

# “When You Pray...”

*Matthew 6:5-15 (text); Jonah 3:1-10; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 45*

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo February 10, 2013

Today, we come to the last portion of the third part of the Heidelberg Catechism, which is about sanctification or living as citizens of God's kingdom. The first part of sanctification is the explanation of the moral law, the Ten Commandments. The second part is about prayer, which we begin today.

How is your prayer life? This is one of the more embarrassing questions that Christians ask each other, because our prayer life usually consists in a few minutes in our daily devotions. Is this the state of your prayer life? Squeezing it into the last part of the day just to get the routine done? Before a meal, fathers pray the same prayers. Before going to bed, children pray the same prayers. Pastors fumble and mumble around at prayer time during the worship service. Some websites actually advocate a “One-Minute Prayer” time, in which Christians stopped whatever they were doing to spend *one minute* praying. In stark contrast to this, our Lord spent a whole night praying in the garden of Gethsemane for his people and for his own peace before his death.

Our prayer life is in such condition because we often forget the reasons why we pray to our Father in heaven. Even worse, we really do not know what kinds of prayers are acceptable to God. And then, often, we do not even know what to pray for. Today, we open our series on the Lord's Prayer on this theme: “When You Pray...” under three headings: first, **Consider Why You Pray**; second, **Consider What is Acceptable to the Father**; and third, **Consider the Content of Your Prayer**.

## Consider Why You Pray

One thing that Christians and many churches usually forget about prayer is that our Lord himself gave us a model prayer. It is not a prayer that he himself prays, since it includes the petition, “Forgive us our trespasses,” and he never committed any sin. But it is for all Christians to pray, Jesus himself commanding us, “When you pray...”

Up to when I was a young teenager in the 1960s, most Protestant churches taught their congregations to memorize the Lord's Prayer and recited it together every worship service. Why then is this prayer almost wholly neglected by evangelical churches today, so that many Christians have not even memorized it? One reason is that many evangelical churches teach that the Lord's Prayer was commanded by Jesus to Israel alone, and is of the law and not of grace. This is because they believe that there are two kingdoms of God: one of Israel, and another one of the church. So they teach that the whole Sermon on the Mount, of which the Lord's Prayer is a part, is only for Jews, and not for Christians. This is a great travesty!

Notice that Jesus said to his disciples, “*When* you pray...” not “*If* you pray...” This is a command! It is not an option in a Christian's life. But the reason why we are to pray is not only because it is commanded in Scripture. Question 116 of the Heidelberg Catechism tells us two main reasons why prayer is necessary for Christians.

First, "it is the chief part of thankfulness which God requires of us." Why would prayer be the "chief" or highest part of our thankfulness to God? Is not doing good works mentioned first by the Catechism as our response to our redemption by the blood of Christ, so that "with our whole life we show ourselves thankful to God for His blessing" (HC 86)?

But I suggest that the Catechism is telling us that good works and prayer go hand in hand. They are inseparable, as the song goes, "love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage" (since Valentine's Day is four days away). The Ten Commandments that we concluded last Lord's Day is the moral law required for a Christian's life. We actually read about this in the conclusion to the Ten Commandments in HC 115. What's the use of preaching the law, since no one can keep them in this life? The answer is threefold: first, so that we may be convicted of sin; second, so that we may be driven to repentance in Christ; and third, so that "without ceasing we diligently ask God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we be renewed more and more after the image of God, until we attain the goal of perfection after this life."

This third reason connects the preaching of the law to prayer. As we strive to avoid sin and do good works, we are to pray to God for the grace of the Spirit to enable and empower us. The law then drives Christians to prayer, because without Christ, it is impossible to please God by our good works. Without prayer, there are no good works pleasing to God.

But prayer is connected not only to good works, but also to gratitude to God. We cannot show our thankfulness to God without prayer. How are we to thank God for his grace and mercy if not by praying? This is why the psalmist sings, "What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and *call on the name of the LORD*" (Psa 116:12-13). In our opening psalm, we sang a prayer of thanksgiving from Psalm 65:1-2,

*Praise waits for Thee in Zion;  
All men shall worship there  
And pay their vows before Thee,  
O God Who hears prayer.*

Paul also tells us that whether in good or bad times, we are to pray and give thanks to God: "*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances*" (1 Thess 5:16-18).

*First*, prayer is the chief part of our gratitude to God for our salvation from sin. *Second*, we are to pray "because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit only to those who earnestly and without ceasing ask them of Him, and render thanks unto Him for them."

