

Prayer in the Shorter Catechism (3)

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[0 : 00] Prayer is simple in that it is no less than a child speaking to his father. Prayer is difficult in that the father we speak to is the almighty God of the universe, who is awesome in glory and holiness.

Father we dare not take for granted or treat with contempt. He does not accept babble from our lips. But rather he listens to the cries of our hearts toward him.

Our father, our God. A child can pray with freedom. And the oldest saint of God can get tongue-tied. Because at the same time, prayer is the simplest and most difficult of all the Christian disciplines. But thankfully, as we learn in 1 John 5, prayer is not a free-for-all, but it's up to us to set the rules of the game and to be the referee.

Thankfully, we don't have to invent ways of speaking to God. Our father, who knows our weaknesses and understands our tendencies to stray, himself sets the rules for prayer.

[1 : 22] It was said of Israel in the days of the judges, everyone did what was right in their own eyes. In prayer, as in every other Christian discipline, this cannot be.

We must do what is right in God's eyes, rather than in our own. We pray not merely for our own relief. We pray for the supreme glory of God.

Now, if you remember from last time, in our studies in the Westminster Shorter Catechism on prayer, we learned that the correct pattern for our prayers must be things agreeable to the will of God.

Our will must not dominate our prayers. Rather, it should be God's will. And as we pray in the will of God, as our text in 1 John 5, 14 assures us, God will hear us.

We have no assurance that he will hear our prayers for things outside his will. But we do have confidence that if we pray for things within his will, he shall hear and he shall answer.

[2 : 46] But this begs the question, does it not, of what God's will is? What things are agreeable to his will, such that they form the pattern of our prayers?

Well, in question 99 of the Shorter Catechism, Maiden, I don't know if you can put this up on the screen, the fathers ask, what rule has God given for our direction in prayer?

To which they answer, the whole word of God is of use to direct us in prayer, but the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which Christ taught his disciples commonly called the Lord's Prayer. So those things which are agreeable to the will of God, those things we are to pray for, and in which we are convinced that God will hear and answer us, are those things which are limited and bounded by the word of God.

For those of us who are finding prayer over difficult, you know, perhaps we're not praying with an open Bible in front of us. For those of us who are finding it difficult to pray about anything, God has given us his word as our primer for prayer.

[4 : 06] So how can we avoid that judges type experience where everyone does what is right in their own eyes when it comes to prayer? Answer, by using the whole word of God, but especially the Lord's Prayer, as our rule and direction.

Now I want us to consider very briefly this evening three themes encapsulating, encapsulated within our Father's answer in that catechism question of what those things agreeable to the will of God, those things we're convinced he will heed us in, are.

Direction, word, and form. Direction, word, and form. Direction, first of all. You'll notice, if Aidan puts that slide back up, that the word direct is used two times in the answer.

But the whole word of God directs us in our prayers, but the primary direction comes from the form of the Lord's Prayer.

In addition to the direction we receive from the word of God, the fathers also used the word rule, the special rule of direction. Now to direct someone is to point them to something.

[5 : 30] So you're walking down St. Vincent Street to the back of me here, and someone stops you and says, where's Central Station? And you give them directions. You say, take a right there, take a left there, take a right there, and go straight on.

If you didn't give them directions, they would wander around the center of Glasgow all day and end up missing their train because they could not by themselves find their own way to Central Station. And so we come to God day by day in our prayers and we say to him, tell me, Lord, tell me where I can find those things which are agreeable to your will.

And he answers, they're in my word. They're in my word. It was said of the famous theologian Karl Barth that he would hold the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other when he prayed.

And that's good. But just as long as we understand that what directs our prayers isn't the changing and political social scenes of the world, but the unchanging and always relevant word of God.

[6 : 43] That the hand in which we hold our Bibles when we pray is the more sure direction as to the things which are agreeable to the will of God. We are not to read our Bibles in the light of our newspapers.

Rather, we are to read and pray through our newspapers in the light of what we have first read of the Bible. If in prayer everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes, there will be anarchy.

No two Christians will agree about any one thing. Everyone praying about it from his or her own perspective. So, there will be an Indiref too, a second independence referendum.

And some will pray that God will make Scotland an independent nation in its own right. And some will pray that God would keep Scotland in that wonderful union of nations we call Great Britain, political allegiances aside here.

If there is no one to direct our prayers, prayers become anarchic and chaotic with nobody right and everybody right. But then there is that word rule.

[8 : 00] A word which we automatically associate with laws. But the root meaning of rule isn't law, it is authority, it is influence.

who will most influence our prayers? Shall it be the word of men or shall it be the word of God? Who has the highest authority in our prayers?

The changing council culture of the world around us or the unchanging love of God through Jesus Christ? Do my prayers start with God and the glory of his gospel or do they start with me and the gloom of this world?

Where is that influence and authority to prevent my anarchy in prayer? None of us like to be told to do something, especially in an area as personal as our own prayers.

But God has the right to tell us what to do because it is for our good. and as we trust him in that, he helps us as we pray.

[9 : 13] He directs us. He points us to the greenest fields and the stillest waters of productivity and joy and pleasure in gospel prayer.

