

"A THEOLOGIAN ON PRAYER"

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There is no aspect of the Christian life more neglected today than prayer. Modern people are activists, and tend (often quite rightly) to be suspicious of those who sit back and do nothing, particularly if they try to justify their idleness by appealing to the power of "prayer." But the fact that such misunderstanding and abuse is possible shows how much this vital subject has been neglected, and it is a major reason why so much of our activism bears so little real fruit. Prayer is the lifeline that connects us with Christ and gives meaning to our relationship with him. To be a Christian without praying is like being married but never speaking to your spouse. It may be theoretically possible, but what kind of a relationship would that be? It would certainly not be one that is growing and flourishing!

To put it succinctly, the closeness of our union with Christ can be measured by the quality of our prayer life. This is not a matter of outward observance or formal rituals, nor does it have anything to do with eloquence. It is not uncommon to hear people praying in public at great length and with considerable passion, but all too often they are preaching to those listening and not speaking to God at all. Jesus told his disciples that when they prayed they should not be like the Pharisees, who were fond of great show and liked to create a big impression (Matthew 6:5). Instead of that, he told them to go into a secluded place and pray quietly, not using many words but making each of them count. The prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, and which virtually every Christian knows by heart, is fundamentally a prayer for union with him (Matthew 6:9-13). First of all, we are told to pray to God using the word that Jesus himself used—"Father." This did not come naturally to the Jews, who regarded Jesus' use of such language as presumptuous if not actually blasphemous (John 5:18). But not only did Jesus use the term himself, he taught his disciples to use it as well, thereby putting them in the same relationship to God that he himself had.

The first purpose of prayer is to glorify God, which is why Jesus told his disciples to ask that his name might be "hallowed." This cannot mean that they were to pray that God should become holier than he already is, but rather that his name, that is to say, his reputation and glory, should be honored for what it is and set apart in our minds as something on which we must focus above everything else. Once we have done that, we can go on to pray for things, which as Jesus outlines them come under four main headings:

- A. The coming of the kingdom.
- B. The giving of God's gifts.
- C. The forgiveness of our sins.
- D. Deliverance from temptation and evil.

Each of these takes us deeper into the mystery of what it means to be united with Christ. First, there is the coming of the kingdom and the doing of God's will that must accompany it. There is no kingdom without the king, so what we are praying for is his presence in our hearts. As for doing



his will, we have already seen that this was the prayer of Jesus as he prepared himself to make the supreme sacrifice on the night before his crucifixion. So what we are really praying for is a deeper experience of the crucified Christ, who brings his kingdom into our lives by subduing our will to his and making us live in him by the power of his Holy Spirit.

Of the gifts that we pray for, the greatest is the food we need for survival. Jesus was undoubtedly alluding to the manna that fed the people of Israel in the desert on a daily basis, and that image recurs in the New Testament as a picture of the spiritual food that is ours only if we are united with him (John 6:35, 41; 1 Corinthians 10:3). Jesus is the bread that came down from heaven, and in him all our wants and needs are satisfied.

Forgiveness is the next thing we are told to pray for, and of course that can be had only in and through Christ and his sacrifice for us. Apart from him there is no atonement, no forgiveness, and no power to forgive. Just as we cannot love others without the love of God at work in our hearts, so we cannot forgive them unless we know his forgiveness by being crucified with him. The secret of being able to forgive others and to receive forgiveness ourselves is to be united to Christ.

Finally, we are told to pray for deliverance from temptation and evil. Temptation is something we are led into, while evil is something we have to be delivered from. The two things are not identical, but they are related, since it is the evil one who tempts us, and if we are not to be led into temptation, it is from him that we must be delivered. This is possible only if we are united to Christ, who has defeated the forces of evil and set us free from them. If we have been delivered from death, it is because he has been delivered from it; our new life is the one he gives us when we are grafted into him. Here too, the spiritual battle we are called to wage is a battle that he has already won for us and our victory can be found only in and through him.

The life of prayer is a life of growing into deeper union with Christ, of knowing him and the power of his death and resurrection more fully in our lives. Prayer is not, and cannot be, an afterthought or something we resort to only in an emergency. Just as physical food is beneficial only if consumed in regular portions, so spiritual food must be absorbed on a regular and orderly basis. As for those who use "prayer" as an excuse for inaction, let us remember that just as material food is useful only if it is burned up in energy, so spiritual food is intended to give us new life and the power that goes with it. To sit back and do nothing but eat is the sin of gluttony, which can be as destructive spiritually as it is physically. True prayer is a spur to action, not an excuse to avoid it. When God speaks to us, we must hear—and obey.