

# Chapter 12

## December 1, 1996

We are considering the various “qualifications” or “characteristics” of true prayer, prayer that prevails with God. That is, those things that the Bible says must be true about an individual prayer, or about our prayers in general, if we wish for our prayers to be heard. We have so far considered a) perseverance/importunity; b) “in the Spirit;” and c) prayer “in Jesus’ name.”

Tonight we go on to consider prayer that is *according to God’s will*.

In 1 John 5:14 we read: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he will hear us.”

Now, we might think that what John meant was that prayer should be offered *in the right way*, that is, if we pray the way we have been taught to pray we will be heard. But comparison with other texts suggests another interpretation.

Remember how often we found in John’s Gospel the Lord’s saying that we would be heard if we prayed *in Jesus’ name*. And we took that to mean praying as Christ’s representatives, acting in our prayers in Christ’s spirit and for Christ’s purposes. But that kind of praying, that spirit of praying surely implies subjection to the will of God. If we want what Christ wants, then, in our prayers, we want to be subject to his will, advancing his will, desiring that his will should be done. No one can pray in Christ’s name without such a desire.

And, had we any doubt about that interpretation of the phrase “according to his will” it is put to rest by the example of Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night of his betrayal.

*Read: Mark 14:32-36.*

Luther calls the Lord’s words, “Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me” “the most astonishing words in the Bible.” [Whyte, Lord Teach us to Pray, p. 134.]

And we can well understand his astonishment. All the three years of the ministry the Lord Jesus made it clear, at least to his disciples, that the Son of Man had come not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. And through the last year of the ministry, this point, this intention, this prospect, this single purpose of his life and work had been a chief matter of conversation with his disciples. From the Mount of Transfiguration onward through the Perean ministry —as the Lord made his way slowly southward to Jerusalem— the Lord set his face toward Jerusalem and talked often and pointedly about his going to the capital, his falling into the hands of the Jews, his being crucified and then rising again. They did not understand what he was saying, they were prevented from understanding, but their failure owed nothing to any failure on Jesus’ part to tell them plainly what he was about and what was going to happen to him and why.

What is more, that very night, as he celebrated the Passover with his disciples in an Upper Room in Jerusalem, just across the valley from Gethsemane, where now he lay prostrate before his Father in Heaven, in his terror sweating as it were great drops of blood, he had told his disciples once more what was to happen — his betrayal, his execution, his resurrection and his ascending to the Right Hand.

For him now to ask out of his ministry, to request that he be released from the charge for which he had come into the world, to plead to be spared from the stripes and the agony and the death which were the whole purpose of his life, to ask that he be allowed not to do what he himself has said it was his life to do for these many years, seems very strange to us.

Indeed it has seemed so strange to some commentators — who see how firmly fixed in Jesus’ mind has been his coming suffering and death for the three years of his ministry and how that conviction has grown still stronger through the last year, that they cannot imagine that Jesus would ask to

be exempted from the great purpose of the incarnation — that these men propose another way of taking Jesus prayer: “Take this cup from me.”

Our own Dr. Buswell, good and wise man that he was, joined with the men who have felt Jesus could not possibly be asking to be released from his duty as the Savior of the world. He must be asking for something else.

Dr. Buswell writes:

“I am personally convinced that the ‘cup’ from which Jesus asked to be delivered in Gethsemane was physical collapse and death in the garden before he reached the cross. [The Gospels emphasize the near physical collapse of the Lord at that moment.] My suggestion is that our Lord Jesus Christ, finding Himself in this physical state of extreme shock, prayed for deliverance from death in the garden, in order that He might accomplish his purpose on the cross.” [II, 62]

In favor of this interpretation of the Lord’s prayer in the garden Dr. Buswell reprises the point I made before, about the Lord’s consecration of himself to death for the salvation of his people, how clearly he saw this as his purpose and calling and how determined he was to fulfil his life’s great work. And then he says, “I cannot imagine his shrinking back from the cross. Many courageous men, even wicked men, have faced cruel death without flinching.” But, then, what did Jesus mean by saying, “But not my will, but thine, be done”? Dr. Buswell can only, rather feebly in my judgment, offer this:

