

Doing Prayer

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: 02 March 2019

Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we worship you as the creator and sustainer of the universe. Lord Jesus, we worship you, Savior and Lord of the world. Holy Spirit, we worship you as the convictor of sin and the sanctifier of the people of God.

So we give you glory to you, Father, to you, Jesus, and to you, Holy Spirit. Heavenly Father, we pray that we might live today in your presence and please you more and more.

Lord Jesus, we pray that we will take up our cross and we will follow you. And Holy Spirit, we pray that today you will fill us with yourself and cause your fruit to ripen in our lives.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. So have mercy on us now, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[1 : 01] And be our teacher as we open your word for your praise and glory. Amen. And so we finish our series on prayer today looking at three basic kinds of prayer to God.

And you've hopefully got a sermon outline in front of you. If you haven't, stick your hand up and our welcomers will gladly get one to you to give you an idea of where we're going today.

Very briefly, there is upward awe prayer. Praise and thanksgiving that focuses on God himself. Then there is inward intimacy prayer.

It's self-examination and confession that brings a deeper sense of sin and in return, a higher experience of grace and assurance of love.

And finally, there is outward prayer, which is petitions that focuses on our need, the needs of others in the world. And this prayer requires perseverance and often involves struggle, as our Luke 11 passage indicates.

[2 : 08] So firstly, upward awe, praising God's glory. Now, praise of God is where prayer starts. It is, in fact, the motivation for the other two forms of prayer.

The more we grasp God's perfect holiness and his justice, the more that we will see our own flaws and we will confess them. And the more we sense his majesty and the more we realize our dependence on him, the more readily we will go to him for every one of our needs.

In our overall prayer life, praise and adoration of God has the prime place. It's the starting point and it has the prime place.

It seems, however, if you dig into it a little bit deeper, that a little egocentric that God would call us to praise him.

Like it's like God is there saying, right, guys, the way you pray is tell me how great I am. You know, that's a starting point. You just tell me how great I am.

[3 : 21] It seems a little egocentric. So is praise of God just simply about God or is there, biblically speaking, a gift enough for us?

Is praise for us as much as it is for God? Well, what I want to declare is that praise and adoration of God, in fact, changes us.

Praise of God is the only form of prayer that directly develops love for God. Directly develops love for God.

It changes us. St. Augustine was a fifth century Christian theologian and philosopher. And he taught that what we love is basically what we are.

What we love is what we are. Our most fundamental identity and life behavior is a function of what we love.

[4 : 26] All people seek happiness, even in the fifth century, and they attach themselves to things that they believe will make them happy.

However, when you throw sin into that mix, into that equation, what we do is we misidentify what will make us happy. That's our biggest problem.

Our biggest problem in life is that we have disordered loves. We either love what we ought not to love or we fail to love what we ought to love.

Or we love more what we should love less or love less what we should love more. For instance, if a person loves making money more than doing justice, So if money is more important to them than justice, then they will exploit their employees.

If they love their career more than they love family, then their children, their family relationships will ultimately feel neglected and will break down. The ultimate reason for our misery, according to the Bible, is that we do not love God supremely.

[5 : 44] As Augustine so famously put it in a prayer, You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

So that means quite simply, if you love anything at all in this world more than your creator, God, Whatever you love more than God will ultimately crush you under the weight of expectations and it will eventually break your heart.

Augustine wrote, Wherever the soul of man turns, unless towards God, it cleaves to sorrow, Even though the things outside God and outside itself to which it cleaves may be things of beauty themselves.

To change in the deepest sense, we must change what we worship. We must love God supremely and that can be cultivated only through praise and adoration of God.

Now, thanksgiving is a subcategory of praise. Thanksgiving is praising God for what he's done, While praise is adoring God for who he is in and of himself.

[7 : 14] So Psalm 135 just read out to us. Psalm 135 calls us to praise God. Psalm 136 gives thanks to God for specific things that make him praiseworthy.

So Psalm 135 praises God for having delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. And Psalm 136 praises God for being loving and good.

And those things, praise and thanksgiving, are intimately connected. Thanksgiving for a blessing automatically draws our mind towards the attributes and the loving purposes of the God to whom the blessing has come, from whom the blessing has come.

Praise for God for being loving and good. Praise for God for being loving and good. Praise for God's love and his goodness transforms effortlessly into thanksgiving for all the examples of his goodness in our life.

