

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: The Lord's Prayer
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The Lord's Prayer: Introduction

The Lord's Prayer, it has been observed, is probably the most significant statement in Scripture concerning prayer. If it should be asked why, the answer is found in the title traditionally given to it: "the Lord's Prayer." It wasn't Abraham's prayer, or David's prayer or Paul's prayer. It is the Lord's Prayer, something more than a mere man setting an example for other mere men.¹ This was not one sinner praying so that other sinners may hear. This is the counsel of the sinless God-man, our Lord Jesus Christ. So, we are told here, in response to the disciples' request, precisely how our Lord wants us to pray. First of all, the prayer may properly be designated "the Lord's Prayer" only in the sense that He is its source.² Jesus authored the prayer on behalf of His disciples, not Himself. Jesus does not need to pray for personal forgiveness. Finally, a word needs to be said about reciting the Lord's Prayer. There is no innate "magic" in simply reciting these words. They are not a mantra or a charm that can be used like the formula abracadabra. In the word of one old trusty Divine, "To commit idolatry about the Lord's Prayer is to ascribe to it some Divine power or veneration which does not belong to it. This is done by those persons who imagine that the words themselves, because Christ is their author, possess such worth and efficacy with the Father, that the bare repetition of them, unaccompanied by the attentive exercises of the mind, is sufficient for obtaining blessings from heaven. The true way of avoiding this danger is not to neglect the use of this prayer, but to entertain a deep and serious conviction that an unmeaning muttering of any words whatsoever to the Supreme being is absolute ungodliness – that there is no value in their sound – that the matter conveyed by these expressive words ought to be carefully and devoutly considered – that the mind ought to be prepared for being excited by means of the words to the desire of heavenly things, and, when excited for expressing its desire to the Supreme being. If this be done, there remains not even the semblance of idolatry. The frequent repetition of the Lord's Prayer, which raises our minds to our Heavenly Father, and teaches us to ascribe to Him alone *the kingdom, the power, and the glory* is really attended by no greater danger, in reference to that prayer, than the frequent repetition, strict enforcement, and careful examination of the words of the second commandment, by which all idolatry is forbidden."³

I. HOW NOT TO PRAY: TWO ILLUSTRATIONS

Prayer, by its very nature, is a religious act, and, as such, is an aspect of religious belief. People who only pray when confronted by danger or some demanding situation, reveal that they are, in fact, only concerned with their immediate circumstances and not the least bit concerned with their relationship to their Creator. B.M. Palmer once wrote, "Prayer is not only universally binding as the language of the creature and the sinner, but also as that of the worshipper. Stamped with the divine image as being made 'a living soul,' man's high prerogative is to catch upon the mirror of his own nature the glory of the Creator, and to reflect it back upon him in intelligent and holy worship. His headship over nature is to this end: That, in the interpretation of her secrets, he may disclose the 'eternal power and Godhead' hidden in them from the creation of the world; and, as the organ of her hitherto silent praise, may pour it forth in psalms of joy before His throne. Man is ordained a priest to render vocal the worship of all the creatures; which is first made instinct with the life and heart his intelligence and love shall supply. It is a high and solemn function, binding on all who possess the powers of thought and feeling which

distinguish men from the brutes. If sin has blinded the understanding, blunted the affections, defiled the conscience, and enslaved the will of the sinner, so much the worse for him; for there can be no release from the responsibility which belongs to him as the man to render ‘incense to God and a pure offering.’ If in his perverseness he shall bring ‘the torn and the lame and the sick’ for sacrifice, it will surely not be accepted; but neither shall he be discharged from the obligation to ‘offer the sacrifices of thanksgiving’ unto the Lord.”⁴

A. Avoid Ostentatious and Sanctimonious Displays

“It would seem that, just as was the case with helping the poor, so there was a tendency for people to use their prayers as a means of impressing others with their piety. But prayer is to be communion with God, not a means of increasing one’s reputation. To pray with a view to impressing people is wrongheaded. Jesus calls on praying people to consider what they are doing. They should concentrate on the matter in hand and forget the plaudits of people.”⁵ Let me add that the text is *not* concerned with the posture we take in prayer, nor does the passage prohibit public prayer.⁶ It is dealing with the *motive* of prayer. Ridderbos notes, “One should not conclude from this command of Jesus that He condemned all communal or public prayers (cf. v. 9; Acts 3:1). His ultimate concern was not with the place of prayer; indeed, one can even call attention to oneself by praying in an inner room with the door closed. Rather, the contrast that He draws between the prayer of His disciples and that of the hypocrites is concerned with the *motive* of prayer. The sole purpose of prayer is to glorify God. Since the presence of other people can so easily compromise the purity of this motive, prayer should always be as inconspicuous as possible. God sees even the secret prayer, and He will reward it in time.”⁷