As Paul has commanded, we are to *earnestly* and *unceasingly* pray to God to supply our needs. Not just when we're in financial trouble, and there is no food on the table. Not just when our marriage is on the rocks. Not just before an examination. Not just before a critical surgery. We are to *earnestly* and *unceasingly* pray to God to thank him for giving us our needs. Not just before meals. Not just when we are able to provide for our families because we found a job. Not just after we pass our school test or board exam. Not just after a successful surgery or healing from a serious affliction. We are to pray and "*give thanks in all circumstances*" (1 Thess 5:18).

How are we able to thank God even in the most difficult situations in life? How are we able to be content in whatever situation we're in? (Phil 4:12) Paul says he is able to do this because of the strength of faith that only the Spirit can give, *"In all circumstances take up the shield of faith"* (Eph 6:16). This faith results in a prayerful attitude, which in turn gives us *"the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,"* and which also *"guards our hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"* (Phil 4:7). Have you noticed that prayer often has an immediate calming and peaceable effect on our worried minds?

Jesus says we who are sinners are gracious enough to be able to give good gifts to our children. How much more will his Father in heaven, who is infinitely more gracious than sinners, give us his most precious gift, the Holy Spirit himself? (Luke 11:13) And when we have the Spirit, we are able to pray for our needs according to the Father's will. And when we pray according to his will, he will surely give *whatever is best for us, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you ... Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full"* (John 16:23-24). If we do not ask, we will never know what the Father has in store for us. And when the Father grants our requests, what joy fills our thankful hearts! Do you take to heart and believe Jesus' well-known command about prayer? *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you"* (Matt 7:7).

Remember Jesus' parable of the persistent widow who pleaded for justice against her enemy before an unjust judge *"who neither feared God nor respected man"* (Luke 18:1-8)? Because she kept coming to the judge, the widow was finally granted her request by the judge. Jesus told this parable so that they will always pray and not lose heart. If a judge, who is unjust, finally gives in to the widow's persistent *"prayer,"* how much more will our just and merciful Father hear the prayers of his people?

But when we persist in our prayers, does it mean that God will always and surely grant them? And how do we know that what we are asking is acceptable to the Father in heaven?

## **Consider What is Acceptable to the Father**

We sometimes hear people say that the prayers of bad people reach only the roofs of their houses. There is some truth to this, as we read in Psalm 66:18, *"If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened."* And also this, *"If one turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination"* (Prov 28:9; see also Isa 59:2). James also warns us, *"You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions"* (Jas 4:3).

This means that not all prayers are acceptable to God. Praying for God's help in order to be able to commit sin is absolutely not pleasing to God. How do we know if our prayers are acceptable? If you pray for a successful job interview, but you didn't do your homework in researching the job and the company, God will probably deny your request. If you ask God to help you pass an exam, but you did not study, and plan to cheat, you will most likely fail. If you pray to win the lotto, your prayer means you worship money more than God. If you pray to Mary to make sure you win a boxing fight, your prayer is an abominable idolatry. If you laid hands on your teammate and prayed for him to win the Super Bowl for your team, your prayer is selfish. God

will respond, "Your prayers are out of order, and therefore denied!" In short, only those prayers consistent with God's revealed will in Scripture are acceptable. This is why Q&A 117 says we are to pray only "for all that He has commanded us to ask of Him."

Thus, Scripture tells us that the prayers of unrepentant, rebellious sinners are of no avail. Why? Because those people do not worship God. Jesus declares this, "*We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him*" (John 9:31). This means that God does not hear the prayers of an unrepentant unbeliever who worship himself, other gods, money, power and other things above God. Q&A 117 says that only prayers to "the one true God, who has revealed himself to us in his Word," are pleasing to God.

To be sure, unrepentant sinners and pagans "pray" for things they want and they get it. But this does not mean that God heard or blessed their prayers. God uses all things to accomplish his purposes, even giving pagans their wishes, as when the Babylonians and the Romans were granted their "prayers" to conquer Jerusalem. All around us, the wicked prosper, and we often wonder why and how they do. This is why the psalmist says, "*Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers!*" (Psa 37:1) Why not? Because their prosperity is not a sign of God's approval. In fact, "*they will soon fade like the grass ... [they] shall be cut off*" (Psa 37:2, 9).

Unlike the unrepentant, we are to acknowledge our sin and misery, and humble ourselves before God in our prayers. This is why we include a prayer of confession at the beginning of our worship service, so that we are assured that we have been forgiven by God. Then, we are able to joyfully thank God for salvation, and to ask God to provide for our needs. HC 117 again says that God accepts our prayers when "we thoroughly know our need and misery, so as to humble ourselves in the presence of His divine majesty."

