

Prayer in the Shorter Catechism (1)

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] Of all the Christian disciplines, prayer is by far the most prominent. It's been said, prayer is the Christian's vital breath.

In other words, you can take everything else away from a Christian, but he can't live without being able to breathe or pray. Not a day goes by, not an hour, when in some form or another, the Christian does not lift up her heart to God, and that's what we call prayer.

Without prayer, our lives are strangled. You might as well surgically remove our hearts from within us, then tell us we cannot pray. For us, prayer isn't something clinically theological as much as it is our life and our breath.

And yet, it must be theological, lest the prayers of the Christian are of no effect. Why not dance instead of pray?

Why not play golf instead of pray? Why not cook instead of pray? What is it about prayer that works and which appeals to us?

[1 : 21] Prayer is so much more than theology, but it is certainly no less than theology. And so, even at a very basic level, we have to understand where prayer fits into the theology of the gospel.

And I'm really excited about starting this new series this evening. And I think it complements David Parker's series on the Beatitudes very nicely. The teaching of the Westminster Shorter Catechism in prayer begins in question 88, which asks, and this is going to be shared on your screen in a moment, What are the outward benefits whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption?

And the answer is, the outward means by which Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are his ordinances, especially his word, sacraments, and prayer, all of which are made effective to the elect for salvation.

That answer starts where we must start as well, with where our prayers fit into the gospel. In weeks to come, we're going to get very much more practical.

But this evening, it's important that we start right at the beginning. So from this answer of the Westminster Fathers, and its description of where prayer fits into the gospel, we learn two things.

[2 : 58] First of all, prayer is a pipeline for spiritual grace. And prayer, secondly, is a pipeline for spiritual life.

Prayer is way more than theology. But it most certainly is not less. First of all then, prayer is a pipeline for spiritual grace.

Prayer is a pipeline for spiritual grace. Our fathers in Westminster wrote, The outward and ordinary means by which Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are his ordinances, especially the words, sacrament, and prayer.

And so we ask, what is prayer? To which our fathers gathered in Westminster in the 1640s answered, It is one of the ways in which Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption.

Prayer is a pipeline to us for the blessings of the cross and the grace of Christ's salvation. It's how what is Christ's becomes ours.

[4 : 17] And what he died for is given to us. Now we're all familiar with pipelines. Whether it's for transporting gas or water, electricity or broadband, we know that these pipes ensure the movement of something from one place to another.

And prayer is the pipeline which ensures the movement of the grace of Christ from the cross into my heart.

Yes, there's a pipeline which leads directly from a hill outside Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, right into your heart this evening.

All Jesus died to achieve becomes ours through this pipeline of prayer. One of the outward and ordinary means by which Christ communicates to us or gives us the benefits of redemption.

What are these benefits, however? Well, for those of you who know your Shodokatechisms and were brought up with it, you'll know that our fathers answered this question between answers 32 and 36.

[5 : 35] To summarize, what Jesus did to give us, what Jesus died to give us, is justification, sanctification, adoption.

We have been forgiven of all our sin and declared righteous by God. We have become a son or daughter of God. We have been changed and are being changed into new people in Christ.

At a practical level, our fathers tell us, this results in an assurance of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Spirit, increase of grace, and perseverance to the end, and at death, results in our souls immediately passing into glory.

Money can't buy these things. Good works. Good works can't earn even the tiniest portion of these things. But the ordinary and outward means whereby all this becomes ours is, among other things, by prayer.

It's through prayer we gain a fresh assurance of God's love for us. It's through prayer we have a new peace of conscience. It's through prayer we begin to vibrantly rejoice in the Holy Spirit.

[7 : 08] It's in prayer that we have a remarkable increase in grace. It's in prayer we shall endure perseveringly in our faith. This is the pipeline which goes from the cross into your heart this evening.

And so from a practical level, we want to propose a question. So there's a certain Christian who lacks the assurance of God's love to her.

She may intellectually understand the gospel. She may even believe the gospel for herself. She is a Christian. But she has never experienced the inward voice of God assuring her that she is his beloved daughter through Jesus Christ.

And that lack of assurance, it shows itself in a number of ways, perhaps the most serious of which is her fear of committing herself to the family of Christians we call the church.

She won't come forward to the Lord's Supper because she thinks and feels that she's not good enough. She holds back because for all that she thinks and believes, she feels nothing.

[8 : 28] How is that Christian to gain a deeper assurance of Christ's love for her and her being adopted as God's beloved daughter?

How is she to feel the gospel such that it warms her heart and fills her with a sense of security? The fathers teach us to put words in their mouths.

