

Onething Regional: The Heart Foundation of Prayer

1. Introduction

A thousand years ago Prince Vladimir the Great, the pagan monarch of Kiev, was looking for a new religion to unify the Russian people. Toward this end Prince Vladimir sent out envoys to investigate the great faiths from the neighboring realms. The envoys who had investigated Christianity in the Byzantine capital of Constantinople reported finding a faith characterized by such transcendent beauty that they did not know if they were in heaven or on earth.

“Then we went to Constantinople and they led us to the place where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or earth, for on earth there is no such vision nor beauty, and we do not know how to describe it; we only know that God dwells among men. We cannot forget that beauty.”

Prince Vladimir adopted Christianity as the new faith for the Russian people. - Brian Zahnd (Beauty Will Save the World)

- a. Some would dare say that our faith and our union with Christ is dull and boring, nothing to be desired or aspire for, but let us all remember that there is something absolutely beautiful about our faith.
- b. Is there anything more beautiful than broken weary sinners being filled with life and joy from on high? Does anything compare to the sight of a life that was utterly destroyed and ravaged by the work of the evil one being healed and reconciled back to their Creator? Can anything of this world’s system of death, violence, corruption, and power mongering bring about such egg-sistential wonder and beauty?
- c. Every time you close your eyes to pray and open your lips to sing something mysteriously beautiful is taking place. As we partake in the very nature of God and the ministry of Christ we are partaking in the most beautiful act in the universe.
- d. While some see an almost empty room and others hear a missed note heaven sees something completely different going on. Heaven sees beauty in you, in that empty room, singing those same songs, and playing those basic chord progressions over and over again.
- e. Much can and has been said about prayer over the centuries. It is a vast topic that reaches as high as the heavens and its scope reaches down to the very depth of the human heart.
- f. Volumes have been written concerning the “mechanics” of prayer; how to pray, what to pray, how to address this or that, how to see change and breakthrough in this situation or in that area of concern, and everything inbetween.
- g. These works are beneficial and important and, most of them, highly biblical. Yet when I read the Bible it seems to speak less about what to pray and more about in what manner we should pray, that is it seems to speak less about the mechanics of prayer and more about the heart of prayer.

- i. This is not to say that the Bible never address what to pray because it obviously does in the Lord's prayer among other places. Yet the emphasis, in my opinion, seems to be on the heart with which we pray rather than on the words we speak when we pray.
- ii. I think the Bible clearly states, as we will see, that it is entirely possible to pray the right words with the wrong heart and that these prayers fall on deaf ears. Likewise it is entirely possibly to pray less than perfect words but with a pure heart and that those prayers ascend rapidly before the Lord and find their way into His hearing.

*"And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. **You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form.** But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. **You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.** But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life." - John 5:37-40*

- h. This truth, although simple, is dramatic and demands that we closely examine our own hearts as we give ourselves to prayer. That it is entirely possible to be in a prayer room, part of a prayer ministry, and engaging in prayer meetings without actually coming before Jesus in prayer.
 - i. For thousands of years the Jewish people had been praying for their Messiah, reciting the Torah and the Psalms of David that spoke about this One who would come. They rested their hope upon the Prophets and the revelation of the Christ to come that was given to their forefathers.
 - ii. Yet in all their praying Jesus, who was the answer to their prayers, testified against them that they had wandered from the true place of prayer in their hearts.

*"These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, **but their heart is far from Me.** And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." - Matthew 15:8*

- i. Immediately preceding His giving of the Lord's Prayer Jesus addresses two of the primary heart issues related to prayer. Before we are told what to pray we are told how to position our hearts in prayer.
 - i. Again this doesn't demote or demean the "what" of prayer. Obviously the Lord's Prayer is among the greatest teachings Christ ever gave His church. It is simply to say that, like a house, there is an unseen foundation that the entire structure is built upon.

"And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will

reward you openly. And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. 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.'"
- Matthew 6:5-10

- j. Jesus alludes to two questions that form this foundation:
 - i. Why do you pray?
 - ii. Why do you think you are heard?
- k. How we answer these two questions dramatically impact the quality and effectiveness of our prayer life.

2. Why Do You Pray?

- a. The first heart foundation that Jesus addresses in His masterful teaching on prayer is to address the motive that causes us to pray.
- b. To accomplish this Jesus contrasts two different types of pray-ers, hypocrites and Christians.
 - i. It is important to realize that we properly understand what the term hypocrite means here. Typically when that word is used we think of someone who is fake.
 - ii. By really the word means to be inconsistent. So here Jesus is addressing inconsistent pray-ers.
- c. The contrast comes at the heart level where motives and desires live.