When the kingdom of Judah was surrounded by a great army of their enemies, King Jehoshaphat prayed, "*O our God ... we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you*" (2 Chron 20:12). Like Jehoshaphat, we are to admit that we are needy and helpless, and dependent only on God. If we have this humble attitude, the Lord promises, "*The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit*" (Psa 34:18).

In our text, Jesus warns his disciples to avoid praying like hypocrites, who pray in public all to display false piety. The Pharisees lacked a humble attitude when they prayed in public. They did not see themselves as needy and helpless sinners; in fact, they were so proud of their good works before God and before men that they pray, "*God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.*" But the tax collector saw himself as a helpless sinner, "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*" (Luke 18:11-13) To be sure, not all public prayer are condemned, such as praying before a meal at a restaurant. But sinful and prideful motives, such as intentionally announcing a "prayer mountain" retreat, are condemned. Jesus says that private prayers inside your room are more profitable since they allow you to focus more on God, away from life's concerns.

Lastly, we are to pray in faith. Does this mean that we are to pray "name-it-and-claim-it" prayers, like the prosperity gospel televangelists do? And if we do not receive what we pray for,

does it mean that we do not have enough faith? What the Catechism says is very different from this false teaching. Our prayers, to be pleasing to God, must be accompanied by faith and assurance that God will answer the prayers of unworthy sinners according to his divine purposes. We pray in order “that we be firmly assured that notwithstanding our unworthiness He will, for the sake of Christ our Lord, certainly hear our prayer, as He has promised us in His Word.”

First, know why prayer is required of a Christian. Second, know what kind of prayer is acceptable to God. Lastly, out of so many things in our lives, what are we to pray about?

## Consider the Content of Your Prayer

In Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, the disciples saw that prayer was very important in Jesus' life, so they asked him, “*Lord, teach us to pray.*” And Jesus answered, “*When you pray, say...*” He could have pointed them to the Psalms, which are full of prayers, such as Psalm 28:8-9, where David intercedes for his people. Or to Psalm 86, a prayer of supplication, where he asks God to rescue him from his troubles.

Prayers like these are a big part of our prayer life. But the Psalms are overwhelmingly prayers of adoration, confession, and thanksgiving to God. Psalm 145 is a prayer of adoration for his glory, grace, mercy and mighty acts, and begins with an exclamation of praise, “*I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever.*” Psalm 51 is probably the most well-known prayer of confession by David. Psalm 9, a prayer of thanksgiving, begins with, “*I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart.*” Psalm 95 is another prayer of thanksgiving that starts with praising God for his wonderful creation, “*Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving.*”

We often hear of the acronym ACTS to teach us what the content of our prayers should be: adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. This is a good teaching tool, and we see that the Psalter is full of these kinds of prayers. But when Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, he taught them the prayer we find in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4 – the Lord's Prayer.

Before he taught them this model prayer, Jesus warned them not to pray like the pagans, who “*heap up empty phrases ... [and] many words*” (Matt 6:7). The Greek verb used here is most often translated “vain repetitions,” or “babbling.” The word comes from the kind of speech of a person who stammers with involuntary pauses and repetitions of sounds. So Jesus is prohibiting mindless, meaningless, and routine repetitious prayers, especially the repetitious, mindless invocation of the names of their gods. The priests of Baal prayed to their god all day long, repeating, “*O Baal, answer us!*” (1 Kgs 18:26-29). The Greek pagans, in opposition to the Christians in Ephesians, “*for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!'*” (Acts 19:34) Meanwhile, in the Roman Catholic tradition, a person can be given by a priest a penance of one “Our Father” and ten “Hail Marys” to absolve him of his sin. How can reciting the same prayer ten or more times not be mindless repetitions devoid of contrition?

This *mindless, meaningless repetition with many words* that Jesus prohibits is also in Paul's mind when he criticizes *unintelligible* speaking in tongue, “*Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue*” (1 Cor 14:9, 19).

When we pray, we can repeat words and phrases or formulas, but not like the pagans' mindless repetitions, but with devotion and zeal in our hearts. We often say the same formal prayers, such as the Lord's Prayer and other prayers from the Bible, or the same formal songs, such as different doxologies, in our worship services. Sometimes we use antiphonal psalms in our responsive readings. Psalm 136 is the most well-known example of this: the pastor reads the first line of each verse, and the congregation responds repeatedly with, "*for his steadfast love endures forever.*"

Did you know that Jesus himself prayed formal prayers that are often recited in the synagogues? Did you know that he prayed the same words in the garden of Gethsemane at least twice? (Mark 14:39)

Most evangelicals loathe formal prayers like the Lord's Prayer or the Psalms, thinking that spontaneous, led-by-the-Spirit prayers are more acceptable to God. But often, pastors end up with babbling, mindless prayers, often mumbling repetitiously because they do not know what to say. What can be more beneficial than a prayer that the pastor himself has composed beforehand, filled with Scripture and with well-thought-of words? We can even use the Puritans' prayers from the Valley of Vision, or those composed by Reformed churches, for various occasions and situations.

