

- b. From alms-giving, Jesus turned His attention to the matter of **prayer** (6:5-15). This passage is best known for containing what is traditionally called the Lord's Prayer, but it is important to recognize that that prayer is set in the larger context of Jesus' confrontation of Israel's religious hypocrisy. Severing His prayer from its context, multitudes through the centuries have viewed it as a formulaic chant or incantation – the very understanding and approach to prayer Jesus was rebuking. This prayer must be kept closely in context if His true meaning and purpose are to be discovered.

This passage consists of three parts:

- The first parallels the structure and orientation of the preceding and subsequent passages (vv. 2-4, 16-18) and consists of Jesus' rebuke of a common Jewish practice respecting public prayer (vv. 5-6).
- The second addresses a different perversion of prayer associated with Gentile paganism. This section contains the Lord's Prayer (vv. 7-13).
- The third section is an extension of the second (vv. 14-15). In it Jesus provided to His hearers an important point of commentary related to the forgiveness component of the Lord's Prayer.

Together, these three small passages form one unified treatment of prayer as an instrument and expression of religious hypocrisy, and they must be interacted with in that way. Each of the three parts may be considered separately, but such that their place within the whole section is kept in mind.

- 1) As noted, the first part of this section concerns a common abuse of prayer by the religious elite in Israel. Like the giving of alms, public prayer had become a means of demonstrating one's piety, and this demonstration was especially useful to Israel's religious leaders who took great pains to secure and preserve their prestigious standing in the eyes of the common people. Their insistence upon recognition and praise in deeds of charity carried over into their prayer: They loved to pray "*in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men*" (6:5).

In this way, too, such individuals revealed their hypocrisy. Though they appeared to be pious men devoted to seeking and serving God through a disciplined prayer life, their prayer really had nothing at all to do with Him, even as their alms-giving had no real interest in the recipients of their charity. In both cases, their true concern was securing and basking in the honor and praise of men.

But in contrast to the self-concerned, self-aggrandizing public displays of the religious hypocrite, the piety of the sons of the kingdom is to reflect the integrity of authentic *love*:

- In the instance of alms-giving, Christian charity is to express sincere love for the recipient, but specifically as an extension of his love for God. The care and concern shown by the Father's children is the care and concern of the Father Himself.
- So also the prayer of God's true sons transcends the mere appearance of committed devotion to God to reflect genuine love for Him. They actually pray *to* their Father as an expression of true intimacy with Him, not as a public "speech" intended to capture the attention and recognition of other men (ref. Luke 18:11).

As He did with the issue of alms-giving, Jesus conveyed this distinction by means of a call to secrecy: "*When you pray, go into your inner room [private place] and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you*" (6:6). Jesus wasn't forbidding public acts of charity, and neither was He forbidding public or corporate prayer. The point of His directive is that prayer is authentic communion between a human being and the living God. It has everything to do with God and only secondary pertinence to other men. It is certainly appropriate to pray corporately (cf. Acts 1:24-26, 4:23-31, 12:11-12) as well as for other men in their presence, but such prayer is directed to one's heavenly Father so as to seek His face and favor. The "secrecy" of alms-giving speaks to the need for the giver to be free from the bondage of self-reference and self-interest, and the same is true with regard to prayer: Unless and until a person is liberated from his self-enslavement and reconciled and recovered to God, it is impossible that his prayer can be anything other than one more expression of his consuming self-interest. *Prayer only becomes prayer in the context of the new creation.*

- 2) Jesus punctuated this truth by his instruction in the second part of the context (vv. 7-13). For here He implicated the Gentiles (non-Jews) in His condemnation of pseudo-prayer. What was true of the covenant people was equally true of the nations of the earth: All men in their estrangement are incapable of authentic prayer; what they call "prayer" is simply another facet of human religion as *magic*.

Many in Israel used prayer as a means of recognition and praise; the world of men employs it as a means of acquisition and aid. Prayer is simply another tool of manipulation – another human device intended to make the divine present, amenable and beneficial. In their state of estrangement, men find the goal of their prayer, not in intimate fellowship with the living God, but in the benefit deity can provide. Men seek what God can give rather than seeking Him. They desire that their prayers will gain His ear, but they design those prayers in order to move His hand. Thus Jesus' observation: The Gentiles employ repetition in their prayers in the hope that their incantation will secure divine favor (6:7; cf. 1 Kings 18:17-29).

The sons of this world entreat the divine in order to obtain what *they* perceive to be their good; the sons of Jesus' kingdom entreat their heavenly Father to provide what *He* discerns to be their good based upon His intimate knowledge of their true need (6:8). For the estranged man who is isolated within his own mind and captive to his own perceptions, thoughts and speculations, prayer is entirely self-referential and self-seeking in accordance with his personal sense of what is good and needful.

But for the sons of the kingdom, prayer is the response of an illumined mind and enlivened heart that know and love God and recognize His goodness and wisdom. The natural man (Jew as well as Gentile) is blind to himself and his true need, and yet presumes to dictate to God in his prayer; the son of the kingdom of heaven correctly perceives his God, himself, and his need and looks to his Father in adoration, humility and dependence. This is the thrust of Jesus' exemplary prayer in vv. 9-13.

The first part of the Lord's Prayer (vv. 9-10) highlights the foundational truth that authentic prayer has its point of reference in God rather than in oneself. *This is the essential and crucial difference between true prayer and the counterfeit phenomenon men call "prayer."* The pseudo-prayer of men in their fallen condition is both constrained and determined by their estrangement and self-enslavement, and is therefore necessarily self-referential; in its perspective and perception as well as its substance and goals, such "prayer" begins and ends with the person praying. Counterfeit prayer reflects the fallen human condition, and thus Jesus attributed it as much to those who are religiously connected to God (the Jews) as those who know nothing about Him (the Gentiles).