B. Avoid Superstitious Beliefs

The other caution is directed not against pretense, but against superstition. It will be seen, however, that the two belong to the same category, and therefore are most appropriately dealt with together. What is the sin of the formalist? It is that his heart is not in his worship. What is the folly of the vain repetitionist? It is the same – that his heart is not in his words. For there is no discouragement of repetition, if it be prompted by genuine earnestness. Our Lord again and again encouraged even importunate prayer, and Himself in the Garden offered the same petition three times in close succession. It is not, then, repetition, but “vain repetition” – empty of heart, of desire, of hope – that is here rebuked; not much prayer, but “much speaking,” the folly of supposing that the mere “saying” of prayers is of any use apart from the emotions of the heart in which true prayer essentially consists.⁸ Actually, the KJV does not, in this case, properly capture the thought. The ESV rendering is more accurate. In view is the attempt to manipulate God thought repetitive, perhaps even magical phrases, as the verb BATTALOGIEN, “babble,” and the noun POLULOGIA, “much speaking,” suggest. BATTALOGIEN, and onomatopoeic word, is probably derived from the cognate noun meaning “stammerer” or “stutterer.” The verb here, however, refers not to a speech impediment, but to the repetition of meaningless syllables. POLULOGIA seems to have in mind vain repetition and lengthiness. They “think” (DOKOUSIN) they will be heard by means of their devices, but in this they are mistaken. The disciples are to avoid this kind of “praying” but are to realize that what they need is already known to God. Prayer does not inform God about their needs.⁹

CONCLUSION: Ezekiel Hopkins, another one of the worthy old Puritans, made these helpful remarks, “There is, therefore, a great deal of difference between much-speaking in prayer and speaking much in prayer: For certainly, a man may speak much to God in prayer, when yet he may not be guilty of much-speaking: For there is a compendious way of speaking, to speak much in a little; and there is a babbling way of speaking, when, by many tedious ambages and long impertinencies, men pour out a sea of words, and scarce one drop of sense or matter. Now it is this last way of speaking unto God, which our Saviour here condemns. And condemns it justly: For it shows either folly or irreverence. Folly, in that it is a sign we do not sufficiently consider what we ask: Irreverence, in that it is a sign we do not consider of

whom we ask. And such men are rather to be esteemed talkative than devout. But when a man's soul is full fraught with matter (of which, if he duly weighs either his spiritual wants or his temporal sorrows and afflictions, he can never be unfurnished) to pour out his soul, and with a torrent of holy rhetoric lay open his case before God, begging seasonable supplies in suitable expressions, certainly he cannot fall under the reproof of much-speaking, although he may speak much and long: For such a one hath much to say; and, whilst matter and affections last, let his prayer be an hour long, yea a day long, yea an eternity long, as our praises shall be in heaven, he is not to be censured for a babbler, but hath still spoken much in a little."¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ C. Samuel Storms, *Reaching God's Ear* (Tyndale, 1988), p. 174

² The "Lord's Prayer," as it has been traditionally called, is, in the opinion of some, poorly named. Darrell Bock writes, "Here, the prayer is the direct result of a request from the disciples to be given a community prayer such as John the Baptist's community has. Such community prayers were not unusual. The Jews had the Eighteen Benedictions, and the disciples' remarks make it clear that John also had a community prayer. The Qumran community had numerous hymns and prayers (1Q34; 4Q507-9). This makes the Lord's Prayer really "the Disciples' Prayer." It was given to exemplify the attitude of dependence that Jesus' disciples should have." *Luke: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (IVP, 1994), p. 202.

³ Herman Witsius, *The Lord's Prayer* (rpt. P&R, 1994) p. 136.

⁴ B.M. Palmer, *Theology of Prayer* (rpt. Sprinkle, 1980), p. 56.

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (IVP, 1998), p. 139.

⁶ If Jesus were forbidding all public prayer, then clearly the early church did not understand him (e.g., 18:19-20; Acts 1:24; 3:1; 4:24-30). The public versus private antithesis is a good test of one's motives; the person who prays more in public than in private reveals that he is less interested in God's approval than in human praise. Not piety, but a reputation for piety, is his concern. Cf. D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew* (Zondervan, 1984), p. 165.

⁷ H.N. Ridderbos, *Bible Student's Commentary: Matthew* (Zondervan, 1987), p. 124

⁸ J.M. Gibson, *The Expositor's Bible: Matthew* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1956), p. 717.

⁹ Donald Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew* (Word, 1993), p. 147.

¹⁰ *The Works of Ezekiel Hopkins I* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), p. 54.