“Jesus of course knew that God’s plan of redemption could not ultimately fail, but having chosen to keep his active consciousness within the horizon of human experience, he expressed perfect willingness that the inscrutable will of the Father should be done even though it might include the apparently frustrating experience of collapse in the garden.” [II, 65]

In other words, Jesus is saying, “if I’m going to collapse here in the garden I’m sure that won’t finally prevent me from going to the cross and accomplishing my people’s redemption.” Which, I think, turns one of the most wonderful, powerful, and dramatic moments in human history into something so banal as scarcely needs to be reported.

But, it has seemed to most Christians and most theologians and commentators who revere the Bible that the totally unexpected prayer of Jesus is exactly the point of the Lord's cry in the garden. The fact that he prayed a prayer that is completely unexpected carries the meaning and the terrible significance of this horrible moment in our Savior's life. The death he was facing no man had ever faced before or ever would! As Luther put it, no man ever feared death as this man. "Because it was not the physical torment that he was fearing [vs. Dr. B] — but the guilt of his people being poured into his soul and the wrath of God, the infinite and eternal wrath of God being poured into it after. We have no idea what this meant for him, sinless as he was, in such unbroken and intimate fellowship with his Father as he had always lived.

The cross is sharp, but in thy woe,  
it is the lightest part;  
Our sin it is that pierces thee,  
and breaks thy sacred heart.

His prayer is the most powerful imaginable demonstration of the horror of his death — that after all of this pointing toward it he would flinch now — and, therefore, of the majesty of that love and obedience that led him to it for our sakes nevertheless!

Well, wonderful to contemplate the gospel, Christ for us, for just a few moments. But, our interest this evening is in the last sentence of the Lord's prayer in the Garden, "Yet not what I will, but what you will."

Here is the Lord *subjecting his prayer, his petition* to the will of God. He is very definitely asking for one thing — to be spared the death of the cross and God's wrath against our sin —, and then, very clearly, he acknowledges that such a request God may not be able or willing to grant and, if that be so, he defers to God's perfect will. At the last, his ultimate interest is in the pleasure of God, advancing his will, bringing him glory, and, here he acknowledges that the way he is proposing may not best do that and, if so, then he wants God to know that he surrenders his petition and does so willingly.

What is most striking about this subjection of his own will to his Father's, of course, is that it concerns a petition of supreme importance to him, a matter of personal desperation. It is one thing to say "thy will be done" if

we are praying for things of no great personal interest to us — the financial support of a missionary we barely know, the progress of the gospel in some place we've never been, the healing of a member of the congregation whom we do not know well, etc. *It is another thing altogether to subject your will to God's concerning something you are desperate that he give you.*

No wonder then that the great example of this subjection in prayer is found in the most desperate prayer that has ever been prayed in all the world, for that one thing that no one has ever wanted as much as it was wanted by the one who prayed for it. Still he said, "Not my will, but thine be done!"

Now, that it is right to pray this way is not so difficult to demonstrate. It is a simple application of several facts that any Christian should readily acknowledge:

1. The sovereignty of God. God does what pleases him in heaven and on earth and orders all events according to his perfect counsel and plan. In giving us freedom and making promises to prayer God did not hand over to us the running of the universe!
2. The wisdom of God. We do not presume, no Christian can presume to know better than God what ought to be. We can see so little; he sees everything in its connections with everything else. Is there anyone here, who has been a Christian for any length of time, who cannot look back on prayers he prayed that now he is glad were not answered. "Lord, make her love me!" "Lord, give me that job."
3. Our own frailty and sinfulness. We do not know what to ask for, Paul said, and what a world of honest reckoning with our natures, even our reborn natures, there is in that remark. We do not know — we are so finite, and, much more, we are so sinful that the only truly appropriate attitude for ourselves when we come to petition, especially for ourselves, is a certain measure of self-doubt, of modesty, by which we come to God ready to acknowledge that in our foolishness and selfishness and finitude we may well ask for what is not in our best interests or that of God's name.

