

Praying, Part 4 - Check-up

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 December 2003

Preacher: Canon Dr. J.I. Packer

- [0 : 00] that we're going to deal with in this session. And, by the way, you know, as I know, that the morning service is at 10 o'clock, so this has to be an abbreviated session.
- And what that is going to do to me and to Bill, both of whom, you see, will be involved, Bill, in making sure that the meeting finishes no matter what, and I am trying to get to the end of my prepared material no matter what, it may be quite exciting.
- Stay awake and see. Now, let's pray. Holy Father, we need the help of your Spirit to understand divine things.
- And so we pause to ask for that help now. Give us light in our darkness and wisdom in our folly, and strength in our weakness, and hearts of joy and praise at this happy season of the year.
- In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Now, the title to which I'm speaking this morning is Checkup.
- [1 : 24] Where have we got to thus far? Let me remind you. These are talks on praying, the activity of praying, in which we're, all of us, strugglers, doffers, as we feel.
- And I am one of the members of that club. So I am not attempting to act as if I were a pundit, offering you a drawing board formula for perfect prayer.
- Now, I think of myself, rather, in these talks, as contributing to running repairs on the road.
- As you know, sometimes you realize that the car isn't firing right. And so you pull into a lay-by if you understand how the internal combustion engine works.
- Then you check up yourself, raising the hood and looking wisely inside. If you're anything like me, well, the internal combustion engine is an infernal combustion engine.
- [2 : 48] And all I can do is summon the CAA. But that's the scene. And it's that kind of check-up.
- A check-up for people like ourselves who try to pray, do pray in one sense, are quite sure that we don't pray as well or as wisely as we should.
- And we need, therefore, a work-over. And in a broad sense, everything that I've offered you so far has been in the nature of running repair, check-up in that sense.
- I've asked you whether we are clear on the God to whom we pray. And I've given you some thoughts for achieving clarity there.
- I've asked you whether you pray in terms of a clear vision of life. And I've offered you the vision of life as hiking with a friend. I asked you last week whether you use your mind in this matter of praying, whether you think as Christians should, first of all, by letting God speak in His Word and thinking about what He says, and then by talking to yourself, which requires thought, in the presence of God as a preliminary to talking to God about yourself.
- [4 : 25] In other words, I asked you whether you practice meditation as it seems clear from Scripture that Christians should.
- The psalmist models meditation all the time. And we're still on the check-up theme. We're on it in a more direct sense now than any of the three previous presentations have been.

I invite you to think at this moment of our God, your God and my God, as among other things our physician who gives us on a regular basis that which corresponds to the annual physical, which I expect that most of us being elderly make a big point of.

And you know what happens in a physical? The physician checks up on everything really that functions. Your breathing, your blood pressure, your heart, your circulation, whether your eyes work properly, whether your ears work properly, whether your digestive system works properly, whether there's any particular malfunction of your body of which you're conscious, any particular puzzling symptoms which need to be attended to.

that's how a physical check-up goes as we all know and I want to give you straight away the thought that our God regularly puts us through a spiritual check-up corresponding to that.

[6 : 19] He checks up in other words on our inner life, the life which really only we and he know about faith. And he checks us up in the matter of faith.

Do we know what we should know about God and do we trust in him, trust in Christ as we should or is that which we call faith no better than superstition?

He checks up on our repentance. As we know our prayer book services call us to regular repentance and repentance I've already said I think in these talks is more than a matter of regret for what's gone wrong.

It's a matter of resistance to the impulse to go wrong again. It is in other words a change of life which we're constantly seeking to make.

The life of repentance which is the reality of self-denial. When Jesus talked about self-denial he was as Richard Baxter the Puritan neatly put it telling us that we have to resist carnal self that's Baxter's phrase carnal self self corrupted by sin at every point where carnal self seeks to lead us along its own path the path of self centered self indulgence as it always will be.

