

Praying, Part 5 - Asking

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[0 : 0 0] Friends, let's bow our heads for a moment and pray. Lord, teach us to pray. For your name's sake, Amen.

As last week, the time is restricted, and I am burdened with a good deal to say, so allow me please to move straight in, reminding you that this is the fifth in my series of talks on praying, the activity, praying for dummies, I suppose we might call the series.

I stand before you as a member of the class. And this morning's title is Asking.

And this, I suppose, is the theme that you thought I was going to zero in on in the very first address and stay with. Because, after all, we do know in a broad sense of this, that asking is the essence of praying.

Whatever else we do builds around the activity of asking as its center. Even in primitive religions, that's the idea.

[1 : 3 6] And Bible teaching doesn't contradict it. And so you may be a bit surprised that I've waited until the fifth in the series to focus on this theme and make it central.

Well, I wanted to say a whole series of things before I got to this, and I think you will see that what I have to say about asking builds on what we've explored together in the first four talks.

Here, now, to start us off, is a definition of prayer which I take from a document that, ideally, we would all of us acknowledge as part of our Anglican heritage.

Namely, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, never used among Anglicans in the normal way, left to Presbyterians, but actually produced in the 1640s by a company of experts of whom 90% were clergymen of the Church of England.

Here, now, from this Anglican document, is the answer to question 98 in the Shorter Catechism, what is prayer?

[3 : 0 8] Prayer is an offering up of our desires to God. That's where the asking, you see, comes in, center stage.

An offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to His will in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgement of His mercies.

And with that, take question 99. What rule has God given for our direction in prayer? 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.

Right, now, there's a perspective which I shall try to follow through on for the next half hour.

[4 : 1 3] Desire. That word expresses all the things that we ask for. And your heart might be saying, well, then surely, this matter of asking in prayer is basically simple.

Everybody knows what it means to ask for something. So, surely, this is obvious, this is basic, this need not take up much of our time for there's no problem here.

Oh, no. Friends, it isn't quite as straightforward as that. Why not? Why? Because of the sinfulness of our twisted hearts.

That's why not. Prayer from God's standpoint is straightforward, but prayer from our standpoint as we have to learn to sort out our twistedness and straighten it in the presence of God.

That is something of a task. You know how it is with young children in the family. They ask for something, and it's something that, as a matter of fact, you're very happy to give them.

[5 : 31] But you tell them, you've got to ask properly. And you're not going to have it until you do ask properly.

And, oh, we even apply this to our pets. The dog is sniffing around because there's food. You must ask for it properly.

Sit, beg. And the dog doesn't get anything until he or she does sit and beg. Well, we are children of God who need to learn to ask for things properly.

And that's what this talk is all about. Perhaps I should now read you a little more from the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Question 100.

And this is following up on the dictum you just heard that the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which Christ taught his disciples and which we call the Lord's Prayer.

[6 : 34] Question 100. What does the preface of the Lord's Prayer teach us? Answer. The preface of the Lord's Prayer which is Our Father who art in heaven teacheth us to draw near to God with all holy reverence and confidence.

Reverence because he's God in heaven. Confidence because he is our heavenly Father. We're to draw near, says the Catechism continuing, as children to a father able and ready to help us.

Question 101. What do we pray for in the first petition? Which is, Hallowed be thy name. Answer.

In the first petition we pray that God will enable us and others to glorify him in all that whereby he maketh himself known. And that he will dispose all things to his own glory.

And then question 102. What do we pray for in the second petition? Thy kingdom come. Answer. In the second petition we pray that Satan's kingdom may be destroyed and that the kingdom of grace may be advanced, ourselves and others brought into it and kept in it.

[8 : 00] And that the kingdom of glory may be hastened. And what do we pray for in the third petition? Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.

In the third petition we pray that God, by his grace, will make us able and willing to know, obey, and submit to his will in all things as the angels do in heaven.

And those answers seem to me to prompt a series of questions, four questions, which I now pose and attempt with you to explore.

They're questions, really, which God asks us when we ask him for things. Two-way street, you see. As we ask, so we are questioned.

