

Chapter 14

December 15, 1996

We have been considering the “characteristics” or “qualifications” of true prayer as we can collect them from the various statements of Holy Scripture touching what must be true of prayer for it to be heard by God. We have so far said that prayer must be: a) importunate/persevering; b) in the Spirit; c) in the name of Christ; d) according to God’s will; and, last week, e) prayed in faith and with expectation of being heard. Tonight we will consider the last of these qualifications. [I should say, of course, that other things might be added to this list of characteristics or qualifications that we will consider later in our series in connection with other issues: posture, fasting, privacy for personal prayer, and the like. It is merely an editorial choice to put such subjects in one place or another in a study of prayer.]

Tonight I want to consider the importance that is attached in Holy Scripture to praying *with right motives*. Of course, the other characteristics we have so far considered bear on this subject powerfully as well, I know that. But the Scripture draws specific attention to this way of thinking about true prayer, and so must we.

It is a point made many times and with great emphasis in the Bible.

I. Read: James 4:1-4

The point is made explicitly. We are not to suppose that God will hear our prayers if we intend to use the blessing we seek from him for sinful purposes;

if we intend to take his kindness and offend him with it!

II. Read: Isaiah 1:10-17

Comment: Note striking address of *Israel* as Sodom and Gomorrah. Some critics have taken this to be a protest against sacrificial worship, as indication that Isaiah favored a more ethical religion (like modern Protestant liberals!). But, then, prayer goes too! He is not criticizing sacrifices, but sacrifices performed only to protect the liberty of sinning! This is the man who sows his wild oats Monday through Saturday and then goes to church on Sunday to pray for crop failure! (Billy Graham)

III. Another way of making the same point about motives in prayer is the frequent connection between penitence and prevailing prayer.

1. Psalm 66:18: “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.”
2. Luke 18:9-14: The parable of the Pharisee and Publican praying in the temple. One prays “Lord, I thank you that I am not like other men: robbers, evil doers, adulterers, even this tax collector here. I fast twice a week and pay a tithe of all I get.” The other, the tax collector, standing back and with his head bowed, prays, “Lord, have mercy upon me, a sinner.”

The parable ends with words that mean, in effect, the Lord heard the tax collector’s prayer but not the prayer of the proud Pharisee.
3. Mark 11:25 (with parallels): “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

Clearly, the point is not that you must be without sin to be heard, but that you must regret yours sin, hate them, seek to turn from them for God’s sake, and seek their forgiveness, if your prayers are to be heard. Otherwise, you are asking God to bless you, to give you some favor while saying to him — for he can see your heart when you pray — but don’t imagine that I have any interest in your holiness or your pleasure in my life. Give me forgiveness but don’t expect me to forgive others whose offenses against me are infinitely

less grave than mine against you. Just give me what I want and leave me alone to do what I please. That is prayer with wrong motives!

Remember now, people can pray *very earnestly* and *very importunately* with wrong motives! They may want something very badly and be theologically aware enough to know that God alone can give them what they want, yet still have no interest or intention to submit their hearts and lives to God. One can even pray with a religious zeal and interest in certain laudable, commendable outcomes, but still, himself, have no intention of surrendering his sins to God.

Before going any further, let me say, as an aside, that one perfectly unavoidable implication of this teaching about prayer is that God does not hear the prayer of the wicked, the unbelieving and the impenitent. Do you remember a few years ago Dr. Graham getting into some hot water in the press, both secular and Christian, for his answer to the question (when anti-semitism was much in the news): does God hear the prayer of the Jew. I cannot now even remember exactly what Dr. Graham said, probably something by which he sought to dodge the trap being laid for him without compromising the truth. But, in any event, of course God “hears” everyone’s prayer if by “hear” we mean, knows that it is offered and knows what has been said to him. But that isn’t what is meant by God’s “hearing” prayer! When God is said to “hear” a prayer, we mean he “answers” it! [In fact, you will find that most places where the KJV has “hear” as in “the Lord will hear a cry or a prayer,” the newer versions read “answer.” e.g. Ps. 20:6] He accepts it as a plea from one of his children whose prayers he has promised to answer. And, clearly, by this principle of motives and by the explicit teaching of Scripture the prayer of the unbelieving and impenitent God does not hear.

Isa. 16:10: “When Moab appears at her high place, she only wears herself out; when she goes to her shrine to pray, it is to no avail.”

Hosea 11:7: “My people are determined to turn from me. Even if they call to the Most High, he will by no means exalt them.”

Zech. 7:13: “When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen.”

Against the sentimentalism of modern culture, with its denial of the holiness and wrath of God, the Scripture leaves us in no doubt that a refusal on

the part of any man to bow before God in the matters of life and salvation renders his prayers worse than pointless, but a positive offense to God. Such prayer amounts to one of God's mere creatures acknowledging and refusing him at one and the same time.

No! No! In the Christian view of human life it is *motive*, it is intention, it is purpose that is everything! God looks on the heart. This was a special emphasis of the Lord's teaching. Much of the problem with the Scribes and Pharisees' religion could not be uncovered by an examination of their acts themselves. Jesus was always calling attention to *the reason* they did things: they fasted and prayed so as to be noticed, they opposed Jesus out of envy, they dedicated things to God so that they wouldn't have to give them to their parents, etc. Now that was inflammatory, because, of course, no one can see into another's heart and the Pharisees denied that they had such unworthy motives and bitterly resented the suggestion — just as almost everyone does today. But Jesus knew and wise people can tell today in many cases that people often do even good things for base motives.

