

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 have been examining the topic of prayer for some time and we just finished looking at the requisites of acceptable prayer according to Charles Hodge.¹ Dr. Spencer, what do you want to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to discuss some errors that we should be careful to avoid regarding prayer.

Marc Roby: What errors do you have in mind?

Dr. Spencer: Well, let me begin with a warning regarding the requisites for acceptable prayer that we just finished covering. Hodge noted that for our prayers to be acceptable, we must pray with sincerity, reverence, humility, persistence, urgency, submission to the will of God, faith, and in the name of Jesus Christ.

Now, whenever someone who is being serious about his faith looks at a list like that, I think there is a tendency to feel inadequate. We see our own faults all too clearly. We question our own sincerity, reverence, humility and so on. And Satan can then use that to attack us. He comes and says, in effect, "Your prayers are terrible. They are worthless and unacceptable in God's sight. They may even be an affront to him and bring judgment. So just give up and don't bother to pray."

Marc Roby: Well, the devil certainly does know how to hit us in our weakest points and at our most vulnerable times. And you're right that a list like Hodge provides can make us feel inadequate to the task.

Dr. Spencer: But the great news of the gospel is that, while *we* are inadequate to the task, our great Lord and Savior is not inadequate! In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus told his disciples, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."²

Jesus knows how inadequate we are, but he died for us anyway and his death and his intercession are efficacious. And he promises us rest. He never turns away a repentant sinner who comes to him in faith. Our repentance is never perfect, our faith is never perfect, *nothing* we do in this life is ever perfect. But that is, in a sense, the point. If we were perfect, we wouldn't need a Savior.

Marc Roby: Yes, that's a good point. But I can still imagine someone saying, "Yes, but I know my own heart. When I pray, I am not as humble or sincere as I could or should be, my thoughts

¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. III, pp 701-705

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tend to wander and I don't feel the reverence I think I should feel. It almost seems as though I would be better off not praying when I'm like that."

Dr. Spencer: I know thoughts like that can come, because I've experienced them! James and Joel Beeke deal with this issue in a short booklet they wrote called *Developing a Healthy Prayer Life*. In the section on praying sincerely, they wrote, "Praying sincerely does not mean that we first attain a certain degree of sincerity and then pray. A sincere person knows and feels his imperfections; he deeply recognizes that his sincerity is not sincere enough. If we needed to become truly sincere in order for God to hear us, nobody would be able to pray."³

Marc Roby: Well, they do make a good point, but I see a danger here too. We don't want to just say that the requisites of acceptable prayer don't matter.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, that would certainly be the wrong conclusion. It matters very much how we pray. Insincere prayer, or irreverent prayer, or proud prayer, any of these are unacceptable to God. But there is a big difference between insincere prayer and being aware of our own lack of perfect sincerity. And I think the point they are making is true of other requisites as well. A truly humble person, for example, will recognize the pride that tends to well up in his own heart. He will want to deny that he is at all humble.

Marc Roby: And, paradoxically, a sincere denial of humility is evidence of humility!

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. But you are still right that there is a danger here. We must *strive* with all our might to come to God in an acceptable way. But then we must also recognize that we are sinners in need of grace even when we do our best. We must always be like the tax collector in Luke 18:13. We are told that he "stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"

Marc Roby: Now that is a wonderful demonstration of great humility and reverence for God.

Dr. Spencer: It is, absolutely. But I'm sure the tax collector would have said, "Oh, but you don't know my heart! There is so much pride there and so much lack of reverence for God. I am so unworthy!"

Marc Roby: Yes, I see your point. His humility was sincere enough that he would still have admitted to, and in fact insisted on, his pride and other problems. In a certain sense, all true Christians are going to feel somewhat hypocritical at times because we hold up a standard that we know we can't meet.