Now this is following up on the thought we explored last week, that as we brood over the things that God tells us, he searches us by applying them to our hearts in ways that perhaps we haven't expected.

[9 : 24] Remember? We found all this in Psalm 139. Well, of my four questions, this is the first. It has to do with the substance of prayer.

Question, what do we ask for? We've already had a formula answer, the Westminster Catechism gave us that, things according to God's will, and things that we desire.

And, in saying that, the Catechism is picking up familiar ground, I think, to all of us in the New Testament. For if you remember, in his farewell discourse to the apostles, Jesus spoke more than once of asking the Father for things in his name.

Remember? If you wanted the texts there, John 14, 13, and 15, 16, and 16, 23. What's the thought?

Well, the thought is that we ask God for things which the Lord Jesus also will ask for on our behalf.

[10 : 52] We make requests to the Father that the Lord Jesus will back. He associates himself with us in our requests because our requests match what he wants from us.

and that's the meaning of asking in his name and so for his glory and so with his help and by his power and that means asking according to God's will, the will of the Father which the Son knows and does and the will of Christ himself as we, his children, come to know it through learning from Scripture, brooding on the implications of Scripture and seeking the Savior's face in a direct way.

So, in 1 John chapter 5 and verse 14, the Apostle puts it like this, states it straight as we might say, this is the confidence that we have towards him, this is the Son of God, the Lord Jesus, this is the confidence we have towards him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us and if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we've asked of him.

Yes, John is thinking of presenting requests to the Lord Jesus, asking him to present them to the Father because they are requests which may be offered to the Father in his, that is, the Savior's name.

well, the notion is clear and simple that I grant you, but actually discerning the Savior's will, the Father's will, in each situation, that is not so easy.

[13 : 18] So, let me quickly say two things which I hope will encourage us at this point, three things really. First, when we ask for things, asking the Father in the name of the Son and asking the Lord Jesus to present our requests to the Father, let us learn to give reasons, that is, to tell the Lord why we think that what we're asking for matches his will, and is therefore the right thing for us to be requesting, and is a request that he, the Lord Jesus, will back.

Give reasons. The Puritans, rather grandly, used to talk about using argument in prayer. What they meant was simply giving God reasons.

why we believe that what we're asking matches his will and makes for his glory. Remember for a moment Jesus' parable of the friend who comes at midnight.

Well, he gives his friend, who's in bed with his children, reasons why the friend should get up and get him bread. The reason is need.

Remember? A friend of mine has come on a journey, he needs a meal, he's hungry and I've got nothing to give him. So, please, give me some food. And the guy who's in bed with his children gets up and gives him food because he's asked in a straightforward and forthright way, which in our translation I think expresses with the phrase because of his importunity he'll rise and give him what he asks for.

[15 : 19] Well, let's say, he gave a reason. The reason was need and that's very often the reason that we shall find ourselves giving in the requests we make.

This is needed, Lord. I need it. Someone else needs it. The church needs it. In your mercy meet our need.

So, give reasons why you ask for things, reasons why you believe that they match God's will.

And to that end, second thing, get your prayers from God as far as possible. How do you do that?

why? By brooding on Scripture as a life activity to see what God encourages his people to ask for and gives to his people in mercy in their time of trouble.

[16 : 24] Scripture itself guides you over and over as to what's the right thing to pray for in a particular situation. And here, if you want an example, just remember the Lord Jesus himself in Gethsemane.

He starts his prayer, it's a single sentence, he doesn't say Amen until he's got to the end of the sentence. He starts his prayer by saying, Lord, Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.

Nevertheless, sentence hasn't finished yet, not my will but yours. And what's he referring to there? He's referring to the fact that he knows very well that the Father has sent him to earth so that he should make atonement for the sins of the people by dying on the cross, which he does, which he did, which is the basis on which we meet here as forgiven sinners today.

Not my will but yours. He knows what it is and he brings it into the forefront of his mind and identifies with it before he says Amen at the end of his prayer.

He got that prayer therefore from God, from the Father. it started to be sure with him spreading in human terms his own sense of need and distress and unhappiness, inner agony as he contemplated the cross, but he moves from that to a reaffirmation of the fact that he is here to do the Father's will, not my will but yours be done.

