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The Christian Life (4)

*The Christian Life:
What is Involved and How do I Live it?*
Part Four

Prayer

Why should we address the subject of prayer when our topic is the Christian life? Because there quite literally is no Christian life without prayer. As difficult as it is to understand, we must embrace the foundational truth that *the all-powerful, all-wise, all-loving God who called this universe into existence out of nothing wills for your prayers to be the occasion of his acting on your behalf.*

To put this yet another way, God never ordains any particular “end” without also ordaining the appointed “means” by which that end is attained. And whether it be salvation, healing, guidance, financial provision, or any other spiritual blessing, God’s appointed means for receiving what he wills to bestow is prayer. So we begin with taking note of the absolute necessity of prayer. Consider **Isaiah 30:18-19**:

“Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him. . . . He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you.”

But why does the Lord “wait” to be “gracious” to us? If he is really gracious and kind and wants to bless us, well, in the words of the Nike commercial: “Just do it!” If God longs to show us mercy and pour out his power, why does he wait until he hears “the sound of your cry” in prayer? Why must he first “hear” it before he blesses us?

God orchestrates it this way in order that he might be glorified in the most visible and public way. We read in Proverbs 15:8 that “the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is his delight.” Why is it his delight? Why does it draw attention to his greatness? How does it glorify him? It is because more than anything else *prayer highlights the depths of our poverty and helplessness and magnifies the riches and resources of God’s gracious supply.*

Why is this a matter of such urgency? Why *must* we pray?

(1) We must pray because *otherwise God will not be glorified.* “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13).

(2) We must pray because *otherwise you and I will not experience the fullness of joy that Jesus lived, died, and rose again to give us.* “Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full” (John 16:24).

(3) We must pray because *otherwise we will go without.* “You do not have, because you do not ask” (James 4:2b). *Never be deceived into thinking that God will give you apart from prayer what he has promised to give you only through prayer.*

(4) We must pray because *otherwise the gospel will not succeed.* “Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored” (2 Thess. 3:1). “At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ” (Col. 4:3a).

(5) We must pray because *otherwise when we do attempt to preach the gospel we are more likely to bring confusion to people rather than clarity.* “At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison – *that I may make it clear*, which is how I ought to speak” (Col. 4:3-4).

(6) We must pray because *otherwise we will remain enslaved to fear and cowardice and fail to preach the gospel at all*. “[Pray also] for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak” (Eph. 6:19-20).

(7) We must pray because *otherwise the lost will not be converted to Christ*. In speaking of his Jewish kinsmen, Paul said: “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved” (Romans 10:1).

(8) We must pray because *otherwise the church will experience hardship and face obstacles that hinder the fulfillment of our calling as God’s people*. “I urge that supplications, prayer, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

(9) We must pray because *otherwise the sick will not be healed*. “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray” (James 5:13a). “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” (James 5:14). And again, “confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16).

(10) We must pray because *otherwise the demonized and oppressed will not be set free*. At the conclusion of Paul’s discussion of our battle with demonic forces, he exhorted the church to pray “at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:18). When Jesus finally delivered a young boy of a demon, he explained to his disciples that “this kind (of demon) cannot be driven out by anything but prayer” (Mark 9:29).

A Summary of the Urgency and Power of Prayer

“For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many” (2 Cor. 1:8-11).

Paul has confidently declared that the God who already delivered him from a life-threatening affliction would do so yet again (v. 10). God’s purpose in Paul’s suffering had worked: he no longer looked to himself but now trusted wholly in the “God who raises the dead” (v. 9).

“Well, what then is the point of prayer? If Paul is so confident that God ‘will deliver’ (v. 10) him, it matters little, if at all, whether or not the Corinthians pray. God’s going to do what God’s going to do irrespective of their prayers for Paul or, conversely, their indifference toward him. Whatever will be, will be.”

That may well be your conclusion but I assure you it wasn’t Paul’s! No sooner has he spoken with assurance of God’s gracious intentions toward him than he enlists the intercessory prayers of the Corinthians on his behalf. What is it that Paul asks them to ask God? Undoubtedly he encourages them to ask God to do what God has declared is his desire and character to do!

God will deliver us, says Paul (v. 10a). We have put our hope in him “that he will deliver us again” (v. 10b). **Therefore, based on this assurance**, flowing out of this confidence, we beseech you Corinthians to “help us” (v. 11a) by praying for our welfare. Verse 11 reads as follows:

“You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks [to God] on our behalf for the blessing granted us [by God] through the prayers of many” (v. 11).