Base motives can still be powerful to produce remarkable things: religious zeal, heroism in battle, a trip to the moon.

Winston Churchill didn't even hesitate to tell his mother in letters home from the war in Cuba that he hoped to be brave and heroic in battle so that he could win a medal that he could then wear when he went to parties back home in England. Suddenly his heroism seems tawdry.

In Modern Times, — a book that all of you ought to read, a history of the modern world — Paul Johnson records this conversation in the White House two days after the Russians had launched the first man into space:

“Is there anyplace where we can catch them? What can we do? Can we go around the Moon before them? Can we put a man on the Moon before them?... Can we leapfrog? If somebody can just tell me how to catch up! Let's find somebody, anybody. I don't care if it's the janitor over there, if he knows how.” [p. 629]

Later he said to V.P. Johnson, “Is there any other space programme which promises dramatic results in which we could win?” A few weeks later the Apollo program was announced. We went to the moon to show up the Russians! Now, that was a wonderful achievement, but the motive that lay

behind it, the reason the program was begun at all, was pride and a hungering for political prestige. So it is in human life everywhere all the time — the motives lying behind human deeds are often corrupt even when the deeds themselves are not unworthy. But those motives can be powerful and can even lead a person to pray, a religious person to pray often and an irreligious person to pray when he finds himself in a foxhole with bullets whizzing about his head.

But here is the searching demand of biblical holiness — for any act, any word, even any thought to be good, the goodness must go down all the way to the motives.

“Search me O God and know my heart, try me, and know my thoughts. See if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

There is a man who knows that to be holy he must be holy down in the secret springs of his life. In a way it is not too much to say that “motives” are the true meaning and the true glory of human life. The stars and the moon move and serve useful purposes but they have no motives. The birds and the animals live and move and have their being, they have instincts and drives, but they do not have motives, purposes that can be measured morally and ethically. Only man can enter into his Master’s mind and understand the rights and wrongs of behavior and can act either with one purpose or another, choose to do something, to be something, for one reason or for another.

Now we cannot see the motives of another person, though we can sometimes discern them. We can’t even see our own, most of the time, at least not completely and accurately. C.S. Lewis wisely wrote:

“Humans are very seldom either totally sincere or totally hypocritical. Their moods change, their motives are mixed, and they are often themselves quite mistaken as to what their motives are.”
[Letters to an American Lady, p. 97]

But that does not mean that the Lord cannot and we cannot discern a difference between true and false motives, however imperfect our motives may be. We never do an entirely sinless thing, but that does not mean that Christians cannot live righteous and obedient lives, as the entire Scripture affirms. Perfection and genuineness are not the same thing in the spiritual life.

And that is of very great importance because, as I said, God looks upon the heart.

For I am ware it is the seed of act
God holds appraising in his hollow palm;
Not act grown great thence as the world believes,
Leafage and branchage vulgar eyes admire.

God judges our acts as wholes, motives, attitudes, manner, and behavior itself as all one entire thing, for that is how he made us and that is what righteousness or sin is to him. And the holier a man or woman becomes, the more painful and the more important this fact becomes. While others admire him or her for all the behavior, the faithfulness, the kindness, the reverence, the honesty, the discipline, the hard work that can be seen, he or she sees more and more clearly down into that mixture of motives and those base and unworthy motives that cling to so much of what is done.

It was just such a man, William Beveridge, who wrote of himself,

“I cannot pray but I sin: I cannot hear or preach a sermon, but I sin: I cannot give an alms or receive the sacrament, but I sin: nay, I cannot so much as confess my sins, but my confessions are still aggravations of them. My repentance needs to be repented of, my tears want washing, and the very washing of my tears needs still to be washed over again in the blood of my Redeemer.”

But, then, what of us when we come to pray. Are our motives, when we bow before God to beg a blessing from him, are our motives right and pure before the God who looks upon the heart? When we bow down and call out, “Holy Father,” do we love that holiness in our deepest hearts and therefore seek it for ourselves by might and main? When we pray for our daily bread, are we seeking only that provision of life that is necessary that we might worship and serve our God, or do we long to make our home in this world and to enjoy its pleasures even at the expense of the will of God? And, above all, when we confess our sins to him in prayer and seek his forgiveness, do we do so fully committed to never committing that sin again, or do we confess, if the truth be told, while laying plans for our next transgression?

Well, every Christian must admit that his motives are far too mixed. That much as he wants all and only that which God wants for him and in him, there is also in, under, around, and through those pure and holy motives those that are impure and unworthy, selfish and carnal.

But, here is the paradox. The Christian who sees most clearly the necessity of right motives, who mourns most deeply the impurity of his own motives when he comes to pray, is the Christian who will pray with right motives, or what the Bible calls right motives — not perfect, no doubt still sinfully mixed — but right and holy nonetheless. That Christian will also often be found in his prayers asking that he might pray with purer motives and live with purer motives, because he knows that God looks upon the heart, and he wants to honor and please his God, who has been so gracious and so forgiving to an ill-motivated hypocrite like himself!

Here again we are before the reflex blessing and effect of prayer. We bow down before God, and, if we are serious in our prayer, we come face to face, we cannot help but come face to face with our motives, and in that encounter, painful and shameful as it must so often be, true godliness and holiness are born!