

THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER



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For Jane, Jared, Justin, Julia, Jordan, Joelle, and Jaimee

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1

This short book is a series of “meditations” or essays on a subject that produces guilt in most Christians: prayer. I have two reasons for focusing on prayer.

First, I want our church to pray more and better. Second, I want to pray more and better. I think you would be hard pressed to find a Christian who would say that they are praying as much as they ought to pray and they are praying as effectively as God would have them pray.

Based on my own experience in prayer and 30+ years of talking with other Christians about prayer our struggles in prayer come from a variety of sources. So the best way I can think of proceeding is by considering together those passages in the New Testament that are directly given to instruct us in our prayers. God knows our struggles and he has given us clear instructions to help us to persist in effectual prayer. So that will be our goal for this booklet: we are aiming to be individuals and families and a church that persists in effectual prayer for God’s glory and our eternal joy.

It will be very important as we consider God's Word together that we are prepared to evaluate our own thinking about prayer and our practice of prayer in light of what God says and to change how we think and act when we discover a discrepancy between us and God's Word.

We will begin where all discussions of prayer ought to begin with the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray: what is commonly called "The Lord's Prayer." Actually we will begin where Jesus begins as he gives instructions concerning not only prayer, but also giving and fasting.

We will begin with Jesus' instructions in Matthew 6:1 concerning how we practice these "acts of righteousness" as the NIV translates it. First of all, here is a more literal translation of v. 1 which we will use: "Pay careful attention not to do your righteousness before men in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."

The first thing to notice here is that prayer is identified by Jesus as "doing or practicing your righteousness." When we remember that this statement is made in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount which begins with the "beatitudes" in 5:1-12, then we will recognize that prayer is an action that all those who have been blessed by God with his salvation participate in. To use the language of the apostle Paul in Romans 3-5, we have been counted righteous by God because of what Jesus has done through our faith in Jesus.

We have been given his righteousness and thus we do or practice that righteousness we have been given. One of the ways we practice that righteousness is in our praying. Prayer does not make us righteous, rather it is an expression of the righteousness that belongs to us through our faith in Jesus. It is one of the actions in which "blessed" people participate.

The second thing to notice here is Jesus' main concern is with our motivation for practicing prayer. This is the main concern of Jesus throughout his entire discussion regarding the practice of our righteousness in giving, praying and fasting (vv. 1-18). We can do these actions in order to be seen by men or in order to be seen by God. Notice that it is not simply being seen that is the issue but it is the reward we are looking for that is the issue.

If I pray in order to be seen by men, what is the reward that I am looking for? I want people to be impressed with me. I want people to think well of me, to respect me, to admire me, to approve of me. On the flip side I don't want people to think poorly of me. I don't want them to disrespect me or to disapprove of me or to reject me. It's not simply that I want them to think well of me but I want to be treated well.

There is a social dimension I want from this reward. I want others to accept me into their company. I want people to want to be in my company, to want to spend time with me, and I aim to obtain this by impressing them with my "righteousness."

What is the reward I'm looking for from my unseen Father who is in heaven? We certainly are not seeking to impress God with our righteousness. The people who practice righteousness know they have none of their own as can be seen in the first four beatitudes.

However, there is an analogy between the reward I seek from God and that which I seek from men. Just as the point of impressing men is to gain their fellowship, so the reason for prayer is so that I might have intimate fellowship with God and experience his favor in my life. So at the core of motivation is simply this: do I believe being loved by men or God is better? Which is more necessary to my happiness and well-being:

having men accept me into their company or having God accept me into his company?

The third thing to notice in this verse is that praying with right motives requires that I pay very careful attention to my motives. If you read through vv. 1-18 it is very clear that the natural or “default” motive of human beings is to do these actions in order to be seen by men. So if I’m going to pray in order to be seen by my Father, then I must be very attentive to my heart motivations.

Here is a question that I think can really help in this regard. I don’t think most of us consciously pray in private or in public in order to impress others. That is a fairly obvious thing to observe in our hearts. But how comfortable would you be if everyone in our church knew specifically how little you actually pray? I think most of us would be very uncomfortable with other people knowing the actual amount of time we pray each day. Yet, God knows exactly how much we pray. Does it bother us that God knows in the same way it would bother us if other people knew?

It seems to me that the beginning of prayer must be an open admission, a confession to God that we care more about what others think than about what he thinks. We are not as immune to the hypocrisy Jesus condemns in this passage as we normally think. So we must begin by acknowledging our fear of men and asking God to give us hearts that yearn to live in fellowship with him far more than they yearn to have people accept us into their company. In the next chapter we will consider the course of action Jesus recommends to fight our default bad motives and what it means to pray to a Father who knows what we need before we ask.

2

When Jesus talks about prayer in Matthew 6 he begins, as we saw in the previous chapter, 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 not to 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 we will begin to examine each of the petitions in this prayer so that we may learn to pray like children, not like employees.

3

As we examine our practice of prayer, we have begun by looking at Jesus' teaching on prayer as recorded for us in Matthew 6. We've noted that true prayer cannot be motivated by a desire to be respected by men, but rather a desire to be rewarded by God. We've recognized that we are praying to our Father in heaven who knows what we need before we ask. We've noted that what is commonly called "The Lord's Prayer" is Jesus telling us what God says we need and thus what we should ask him.

This prayer which is recorded in vv. 9-12 in Matthew 6 is not given to us simply to repeat word for word, though that is OK when done in faith, but rather it is given as a description of the categories of things which our heavenly Father wants to give us because these are the things we need most of all.

John Calvin says about this prayer in his commentary on Matthew, "No man will pray aright, unless his lips and heart shall be directed by the Heavenly Master. For that purpose he has laid down this rule, by which we must frame our prayers, if we desire to have them accounted lawful and approved by God." Therefore, let me encourage you to memorize this prayer

if you have not done so already and have your children memorize it as well.

For hundreds of years the church in all of its denominations recognized learning and using this prayer as one of the most important things that a Christian could do in order to know and glorify God. It is a tragic fact that most people in most Bible-believing churches do not know nor use this prayer. So learn it and frame your prayers according to it.

First of all, our prayer is to be directed to "Our Father in heaven." I want to note three things that Jesus wants us to have in mind and heart when we pray. First, God is "our" Father, not "my" Father or "your" Father. No one prays correctly who is not part of a community of believers. The idea that I can be a good Christian in isolation from the church is one of the great lies of American culture which is intensively individualistic.