The opening line of v. 11 should be rendered with a conditional force: “**If** you help us by your prayers,” or “Provided that you, for your part, help us by interceding on our behalf.” This serves to reinforce the emphasis Paul consistently places on prayer as a contributing factor to the success of his ministry (see below on Philemon 22; Phil. 1:19; Rom. 15:30-32).

His desire was that news of his rescue from death be the impetus for the saints in Corinth to join together in prayer on his behalf, in response to which he hoped God would deliver him yet again should similar perilous circumstances arise. If a “blessing” (ESV) or “favor” (NAS) was to be granted Paul, if his ministry was to continue with success, these believers **must** intercede on his behalf. And not only would he prosper as a result, God also would be glorified by the many thanksgivings that were uttered for the blessings he bestowed on Paul through prayer.

Consider *the dynamics of intercession*, how it works for the benefit of everyone involved:

The ones who pray (in this case, the Corinthians) experience the joy of being an instrument in the fulfillment of God’s purposes and delight in beholding how God works in response to their intercessory pleas (cf. Romans 10:14-15).

The one who is prayed for (in this case, the apostle Paul) experiences the joy of being delivered from peril or sustained in trial or being made the recipient of some otherwise unattainable blessing.

The one to whom prayer is offered (in every case, God) experiences the joy of being thanked, and thus glorified, for having intervened in a way that only God can in order to bless or deliver or save his people.

On two occasions he indicated that whether or not he was released from prison may well be dependent on prayer. Although the power to set him free appeared to rest with the civil authorities, they were but instruments used of God to accomplish his purpose in Paul’s life (cf. Prov. 21:1), a purpose God had determined to fulfill by means of prayer offered on Paul’s behalf by the saints.

In his letter to Philemon, Paul wrote, “at the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that *through your prayers* I will be graciously given to you” (v. 22). The word here translated “given” means “to graciously grant a favor”. Combined with the fact that it is passive in voice indicates that Paul envisioned his physical welfare and eventual whereabouts to be ultimately in the hands of God. And it is God, Paul hoped, who had determined to act in response to the petitions of his people, specifically Philemon and his household, to secure his release.

Paul was uncertain of the outcome. He hoped to be set free, but knew that it rested with God. The civil authorities in this case were mere intermediaries who could be moved to do God’s bidding in response to the petitions of God’s people. Is it too much to say that without their prayers, Paul had no hope? Is it too much to say that had Philemon and his family not prayed that Paul may well have remained in that prison? Perhaps God had purposed to secure Paul’s release through another means should the saints have faltered in their prayers for him. Perhaps. But not to pray on that assumption would have been presumptuous and sinful on the part of Philemon and his household.

We find a similar scenario described in Philippians 1. Paul is again confident of his impending release from prison and ultimate vindication. Yet he also says, “for I know that *through your prayers* and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance” (Phil. 1:19). Paul evidently believed that God had purposed to effect his deliverance through the prayers of the Christians at Philippi and the gracious provision of the Holy Spirit.

Paul’s appeal to the Roman Christians is especially poignant:

“I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company” (Romans 15:30-32).

The apostle was convinced that God had suspended the success of his journeys and mission on the prayers of his people. Without those prayers, Paul was at a loss. His anxiety about a threat from the unbelieving Jews in Judea was well-founded (cf. Acts 20-21). Therefore, “his request for continued prayers was not merely a tactical maneuver to engage their sympathy, but a call for help in what he knew to be a matter of life and death” (Gordon Wiles, 269).

His plan to come to Rome and enjoy the fellowship of these saints was also dependent on prayer (cf. 1 Thess. 3:10-13). Important here is Paul’s statement in Romans 15:32 where he suspends his impending journey on “God’s will”.

He refused to presume on God's determinate purpose, never suggesting that he will make it to Rome whether or not they choose to pray for him. He eventually made it to Rome, although his arrival there was not in the manner he expected (see Acts 21:17-28:16). In any case, the important thing to note is that he believed in the power and importance of prayer as a means employed by God in the effectual fulfillment of his will.

