

Dear Friend,

When Jesus talks about prayer in Matthew 6 he begins, as we saw in last month's newsletter, with what motivates us to pray. Prayer, if it is to be effective prayer, must aim at gaining God's approval, not the approval of other human beings. In vv. 7-8 Jesus confronts one of the most pervasive errors regarding prayer that humans make. He commands us, when we pray, to not keep on babbling like the pagans do when they pray. However, the main point of this prohibition is not that God does not want us to pray long prayers or that we should never repeat ourselves. Rather the focus of this command is the reason pagans keep on babbling when they pray. The reason they do this is "because they think they will be heard because of their many words."

The natural, human view of "God" and of our relationship to him is like the employer-employee relationship. If we do our part, if we perform the work that is required by "God" then he will give us what we want; he will pay us our wage. "Pagan" praying focuses attention on the words and the form and the intensity and the faith of humans in prayer. If I get the "formula" for prayer right then God will have to do what I ask him to do because of what I've done, how I've prayed. The reason why Jesus is opposed to this kind of prayer is obvious. If a "pagan prayer" gets the answer to his or her prayers, then who gets all the credit? The prayer gets the credit because he or she has performed up to the required standard. He or she has figured out the key that unlocks the door to the divine blessings. Pagan praying magnifies the spiritual fortitude of the one who prays, not the grace and power of God.

In v. 8 Jesus says that the reason we should not pray like them is because our Father in heaven knows what we need before we ask him. Jesus tells us two things about God that should change forever how we pray. He is our Father and he knows everything about us, who we are and what we need. Calling God "Father" is recognition of the fact that our relationship to him is a relationship of grace, not of obligation. John expresses the gracious nature of our relationship to God our Father in John 1:12-13: "But to as many as received him (Jesus), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God; who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Just as no human being decided to be born or contributed to their birth in any way, so God has given his divine life to his people graciously, contrary to what they deserve, through their faith in Jesus.

Thus God, like a human parent, does not care for his children because of what they do but because of who they are. We are his children because of what Jesus has done and through a work of the Holy Spirit and so his affection for us and his care of us is not based on our performance but is due to the nature of our relationship to him. So just as our having our sins forgiven and being counted perfectly righteous and being promised eternal life is not due to us but due to Christ, so God's hearing our prayer and answering our prayer is not due to us but to what God has done for us in Christ. He is our Father and so we must never approach him as if our praying is the condition of his caring. He cares for us and loves us because he is our Father through Christ, not because of our prayers. We pray because he cares, not in order to persuade him to care.

The second thing Jesus tells us about this Father to whom we pray is that he knows what we need before we ask. If God knows what I need and he loves me because he is my Father and he is able to do anything he wants to do because he is God, then why do I need to pray? Why doesn't he just take care of me and let me just live my life? First, remember that Jesus says this as the reason to not pray like a pagan. Thus we must always remember that we are not praying to a God who is somehow unaware of what is going on and must be informed about our situation. We should not pray as if God doesn't care, as if he is more interested in someone or something else and we need to get his attention. We should not pray as if he is reluctant to take an interest in us and has to be nagged, like a distracted parent before he will act. No, God is the perfect parent who is always paying attention to you and is always aware of your needs and is always ready to act on your behalf.

There is another error that God's omniscience concerning your needs corrects. Knowing that God knows what I need also curbs my arrogance and my presumption. Prayer is an act of humility and weakness, not an assertion of my intelligence and strength. I don't demand that God do what I say but rather I humbly approach him as my loving Father who knows what I need. I ask my Father with submissiveness to his will because I know that what he does on my behalf is always governed by his Fatherly love and by his infinite wisdom. I don't know what I need because I am a child. God knows what I need. It is no accident that right after Jesus informs us that our Father knows what we need before we ask him, he then tells us what we should pray. Thus, v. 8 tells us the purpose of what is commonly called "The Lord's Prayer." This prayer which Jesus gives us is a description of what we need. It is our Father's telling us, his children, what we need and what he wants to do for us and thus informing us as to what we should be praying about. Next month we will begin to examine each of the petitions in this prayer so that we may learn to pray like children, not like employees.

Learning to pray,