And yet, neither praise nor thanksgiving comes easily. Go to any prayer meeting. Go to any prayer meeting. And praise and thanksgiving is often the shortest little bit, the bit with the most amount of silence, whereas the petition stuff is where it all flows.

[8 : 33] Confession and repentance are driven by our circumstances too often.

We fail and we are burdened with guilt and shame and so we pray, driven by circumstances.

Petitions, supplications, asking God for stuff is driven by circumstances.

A friend or a family member gets a diagnosis of cancer or their career looks like it's about to turn really bad and so we pray. That is, it's driven by circumstances.

When good things happen to us, you would expect that it too would be driven by circumstances and that good things happening to us would naturally provoke us to thanks and praise in the same way that when bad things happen to us, we are naturally driven towards confession and petition.

But it doesn't. Why do we not automatically flow over in thanksgiving and praise? In Romans 1 verses 8 to 21, Paul is describing the character of human sin.

[9 : 56] And he writes this, For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God, nor gave thanks to him.

Ingratitude to God is the essence of sin. Cosmic ingratitude is the illusion that we are spiritually self-sufficient.

Cosmic ingratitude is taking credit for something that was in fact a gift. It's the belief that we know best how to live. And it's a dangerous delusion.

We do not create ourselves. We cannot keep our lives going for even one second without his upholding power. And we, by nature, hate the idea that we are utterly and completely dependent upon God.

Because when we do, when we admit that we are, we are obligated to him, and we are not able to live as we wish. We would, in fact, have to defer to the one who gives us everything.

[11 : 11] And so the sin in our heart makes us desperate to keep control of our lives and to live the way we want to. And so we cannot acknowledge the magnitude and the scope of what we owe him.

When good things come to us, we do everything possible to tell ourselves that we accomplished it or that we deserve it. When our lives are simply going along pretty smoothly, we don't live in quiet, amazed, thankful consciousness of God's blessing.

We have a problem with gratitude and praise. We do it in all of our life.

We are way more critical than we are thankful. We are way more critical of our kids than we are affirming and giving them thanks. We are way more critical of governments for the mistakes they make and rather than affirming them for the good things that they do do.

We have a problem with gratitude and praise, and yet praise is the one kind of prayer that properly motivates, energizes, and shapes all of our prayer life.

[12 : 31] You've got a problem with praise and thanksgiving. You've got a problem with your entire prayer life. So how do we turn it around? Multiple ways, but broadly speaking, it's developing the habit to turn every gift of God into praise of God.

I would encourage you, if you've got a problem in this area, which virtually all of us do, is to stop petitions and start praise.

Get your shopping list of petitions. Put it to one side and write a list of everything that you are thankful to God for and pray over it and over it and over it and keep adding to it and keep adding to it and keep adding to it until you start to feel the emotions well up of thanksgiving and gratitude to God.

Gratitude says, this is a little bit more than just even a shopping list of thanksgiving, a little bit more of a shopping list of things you're thankful for. Gratitude says, God, you are so good to give me this. Praise says, what kind of God would give me this? See the difference? Gratitude says, thank you God for that. Praise says, who are you that you would give me this?

[14 : 04] The Westminster Catechism says, a person's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. And many suggest that they are in fact exactly the same thing.

To fully enjoy is in fact to praise. In commanding us to glorify him, God is inviting us to enjoy him. And enjoying him, it's the only love that won't crush us. The only one. Secondly, intimacy, finding God's grace.

Us modern people, we often have a one dimensional view of God as a spirit of love. Therefore, the free forgiveness of God through Jesus on the cross doesn't seem that remarkable at all, because, well, in fact, that's God's business.

You know, he's in the business of loving, he's in the business of forgiving. That's what he's meant to do. And so we struggle with passages like Exodus 34, six and seven, which makes two startling assertions about God.

[15 : 16] It says that God maintains love to thousands and gives, forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin. And yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.

That is, we struggle with this concept that God, as it says there, is loving, but he's also holy, and he cannot let injustice and wickedness go unpunished.

How do you hold those together? That is, God's forgiveness in the Bible is neither simple to the modern mind or expected. So the conundrum of Exodus 34, verses six and seven is actually the tension that drives the entire plot of the Old Testament.

The history recorded in the Bible is an account of individuals and communities continually breaking their promises and obligations to God.

And you would just expect that this God would do as we would do is, frankly, I've had enough of this, cut you off. And yet there are numerous statements throughout the Old Testament, like Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36, that somehow, God will nevertheless remain faithful and that he will forgive and he will restore the rebellious.

