

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. We are currently discussing the doctrine of sanctification and, more particularly, the means of grace. We are in the midst of discussing prayer, which is how we communicate with God. Last time we discussed a number of benefits that we derive from prayer. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I would like to begin by discussing one final benefit that is extremely important. Prayer is one of the means that God uses to equip us to do the work that he wants us to do. He has given each of us natural abilities, resources and opportunities, but he doesn't just leave us to use these in our own strength. In his second letter to his young protégé Timothy, the apostle Paul exhorted, as we read in 2 Timothy 2:1, "You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus."¹

Marc Roby: And to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus certainly implies a more immediate help than just having endowed us with particular natural abilities and opportunities.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. John Calvin made a very interesting comment about this verse. He wrote, "By this expression he [obviously meaning the apostle Paul] intends to shake off sloth and indifference; for the flesh is so sluggish, that even those who are endued with eminent gifts are found to slacken in the midst of their course, if they be not frequently aroused."²

Marc Roby: And prayer is a means that God makes available to arouse us to make use of the gifts and resources we have to do the work he has prepared for us to do.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is an important purpose and benefit of prayer. Calvin goes on in his commentary to say, "Some will say: 'Of what use is it to exhort a man to "be strong in grace," unless free-will have something to do in cooperation?' I reply, what God demands from us by his word he likewise bestows by his Spirit, so that we are strengthened in the grace which he has given to us."³

Marc Roby: That is a marvelous statement. God is our sufficiency. Not just the natural gifts and resources he has given to us, but the strength he provides by his Spirit to make proper use of them.

Dr. Spencer: And prayer is a very important means of being strengthened by God, through the Holy Spirit. Let me give a good biblical illustration of our need for prayer.

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² John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, in Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. XXI, Baker Books, 2009, pg. 208

³ Ibid

The night before he was crucified, our Lord was in great distress and he went off to a solitary place to pray. He took Peter, James and John along with him part way to keep watch. At one point he told them to stay while he went a bit further to pray in private and, in Mark 14:38, he famously commanded them, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”

Marc Roby: And it is important to note that this happens right after Peter had declared that he would never disown Christ, but Christ then told him that he would deny even knowing Jesus three times that very night! You would think that would shake Peter’s confidence and he would be strongly motivated to obey this command and pray earnestly for strength to not deny his Lord.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, but we all know what happened. Peter and the others fell asleep instead of praying and Peter *did* end up denying his Lord just as Jesus had foretold. And I want us to learn from Peter’s mistake and listen to what Christ said to him and the others. He said to “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”

We are often weak, physically, mentally, spiritually – in every conceivable way we are weak. But God is always *able* to provide the strength necessary for us to do what he has commanded us to do. Nevertheless, he may not give us strength if we aren’t humble enough to see our need and ask for his help. He will sometimes let us go forth in our own arrogance and fail.

Marc Roby: Yes, seeing how badly Peter failed should motivate us to pray more earnestly. I’m sure that is one of the reasons his failure is recorded for us to read.

Dr. Spencer: I’m sure that is one of the reasons, yes. We are very likely to fail whenever we stupidly and arrogantly think that we have all we need to succeed entirely on our own, independent of God. Now, for his own purposes, he obviously does allow people who don’t see their need to succeed in many ways, but they will pay a price for ignoring him and not giving him the glory. And it is especially foolish for a child of God to act as though he or she could do just fine without God. Again, he may allow us to succeed in some ways, but it will always be better for us if we recognize our dependence and pray to God for help. One of the benefits of prayer is that God strengthens us to do the work he has called us to do when we are faithful in depending on him and seeking his aid in prayer.

Marc Roby: That is an important benefit of prayer. And it is clear that Jesus’ command contained the implicit promise that *if* Peter and the others had been faithful to watch and pray, they would *not* have fallen into temptation.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that promise was certainly implicit. But now, having covered that final, very important, benefit of a life of prayer, I’d like to move on to look at some things that Charles Hodge noted about prayer. He wrote that “Prayer takes a great deal for granted. It assumes, in the first place, the personality of God.”⁴

⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. III, pg. 692

Marc Roby: That seems fairly obvious. You can't have a conversation, let alone a relationship, with some inanimate force or principle.