Calvin puts it this way in his comment on 1 John 5:14:

“For although God has promised to do whatever His people ask, He does not permit them the unbridled liberty of asking whatever comes into their heads, but has laid down for them a law of proper prayer. And, indeed, nothing is more useful for us than this bridle. For if each of us were allowed to ask what he liked, and if God indulged our wishes, it would be in our worst interests. For we do not know what is for the best. Nay, we seethe with depraved and harmful desires.”

So much of what brings the best and the deepest to life in our souls is just exactly that we do not have and do not get what we want! Is that not so?

Now, if we believe all that, we will agree with P.T. Forsyth’s perceptive comment about the Lord’s “thy will be done.”

“‘Thy will be done’ was no utterance of mere resignation; though it has mostly come to mean this in a Christianity which tends to canonize the weak instead of strengthening them. As prayer it was a piece of active co-operation with God’s will. It was a positive part of it. It is one thing to submit to a stronger will, it is another to be one with it. We submit because we *cannot* resist it; but when we are with it we *cannot* succumb.” [The Soul of Prayer, 83.]

You see, there are those who argue that to say “thy will be done” at the end of a prayer is nothing but weak faith. People who pray that way are just hedging their bets. They have no real confidence that God answers prayers, or at least that he answers their prayers. But that mistakes the place of faith in prayer. You do not get from God because of the strength of your faith, as if, if you *really believe you are going to get it* you will (the way some of the prosperity preachers put it). “If you have faith the size of a grain of mustard seed...” It is not the subject of our faith — ourselves and the strength of our desire (as the TV preachers think) — but the object of our faith, God in Christ which brings the answer to our prayers!

We are praying to Almighty God, after all, the Holy God, the God of infinite wisdom, goodness, and love. Do we really think we are in a position to advise him as to the best course to take with our lives or anyone else’s?

Does any Christian here with a conscience really think that his life would be more of what it should be, of what God wants it to be, of what we ultimately want it to be, if God had answered some of the prayers we have prayed to him. Can we say that we trust our hearts, our motives, our level of commitment to God to know that what we have asked for would certainly be wise and right and that we would do with that blessing something fine, that we would be made better than now we are? If so, what are we confessing about God: that he either is sometimes not as wise as we are or that he doesn't really love us as much as Christ in Gethsemane would seem to suggest?

But now, think some more about this characteristic, this qualification of prayer. And especially ask yourself this: why do hear Jesus' saying, here in the garden, "not my will, but thine be done," but not saying the same thing in the Upper Room when he prayed his high-priestly prayer to the disciples and the church.

He did not there ask the father to make his church one, and then quickly add, "but not my will, but thine be done." And that is so even though the church is not one and there are divisions everywhere! But, of the will of God in that sense he does not speak.

We might well say, "not my will, but thine be done" as we pray for a certain outcome in a particular dispute and division among Christians. We cannot know what God's purposes may be and what they ought to be in any particular case. We see what we would like to see happen and think ourselves would be good to have happen. But, then, we are unlikely to know if in this particular case, there must be division, as Paul once wrote, to show who the true believers are.

But, in general, to pray for the unity of the church does not require the qualification of Gethsemane, because God has told us that he is gloried by that unity and that it is his wish that his people be one.

This is what led older writers to distinguish between the way we are to pray for certain things and the way we are to pray for others. Here is Jeremy Taylor:

"For spiritual blessings let our prayers be particularly importunate, perpetual, and persevering; for temporal blessings let them be generally short, conditional, and modest." [In Whyte, Shorter Catechism, p. 203.]

That is not an absolute rule. Cf. Hannah praying for a child. But it is a wise principle to observe. Some things you can beg God for without reserve or qualification. Concerning other things you cannot have the same certainty that they are unqualified blessings and advances on the glory of God.

Remember this: We pray, in the model prayer Christ himself taught us, “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” If we really mean that, we cannot then pray, Lord do what *I* want you to do, no matter what!