[8 : 01] God checks up on our repentance. I remember how struck I was donkeys years ago by a conversation with an elderly clergyman we had some things to sort out and when we'd sorted them out this clergyman said to me rather abruptly well you must excuse me I have to go now I have some repenting to do I wonder if you've ever said that to yourself let alone to anybody else it struck me because I confess I don't remember ever saying such a thing to any of my friends well but there it is this is serious real Christianity God checks up on our repentance this senior brother of mine was right God checks up on our love love to himself love to our neighbor and he exposes to our consciences the self absorption and the self righteousness and the focus entirely on ourselves and our own concerns which keeps a lot of us actually both from loving him in the sense of being willing to do things for him and of loving our neighbor in the ordinary sense of showing imaginative humanity helping people when they need help

Christians are not always distinguished at either of those points he checks up on our humility pride pride is one form or one element in original sin that surely we know and pride is there in our hearts engendering self confidence and self reliance at points where no such attitude ought to enter so that we don't depend on our God as we should and we don't let him lead us as he promises in scripture to do if we're willing to be led we have to learn humility and God regularly checks up asking us to examine ourselves and see how we're getting on at that point he checks us up in the matter of wisdom we're all of us much more inclined to foolishness than we know and God constantly has to be peeling layer after layer of supposed wisdom off us so that we may face the reality of our foolishness and then take from him the real wisdom which reckons with him and with the consequences of what we say and do in the way that Christians should and there's the overall question of focus integration whether we've got life together or whether we haven't you know the story and the fable of the donkey who died because he was in the middle of the field and he saw good what was it oats or something in two corners of the field and he could never make up his mind which corner to go to so there he stood until he starved to death well often we're too much like the donkey we are torn apart by alternative options and desires and we haven't got what it takes we haven't shall I say put it all together so that we know how to decide between the options and God checks up on us at that point have we got enough integration to know how to make those decisions

Paul remember in Philippians chapter 3 says one thing I do forgetting what's behind reaching out to what's ahead I press towards the mark for the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ of course from one standpoint he was doing 50 60 100 120 things different things every day so are you so am I but he's able to say one thing I do because he's got it all together God checks us up to see whether we are like Paul and like Paul's master because this single-minded is what you see supremely in the Lord Jesus or whether we are falling behind at that point well God does it that's the point the question is how does he do it the answer begins to come as we look at

Psalms 139 now you haven't all of you got Bibles with you and in any case the impact of Psalm 139 requires I think that it be read straight through without comment before I begin to pinpoint any of the details it's one of those psalms in which the psalmist speaks in the first person singular and as the commentators often say the I of the psalms is meant to be understood as an inclusive I it's I the psalmist and I the reader of the psalm and you every single person who hears the psalm and joins in we're all of us individualized by these first person singular psalms and when we read them or hear them read we need to take that individualizing very seriously indeed these psalms are models of praise and prayer for us to enter into and we can only enter into them let me put it this way one at a time

I you you you and so on so have that in mind friends as I read psalm 139 in of course the English standard version as you expected oh Lord you have searched me and known me you know when I sit down and when I rise up you discern my thoughts from afar you search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways even before a word is on my tongue behold oh Lord you know it all together you hem me in behind and before and lay your hand upon me such knowledge is too wonderful for me it's high I cannot attain it where shall

[15 : 47] I go from your spirit or whether where shall I flee from your presence if I ascend to heaven you're there if I make my bed in shale you're there if I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me if I say surely the darkness shall cover me and the light about me be night even the darkness is not dark to you the night is as bright as the day for darkness is as light with you for you formed my inward parts you knitted me together in my mother's womb I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made wonderful are your works my soul knows it very well my frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret intricately woven in the depths of the earth your eyes saw my unformed substance in your book were written every one of them the days that were formed for me when as yet there were none of them how precious to me are your thoughts oh god how vast is the sum of them if I would count them they are more than the sand

I awake and I am still with you oh that you would slay the wicked oh god oh men of blood depart from me they speak against you with malicious intent your enemies take your name in vain do I not hate those who hate you oh lord and do I not loathe those who rise up against you I hate them with complete hatred I count them my enemies search me oh god and know my heart try me and know my thoughts and see if there be any grievous way in me and lead me in the way everlasting prayer prayer that is talking to

God about oneself and about life the psalmist goes to and fro over that borderline and so in fact will everybody who prays there's nothing special about that in the first 18 verses you have the psalmist practicing God's presence as we would say and admiring God's greatness what he's admiring is God's omniscience that's the first five verses where the key phrase is you know oh Lord you have known me you know when I sit down and rise up before a word is on my tongue oh Lord you know it all together he says verse six such knowledge is too wonderful for me

