

## —Westminster Shorter Catechism—

### Lesson 54—*What is prayer? Q. 98*

**Bunyan** (Vol. 1.623): “Prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the heart or soul to God, through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit, for such things as God has promised, or according to the Word, for the good of the church, with submission, in faith, to the will of God.”

#### **Prayer is:**

##### I. *An offering up of our desires to God.*

A. Prayer can only be offered to God, Ex 20.3; Ps 62.8; WSC 45-47.

1. Prayer is an act of worship that’s only to be offered to the one, true, and living God. To pray to idols, devils, angels, the departed saints, Mary, or to any other is the sin of idolatry, Col 2.18-19.
2. Why must we pray only to God?
  - a) Because only God can hear prayer, Ps 65.2; 1Kgs 18.37; 1Pet 3.12.
  - b) Because only God can answer prayer, Ps 50.15; 86.7; Isa 65.24; Jer 29.12.
3. Prayer to none but God honors Him because it acknowledges Him as the one God and our God.
4. Prayer is the soul’s chief and most blessed communion with the Triune God.

B. At the heart of petitionary prayer is the *recognition of God* as God—and therefore the sole source and fountain of all good—and *of ourselves* as utterly dependent upon Him for all things.

1. A sense of our need and a sincere desire for what we ask are therefore indispensable to prayer.
2. Nothing can make up for a lack of this sincere desire. It is at the heart of prayer. If we have all the form and structure of prayer, but have not this desire, then we have not prayed, and God will not answer. For if we have no desire for what we pray, then we have no heart in our prayer, and where there’s no heart, God gives no answer, Mk 7.6-7; Jer 29.13; Hos 7.13-16.

##### II. *For things agreeable to His will.*

A. Prayer is the offering up of our desires, but a *desire* for something is not enough for it to be granted. It must also be agreeable to God’s will. This qualifies such statements as found in Jn 14.13-14.

1. This means we must endeavor to know the will of God before we pray. And His will can only be discerned from His Word, in which He reveals His purpose to glorify Himself and His promises to us which will secure His glory.

a) **Irving**, “The first step toward prayer is the knowledge of the promises of God, which are, as it were, a charter to go by. Further than these revealed purposes, His will in an impenetrable mystery.”

b) **Bunyan**, “It is prayer when it is within the compass of God’s Word; and it is blasphemy, or at best vain babbling, when the petition is beside the book,” Ps 119.49; Dan 9.2-3; Mt 26.53-54.

2. With a promise in hand, we can pray confidently and boldly, because we can ask *absolutely*, knowing He wills to give us what we ask, 1Jn 5.14-15; Ps 50.15.
3. Yet, we must always pray *conditionally*, submitting our confidence to the wisdom of His timing and to the goodness of His will in either giving us what we ask or better. We may be sure a prayer will be answered, but we cannot know when or how it’ll be answered. God will answer either in kind or better, but He’ll always answer in kindness.

a) Thus, every prayer is offered, even with the bond of a promise, in submission to what God knows will best accomplish His purpose and secure His glory, Mt 6.9; Mt 26.39; Dan 9.17-19. Hodge, “We make known our requests, but expect Him to do wiser and better than we can ask, 2Cor 12.8-9.

B. Prayer is vitally instrumental in the doing of the will of God in this world. His counsel *will* stand. He *will* do all His will in this world as its Sovereign GOD. But it’s pleased Him to bring His decree about *by way of* the prayers of His people, Job 42.8-9; Ezk 36.37; Philemon 22; Rev 8.3-6. He’s mysteriously and indispensably tied many of His purposes to our prayers, Mt 7.7; Js 4.2.

1. We don't pray as *enemies* or as *strangers*, but as *children*, seeking not to bend God to our will, but rather to learn to pray in accord with His. We cannot change His will by prayer, but by prayer we find ourselves changing to align with His will and our prayers bringing about His will.
2. In prayer we recognize His *will* and *power* to answer, and submit to His *wisdom* and *love* in answering.

### III. *In the name of Christ.*

- A. We can't approach God without a Mediator, Heb 12.24, 28-29. The entire Old Testament economy was designed to establish this truth and immediately expired when the Mediator Himself arrived, Jn 14.6; Heb 3.5-6; 4.14-16.
  1. We pray to the *Father* in heaven, we draw near to Him through the high priesthood of *Christ*, and we pray by the leading of the *Holy Spirit*, Eph 2.18. **Hodge**, "The Spirit teaches us to pray, the Son endorses our petitions and claims His merit (for the answer of them), and the Father grants our requests, which Christ then bestows through the administrations of the Spirit."
- B. To pray in Christ's name is not to tack on the bare mention of it in our prayers. Instead, it's to draw near to God in the recognition and acceptance of Christ as our only sacrifice and intercessor before God. **Hodge**, to pray in Christ's name is to "draw our encouragement to pray, and our boldness, strength, and acceptance in prayer, from Christ and His mediation."
- C. The "name of Christ," which gives credit to a believer's prayer is his conception and utterance in prayer of all that Scripture teaches us of the divinity, incarnation, sacrifice, and intercession of Him we call Christ. It is the believer's appeal to and rest upon the person and work of Christ for sinners.
  1. To pray in the name of Christ is to pray in the hope and confidence of His merits. We must carry the lamb of Christ in the arms of our faith if we expect to prevail in prayer. When we don't pray in Christ's name we offer up incense without a priest and can only hope to meet with the displeasure and rebuke of God.

### IV. *With confession of our sins.*

- A. It's impossible to draw near to God aright without a sense of our corruption and guilt as sinners. And it's in the sense of this guilt that we join confession with our prayers, confessing our particular sins particularly, asking God to wash our spots, Isa 1.18.
- B. Moreover, we are encouraged to confess our sins because, for Christ's sake, we've been assured that God will freely and fully forgive us, 1Jn 1.9; Isa 55.6-7; Heb 4.14-16; 10.19-23.
- C. Without the confession of known sin, we annul our prayers. For to regard or countenance sin against God while seeking mercies from God destroys prayer, Ps 66.18; Pr 15.29; Jer 29.13.

### V. *And thankful acknowledgement of His mercies,* Ps 103.1-4; Phil 4.6.

- A. Everything we have from God is a mercy, Gen 32.10; 1Cor 4.7.
- B. But we shut up answers from heaven when we shut up thanks from earth. For where the Lord receives no gratitude for His mercies, He'll withhold His mercies until we see our emptiness without them, because a sense of our own emptiness is the best help to being thankful for every mercy of God we receive.
- C. When we see all God's mercies as undeserved and ourselves as unworthy beneficiaries, it'll be easy to be thankful for every mercy. But when we look on God's goodness as deserved and ourselves as deserving, God loses His thanks and we forfeit our mercies.
- D. **Bunyan**, "God's people pray with praises. A sensible thanksgiving, for mercies received, is a mighty prayer in the sight of God; it prevails with Him unspeakably."
- E. **Whyte**, "Prayer and thanks are like the double motion of the lungs; the air that is sucked in by prayer is breathed out again by thanks."

### **Inferences**

- I. We must be a praying people. For to live without prayer is a godless and graceless life, Jer 10.25.
- II. The chief reasons our prayers aren't answered is because we pray without faith (Heb 11.6), without an eye to God's glory (Zech 7.5; Isa 58.3), or without repentance (Ps 66.18; Mk 7.6-7).
- III. Let us see in every prayer, that we can lay hold of that in Christ which warrants the request and merits an answer, and that we have the blessing of the Spirit in a promise from God's Word, and we can be sure of a good answer.