

Truth for Today

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The Problem of Prayer - in a Self-sufficient World

In order to consider the statement "The problem with prayer - in a self sufficient world" we need to break the statement into its various components. The components which I intend to cover are as follows:

1. What is prayer?
2. A self sufficient world
3. The problem with prayer

As we consider the above I am sure our conclusion will be surprising but not necessarily pleasant!

1. What is prayer?

Our Daily Bread on 1 June 2009 made this short statement, "Prayer is the voice of faith". This poem then followed the statement:

*Faith looks across the storm – it does not doubt
Or stop to look at clouds and things without.
Faith does not question why when all God's ways
Are hard to understand, but trusts and prays. (Anonymous)*

Prayer, at its simplest, is the means by which a Christian can communicate with God - God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. When the Lord was here in the world He illustrated certain principles concerning prayer.

In the Gospel of Luke 18:10-14, we read: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The Pharisee was wrapped up in himself. He was all I, I, I. He was proud of what he was and did and wants everyone to know. He is ready to condemn the tax collector who is standing nearby. It would be surprising if this man's prayer got above the ceiling! In contrast the tax collector feels his unworthiness and owns his right condition before God, that of a sinner. He makes no claim or boast but simply casts himself upon the mercy of God. The Lord Jesus then gives His assessment of the two men as only One who is God can do and states that the tax collector went down to his house justified. In other words we learn that God listened to his prayer and he received a blessing.

We conclude that prayer, to be effective, must include a correct assessment of self.

In the Gospel of Matthew 6:9-13, we have what is commonly referred to as the "Lord's prayer". In reality it is not the "Lord's prayer" but an example for how the disciples should pray and possibly a sample structure for prayers. It was never intended to be repeated word for word as the words, "In this manner" indicate. Matthew's recorded version of this example of prayer commences with the acknowledgement that God the Father is in heaven and that His name is holy. It is important to remind ourselves that God is indeed holy and as such, should be treated with the utmost respect. God is not a good luck charm to be turned to only in times of crisis. Nor is our manner of conversation with God to be disrespectful in any way. We are not to converse with God as we would with our next door neighbour or friend.

In this prayer we are acknowledging a number of things which we need to keep in our thoughts. There is a coming kingdom that is God's. As we read through Scripture we find that the kingdom will be preceded by judgment. When we say "Your will be done", then we must mean it. We should be living our lives in God's will.

When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread", then we are expressing our dependence upon God for daily provision. In some parts of the world this is a very real challenge. Are we a thankful people as we sit down to our

meals during the day? Do we thank our loving heavenly Father for our meal or do we just gobble it down in the same manner as non-Christians without a thought towards our God and Father who is the ultimate provider?

Do we have a forgiving spirit? If we fail in some way, acting like an unbeliever, do we ask for forgiveness? "If any one sins we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous", 1 John 2:1. The other side of the forgiveness coin is the challenge to forgive others who do us harm. Our personal Christian testimony is either enhanced or tarnished by how we act in the above situations. At one time it was commonly stated among Christians, "That we should keep short accounts with God and not leave sin un-confessed". The same attitude needs to be true in relation to others. If we do not have the forgiving spirit then we may find that problems and difficulties come. Being unforgiving results in the problem festering away in our hearts and minds and is likely to make us bitter and twisted. As such we will have the utmost difficulty in living a victorious Christian life as a testimony to others. Additionally it will hinder our communion with both the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The next phrase is really a desire to live a fruitful life for God. Keep us out of adversity (temptation) and keep us away from Satan or his influence. We need to ask for preservation at all times. And this part of the prayer goes alongside knowing God's word. An essential feature that is closely connected to prayer is the study and meditation upon God's word. The two must go hand in hand to be growing Christians.

Matthew ends with the acknowledgement of God's kingdom, power and glory. In this sample prayer there are no I, I, I's. This prayer is all about God the Father and our dependence.

I will now read Matthew's version of this prayer so that we may gain the full impact of what the Lord Jesus Christ was teaching. "In this manner, therefore, 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 this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

My final consideration in regard to prayer is to touch on the variety of its features. To do this I will use the following verse, Philippians 4:6, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." In this verse we find features which are also true of what we commonly call the "Lord's prayer". Paul is seeking to bring comfort and encouragement with the opening phrase of the verse "Be anxious for nothing". Worry is one of the greatest ways to ruin our health both physically and spiritually. So Paul is seeking our total wellbeing with this opening phrase. Paul is not saying we are not to be concerned about things, but being anxious and worrying is a negative attitude. Being concerned is positive because concern leads to thinking of positive solutions. This first step is prayer! Prayer can be worship, verbal and full of energy. Worship is a good point to start, being verbal helps to concentrate and clarify our thoughts and energy or earnestness would highlight our determination to bring the situation positively to our God who answers believing prayer.

Supplication would remind us that we are asking a great God to provide either for ourselves or others. We must at this point remind ourselves that when we pray and supplicate we should be doing so according to the will of God. The will of God is the furtherance of God's interests in this world through individual Christians. There is a story of a courtier in the palace of a past monarch of England who was always coming and asking for favours. After many such requests (all of which had been granted) the king responded one day to the courtier's request, "When will you stop asking?" The courtier's reply was "When the king stops giving". Our God will not stop giving as long as we ask in faith for those things which are according to His mind and will.

