

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF VILLA RICA, PCA

Rationale for Prayer

By
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Matthew 6:5-8

⁵"When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ⁶"But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

⁷"And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸"So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

Three Indians--a Navajo, a Hopi and an Apache--were speaking about how powerful their prayers were. The Navajo said, "You know, we Navajos pray for healing, and the patients get well about half the time." The Hopi said, "Well, we Hopis pray for rain, and it happens about 70 percent of the time." Finally, the Apache spoke up: "Yes, but we Apaches have the sunrise prayer dance, and it works every time." -- James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988) p. 42.

Why does a man pray? For many years I never prayed. Before I came to the end of myself I did not pray. A little reflection will explain why? Before I called upon the Lord I was trusting in myself to be the master of my own fate. I did not pray because I didn't know how sinful and error-prone I was. I trusted in my brainpower, my reasoning power, to make my own decisions and plot my course in life. I had to come to a place in my life where I knew I had made so many mistakes and found myself in such sinful misery that I looked up and sought for God's salvation and guidance.

William Henley spoke for many in his famous poem "Invictus" "I AM THE MASTER OF MY FATE, I AM THE CAPTAIN OF MY SOUL. The macho, unconverted man is proud and unbowed to anyone greater than himself.

In Matthew 6 our Lord addresses the subject of practicing personal righteousness. He spoke first of deeds of righteousness, acts of kindness and goodness done to others, which flow out of the converted life. The bankrupt sinner is given Christ's robe of perfect righteousness and the gift of the Holy Spirit to begin to live for Christ and others. The secret is to keep oneself out of the way and avoid all ostentation and self-glorification otherwise my righteous acts are spoiled. Ever and always my attitude must be, in me is no good thing. All of my righteousness is filthy rags. Only in Jesus Christ am I righteous. All the glory belongs to him for any good that I might do. This same humble attitude must be preserved in my prayer life.

I asked the question, "Why Do Men Pray?" The answer is of course that men pray because they know they have human limitations, that there is a higher power than one's self. The Bible says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

The first sin in the garden was Adam and Eve wanting to be independent of God. They desired to be like God, equal to God, to be the masters of their own fate, the captain of their own souls. That is still the sinful disposition of the natural man. We want to do our own thing, make our own choices, and walk according to our own wills. This is the inherited sinful nature we have from Adam. God will let us continue in that sinful self-will, but there is a price to pay. We sooner or later come to see, if we are not too stubborn and proud to admit it, that we have made mistakes and that we need God's help, God's leadership. And once we admit that we have sinned and made mistakes, the Lord offers to us a perfect salvation and complete forgiveness in Jesus Christ. This puts me in the proper posture before a thrice-holy, almighty Creator, Father-God. So I am a suppliant, I am inclined to pray because I know I have a Friend and a Helper who can do exceedingly abundantly above all that I might ask or think.

When Dwight Eisenhower was being inaugurated president of the United States in January, 1953 he surprised the nation by personally offering up a prayer to Almighty God. Here was a man who had commanded three million troops in the invasion of Normandy, had been a major figure in ending World War II and now was being inaugurated into the most powerful office in the world. And what did he do in front of all the people in America and all the nations of the world? He acknowledged that he needed help. He needed a power greater than himself to fulfill the task before him.

Ike explained: "To the best of my knowledge, the men of courage I have known have been men of faith. I've never seen any of them who weren't"

Dwight Eisenhower understood that God was to be acknowledged and called upon, that He is the sovereign Lord of all. Jesus Christ assumes that men will pray. Prayer is a given in this life for all men. He says, "When you pray" not "If you pray." The believer will pray because he feels the need of God's blessing and help. He also prays because it is an act of worship.

This act of worship is an act of righteousness, just as alms giving can be. However, once again, our Lord advises that we can do the right thing for the wrong reason and thus corrupt what might otherwise be a good work. He says, **when you pray, you are not to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. V. 5**

Here is a case of men praying in order to impress other men with their piety. They were not motivated by a sincere desire to get through to God so much as by a desire to reach men with this message: I am devout. I am a God-fearing person. I practice my religion as you can plainly see. It was done to impress men.

I have a problem with people who kneel down on a public street and pray. It is obviously an attempt to sway the opinions of men. God can be prayed to in a worship service, but to kneel down in front of an abortion mill or a public officials office or home and put on the pose of prayer is to me nothing but a fleshly way of calling attention to oneself and one's cause. The cause may be just but the pose of prayer is obviously a public statement of moral outrage. True prayer could be offered out of sight of the public and the media. Even though the prayer demonstration is not done for personal recognition but for public awareness of a perceived moral issue it would not seem to me to be in the true spirit of faith. Faith does not rely on such tactics. Faith relies entirely on God's power to bring about the desired change. That is not to say that Christians should not be involved in the political process. We can make our voices heard, but prayer by its very nature is a spiritual exercise that never flaunts itself. Jesus says, **BUT YOU, WHEN YOU PRAY; GO INTO YOUR INNER ROOM, AND WHEN YOU HAVE SHUT YOUR DOOR, PRAY TO YOUR FATHER WHO IS IN SECRET, AND YOUR FATHER WHO SEES IN SECRET WILL REPAY YOU.**

Does that mean that it is wrong to have public prayer, a pastoral prayer, hold prayer meetings? No. The Lord's Prayer uses the plural, Our Father...Give us our daily bread...indicating a corporate prayer. But the principle is still valid: Prayer is a spiritual exercise that should never be done for the purpose of impressing men. The idea of theatrical display is out of accord with the spiritual character of prayer.

