

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 and in previous sessions we have looked at the first two requisites of acceptable prayer according to Charles Hodge; namely, sincerity and reverence for God. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: By looking at the third requisite Hodge mentions, which is humility.<sup>1</sup>

Marc Roby: Yes, humility is without any doubt an extremely important character trait for Christians to cultivate. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our example, was supremely humble. In Philippians 2:1-3 Paul exhorts his readers, saying, “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.”<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Spencer: That is a marvelous passage, and it shows that Paul himself was humble and loving. Note that he said his readers could make his joy complete by being like-minded with Christ. In other words, Paul’s own joy was bound up in doing what was best for others and seeing them move forward and prosper in the faith. And he told them to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit; such things are antithetical to true humility and love. But I’d like you to go on and read Verses 4-8 as well.

Marc Roby: Sure. Paul continues, writing that “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”

Dr. Spencer: There is so much that we could say about this passage. It describes what theologians call Christ’s humiliation, and it does give us, as you noted earlier, the supreme example of humility. Jesus Christ was in very nature God. He was and is the eternal, second person of the Holy Trinity. But he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, in other words he didn’t jealously guard his privileges and status as God, but willingly gave some of them up when he became incarnate. Which Paul describes as his having made himself nothing or it can be translated as he emptied himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. III, pg. 702

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**Marc Roby: I know that the meaning of this phrase has been controversial in the church. Some say that Christ emptied himself of some of his divine attributes when he became incarnate.**

Dr. Spencer: That view has been expressed, but only since the mid 1800's or so, it was an idea that no theologian of note expressed prior to that time and it is unbiblical. It is called the kenosis theory, because the Greek verb used in the verse is κενόω (kenoō), which means to empty. Wayne Grudem does an excellent job of showing why this theory is wrong.<sup>3</sup> He properly concludes that what is really meant by the phrase is that Christ willingly surrendered some of the privileges and status that were rightfully his in order to carry out the work of redemption. But he never stopped being God. He became fully man, but he is the unique God-man, two natures in one person.

I don't want to get lost in that discussion right now, even though it is very important, because it isn't the central point I want to get to today. Look at what Paul says about Christ in his state of humiliation. He says that being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death. This speaks about the infinite chasm that exists between the Creator and his creatures.

**Marc Roby: You mean that God is eternal and not subject to death.**

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. That is one of the defining differences between God as our Creator and us as sinful creatures. We must remember that death is not natural – it is the punishment due to us for sin. We were made for eternity. Paul was using Christ as a supreme example of humility in order to get people to love others in humility, but in terms of Hodge's saying that humility is a requisite to acceptable prayer, he is actually speaking about the humility that we, as sinful creatures, ought to have in the presence of our Creator, God. He is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. We are finite, created and changeable. He is truth. He is good. He is perfect. We lie. We are sinful. We are anything but perfect.

**Marc Roby: Yes, the truth of those statements would be impossible for any thinking person to deny.**

Dr. Spencer: I can't imagine anyone even trying to claim that people are always truthful or morally perfect or uncreated. John Calvin famously began his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by saying that "Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."<sup>4</sup> Anyone who has any understanding at all of who God is and any proper understanding of their own nature, will necessarily be humble in God's presence.

**Marc Roby: But, of course, many people simply deny God's existence altogether, or speak only of an impersonal spiritual something more akin to the force from Star Wars.**

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pp 549-552

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge, Hendrickson Publishers, 2008, 1.1.1 (pg. 4)

Dr. Spencer: And the Bible tells us, in both Psalms 14:1 and 53:1, that “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” And Paul tells us in Romans 1:18-19 that “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.”

In any event, it is clear that Hodge is right about humility being a necessary prerequisite for our prayers to be acceptable to God. We are told in Hebrews 11:6 that “without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” And, obviously, to believe that God exists implies that you have some proper understanding of who he is. This isn’t talking about a god of our imagination, it is talking about the true and living God.

**Marc Roby: And there are many examples in the Bible of how people react when they have an encounter with God. Such an encounter forces humility on you.**

Dr. Spencer: That’s very true. It is impossible to deny the infinite gulf between God and us whenever he chooses to reveal himself in a more dramatic and explicit way than normal. I think the prophet Isaiah is the greatest example. The prophet was given what is probably the clearest vision of God given to anyone in the Old Testament. He saw God on his throne and, in Isaiah 6:5 we read his response, he cried, “Woe to me! ... I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

We all need to realize that if we ever stand before God on our own, we *will*, in fact, be ruined. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God as Paul tells us in Romans 3:23, so the only way we can ever stand before the judgment seat of God and not be condemned is if we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

**Marc Roby: In other words, we must have humility to see that we need a Savior.**

Dr. Spencer: Precisely. And that same humility is a necessary precondition for God to listen to our prayers. We must see that we need a Savior, a mediator, an intercessor. That is why Christ told his disciples, in John 15:16, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.” We don’t come before God in prayer on our own, we come in the name of Jesus.

**Marc Roby: And Jesus also said, as we read in John 14:6, that “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”**

Dr. Spencer: And that requires humility on our part as well. But now I think it is time to move on to the fourth requisite for acceptable prayer according to Hodge, which is importunity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hodge, op. cit., pg. 703

Marc Roby: That's not a word that is used very often, so perhaps it would be good to define it. According to Webster's dictionary, to be importunate means to be "troublesomely urgent" or "overly persistent in request or demand".<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Spencer: That's a reasonable definition, although biblically I wouldn't want to say that our urgency in a matter is troubling to God, or that we can be overly persistent. Hodge points out that Jesus emphasized our need for urgency and persistence several times. I'd like to look at one of those examples in some detail.

Marc Roby: Now, which example is that?