The Father to whom I pray has a family and thus all of his children pray in light of the fact that all of us have brothers and sisters whom we love and care for. We cannot isolate our concerns from the concerns of this family. He is not some personal deity whom I can manipulate to obtain what I desire but the Father of a large family of which I am a part.

Second, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, he is our Father. That is, my relationship to him is a relationship based on grace and love, not performance. No human can presume to call God his Father on his or her own initiative. God can only be our Father if he has acted to make us his children, which he has done by giving Christ for our sins and sending his Holy Spirit to give us his life. So we must always approach God on the basis of Christ's work for us, not on the basis of our own work or worth.

Third, our Father is "in heaven." Thus the one to whom we pray

not only loves us but he is the Creator and Lord of all things. This is not so much a reference as to where God lives as to who God is: the one who rules over all things according to his own purposes. This phrase has behind it hundreds of Old Testament statements regarding God's sovereign power.

For example: Psalm 115:2-3:

Why do the nations say, 'Where is their God?' Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.

Psalm 103:19:

"The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all."

God's presence in heaven is a statement regarding his ability to do whatever he wants to do. Our Father has unlimited power to do all that he is pleased to do. Nothing and no one can resist him.

This means that if I pray and it is not answered as I desire, it is not because God does not love me; he is our Father. It is not because he lacks the power to do what I want; he is in heaven. Rather it means that my infinitely wise Father knows far better than I what I need.

Prayer is not me asking God to do what I want but me asking our Father to give me and us what he wants to give. It is in this prayer that Jesus tells us what God wants to give us. In the next chapter we will examine the first of the six petitions that make up the "Lord's Prayer" in order to understand what it is that our Father wants to give us.

4

Our Father in heaven has told us what he wants to give to us in what is commonly called "The Lord's Prayer." In telling us what he wants to give to us he is also telling us what we need. As our loving and wise Father he has not left us to our own immature and perverse imaginations to determine what we should pray. The first thing our Father, by his Son tells us that he wants us to ask him for is that his name be hallowed. What does that mean? When we pray, "hallowed be your name" what exactly are we asking our Father to do?

The verb translated "hallowed be" literally means "to sanctify", that is, "to set someone or something apart as holy, to treat someone or something as holy." We all know that God is holy. The cherubim who surround the throne of God in heaven sing out 24/7, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory." Holy is a religious word that religious people love to throw around but what exactly does it mean when the Bible says that God is holy?

Ultimately it means that God is different from and superior to everything in the created universe in every possible category

which you can imagine. He is unique, one of kind, cut out of a different cloth. He is completely “other” than we are. It is the word that most completely captures the “Godness” of God. His love is a holy love. His wrath is a holy wrath. His justice is a holy justice. His presence is a holy presence. His moral purity is a holy purity.

Therefore, when we pray that God would “hallow” his name we are asking God to so work that we and all other people and every part of creation treat God as he actually is: holy. It is a prayer that we and others respect and honor and worship and trust and love and delight in God himself as he alone is worthy of being respected and honored and worshipped and trusted and loved and delighted in.

We are praying that we and everyone we know can honestly and whole-heartedly say what the psalmist said in Psalm 73:25:

Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

We are asking that God would exert his omnipotent power so that we could say with the prophet Isaiah, “My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you.” (Isaiah 26:9). We are praying that God would so work that rather than yearning for the approval of others or money or sex or new cars or accomplishment or a happy family or good grades or a good job we would yearn for God himself.

When we pray this we are asking God to overcome the heart of sin in our lives. Paul says that the core of sin in every human heart is that we “do not glorify God, nor give thanks to him” (Romans 1:21). By nature we are not impressed with God,

nor are our hearts full of gratitude because all that we are and have comes from God. Thus, for everyone who has been born of God, who trusts in Jesus, our first and greatest passion is that we and everyone else see God as he actually is and treat God the way he alone deserves to be treated.

The good news is that God wants to make himself appear holy and glorious to us, to his universe. He is our Father and wants to give us the best thing he can give us, which is a true vision of himself and the ability to rejoice in him alone. Here perhaps is the most troubling question that this prayer confronts us with: Can we honestly pray it? Is this what we want or at least is this what we want to want?

But this prayer also fills us with hope because if you are honest, you know that this is not what you want in the way you should want it. But God invites, indeed commands you to ask him to make you want to treat him as holy. You can pray with absolute confidence for God to “hallow his name” because this is his highest aim, his greatest ambition, the highest expression of his love for you.

5

The second thing that Jesus tells us that we should ask our Father in Heaven to do is to send his kingdom. I doubt that most of us, if we were asked to make a list of the things we would most like God to do would put the coming of his kingdom very high on the list, if on the list at all. Part of the problem is because we do not really understand what we are asking for when we ask that God send his kingdom. So what is it that we want God to do when we ask that his kingdom come? What is his kingdom?

The kingdom of God is a massive subject in the Bible. It is one of the central themes of the Bible. Here are a few statements regarding God's kingdom from the Old Testament:

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you; because the kingdom belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations. (Psalm 22:28-29)

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter

of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness. (Psalm 45:6)

The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all. (Psalm 103:19)

All your works ... shall speak of the glory of your kingdom and tell of your power, to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. (Psalm 145:10-13)

We discover in the Old Testament that God's kingdom is an eternal kingdom. The seat of its authority is in heaven. It is from his throne in heaven that God exercises his rule as king over all the nations, over all the universe. So, on one hand God's kingdom is currently in operation and it is this kingdom that holds sway over this earth and all the kingdoms of this earth. There is nothing and no one in this world over which God does not exercise dominion. He is currently ruling as king over the earth.

Yet, there is another sense in which all the kingdoms of this earth are in rebellion to him. This is also expressed repeatedly in the Old Testament.

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us'. (Psalm 2:1-3)

While God's kingdom is currently exercising authority over the universe, yet at the same time, the peoples and nations of the

world are in rebellion against his rule. As Psalm 2 makes clear the rebellion of the nations against God is a futile rebellion. But, it is true that the nations and peoples of the world are in rebellion against God even though their rebellion is limited and circumscribed by God's eternal kingdom. That is, their rebellion only exists by the will of God.

What we discover in Psalm 2 as well as in numerous other places in the Old Testament is that God intends to ultimately subdue all the rebel nations and peoples of the world through his king whom he will establish on his holy hill, Mt. Zion.

