

October 8, 2006

Prayer III

Matthew 6:9-13

The Gospel writers were aware that following a time of dealing with the spiritual and physical needs of the crowd Jesus went off by himself to pray. They saw something happening in the life of Jesus that they felt they needed and should be shared with those of us who were not around to hear him but are pulled to follow the life we see in his teachings and in his actions.

We Christians look at the crucifixion and resurrection as the high points of Jesus' ministry. These events assure us of his divinity, "*Surely this is the Son of God.*" Concentrating on the drama of these two events we tend to skip over the fullness of the teachings contained on the Sermon on the Mount. Speaking on a grassy hillside rising from the shores of the Sea of Galilee Jesus provides us with directions to the good life, the more abundant life, the life that God intended us to

lead. According to Matthew, Jesus included in that sermon some directions as to effective prayer.

Jesus tells us that prayer should be personal. We are to lay bare before God the innermost thoughts of the mind and the cries of the heart.

Jesus tells us that prayer must be private. Prayer should be such an intimate, personal experience that we cannot let it be heard by the human ears.

Jesus tells us that prayer must be pointed. God knows our needs before we ask him. No need to peat and repeat.

Following these directions Jesus gives us what we call the Lord's Prayer or the Disciples Prayer. This is a prayer we can repeat without even thinking. The words flow from our lips without passing through the heart. We have to wonder when we say these words are we really praying? As we give expression to the words are we **“laying one's soul utterly naked before God?”** If the answer is no, then what is the value of this prayer, what can it accomplish? To answer that

question we need to determine what was the purpose that Jesus had in mind when he gave us this prayer. In the record we have Jesus isn't telling us that this is a prayer we ought to memorize and use. He tells us, "*Let this be how you should pray.*"

In the King James Version Jesus introduces the Lord's Prayer, "*After this manner therefore pray you.*" The Revised Version reads, "*Pray then like this.*" Other versions including Moffatt's read, "*Let this be how you should pray.*" In each version we are directed to a model based on instructions that prayer is to be personal, private and pointed.

There is a great difference in saying here is a prayer you are to use and saying that here is how you should pray. This direction as "*this is how you should pray*" immediately follows instructions that prayer should be personal.

It is a vain thing to say the words unless those words express the deep conviction of the heart. Maybe we would better serve if instead of reciting the words we break them

down to determine what attitudes they portray.

“Our Father.” An acknowledgement of God’s reality, his character and his supremacy. If from the depths of our heart we can pray *“Our Father”* we are trusting our thoughts, our petitions, to what we believe to be character of God. We start our prayer by throwing ourselves and what we ask for on what we believe to be the character of God. That is we believe that God has a personality of an ideal father who knows all and wills the best.

To be able to say from the heart, *“Our Father”* is to align ourselves with God by putting ourselves and our prayer in his hand trusting that he will behave toward us as would a perfect father.

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done as it is in heaven.” An effort to identify ourselves with what God wants to be done.

As Paul says, *“we see though a glass darkly.”* Our vision is limited, we can’t see the whole picture. To pray

these words is not an effort to bind God to what we in our limitation may want but to really desire the presence and the perpetuity of God's kingdom here on earth.

When we reach the stage where we are able to say, "*Thy will be done*" we will have come to full spiritual strength. This is a tough hill to climb. It takes real spiritual strength to step aside and let God take over. Just saying with our lips won't get the job done.

"*Give us this day our daily bread.*" Sounds more like a political "**chicken in every pot**" dream. It has to be deeper than that. Here we express an attitude that our needs be met without including unessentials and luxuries. If we can achieve that attitude it will do away with a lot of unnecessary prayer requests on our part. Just think how much of our prayer requests are concerned with things we could do without. The older we get the easier it is to leave unessentials and luxuries out of our prayer requests. But, at the same time our anxieties about tomorrow are increasing.

I don't think we can take a passage out of the Bible and say "*this is it.*" I think you have to put that passage in context with the whole. In other words you look at the whole of the Bible to understand the fullness of each particular passage. Same is true with life where each event has an impact on the whole personality. We can't look at one event and say that is the personality.

When tempted by the Devil Jesus says, "*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that precedes from the mouth of God.*" In those words we see the two facets of life, the human and the spiritual. Bread strengthens the body and God's words strengthen the soul. Reading Jesus' instructions on how to pray from the spiritual viewpoint we would be safe to substitute the word "*strength*" for the word "*bread*", i.e. "*Give us strength for meeting the needs of the day.*"

In this model prayer Jesus is recommending that we be concerned with the strength for the living of this day in order to do well and meet the issues that come before us. In living

the good life we are not to be unduly distracted by what might happen tomorrow. *“Sufficient unto the day are the evils thereof.”* In this light we are to pray with the attitude of requesting that God supply us with what we need for the spiritual and material necessities so as to enable us to make the most out of today.