Now, I don’t say that it is easy to maintain all of these convictions and attitudes in a happy balance in the heart as we pray. We often lurch from one to another — pleading with God to *do what we ask; we must have it* to remembering that his will must be right and best: that he is our heavenly father, and that, as C.S. Lewis puts it,

“prayer is request [and] the essence of request, as distinct from compulsion, is that it may or may not be granted and if an infinitely wise being listens to the requests of finite and foolish creatures, of course he will sometimes grant and sometimes refuse them” [B29].

But let me close with what I think is an illustration of the right kind of mind and attitude in prayer in regard to the will of God.

It comes from the Memoirs of Thomas Boston and concerns the illness on two separate occasions of his daughter Jane. The illness of his children, remember, was a particularly frightening trial for Boston. He lost six of his children when they were young!

Jane was his most spiritually precocious daughter. He tells the story, at another point in the Memoirs of when she was just a little girl. A boy came to the house begging. His speech was so poor that Mrs. Boston, with a smile, had had to ask him to repeat what he had said. Jane was looking on the scene with tears, as later asked her mother “Mother, did God make that laddie?” “Yes, my dear,” came the reply. Then Jane replied, “Will he not be angry at you for laughing at him? for my book says, ‘He that mocketh the poor reproacheth his Maker.’ Jane, just a little girl, was the one in the family most concerned to get the boy some decent clothes. [—some very very, spiritually sensitive].

At any rate, years later Boston had left his daughter Jane in Edinburgh and

had worried about leaving her because she had a bad cold. Then word came that she was dangerously ill with a high fever. What made matters worse was that Boston had himself fallen spiritually a day or two before the news of Jane's illness reached him. [His 'besetting sin' in the Memoirs. This is a case of it. Here he speaks of "being attacked with a certain temptation, which often has been ruining to me..." What? Sexual? Bitterness toward God? Speech?] But now he fears that Jane may be suffering for his sin!

Now, listen to Boston:

"It was ground of comfort, that the Lord had begun early to deal with her soul... At five o'clock I took my horse, and journeyed all the night. Many thoughts about her went through my heart like a arrows, while I was by the way; but still I held firm by this, that whatever the Lord should do in her case, it would be well done, it would be best done, and my soul would approve it as such. And the faith of this was my anchor." [p. 313]

*To think, you see, God may not answer his prayers, and she may be suffering in part for his sin!* Well, when he got to Edinburgh she was better. And so he writes,

"I was often made to thank my God, for the kind rebuke he had given me; for while he smote with the one hand, he embraced with the other."

Well, not long thereafter, Jane came down with small pox and a particularly bad case of it. He prayed for her — this was a man of prayer! — and, while he was praying for her, and when her illness was so grave it seemed that she would die,

"awful impressions of the sovereign God sitting on his throne in the heavens, having the matter in his hand wholly, to turn it what way he pleased, were seasonably, by his grace, fixed on my spirit, commanding me silently to wait the issue. And that word, Psalm 85:12, 'The Lord shall give that which is good' was the word I was led to for resting in, during the long time of her illness. When the worst was past on the Monday after, new straits arose, and

I was plunged in difficulties, but deliverances came, which were sweet *as the answers of particular petitions to the Lord.*”

Do you see it: urgent prayer for particular mercies, all the while supported by the conviction of the sovereignty of God whose love and goodness make his will perfect for us no matter what!

This is the balance spiritual and godly men and women achieve. Here is one more of them, Alexander Moody Stuart [Memoir, p. 211]. He is speaking of prayer for things we desperately want, prayer when we are in great need and want. And this is his advice, his way of explaining what it means to *pray* but to pray *according to God’s will*.

“The way I always take in such cases is to look steadfastly at it [that is your circumstance; your need; your pain, your longing; your lack, whatever it is] in its most terrible issue [i.e. the child will die; I will never be granted this blessing I seek; etc.] as what the Lord threatens; then to bow down beneath this as what we can’t avert, and what *we* deserve. . . then to plead as earnestly as if the [issue] depended on our prayer, and on nothing else whatever—as if our prayer were. . . life and our silence. . . death. Oh what answers the Lord gives us when so enabled to pray, and what entrance into the heart of his love, and how blessed the result whatever it may be.”