So throughout the Old Testament there is an expectation that God's invisible, heavenly kingdom will one day become a visible kingdom upon this earth through the work of God's Anointed One, his Messiah. Thus, when John the Baptist and then Jesus appear in Israel and their message is, "Repent for the kingdom of God is near," everyone in Israel understood that they were claiming that God's king has now come and is preparing to set up God's kingdom on the earth.

Therefore what Jesus was calling for people to do was to acknowledge and turn from their rebellion against God and his rule and to submit to God's rule by submitting to him as God's Messiah. This is what Peter does in Matthew 16:15-16 when Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is and Peter says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." The apostle Nathanael had made the same confession earlier when Jesus first called him to follow him as recorded in John 1:49: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the king of Israel."

Thus, when we ask our Father in heaven to send his kingdom we are praying that right now we and others will bow to Christ. We are praying that we and others will recognize Jesus as God's king and yield to his gracious rule over our lives and trust him

to be our captain, our provider, our protector, our leader. We know that we are members of God's kingdom as we bow the knee to the one who is God's king. We want more and more people in the world to see Jesus for who he is and to join us in glad submission to him.

But we also are praying that Jesus will return and finally and fully establish God's rule upon this earth. We long for the curse of sin and death that is upon this world to be removed by our king and so we are praying for the return of Christ when, as the heavenly hosts proclaim upon the return of Jesus:

'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.' And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, 'We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth'. (Revelation 11:15-18)

So the question all of us must ask ourselves is this: do I want Jesus to be my ruler? Do I want him to be my king? Do I want him to be my captain and provider and protector? Am I willing to trust my future into his hands and to make my future the future of his kingdom? Or do I want to join my future to the future of the kingdoms of this world? Here is the desire of every person who has been born of God and thus calls God his father in heaven: we cannot imagine a better thing than to live in submission to Jesus forever. And so we pray, "your kingdom come."

6

In the third petition of the Lord's Prayer Jesus tells us to ask our heavenly Father: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." What is it that we are asking our Father to do in this petition? To answer that question we must first consider the two ways that "the will of God" is referred to in the Bible.

The first way the Bible refers to God's will is what is called his "will of command" or "his revealed will." Here are some examples from Scripture which refer to this aspect of God's will.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God. (1 Thessalonians 4:3-6)

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not

get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:15-21)

In each of these examples we can see that God's will relates to how we live our lives. He commands us to be sexually pure, to use our time wisely, to not get drunk but be filled with the Spirit, to be connected to the worshipping people of God, giving thanks to God for everything and submitting to one another. God desires that his people live in a certain fashion. There are things he wants us to do and things he does not want us to do. Therefore, when we ask God that his will is done on earth as it is in heaven we are asking God to so work that we and others live the way God wants us to live.

Every command of the Bible can be turned into a prayer for myself and for other believers, that is, all those who can call God their Father because they have been born again by God's Spirit. In addition, we not only ask that Christians obey God but that we obey him like the angels do. That is, we obey with joy, not out of duty.

We obey in dependence upon the Triune God, not depending upon our own strength. We obey so that God is glorified, not ourselves. This is a remarkable petition. Every time you hear a command from God in the Bible you should immediately turn it into a prayer that God would enable you and others to obey it like an angel would. Then, after you obey, you thank God that you obeyed because the only reason you or I ever obey is because God is the one who enables us to do so.

The second way that the will of God is referred to in the Bible is called “God’s will of decree” or “his secret will.” Here are a few examples where this will of God is referred to in the Bible:

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will. (Ephesians 1:11)

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. (1 Peter 4:19)

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. (John 6:39-40)

In these passages we are told that God is working all things according to the purpose of his will. That means that everything in the universe is going in accordance with his perfect will. Two of those things that God controls are then stated in the other two passages.

God wills how and when Christians will suffer and he wills that Christ save all the elect as they trust in Jesus. God does not tell us in advance what his will is in regard to these things. He doesn’t tell me what the weather will be like tomorrow or when I will die and by what manner. He doesn’t tell us who are those that he gave to Christ and who will therefore believe.

We don’t know these things until they happen. Yet all things are

being worked by God according to his will. Therefore, when we ask that God's will be done we are also asking that we will submit to that will, no matter what it might entail for us. We are asking God to enable us to want his will more than we want anything else so that we, like Paul, "will be content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Philippians 4:12).

We will be content because we know that God is working out his will perfectly, and thus we have nothing to fear and can be secure and endure whatever God has determined is best for us.

So let us join our voices with those of the church through the ages in asking God to enable us to obey his revealed will and to gladly submit to his secret will.

7

In the fourth petition of the “Lord’s Prayer” Jesus commands us to ask our Father in heaven, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Again we ask, what is it that Jesus commands us to ask our Father to do for us? Before I answer that question I want to remind you of something I mentioned in an earlier chapter. In giving us this prayer Jesus is telling us the things that God wants to do for us. If we will form our prayers according to this prayer we can be absolutely certain that God will hear and will answer because it is in this prayer that the Son of God, our Savior, Jesus the Messiah, is telling us what God wants to do.

Another thing to draw our attention to before answering our question is this: by putting this request for “daily” bread in the prayer, Jesus is letting us know that prayer is a daily event for the Christian. Every day we are to ask our Father to do all these things. There will never be day when you and I do not need to ask our Father to do these things.

There are several questions that this simple request raises which we need to answer. First, to what does “bread” refer? Can we ask for more than bread? The great reformer Martin Luther explains

what is meant by bread most clearly in his "Shorter Catechism": "Daily bread includes everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors and the like." Everything we need to support our physical existence on this earth for as long as we live upon it is to be asked from our Father in heaven.

Second, how does God provide us with our daily bread? As we think about how God provides for our physical necessities we at once recognize God's providential care of his world. God provides us with food not only by providing rain and sun and fertile soil but also by providing farmers and truckers and railroads and butchers and grocery stores and grocery store clerks and farmers markets and doctors and hospitals and trash collectors and sewage treatment plants and jobs and health and motivation to work at our jobs and everything that we need to live here.

So when we pray for God to give us daily bread, we are asking God to continue working in his world to cause all created things to work together, so that we are provided for in every way we need to be provided for physically.

Third, why does he so strongly emphasize "daily" bread? Are we not to ask God to provide for any need in the future? Jesus includes "daily" in order to restrain our greed and to promote our peace. We have a Father who promises to provide for us (Matthew 6:25-34) and he promises to do so in response to our prayers (Matthew 7:7-11).

