

“Our Pattern in Prayer: The Lord’s Prayer”

March 27, 2022

1 Kings 18

Psalm 5

Matthew 6

We are looking today at our *pattern* in prayer.

Not surprisingly, the focus of our attention will be on the Lord’s Prayer –
but I wanted to show you an example of how the Lord’s Prayer itself
is modeled and taught in the Old Testament.

Elijah’s prayer at Mt. Carmel demonstrates all that Jesus will say about prayer in Matthew 6!

The prophets of Baal spend six hours in prayer – from morning til noon –
and nothing happens.

So they spend almost six hours more in desperate devotion to their god –
“No one answered; no one paid attention.”

Notice that “the raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation”
(the evening sacrifice in OT worship).

Then Elijah spends a few minutes preparing his sacrifice,
and then a few more minutes pouring water on everything.

And then Elijah prays a prayer of two sentences,
and God answers.

I’m not saying that God always acts that fast!

After all, a few verses later (v43) Elijah prays *seven times* –
and sends his servant *seven times* – to look toward the sea.

But James reminds us that the prayer of a righteous man avails much.
And then points to the example of Elijah.

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 5 –
a song that also exemplifies what prayer should be.

Psalm 5 is a morning prayer –
where David comes to God asking that the LORD would hear his cry,
because our God does not delight in wickedness.
We come to God asking that he would make things right!

Psalm 5

Read Matthew 6

What are you anxious about?

Anxiety has become a lot more popular in the last few years!
There are lots of reasons why anxiety is on the rise.

We are inundated with information about all sorts of things –
think about it this way:
250 years ago, we still might not have heard
that Russia had invaded Ukraine!
And it would be years before detailed information was available.

It makes sense – after all, what could Americans do about it?!

Today, you and I have access to an immense quantity of information about the war –
some true, some false –
but all the information in the world is useless
because we are still pretty helpless to do anything about it.

We are inundated with information – and we are expected to have opinions –
but really, all we can do is be anxious and worry about the future!!

Or we can talk to the one who holds the whole world in his hands!
We can pray.

There is a reason why Jesus moves from talking about prayer
to talking about anxiety.

The Westminster Larger Catechism has a really useful section on prayer.
And so I'm using their questions to structure this series on the Lord's Prayer.

I didn't put the catechism answers in the bulletin –
but they are found in your Trinity Psalter Hymnal on pages 964-965.

The catechism sets up our discussion of the Lord's Prayer
by asking a few general questions about prayer –
drawing together a wide range of scriptures in the answers.

The first two questions are pretty basic – but also pretty important!
For whom are we to pray?
And what things are we to pray for?

And, not surprisingly, the answers are pretty comprehensive!

The catechism asks:

Q. 183. *For whom are we to pray?*

A. We are to pray for the whole church of Christ upon earth; for magistrates, and ministers; for ourselves, our brethren, yea, our enemies; and for all sorts of men living, or that shall live hereafter; but not for the dead, nor for those that are known to have sinned the sin unto death.

If you are wondering about that last phrase –
it comes from 1 John 5:16,

where John says that we should not pray
for the one who is known to have committed the “sin that leads to death.”

The apostle John does not explain what is meant by “sin that leads to death” –
so there is considerable discussion about what it means!

The sin that leads to death seems to be a sort of final apostasy –
an irrevocable rejection of Christ.

(People have sometimes told me that they are afraid that they may have committed such a sin.
I ask them – “Have you repented of it?”
They say – “Yes! But I don’t know whether God has forgiven me!”
To which I reply, “If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins”
The only unpardonable sin is the one that is never repented of!

You will note that the Westminster Larger Catechism does not try to resolve the question.
Rather, the catechism simply affirms what 1 John says:
we are not required to pray for the one who has sinned unto death.

But we *are required* to pray for everyone else!

Scripture has lots of examples of prayers for the whole church – for magistrates and ministers –
for ourselves, our brethren – even our enemies.