Dr. Spencer: And so it will always be. We don't expect God to hear and answer our prayers because we are worthy to pray. In fact, if we think we are worthy to pray we have a real problem! Anyone who has been born again and thereby granted some understanding of how

³ James W. Beeke & Joel R. Beeke, *Developing a Healthy Prayer Life*, Reformation Heritage Books, 2010, pg. 53

great God is and how deep our sin is will know deep down in his heart that he is completely unworthy to come before God. But God has dealt with our sin on the cross.

Marc Roby: Praise God for that cross! We all need to realize how great a price God paid to forgive our sins.

Dr. Spencer: He paid the greatest price imaginable. Which should always humble us. And we should strive to live a life worthy of the calling we've received, even though we can never live up to that aspiration.

Marc Roby: And that again is somewhat paradoxical.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. But it is true nonetheless. Beeke goes on to write that "We sin in God's sight when we look more to the degree of sincerity of our requests than to the degree of sincerity in God to hear and answer *graciously*. It is an affront to God to doubt His grace."⁴

We must look to God and his promises, not to ourselves. We *are* unworthy sinners. That is a given. But God is a wonderfully gracious God who has promised to forgive our sins and hear our prayers. He knows our weaknesses. We read in Hebrews 4:15-16 that "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Marc Roby: Now that is amazing and encouraging! He knows our weaknesses and yet tells us to approach his throne of grace with confidence.

Dr. Spencer: It is extremely encouraging. But the confidence we have is based on *God's* goodness, not ours. His promises are true. We must plead his promises, not our worthiness. When Satan attacks us we should respond by saying, "You're right Satan! I *am* unworthy. I *am* a wretched sinner. But Christ died for me. He has taken away my sin and guilt and clothed me in his righteousness. And he is faithful and just to forgive my sins. So, flee from me!"

Marc Roby: And that immediately calls to mind what James commanded us in James 4:7, where we read, "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Satan is far more powerful than we are, but when we submit ourselves to God, we are under his protection and Satan cannot harm us.

Marc Roby: The apostle John, in writing about dealing with people who oppose Christ and his gospel, wrote in 1 John 4:4, "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

Dr. Spencer: And we must always remember that. Our trust is in God, not ourselves. And so, that is how we handle the doubts that come to us when we are praying and we feel ourselves to be unworthy. We must be diligent to be as sincere, reverent, humble and so on as possible, we must be very serious about these things. But we must also trust in God's promises. Cry out for mercy.

⁴ Ibid, pg. 54

Cry out for the Holy Spirit to help you pray. Ask God to help you to stay focused and humble. Ask God to forgive when you fail and then move on.

Marc Roby: And we all fail way more than we would like to admit.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. But be honest with yourself. God knows your heart. If you think your prayers are wonderful, and that you are the most humble and reverent person you can imagine, you're in serious danger. And examine your prayers. If you spend most of your time praying about yourself and things you want God to do for you, there may be a real problem.

Marc Roby: Yes, that seems pretty obvious. You can usually tell an arrogant person pretty quickly. They like to talk about themselves!

Dr. Spencer: That's very true.

But now let's move on to discuss a second error I want us to avoid in our prayers. I want to examine the *motives* that we have when we pray. We need to watch out for the pride, ambition and covetousness that so characterize our modern world. In James 4:1-3 we are told, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

Marc Roby: That's not a pretty picture of humanity, but it is, alas, all too accurate at times.

Dr. Spencer: And even when we control ourselves and don't allow such ugliness to show up explicitly, we all know what it is to be jealous or covetous. To want what others have. To be jealous of their success or praise or possessions. And James gives us two reasons why we don't receive things we might want. The first is that we don't ask.

Now, sometimes we don't ask because we are self-sufficient. We are trusting in our own abilities or in our wealth or whatever. But we need to see our dependence on God for everything.

Marc Roby: And that leaves the second reason we don't receive what we ask for; namely, our motives can be wrong.

Dr. Spencer: That's very true. People sometimes pray for things selfishly. They may come up with other reasons in their minds to make their requests seem legitimate, and the requests themselves may *be* legitimate, but their motives are wrong nonetheless.

