

“Our Lord at Prayer”

John 17:1-5

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Text Comment

What we have in the chapter we begin to read this morning is the *Lord's* prayer. What we commonly *call* the Lord's prayer is a prayer that the Lord Jesus taught his disciples to pray. That prayer, which we prayed this morning, would really better be called “the disciples' prayer that the Lord taught them.” So far as we know, he did not use that prayer himself, though, no doubt, he prayed similarly, for that Lord's Prayer is very much like the typical Jewish prayers of the period and includes petitions that are found in many other places in the Bible. But, for example, he had no sins to confess and so could not have prayed, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” In fact, nowhere in the Gospels do we find the Lord praying *with* his disciples. He taught them to pray; he spent whole nights in prayer himself, but we never find him praying with or alongside his disciples. [Cf. Marcus Rainsford, *Our Lord Prays for his Own*, 31] Indeed, very soon after praying the prayer recorded here in John 17, he would go off by himself in the Garden of Gethsemane to pray alone. Apparently he usually prayed alone. But the prayer in Gethsemane, of all the prayers he prayed during the years of the ministry, was too intimate and concerned things too terrible and too terrifying to be overheard. He would, of course, ask his disciples to pray too, while he was at prayer, but they would fall sleep instead.

But here, first, we have his own prayer. And clearly he prayed it aloud so that his disciples could hear him pray to his Father in heaven. And, as the NIV editors indicate by their paragraph headings, the prayer he prayed has three sections: one in which he prays for himself, one in which he prays for his disciples, and one in which he prays for believers yet to be. In many ways, John 17 is a specimen of that prayer that Jesus prays still today for us, now at the Right Hand of the Father. The Scripture teaches us that Jesus ever lives to pray or make intercession for his people. Well, this prayer in John 17 is a specimen, and tells us what sort of things he prays for on our behalf.

What is more, the entire prayer is something of a summation of the Gospel of John to this point. Its themes include Jesus' obedience to his Father, the glorification of the Father through the death and exaltation of the Son, the revelation of God to the world and to his people through Jesus Christ, the choosing of the disciples from out of the world, the mission of the Gospel still to come and others still to be brought to faith in Christ, and the final destiny of believers to behold the glory of God and to share fellowship with the Father and the Son in heaven. [Carson, 551] All of this is in the Lord's prayer to his Father and all of it was obviously on his heart that night as the hours in the Upper Room with his disciples came to their end. It sums everything up just before the account of the passion of the Lord properly begins in chapter 18. So, there is a great deal of the entire gospel in this chapter and in this prayer the Lord Jesus prayed. No wonder that it should be this chapter that John Knox tells us made him a Christian. On his deathbed he told his wife to read this passage, saying to her, “Go read where I cast my first anchor.” [J. Ridley, *John Knox*, 24]

- v.1 Interestingly, rarely in the Gospels are we given the content of Jesus' prayers. We are only told that he did pray. But in John, on three occasions we are told what he prayed, and in each case, clearly he intended to be overheard. In fact, in regard to his prayer at Lazarus' tomb he himself said to his Father in heaven, "I said this for the benefit of the people standing here." (11:42) Well, so with this prayer.

And did you notice that eye-witness detail, "he looked toward heaven and prayed." In our supposed spiritual-mindedness we might think, "Well, you don't have to look up to pray to God. You can address him in your mind and heart no matter what your body is doing." And, of course, that is true, so far as it goes. But the great men and women of prayer in Holy Scripture and in Christian history did not despise the significance of the outward motion or attitude and used it to strengthen the focus of the heart. Moses raised his hands and eyes heavenward; Daniel knelt toward Jerusalem and prayed. And here Jesus looked upward to pray. All the arguments for kneeling and standing to pray are compacted in that little note: "he looked toward heaven and prayed."

He addressed God as "Father" here and several other times throughout the prayer; "Holy Father" in v. 11; and "Righteous Father," in v. 25.

As you have guessed by now "the time has come" is the NIV's translation of "the hour has come;" the hour that for so long in the Gospel had not yet come, but now is upon the Lord, the hour of the consummation of his work, the hour of his being lifted up on the cross.

- v.2 A strong statement of discrimination like others we have already encountered in the Gospel and still others to come in this same prayer. He has authority over all people that he might give life to those the Father gave him.
- v.3 Eternal life is not unending existence *per se*. It is the personal knowledge of the personal God and of his son, Jesus Christ. This is the knowledge of fellowship, of relationship, of love. In this world we have learned that it is blessing and happiness to know certain people. How much more to know the Living God!
- v.5 When the Son came into the world he laid aside his glory. People did not recognize him as the Living God. But that glory will be returned to him upon his resurrection and ascension. The Lord is clearly conscious of the impending events that are to overwhelm him, but he looks forward to them here with confidence, hope, and even "the joy that is set before him."