[16 : 41] And then you get to the New Testament and Romans 3, 25 and 26 point out the answer to the riddle. God presented Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood.

And he did this so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith, those who have faith in Jesus. You see, when Jesus died on the cross, he took our curse for our unfaithfulness so that we could receive the blessing that he earned through his perfect faithfulness.

In Jesus, God can be both just towards sin and yet merciful in justifying the sinner.

It means that because of Jesus' atoning sacrifice, no sin, according to Romans 8, can be brought up and condemn those who have faith in Jesus.

And so God's free forgiveness is the foundation of all inward intimacy and confession and repentance.

[17 : 58] But when we forget the free grace of God in Christ, when we aren't totally convinced that God loves us in Jesus, then confession and repentance becomes just another way of trying to keep God on our side.

It's a self-righteous attempt to atone for my own sin. Jesus has suffered for our sin.

We do not need to make ourselves suffer to merit God's forgiveness. We simply receive the forgiveness earned by God. How confident can we be that God's love will exist in such a way that my sins are continually going to be dealt with?

Well, God forgives us not just because he's merciful, which he is, but because he is just. It's because of his justice that we can be confident of his mercy and his love.

The apostle John writes, and we'll read this a little bit later, that if we confess our sins, it says, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins.

[19 : 29] John 1, 1, 9. It doesn't say God is loving and will forgive us our sins. It says he is just and will forgive us our sins.

Our confidence in that verse is that he is just. That is, it would be unjust of God to deny us forgiveness because Jesus has already earned our acceptance.

All those who are in Christ must and will be forgiven because Jesus has taken the punishment. He has paid the debt for our sins.

It would be unjust of God to receive two payments for the same debt. And this profound assurance and security transforms repentance from being a means of atoning for our sin into the means of honoring God and realigning our lives with him.

Without a firm, firm grasp of free justification, we will admit wrongdoing only under great duress. We will focus on our behavior and itself and be blinded to just the deeper issues of our attitudes and our self-centeredness.

[20 : 55] We will also take as little blame as possible for anything that we've done. We will recite every possible mitigating circumstances to ourselves and to others. And we will never ever experience the release and the relief of resting in Jesus' forgiveness.

The more that we know that we are forgiven, the more that we repent. The faster we will grow, the quicker we will change, the deeper our humility and the deeper our joy and greater will be our praise and our thanksgiving.

But that doesn't mean we take our sin lightly. We must not make the mistake of taking forgiveness lightly because it is free.

Our great debt and sin against God required the ultimate infinite payment. And the only way God could forgive us was to bear it himself.

God the Father sent God the Son to take our punishment, who with the Father sent God the Spirit into our hearts, both to show us and to help us receive that costly forgiveness.

[22 : 17] If we forget the costliness of sin, our prayers for confession, our prayers of repentance will simply be shallow and trivial.

They will neither honor God nor will they change our life. So praise changes our life. Confession changes our life.

Repentance changes our life. You see, confessing our sin implies the forsaking of those sins. So can I just ask you, I'm not asking for a show of hands here at all.

How many are still doing and confessing the same sins year after year after year after year? How many know that experience deep in your heart?

It's because there's a problem with our confession and repentance.

[23 : 25] We must be inwardly grieved and appalled enough by a sin to the point that it loses its hold over us.

There's a kind of false repentance where we may admit our sin, but we're not really sorry for the sin itself. We're sorry about the painful consequences of the sin.

We're sorry about the guilt that we feel. We want the pain to stop. And so we end the behavior momentarily.

There hasn't been any real change to our wrong beliefs, to our wrong hopes, to our disordered loves or mistaken self-perceptions that cause the sin.

The only way to get real and genuine change in our lives, to actually defeat the sin, to, as English theologian John Owen said, to mortify our sin, the mortification of our sin, to kill it, is to keep looking to the cross and asking yourself, how can I treat Jesus like this?

[24 : 44] The one who died so I would never be punished? Is this how I treat the one who has brought me into this unconditional loved state?

Is this how I treat him after all that he's done for me? If I failed to forgive when he died to forgive me? Will I be anxious over the loss of my money when he gave himself to be my security and my eternal wealth?

Will I nurse my pride when he emptied himself of his own glory to save me? The gospel truth, Jesus' dying love, his unconditional commitment to us, his costly sacrifice, our adoption into his family, is the powerful instrument of change.

Beating yourself up, doing good works, can't eradicate the sin or bring change.

Only Jesus can do it. Only the gospel can do it. We must stop trying to cleanse ourselves through self-punishment or to get a sense of cleanliness by living in denial about our sin.