Dr. Spencer: It is obvious, but it is still important to make the point explicit. If someone calls himself a Christian but doesn't pray, he is acting as though God were not a real person. His claim to faith is very suspect if not outright false. But prayer assumes even more than the personality of God. Hodge went on to say, "Secondly, God, however, although a person, may dwell far off in immensity, and have no intercourse with his creatures on earth. Prayer, therefore, assumes not only the personality of God, but also that He is near us; that He is not only able, but also willing to hold intercourse with us, to hear and answer".⁵

Marc Roby: Yes, it is a common misconception that God is somehow so transcendent that he would never deign to communicate with human beings.

Dr. Spencer: But such a conception of God is completely opposed by the Bible from beginning to end. God is not only able to hear and respond to our prayers, he is also, praise God, willing to do so. As God's redeemed and adopted children Christians are very foolish indeed if they don't avail themselves of this tremendous privilege.

Marc Roby: And, we could add, it is also a responsibility.

Dr. Spencer: Very true. Virtually every privilege has a concomitant responsibility. And, moving on, Hodge also notes, "Thirdly, [prayer] assumes that [God] has the personal control of all nature, i.e., of all things out of Himself; that He governs all his creatures and all their actions."

Marc Roby: Well, that statement makes it obvious that Hodge was well catechized. He is quoting, in part, from the Westminster Shorter Catechism here. The answer to Question 11 says that "God's works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions."

Dr. Spencer: And Hodge is correct in asserting that real, vibrant, believing prayer assumes this providential control by God. If that were not so, there would be no point in praying to him. But he also brings out the importance of secondary causes, as we have done in speaking about prayer. He wrote that "When [God] wills that it should rain, He wills that all the secondary causes, productive of that effect, should be brought into operation. The doctrine of providence only supposes that God does, on the scale of the universe, what we do within the limited sphere of our efficiency. We, indeed, so far as effects out of ourselves are concerned, are tied to the use of secondary causes. We can act neither against them, nor without them. God is not thus limited. He can operate without second causes as well as with them, or against them."⁶

Marc Roby: Yes, that is a very clear statement. God is not limited as we are, but he does still make use of secondary causes.

⁵ Ibid, pg. 693

⁶ Ibid

Dr. Spencer: Hodge also notes a fourth thing that prayer assumes. He wrote, “Prayer also supposes that the government of God extends over the minds of men, over their thoughts, feelings, and volitions, that the heart is in his hands, and that He can turn it even as the rivers of water are turned.” And so we see that in addition to being well catechized, Hodge knew his Bible very well and his writings are filled with statements that are almost direct quotes from Scripture. In this case, he obviously has Proverbs 21:1 in mind, where we are told, “The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.”

Marc Roby: I think the idea that God in any way exerts control over the thoughts or feelings of men is even more troubling to many than the idea that he controls inanimate forces.

Dr. Spencer: Well, you’re obviously right in asserting that people have trouble with this idea. But if it were not true, God would not be God in any meaningful sense of the word. Hodge makes the same point we did a minute ago in this regard, but he also adds a comment that completely destroys the idea that many people have that prayer is valuable in the same way that unbelieving meditation is valuable; namely, that it somehow helps us subjectively to pray.

Hodge wrote, “If there be no personal God, there is no one to pray to; and if God, supposing such a Being to exist, has no control over nature or man, then there is no rational motive for prayer; there is nothing to be accomplished by it. The idea that the service would still be of value for its subjective effect is irrational, because its subjective effect is due to faith in its objective efficiency. If a man believes that there is no God, he cannot make himself a better man by acting hypocritically, and pouring forth his prayers and praises to a nonentity.”⁷

Marc Roby: He doesn’t pull any punches, does he? But Hodge is clearly right. Praying when you don’t believe in a real God who has control over his universe is irrational and hypocritical.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he is relentlessly logical and consistent. And he notes that almost everyone, including people who do not express any real faith, will “pray” at times.

Marc Roby: That’s the old idea that there are no atheists in foxholes.

Dr. Spencer: That is the idea, yes. Whenever people experience extreme danger or even, sometimes, extreme joy, there is a natural tendency to cry out to God. And so Hodge notes that “Any theory of the universe which makes religion, or prayer, irrational, is self-evidently false, because it contradicts the nature, the consciousness, and the irrepressible convictions of men. As this control of God extends over the minds of men, it is no less rational that we should pray, as all men instinctively do pray, that He would influence our own hearts, and the hearts of others, for good, than that we should pray for health.”⁸

Marc Roby: Yes, that is very true. And I like his way of putting it – the irrepressible convictions of men. He is honest enough to recognize that there is a reason why all men have an innate tendency to cry out to God in times of great need.