Therefore, our prayers are an expression of our confidence he

will provide and a declaration that we are content with his provision. We are not asking God to provide everything today that we will need for the rest of our lives. We are to ask God to provide us today with what we need for today. By praying this prayer we learn to want what we need this day to live for the glory of God and in submission to his rule and obedience to his commands. We learn to be free from anxiety about the future because we are thinking only about what we need this day.

Fourth, if I don't ask God to give me my daily bread does that mean I will go hungry? In one sense this petition is an odd one in light of everything the Bible says about God's caring for his creation. Psalm 145:15-16 says,

The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:45,

He (God our Father) causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Paul says in Acts 14:17,

He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."

If God gives food and everything that everyone needs for physical life to all without their asking, then why does Jesus want me to ask? Martin Luther again gives a clear answer to this question. He says that Christ commands us to ask for daily bread because "he wants us to realize that our entire life and that of

everyone else depends on God; to receive all our physical blessings with thanksgiving and to look to God for physical as well as spiritual provision.”

Fifth, if I do ask does that mean I will never go hungry, that I will always have everything I want and need? This is a far bigger question than I have space to deal with here. Let me simply draw your attention to what Paul says in Philippians 4:12:

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

Then in 2 Corinthians 11:27 as he defends his “credentials” as an apostle he says he was “in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” Was Paul not asking the Father to provide his daily bread? I cannot imagine that to be true.

Thus God’s provision of our physical needs is governed by his goodness and his wise love for us. He will provide us with everything we need to do his will, both revealed and secret, for as long as he has ordained that we live upon this earth.

Sixth, why does he tell us to ask for “our” daily bread? Is it wrong to pray for “my” daily bread? Jesus teaches us by the word “our” that we are to always pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ when we pray. Our prayers are never exclusively concerned with our personal needs but always include the needs of our brothers and sisters. We always pray as a member of the body of Christ. Prayer is therefore not just a private matter but is always concerned for the good of the whole body of Christ.

8

We have come to the fifth petition in the Lord's Prayer, "And forgive us our debts as also we forgave our debtors." This petition raises a host of difficult issues regarding forgiveness. We will begin with the easier issues and move to the more difficult.

First, Jesus helps us to think about what sin is and how we stand in relation to God because of sin by referring to our sins as "debt". This "economic" language helps us to understand sin and forgiveness. God gives me life and breath and everything else for a purpose. He aims for me to use all that he has given me to pursue him as the satisfaction of my soul, to use all my life to know and enjoy and praise him.

However, I use all he has given me to pursue my happiness in other things and people. Thus, I am in his debt because I have not used the resources he has given to me for the purpose for which he gave it (You can read a parable that Jesus used to express this exact idea in Matthew 25:14-30.). Like a man who takes out a business loan to start a business but instead gambles it all away at the casino is in debt to the bank with no way to repay what he owes, so we by our "spending" God's time, life,

resources on other things are in God's debt with no way to repay. Thus, if I am going to escape being thrown into debtor's prison I need God to release me from or forgive my debt.

Second, as we remember that this prayer is a description by Jesus of the things that our Father wants to do for us, it is encouraging to know that God wants to forgive our sins. Every person who is a son or daughter of God through their union with God's only Son can be assured that his or her Father is eager to forgive his or her sins. As the psalmist says (Psalm 130:3-4),

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared."

A third observation is that Christians are to ask God to forgive their sins every day, thus indicating that Christians commit sins every day. There are many within the broader Christian church who teach that Christians are able to come to a place where they are trusting in Jesus so securely that they no longer sin. This petition shows that cannot be the case as every day Jesus commands me to ask my Father in heaven to forgive my sins. Thus he must expect that I will sin daily.

How are we to understand this command from Jesus to ask God daily to forgive my sins when we are told numerous times in the New Testament that all of our sins are already forgiven? For example, Paul says in Colossians 2:13-14,

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside,

nailing it to the cross..

Here Paul says all of our sins, past, present and future, are already forgiven because the record of debt that we incurred with God due to them has been taken out of the way by its being nailed to the cross of Christ. So, why does Jesus want me to ask my Father to forgive my debts when I've already been forgiven of them because he has already paid the debt for me by his life and death?

We must recognize that the one who commands us to ask our Father to forgive our sins is the one who died to secure our forgiveness. Thus we are asking our Father to forgive our sins on the authority of Jesus who lived and died to obtain our forgiveness. We are asking him to forgive us for his sake, in his name, not because we are sincere. We are not in doubt about our forgiveness when we ask; rather we are applying the work of Jesus to each particular sin as we experience it.

It is not that the sin is not forgiven until we ask but that we cannot experience that forgiveness until we ask. Forgiven people are sorry for their sins and go to the Father each time we sin in order to apply the work of Christ to that particular sin and enter into the joy of our forgiveness before God for each particular sin.

Finally, the most difficult part of this petition is the second half. Why does Jesus want us to tell our Father that we forgave all our debtors when we ask him to forgive our particular sins? It would appear from the way that Jesus forms this request that our being forgiven by God is conditioned upon our forgiving others the debts they owe us. This appears even more the case when we add the statement Jesus makes in Matthew 6:14-15:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do

not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your
Father forgive your trespasses.

The question is: do we earn or deserve God's forgiveness because we forgive others?

The answer to that question is no. First of all, vv. 14-15 are a grammatical construction known as a "condition of fact" statement. The two halves of the assertion "if this, then that" are not cause / *effect* but rather *both/and*. In other words, my forgiving others does not cause God to forgive me. Rather, all who are forgiven also forgive others, and if I do not forgive others then it is necessarily true that I am not forgiven. My unforgiveness is the evidence that I have not been forgiven because everyone who is forgiven also forgives others.

It is plain that this is the point that Jesus is making from his response to Peter's question in Matthew 18:21. Peter wants to know how often he must forgive his brother who sins against him, "as many as seven times?" Jesus tells him there is no limit on how many times he must forgive his brother, he must always forgive and then, to make his point, he tells the parable of the unforgiving servant.

The parable describes how a king forgave millions of dollars of debt that one of his servants had accumulated when the servant begged for mercy. However, this forgiven servant, as soon as he leaves the king's presence, encounters a fellow servant who owes him a few hundred dollars. He refuses to forgive him, even though he begs to be forgiven, just as he begged the king. He has him thrown into prison. When the king finds out how the servant treated his fellow servant he arrests him and has him thrown into debtor's prison for his unwillingness to forgive his fellow servant after he had been forgiven such a great debt.