As I said earlier, we must never presume that God will grant us apart from prayer what he has ordained to grant us only by means of prayer. We may not have the theological wisdom to fully decipher how prayer functions in relation to God's will, but we must never cast it aside on the arrogant and unbiblical assumption that it is ultimately irrelevant to God's purpose for us and others.

Here's the bottom line: If we don't ask, God doesn't give. If God doesn't give, people don't receive. If people don't receive, God won't be thanked. And if God is not thanked, God is not glorified.

Paul's Reflections on Prayer in Philippians 4:6

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."

(1) **"in everything"** – I.e., in every circumstance, no matter how serious or casual, no matter how tragic or trivial; and at all times. The contrast is striking: in **nothing** be anxious, but in **everything** be prayerful.

(2) **"prayer"** – This is broad term that encompasses all kinds of prayer: adoration, praise, petition, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, etc.

(3) **"supplication"** – This word is more narrow and specific in its focus. Here Paul has in mind the reality of need and want. This word thus points to our dependence on God for everything.

(4) **"with thanksgiving"** – *Before you ask God for something new, thank him for something old.*

Thanksgiving is not here another kind of prayer, along with petition and supplication. Here it is the mood or mindset or attitude that characterizes all prayer. So Paul wants us to thank God in every prayer, whether or not what we ask comes to pass as we hoped it might. If it does, thank him. If it doesn't, thank him for having the wisdom not to give us what we couldn't handle. If it doesn't, thank him for how he will address your needs in a way that is far superior to how you first envisioned.

(5) **"requests"** – Here Paul has in view the actual content of our prayers; the precise details. It's Paul's way of reminding us **not to hide behind generalities and vague religious platitudes. Be specific.** Be concrete. It's amazing when you think of it. Prayer, on the surface, seems so impertinent: that fallen, hell-deserving finite creatures should ask the infinitely glorious Creator for anything! What makes it seem even more impertinent is the expectation we have that God might actually do or provide what we ask!

(6) **"to God"** – Or more literally, in the presence of God, face to face with him, as it were. Paul is telling us, without hesitation, without tongue in cheek, without the slightest tinge of insincerity or rush of sensationalism, that **God has designed and ordained this universe in such a way that he will act and intervene on our behalf when we ask him to.**

That truth apart from which nothing here makes any sense at all is that God has promised to do for his children, for those who are in Christ Jesus, marvelous things that we simply cannot do for ourselves. And no less true is the fact that if we do **not** pray as we are here instructed to pray he quite likely will **not** do for us what we need done.

Overcoming Our Doubts about God's Ability to do What We Ask

We must consider Ephesians 3:20-21 – "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

Paul's effusive praise of God reflects the unbounded bounty of his ability to bless his people in response to their prayers:

- (1) He is able to *do* or to work, for he is neither idle nor inactive, nor dead (contrast the dumb idols in Ps. 115:1-8).
- (2) He is able to do what we *ask*, for he hears and answers the very prayers that he commands we pray! Principle: when it is God's will to bestow a blessing, he graciously incites the human heart to ask for it!
- (3) He is able to do what we ask or *think*, for he reads our thoughts, and sometimes we imagine things which we are afraid to articulate and therefore do not ask. In other words, his ability to provide for us must never be measured by the limits of our spoken requests.
- (4) He is able to do *all* that we ask or think, for he knows it all and can perform it all. There is nothing that is proper for us to have that transcends or outstrips his power to perform.
- (5) He is able to do *more . . . than* (*hyper*, 'beyond') all that we ask or think, for his expectations are higher than ours.
- (6) He is able to do much more, or *more abundantly*, than all that we ask or think, for he does not give his grace by calculated measure.
- (7) He is able to do very much more, *far more abundantly*, than all that we ask or think, for he is a God of superabundance (the single Greek word that stands behind this idea, *hyperekperissou* (see 1 Thess. 3:10; 5:13), has the idea of an extraordinary degree, considerable excess beyond expectations, etc.).
- (8) All that he does he does by virtue of his power that even now energetically works within us.

A Brief Look at the So-Called "Law of Agreement"

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matt. 18:15-20).

Contrary to widespread opinion, Jesus was not talking about the so-called "law of agreement" or in any way suggesting that if we can put aside our differences and come to unity in that for which we pray we will see "miracle power" released where "anything becomes possible." So, what was Jesus saying?

