

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 now. Last week we looked at the acrostic ACTS, which stands for adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication and is a useful tool to help us pray. What would you like to cover today Dr. Spencer?

Dr. Spencer: I want to begin to examine the Lord's Prayer.

Marc Roby: Which we should probably say, for any listeners who are not aware, is the prayer that Jesus himself taught his disciples.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. We read in Luke 11:1 that "One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.'"¹

Marc Roby: And Jesus responded by giving them what is commonly known as the Lord's prayer, although not exactly in the form in which most Christians learn it today.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, the form has been modified a little, and we will discuss that later. We are also given the prayer in the sixth chapter of Matthew, and it is instructive to see what else Jesus says there. It is a part of what is commonly called the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus provided extensive teaching to his disciples, and we read in Matthew 6:5 that Jesus said, "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full."

Marc Roby: Now, that's a terrifying thought. They have already received their reward in full, which obviously means that they have received it in this life and are not headed to heaven when they die.

Dr. Spencer: It is terrifying. But I want us to notice two things about Jesus' statement. First, he said *when* you pray, not *if* you pray. There is a clear assumption that anyone who is a true disciple of Jesus Christ will pray. It is a normal part of the Christian life. And it isn't just once in a great while when we are in trouble, or just a 20-second prayer before our evening meal, or just on Sundays at church. If prayer is not a normal part of a person's daily life, that person is either not a Christian, or is horribly back slidden.

Marc Roby: Yes, I agree. And I would assume that the second thing you want us to notice about Jesus' statement is that we should not be hypocrites, trying to look good to others.

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Dr. Spencer: That is the second point, yes. He says that there are people who pray only to be heard, and the assumption is, admired by others. Prayer is part of our private communication with God. There is a time and a place for public prayer, but the vast majority of our time in prayer should be in private. We are speaking with God, not trying to impress others. We certainly aren't going to impress God.

Marc Roby: I'm sure not! And in keeping with the fact that most of our praying is done in private, Jesus went on, as we read in Verse 6, to say, "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Dr. Spencer: And Jesus also went on to warn about the content of our prayers. In the next two verses, Verses 7 and 8, we read that he said, "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

Now we've dealt already with the fact that God doesn't need us to pray to inform him of our desires or needs. He knows them perfectly well already. Prayer is part of our fellowship with God, it is a secondary means of accomplishing his will, and it is a blessing for us. But we should not just babble along repeating the same thing over and over again. We are to intelligently and thoughtfully speak to God.

Marc Roby: Which makes perfect sense given that God is an intelligent being.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does make perfect sense. And so Jesus then goes on, in the next verses, Matthew 6:9-13 to give us the Lord's Prayer. He said, "This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'"

Marc Roby: I think one of the things that strikes most people about this prayer is its brevity and simplicity.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I agree. People sometimes seem to equate piety with very lengthy prayers and flowery language, but that isn't necessarily the case. Now, don't get me wrong, our prayers can be quite lengthy if we are bringing many issues to God and there is nothing inherently wrong with lofty language if it used for the right reasons. But we don't want to make our prayers artificially lengthy or ostentatious, and this prayer provides a wonderful framework for how we should come to God in prayer.

Marc Roby: Which is why it is analyzed in, for example, both the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms.

Dr. Spencer: And other catechisms as well. The prayer is often broken down by saying that it consists of a preface and six petitions, or you could say requests. The preface is, in the wording most common today, "Our Father, who art in heaven".

Marc Roby: Now, that preface says a lot in very few words. Question 100 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What does the preface of the Lord’s Prayer teach us?” And the answer is, “The preface of the Lord’s Prayer, (which is, Our Father, who art in heaven,) teaches us to draw near to God with all holy reverence and confidence, as children to a father, able and ready to help us; and that we should pray with and for others.”²

Dr. Spencer: That’s a wonderful summary of what those few words teach us. First, God is in heaven, not here on earth. He is on his throne, ruling over his creation. Therefore, we must approach him with “all holy reverence” as the catechism says. Second, we can approach him with confidence.

In his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, which also goes through the Lord’s Prayer, G.I. Williamson wrote, “Of course, the natural man will try to pray when he faces a crisis. He knows that God is there, and in time of great need he may cry out to him for mercy. But only the Christian is able to pray not only in humility but also with confident expectation. And he can do this because God has told us that he will listen to us if we come in – and through – the Lord Jesus.”³

Marc Roby: I like the way he phrases that. We can come not only in humility but also with confident expectation.

Dr. Spencer: I think that is an important point. Our confidence is in God. His promises, his faithfulness and his power, not in ourselves. So humility and confidence can, in fact, go together. God has given us many great promises, some of which we have looked at in past sessions on prayer, and God is truthful. His promises are certain.

But moving on, the third thing the catechism answer tells us is that we can come to God as children to a father. If we are born again, we have been adopted by God and are part of his family. Jesus Christ is our older brother. And finally, note that the prayer said “Our Father”, it uses the plural pronoun. So, even though Christ told his disciples to go into a private place to pray, the form of prayer he taught them used the plural, which tells us that he also expects us to pray, as the catechism says, with and for others.