Jesus finishes the parable by saying, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:35). The point is that all who truly understand the graciousness of God in forgiving our enormous debt are gracious people. The evidence that we "get" forgiveness is that we forgive others. You cannot earn forgiveness; it is a free gift. However, all those who have been forgiven the infinite debt they owe God freely forgive those who owe them such inconsequential debts.

We remember before the Lord our having forgiven others when we ask for forgiveness as a reminder of how large our debt is in comparison to the debts others owe us.

9

We come now to the final petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one." This petition, like the others, raises several questions we must answer if we are to understand exactly what it is that our Lord Jesus is telling us our Father wants to do for us. The word translated "temptation" is either translated "trial" or "temptation."

For example, James 1:2 says,

Consider it all joy, brothers, when you encounter various trials.

Or again in 1Peter 1:6-7:

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, you may have had to suffer grief in various kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith, of greater worth than gold... may be proved genuine.

So is Jesus telling us to ask God not to lead us into trials? That would seem odd in view of the fact that we are commanded to

rejoice in trials and that trials are sent by God for a good purpose, that of purifying our faith.

The word is also used as “temptation,” in the sense of being induced to do evil. That is its meaning in 1 Corinthians 7:5, where husbands and wives are commanded not to deprive one another sexually “so that Satan might not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”

It is in this sense that James uses the word in 1:13-14:

Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

Why would Jesus tell us to ask God not to do what it is impossible for God to do?

The answer to these questions is to see the connection between the two ideas expressed by the word translated “temptation.” This petition is based upon the fact that God is the one who is sovereignly directing our lives. Proverbs 20:24 says, “A man’s steps are from the LORD; how then can man understand his way?” God is the one who determines what trials come our way. So in the petition we are asking God not to bring into our lives those trials and difficulties that he knows will overwhelm us and through which we will fall into sin.

We know that in every trial there is a temptation to abandon Christ and pursue sinful strategies either to escape or to bear the trial. Therefore we are asking the Lord not to lead our steps into any trouble that he knows we will be too weak to bear and thus sin. We daily entrust our lives into the Lord’s hands, asking him

to so order the circumstances of our lives in a way that he knows will not destroy us.

The second half of the petition confirms this basic understanding. Paul says to the Thessalonians that he sent Timothy to check up on them and to encourage them because he was afraid that as a result of their undergoing persecution “the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have proved useless.”

Peter says in 1 Peter 5:8-9,

Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.

The idea here is that the evil one, Satan, sends trouble upon us for the purpose of causing us to abandon Christ, to sin. Thus to be delivered from the evil one is for God not to permit him from doing those things to us that the Lord knows will result in our sinning.

We are not asking the Lord never to let any bad thing happen to us, because we know that God uses trial and difficulty and suffering for our good. Rather we are praying that God would only permit into our lives those things which he knows that we can handle.

We are essentially praying back to the Lord the promise he makes to us in 1 Corinthians 10:13:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be

tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

At the core of this petition is the fact that we hate sinning. We know how weak we are and how prone to sin we are, so we daily ask the Lord not to lead us into any circumstance that he knows will overwhelm us, not to permit the devil to do anything to us that will drive us to despair and to turn our back on Jesus. This is our greatest fear and thus this is our prayer.

Let me finish our discussion of this petition by again noting the first person plural pronoun: "us." We are not only concerned for our own spiritual safety but for the spiritual safety of all Christians. Jesus wants us to petition daily our heavenly Father that he would guard and protect our brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as us. It is in this petition that we find the pattern and the motive that stands behind the prayers of Paul on behalf of the churches to which he wrote.

All of his prayers are concerned with the spiritual health and vitality and protection of his "children in the faith." I'll conclude this chapter with Martin Luther's description of what this petition means: "God tempts no one to sin, but we pray in this petition that God may so guard and preserve us that the devil, the world, and our own evil nature may not deceive us or mislead us into unbelief, despair, and other great and shameful sins, but that, although we may be so tempted, we may finally prevail and gain the victory. We pray that our Father in heaven may deliver us from all manner of evil, whether it affect body or soul, property or reputation, and that at last, when the hour of death comes, he may grant us a blessed end and graciously take us from this world of sorrow to himself in heaven."

10

We began our study regarding the theology and practice of prayer where every Christian teacher for the past 2000 years has begun when considering prayer, and that is with Jesus' teaching on prayer in Matthew 6, which is where the main form of "The Lord's Prayer" is recorded for us. Now I think we should consider several important passages in the gospels where Jesus gives further instructions concerning prayer.

Luke 11:1 says,

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'

The gospels regularly report that Jesus was engaging in prayer both privately and, as here, in the presence of his disciples. As one of my favorite Bible teachers, Dr. Howard Hendricks, said, "If it was so necessary for the Son of God to regularly pray, how much more important is it for us to pray."

The main thing to observe here is that one of the disciples

recognizes in Jesus' practice that he is deficient in his understanding and practice of prayer and so he asks Jesus to teach all of the disciples how to pray. This is an excellent prayer for us to pray as well: Lord, teach us to pray.

In response, Jesus tells them first not how to pray but what to pray, by giving them an abbreviated form of the Lord's Prayer. The fact that this is not identical to the prayer in Matthew 6 shows two things.

First, Jesus often repeated himself, just like every good teacher does. When asked how to pray he doesn't tell them anything different from what he has already said.

Second, this shows that the primary purpose of this prayer is not so that we pray it verbatim all the time. Rather, this proves that the prayer is a description of the kinds of things that God the Father wants to do for us. We are to use it to form our prayers, not to be our prayer all the time.

Immediately after giving them this abbreviated form he continues to give them further direction on how to pray. He tells them a parable about a man who had a hungry friend arrive at his house late at night. The man had no food in the house and so he went to his neighbor and began to pound on the door to wake him up so he could get a loaf of bread to feed his visitor.

The neighbor was irritated at being awakened in the middle of the night and told him that he would not get up and give him bread. However, the needy neighbor would not take no for an answer and kept pounding on the door until finally, not being able to sleep with all the racket, the neighbor got up and gave him food for his hungry friend. Jesus applies the parable by drawing attention to the fact that the neighbor did not get up and give him bread because he is his friend but because he

wouldn't stop knocking on the door.

