

The Structure of Prayer

by Rev. Michael Voytek

Our Model

Our Lord Jesus Christ, in response to the request from His disciples to teach them to pray, gave us a wonderful gift that has been traditionally referred to as the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:1-4). It is both a model prayer ("after this manner" - Matthew 6:13) and an example ("say" - Luke 11:2-4). Through this prayer, He gave us biblical principles as well as biblical content. Have you ever considered that one can actually misuse this gift whether in private devotions or in the corporate gathering of God's people? This most commonly occurs during the time that we pray this prayer and yet our hearts or our minds are not engaged. This is nothing other than "vain repetition" that our Lord warned us not to practice (Matthew 6:7). One of the ways to overcome this tendency is by keeping in mind the principles found in the prayer. To begin to explore these principles, it is helpful to formulate a working definition of prayer. We will define it as "a structured, personal communication with God." In this article we will break this definition into three parts. First we will focus our attention on the personal aspect of prayer. Then we will consider what kind of "communication" it is. And finally we will examine the structural principles that are present in this prayer.

Personal Relationship

Notice that the first two words of the prayer "Our Father" provide a wealth of information concerning the personal relationship that we have with the one to whom we are speaking. Even the first word "Our" indicates that we have a relationship that is personal (it is a personal pronoun), intimate (it is a possessive pronoun), and one that goes beyond the individual to include the entire family of God (it is also a plural pronoun). This is reinforced by other pronouns such as "us" and "we" used throughout the prayer. Furthermore, instead of the more generic term such as "God," our Lord Jesus taught us to use the word "Father." The Heidelberg Catechism explains it this way "Why did Christ commanded us to address God thus: Our Father? To awaken in us at the very beginning of our prayer that childlike reverence and trust in God, which are to 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 faith than our parents refuse us earthly things" (Q. #120). Thus prayer is a communication between persons in a special relationship.

Communication and Communion

But what kind of communication are we attempting when we pray? It is more than simply providing information or requesting assistance. Because of the nature of the relationship between God as our heavenly Father and us, His children, there is an aspect of intimacy that is

involved as well. It can be referred to as "communing" with our God. A helpful definition of "communing" can be found on www.dictionary.com; "1. to converse or talk together, usually with profound intensity, intimacy, etc.; interchange thoughts or feelings. 2. to be in intimate communication or rapport." To have this communion with God, we must know Him and more importantly be known by Him (John 17:3; Luke 13:25-27). We must also know our inability and need as well as His ability and promised provision (Phil. 4:19). Furthermore, we must trust Him to hear and answer our prayers according to His will (Hebrews 11:6; James 1:5-6). Again the Heidelberg Catechism comes to our aid in understanding this aspect of prayer. In answer to the question; "What belongs to such prayer, as God is pleased with and will hear?" we learn that "First, that from the heart we call only upon the one true God, who has revealed Himself to us in His word, for all that He has commanded us to ask of Him; secondly, that we thoroughly know our need and misery, so as to humble ourselves before the face of His Divine Majesty; thirdly, that we be firmly assured, that withstanding our unworthiness He will, for the sake of Christ our Lord, certainly hear our prayer, as He has promised us in His word" (Q. #117). To summarize, our communication in prayer is faith in action.

The Structure that assists us in Prayer

Now how does the structure of the Lord's Prayer help us in our daily devotions or in corporate worship? We begin by noting that the prayer can be broken down into two main parts. The first part focuses upon God and who He is in relations to us. The second part concerns ourselves and who we are in relations to Him. Considering once again the use of the various pronouns will help us in discerning this distinction. In the first half of the prayer the pronoun that is used is "Thy". After acknowledging God's transcendence (who art in heaven), we proceed to concentrate upon His holiness and self-revelation (hallowed be Thy name), and His sovereignty and power (Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done...). Furthermore it is appropriate that this pronoun is again used at the very end of the prayer (Thine is the kingdom...). Thus our prayers should be first and foremost God-centered communication with the Almighty sovereign Lord and King over all things. On the other hand, by using the pronouns "us" and "our" in the second half of the prayer, we acknowledge our honored and exalted status as sons and daughters (our Father), our dependence upon Him (give us this day our daily bread), our sinfulness in relations to others (forgive us as we forgive), and our need for His guidance and protection (lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil).

The structure can also be viewed from another perspective that helps us in formulating our own prayers. We are taught here to begin by focusing on the transcendent nature of God (in heaven) and His transcendent holiness (hallowed by Thy "name" (i.e. Thy person and works)). This should lead us to reflect upon ourselves in relations to Him. Among the possible results is confession of sin (like Isaiah - see Isaiah 6) or the acknowledging of our insignificance (like David - see Psalm 8). Next we are confronted with His sovereign rule over all things (Thy kingdom come) and our responsibility to submit to His will (Thy will be done). We can

describe this point as re-consecration of ourselves to Him and His sovereign will. Again we find this movement from confrontation of sin to re-consecration to service in the life of Isaiah as recorded in Isaiah chapter 6. This is nothing more than a turning of our hearts and minds from ourselves and our worldly concerns to our heavenly Father, dealing with whatever has come between us (i.e. self-centeredness and sin) and renewing our commitment to our relationship with Him. In the modern vernacular it is "getting right with God". Once this is done, the rest of the prayer is set within the proper framework. We can pray: that You, our heavenly Father, would provide our daily provisions in order to serve Your kingdom purposes (give us this day our daily bread), enable us to be reconciled with others as we have been reconciled with You (forgive us our debts...), guide us by Your word and spirit as we travel through this treacherous and rebellious world (lead us not into temptation), and deliver us from those forces and individuals who oppose Your sovereign will (i.e. the world, the flesh, and the devil). In essence this prayer is a kingdom prayer which should reflect a life that is kingdom focused. Thus the prayer ends with the declaration that "Thine" is the kingdom, the power, and glory forever. Again our Heidelberg Catechism explains the closing of the prayer thus "How do you close this prayer? For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. That is: All this we ask of Thee, because as our King, having power over all things, Thou art both willing and able to give us all good; and that thereby not we, but Thy holy Name may be glorified forever" (Q. #128).

In summary, we have been given a precious gift from the Lord Jesus Christ, not only access to the Father through His redemptive and intercessory work, but also through a model prayer that contains a wealth of guidance that enables us to make the most of what we have been given.

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