

Prayer in the Shorter Catechism (4)

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[0 : 00] Please turn with me again to Matthew chapter 6 and the words we find in verse 9. This then is how you should pray, our Father in heaven.

When it is born, the first thing a baby does is to cry. One of the first things a new Christian does is to pray. For the baby, the first cry draws air into its lungs.

For the Christian, the first prayer draws Jesus into her heart. Over time, that baby learns to express herself in speech.

And over time, that Christian learns how to express himself in prayer. Over time, the baby learns how to feed itself. Over time, the Christian learns that in response to her prayer, God feeds her with joy, grace, and peace, and makes her more like Jesus.

Now, babies can't stay babies forever. But is it not true that many of us, many of us don't grow in prayer? We expect and we rejoice even in new Christians praying with nervous and halting words.

[1 : 26] But if after five or ten years of following Jesus, they are still praying with halting, nervous words, it may be a sign that they are not growing in their faith at all. We need to learn how to speak and feed ourselves in prayer with joy, grace, and peace by learning from Jesus himself.

That's why the Westminster Fathers, in their Shorter Catechism, direct us to the Lord's Prayer. As both the model and pattern prayer for Christians.

The Lord's Prayer is where we listen to and learn from our Master Jesus as he teaches us how to pray. Now, in question 100, if you want to, you can look up in your phone, Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 100.

The Fathers ask the question, what does the preface to the Lord's Prayer teach us? And the answer, the preface of the Lord's Prayer, which is, Our Father, who is 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.

This preface 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.

[3 : 02] Now, over the next couple of Wednesday evenings, I want to open up this answer to give us maximum access to Jesus' teaching on prayer. Next time, I want us to look at the words of the preface itself, Our Father in heaven.

But this week, I want to introduce the subject by dealing with four issues included in that answer. Position, pattern, presence, and partnership.

Position, pattern, presence, partnership. Now, the aim of these two studies is, ultimately, to help us to grow as Christians, learning both to speak and, through prayer, feed ourselves with grace, joy, and peace in Christ himself.

First of all, then, we want to look at position. Position. The fathers of Westminster called the first line of the Lord's Prayer the preface.

Now, a preface is another word for an introduction. That which introduces the purpose for what will follow. Just about every book I've ever read, and believe me, that's a lot of paper, contains a preface.

[4 : 22] And the Lord's Prayer contains an introduction, Our Father who is in heaven. The whole of this prayer, beginning to end, is encapsulated by these words, Our Father who is in heaven.

The rest of the prayer is merely an expansion of these words. An explanation of what it means for us to live with God as our heavenly Father. It means for God our Father to give us our daily bread. It means for God's glory, our Father's glory to be recognized by all. For our Father's will to be done here on earth, as it is in heaven, and so forth. If we fully understood what these words, our Father who is in heaven, actually meant, we wouldn't need the rest of the prayer at all.

Because all the other requests would flow naturally from this truth, that God is our heavenly Father. So if we fully understand the preface, we will get the most out of the Lord's Prayer.

Another thing that would change, perhaps, would be how we understand the flow of the prayer. We're so used to praying these words that all I have to say is, Our Father who is in heaven, and we automatically fill in the first petition, Hallowed be your name.

[5 : 47] But the preface does not merely introduce the first petition. It introduces them all. For example, we could just as easily say, Our Father who is in heaven, give us today our daily bread.

Our Father who is in heaven, lead us not into temptation, and so on. Every aspect of this prayer is covered by the preface, and its statement of the fatherliness and the heavenliness of God.

In other words, it's your Father you are praying to for forgiveness of sin. Not to a judge, but to a Father. A Father who loves you, who wants nothing to get in the way of his relationship with you. No, not even your sin. And you're praying for your heavenly Father's kingdom to come. Not a distant deity, not a military force, but that both we and the world in which we live, would live under the loving lordship of our Father.

Now, some books have the most wonderful introductions. But the Lord's Prayer has the greatest of them all. My father used to say of the game of golf that it was the study of a lifetime.

[7 : 04] The preface to the Lord's Prayer is likewise the study of a lifetime. As we'll see next time, the beauty of the knowledge of God as our heavenly Father is more than enough to fascinate the spiritual babies among us and the spiritual gray hairs among us.

The position of the prayer. Second, the pattern. The pattern of this preface. The Fathers continue in that answer to what the preface of the Lord's Prayer teaches us by saying, the preface of the Lord's Prayer.

They call this prayer the Lord's Prayer. Now, we're often quick to point out that in fact, it may well be better known as the Disciples' Prayer, given that it was the prayer Jesus taught to his disciples.

But the more I've spent time thinking through this over many, many years, the more I realize that we should be satisfied with the original title, the Lord's Prayer, or the Prayer of the Lord.

Where did Jesus get the inspiration to use the words he did when his disciples asked him, Lord, teach us how to pray? He got it from his own personal life of prayer.

