the ill-fated defense of Khartoum, was an eccentric and opinionated man, though also a warm and lively and caring Christian. He had, over the course of his career, the severe temptation of having many people dislike him and seek to undermine his reputation with others, either out of envy or dislike of his Christian principles, or some offense that they felt he had committed against them — after all he was always making decisions that profoundly affected other people. He found his way of dealing with the feelings that inevitably arose in his heart in praying for these people, asking God to bless them. It cleansed and purified his heart toward them. But, what is more, he wrote to a correspondent,

“Do you know, my experience is that if you pray for anyone, that person is sure to like you, let him be ever so much against you at the beginning. . . It is even in a worldly way a good investment.”

[Trench, p.]

Just, imagine for a moment the contrary. Suppose you envy someone here in this church. Suppose for some reason you dislike someone here. Take up that person's name in prayer to God. Now, what shall you pray? You are a Christian, a child of God, a follower of Christ? What shall you say to God about that person, what shall you ask God to do to or for that person?

Can you pray the imprecatory prayer that you have often, if the truth be told, had in your envious and jealous and hateful heart?

“Lord, break the teeth in her mouth; pour out your wrath on her, may her eyes be darkened so that she cannot see, her back bent forever, let her place be deserted, may she be blotted out of the book of life.” [From Ps. 69]

No, you cannot be a Christian a pray that prayer. You know full well what God would think of that prayer and what he would think of you if you dared to come to him with that prayer.

Even to face God in prayer is to recognize immediately how sinful your own spirit is, even to come to God in prayer about this person is to force upon your conscience that you are thinking about this person in a way that is a betrayal of everything Christian — grace, humility, love, forgiveness — that you are thinking about another in a way that God deserves to think about you, but he did not and so you cannot.

And even to come to prayer about that person is to force you to speak to God in the terms that ought to be also controlling the thoughts of your heart. And so you now, because you must, ask God to bless that rival of yours — who probably doesn't even know that he or she is a rival —, to do her good, to bless and keep her and make her happy, and make you to love her and to be a blessing to her.

Now, can you see what praying daily for everyone in your circle would do for the relationships of your life — your prayers would lay you under obligation to think about those people and to treat those people in keeping with what you have said about them to God. You cannot ask God to bless them and then curse them yourself! Praying for them cleanses the heart toward others. It is the best possible antidote to envy and ill-will.

How like our God, that just to speak with him about the important matters of our lives, clarifies our thinking, purifies our motives, deepens our affections, and kills our self-love. This is the reflex effect of prayer and it is as important an effect in any true Christian life as is the effect of specific petitions being heard and answered. This is really more what is meant, I think, when the Bible refers to David, for example, as a “man of prayer.” He was a man upon whom prayer left its mark in many ways.

May it leave its mark on us. But it will not, unless we are praying daily, often, about everything.