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- d. These men, these hypocrites, were condemned by Jesus because they had an ulterior motive to pray. They wanted acclaim and attention. Simply, they wanted to be seen and accepted as devote by their peers.
- e. But lets broaden our scope and we see what Jesus is really pointing at. To these religious men prayer, and God, was simply a means to a greater end rather than an end in and of itself. Prayer was simply the vehicle they were using to chase the true desire of their heart.
- f. And sadly many people do this today. Prayer is seen as nothing more than an end to a desired end and God is converted into a medium by which we can obtain the true dreams of our heart.
- g. For these men it was acclaim and religious acceptance. What is it for you?
 - i. Is it blessing? How about riches and wealth? Is it influence in and through ministry? Is it revival? Is it a spouse? What is the thing that your heart thinks it can't live without?
- h. These men are called hypocrites, inconsistent pray-ers, because any time we operate under this paradigm we will only pray under two circumstances:
 - i. To obtain the thing we so badly seek

- ii. Or to protect it when it is threatened by something
- i. If the true aim of my heart is wealth then I will only pray and seek God when I either need money or when something has happened to me and my finances are being negatively impacted.
- j. If influence is my supreme desire than I will only pray to seek more influence or when I see attendance dwindling and my influence waning.
- k. The truth is that many people operate under this mindset where God simply becomes a means to desired end. But this is, by biblical standards, nothing more than idolatry dressed up in religious clothes. If our supreme pleasure and joy is anything other than Christ than we will eventually, at some level, in some way, turn God and prayer into the way we try to gain our true joy and the Bible calls that idolatry.
 - i. This is the issue Paul addressed in Romans 1 when he confronted the idolatrous hearts of men.

*“Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things...and **worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator**, who is blessed forever. Amen.” - Romans 1:22-23, 25*

- l. How do you know whether your heart has subtly slipped into religious idolatry? Jesus gives us the answer.

*“But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is **in the secret place**; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” - Matthew 6:6*

- m. Jesus points us to our secret time and private life. What do you think about when no one is making you think about anything? What do you dream about when you have 5 minutes to daydream? When you have time to do whatever you want what is it that you desire to do?
 - i. These can point to the true desires of your heart. The desires that rise to the surface on the own when no one is around are typically those which you desire most.
 - ii. So again when you don't have anything to think about or dream about what do you find yourself pondering? Is it blessing? How about riches and wealth? Is it influence in and through ministry? Is it a spouse? Is it revival? What is the thing that your heart thinks it can't live without?
- n. I believe that there are two major idols that most Americans war against in their hearts. These take on different forms and shapes in different people but at their core most people struggle with these two idols and therefore, many times unknowingly, turn prayer and God into their means of obtaining these two things.
- o. The first is success.

- i. This is defined differently by everyone. Some view success as influence, as a promotion, as money, as having a perfect family, as having things, etc. The list goes on and on.
 - ii. But everyone innately wants to be successful. The question is simply how we define success. If we define success as anything other than having a heart full of love for Jesus than we will at some level turn God into our means to become successful.
 - iii. Our prayer life will simply become the medium by which we can obtain success. And when we don't get what we want we will blame God for not giving us what we truly want. And when we do receive a blessing from God we will take the foot of the gas pedal because no longer have a need for God, hence why Jesus refers to these men as inconsistent pray-ers.
- p. The second is comfort.
- i. This is typically not, although it can be, physical comfort obtained through having nice things. This manifests in most people as emotional, psychological, mental, and/or relational comfort.
 - ii. Humans are like water, we seek the path of least resistance. When something threatens our comfort relationally or emotionally our gut reaction many times is to seek to regain that comfort.
 - iii. God therefore becomes our medium through which we obtain comfort. Now this is tricky because God is the one who comforts us. The rubber hits the road though with the question, "Is God enough even if the pain and discomfort you are currently experiencing doesn't go away?"
 - iv. Many people would rather have comfort than God. If this is the case than comfort itself has become an idol and God the means by which you are trying to obtain it.
 - v. And if this is true the only time you will pray and seek God is when are stressed or discomforted in some way. But as soon as comfort returns you will no longer have a need for God or prayer.
- q. Anytime we turn a good thing into the supreme desire of our hearts we will undoubtedly use prayer and God as the medium by which we try to obtain that supreme joy. This is, according to Jesus, the hypocritical, inconsistent, religious way to pray.
- r. The Christian, gospel-centered, way to pray is seen simply in God becoming our chief aim and our supreme joy and desire.

"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward." - Genesis 15:1

- s. In and through the gospel prayer's primary purpose is for us to connect with our Father and hallow His glorious name.

"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.'" - Matthew 6:9-10

- t. So is prayer a means to an end or is it an end in itself? Is God your supreme pleasure and desire or is He the simply the way you are trying to obtain the true desire of your heart?

3. Why Do You Think You Are Heard?

- a. After addressing the foundational issue of motive Jesus turns His attention to the foundational issue of confidence.
 - i. Confidence is one of the core issues related to prayer. Confidence is possibly the quickest way to fuel prayer and lack of confidence is possibly the quickest way to destroy someone's prayer life.
- b. But the primary issue is not whether you have confidence but where your confidence comes from. Confidence is always dependent upon its source. Therefore when we talk about confidence in prayer we must ask, and Jesus does, from where do we derive our confidence?
- c. Jesus contrasts two different paradigms of prayer that relate to where we get our confidence in prayer from.