There is much in the Bible about praying for the living – and praying for generations yet unborn,
but nowhere in the Bible are we ever commanded to pray for the dead,
nor are there any examples in the scriptures of praying for the dead.

Question 184 then asks:

Q. 184. *For what things are we to pray?*

A. We are to pray for all things tending to the glory of God, the welfare of the church, our own
or others' good; but not for anything that is unlawful.

In the same way that we are to pray for *everyone* (with very few exceptions!),
we are also to pray for *everything* (with equally few exceptions!).

Just don’t pray for things that are unlawful.

Don’t ask God to bless wickedness.

Don’t ask God for something that runs contrary to what he has *said!*

Rather, pray for all things – for the glory of God and the good of the church,
and of all humanity.

But our primary focus this morning is on the next question:

Q. 185. *How are we to pray?*

A. We are to pray with an awful apprehension of the majesty of God, and deep sense of our own unworthiness, necessities, and sins; with penitent, thankful, and enlarged hearts; with understanding, faith, sincerity, fervency, love, and perseverance, waiting upon him, with humble submission to his will.

This is at the heart of what Jesus is saying in Matthew 6.

When we have a clear apprehension of the majesty of God –
and a deep sense of our own unworthiness, necessities, and sins –
then we will recognize that *he is God* – and we are not! –
and so we will pray.

When we have penitent, thankful, and enlarged hearts –
then we pray with understanding –
we pray with faith –
we pray with sincerity – and fervency – and love;
we persevere in prayer – we wait upon God –
and we humbly submit to his will.

When we pray in this way, our anxiety dissipates –
because we remember that *he is God* – and we are not!

How are we to pray?

Jesus starts by saying:

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”

What does “practicing your righteousness” mean?

In Matthew 6, Jesus will use three examples:
giving to the needy,
praying,
and fasting.

Jesus is talking about how to live as his disciple.

A disciple is a learner – one who has put him or herself under the authority of a master.
The disciple is an apprentice.

A disciple is a learner who *does* what he or she is taught.

Jesus will say at the end of Matthew’s gospel:

“Make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
and teaching them *to observe* all that I have commanded you.” (28:20)

A disciple who merely *hears* but does not *do* is not a disciple.

A disciple is one who *observes* – who *practices* – all that Jesus has commanded.

So what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?

The Sermon on the Mount describes Jesus himself.

He *is* the one who perfectly exemplifies the whole sermon.
And therefore, those who follow Jesus will look like this too.

Here in the first half of chapter 6, Jesus provides a warning – a caution – to us about *how* to practice your righteousness.

First, what does it mean to “do righteousness”?

There are three things that Jesus highlights here:
giving to the needy,
prayer,
and fasting.

How do you give to the needy?
How do you pray?
How do you fast?

This is “practicing righteousness”!
And so when the catechism asks “how are we to pray” –
we rightly turn to Matthew 6!

And particularly, Jesus emphasizes the importance of *motive* in doing righteousness.
Jesus says, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people
in order to be seen by them,
for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”

Whose eyes matter to you?
When you are a child, your parents are everything.
What they think of you is your whole world!
When your father praises you, your heart sings!

And there’s a reason for that!
God is teaching us about himself.
He is our heavenly Father.
And he wants us to look to him for our praise and reward.
When your heavenly Father praises you, your heart should sing!

Our problem is that we do not learn our lesson properly.
As we grow up, we do not transfer our desire for praise to God –
but to others.
And so we look for the applause of men.

When Jesus says give to the needy in secret,
pray in secret,
fast in secret –
the point is not that no one knows what you are doing.

Jesus does not say, “Do not practice your righteousness before other people, period.”
He says beware of practicing your righteousness before other people
in order to be seen by them.”

You are to practice your righteousness before other people!
 (“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works
and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” 5:16)
But if you do this *in order to* win praise from men,
then when they praise you, you have your reward.

