

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 in our session last week we discussed some common errors that need to be avoided. Dr. Spencer, what do you want to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to provide us with a couple of additional warnings concerning prayer.

Marc Roby: Alright, what would you like to warn us against first?

Dr. Spencer: I want to warn us against praying improperly, especially under stress. It is always good to turn to God in prayer, especially when we are in trouble or stress, and I'm quite certain that God makes allowances for us when we are in great stress. But, nevertheless, we must pray for the right things in the right way or our prayers will not be as effective as we would like.

Marc Roby: Can you give us an example of the sort of thing you have in mind?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, but I need to provide some biblical history as background first. When Joshua led the Israelites into the promised land, God worked a number of miracles to make it clear to his people that it was *his* might and power that prevailed against their enemies, and not theirs. For example, he parted the Jordan River and allowed the people to cross over on dry ground.

Marc Roby: Which is even more incredible when you consider that the Jordan River was at flood stage at the time, as we are told in Joshua 3:15.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that does make it even more incredible. But the miracles didn't end there. The first town the Israelites conquered was Jericho. Now Jericho had high walls and was a very secure town. But God told his people to march around it once a day for six days. Then, on the seventh day, he told them to march around it seven times. After the seventh time, they all gave a loud shout and the walls came tumbling down to allow the Israelites to go up into the city and conquer it.

Marc Roby: That is an unusual military strategy to say the least. And the way in which God won that victory doesn't leave much room for the Israelites to take credit.

Dr. Spencer: No, it doesn't. And that was precisely the point. Nevertheless, the people evidently started to think that they were very powerful in their own strength. The next town they tried to conquer was Ai. And Joshua sent spies to look at the situation first. The spies came back and we read in Joshua 7:3 that they reported, "Not all the people will have to go up against Ai. Send two or three thousand men to take it and do not weary all the people, for only a few men are there."<sup>1</sup>

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**Marc Roby: And, unfortunately, Joshua heeded the counsel of those spies.**

Dr. Spencer: Which was a huge mistake, in fact, it was sin. He didn't inquire of God, but listened to the spies and sent a few thousand men against Ai. But we need to say something more about the attack on Jericho before we relate what happened next. What Joshua didn't know, but would probably have found out if he had inquired of God, was that one of the Israelites had taken plunder from Jericho and hidden it in his tent. But God had commanded the Israelites that the plunder was to be devoted to him, so this was clear sin against an explicit command of God. The Israelite who stole the plunder was named Achan, which is appropriate since the name means troubler.<sup>2</sup> And because of that sin, God was angry with the Israelites.

**Marc Roby: It is never a good thing when God is angry with us. And in this case, when the Israelites attacked Ai, we are told in Joshua 7:4-5 that "they were routed by the men of Ai, who killed about thirty-six of them."**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, as you pointed out, it is never good when God is angry with us. And as a result of this defeat, Joshua was perplexed and cried out to God in prayer. But his prayer was not right. Now I have to be very careful here because Joshua was a very godly leader. But he was also a sinner like all the rest of us and in this particular case he did not pray as he should have prayed. He complained to God and gave in to self-pity. Although, I do have to point out that he ended the prayer well by showing concern for God's glory.

**Marc Roby: Which should always be our greatest concern.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it should be. I don't want to spend a lot of time looking at this situation, I would refer interested listeners to A.W. Pink's discussion of Joshua's prayer in his book *Gleanings from Joshua*.<sup>3</sup> But I want to look at God's response to Joshua's prayer. In Joshua 7:10 we read that "The LORD said to Joshua, 'Stand up! What are you doing down on your face?'" We can see from this response that God was not pleased with Joshua's prayer, so he stopped him. He then graciously told him what was wrong. God was not with the Israelites anymore because there was sin in the camp and they needed to remove it.

**Marc Roby: I see now what you mean about prayers not being effective if they aren't the right prayer.**

Dr. Spencer: Its interesting to speculate a bit and ask what would have happened if Joshua had done as he should have and had inquired of God prior to sending men against Ai. I think God would have revealed Achan's sin to him at that time and the community could have taken care of it without having 36 Israelites killed in the aborted attempt to conquer the city. Think of all the suffering that could have been avoided.