The outward and ordinary means by which Christ gives us the assurance of faith are the word, sacraments, and prayer.

In other words, she prays and assurance of faith flows down the pipeline from the cross to her.

She joins her prayers with the prayers of God's people and together they experience their adoption. And as she begins to understand that she is a beloved daughter of God, her joy begins to grow.

[9 : 37] But it's all because that assurance has flowed down the pipeline from the cross of Christ to her in prayer. You see, prayer is the pipeline for spiritual grace.

The assurance of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Spirit, increase of grace, perseverance to the end. That's why prayer is so vital for you. Because without it, the grace of Christ will not flow into your heart.

Second thing we want to look at this evening is what's highlighted in the red on your screen.

Prayer is a part of salvation's life. Prayer is a part of salvation's life. Prayer is the best known of all the spiritual disciplines, but prayer by itself achieves nothing.

People from every religion pray, and it does them no good whatsoever. One of the things which marks out Christian prayer is that it is connected both to the word of God in which the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed verbally, and the sacraments of the church where the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed visually.

[11 : 02] These three parts of Christian discipleship belong together. Just like you can't have a plane with only one wing, so you cannot have prayer without the word and sacrament.

That's why the fathers wrote, the outward means by which Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer.

Prayer is one pipeline, but the word of God and the sacraments form part of that pipeline also. There are not three pipelines, there is only one.

In the book of Proverbs we read these words, a cord of three strands is not easily broken. And the pipeline by which Christ gives us the grace of salvation is made up of these three parts, prayer, the word, and the sacraments.

It says these three are intertwined in our discipleship that we as Christians begin to grow in our faith. Many Christians who may choose to agree with the Westminster tradition on this particular point, but what we pray for must be defined within the limits of the word of God, as we'll see in weeks to come.

[12 : 30] What we pray for does not come immediately from our own thoughts and our own feelings, but from the fullness of the gospel as revealed in the Bible.

By no means is that restrictive because the word of God of course we know covers every situation, circumstance, and experience known to mankind. That's one of the reasons we've been studying together for the past few months how to express ourselves in prayer from the book of Psalms.

Because from that book, that book alone, we can express our grief and our confusion and our joy and our ambition for mission and our witness and our confidence in prayer through the words of Scripture itself.

Remember how early on in the coronavirus crisis I circulated to you the writings of the Filipino pastor Federico Villanueva on the use of lamentations in prayer.

Remember that? It really is a most liberating and spiritually uplifting article which many of us benefited from greatly. It is great to use the words God has given us to pray back to him.

[13 : 51] The English Puritan Stephen Charnock best known of course for his big book The Attributes of God he once said prayer is nothing else but a presenting God with his own promises.

Prayer is nothing else but presenting God with his own promises. But along with the word and prayer come the sacraments of the church baptism and the Lord's Supper these visible signs of an invisible grace as St. Augustine used to call them.

They are visual demonstrations of the gospel given to us by a Christ who knows that we need visible evidences of what is invisibly true.

I want to think about it this way as the great American railroads drove west across the continent in the late 19th century thousands of workmen from all over the world were employed to drive sleepers sorry to lay sleepers on tracks and then to drive huge iron spikes into the ground to secure their rails to the ground.

And these iron spikes were so huge that it required three men each with a vast hammer to drive that spike deep in so that the rails would be firmly secured and did not move when the train passed over it.

[15 : 22] So was one prepared to swing his hammer the other would have his hammer ready to strike while the other would be hitting the spike. And so the sound of those three hammers hitting the spike would be a constant chorus driving that spike deep down into the ground so that in days to come huge steam trains could make their way from New York on the east coast to San Francisco on the west coast.

The three hammers of Christian discipleship are prayer the word and the sacraments. They drive the spike of the gospel deep into our hearts so that the grace of Christ can freely flow from the throne of God into the heart of sinful men and women.

These three gospel ordinances are one inseparable team. The sound of their blows is heard in heaven and received with joy.

The sound of their blows is heard in hell and received with dread. prayer the word and the sacraments the three parts of salvation's life.

So what about the Christian who is struggling with doubt and fear? So she's paralysed by all that she sees around her in the world and all the bad news and she's also paralysed by fears within.

[16 : 54] What should she do? She should not let her fear and doubt keep her from the three hammers of Christian discipleship but resolve to double her efforts in prayer in the word and the sacraments of the church because these three together are the pipeline through which Christ's grace will flow to her allaying her doubts calming her fears without prayer we can't breathe without it we can't live as Christians but now having this theological foundation from which to understand the place of prayer in the gospel toward us we can live in the liberty and freedom of the children of God and may God bless our prayers this evening together and individually with his grace confess one that