[18 : 19] He got his prayer in other words from God and in the same way you and I must learn to get our prayers from God as far as possible.

And that takes us back to the Lord's Prayer. It's always right to ask for the three things that fill the second part of the Lord's Prayer.

Prayer for provision, daily bread, we need it. Prayer for pardon, forgive us our trespasses, our debts, we need that.

And prayer for protection, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. It's always right, repeat, to be asking for those three blessings on a daily basis.

And it's always right to pray for churches, congregations, Christian groups, in the way that the Apostle Paul prayed for the churches, and time doesn't allow me to show you that as fully as I'd like to.

[19 : 32] But if you read the end of Ephesians chapter 3, and the first half of Colossians chapter 1, and the whole of 1 Thessalonians 5, just have to give you the references, you must, I'm afraid, look them up when we finished, but there you will find Paul praying quite elaborately for the blessing of God on the churches, and his prayers are moral prayers as we pray for God's blessing on any church, including our own.

Well, these are the things that I wanted to say about determining the substance of our prayers, the particular things that we're going to ask for.

And negative, let it never be a case of saying to the Lord, in effect, of course you wouldn't put it this way, but saying, you can still say, in effect, Lord Jesus, Heavenly Father, my will be done, this is it, this is what I want, and the mere fact that I want it is by warrant for asking you to supply it.

There are people, I'm afraid, who get no further in their petitions than the this is what I want, and they look to God as if he's simply there to do like Jeves in the Woodhouse stories and supply the needs of the young master.

But no, that's not the way to go. That actually is what Jesus is nailing when he says in the middle of the Sermon of the Mount when he's talking about prayer, when you pray, don't heap up empty phrases, as the Gentiles do, for they think that they'll be heard for their many words.

[21 : 43] Empty phrases, many words. What Jesus is pointing to is the fact that some people think that if they say to God, this is what I want, my will be done, and they say it often enough, they will twist God's arm and secure what they need just by saying it often and saying it insistently.

But it's not like that. That is superstition and that is irreverent and that is not the way to petition God and ask him for things.

Second question of my four. this has to do with the motivation of our asking. Why do we ask for the things that we ask for?

We've already heard the Westminster Catechism telling us that we ask for things that will, as far as we can judge, advance God's glory and further his kingdom.

and bring good to us who ask and others on whose behalf we are asking. And that really is the complete answer from scripture to the point about motivation.

[23 : 18] petition. We've got to be clear, in other words, that hallowed be thy name is our basic petition, the fundamental thing we're asking for, and the thing that basically and fundamentally we desire.

Hallowed be thy name means that God should be acknowledged as he is, exalted, magnified, glorified, honored for what he is.

We pray to God for the praise of God, not, as I said, in order to gratify our own selfish concerns.

desires. That actually is said in an explicit way by James, who in the fourth chapter of his letter starts off like this.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Isn't it this that your passions are at war within you? Fighting other people's passions as well as other passions that they fight in your own heart.

[24 : 39] You desire and don't have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. Well, all right, if that was what was going on in the churches that James addressed, it was a good thing that he took time out to write about it.

But then comes the key word, which he's working up to. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and you do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions.

You ask and you don't receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions. There is James nailing improper motivation, the self-focused motivation that produces the self-focused desires and the why will be done type of asking.

Yes, I must jump. I have more to say there but haven't got time for it. Third question that I raise, on what basis do we pray?

That is, what reason have we to expect answers to our prayers? What reason have we to expect that God will move, that Christ will move, that divine action will be taken in response to the requests we make?

[26 : 13] Well, really there's three basis, a three-fold basis here. I deal very quickly with all three legs of the three-legged stool.

There is to start with our relationship with God as his children. He is our father. He is our father by adoption and grace.

we weren't born that way, nobody is, but we become God's children, as I guess we all of us know, through faith in Jesus Christ. He, the eternal son of the father, the son of God by nature, introduces us into the family in which henceforth he is our elder brother.

We become the father's children by adoption, and he and we are one as the family of God. It's mother. Again, time doesn't allow me to dwell on it the way I'd like to.