(But don’t expect God to be pleased with you!)

Why do you pray?
If you do it to be seen by men,
then when men praise you, you have been fully paid.
But if you do it because you are a child of God and you desire his fatherly praise,
then your Father, who is in secret, will see in secret
and reward you.

Let me say this very simply:
God is pleased to reward that which is sincere.
As we saw last time, Jesus is talking to his disciples.
He is talking to those who are already justified.
The Sermon on the Mount is not about how to “win favor” with God.
Jesus is talking about how the Father relates to his children.

So, what does it mean that God rewards us?
Think of it this way:
your child does something good –
what do you do?
You smile!
You give them a hug!
You say, “Well done!”

That’s what your heavenly Father does
when you deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus!
He smiles.
He gives you a hug.
He says, Well done!

When your heavenly Father sees you looking like Jesus –
he is pleased!
So the point is *not* that you need to be *secretive* when doing your righteous deeds.
Rather, the point is that you shouldn’t care who *on earth* is watching.
What matters is that your heavenly Father is watching.

Do you act differently when you are alone and when you are in public?

Do you give to the needy in public – but are stingy when no one is watching?

Do you pray well in public, but ignore God in private?

Do you participate openly in corporate fasts, but never fast in secret?

This is at the heart of what Jesus says about prayer in verse 5:

⁵ *“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.*

When Jesus talks about prayer in the synagogue he is not talking about corporate prayer.

The synagogue was not a place for worship.

Worship happened at the temple.

The synagogue was a place for studying the scriptures
and coordinating the care of the needy.

It was more like a school or a community center.

But the scribes and Pharisees would do their “private devotions” publicly in the synagogue.

Again, the theme is that the “hypocrites” want to be seen by others.

For them, “people” are big – and God is small.

In contrast, Jesus says:

⁶ *But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Jesus’ point is not that you should never pray in public.

Rather, his point is that you should not care what others think!

You should pray the same way in public that you pray in private.

This is just who you are.

⁷ *“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

Lengthy prayers – flowery prayers – detailed prayers –
all are about being heard by men.

If you are praying to the God who *knows what you need* before you ask,
then your prayers should be characterized by simplicity, directness, and honesty.

Think of how the catechism says it:

A. We are to pray with an awful apprehension of the majesty of God, and deep sense of our own unworthiness, necessities, and sins; with penitent, thankful, and enlarged hearts; with

understanding, faith, sincerity, fervency, love, and perseverance, waiting upon him, with humble submission to his will.

You are talking to your heavenly Father.

You are talking to almighty God.

You will not convince him to do what you want by getting more flowery!

If you add lots of extraneous details you will not impress the one who knows all things!

We'll talk about the content of the Lord's Prayer over the next few weeks,
but notice that Jesus adds an extra note on Forgiveness in verse 14.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

In the Lord's Prayer we ask God to treat us the same way we have treated others.

Indeed, Jesus goes so far as to say that if you do not forgive others,
neither will God forgive you.

Remember again – Jesus is describing first *himself*!

Jesus will say on the cross,

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Jesus is the one who forgives others,

and so when the one who knew no sin *became sin* for us,

the Father heard his cry and raised him from the dead.

And so therefore, Jesus says that his community – those who are united to him –
will share in this disposition, in this attitude of forgiveness.

Since we have been forgiven much, we should love much.

If you do not forgive others, what you are saying is that you don't believe in Jesus.

Several years ago we hosted a group of Rwandans who were preparing for the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide (April of 1994).

Many of those who had participated in the killings have repented and sought forgiveness.
How would you respond?

One of the speakers said it boldly and clearly:

you can either forgive – and go to heaven with the penitent killers;
or you refuse to forgive – and go to hell with the impenitent killers!

Such is Jesus' command to forgive.

If you will not forgive others – then God will not forgive you.

Now, a word to the wise:

if you are repenting,

it is not *your job* to make them forgive you.