The word he uses to describe the needy neighbor is translated "impudence" in the ESV, "persistence" in the NAS, NKJ, NLT, and RSV, and "boldness" in the NIV. This is the only place it is used in the New Testament. It is used eight times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament it refers to action without any consideration for the opinions of God or other people. It is the shameless, aggressive behavior of a prostitute or the single-minded pursuit of food by a hungry dog or the shameless idolatry of Israel in the face of God's revelation of himself to them. This is why it is translated "impudence" by the ESV. It is a good word to describe the man's behavior: banging on his neighbor's door in the middle of the night even after being told he would not help him.

What was it that motivated the man to act with such impudence? He had a need which he deeply felt: he needed food to give to his hungry friend. He also knew that his neighbor had what he needed. Why is it that you and I are not impudent in our praying? We don't need anything that we cannot provide for ourselves and/or we don't believe that God is able to give us what we need.

The point of this prayer is not that God will only listen to us if we beg and plead. Rather, the point is this:

- Do I need anything that I cannot get for myself?
- Do I believe that my heavenly Father is able to give me what I need?

It is absolutely critical that we read this parable in its context, which is that it immediately follows the Lord's Prayer. Thus, if we are going to be impudent in our prayers then we must desperately desire those things that Jesus tells us to pray in the

Lord's Prayer, and we must be convinced that our heavenly Father wants to and is able to give us those things.

- Do I long for God's name to be glorified?
- Do I yearn for God's kingdom to come?
- Do I crave God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven?
- Do I want daily bread for myself and for other believers?
- Do I desire to have my sins forgiven and the sins of my brothers and sisters in Christ forgiven?
- Do I want to be kept from all sin and all evil, together with the rest of Christ's church?

If these are the things you long for, that you cannot be happy without, then you will be impudent in your prayer life. You will keep on asking, seeking and knocking so that God will give you these things because he has told us that these are the things that our Father in heaven wants to give to us. May our Lord Jesus teach us to pray with impudence.

11

One of the things that inhibits our prayers is that so often it appears that what we ask God to do never happens. I think of the numerous times as a young father I prayed for my sick little children to stop throwing up and they didn't. I think of a mom I knew who asked the Lord to protect her son when he went mountain climbing in the Rocky Mountains, but he fell and died. This mom wanted nothing more to do with God as a result. Probably most everyone can quickly call to mind prayers they have prayed, some for big things, some for small things, which apparently went unanswered. The fact of unanswered prayer has led to a wide variety of explanations ranging from the atheist who uses this reality as one of their chief proofs that God doesn't exist to the religious one who says this merely proves there is something wrong with the one who prays, either with their faith or their moral character.

The Bible knows that many prayers go unanswered. In Psalm 22:2 the psalmist writes,

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer. Job says (19:6-7), "...know then that God has put me in

the wrong and closed his net about me. Behold, I cry out, 'Violence!' but I am not answered; I call for help, but there is no justice."

Or consider the pathetic cries of the psalmist in that darkest of psalms, Psalm 88:

"O LORD, God of my salvation; I cry out day and night before you. Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry! ... I, O LORD, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?"

The Bible also gives a number of ways to think about the reality of unanswered prayer. We have one of those ways given by Jesus at the end of the passage we considered in the last chapter. In Luke 11:9-10, as part of his answer to his disciple's request, "Teach us to pray," after summarizing the Lord's Prayer and telling the parable of the two neighbors, Jesus makes one of those bold and well-known promises regarding prayer. He says,

And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

If you simply take this statement all by itself, ripping it out of its context, then unanswered prayer becomes a serious challenge to the Christian faith. This is why we must always seek to understand the Scriptures in their context. This is simply stating in principle what he demonstrated in the parable: All those who desperately want what God promises to give in the Lord's Prayer and who believe that God is willing and able to give what

he promises will persistently pray. They will keep on asking, seeking, and knocking, and our Father in heaven will answer. So we should continually and persistently ask our Father to give us those things that Jesus commands us to ask in the Lord's Prayer.

But notice what Jesus says next. He draws an analogy between human fathers and our heavenly Father. He makes the point that if human fathers, who are by nature evil, normally respond to the requests of their children for food by providing them with food, then how much more will the heavenly Father, who is not evil but all good, give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?

Why does Jesus make such an obvious point about the nature of God at this exact point in his discussion on prayer? He has just said that God is going to answer every person who persistently, "with impudence," asks God to give those things delineated in the Lord's Prayer. Every true child of God will continually ask his Father to give him or her the good things identified in the Lord's Prayer, and Jesus assures us that just as evil human fathers give good things to their children, so God can be counted on to give the Holy Spirit to his praying children.

There are two points Jesus is making.

First, when you and I ask God to hallow his name, to send his kingdom, to cause his will to be done, to give daily bread, we are asking him to do what is good. However, in answering those prayers it may appear that he has given a snake instead of a fish or a scorpion instead of an egg. Yet, Jesus emphasizes that we can always be sure that our good heavenly Father is not giving us evil things when we ask for good, no matter what it looks like. Whatever he gives in response to our prayers is good.

This leads to the second point: what is the main good gift that our Father aims to give us? The Holy Spirit is the good gift he

gives as we pray. We ask for a job, we remain unemployed for a year, and he gives us the Holy Spirit. We ask for a job and the next day we get the dream job with lifelong job security, and he gives us the Holy Spirit. We ask for his name to be hallowed in the salvation of our child, and the child never repents and believes, but he gives us the Holy Spirit. We ask God to save our child for His glory and he trusts Christ at age five and never strays but goes on to be a leader in the church, and he gives us the Holy Spirit. We ask for a child to be healed, but the child remains injured for life and he gives us the Holy Spirit. We ask for a child to be healed and she is healed, and he gives us the Holy Spirit.

What God aims to give every praying child of God is himself. He is the best gift and the greatest good he ever can give to you. God answers our prayers for everything contained in the Lord's Prayer in such a way that, according to his perfect wisdom, he is always giving to us that best gift, himself, by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

We are to pray all that he commands we ask in the Lord's Prayer knowing that he will perfectly grant every request we make in such a way that we discover more of his greatness and glory. We learn, as he answers our prayers, by the work of the Holy Spirit that it is really true that "earth has nothing I desire, besides you" (Psalm 73:25) and "my soul finds rest in God alone" (Psalm 62:1).

12

Thus far we've looked at the Lord's Prayer as recorded in Matthew 6 and then his teaching regarding prayer in Luke 11. In this chapter I want us to look at a passage that has caused many Christians much consternation over the years, and is a favorite passage of those who teach that your faith is the factor which determines whether or not you receive what you ask from God in prayer.