I can't attain it but you Lord have it you know me through and through and that's not all he also celebrates God's omnipresence that's verses seven through twelve where the key words are you are there where everywhere if I ascend to heaven you are there if I make my bed in shale you are there if I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea even there your hand will lead me and your right hand will hold me I never get out of your presence I never escape if that's the word shake free if that's the phrase I never am without or outside your upholding hand that's the omnipresence of God and the omnipotence of God goes with the omniscience and the omnipresence and the omnipotence of God is the concern from verse 13 down to verse 16 here the key word is you formed

God by his power formed me my circumstances my hours my days everything about me and everything about everybody else as well you formed my inward parts and verse 16 your eyes saw my unformed substance in your book were written every one of them the days that were formed for me when as yet there were none of them this is God the creator shaping the things that he brings into being and that's his omnipotence in action so having surveyed the greatness of God in this way the psalmist understandably says verse 17 how precious to me are your thoughts oh God how vast is the sum of them and yes that applies to each single one of us so perhaps does the next verse if I would count them they are more than the sand

[22 : 34] I awake you see it's like counting sheep trying to count the thoughts of God as sent into sleep but he wakes up I awake and I am still with you and you are still with me well that's meditation on the greatness and the goodness and the glory of God as we said now suddenly there's a shift and verses 19 through 24 show the psalmist moving from admiring admiring God to desiring desiring peace with justice in the world oh that you would slay the wicked oh God your enemies who take your name in vain and desiring also that for himself he be searched and led search me oh God verse 21 verse 23 and know my heart try me and know my thoughts that is said against the background of what he said in the first verse oh Lord you have searched me and known me but now what he's praying is that out of that searching which God is actually doing all the time in relation to every single person

God will let him see what it is that God himself sees search me oh God and know my heart try me and know my thoughts and see if there be any grievous way in me the implication is if you see any such way tell me so that I may so that I may put it behind me and so lead me in the way everlasting the alternative reading is lead me in the old way and for us as Anglicans in the year of grace 2003 well in a very familiar way the old way is the way everlasting everlasting and the modern alternative way is precisely not that so that's what's going on in the sun and it's only as you feel the power of the vision of God in his greatness and glory in the first 18 verses that you appreciate the force of the prayer search me oh God there is a hymn which spells out the significance of that final prayer

I'd like to read it to you you may know it it isn't I think a hymn that we've ever yet sung at St. John's but you shall judge as I read it whether or not it's a good one it's to my mind a very poignant plea for the gift of spiritual honesty through God showing us what he sees in us when he searches us search me oh God my actions try and let my life appear as seen by thine all searching eye to mine my eye my ways make clear search all my sense and know my heart who only canst make known and let the deep the hidden part to me be fully shown throw light into the darkened cells where passion reigns within quicken my conscience till it feels the loathsomeness of sin search till thy fiery glance has cast its holy light through all and

I thy grace am brought at last before thy face to fall and so on well that's the prayer which God in mercy answers for all his children that's the activity which God in fact is engaging in as we seek to commune with him whether we've asked him to do it or not because it's for our good that he should do it we need the running repairs on our inner life which his searching exposes and which his leading in the way everlasting requires us to acknowledge and do something about the desiring comes out of the admiring as we've seen the essence of the desiring rests on the realising of how much we need to realise

God's reality and the way that God himself sees us and I think it's right to say that there are two qualities of spiritual health which this searching leading us to constant repentance as it must do is meant to generate there's the quality of emptiness God constantly emptying us of self ourselves so that he may fill us with himself and the things that pertain to himself and with that I think the searching is meant to induce and sustain the quality of eagerness that passionate desire which you got in the very last verse of the psalm that

[29 : 21] God having seen if there be any grievous way in me will take steps to lead me in the way everlasting that isn't I think a desire about which it's possible to be too passionate too zealous too intensely concerned Lord at all costs lead me in the way everlasting that's what I ask and as you see this psalm is in a way a model of this happening now one of the realities of life spiritual life which I don't think we always recognize is that there's a great deal of make believe about us yes alas there is and we think again and again that we're being honest when in fact make belief is as far as we've got

I'm going to quote I apologize for this but I can't do better I think I'm going to quote the way in which some years ago I wrote this out got into print on another occasion I was speaking and then publishing on the subject praying in the spirit praying in the holy spirit and well let me pick up we need help basically to be really real and honest with God in our praying in letters to Malcolm C.S.