**Marc Roby: That's a steep price to pay.**

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<sup>2</sup> Zondervan, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (in five volumes), Zondervan, 1976, Vol. 1, pg. 37

<sup>3</sup> A.W. Pink, *Gleanings in Joshua*, Moody Press, 1964, pp 187-193

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. But sin is always costly. And, in this case, there was sin by both Achan and Joshua, who was the leader of the people. The lesson for us in terms of our prayer life is simple. When we pray, even in times of great stress, we need to think and apply biblical doctrine to be sure that we are praying correctly. In his commentary on 1 John, Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote, “in a situation of crisis the New Testament does not immediately say, ‘Let us pray’. It always says first, ‘Let us think, let us understand the truth, let us take a firm hold of the doctrine.’ Prayer may be quite useless and quite void.”<sup>4</sup>

**Marc Roby: Yes, that’s a great warning to us all.**

Dr. Spencer: It is a very important warning. Now there are times, especially if we experience serious difficulty and stress, when we may not immediately know what we ought to pray. In those times, I think we would be well advised to come to God and say, “Oh Lord, I don’t know what to do. Show me how to think properly about this situation. Show me what I should feel. Show me what I should do.” Our feelings always need to be the caboose, not the engine. So, we need to pray for God to enable us to think biblically, to control our emotions and to pray for the right thing. And any time we experience serious trouble, we should certainly pray for God to reveal to us any sin that might be the cause of the trouble.

**Marc Roby: And, if God reveals to us sins that we have not yet repented of, we must repent of them truly and strive to put them to death.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we most certainly should do that. So, the lesson for us here is similar to the lesson we saw last time in regard to praying for God to take away pain. Whenever we experience trouble of any kind, we should first seek to know what God is speaking to us. We should want to profit from the trouble. It is improper to pray for trouble of any kind to simply be taken away without first seeking to know what God is teaching us.

**Marc Roby: Yes, as you noted in our last session in speaking about pain, God is good and he is sovereign, so we need to realize that any troubles that come our way are ordained by him. Therefore, they must have a good purpose for his people. May we all learn that lesson and grow in our faith and usefulness in the kingdom of God.**

Dr. Spencer: Indeed. But moving on, there is another, similar, way in which prayer can be improper. And that is when we pray rather than doing what we know we ought to be doing. Martyn Lloyd-Jones went on to say that “Prayer is sometimes an excuse for not thinking, an excuse for avoiding a problem or situation.”<sup>5</sup>

**Marc Roby: Well, I think we must all plead guilty to having experienced that at one time or another.**

Dr. Spencer: I agree. And Jones says the same thing. But when we know what we ought to be doing, prayer can be a sinful way of trying to avoid it. If the boss has told us to do something we

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<sup>4</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in Christ; Volume One, Fellowship with God*, Studies in 1 John, Crossway Books, 1993, pp 12-13

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pg. 13

don't want to do, it would be completely improper to ask God to somehow remove the task from us. We should do what we know we are supposed to do. It would be proper however, to come to God with a short prayer as we begin the task and ask him to give us the right attitude and the ability to do the task well.

**Marc Roby: We often need to ask God to help us to adjust our attitude. Sin is so pervasive and sneaks into our thinking and feeling so easily. But the lesson here is clear. Prayer is not a substitute for obedience.**

**Is there any other type of improper prayer that you would like to warn us against?**

Dr. Spencer: Yes. In a similar vein, we should not pray for God to bail us out of the consequences of our own sin.

**Marc Roby: I think an example of what you have in mind would again be good.**

Dr. Spencer: Well, think about a student who hasn't properly prepared for a midterm exam. It would be inappropriate for him to ask God to have the exam be postponed or to help him somehow perform way better than he deserves. His own slothfulness put him in the position and God is not typically going to bail him out. It would be appropriate for him to confess his sin of laziness and to pray for forgiveness and even to pray that he be able think clearly and remember what he has learned so that he can do as well as possible. But just to ask God to somehow miraculously help is not proper.