Rule, that's the first thing I want to look at with you this evening. Second, word, word, the whole word of God. Now, when we think of those Puritans who drew up the Westminster Shorter Catechism, our image is often one of joy-killing legalists who took great pleasure in denying the common man the common pleasures of their lives.

They didn't do art or culture. They looked down on anything creative. That may be the image we have in our minds, but it is most definitely not the truth.

The more you read about and the more you read the Puritans for yourself, the more you realize that the caricature is just that. It is a caricature. It is not real.

These men were not legalists. They were gospel men whose fascination with the person and the work of Christ exploded into passionate and practical preaching, pastoring and writing.

[10 : 36] Our own Samuel Rutherford was among those men who drew up this answer. And for any of you who have ever read any of Samuel Rutherford's writings, you will know that his life's mission was not the proclamation of the law, but the gospel.

And so when we're thinking of how these men call us to pray using the whole word of God, we are not to think of this as a legalistic law or a restrictive requirement, rather we are to think of the whole word of God as the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ from Genesis 1 verse 1 to Revelation 22 verse 21.

Our prayers after all are to be prayed in the name of Christ, true both of the Levitical laws, but also of the Pauline epistles.

One of the reasons why earlier this year and last year we devoted 20 Wednesday evening sermons to learning how to express ourselves in prayer using the Psalms as our template is for this very reason.

That not just can we find Jesus in the Psalms, but that we cannot but find Jesus in the Psalms. the Psalms as surely as the Gospels are filled with grace.

[12:05] Earlier this year when we were in lockdown because of coronavirus, I circulated a marvelous document by the Filipino theologian Federico Villanueva where he used some verses from the book of Lamentations as prayers.

Lamentations of all places in Scripture to use as a prayer. But yes, he used it and with great profit for us all.

From a practical perspective, may I drill this teaching down into application which you can take from here and you can put it into practice this very evening. In the first instance, if you're struggling to find things to pray about, pray through a psalm, pray through a psalm.

As a young Christian, my minister taught me to do this and I found it very helpful over the years because some psalms lend themselves to this practice in particular.

Psalms like Psalm 23, 63, 130. Try it and you'll see. And then secondly, to link your reading of Scripture with your prayers, why don't you try this tip.

[13:22] Summarize what you have read from the Bible that morning on a piece of paper and then turn that summary into prayer. Turn the indicatives and imperatives of Scripture into confessions, thanksgivings, requests.

For a few days at least, write your prayers based on the Scriptures you have read and then in succeeding weeks and years, it'll become second nature for you to allow the whole Word of God, the fullness of the Gospel, to direct you in prayer.

Word. And then lastly, form. Form. The third aspect, Aidan, put that back up again, please. The third aspect of the will of God, what things are agreeable to the will of God.

The Westminster Fathers chose to close off their description of things agreeable to God's will by narrowing down the focus of prayers from Scripture to that form of prayer which Christ taught His disciples commonly called the Lord's Prayer.

Now that is, of course, a reference to the prayer we find in Matthew 6 and Luke 11, we know it all so well, I hope. Incidentally, before anyone should say, I don't need you to teach me how to pray, Colin.

[14:54] It just comes natural to me as a Christian. Are you greater than the disciples of Jesus who knew their need of Christ's teaching?

Of course not. We all need to be taught how to pray, and it's Christ who is word who teaches us. But first among equals, the Lord's Prayer stands as the church's bulwark of grace and our constant help in trouble.

The remainder of the Shorter Catechism, questions 100 to 107, which we'll look at over the next few weeks, covers the form of the Lord's Prayer, moving through petition by petition and helping us as Christians to get our priorities right in prayer.

God first, then us. God's glory first, then our needs. This is our form of prayer, that every prayer we pray should find its source in the Lord's Prayer.

And when we say form, we mean then the pattern the Lord's Prayer teaches us. God's glory is. But then the question arises whether we should as Christians repeat the Lord's Prayer.

[16:19] I remember when I first came here to Glasgow City, St. Vincent Street, as it was then, having to defend the practice of reciting the Lord's Prayer against so-called conservatives who said it was an innovation and would inevitably lead us to theological downgrade.

And I clearly remember taking that rather conservative brother of ours to the Westminster Directory of Public Worship, drawn up by the very same men who formulated the Shorter Catechism.

Listen to what these men said about the use of the Lord's Prayer verbatim in the public worship of God. They said, prayer, because the prayer which Christ taught his disciples is not only a pattern of prayer but itself a most comprehensive prayer, we recommend it to be used in the prayers of the church.

In other words, from Westminster days in the mid-17th century, Protestant Reformed churches have recited the Lord's Prayer every week in public worship. So to be clear, the conservatives among us want to insist upon the public recitation of the Lord's Prayer.

[17 : 43] Those who call it vain babbling are in fact turning their backs on Westminster theology and practice. That's one of the reasons that we recite it every Lord's Day in public worship.

That's also why it's good to recite it in our own private prayers and teach it to our children. Help them to learn both its words and its form.

Prayer then is at the same time the simplest and most difficult of all the Christian disciplines. To pray for things agreeable to God's will ensures, according to 1 John 5, 14 as we read, that God will hear our prayers.

The study this evening points us to where we find the grist for the mills of our prayers, the word of God, gospel of Christ, the prayer he taught his disciples.

So once again we say, enough talk. Let's pray. sots