The point I'm making is that the relationship itself, the relationship with the father of Jesus as our father, that is basic when we ask fathers, give good gifts to their children.

[27 : 36] God's love. So that should give us boldness in making our requests. Jesus himself made a point of that in the Sermon on the Mount. Without comment, I simply read chapter 7, verses 7 through 11 of that wonderful sermon, which is addressed, incidentally, all through to disciples of Jesus who, through faith, are children of God.

If you read the sixth chapter of Matthew, the middle section of the Sermon on the Mount, you find that it's life with our heavenly father that's being dealt with from beginning to end of the chapter.

And it's within that frame that the Lord's prayer, the address to our father in heaven, is set. and that's the deepest truth about the identity of disciples that the Sermon on the Mount offers.

Now, chapter 7 maintains that perspective and these words are addressed to the children of God who know their children of God through faith, as I said, in the Lord Jesus.

Says the Lord Jesus, Ask, and it will be given to you. seek, and you will find, knock, and it will be opened to you.

[29 : 05] For everyone, note that everyone, this is very strong and inclusive and forthright and categorical, everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, it will be opened.

Or, and now here's a parable, an analogy, to encourage us to believe this. Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?

Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father, who's in heaven, give good things to those who ask him?

those words speak for themselves. So, I'm bold to say, our relationship with God as children to a father is the first basis on which we expect, and I may use the word advisedly, we expect, and we should expect, that our asking will receive a positive answer.

secondly, and buttressing what I just said, there are the promises of God, the explicit words of promise in which God undertakes to do specific things.

[30 : 36] When he undertakes, he is faithful, who promised, he does what he said he'd do. And there's a good deal in the New Testament about standing on the promises of God, and living by the promises of God, and claiming the promises of God, and invoking the promises of God in our petitionary prayers.

Again, the clock is beating me, and I haven't time to go into this as I'd like to. Romans chapter 4, where Paul is celebrating the faith of Abram, who was given a promise, that he would have a child, and he was an old man, older even than I am, and his wife was an old lady, and humanly it seemed impossible, but, says Paul, elaborating, he didn't stagger at the promise of God.

He trusted, he was confident, confident, that God was able to promise, able to fulfill his promise. You know the words, expect, no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith, as he gave glory to God, rejoicing in the certainty that the promise would be fulfilled, that's what Paul means, he was fully convinced that God was able to do what he promised, and of course it happened.

The promises of God are trustworthy, and then I was going to elaborate some verses in 2 Peter, where the thought of trusting the promises of God comes out very big, and I was going to talk about something that I'll be talking about actually on one of the Monday evening lectures in January, the way in which Nehemiah, man of prayer that he was, pleaded the promise of God to restore his penitent people, he pleaded that promise as the basis for his looking to find favor, the sort of find the favor that he wanted in the Persian king's eyes, so that he would be sent to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls, and God fulfilled his promise, and it happened in a very remarkable way, but again,

I can only just refer you to that, read it at your leisure, I'm afraid the time has run out on me. And then the third basis for expecting prayer to be answered, along with our relationship to God as our Father, and the faithfulness of God as a promise keeper, is purity of heart before God, that's our own purity of heart, when we bring requests to God.

[33 : 57] Before we say anything, we need to check up on ourselves and make sure that we're not interposing an obstacle in the answering of our prayer in the way that children who are trying to fool their parents and whose parents can see what the kids are up to, those kids interpose an obstacle to the parent granting specific requests that the children may then make.

this is said in the straightforward way in scripture, Psalm 66 and verse 18, if I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

But truly God has listened, he's attended to the voice of my prayer, blessed be God, because he's not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me. But the psalmist recognizes prayer wouldn't have been answered in his life and the way that it has been if he cherished iniquity in his heart.

Under those circumstances, the Lord wouldn't have heard his prayer. With that, one may bracket what God says to his people through Isaiah the prophet at the beginning of chapter 59 of the prophecy, where Isaiah says, Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, or his ear dull that it cannot hear.

If you suppose that God has lost his power, you should think again. But, verse 2, your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he doesn't hear.

[35 : 59] He hears in the sense that he knows what he's saying, but he doesn't hear in the sense of responding to your request. Why not? Because of the sins, the perversities, the things you know are wrong, which nonetheless you're cherishing.