**Marc Roby: Sin does have consequences in this life, even for Christians.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. When Moses told the people about God's curses for disobedience, we read in Leviticus 26:40-42, that God told them through Moses, "But if they will confess their sins and the sins of their fathers—their treachery against me and their hostility toward me, which made me hostile toward them so that I sent them into the land of their enemies—then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sin, I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land."

**Marc Roby: And, of course, by saying that God will remember his covenant and remember the land, he means he will restore the covenant blessings.**

Dr. Spencer: That's exactly what he means. But we must pay attention to the conditions under which he says he will do that. First, the people must confess their sins. Second, their hearts must be humbled. And notice that it is the trouble God brings that is intended to humble their hearts. In this case God says he sent them into the land of their enemies. And further notice that this trouble God brought to them was not only to humble their hearts, it was also to pay for their sin!

Now, we must be clear that this is not speaking about atoning for sin. No man can atone for his sins. Even the smallest sin is committed against the infinite, perfect, thrice holy God and deserves infinite punishment. We can never pay enough.

Marc Roby: We are told in Psalm 49:7-9 that “No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him—the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough—that he should live on forever and not see decay.”

Dr. Spencer: And that is why God sent Jesus Christ to redeem his people. His is not *just* a man, he is the unique God-man, the only satisfactory sacrifice for the sins of his people. It was his sacrifice that all of the bloody sacrifices of the Old Testament pointed to.

Marc Roby: We are told about that in the book of Hebrews. In Chapter 10, Verses 1-4 we read, “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

Dr. Spencer: That passage makes a clear, logical argument. If the animal sacrifices had been able to make people perfect, they would have stopped. But they went on year after year as a reminder of sins. In other words, as a reminder of our need for atonement, which is only available through Jesus Christ our Savior. His sacrifice was efficacious for all of the sins of all of his people for all time and is never to be repeated.

It is interesting to note that even though the Jews do not accept Jesus as the Messiah, in God’s providence, the animal sacrifices stopped in 70 AD when the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and they are still not being performed to this day.

Marc Roby: That is interesting.

Dr. Spencer: And so, when we say that we must pay for our sins in this life, we are *not* speaking about atonement. We can never atone for our own sins, we cannot save ourselves. We are simply making the point that our sins have unpleasant consequences for ourselves and others as well. Our family, our church, our country and so on. And, more in keeping with our topic today, one consequence of sin is that God will not hear our prayers if we are walking in sin.

Marc Roby: When you refer to walking in sin, I assume you mean either habitual sin or, at least, sin of which we are aware and have not yet repented or forsaken.

Dr. Spencer: That’s what I mean, yes. We all sin. But, as the passage in Leviticus said, God will bring trouble to us for the dual purpose of first, our paying for our sin and, second, humbling our hearts in order to bring us to true repentance so that he can restore us to right fellowship. We are told in 1 John 1:9 that “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” So, when we confess and turn away from our sins, God restores us to fellowship and is ready to hear our prayers again.

Marc Roby: We are told in James 5:16 that “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”

Dr. Spencer: And in speaking of a righteous man in that verse, James does not mean a perfect man or it wouldn't apply to anyone outside of Christ. He is referring to a man who does his best to know and do the will of God and who, when he fails, confesses his sin and repents. If that is true of us, then our hearts will be clear before God and the promise he gave to us in 1 John 3:21-22 will apply, "Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him."

Marc Roby: That is wonderful. If we strive to live holy lives, we can have confidence that our prayers are heard.

Dr. Spencer: It is amazing that God is willing to hear our prayers at all, but doubly so when you think of all that he has to forgive.

Marc Roby: Do you have anything else you want to bring up before we conclude for this week?

Dr. Spencer: No, I think that is all for today.

Marc Roby: Very well. Then let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We will do our best to answer.