[26 : 02] Instead, we must go to him in prayer, looking to his work on the cross and both admit and forsake our sin.

Thirdly, outward struggle, asking God's help. Third form of prayer is asking God for things, for yourself, for others and for the world. Now, compared to the other two forms of prayer, this kind of prayer looks rather simple and straightforward.

Most of us would tick the box and go, well, I know how to do the petition thing because frankly, my whole prayer life is consisting of a shopping list, asking God to do stuff. And yet, if you look at James chapter 4, verses 2 and 3, he says this, You do not have because you do not ask God. And when you ask God, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

You ask with wrong motives. It's about you. It's like a story I heard, a young lad who mounted a campaign to get himself a skateboard for Christmas.

[27 : 22] He went to his mother and his mother suggested to him, she confused Santa with Jesus, but suggested that he writes a letter to Jesus and tell Jesus how good he's been and that in fact he deserves to get this skateboard for Christmas.

And so the boy grabs a piece of paper and a pen and sits down at his desk, Dear Jesus, I've been good all year. He's realized, well actually that's a bit of an overstatement.

So he stops and screws up the piece of paper and throws it on the floor and grabs another piece and starts again. Dear Jesus, I've been good for the whole month. Realizes there was that incident or two with his sister and at very least the poor lad's a realist and so he screws up that piece of paper and throws it down and he says, Dear Jesus, I've been good all week.

And again he realizes, ah, that's just not true. It's so frustrating. He throws the piece of paper down and he goes downstairs, storms downstairs, walks up to the mantelpiece, goes to the nativity scene and grabs Mary out of the nativity scene, walks back upstairs, sits down at his desk, plonks Mary down on the desk, grabs his piece of paper, Dear Jesus, if you ever want to see your mother again, Now, James 4 suggests that petitionary prayer can be just another way of us saying, my will be done.

My will be done. We are prone to telling God in no uncertain terms how he should run the universe. And what he should do for us.

[29 : 10] And it is quite easy in asking God for his help in the wrong way. It's also possible to be too timid in asking God.

Prayer is not just upward and inward, it's also outward. And prayer is a way to participate with God and his work in the world. Prayer has been referred to, in fact, as rebellion against the world's evil status quo.

I love that. Prayer is a rebellion against the world's evil status quo. And the Bible is filled with promises about the power of prayer in the affairs of history.

James 5.16 says that Elijah was a man just like us. And he prayed away the rain in Israel and then prayed it back as a way to confront a corrupt ruler.

And James concludes that prayer can have great power and produce wonderful results. John Calvin, the famous theologian, famous especially for his views of predestination and God's sovereignty, makes some remarkable statements about prayer based on James chapter 5 verse 16.

[30 : 46] He wrote this, It was a notable event for God to put heaven in some sense under the control of Elijah's prayers to be obedient to Elijah's requests.

By his prayers, Elijah kept heaven shut for two years and a half. Then he opened it and made it suddenly pour with great rain from which we may see the miraculous power of prayer.

So Calvin there is both bold and careful. He says that prayer is in some sense, that Elijah's prayer in some sense affected the weather conditions in Israel for two and a half years.

In the ultimate sense, God is in charge of everything that occurs. Our prayers could not possibly take control of any part of the universe away from God.

However, it is part of God's goodness that he allows the world to be susceptible to the prayers of the faithful. How he maintains control of history and yet still makes human prayer and action responsible within history is one of the most practical mysteries of the Bible.

[32 : 14] our prayers matter and yet God's wise plan is sovereign and infallible. These facts, two facts, are true at once, however that is possible is a mystery to us but not to God.

It's easy. But just think for a moment of how wonderful and practical this is. You see, if we believe that God was in charge of our actions and that our actions meant nothing, if we believe that God was totally sovereign and our actions meant nothing, it would lead to a discouraged passivity in our world.

If, on the other hand, we really believe that our actions and our prayers change God's plan, God's plan like, in that he vacated his sovereignty and his purposes and changed his mind based on our prayers, it would lead to paralyzed fear because we cannot see the full picture and what course of action we might be putting in motion through history because we simply do not know best.

But if both are true, we have the greatest incentive for diligent effort and yet, we can always sense that God's everlasting arms are around us.

In the end, we cannot frustrate God's good plans for us. It's a tremendous truth. God bends his ear and delights to hear our prayers.

[33 : 58] He allows the world to be, in some sense, under the control of the power of prayer. That's why James declares that prayer is powerful and effective.