As we said, there are great riches in this prayer. Since the 16th century it has been common to refer to this prayer as the Lord's "high priestly prayer" both because of the way in which in the prayer he consecrates himself to the sacrifice he is about to make for the salvation of his people and because of the intercession he makes in the prayer for his people. Both praying for God's people and offering sacrifices for them are the work of a priest and Jesus was the Great High Priest.

And, of course, as so often with the great texts of Holy Scripture one could preach many sermons on many different themes from the same few verses. We have divine election here. We have the kingship of Christ. Verse 2 was a favorite among the early church fathers who loved to point out that Christ *reigned* from the Cross, that even in his ignominy and terrible suffering he was exercising the authority his Father had given him to conquer sin and death on behalf of his people. We have, as well, the nature of eternal life, the doctrine of the “two states” of Christ, his humiliation and his exaltation, and the doctrine of the Trinity, with the statement of the equality of the Father and Son in v. 5. And much more.

But I want to treat this first as a prayer, as something that our Lord Jesus did that we must do also. For we are told at the outset that Jesus “looked toward heaven and prayed,” and that is something that we must also do. Surely there are many differences between Jesus’ prayer and ours, but surely it is also striking that here we find him doing precisely what we are to do ourselves. And, what is more, clearly it is a model prayer, an exemplary prayer. The Lord prayed so as to be overheard. He intended for his disciples to witness his prayer, to watch him pray. The Lord Jesus taught his disciples many things by example, by showing as well as by telling. Well, what did they see and learn watching and listening to Jesus pray?

Many of you have by this time seen the little book by Bruce Wilkinson, published by Multnomah Press, entitled *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*. Go to any Christian bookstore, go to Borders or to Costco and you can find an ample supply of this little book. It has sold thousands upon thousands of copies. A catalog of Christian books came across my desk the other day and it featured not only the *Prayer of Jabez* but now *The Prayer of Jabez Devotional*. It is something like a movie sequel. Just as with a Hollywood movie, when a Christian publishing house produces a blockbuster, you can be sure that a sequel is not far behind.

The blurb on *The Prayer of Jabez* in the catalog read this way: “Discover how to release the miraculous power of God in your life! Taking you to an obscure corner of 1 Chronicles, Wilkinson introduces you to Jabez, whose audacious one-sentence prayer brought him extraordinary blessings – and has changed thousands of believers’ lives. See what God will do for *you* when you put Jabez’s prayer to work!” Retail \$9.99...CBD price \$6.99 plus postage and handling, of course.

Now, apart from the disturbing notion of selling the miracle working power of God and offering God’s blessing to his people for \$6.99, apart from the suspicion that sacred things are being talked up as a way to increase sales (The blurb for *The Prayer of Jabez Devotional* begins: “Live the miracle of 1 Chronicles 4:10!”), there is a peculiar view of prayer at work here.

The prayer of Jabez, as the blurbs told us, comes from 1 Chron. 4:10. There we read of one Jabez, otherwise unknown to the biblical record, that he prayed, “Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.” And then the narrator adds in a wonderful understatement, “And God granted his request.”

That is a great prayer and a lovely record of simple trust in the Lord being wonderfully rewarded. But nowadays you will hear Christians say that they have “prayed the prayer of Jabez” – that is

the wording they use – they have “prayed the prayer of Jabez” over their families, or their companies, or their ministries, or some particular project that they have embarked on. Mr. Bechtel told me that a few months ago he had consulted with a Crisis Pregnancy ministry elsewhere in the country and was told by several that they had “prayed the prayer of Jabez” over the ministry. In a thoroughly American, market-driven, and faddish way, a verse in 1 Chron. has been turned into a technique, a formula for success, almost a mantra. You have evangelical protestants who now speak and behave as if they now had their own rosary, or their five-times-daily prayer of Islam with its ritual prostrations, their own formula by which to obtain the favor of God.

Now there are many good things in Wilkinson’s little book and I certainly don’t blame him for the use that Christians may be making of his book or the way in which publishers seek to sell it. But, I couldn’t help but compare the way in which Christian people talk about the prayer of Jabez nowadays and this prayer the Lord prayed in the presence of his disciples.

In some ways there is a great similarity. Jabez asked God to bless him and so did Jesus. “Glorify your son...” the prayer begins. “Glorify me in your presence...” the prayer concludes. But there is more here about prayer and its nature and character than can be deduced from a single verse summary of Jabez’ request to God in 1 Chron. 4:10.