Matthew 21:22 says,

And whatever you ask for in prayer, you will receive
if you have faith.

That seems like such a straightforward assertion: the success or failure of your prayers is entirely dependent upon your faith. It appears to affirm what some Christians I knew a long time ago said about a mutual friend who died of cancer: "He died because he did not believe the Lord had healed him. He doubted and so he died." Is this what Jesus means to teach us about prayer and faith?

In order to answer that question we first need to place this verse in its context. In vv.18-19 Jesus curses a fig tree and it immediately withers. Jesus' cursing of the fig tree is set in the midst of his entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey colt, acclaimed as the Messiah (vv.1-11), his cleansing the temple (vv.12-17), and his confrontations with and condemnation of the religious leaders of Israel (vv.23-46).

Fig trees are a frequent sign of God's favor on his people (1 Kings 4:25, Isaiah 36:16) and their destruction is a sign of God's judgment on Israel (Joel 1:22, Micah 7:1-6). The temple in Jerusalem is full of religious activity commanded by God. Yet Jesus says about the religion of these people when he cleanses the temple that while God intended the place where he dwells in the midst of his people to be a place of prayer, they are using it as a place to make money. In other words, Jesus' complaint is that the religious leaders appeared to be for God, but actually, they were for money.

The disciples and the first readers of Matthew's gospel would have known that the fruit appears on a fig tree at the same time that the leaves appear. So if a fig tree had leaves, it also should have fruit. However, Jesus approaches this fig tree full of leaves, rightly expecting to find fruit, and he finds none. When he finds no fruit, he sees a perfect opportunity to give a graphic picture of God's opinion of religious hypocrites. He curses the tree and it immediately withers. Jesus' cursing of the fig tree is an expression of the wrath of God against all religious pretension.

Repeatedly in the Old Testament this is God's complaint against the religious Israelites. He continually accuses them of using all the gifts he gives them and participating in the religious activities he commanded, while at the same time they indulge in all kinds of sinful behavior and the worship of idols.

The disciples, rather than trembling at the warning this cursing is intended to deliver, are amazed that the tree withered so quickly and so they ask, "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" Jesus displays the great love of God and patience of God with his people by showing them the means God has given to keep us from being trees with leaves but no fruit. Jesus tells them that if they believe and do not doubt, then they will do what he just did, they will speak to a fig tree and it will immediately wither. They will even be able to "say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea and it will happen.'" Does Jesus mean this literally? Obviously not. We have no record of any of these apostles or for that matter of any Christian in the last 2000 years doing either one of these things. He is using, as every good teacher does, metaphor and hyperbole.

So what is it that Jesus' disciples will be able to do if they believe and do not doubt? First, it is important to recognize that the last sentence (v.22) is another way of saying the same thing. Being able to speak to fig trees and mountains and have them obey you is the same thing as getting whatever you ask for in prayer. Jesus is promising the disciples that they will be able to overcome and eliminate religious hypocrisy by their speech and their prayers. They are going to be a part of God's campaign to rid the earth of religious hypocrites. Mountains are often portrayed as obstacles to a certain course of action. "This mountain" refers in the immediate context to Mt. Zion on which the city of Jerusalem is located. Jerusalem is the prototype for all the religious pretension that opposes God's purposes in the world.

The Old Testament is full of God's promise that the day is coming when he will make a new covenant with his people. He will remove their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. He will cleanse them of their sins and eliminate their desire to disobey him. He will put his Spirit in them and cause them to

walk in his ways. In short, God's purpose is to create a people who will publicly draw near to him in order to pray, not to parade their own righteousness.

Jesus promises his disciples that they are going to be able to accomplish this great work by their prayerfully speaking to all that stands in the way of God's purpose to create a holy people. The "whatever you ask" of v. 22 is not an unqualified "whatever your heart wants" but rather it is qualified by this purpose of God. It is "whatever you want God to do in order to create holy people, who are happy in God and not using God to get something else."

What is it that they and we must have faith in and not doubt? Again, we must pay attention to the context.

The context is full of the contrast between the unbelief of the religious leaders and the faith expressed by the crowds who acclaim Jesus, the blind and crippled who come to be healed by Jesus, the children who worship Jesus, and the tax-collectors and prostitutes who believed John the Baptist's words about Jesus.

The religious leaders do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah. They do not believe that salvation is by grace. They reject Jesus as the Savior and trust in themselves and their religious performance. Jesus is emphasizing that the condition of belonging to God and of living in his kingdom is faith in him.

Thus those who will be able to eliminate religious pretension in themselves and in others by their speech and prayers are those who trust in Jesus as the one who makes us holy and do not doubt that God is able to make hypocrites into true worshippers of God.

13

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In order to answer that question we first need to place this verse in its context. In vv.18-19 Jesus curses a fig tree and it immediately withers. Jesus' cursing of the fig tree is set in the midst of his entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey colt, acclaimed as the Messiah (vv.1-11), his cleansing the temple (vv.12-17), and his confrontations with and condemnation of the religious leaders of Israel (vv.23-46).

Fig trees are a frequent sign of God's favor on his people (1 Kings 4:25, Isaiah 36:16) and their destruction is a sign of God's judgment on Israel (Joel 1:22, Micah 7:1-6). The temple in Jerusalem is full of religious activity commanded by God. Yet Jesus says about the religion of these people when he cleanses the temple that while God intended the place where he dwells in the midst of his people to be a place of prayer, they are using it as a place to make money. In other words, Jesus' complaint is that the religious leaders appeared to be for God, but actually, they were for money.

The disciples and the first readers of Matthew's gospel would have known that the fruit appears on a fig tree at the same time that the leaves appear. So if a fig tree had leaves, it also should have fruit. However, Jesus approaches this fig tree full of leaves, rightly expecting to find fruit, and he finds none. When he finds no fruit, he sees a perfect opportunity to give a graphic picture of God's opinion of religious hypocrites. He curses the tree and it immediately withers. Jesus' cursing of the fig tree is an expression of the wrath of God against all religious pretension.

Repeatedly in the Old Testament this is God's complaint against the religious Israelites. He continually accuses them of using all the gifts he gives them and participating in the religious activities he commanded, while at the same time they indulge in all kinds of sinful behavior and the worship of idols.

