

Prayer

What is prayer?

Prayer is a humble and sincere speech with God. James instructs to ask in faith without doubting. The opening words of the Lord's Prayer already teach us to securely trust our Heavenly Father in faith. A natural child trusts his father and relates to other children what he has promised. We can pray and speak much more in faith. The apostle said, as I believe so also I speak.

Jesus said: "God is a spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24). The child of God can pray in "the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father." (Rom. 8:15). It is a plea of a meritless child of God, together with other believers, or alone whenever one feels the need. It is not in the manner of the Pharisees listing their own accomplishments.

As believers we need to pray in many states of mind: Sometimes with thanksgiving that God would allow his blessing to rest upon us; sometimes as David to cry from the depths when heavy trials and temptations surround us, "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications." (Ps. 130:1-2). In the great distress of the people of Israel, on the shore of the Red Sea, where the sea was in front of them and the Egyptian army behind them, the "Lord said unto Moses, Wherefore criest unto me? speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward." (2 Moses 14:15).

What should we pray for?

First for a humble heart. God said He gives grace unto the humble and the rich he hath sent away empty. God threatens much worse to the proud and pious that he shall take them away from the midst of his people, that only the poor and lowly people remain. Jesus teaches us in the Lord's Prayer to request spiritual and temporal gifts. In everyday bread we ask for all temporal needs, as Luther explains in the catechism. We ask that his kingdom would come, in which kingdom there is the forgiveness of sins to them who pray for God's pardon and the forgiveness of sins. We ask for strength to avoid temptations and if we fall into sin then strength unto repentance. Also we ask for strength to put away from our conscience those sins which trouble our conscience that they would not weigh us down and begin to dry our life of faith. Sometimes such a condition of conscience where sin troubles has been compared to a pebble which has gone unnoticed into our shoe and there it rubs the foot and makes the travel difficult. I have sometimes thought, why someone endeavoring on the way of faith has let such a pebble of sin be on the conscience for years, even decades, to slow one's travel. Someone may have put them away on their death bed. That's good even then. Our experience, nevertheless, is that although we do not know of anything special on the conscience, our journey is often slow and troublesome.

The most important matter in our personal prayer is, that God would protect us in faith, in which would be seen fruits flowing from faith. Then once when our brief endeavor ends, a testimony would be left in the congregation that our soul was acceptable to God.

Praying in behalf of others

The love of Christ exhorts us to pray also in behalf of others. The Apostle Paul left us a precious example of this as he relates having prayed in behalf of the Ephesians. “For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end.”

Believing parents often feel urgent need to pray in behalf of beloved children, that they would remain in faith. Or if some of them have already gone into the world, that they would receive grace of repentance from the ways of the prodigal son. But it is also important to pray in behalf of our dear home congregation and the entire Zion, that God could care for them through his Word and spirit protecting in true doctrine and grace, and that He would give faithful teachers who correctly divide the Word of Life and also that God would open to them the door of his Word. “Withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds.” (Col. 4:3). Paul asks for intercessions, that he who had preached to others would not be a castaway. Throughout all times there have been those whom God has not been able to help in spite of prayers. Being disobedient they have lost their faith. Then they have established fleshly spiritless heresies. During such storms the prayers of watching souls have risen as cries to the ears of God: Enlighten, dear father, where the kingdom of God is. God has promised through Zechariah: “And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried.” God hears the cries of his children: “They shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, the Lord is my God.” (Zech. 13:9).

In chapter 12 of the Acts of the Apostles is related how the disciples earnestly prayed in behalf of Peter whom Herod had taken into custody. God soon heard those prayers and sent an angel to free him. Peter went to knock at the door of the house where the disciples were. The damsel Rhoda goes to the door, hears Peter’s voice and in gladness runs to relate that Peter is knocking at the door. They did not believe at once but said unto her: “Thou art mad.”

James said, “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” But he teaches to be content with the will of God and says, “If the Lord will, we shall live and do this, or that.” (James 4 and 5).

Paul instructs to pray “for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty” (1 Tim. 2:2). Jesus taught to pray even in behalf of our enemies. Many times it has happened that those prayers have been heard. Former persecutors and mockers have received the grace of repentance, as did Saul of Tarsus.

All prayers are not acceptable to God

David says, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.” (Ps. 66:18). “He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law [that is, from God’s Word], even his prayer shall be abomination.” (Prov. 28:9). The Bible says of Esau that he did not find a place for repentance, though he sought it with tears.

The Pharisee’s prayer was not acceptable to God for he was one of whom Paul says: “For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness” (Rom. 10:3). John also speaks of such sins which have led to spiritual death. He says not to pray in behalf of those who have fallen in this way. He obviously means blasphemy against the Holy Spirit which is not forgiven, or if the time of visitation has gone by for someone as with the king of Israel, Saul.

God hears the unbelievers’ prayers, especially if they are seeking God’s kingdom, seeking for the true grace of repentance. Cornelius and the eunuch of Candace, the queen of Ethiopia, are good examples of this, among many others.

When I have sometimes encouraged unbelievers unto repentance they have said they cannot repent for they have no distress of conscience. I have agreed that it is the truth but have encouraged them at the same time to pray to God that He would awaken their conscience and grant the grace of penitence and faith.

Also, a child of God, as the result of being unwatchful, is in danger of losing true self-knowledge. Even the effects of self-righteousness or some other darkening of our life of faith are not far from us. That is why it is necessary to pray as we pray in the communion prayer: Grant me Thy holy grace that with Peter I would weep over my sins, and also have strength to believe them forgiven so that, as the sinful woman, I could comprehend sincere love toward the Lord Jesus, who forgives sins.

John also writes, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” The confession of our own unsuccessful endeavor of faith and begging for grace, which we often hear among God’s children, is wholesome for our life of faith.

How often ought we to pray?

We can pray regardless of the time or place, alone or aloud together with others, or quietly in our hearts. However, the saints of the Bible also had special times of prayer. The psalmists relate of praying twice or three times a day (Ps. 88:1; 55:17). It is also said of Daniel, he gave thanks and prayed three times a day.

Remember also to give thanks for the gifts one has received

Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving, Paul writes to the Colossians. In the same way also to the Thessalonians: “Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. Quench not the Spirit.” (1 Thes. 5:16-19).

When everything seems to be going well with a believer, one has good health and temporal matters succeed, it can happen that one doesn't even pray very often. That is why the apostle instructs unto thanksgiving and prayer and warns not to quench the Spirit. God in His love can that which is more needful for us.”

We as children of God can also feel such poverty that it seems we cannot find words with which to pray. The apostle comforts: Even then the Spirit makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. God's Word also assures us that the Lord Jesus is our perfect intercessor at the right hand of the Father. Therefore we can always be of good cheer.

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