And in the additional perspective and understanding that we get here in the Lord’s prayer – and, indeed, from the totality of the Bible’s teaching about prayer – we find the true and wonderful uniqueness of Christian prayer. Many religions teach their practitioners to pray. Prayer is an activity widely practiced by people who have no Christian faith. What, then, is unique and distinctive about true prayer, prayer as God himself teaches us to pray and as Christ himself prayed? Well, I think that is the same thing as asking, what is unique about Christianity among the religions of the world? And I think the answer to *that* question is found in these verses that show us prayer as a personal conversation between the soul and the living God. It is the effulgence, the overflow of an *actual relationship of persons*. It is the conversation that persons who know one another have with one another. It is precisely *not* a religious exercise, it is *not* a formula for success or divine favor. It is not a religious technology, it is not merely religious duty or the obligation of piety. It is *knowing God*. We are always tempted to turn it into something less than this, to depersonalize our prayer, to offer it to God as an act of obedience rather than to look up to God in faith, love, and dependence and talk to him as someone we have come to know.

There is nothing of this kind of prayer in Buddhism. Buddhists pray, they even use prayer wheels, but there is no relationship with a personal, living, infinite God whom you have come to know, trust, and love. Buddhism has no such God and no such relationship is possible in it. Islam makes prayer one of the pillars of religious devotion, but it is not the outworking or the practice of a personal relationship with God, it is nothing like John Knox’s account of Christian prayer as “earnest and familiar talking with God.” Muslim prayer is the repetition of a formula, in Arabic, accompanied with a strictly prescribed set of ritual “stances, genuflections, and prostrations.” [J.N.D. Anderson, ed., *The World’s Religions*, 83.] In Islam God is distant and unknown. And, of course, nominal Christianity and all forms of civil religion similarly employ prayer, but prayer that is nothing remotely like the conversation exchanged by two persons,

nothing like a child addressing a father whom he or she loves and trusts and needs. Only in Christianity is there the promise that an individual human being can know God, can know him really, individually, privately, affectionately, seriously, can talk to him and ask him for things and be heard. Only in Christianity is there the promise that the living God, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, would stoop to be known by us.

We see so clearly the character of true Christianity and of true Christian prayer in Jesus' prayer.

I. You see first the intimacy together with the reverence.

He addressed God as Father. What is more remarkable is that he taught us to address God in the same way. "Our Father who art in heaven..." Yes, the Father is above the Son, the Son must honor the Father, and Jesus always did. But, at the same time, a son knows his father, loves his father, can count on his father's love for him.

Christ, Paul says in Galatians 4:5, redeemed those under the law so that "we might receive the full rights of sons." And because we are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave but a son.

And, remember, ladies, that he should speak of sons, when he is clearly meaning all Christians, men and women alike – for just a few verses before he said "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, *male nor female*, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." – is a great compliment to you. In that culture, in that day, sons got everything, daughters almost nothing. Sons inherited, daughters did not. And yet, Paul says, you women are the sons of God just as much as the male Christians are. You have just as many rights and just as great privileges as the men do who love Christ and trust his Word. His is the father of us all and we are all free to address him as our father, "Abba," the family name for father in the Hebrew world.

"I have often found," John Bunyan once said, "that when I can say but this word 'father,' it [does] me more good than if I called him by any other Scripture name." [In Shedd, *Sermons to the Natural Man*, 55] And John Owen described this freedom to address God directly as our father, Abba, as "the great and fountain privilege" of Christians. "What is a Christian?" asks J.I. Packer? "The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God for his Father." Or, as another theologian well put it, "'Father' is the Christian name for God."

That is what Christianity alone among all the religions and philosophies of the world proclaims, that God makes human beings his children, brings them into his family, and, like any truly loving father, but so much more wonderfully, always stands ready to listen to his children, whom he loves, when they come to talk to him. Who puts up with them because he loves them. That is what Christ has done for us: he has brought us into God's family. He has, as the God-man, become our elder brother in that family. That is the truly astonishing thing. Many people claim to know God who know nothing of God as their father and who do not see themselves and do not even attempt to relate to Him as children to a Father. But prayer, in Christianity, is children talking to their father, with all the love and the confidence and the reverence with which children

talk to their father in happy, healthy, and well-ordered homes. Prayer is just like that! What a wonderful world lies in that first word of our prayer, “Father...”

II. Second, in Jesus prayer you find him praying for the glory of God.

This is a very unusual thing, but it also comes very close to the heart of our faith as Christians. The NIV editors entitled this first section of the prayer “Jesus prays for himself,” and there is sense in which that is correct, as you can see. Jesus began, “Father...glorify your son.” But then see how the prayer continues, “...that your Son may glorify you.”