There is nothing more ugly than saying,

“If you don’t forgive me, then God won’t forgive you!”

What is the right language of repentance?

Israel says to Moses, “We have sinned,

for we have spoken against the LORD and against you.” (Num 21:7)

Achan said to Joshua, “Truly I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel,
and this is what I did...” [and he gives the details] (Joshua 7:20)

The prodigal son said, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.
I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” (Luke 15:21).

Genuine repentance *names* the sin –

demonstrates that you understand *how* you have wronged the other person –
and how you intend to make it right.

But remember – if you want God to forgive you,
then you need to forgive those who sin against you!

Let me be clear:

there are two parts to forgiveness –

there is the *disposition* of forgiveness,

and then there is the transaction of forgiveness.

The disposition is the heart of forgiveness.

Since God has forgiven us, we should be inclined to forgive others!

But forgiveness is also a transaction.

Think about it this way:

God himself has a disposition of forgiveness toward us.

Take Saul of Tarsus.

God had a disposition of forgiveness toward Saul –

but when Saul was persecuting Christians –

when Saul was *murdering* Christians –

we would not say that there was any *transaction* of forgiveness!

Only when Saul repented – only when Saul confessed his sin –

only then did the transaction of forgiveness take place.

We’ll talk about this more when we talk about “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”!

Jesus then returns in verses 16-18 to his discussion of practicing righteousness.

¹⁶ “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

We have forgotten how to fast.

“Fasting involves the discovery of what we serve.” (Hauerwas, 80)

How hard would it be for you to go a week without any electronic devices?

An electronic fast could be good for you!

“Nothing enslaves more than that which we think we cannot live without.” (Hauerwas, 80)

The discipline of fasting is given to us by God to remind us that

“man does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

The point of fasting is to remind yourself that you are a beggar.

You are poor.

You are helpless.

You are hungry.

When you go for a day – or a week – without food,
you begin see more clearly what really matters to you.

I realize that there are some people who have genuine medical reasons
why a total fast would be dangerous.

But even those people can engage in genuine fasting –
eating only the minimum that is required for their medical condition.

Jesus does not say, “if you fast.”

Jesus says, “when you fast” – just like he says, “when you pray,”
or “when you give to the needy.”

A Christian who never fasts is like a Christian who never prays –
or who never gives to the needy.

I should point out that Jesus uses both the plural and the singular.

In verse 16, he says “when you [plural] fast” –
suggesting that he is speaking of corporate fasts.

But in verse 17, he says “when you [singular] fast” –
pointing either to individual fasting,
or at least to how the individual participates in a corporate fast.

In your giving, in your praying, and in your fasting –

don't worry about what people think – don't look for their opinion –
but practice your righteousness in order to be seen by God.

If you look down further in our passage,
you'll see that this is where Jesus takes us!

What are you anxious about?

Some of you are looking down the road and you're going to need a job soon!

Some of you have children – and you are easily worried about what will happen to them.
Some of you *want* children – and you wonder if you ever will.

Jesus says, the Gentiles are seeking all these things –
and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.

So seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you.

Sometimes when we hear “seek first the kingdom of God,”
we think that it means that have to ignore all these things that we need.

But that’s not what Jesus says.

When Jesus says “do not be anxious about your life,
what you will eat or what you will drink,
nor about your body, what you will put on,” (v25)
he is not saying that you should ignore these things.

He is saying that you should *pray* about them!

Jesus says “do not be anxious” about them.

Your life should not be devoted to running after these things.

How do you know when you are being anxious about these things?

If you find that your mind keeps drifting to “these things” –
and you keep mulling them over and devoting your time and energy to “these things” –
that would indicate that you are anxious about the wrong things.

Do you pray about “these things”?

Paul Miller rightly says that if there is something that you don’t pray about,
that suggests that you think that you don’t need God to help you with that!

If we are seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
then that means that (at the very least) we should be praying about it.