Marc Roby: I think an example might be very useful at this point.

Dr. Spencer: Well, let me give an example from my own life. I was a professor of Electrical Engineering, so my job involved teaching and doing research with my graduate students. Now it is most definitely appropriate for us to pray for God to enable us to do our jobs well, but only if our motives are right.

For example, I often prayed for God to give me wisdom to help me solve some problem we were having in a research project. But if my motive for such a request was that I would be more successful and maybe receive more awards, recognition and praise, that would be an improper prayer. If, on the other hand, my motive was to be able to do the best job I could of training my graduate students, providing useful results for my sponsors and to bring glory to God, then the same prayer would be completely proper.

Marc Roby: OK. That's clear, if my motives are entirely selfish that is inappropriate. But what about prayers for healing for example? If I ask God to heal me of some affliction, that could be seen at least as being selfish. But is it wrong?

Dr. Spencer: I would say that again depends on my motives. If I just want God to take some pain away without even bothering to examine my life and ask why God brought the pain in the first place, then I would say it is an improper prayer. If we really believe in the sovereignty and goodness of God, then we will realize that no pain ever comes to us outside of his will. And we will know that God never gives us pain without a purpose. Therefore, we will first want to know what God wants us to learn and that will be our first prayer. In other words, we will pray that we profit from the pain. Only then will it be appropriate for us to ask God to take the pain away.

Marc Roby: Alright, now that makes good sense. Are there other ways in which our prayers can be improper?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. If we think we are going to change God's mind, our prayers are improper.

Marc Roby: I can hear a number of our more biblically literate listeners objecting to that statement! They will argue that the Bible speaks of God changing his mind in response to believer's prayers. For example, when the people had Aaron make a golden calf for them to worship while Moses was up on the mountain speaking with God, we are told in Exodus 32:10 that God said to Moses, "Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." But Moses then prayed to God on behalf of the people and we read in Exodus 32:14, "Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened."

Dr. Spencer: That is a classic case for making such an argument. But we must be very careful in how we interpret this and our interpretation must be consistent with everything else the Bible teaches us about God. God does not change. The prophet Samuel tells us in 1 Samuel 15:29 that "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind."

We must remember that God ordains the means as well as the end. So, when we read of him changing his mind in response to something man has done, it was his will from the beginning to do so. It was part of his plan. There was no real change in God, there was only a planned reaction to the actions of men. This is somewhat similar to the situation where a human father tells his child that he will get a reward if he does one thing, but will be punished if he does something

else. The father is not changing his mind when he then responds to whatever the child actually does.

Marc Roby: Well, that does seem perfectly reasonable. But are you concerned about a specific danger when you say that it is improper for us to think of our prayers as changing God's mind?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. There is a very real and serious danger. If we think that we can cause God to change his mind by our prayers, that implicitly says that we somehow think we know better than God what is the right or best thing to do in a given situation. We are providing him counsel if you will.

Marc Roby: Well, when you put it like that, it doesn't sound very good. Paul asked, rhetorically, in Romans 11:34, "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" And the obvious answer is, no one! For, as Paul concludes in Verse 36, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."

Dr. Spencer: Understanding this is part and parcel of coming to God in humble submission to his perfect will. We can pray for what we desire and what we think is best, but we should always recognize that whatever God does *is* what is best for accomplishing his perfect purposes. It may *not* be what leads to our greatest pleasure here and now, but if we are his children, then we have his promise in Romans 8:28 that it will work for our eternal good.

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful promise.

Dr. Spencer: But it requires that we have humility and an eternal perspective. God's way is always best and we must keep that in mind as we pray and as we deal with the answers we receive to our prayers. God is good. We don't want him to change.

Marc Roby: That is good counsel to help us have productive prayer lives. But we are out of time for today, so I'd like to close by reminding our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We love hearing from you.