As we pray let us remember to be thankful or grateful for those things we do have and for the fellowship of other Christians. Our God loves to see us praying because it is an indication that we show our dependence upon Him. If we give up praying and depending then we are on the road to failure. At home we have recently read about king Asa (see 2 Chronicles 14-16). When king Asa depended upon God he was victorious in battle and his kingdom prospered but when, after many years of peace, he was faced with a problem he forgot to pray and a seeming victory turned into a personal disaster (read 2 Chronicles 16:7-10). Instead of repenting he got angry with God and persecuted God's prophet.

As we close this section we should remind ourselves that the Lord Jesus Christ was very much a man of prayer. So much so that at least on one occasion spent a whole night on a mountain in prayer. If we need an example, let it be the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

2. A self sufficient world

Many of us live in countries where we can obtain, assuming we have the resource to do so, anything that we require. This is not true worldwide. There are many countries where people struggle to find sufficient food to keep them from starvation. Where life is one continual battle for survival and that is without the hazards of war, political unrest, religious differences and social injustice. Therefore, we can conclude that the phrase "a self sufficient world" is

certainly not universally true. A self sufficient world may well be true in what we call "western countries" but with the current economic "credit crunch", there are many people seeing how deceptive our world is.

A self sufficient world might almost be true for the wealthy but they always seem to want just "a bit more". Our world is built on covetousness, "I want". The basic aim of the advertising industry is to make everyone "want things or services" and then to spend to satisfy that want. This is an endless cycle. If people do not have the money to satisfy their wants then the credit card is the answer – buy now and pay later. Sadly we are seeing many people paying for it now, reckless spending with mounting debt and not the means to repay.

Not many years ago there were "food mountains" and "wine lakes" in certain countries. Such countries had a surplus of food stuffs but instead of reducing the prices they were kept artificially high and in some cases food was actually destroyed. A few thousand miles away there were people at starvation level. This is not the picture of a self sufficient world. In reality our world is unbalanced and greed is a major driving factor. These are features which came about with sin and it started way back with Adam and Eve.

Warfare and terrorism are not features of a self sufficient world; they are features of a world that turns to violence to achieve its objectives. Murder and other forms of killing are features of a world which has its basic values turned upside down. In our so called self sufficient world, the value of life as something absolutely precious, is no longer considered important. The problems of abuse are rising despite what seems to be frantic efforts by government departments as they lurch from one crisis to another. God's standards and basic guidelines for right living are increasingly being ignored and overturned by the laws of countries.

The statement "a self sufficient world" is a misnomer as the above considerations clearly indicate. God knew the reality with regard to this world and its people. God fully appreciated the devastation that had come in with sin. The only sure solution was the sending of God's Son into this world to become its "Deliverer and Saviour". John 3:16 states, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." God starts His Salvation with what is most important, a precious never dying soul. From this starting point, those that are saved through the precious blood of Christ are then expected to live right according to God's standards and guidelines as found in the Bible.

3. The problem with prayer

It is not so much the problem with prayer; it is our attitude to prayer and the implied dependence upon God. Because Christians in some countries can obtain just about anything that they need, then there is the perceived impression we no longer need to depend upon God for our daily needs. It is in these same countries where there is little or no opposition to Christians. Yes, there are issues where Christians are discriminated against when wearing a cross or taking a stand against issues which the Bible clearly teaches as wrong. But, so far we are not driven from our homes, excluded from certain employment opportunities or excluded from education. This does happen in many countries where Christians are the minority. If we take the world as a whole, the majority of Christians are great on prayer as they realise that without God's protection and provision each day things go sadly wrong.

Maybe in western countries it is not until some great issue or crisis hits us that we begin to feel our helplessness and are driven to prayer. It is when we realise that we have nowhere and no one else to turn to that prayer becomes the only remaining option. This should not be the way in our Christian lives. At all times prayer should be our first resource. So we are encouraged in the Bible by Paul's word to the Thessalonians (5:16-18): "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." This scripture tells us that prayer should be a constant characteristic of our lives as well as rejoicing and giving thanks. Why should this be so? Because it is God's will for us that we should be Christians with this kind of positive attitude.

When dealing with "problems", Christians need to be constant in prayer as we are taught by the Lord in Luke 18:1-5 concerning a determined widow with her constant appeal to a judge for justice. Are we constant in prayer? Or do we pray once or twice and then give up?

To conclude on the question: "The problem with prayer – in a self sufficient world".

- There is no problem with prayer.
- The problem is with Christians who do not see the importance of communicating with a loving God.
- Even with a cursory consideration of our world's situation and activity we must conclude that it is anything but self sufficient.

What must our response be to this statement?

1. Re-affirm our dependence on a loving God.
2. Place God at the centre of our lives instead of being a last choice.
3. See the world for what it is and our relationship to it. As the Lord said of His followers in John 17:16: "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world."

As we close our talk this morning, let us consider some of Mrs MA Kidder's hymn "Did you think to pray?" based on Colossians 4:2, "Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving."

*Ere you left your room this morning,
Did you think to pray?
In the name of Christ, our Saviour,
Did you sue for loving favour,
As a shield today?*

*When you met with great temptation,
Did you think to pray?
By His dying love and merit
Did you claim the Holy Spirit
As your guide and stay?*

*When your heart was filled with anger,
Did you think to pray?
Did you plead for grace, my brother,
That you might forgive another
Who had crossed your way?*

*When sore trials came upon you,
Did you think to pray?
When your soul was bowed in sorrow,
Balm of Gilead did you borrow
At the gates of day?*

(Chorus)

*Oh, how praying rests the weary!
Prayer will change the night to day;
So when life seems dark and dreary,
Don't forget to pray.*

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