⁷ Ibid, pg. 695

⁸ Ibid, pg. 698

Dr. Spencer: We should never ignore things that we innately believe to be true. Although it is no guarantee that they are truth, the fact that we are born with certain innate impressions should not be discounted. For example, philosophers struggle to provide a convincing proof that anything outside of our own mind exists, but we all have an innate sense of the reality of the external world and the fact that we exist in it and are just a part of it, rather than it being a figment of our imagination.

But now I'd like to move on and look at what Hodge calls the requisites of acceptable prayer.

Marc Roby: Well, certainly, it would be of no use to us to pray in a way that is not acceptable to God, so this is obviously an important topic. What requisites does Hodge list for acceptable prayer?

Dr. Spencer: Well, he wrote, "The first and most obviously necessary requisite of acceptable prayer, is sincerity. God is a Spirit. He searches the heart. He is not satisfied with words, or with external homage. He cannot be deceived and will not be mocked. It is a great offence, therefore, in his sight, when we utter words before Him in which our hearts do not join. We sin against Him when we use terms, in the utterance of which the angels veil their faces, with no corresponding feelings of reverence; or use the formulas of thanksgiving without gratitude; or those of humility and confession without any due sense of our unworthiness; or those of petition without desire for the blessings we ask. Every one must acknowledge that this is an evil often attending the prayers of sincere Christians ...".⁹

Marc Roby: Well, that is a very convicting quote. If we are honest, we must all plead guilty to having prayed in a formulaic way without serious heartfelt commitment, reverence, thanksgiving and humility.

Dr. Spencer: I agree that the quote is very convicting. Prayer is a great privilege, especially the fact that we are told we can come to God as our heavenly Father. But we must always remember that he is God and we are creatures. We must have real reverence in our hearts. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. We must have real humility and thanksgiving. We must not let the fact that we can pray anywhere at any time cause us to lose sight of the fact that when we pray we are, quite literally, seeking an audience with the Lord God Almighty, the Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer and Judge of the universe. This is a very serious thing to do.

Reuben A. Torrey wrote that "we should never utter one syllable of prayer either in public or in private until we are definitely conscious that we have come into the presence of God and are actually praying to Him."¹⁰

Marc Roby: Coming into God's presence is obviously a serious matter. But I must say that it seems strange that Hodge would add that it is wrong to pray without desire for the blessings we

⁹ Ibid, pg. 701

¹⁰ Quoted in James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 486

ask; I think most of us would be inclined to say that we obviously wouldn't ask for something unless we desired it.

Dr. Spencer: Well, that is the same initial response I had to that comment. But we need to think more deeply. John Calvin also lists this as one of what he calls his rules of prayer. He writes that “in asking we must always truly feel our wants, and seriously considering that we need all the things which we ask, accompany the prayer with a sincere, nay, ardent desire of obtaining them.”¹¹ He then makes some very good points in this regard. He points out, for example, that if we pray for God to forgive our sins, we must truly sense that we are a sinner and *need* forgiveness! This can't be some formula that we utter.

Marc Roby: And we can guard against that by asking forgiveness for *specific* sins that we have committed, rather than being content with some general forgiveness.

Dr. Spencer: Well, that is a good way of helping to avoid that problem, yes. But Calvin also notes that if we ask God to provide us with something that we actually think comes to us in some other way, we dishonor him. For example, if I pray for continued health, but in my heart am depending on the fact that I am disciplined in what I eat, get regular exercise and so on, I am not truly desiring the thing I pray for. I somehow think that I already have it, or that I obtain it through my own effort. In sincere prayer, I need to see my real, serious, need for God.

Marc Roby: Yes, that makes good sense. And I see what you mean, if we think about it more deeply, we can come up with a number of ways in which we ask for things in prayer with less than complete sincerity. So Hodge's first requisite for acceptable prayer is that it be sincere. I'm sure he has others too, right?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. He lists seven requisites to acceptable prayer.

Marc Roby: And I look forward to hearing the rest of them, but we don't have enough time today to get through another, so I think this is a good place to end. I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We appreciate your comments and questions.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge, Hendrickson Publishers, 2008, III.20.6, pg. 567