Lewis points up the problem his and ours yours and mine at this point almost four centuries ago Francis de Salle Catholic pioneer in teaching the path of prayer laid it down that the first step in meditation and praying is quote to place oneself in the presence of God unquote but that's easier said than done I have superficial and inadequate and self deceived ideas of myself I have mistaken imaginations of myself I carry around with me a public identity that becomes a mask hiding me from myself and it's beyond me to remove that mask so left to myself I'm hidden from myself on a permanent basis and I need God to unmask me to myself just as I need God to unveil himself to me in revelation and to open my spiritual eyes to see his glory so whenever

I pray or try to pray I must look to God God the spirit to strip away the fantasies and illusions and enable me to put the real me in the presence of the real God this is a Lewis point which I'm paraphrasing and now I quote him in prayer writes Lewis this real I struggles to speak for once from his real being the prayer preceding all prayers is may it be the real I who speaks may it be the real thou that I speak to only God himself can let the bucket down to the depths in us and on the other hand he must constantly work as the iconoclast every idea of him we form he must in mercy shatter just as so many of our ideas about ourselves have to be shattered it thus appears that only through the help of the

Holy Spirit can we ever achieve reality in our prayers about this however P.T.

[33 : 44] Forsythe gives us good directions to start us on the track this is Forsythe now quote go into your chamber shut the door and cultivate the habit of praying audibly write prayers and burn them formulate your soul read a passage of scripture and then sit down and turn it into a prayer written or spoken learn to be particular specific and detailed in your prayer so long as you're not trivial general prayers literary prayers and stately prayers are for private prayer traps and sops to the soul to formulate your soul is the best means to escape formalizing it this is the best the wholesome kind of self-examination through which

God puts promises we find ourselves we come to ourselves in the spirit so face your special weaknesses and sins before God force yourself to say to God exactly where you're wrong when anything goes wrong don't ask to have it set right without asking in prayer what it was in you that made it go wrong and ask that that be put right also let prayer be concrete actual the direct result of life's real experiences unquote foresight but without the spirit this realism and the reality to which it leads will not be there and that's the material friends which I had to share with you on the matter of a check-up a check-up which God is concerned to maintain regularly in our lives but which we so often evade by not being as straightforward shall I say and open and humble and attentive in facing him to see what he will say to us as we need to be and friends

I can't say any more than that because from that point on it's my story and it's your story and our stories are between ourselves and God we're all of us different we all of us have different problems and the effect of divine searching and the changes that God will require us to make are distinctive to each of us depending on who we are and where we are at what I may call searching time whenever we read scripture meditate on it and seek to pray on the basis of what we read the question Lord leave me in the way everlasting you are searching me even now what are you seeing show me if there be any wicked way in me that question that request ought to be there as part of what goes on what happens after that as I said is between the Lord and each of us so there's no more I can say about it and perhaps that's a good thing because time is just about up

I guess if you had a question or two that I could answer very quickly I could just take them couldn't I go but I'd have to answer them very quickly two minutes yes and perhaps well I don't know any comments reactions no is a prayer that Jesus could have prayed we're really surprised that David could even write such a thing but that it's a model of something that he would be able to pray and would be apart from the acknowledgement of personal sin yes I think Jesus could have and would have used what the psalmist says in Psalm 139 as a prayer of his own to the Father it's a very old thought actually in the Christian church that the

Psalter was the prayer book of our Lord Jesus and the ideal of godly life that's there in the Psalter was most certainly the reality which he fulfilled in his own earthly life which now in turn becomes a model for us he and the Psalms however constitute one model and we're misunderstanding Jesus' example if we aren't able to link it up with what's in the Psalms and see it as the fulfillment of what's in the Psalms so thank you Bill for asking a question which allowed me to make that point I don't see him acknowledging any sin particularly in that Psalm is there no he isn't acknowledging actual sins but he's saying Lord see if there be any wicked way in me and because he knows himself to be a sinner he makes that prayer and doubtless

[39 : 47] God showed him as God shows you and me that there are things in our lives that need to be changed in the case of the Lord Jesus if he used those words the answer would come back which well the answer which he was expressing when he said I do always the things that please my Father we aren't able quite to say that in the categorical way that he could so there have to be changes made constantly but that's part of the pattern of going forward in fellowship with God now Bill having given me two minutes has occupied them and there's no time for anybody else to say anything this then is the end of today's session and next week I'm going to talk about asking begging if you like did you know that

Luther's last words were we are all beggars that's the truth and then he died well we are all beggars and begging good gifts from God is going to be next week's theme and in He can happen He ■■■■ these Per■