Clearly Jesus is addressing the subject of church discipline (see especially D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 8:403-04; and J. Duncan M. Derrett, "Where two or three are convened in my name . . .": a sad misunderstanding," ExpT 91 [1979-80]:83-86). That is to say, he is setting before us the procedural steps for what is to be done when a professing Christian sins. The first step is private rebuke (v. 15). If unsuccessful, this is to be followed by plural rebuke (v. 16; cf. Deut. 19:15). If plural rebuke fails, which is to say that the person remains in denial or unrepentant regarding their misbehavior, there follows public rebuke and eventually separation (v. 17), a decision that the church may be confident has divine approval (v. 18). So, if Matthew 18:19-20 is taken as a reference to prayer, its application must at least be restricted by the immediately preceding context (vv. 15-18).

However, I'm not persuaded that Jesus is saying anything directly about prayer, much less about the so-called "law of agreement".

The "two" people in v. 19 who come to an agreement are, in all likelihood, the same "two" people mentioned in v. 15, namely, the offender and the person against whom the offense has been committed (Derrett believes that the "two or three" are the judges called by the church to settle the matter, but Carson has a persuasive response in "Matthew,"

404). Furthermore, the verb translated “ask” in v. 19 does not necessarily mean to ask in prayer. It may well refer to the “pursuing of a claim.” Similarly, the word translated “anything” need not be taken in the sense of “any legitimate object of petitionary prayer” but in the sense we see in 1 Corinthians 6:1 where Paul has in mind “any judicial matter” that has come before the church for adjudication.

If this should prove correct, Jesus would have been describing a situation in which two people involved in a dispute come to an agreement on the matter that has divided them. Presumably, this will have occurred on the basis of the church’s judgment, referred to in v. 18. In such cases our heavenly Father will approve and ratify the decision (literally, “it shall come to be from the Father,” or perhaps, “it shall be allowed, granted, sanctioned”). Therefore, the “two or three” mentioned in v. 20 who are “gathered” or who come together in the name of Jesus are probably the two disputants themselves, along with the third party who was called in as an outside witness (v. 19).

Thus, Jesus is most likely not promising that God will answer any prayer that two people agree upon, as if to suggest that the same prayer uttered by only one believer is for that reason less pleasing to God. Rather, Jesus would be saying that when two Christians involved in a personal dispute are able to resolve their differences, God ratifies or sanctions or approves the matter. The verdict of heaven, so to speak, is consonant with that of the church, before whom the matter was adjudicated (see 1 Cor. 5:4).

Although we should avoid being dogmatic in the interpretation of this passage, caution must prevail in any attempt to derive from it a law or eternal principle to the effect that if two believers of one mind pray for the same thing at the same time they may be assured of seeing their request fulfilled.

I am certainly not opposed to corporate prayer. Far less do I mean to indict as unbiblical the so-called “prayer chain” or the “day of prayer” in which believers converge to bring their petitions *en masse* to the throne of grace. I am only suggesting that if this sort of joint supplication is undertaken, the participant should not do so on the basis of Matthew 18:19-20.

Finally, why is it important that we take time to carefully and thoroughly examine a passage in terms of context and authorial intent? The simple answer is that it will protect us from believing something God hasn’t said and from trusting in a promise he never made. My concern is that many will adopt the notion of a “law of agreement” and pray with the expectation (dare I say, presumption?) that if they can only get one or two others to agree with them on some matter that God is obligated to answer their request accordingly. When he doesn’t, confidence in God and his Word is undermined. Of course, he may answer their prayers, but if he does it isn’t because he is honoring a “promise” allegedly stated in Matthew 18.

Discussion Questions

- (1) Let’s begin by describing our own personal prayer lives. How often do you pray? For how long? Do you struggle to do this consistently? What are some of the reasons why you find it difficult to maintain consistency in prayer throughout the course of your daily walk?
- (2) Do you believe prayer is really essential, or is this simply a theological trick designed to get you to pray more than you do? Why is it essential? What role does it play in God accomplishing his goals?
- (3) Does prayer change things? What do you mean by “change” and what do you mean by “things”? Now answer the question again.
- (4) How does prayer relate to the sovereignty of God? If God is truly sovereign, isn’t prayer just a meaningless ritual to make us feel good? If not, why not?
- (5) Discuss the so-called “Law of Agreement” and the text in Matthew 18. Have you used this passage to justify the notion that “agreement” somehow guarantees we’ll get whatever we ask? Discuss how the role of context helps shed light on the meaning and application of this passage.