

Learning to Pray

Heidelberg Catechism #55

Matthew 6:5–13 | Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 116–119

“**T**HE family that prays together, stays together.” “Our thoughts and prayers are with you.” “Pray the prayer in this email and then send it to ten others.” You get the idea. The veneer of spirituality by believer and unbeliever is fascinating and appalling. Yet what is prayer? Why should we pray? What should we pray for? Most importantly, to whom should we pray?

As we popularly say, prayer is talking to God. Isn't that amazing? We who were once apart from God have been adopted as his children and can now talk to him, saying, “Abba! Father!” (Gal. 4:6) Prayer is an intimate talking to God, between child and Father. Because he's adopted us, this talking is both thanksgiving, since praise him for his grace, and supplication, since we look to him as the source of life. All this comes in the context of a covenant, where God binds himself to us and we offer ourselves up to his service. But how do we pray? That's what a disciple once said to Jesus: **Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples** (v. 1).

WHY IT'S NEEDED

In the first place let think of WHY IT'S NECESSARY. Question 116 asks, “**Why do Christians need to pray?**” The necessity is not that prayer causes

us to become Christians but that prayer is the effect of being a Christian. The Catechism gives two reasons.

Prayer is necessary *because through it we thank God for his gifts*. It's **the most important part of the thankfulness God requires of us**. God's gift of his grace as manifested in election, redemption in Christ, and sealing of the Spirit caused Paul to burst forth in one of the greatest acts of thanksgiving in Scripture: **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . to the praise of his glorious grace . . . according to the riches of his grace . . . to the praise of his glory** (Eph. 1:3, 6, 7, 14).

Children, when you get presents, what do you say? "Thank you." God has given us the greatest gift of all, Jesus. Give him more thanks than you do for presents! When the Psalmist meditated upon the LORD's work in his life he responded in thanks: **What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me? I will... call on the name of the LORD...I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving**. (Ps. 116:12, 13, 17)

Prayer is necessary *because through it we invoke God for his gifts*. **God will give his grace and Holy Spirit only to those who continually and with heartfelt longing ask God for these gifts and thank him for them**. The Psalmist said, "I love the LORD, because *he has heard my voice and my*

pleas for mercy” (Ps. 116:1); “Then I called on the name of the LORD: O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul . . . when I was brought low, he saved me” (Ps. 116:4, 6b). This is why Augustine once said, “Prayer is the key of heaven.” E. M. Bounds wrote that, “Nothing is more important to God than prayer.”¹ It is our link to Christ and the Holy Spirit who gifts with grace.

Are you continually and earnestly begging: “Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my groaning, give attention to the sound of my cry” (Ps. 5:1–2a); “I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping” (Ps. 6:6). We’ve got be more moved by our sin, more moved by our lack of sanctification, more moved by the lost in our community. Cry out to God! Beg him for grace! As we groan for the grace and Spirit of Christ, the Spirit will groan: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” (Rom. 8:27).

HOW IT’S ACCEPTED

So what makes prayer acceptable to God? There are three basics. First, it is acceptable when it is a *calling upon the true God*. **We must pray from the heart to no other than the one true God, who has revealed himself to us in his Word, asking for everything he has commanded us to ask of him.** Second, it

is acceptable when our attitude is one of *humbling ourselves before God*. **We must fully recognize our need and misery, so that we humble ourselves in God’s majestic presence.** Third, it is acceptable when we confidently are *confiding in Christ*. **We must rest on this unshakable foundation: even though we do not deserve it, God will surely listen to our prayer because of Christ our Lord, as he has promised us in his Word.**

WHERE IT’S PATTERNED

In the Lord’s Prayer we have “an epitome of the whole Gospel,” in the words of Tertullian.² Cyprian said it is “a compendium of heavenly doctrine.”³ Our Catechism agrees when it asks **what has God commanded us to ask of him? Everything we need, spiritually and physically, as embraced in the prayer Christ our Lord himself taught us.** But should we even be praying the Lord’s Prayer? Many have said “no.”

Objection #1: It’s vain repetition. But Jesus prayed the Lord’s Prayer on two separate occasions (Matt. 6; Luke 11). He also prayed the same prayer three consecutive times in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:44). But doesn’t Jesus warn of **empty phrases** in Matthew 6:7? The word Jesus uses—*battalogo*—means to pray without meaning or heartfelt zeal. It is what we call an *onomatopoeia*, that is, a word that means what it sounds like. When

we say someone is babbling that's because what their saying sounds like "babble, babble, babble." Jesus' point is not praying the same prayer more than once, but that it has heartfelt zeal and fervor as opposed to babbling.

Objection #2: Christ gave two forms of this prayer, therefore he didn't mean for us to pray it. In fact there's little difference in the two forms and Jesus says in Luke, "When you pray, say..." He intended it to be prayed.

Objection #3: It doesn't adequately express our particular needs. All the particular needs we have, though, are covered by the general categories of the Lord's Prayer.

Objection #4: It stifles the Spirit of God. We sing the same Psalms and songs many times, so how do you differentiate? Instead, Colossians 3:16 says, "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." The Lord's Prayer is inspired by the Spirit, it is the very word of Christ, so doesn't it fit Paul's command?

Cyprian said,

For what can be a more spiritual prayer than that which was given to us by Christ, by whom also the Holy Spirit was given to us? What praying to the Father can be more truthful than that which was delivered to us by the Son who is the Truth, out of His own mouth?

The mark of a healthy church is that its members pray and then they diligently come together to pray together.

Notes

¹ E. M. Bounds, *The Weapon of Prayer* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 9.

² Tertullian.

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