We can deduce from these verses spoken by our Lord on the subject of prayer that what God wants us to know is that prayer is personal, intelligent communication with our heavenly Father. When either of these elements is missing it ceases to be prayer. When prayer is corporate it must include the element of some common denominator of interest and concern so that it is personalized for the group assembled, the family, the church, the community, the nation. Certainly we have common interests and concerns, which can be prayed about collectively. This maintains the personal element. For example, Solomon prayed a prayer for the nation which he offered on the occasion of the dedication of the Temple he built. And we know that God heard that prayer for it is recorded in 1- Kings 1 9:2 f. The Lord appeared to Solomon and told him that he had heard his prayer and had consecrated the Temple that Solomon had built.

In the New Testament the disciples went up to the upper room and with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer. They had a singleness of mind and heart about these devotions. So prayer in that way is never out of place.

But Christ also makes the point that prayer should be intelligent and sensible. He lets us know that mechanical, chanting prayers are worthless. He uses the term "meaningless repetition." That would be a prayer lacking in intelligent thought. Just counting beads or spinning a prayer wheel, as they do in Tibet, are inane and pointless devices for offering prayer. It is not how often you pray but how sincerely and intelligently you present your petitions to the Lord.

Moses was a man who knew how to intelligently intercede with God in prayer. When the children of Israel apostasied from the Lord in the matter of the golden calf, we read in Exodus 32: ⁷Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. ⁸"They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!'" ⁹The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. ¹⁰"Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation." Ex. 32:7-10 (NASB)

In these words God let Moses know that he desires him not to pray --Leave me alone so that I might blot them out. But Moses intercedes and his intercession was based on knowledge of God and His Word, plus a reverence for the sovereign power of God. Moses pleaded with the Lord on the grounds of how his actions would be regarded by the Egyptians before whom he had displayed his mighty signs and wonders, and then he reminded God of his promises to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. His covenant is unchanging and even though he could have fulfilled his covenant by making of Moses a great nation the arguments Moses used were effective. (Ex. 32:11-14). ¹¹Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²"Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about *doing* harm to Your people. ¹³"Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" ¹⁴So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people. Ex. 32:11-14 (NASB)

And then, after Moses came down and rebuked the people for their sin, the Lord told Moses to move out and that he would send an angel before him to drive out the people of the land but that he would not go up with them because they were an obstinate people. So again Moses interceded for the people: ¹²Then Moses said to the LORD, "See, You say to me, 'Bring up this people!' But You Yourself have not let me know whom You will send with me. Moreover, You have said, 'I have known you by name, and you have also found favor in My sight.' ¹³"Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight, let me know Your ways that I may know You, so that I may find favor in Your sight. Consider too, that this nation is Your people." ¹⁴And He said, "My presence shall go *with you*, and I will give you rest." ¹⁵Then he said to Him, "If Your presence does not go *with us*, do not lead us up from here. ¹⁶"For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Your sight, I and Your people? Is it not by Your going with us, so that we, I and Your people, may be distinguished from all the *other* people who are upon the face of the earth?"

¹⁷The LORD said to Moses, "I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight and I have known you by name." Ex. 33:12 -17 (NASB)

Moses doesn't stop. He is on a roll. Listen to his final request: ¹⁸Then Moses said, "I pray You, show me Your glory!" ¹⁹And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion." ²⁰But He said, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" ²¹Then the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; ²²and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Ex. 33:18-22 (NASB)

The conclusion to his prayer was that he might see God. Isn't that what we all want most of all, to see the living God, to view his glory?

What a prayer warrior was this Moses. He moves God from his wrath that would have wiped out the whole nation, and then succeeds in getting God to go with him on their journey, then moves from that to get God to restore his presence to the nation, and moves from that to ask God to show him his glory. And God, as much as he can without destroying Moses for seeing his glory, lets Moses have a vision of God, which was as intimate as man can have this side of eternity.

Moses gained his points with the Lord through very careful and intelligent petitions that always focused on the greatness and glory of God. He reminds God of his relationship that God had told him he had with him. This is something that every Christian can also do. We are accepted in the Beloved. We belong to Jesus Christ. He has told us that he will never leave us nor forsake us. We are in a saved relationship and we are bidden to come and ask him for things consistent with his Word. We can approach him with intelligence and with confidence.

Every one of us should have a prayer life. We ought always to pray and faint not. He cautions us against vain repetition and against hypocrisy in our praying. We are to be single-minded and reverent and devout in our prayers. But do not miss the blessings that come through prayer. Christ gives direction in prayer, but he does not mean to discourage anyone from praying. Take time to pray. Plan time to pray. And see what great things the Lord will do.

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