Dr. Spencer: The Canaanite woman of Mathew 15. We are told in that chapter that as Jesus was headed to the region of Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman kept crying out for him to have mercy and heal her daughter of demon-possession. Evidently, Jesus ignored her for some time and his disciples were so bothered that they asked him to tell her to go away.

Marc Roby: It probably bothers some people that Jesus didn't respond to her right away.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure it does, but Jesus doesn't owe us anything, and the story gets even more troubling as we will see in a moment.

Jesus never did anything without good reason, and all things work together for the good of those who love him as we are told in Romans 8:28, so even when we aren't given a full explanation of why he deals with us the way he does, we need to simply trust that he is doing everything in the way that is best for his people. In this case, we all learn a couple of important lessons from this woman. In Matthew 15:24 we read that Jesus finally responded to the woman, although not in the way she had hoped. He said to her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

Marc Roby: Yes, you're right that the story gets more troubling for people. That answer is clearly a bit of a brush off and a put down at the same time.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it was. But this woman was not so easily discouraged. But first, let me finish the story. In Verses 25-28 we are given the rest of the interaction. We read, "The woman came and knelt before him. 'Lord, help me!' she said. He replied, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.' 'Yes, Lord,' she said, 'but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered, 'Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.' And her daughter was healed from that very hour."

Marc Roby: And the story did indeed get even more troubling. Jesus essentially called the woman a dog.

Dr. Spencer: Indirectly, yes. But notice that the woman displayed exactly the requisites for acceptable prayer that we have been talking about. She was clearly sincere in her desire for her daughter to be healed. She also approached Christ with reverence; she knelt before him and addressed him as Lord. Then, when he essentially called her a dog, she didn't get indignant and

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/importunate>

argue with him, she expressed great humility by simply saying “Yes, Lord.” But she didn’t stop there. She asked for the crumbs that fall from the masters’ table, which is importunity in the extreme. She would not be dissuaded. And Jesus rewarded her by healing her daughter.

**Marc Roby: She certainly received what she was hoping and asking for in the end. But you said we would discuss more how Jesus dealt with this woman. What do you want to say about that?**

Dr. Spencer: Well, we aren’t told why Jesus didn’t answer her right away, but at least one reason is obvious. It provides us with a good object lesson in how to pray with sincerity, humility, reverence, urgency and persistence, or we could say with Hodge, importunity. In fact, this same story could be said to provide a good illustration of two of the last three requisites for acceptable prayer that Hodge presents: submission, faith, and praying in the name of Christ.

For example, this woman obviously had great faith, Jesus himself told her, “you have great faith!” And although she didn’t have a full understanding of who Jesus is and didn’t approach the Father in his name, she did, nonetheless, have an understanding that this man was the one she needed to go to for help.

**Marc Roby: Now you didn’t mention her being an example of submission, so that must be the one remaining requisite of acceptable prayer that she didn’t model.**

Dr. Spencer: You’re right. It is one requisite that can only be met by someone who has an understanding of theology. When Hodge speaks of submission in this context, he isn’t just speaking about knowing our place as creatures, he is speaking about truly being willingly submitted to God’s will. In other words, wanting God’s will to be done, not my will.

**Marc Roby: Which, is of course, what Jesus famously prayed the night before his crucifixion. We are told that he was distressed at the prospect of taking our sins upon himself and bearing them on the cross, so in the Garden of Gethsemane he prayed. And in Matthew 26:39 we are told that he “fell with his face to the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.’”**

Dr. Spencer: And we are told that he prayed basically the same thing three times. He earnestly desired to not have to go to the cross. That was a real, heartfelt desire. But an even deeper desire was to do the will of the Father. And the reason Jesus would want to do the will of the Father is obvious; in his humanity he knew that the Father’s will was best. It would bring him great pain and suffering and shame, but in the end, it would achieve the great goal of redeeming all those whom God has chosen to save. It would pave the way for God to finish the work of creating his church, the bride of Christ, and would, ultimately, lead to the consummation of God’s plan when Christ will return and judge the earth. At that time, this world will be destroyed and God will create a new heaven and a new earth, which will be the eternal home of righteousness.

**Marc Roby: That is most certainly a glorious and wonderful purpose.**

Dr. Spencer: And, as the great 20<sup>th</sup>-century theologian John Murray taught, Christ’s vicarious death on the cross was an absolute necessity given God’s desire to save a people for himself.

Murray called it a “consequent absolute necessity.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, it was a necessary consequence of God’s choosing to save a people for himself. Paul writes of this necessity in the book of Romans. In Romans 3:26 we are told that God made Christ a sacrifice of atonement, “so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”

**Marc Roby: In other words, Christ’s sacrifice was necessary as the only possible way to satisfy divine justice on behalf of guilty sinners.**

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And Jesus, in his perfect, sinless humanity, knew that the Father’s will would always be what is best and he was truly submitted to that will. We as Christians should also strive to be fully submitted to the will of God. That doesn’t, of course, mean that we can’t express our desires in prayer, but we must be perfectly content to accept “No” as the divine answer.

**Marc Roby: That’s not always easy.**

Dr. Spencer: I would say that it is never easy. But it is the wise thing and the proper thing for us to do. We need to realize that God’s way is perfect, even, or especially, when it involves our suffering.

**Marc Roby: That is not a popular idea.**

Dr. Spencer: To say the least.

**Marc Roby: And so we have now seen 5 requisites for acceptable prayer as enumerated by Charles Hodge: first, sincerity, then reverence, humility, importunity – or we could say persistence and urgency, and submission.**

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. We have two more to discuss, faith and praying in Jesus’ name.

**Marc Roby: And I look forward to discussing those next time, but we are out of time for today. So, I’ll close by reminding our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org), and we’ll do our best to answer you.**

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<sup>7</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 11