Be honest, admit your error, give it up, and so purify your heart before you bring requests to God.

That's what's being said in those words at the beginning of Isaiah 59. So, on the basis of the fatherly relation, the faithfulness of God as promise keeper, and the purity of heart, which we must cultivate before the Lord, we are entitled to expect answers to our requests.

And that's a very startling and thrilling thing to know. One way or another, all faithful prayers from children of God are going to be answered in positive terms.

That leads on to my fourth and last question, how humble, how reverent, how submissive are we in the prayers, that is, the requests that we make, the things we ask.

[37 : 36] with regard to their substance, are we prepared to have God change our requests for the better? As he did when Paul asked for miraculous healing for his thorn in the flesh, and the Lord's response was to say, I've got something better in store for you than healing.

My grace is sufficient to keep you going, though you remain unhealed. Paul understood that that was better and said, tells the Corinthians, most gladly then will I glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

That was the Lord changing for the better, a request that had been honestly made, and with a purpose of divine glory and all of that, but still, Paul hadn't realized that there was something better for him, and the Lord gave him something better.

Are we ready for an experience like that in our own lives? And then a point about the time frame. When we ask God for things, we always hope that they'll be given straight away.

we are in a hurry, we humans, and God sometimes keeps us waiting, because he isn't in a hurry, he knows the best time to bestow the gifts that he's going to bestow in answer to our request for them.

[39 : 22] And Jesus told the parable of the unjust judge who kept the woman waiting before he gave her justice. Luke 18 opening verses.

Jesus' point is not of course that the father is anything like the unjust judge. His point is simply that we've got to be prepared to wait for the father to decide when is the right time for him to give what we're asking.

And I wanted to develop that and again I can't do it. And then there's a third point here, a point about God's method of answering our prayers.

Sometimes the things that we ask for involve more than we realize. And here is a hymn, a lyric, by the great John Newton, which illustrates that in a very poignant way.

I ask the Lord, wonder if you know it, I ask the Lord that I might grow in faith and love and every grace, might more of his salvation know and seek more earnestly his face.

[40 : 46] T'was he who taught me thus to pray, and he I trust has answered prayer, that it has been in such a way as almost drove me to despair. I hoped that in some favored hour at once he'd answer my request, and by his love's constraining power subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of this, he made me feel the hidden evils of my heart, and let the angry powers of hell assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with his own hand he seemed intent to aggravate my woe. crossed all the fair designs I'd schemed, blasted my gourds, remember Jonah, blasted my gourds and laid me low.

Lord, why is this? I trembling cried, wilt thou pursue this worm to death? Tis in this way, the Lord replied, I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I employ for self and pride to set thee free, and break thy schemes of earthly joy that thou mayest seek thy all in me.

[42 : 10] No comment speaks for itself, but that's how sometimes the Lord answers prayer for spiritual advance.

prayers. And I can't say any more, I wish I could, but the time has gone. I had some review questions, you won't hear the review questions.

Let me close by saying yet once more, we have it on firm scriptural authority that the father's response to requests faithfully, humbly, hopefully, expectantly made by his own children out of a pure heart and an honest desire for God's glory, his response to those prayers is never going to be a flat no.

One way or another, there will be a positive response, though it may be I am adjusting the terms of your prayer to give you something better than you asked for.

It may be I know that this isn't the moment in which answering your prayer would bring you and others most blessing, so I'm asking you to wait on me.

[43 : 38] It may be I am answering your prayer, but you don't know the strategy I'm working to, and it doesn't at the moment feel or look like an answer at all, nonetheless it is.

So keep praying, keep trusting, keep looking for the answer. And it's as if the Lord adds, by the way, always check when you ask me for something, whether you couldn't be the beginning of the answer to your own prayer by doing something which you haven't yet ventured to do.

Over to you, says the Lord, and over to you, says J.I. Packer. It's over now. God bless you, friends. We haven't time for any discussion at all. I'm sorry about that, but there is a 10 o'clock service, and our time has run right out.

So may I, as we commit each other to the Lord, to teach us to pray, and then off we go to worship God in church.