The disciples, rather than trembling at the warning this cursing is intended to deliver, are amazed that the tree withered so quickly and so they ask, "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" Jesus displays the great love of God and patience of God with his people by showing them the means God has given to keep us from being trees with leaves but no fruit. Jesus tells them that if they believe and do not doubt, then they will do what he just did, they will speak to a fig tree and it will immediately wither. They will even be able to "say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea and it will happen.'" Does Jesus mean this literally? Obviously not. We have no record of any of these apostles or for that matter of any Christian in the last 2000 years doing either one of these things. He is using, as every good teacher does, metaphor and hyperbole.

So what is it that Jesus' disciples will be able to do if they believe and do not doubt? First, it is important to recognize that the last sentence (v.22) is another way of saying the same thing. Being able to speak to fig trees and mountains and have them obey you is the same thing as getting whatever you ask for in prayer. Jesus is promising the disciples that they will be able to overcome and eliminate religious hypocrisy by their speech and their prayers. They are going to be a part of God's campaign to rid the earth of religious hypocrites. Mountains are often portrayed as obstacles to a certain course of action. "This mountain" refers in the immediate context to Mt. Zion on which the city of Jerusalem is located. Jerusalem is the prototype for all the religious pretension that opposes God's purposes in the world.

The Old Testament is full of God's promise that the day is coming when he will make a new covenant with his people. He will remove their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. He will cleanse them of their sins and eliminate their desire to disobey him. He will put his Spirit in them and cause them to

walk in his ways. In short, God's purpose is to create a people who will publicly draw near to him in order to pray, not to parade their own righteousness.

Jesus promises his disciples that they are going to be able to accomplish this great work by their prayerfully speaking to all that stands in the way of God's purpose to create a holy people. The "whatever you ask" of v. 22 is not an unqualified "whatever your heart wants" but rather it is qualified by this purpose of God. It is "whatever you want God to do in order to create holy people, who are happy in God and not using God to get something else."

What is it that they and we must have faith in and not doubt? Again, we must pay attention to the context.

The context is full of the contrast between the unbelief of the religious leaders and the faith expressed by the crowds who acclaim Jesus, the blind and crippled who come to be healed by Jesus, the children who worship Jesus, and the tax-collectors and prostitutes who believed John the Baptist's words about Jesus.

The religious leaders do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah. They do not believe that salvation is by grace. They reject Jesus as the Savior and trust in themselves and their religious performance. Jesus is emphasizing that the condition of belonging to God and of living in his kingdom is faith in him.

Thus those who will be able to eliminate religious pretension in themselves and in others by their speech and prayers are those who trust in Jesus as the one who makes us holy and do not doubt that God is able to make hypocrites into true worshippers of God.

14

When you pray for other Christians, where do you begin? It is not hard to figure out where Paul begins in his prayers for other believers. In each of his letters but three (Galatians, 1 Timothy, Titus), Paul begins the letter declaring either his gratitude to God for the believers to whom he is writing or praise to God for his gracious work on behalf of his people.

When Paul prays for Christians he always begins with thanksgiving and praise to God. In this chapter I want to think in particular about Paul's prayers of thanksgiving to God for other believers. Most of us read those opening statements in Paul's letters regarding the thanks he gives to God for others like we read greeting cards. They sound sweet and sentimental but don't really mean anything. But nothing can be further from the truth. Paul's reporting his thanks to God for Christians is meant to instruct us on how and why to pray for other Christians.

There are three things that Paul's prayers of thanksgiving tell us.

First, you and I only thank people if what we have received from that person is something we wanted (I know we often say thank

you for things we didn't want out of politeness. But we are thinking here about true gratitude.). The intensity of your gratitude is directly related to your desire for the thing given. So Paul gives thanks for God's work in and for other Christians because he wants good things for other believers. When God acts on behalf of others, Paul is delighted and so gives thanks because he yearns for God to do good to others.

Second, true thanksgiving is always a response to the grace and kindness of another. We give thanks because we know that we did not deserve the thing given but the gift came to us because of the kindness, the love, the grace of another. No one thanks their employer for giving him his paycheck because it is owed to him. It is not a gift. Thus, Paul thanks God for other believers because he knows that these Christians are a gift given as an act of God's kindness and grace.

Third, you only thank people for the things that they do. If Aunt Betty gives you a gift card for your favorite restaurant you don't write a thank you note to your Uncle Charlie for the gift card. I am going to list three of the things for which Paul thanks God in the lives of other believers. I would encourage you to skim through all Paul's letters and make a complete list for yourself to help you see and be grateful to God for his numerous gifts of grace in the lives of others. Here are three things for which Paul thanks God:

Romans 1:8:

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.

It has become common knowledge throughout the Roman Empire that there is a Christian church in Rome. People are talking, gossiping, if you will, about the faith in Christ of the

Christians in Rome. How did that happen? God has caused people, presumably, many non-Christian people, to take note of their faith and caused these people to talk about what they have witnessed throughout the Roman Empire.

Paul is convinced that if God had not acted, then the faith of the Christians in Rome would not be widely known. So whenever we hear of people talking about the faith of Christians we should thank God for causing this to happen. Also, it would be appropriate if we were to ask God to cause people to gossip about our faith.

Colossians 1:3-4:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints.

Paul thanks God every time he prays for the Christians in Colossae, even though he has never met them, for their faith in Christ and for their love for other believers. Paul does not thank them for their faith and for their love because neither originates in them. When people trust in Jesus and love other Christians it is a miracle of divine grace. Not only are we to thank God for the faith and love of other believers, this shows us that we also ought to ask God to increase the faith and love of other believers because we know he is the author of these virtues.

1 Thessalonians 2:13:

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in

you believers.

Paul knows that the reason these people accepted the gospel which he preached to them as the word of God was because God caused them to accept it as his word. If you or anyone you know accepts the Bible as God's very word it is not because you are smarter or more spiritual or logical than your friends and family who do not accept it as God's word. You accept it by an act of God's free and sovereign grace which overcame all your resistance. Thus you have no ground for being smug or condescending towards those who do not yet believe it. Rather we must be grateful to God for his work of grace in us and others and plead with God to have mercy on those who do not yet accept it as his word.

This is particularly relevant for parents as we seek to teach the word of God to our children. They will only receive it as God's word by an act of God's grace, and so we should be asking God to do this work in them, and then give thanks to God when we see them accept the teaching of the Bible as God's very word to them.

These are only three of the dozens of things for which Paul thanks God. I would encourage you to make it an occasion of personal study and reflection to identify all the things for which Paul gives thanks to God so that you will be grateful to God for all that he does.