The Lord's Prayer is such a prayer. It begins with invoking the name of God the Father who is in heaven. Our prayers are to be directed to the true God, Creator, Redeemer and King. Then, six petitions follow. The first three petitions focus on the adoration of a holy and sovereign God. "*Hallowed be Thy name*"; then, "*Thy kingdom come*"; and then, "*Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.*" The final three petitions are supplications and intercessions for our own needs, and for others, using the words "we," "us" and "our." "*Give us this day our daily bread*" is a prayer for daily provisions for our needs. "*And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*" is a prayer of confession of sin. "*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*" is a prayer for the sake of our souls.

The Lord's Prayer that we usually pray closes with another prayer of adoration or doxology: "*For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever.*" If you notice, both Matthew's and Luke's version do not have this closing praise. In the ESV, there is a footnote saying, "some manuscripts add" this conclusion. But we know that from the early church, these words have been recognized as true words of our Lord. This is why Christians have been saying these words in the Lord's Prayer for 2,000 years. But most scholars conclude that this closing was a scribal addition.

Whether these words were part of the original texts by Matthew and Luke, or whether they were added on by scribes, we must be assured that *they are Biblical*. Why? Because we find similar doxologies all over the Old Testament. For sure, if it was added, it would have come from Old Testament doxologies such as this one from 1 Chronicles 29:11 "*Thine, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is Thine. Thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all.*" In the New Testament, similar doxologies are found, one of which is 1 Timothy 1:17: "*To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen*" (see also 1 Tim 6:15-16; Jude 24-25; Rev 4:11; 5:13).

What then could be more Biblical than ascribing to the eternal God all power and glory?

So the content of our prayers must be these things – praise and thanksgiving, confessions, intercessions and supplications. And when we pray these things, we are changed by the Spirit. When we praise and adore God, we focus not on our needs and unworthiness, but on God's glory, grace and mercy, and mighty works. When we confess our sins, we become more aware of God's holiness, and that he requires us to live holy lives. When we pray for our needs, we grow in our humble trust in God, and become more and more dependent on his gracious Providence. These all result in more and more gratitude toward God.

These are changes that prayer brings to our lives. *Note that prayer changes us, not God. Prayer changes things, not God. "God is not ... a son of man, that he should change his mind"* (Num 23:19). He has ordained all things that will come to pass, and this is why he knows the end from the beginning. But we do not know what God has ordained for us, for others, for the world, except for what he has revealed in his Word.

Do we know if God ordained our loved one to be delivered from drunkenness? Do we know if God ordained that we marry that handsome, successful man we met at the office? Do we know if God ordained us to be wealthy? No, we do not know any of these things that God ordained from eternity. But does this mean that we become fatalistic – “Que sera, sera; whatever will be, will be”?

No, this was not the attitude of the people of Nineveh after Jonah warned them of impending destruction in forty days if they did not repent of their wickedness. Led by their king, the people repented from their evil ways and violence, praying to God to spare them. So God relented from his promise of judgment. But God did not change his mind, because he knew that the Ninevites would believe his word preached by Jonah. Even their prayers were known to him because he had ordained their prayers! Jonah's preaching served to put the fear of God in their hearts.

God commands us to pray earnestly and unceasingly. If he grants us our prayers, he has not changed his mind. He knows even what we will pray for, because the Holy Spirit helps us pray. Jesus assures us that “*your Father knows what you need before you ask him*” (Matt 6:8). If after the prayers of many brethren, our loved one was healed of terminal disease, we see that our prayers have been answered. Whatever God's answer he has ordained, but from our human perspective, our prayer has changed things.

**B**eloved friends, Jesus has left us with a model prayer to teach us to focus on God and on all the things we need for body and soul. Praise God and honor him. Thank him for all his gifts to us. Do this in all circumstances, good and bad. Then ask for the Holy Spirit to give you grace. Ask for forgiveness of all your sins. Call upon God for your daily provision in food, clothing and shelter. Petition the same for your brethren. Plead for the salvation of your family and friends.

Be comforted that God hears your prayers. We are not to inquire what God's will is for our lives, only that his will be done. We are to pray and watch until our Lord returns from heaven. And we have confidence that he will grant us all these things in the end, because he is our sovereign King, who alone has all the power, glory, honor and majesty forever and ever.