[8 : 22] In other words, before this is our prayer, it was his. We read that in the morning, before the sun would rise, Jesus would get up, and he'd go to quiet places to pray.

Sometimes he'd spend whole nights in prayer. To whom was he praying? To his Father in Heaven. And what was he praying for? That his Father's name would be hallowed. That his Father's kingdom would come. That his Father's will would be done on earth, even as it was done in heaven. That he would not be led into temptation, and so on. Yes, I know that Jesus never needed to pray for his debts to be forgiven. But in every other aspect, I believe Jesus got the inspiration to use the words he did in this prayer from his own personal life and priorities in prayer.

Before this prayer's ours, it was, first of all, his. So can you imagine the passion with which Jesus prayed these words?

[9 : 34] A passion stemming not just from his eager faith in God, but his knowledge that by his cross, he would fulfill this prayer.

That by his cross, God's name would be hallowed, and his will would be done. Can you imagine him as he's praying, My Father who is in heaven, may your will be done on earth as it's done in heaven. As we pray these words, we are walking in the shoes of Jesus. Because not only do I want to suggest that these are the very words of Christ himself, but this is the very prayer language of Jesus himself.

To pray like him is to pray his words. And that means praying the Lord's Prayer. Third, about the preface, and the answer our fathers give, is presence, presence.

When we think of catechisms, our minds often turn to cold doctrine, not to warm devotion. The truth is that nothing could be further from the truth. We just have to read the answers slowly.

[10 : 47] Understand them fully and prayerfully. Before you know where you are, you are singing songs of praise. For example, consider how our fathers, in their description to the preface of the Lord's Prayer, call the whole discipline of prayer drawing near to God.

That's what they call it, drawing near to God. Prayer is no cold doctrine set forth in a purely intellectual document to torment children. It is an act of warm devotion.

To go back to the beginning, one of the reasons that babies cry is because they've been separated from their mothers. They cry because they need to be near their mothers. They feel their mother's skin. For the Christian, prayer is drawing near to God.

It is an instinctive cry, draw me nearer to you, my heavenly Father. This seems to me to be the closest definition of prayer.

Drawing near to our heavenly Father. prayer is knowing God and experiencing the nearness of God.

[12:29] It is a prayer. The baby needs its mother. The Christian needs her heavenly Father. And her cry comes out sounding just like this.

Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be your name. Prayer, you see, is the presence of God. It's the heart of piety. We need our Father when we're on the operating table fighting for our lives.

We need him in the joys when life can't really get any better for us. We want him there in our unemployment when we're struggling to know what to do next.

We need him in our despair when we've got no hope left. We don't just need him because he's an anybody. We need him because he's our loving heavenly Father.

Prayer is drawing near to God. And then lastly and briefly, partnership, partnership.

[13:33] Position, pattern, presence, partnership. As we close, I want us to notice the last few words of the answer to the catechism question. Namely, that the preface of the Lord's Prayer teaches us that we should pray with and for others.

With and for others. Now again, we're in the realm here of very basic Christian living. That prayer is a communal corporate activity. that if we only ever pray by ourselves and for ourselves, then we're not praying according to the spirit or the letter of our Lord.

The ideal environment in which to pray is with others. And the ideal subject for which to pray is for others.

What else does our Lord mean by using the word our at the very beginning of his prayer if this is not communal prayer? And so we are to pray for others.

Their concerns are to be entirely as important to us as our own. We dare not enter into the presence of a father who loves all his children equally and pretend that he only loves us and that only we are important to him.

[15:01] So we make it our aim to pray for our families, for our churches, for our world. We pray for many of them because they won't pray for themselves.

And we pray for them because we love them and God loves them even more. Next time we're repeating the Lord's prayer together, pray it not for yourself. Pray it for someone else in the congregation.

That someone else would not be led into temptation. That someone else would be forgiven of their debts. And we pray it with others. With others.

It is no coincidence that the framers of the Westminster Confession of Faith set up their weekly routines to include times of corporate prayer as a church.

Their people were to pray together, not just alone. The reformers and their successors did not recognize the dichotomy we raise of private versus public prayer.

[16:06] For them, to pray with others was entirely as natural as to pray by oneself. Because prayer was, after all, an opportunity to foster, develop, and express the fellowship of the saints.

Churches like Glasgow City are often criticized because we don't have as much social interaction or community events as other churches. Perhaps you can understand why we're located in the city center, we don't have a parish, we're highly scattered.

However, perhaps we can encourage more community among us by both praying for each other and with each other. Technology platforms demonstrate that praying across the internet is both possible and desirable.

The congregational directory allows us to pray for each other daily. We build community by praying for and with each other.

So, the first sound a baby makes is to cry for its mother. The first sound a Christian makes is to cry out for her heavenly father.

[17:26] It really is a most beautiful sound. My fellow Christian, your heavenly father wants you to cry out to him. He wants you to pray.

Pray. Pray. Pray. Pray. Pray. Pray. Pray. Pray. Pray.