Marc Roby: And being able to call God our Father is an amazing privilege he has given to us. Paul tells us in Romans 8:15, “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’”

Dr. Spencer: That is astounding to say the least. That we, as sinful, finite creatures, should be permitted to call the eternal, infinite, all holy God our Father. I like what the Heidelberg Catechism says about this. Question 120 asks, “Why has Christ commanded us to address God thus, *Our Father*?”⁴

² *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2012, pg. 43 (English updated slightly)

³ G.I. Williamson, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1993, pg. 210

⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 212

Marc Roby: And the answer they give is this: “To awaken in us, at the very beginning of our prayer, that childlike reverence and trust toward God which should be the ground of our prayer; namely, that God has become our Father through Christ, and will much less deny us what we ask of Him in true faith than our parents will refuse us earthly things.”⁵

Dr. Spencer: In dealing with this question in his commentary, Williamson asks, “But what does this phrase teach us? It teaches us that all true prayer begins with a relationship to the true God.” In other words, calling God our Father reminds us that prayer is a privilege that is based on relationship. Sin destroyed man’s fellowship with God, but in Christ that fellowship is restored. It is only on that basis that we can come to God in prayer.

Marc Roby: And we should praise and thank God for his incredible mercy and grace. As Paul wrote in 1 John 4:10, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

Dr. Spencer: That boggles the mind. We deserved punishment for our sins, not love. Paul tells us in Romans 5:8 that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Marc Roby: That demonstrates a depth of love that we cannot even begin to grasp.

Dr. Spencer: No, we can’t. God’s love is beyond description or understanding. But let’s now move on to look at the rest of the preface. Christ said we should begin our prayers by saying “Our Father who art in heaven.” We need to understand why Jesus added the fact that God is not just our adoptive Father, which speaks about an intimate personal relationship, but also that he is in heaven.

Marc Roby: Which, of course, speaks about the fact that there still is an infinite gulf between us, as creatures, and God as our Creator.

Dr. Spencer: That is the main idea, yes. Williamson comments on this, saying, “God is infinitely far above us. Yet, at the same time, he is close to us, as a father is close to his children.”⁶ The fact that God is in heaven is meant to point us to the fact that he is infinitely far above us.

Question 121 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, “Why is there added, *Who art in heaven?*”

Marc Roby: And the catechism’s answer is, “That we may have no earthly thought of the heavenly majesty of God, and may expect from His almighty power all things necessary for body and soul.”⁷

Dr. Spencer: In other words, we have to strive to lift our minds above purely earth-bound things. We can’t think of God as just some kind of a superman. We are made in his image, but there is a

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid, pg. 213

⁷ Ibid

an infinite gulf between us and God. He isn't just a lot stronger, a lot smarter, a lot larger, a lot older and so on. He is qualitatively different.

Marc Roby: As the answer to Question 4 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism says, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth."⁸

Dr. Spencer: And the idea of God being infinite already points to a qualitative, rather than just a quantitative difference between him and us. You don't get to infinity by just making something much, much bigger. You can multiply the number one million by itself however many times you want and you will never arrive at infinity. Infinity is a very difficult concept for us to grasp. We use it all the time in mathematics as a limiting concept, but an actual infinity is impossible in this material universe.

Marc Roby: Whoa! I think that comment may require some explanation.

Dr. Spencer: Well, we talked about this once before, way back in Session 64, but the concept of infinity leads to some very interesting paradoxes. We discussed Hilbert's Hotel in that session.

Marc Roby: I have a vague but uneasy recollection of something like that.

Dr. Spencer: Hilbert's Hotel is a paradox about a hotel with an infinite number of rooms. If we say the hotel is full and then ask whether or not it can accept an infinite number of new guests, the surprising answer is, "Yes, it can!" All you have to do is move all of the existing guests to different rooms. For example, have every guest move to a room whose number is twice the number of the room the guest is in now. So, the guest in room 1 moves to room 2, the guest in room 2 moves to room 4, the guest in room 3 moves to room 6 and so on. When you are done with all of these moves, all of the odd rooms are empty. And, since there are an infinite number of odd rooms, you can accommodate the infinite number of new guests who want rooms.

Marc Roby: Well, I didn't understand that back in Session 64 and I don't understand it now.

Dr. Spencer: And neither do I. No one truly *understands* infinity in the normal sense of that word. It is a useful concept, but leads to some very difficult problems. And, as I noted back in Session 64, we've been a bit loose with the concept here, but I think what we have said is sufficient to make the point.

Marc Roby: I like Jesus' way of making the point better. He simply said our Father who art in heaven.

Dr. Spencer: I like that as well. It conveys the idea very simply. We need to be careful to keep the balance at all times. There is simultaneously this incredible privilege of a close personal relationship, which is indicated by our being allowed to call God Abba, Father, and the infinite gulf between the Creator and the creation. A real infinity is impossible in this universe, but God is not part of the universe. He is the infinite Creator.

⁸ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2012, pg. 6

As a very short aside, I was tempted a moment ago to call the gulf between man and God unbridgeable, rather than infinite, but that wouldn't be true, because Jesus Christ, the unique God-man, has alone bridged that gulf!

Marc Roby: Praise God! He is the only mediator between God and man as we are told in 1 Timothy 2:5.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is wonderful. But getting back to the fact that God is infinite, he is present everywhere in the totality of his being at all times. He knows all things, past, present and future. He knows everything perfectly, without having to think about it or remember it. He has the power to do anything that is logically possible and consistent with his own nature. He exists necessarily and independently. We can't even begin to realize the majestic nature and power of God.

Marc Roby: The apostle Paul comments on God's power at the end of one of his prayers. In Ephesians 3:20-21 we read that Paul finished a prayer by saying, "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."

Dr. Spencer: That is a marvelous statement. We can't imagine the power of God. He called this entire universe into existence. He created all life. He has ordained everything that happens. Nothing in this universe is outside of his control.

We must bear all of that in mind when we come to God in prayer.

Marc Roby: Jesus certainly packed a lot into very few words when he said we should pray to our Father who art in heaven.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he did. And in future sessions I want to look at the rest of the Lord's Prayer. But I think that is enough for this week.

Marc Roby: Very well, before we close then, let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org and we will do our best to answer.