*"And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. **For they think that they will be heard for their many words.**" - Matthew 6:7*

- d. Again, we must understand who Jesus is contrasting before we can rightly determine what He is say. Heathen, or pagan, here does not refer to godless secularists like it does today. We know this because they are pictured praying here in this verse.
- e. Here, just like in verses 5 and 6, Jesus is contrasting religious prayer and Christian gospel-centered prayer.
- f. These religious men thought that they would be heard because of the words they were speaking; this was the source of their confidence in prayer.
- g. Again, lets zoom out and look at what is actually working in the hearts of these men so that we can learn from it. These men were deriving their confidence in their ability to say the proper words and do the proper things that would cause the Lord to hear them.
- h. The source of their confidence was their own righteousness. These religious men were coming to God under the assumption that their words prescribed the right way would cause their prayers to be answered.
- i. This is the second faulty foundation that many people unknowingly build their prayer life upon: self-righteousness. If I pray the right thing, do the correct deed, and follow the prescribed method than God will hear me and if I don't He won't.
- j. Their confidence in prayer is rooted in themselves being able to hold up their end of the bargain and if they do they expect God to answer. What these men were pointing to was a self-sufficient and self-righteous paradigm rather than a gospel paradigm.
- k. Put another way they approached God with a business paradigm rather than a family paradigm. These are the two relational paradigms that make up all of our relationships, including our relationship with God.
- l. **Business Paradigm:**

- i. A business paradigm is built upon one thing, mutual services that give each party their desired end. In a business relationship each party is expected to live up to their end of the bargain for the relationship to continue.
 - ii. When someone doesn't live up to their part the relationship suffers. Likewise when one party performs their expected task they expect the other to do their.
 - iii. This paradigm says, "I scratch your back and you scratch mine". Therefore the each party is under pressure to perform his or her duty and they also expect the other party to do the same.
 - iv. The business paradigm rests solely on what you can do for me. Once you prove you can't do anything beneficial for me the relationship will end.
- m. Family Paradigm**
- i. The family paradigm is not built on what you can do for me but on who you are to me. In a family each party acts out of their love for the other party regardless of what they can do for them.
 - ii. Regardless of what a family does or does not do our relationship with them is never broken. Why? Because they are family. At some level, in some way, we continue to have relationship with them solely on who they are to us.
- n. These two paradigms are seen at work in a very easy example. You can live in a home either as a renter or as a family member. The difference is striking.
- o. A renter and landlord have a contractual relationship that is based upon the renter paying their rent. In paying their rent the tenants expect the landlord to mow the lawn, shovel the snow, and fix things that are broken. Both are expected to live up to their part of the agreement.
- i. These religious men in Matthew 6 were thinking like renters. In their mind they had paid their rent and therefore they expected God to perform His end of the deal.
 - ii. In their mind their good deeds warranted an answer to their prayers. They had fulfilled their end of the bargain, doing good and right things, therefore God should answer their prayers and give them what they want.
 - iii. Under this paradigm God's willingness to answer rests not on God but on the renter. If I pay the rent than God better answer but if I don't then He won't.
 - iv. Every unanswered prayer then becomes an indication of my failure and every answered prayer becomes a testament to my goodness. Both are incorrect and will lead you astray from God.
- p. A son or daughter on the other hand knows that their father will take care of them simply because of who they are. They trust their father to provide a roof over their head and put food in fridge even when they as young children can't contribute anything to further the family.
- i. A landlord will only listen to his tenants when they are up on their rent but a father always lends his ear to his children. Nothing needs to be done to gain the attention of the father. The father simply listens.
 - ii. These men were addressing God based their own moral rightness and goodness which will always lead to either condemnation or pride. Therefore Jesus tells us

to address God as Father; the one who listens and loves us simply because we are His child.

- iii. When we approach prayer as a son every unanswered prayer simply becomes a place that we trust our Father because He knows best for us. Just like a small child doesn't always understand why his father says "no" or "not now" but deep down every child trusts that their father knows best.
- iv. Therefore every unanswered prayer becomes a point of trust and every answered prayer becomes a point of praise and amazement. That God would hear me simply because I am His child, regardless of my moral uprightness, but simply because He has adopted me into His family causes me to erupt in praise.
- v. Thus Paul says:

*"And **because you are sons**, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, **crying out, 'Abba, Father!'** Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir of God through Christ." - Galatians 4:6-7*

4. Conclusion

- a. What causes you to pray? And why do you believe that God hears you?
- b. Is He your supreme joy and pleasure or is the treasure that you seek found in something else?
- c. Does He hear you because you've paid the rent? You've held up your side of the agreement by being good and moral therefore He needs to come through on His portion.
- d. Or do you trust your Father in heaven to hear you, love you, and shower you with mercy, grace, and joy simply because it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom?
- e. These questions answered wrongly will cause your prayer life to flounder and most likely perish. Answered correctly and prayer will become the greatest of all treasures because in it you get to be with your Beloved and experience His mercy and grace every single day.