The son asks for what he needs and wants from his father, but with the righteous heart he had, he asks not merely for his own sake but for his father’s sake and for others’ sake. Indeed, it would take too long to explain, but there are questions about the precise translation of v. 2 and, in particular, whether it should not also be read as part of the object of the Lord’s *prayer*. That is, the Lord wants his father to glorify him *so that* he can give eternal life to those the father had given to him. He is not thinking only of himself, but of others. This is the new heart that Christ has given us, the new nature that is consonant with our new life in this new family. It is the divine nature that we share now because we have become God’s children. And that nature does not seek its own but seeks the glory of God and the good of others.

And everywhere in the Bible we learn this about Christianity as we learn it about the grace of God and what it means to effect in a human life. We are, in our sinful nature, curved in on ourselves; but by God’s grace we look away from ourselves to others: to God and to our brethren and to our neighbor. Salvation in Christ has in view our becoming people who will give their lives to good works which God has prepared for us to do.

Think of this wonderful prayer. Do you see how the Lord prayed *for certainties*. He prayed that he would be glorified even though he already knew how things would come to pass. He had told his disciples often enough what was to come, how he would die, rise again, and ascend to heaven. He prayed that he might give eternal life to God’s elect, even though he had often said before this that he would give eternal life to his sheep and that no one could snatch them out of his hand. He prays that he might be glorified, even though a few verses previously he had already stated it as a fact that he had overcome the world.

And this is characteristic of Christian prayer. We pray for God’s will to be done in the certainty that it will. We pray for Christ’s return in the knowledge that the day is already fixed and that nothing in all the world can prevent it from coming to pass.

Why does someone pray for things that are certain to come to pass? Because prayer is not a formula, not a duty, it is an act of love, it is a conversation with someone we love and trust, it is a declaration of our love and trust. You men tell your wives that you love them and your children that you love them – I hope you do – not because they don’t know it, but because you need to say it as much as they need to hear it. Because that is what love is. And that is very much what prayer is. It is not all that prayer is, to be sure, but it is a great part of what prayer is, the conversation of true relationship, of true personal engagement with someone you love, you trust, and you revere. That is what prayer is in the first place.

And that is what Christianity is *in the first place*. Just as Jesus said here. It is to know God and to know Jesus Christ. Jesus lived his life in this world out of the personal communion that he had with his Father, out of that love, that trust, that longing to fulfill all his beloved Father's expectations of him. He was always speaking to his Father about these things and was never far – no matter what was happening in his life and ministry – from his next conversation with his Father in heaven. And in that he left us an example that we should follow in his steps. To pray like that; to live like that, to live out of one's daily conversation with God, one's knowing God and communing with God, is what it means to be a Christian. Christ's great gift to us was, by removing our sins, to give us entrance into the family so that we might know and always look up to and talk to our heavenly Father. He brought us into the family to be beside him, so that we might look up to heaven just as he did, and find the Father just as he did.

For none so lone on earth as he
Whose way of thought is high and free
Beyond the mist, beyond the cloud,
Beyond the clamour of the crowd,
Moving where Jesus trod,
In the lone walk with God.

To know God, really to know him, as we know one another, and to talk to him and know he listens and cares...*that is eternal life and that is true prayer.*

And that is why prayer is the principle of our lives as Christians, because prayer is what one does who really knows the Father. In Islam there is little connection between prayer and life or ethics or behavior. A man who rises from prayer to cheat or to lie will be rewarded for the prayer and punished for the cheating or the lying. But the one is commonly regarded as having little to do with the other. But, in Christianity, prayer *is* life and life *is* prayer and both are nothing if they are not the effulgence, the overflow, the outworking of our relationship of love as children to our heavenly Father, whom we love, whom we desire to please. Such a Christian instinct that was: "Father, glorify your son *that* he may glorify you!" No wonder the Lord Jesus should pray in such a way. No wonder that we should imitate him.

And when you go to pray, in order that it should be this true Christian prayer and not an imitation, not a pale shadow, you begin, you say first this little prayer: "May it be the true I who speaks, O Father, and may it be the true You that I speak to." No formulae, no pious duties to be done, no religious performance: just you and I, O heavenly Father, You and I. And that will be prayer in deed and, no matter what you must say to God and ask from God, you will have all the blessing Jabez got. I assure you of that and won't even charge you \$6.99. Because, if you earthly fathers, though you are very sinful, proud, and selfish, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the *Father in heaven* give his Holy Spirit to those who ask him!