

PRAYER

Matthew 6:5-15

Once upon a time, there was a young boy named Benjamin. Benjamin wanted a baby sister. He wanted a baby sister so much that, one Christmas, he decided to write a letter to Jesus asking for a baby sister. He got out his pencil and paper and started to write:

Dear Jesus,

I've been a very good boy ...

But, then he stopped and thought about what he had written. "No," he told himself, "Jesus won't believe that!" So he wadded up the paper, threw it away, and started again:

Dear Jesus,

Most of the time I've been a good boy ...

Again, he stopped in the middle of the sentence, thinking to himself, "Jesus isn't going to be moved by a wishy-washy argument like that!" So, into the wastebasket went that wad of paper too.

Finally, Benjamin went into the bathroom and grabbed a big terrycloth towel from the rack. He brought the towel back to the living room and laid it on the couch. Then he went to the Nativity Scene below the Christmas tree and picked up the statue of Mary which was kneeling by the manger.

Benjamin rolled the statue up in the towel, and put it in the bottom drawer of the desk. Then he took out another piece of paper and began to write a third letter:

Dear Jesus,

If you ever want to see your mother again ...

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Do you see what's wrong in this story?

Benjamin doesn't know how to pray. He doesn't know the right way to ask God for what he wants. So he tries everything he can think of. He begs. He tries to bargain with God. Maybe, if that doesn't work, he'll get angry at God.

The Apostle James wrote, "From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." (James 4:1-3).

So. It is clear that there is a wrong way to pray! A wrong way to ask God for what we want! A way that will guarantee that God's answer to our prayer will be NO!

James makes it clear that when we pray for something just so that we can satisfy our own selfish lust, God is not going to honor that prayer. Suppose I pray, "Oh, God! My neighbor's wife is so beautiful! Let me have her!" God is not going to honor that prayer! God has decreed, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." How can I ask Him to help me break His own Law.

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But, at the same time, the power of prayer is very, very real! A proper prayer can shake the foundations of the world itself! And God does want us to pray! God commands us, "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God." (Philippians 4:6).

One day in the early 1800's, the Presbyterian minister at Darlington, Pennsylvania was out making his pastoral rounds. He was riding his horse down a country lane, and as he drew up in front of a little cottage he heard the sound of a mother's voice lifted in prayer. As he listened he heard this widow, with her boys beside her, earnestly asking God for an education for her sons, so that they might grow up to be good and useful men.

When he went in to talk with her, the pastor was impressed by the alertness of one of her boys. Since he was also touched by the heartfelt prayer he had overheard, he took the boy with him to the old Stone Academy at Darlington. There, the boy received the education that his mother had so earnestly prayed for.

But the Lord answered the rest of her prayer too. The boy did indeed grow up to be a good and useful man. He was William McGuffey, the author of the famous McGuffey's Readers, the textbooks that honored God. Over one hundred

million copies were in circulation before McGuffey's Readers were superseded in our nation's classrooms by the more modern, godless, textbooks of today!

James 5:16 says, "... The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

In John 14:13 & 14 Jesus said, "... whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it."

So. It is also clear that there is a right way to pray! A right way to ask God for what we want! A way that will allow God's answer to our prayer to be YES!

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The all-important question is thus before us. What is the right way to pray? What is the right way to make our desires known to God.

Fortunately, we don't have to guess the answer. The disciples asked Jesus the same question and he gave them (and us) the answer in Matthew 6:5-15:

5. "And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward."

These hypocrites are not interested in God. They just want to be admired by the people who see them praying. They want to be known as powerful speakers; as charismatic leaders who should be looked-up-to and followed. They don't really care about God at all!

6. "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."

When we pray, we are talking with God. Nobody else has to hear our prayer. God hears it, and He's the only one who really counts. There's nothing wrong with other people hearing our prayers. In fact, if hearing our prayers awakens them to their need for God, it is good that they hear them. But ... If we become proud of our prayers, and

glad that others are hearing how wonderfully we pray and how religious we are, then our prayers are hurting us instead of helping us. Then it is better to get off alone with God!

7. "But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking."

8. "Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him."

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't keep asking for what we need. If our prayers are not answered immediately, we should continue to bring our needs before God's throne! Coming again and again helps us remember that we are dependent upon God for everything! What Jesus was warning against was vain repetition: repeating the same request over and over again in the same prayer until it just becomes a meaningless sing-song. "Oh Lord, I need a thousand dollars. Give me a thousand dollars, Lord. A thousand dollars. I need a thousand dollars, Lord. Give me a thousand dollars Lord. Right now, Lord! A thousand dollars, Lord!" That's not prayer! That's not asking the Lord for His help! That's trying to overpower the Lord with meaningless drivel! It won't work!

9. "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name."

"Our Father" - Through Jesus Christ we can boldly come into God's presence and address him as "Father". In the Hebrew, the term is "Abba". It is a term of great familiarity, like "Daddy" is today. We are so close to God that we can call Him "Daddy"!

"Which art in Heaven" - At the same time, we must remember that God is so far beyond us that we cannot comprehend His greatness. We can come to Him boldly, but not disrespectfully. We must approach Him with reverence!

"Hallowed be thy name" - The Greek word translated "Hallowed" is hagiadzo, which literally means "to make holy". To make something holy is to separate it from the mundane, to reserve it for special use. The commandment, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain," means just that. Keep His name holy!

10. "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as

it is in heaven."

"Thy kingdom come" - The kingdom is here now, but it is not yet complete. The promise of the kingdom included all physical blessings and all spiritual blessings. The church was given all spiritual blessings at Pentecost and we continue to enjoy them today. But "all physical blessings" will not be ours until Jesus comes again to establish His reign on earth. So, we pray "Thy kingdom come" and look forward to that glorious day!

"Thy will be done" - In praying this, we recognize our inability to know what is best for us. We affirm that God is in control and that He works all things together for our good!

11. "Give us this day our daily bread."

"Give us this day our daily bread" - This is meant to be a daily prayer. We ask God to supply what we need for sustenance today. One day at a time. And, we leave the future in His hands.

12. "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

"Forgive us our debts" - We admit that we are guilty before God. We confess our sins and beg His forgiveness. And, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (I John 1:9).

"As we forgive our debtors" - We recognize that God cannot renew us if we stubbornly cling to grudges and defy His extension of grace!

13. "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen."

"Lead us not into temptation" - Having been forgiven, we pray that we won't be tempted to repeat the sin that so sorely grieves our loving Father.

"Deliver us from evil" - But, knowing that Satan will tempt us, we pray that God will deliver us and keep us from giving in to the temptation. And He has promised us that He will! I Corinthians 10:13 says, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful,

who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."

14. "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you:"

15. "But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

If we are hateful and unforgiving, is that not evidence that we have never really experienced God's forgiveness? Simply repeating the words, "Forgive me Lord" means nothing if our hearts are not in it. If we truly hate our sin, if we have truly asked God to forgive us, if we have truly experienced His love and cleansing, we cannot help but have a different attitude towards those who have mistreated us!

This, then, is the way we should pray. Not necessarily in the exact words of the Lord's Prayer, but, rather, following its format.

Hallelujah! Amen!

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