“Forgive us of our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” This petition included in the model prayer goes to the heart. We cannot ask more of God than we are willing to do ourselves. Jesus tells the story about a man who owed much. After pleading for mercy his creditor forgave him his debt. Leaving the presence of his creditor this man ran into one who owed him a small debt. Because the man could not pay this man went bananas. Grabbed his debtor by the throat and threw him into prison. When his creditor heard about this he rescinded his forgiveness and had the debtor thrown into prison until he paid the last farthing. That we ask God to forgive as we forgive applies to all things. We

are not to ask God to do those things which we are unwilling to do.

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

Here we acknowledge our desire not to be tested but if tested not to fall under the influence of evil. Often life will bring us in our weaknesses to that place where we will be tested. When that time comes it is appropriate to ask that evil or our weakness not be allowed to overcome us. Here again we look to God for the spiritual strength to combat the forces of evil that attack us both from without and within.

It is here in the prayer with which we are so familiar that our humanity takes over with the hallelujah of victory. *“For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.”*

Here we express a trust in the goodness, wisdom and mercy of God and in the ultimate triumph of good over evil. It is with this attitude that we face the future. A future where we share Christ’s victory, the victory he exhibited when he rose from the grave.

In his work, “God’s Psychiatry”, Charles Allen quotes C. F. Andrews’ vision of an old legend about an event that occurred when Jesus returned to heaven.

An angel asked Jesus, *“What have you left behind to carry on the work?”* Jesus answered, *“A little band of men and women who love me.”* *“But what if they fail when the trial comes? Will all you have done be defeated?”* *“Yes, if they fail all I have done will be defeated.”* *“Is there nothing more?”* *“No, there is nothing more.”* *“What then?”* Jesus quietly replied, *“They will not fail.”*

We close this model prayer lifting up the complete victory of God in our life and in the world.

Prayer begins with a heart acknowledging God’s reality and the supremacy of God’s will in the living of our life. Having acknowledged in our hearts the supremacy of God we call on him for strength to meet our physical and spiritual needs conditioned on our willingness to do that which we ask be done. We seek protection from testing but if tested the

strength to overcome. We close with a song of victory.

Victory in our life and victory in the world.

This model prayer that Jesus commends to our life represents the attitude of heart with which we are to pray. It is from the depths of our heart that we make our petitions in keeping with these attitudes that come to us from the perfect prayer. Victory begins when we close the door or as Carl Barth puts it, *“To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”*

Pastor's Message

The most disastrous thing in human experience is false religion. The supreme personal tragedy is for a man to use his religion in such a fashion that it defeats the very purposes, ends, and accomplishments which religion exists to produce.

The great end for which religion exists is to produce an individual life disciplined in moral character, radiant with zestful enjoyment of living, appreciative and helpful to his fellow men; with a sense of responsibility for the kind of man he is personally and for the kind of society of which he is a part.

The supreme betrayal of religion is to formalize it into an institution and organization which exacts blind belief, unquestioning obedience and unalterable compliance with external rules and regulations. The most ancient and pernicious of the hoaxes perpetuated upon mankind have been those imposed by spokesmen for authoritarian religious organizations whose commands for obedience were and are usually combined with penalties in the life to come. Concerning this future life, these spokesmen have no more direct knowledge nor influence in determining its nature than the humblest scrub woman. The institution of religion is the servant of the individual to nurture him into a personal experience of a knowledge of the truth and a growth in Christlike goodness.

Another perversion of religion is to discount the value and importance of the life of man that now is. Human beings and their present well-being are the highest external values of which we as men can have any direct knowledge. Jesus was so acutely aware of this that he said, "I am come that they (i.e., men) may have life, and have it more abundantly."

The most common misuse of religion on the level of the personal life is to substitute some formal aspect for personal responsible action: orthodoxy (i.e., right beliefs) for right living; praying for God to do things for one's self, other people in the world about which the individual should be busy himself; pride in one's virtues as measured by the delinquencies and deficiencies of other men; to permit the "vision splendid" to end in personal piety and private enjoyment and never be transmuted into useful human social helpfulness.

PRAYER

O God, lead me into a personal experience of thyself. As I come to know thee and as thou dost come to dwell in me may I bring thee to the world in sincere life and useful action. Amen.