So it's possible to ask wrongly, selfish motive, my will be done, and it's also possible to be too timid in asking of God.

So how do we proceed? To put it simply, we are to lift our desires to God with a view to his wisdom. The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it like this, prayer is 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. We are to ask God to fulfill the desires of our hearts.

[35 : 04] However, as a guard against both selfish motives, as well as our short-sightedness, will be to ask God to fulfill our request with things agreeable to his will.

Instead of a shopping list of things we want, we should reflect on what we want in light of all that we know from the Bible about the things that delight and grieve God, in light of what we know about how his salvation works and what his plan is for the universe.

So if we find, if we ever find in our prayers that we cannot say something along those lines, in terms of being agreeable to God's will, if we find our prayers are not prayers that are shaped by the scriptures, God's eternal plan, then it's possible that we are dealing in that moment, in that prayer, with one of the disordered loves of our life, a heart idol, a rival for God himself in our innermost being.

I remember sitting in a prayer meeting once, where I was making a bunch of changes and things, and someone in the prayer meeting, their simple prayer was this, dear God, I don't like what Steve is doing, please change his mind, amen.

As it turns out, God didn't. Changed my mind. And in moments like that, what should happen, it should trigger a great deal of self examination.

[37 : 06] prayer is not just hard work, it is heart work. Prayer is a struggle, and for too many of us, we just simply give up, we just slide into despondency, we slide into mere duty, and just get, here's

the shopping list.

Our heart is not engaged, it's just our mind. God's need. So, if that is you, there's this famous prayer, parable of prayer in Luke 18, where Jesus tells of an oppressed widow who kept coming to a judge with a plea, grant me justice against my adversary, and Jesus concludes, and will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night?

And the point of Jesus' parable is twofold, we should be confident that God will hear us, first of all, and secondly, we should also be extremely patient with God's timing.

We should be willing to pray with boldness and with perseverance, waiting months, waiting years, waiting a lifetime for God to answer some prayers, because our perspective on timing and wisdom is compared to Betty's with a two-year-old.

They just don't compare. We know God will answer us when we call, because one terrible day he did not answer Jesus when he called.

[38 : 42] Jesus prayed in Gethsemane that the cup of suffering on the cross would be taken away for him, but he says, not my will, but your will be done, and God the Father said, it is my will that will be done.

Your request is turned down. And on the cross he cried out in Matthew 27, 46, my God, but he received silence for the first time in his life.

How could that be? How could it be? Jesus was the perfect man. He served God with all his heart and soul and mind and loved his neighbors himself, according to Mark 12, God and so completely fulfilled the law of the God.

How could it be that God did not hear his prayer? Psalm 66, verse 18 says, if I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. Sinners deserve to have their prayers go unanswered. And Jesus was the only one in all of history who deserved to have every single one of his prayers answered because of his perfect righteousness and obedience to the law of the Lord.

[39 : 53] And yet he was turned away as if he was turned away as if he was a sinner. Why? Why? Well, the answer is at the heart of the Christian faith and the reason why we have prayer and why it's possible for us.

God treated Jesus as we deserve so that when we believe in him, God can treat us as Jesus deserved.

When Christians pray, they have the confidence that they will be heard by God and answered in the wisest way. And so Jesus taught his disciples to pray.

In Luke 11, he gave them this illustration. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, you're going to give him a scorpion.

If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? And Jesus' point here is that there has never been a parent on the face of the earth who wants joy for their children as much as your father in heaven wants joy for you, his child.

[41 : 16] There has never been a parent who wanted to answer his child's petitions as much as God wants to answer yours. God is not only loving but holy and just.

Jesus got the scorpion. Jesus got the snake so that we could have food at the father's table. He received the sting and the venom of death in our place.

We know that God will answer us when we call my God because he did not answer Jesus when he called my God.

when he made that same petition on the cross. So we should ask God for things with boldness. We should ask him with specificity, with ardor, with honesty and diligence.

And yet with patient submission to God's will and his wise love. because prayer is all because of Jesus and it's all in his name.

[42 : 29] And so 1 John 2 verses 1 and 2 says that if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one.

He is the toning sacrifice for our sins. At the heart of the Christian life is an active trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and his sacrificial death for us.

And to finish up in our time of prayer, we're going to just take the Lord's Supper together because this is an outward and a visible sign of God's grace to us in Jesus. It's a reminder that we have full access to God the Father.

As we participate in this symbolic meal together, we are confronted.