But in contrast to self-referential pseudo-prayer, prayer that has its point of reference in God will be framed by the acknowledgement of who God is in Himself, in relation to His people, and in relation to the world of men:

"Our Father, the One who inhabits the realm of the divine, eternal and transcendent, Your name (that is, who you are) is holy; make us and all men to know You as holy – to know You as You really are" (6:9).

This true knowledge and reverential acknowledgement of God's **person** extends also to His **purpose**:

"Father, understanding Your purpose for Your creation – that it should find its consummate perfection, meaning, and function in relation to Your Son, and recognizing that we are, even now, partakers in that renewal that You have wrought in Him, we long for the day when this consummation is realized, when all estrangement is ended and Your dominion through Your image-sons is at last established in perfection and fullness and Your will is the delightful, spontaneous response of the whole creation" (6:10).

This grand vision and longing – this “eschatological angst” – marked the apostles Peter (2 Peter 3:1-14) and Paul (Romans 8:18-25; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, 51-58; Ephesians 1:13-23), and it ought to be the conscious and enduring burden of every son of the kingdom.

True prayer begins with recognizing and embracing God for who He is – the sovereign *Lord* who, by His own goodness and condescending mercy, has reconciled the estranged creation to Himself. And at the center of that reconciliation is Adam’s fallen race: In His Son, God has become the *Father* of men who were “formerly alienated and hostile in mind” (Colossians 1:19-22; cf. Romans 8:1-17). God’s self-revelation is relational (Savior and Father), so that knowing Him brings men to a right knowledge of themselves. This accurate self-knowledge, in turn, produces in them an attitude of humble, submissive dependence; children don’t look to themselves, but to their Father as their **care-giver** and **provider** (v 13).

This is true first with respect to physical needs:

“Our Father, in Your beloved Son You have met our greatest need by delivering us from our alienation and making us Your children, and so we ask You to meet the lesser need of our temporal provision. By Your own power You have secured our everlasting good and glory, and this teaches us that our security in this life rests with You, not our personal or material resource. Therefore, trusting You for our future and all of its needs, we ask only that You would give to us what is needful for today” (6:11)

But it is equally and more importantly true of spiritual care and provision:

“Father, we have found forgiveness and You have reconciled us and made us Your children, not because of our righteousness or good works, but because of Your own purpose and grace which You have given us in Christ Jesus from all eternity. We trust Your unchanging goodness and mercy, and with that confidence ask You to continue to meet us in our infirmity and failure. Forgive us in all in which we fall short: We believe, but help our unbelief; we love, but not without concern for ourselves; we are devoted to You, but not without distraction. And Father, humbled by our recognition of our own enduring need for compassion and mercy, we are moved to show the same mercy and forgiveness to others” (6:12).

“Moreover, Father, as we seek Your forgiveness for all things in which we have offended and fallen short, so we ask You to keep us back from future offenses by directing and protecting us. As our Creator, You know the weakness and need of our souls as well as of our flesh. You have delivered us from the dominion of darkness; complete the work You have begun in us by preserving us from everything that would seduce us and lead us away from You and the simplicity of our devotion to Christ” (6:13).

True prayer has its life and compass in God's person, purpose and outcomes; the sons of the kingdom pray with His mind rather than their own, and thus their prayer is marked by humility, dependence, adoration and exultation: "*Yours, Father, is the kingdom, power, and glory forever.*"

- 3) The fundamental issue in the larger context is man's need to be delivered from his bondage to himself. The self-enslavement that has resulted from his alienation from God binds him over to what A. W. Tozer called the *self-life*, and this pseudo-life is characterized by a self-referential perspective and orientation in all things. Every man is effectively the judge of right and wrong, good and evil, and personally sanctioned "rights" become the focal point of his ethic. The satisfaction of what *he* regards to be right and proper becomes paramount, and the result is that men are much more ready to carry grudges and seek redress for offenses suffered (whether those offenses are real or only perceived) than extend forgiveness for them. *In the self-referential, self-preoccupied world of fallen humanity, mercy is eagerly sought but rarely bestowed* (ref. Matthew 18:21-35; cf. also Romans 1:28-31). This is the framework within which Jesus proclaimed God's forgiveness of a person to be tied to his own willingness to forgive (6:14-15).

Taking Jesus' words at face value, many have interpreted Him as indicating that God grants forgiveness only upon the condition of a person's willingness to forgive others. But this conclusion is soundly refuted by the fact that God's forgiveness is grounded in the atoning work of His Son. God forgives men because of Christ's atonement at Calvary, and He does so in spite of the fact that, in their alienated condition, they are hateful toward their fellow man (cf. Colossians 2:13-14; Titus 3:3-7).

God's forgiveness doesn't depend upon human forgiveness, but the two are inseparable. God forgives men their trespasses while they are yet hostile toward Him and their fellow man, but His forgiveness is only the beginning; divine forgiveness has its preordained destiny in renewal, reconciliation and sonship (Ephesians 1:3-6). God forgives men in order to bring them back to Himself, and that recovery involves the regenerating and transforming work of His indwelling Spirit. Forgiven men are authentic *sons of God*, and sons are like their Father: They forgive others even as their Father has forgiven them (Ephesians 4:17-32; cf. Colossians 3:1-13), but they do so, not as a matter of duty so much as the natural disposition of their renewed nature. Now sharing in the divine nature through their union with Christ (2 Peter 1:2-7), the sons of the kingdom also share in God's forgiving disposition. They love men because their Father's love for them has triumphed in the new creation (1 John 4:7-8, 19); though at times they may struggle with granting forgiveness, God's children can no longer harden their hearts with a spirit of malice and retribution toward those who've trespassed against them.