

Please turn in your Bibles to Philippians chapter 4. Oftentimes when we hear a sermon on the topic of prayer it is in the context of calling the people of have a more diligent prayer life. Other times it is used as a means of trying to get more people involved in the weekly prayer meeting. Both of those things are good and the importance of them ought to be taught on. But it's very rarely that a sermon on prayer is preached with the focus being prayer as an element of worship. This is what our focus will be this morning. So with that in mind give your attention to the reading of God's Word from Philippians chapter 4 verse 6.

Read Philippians 4:6

Pray

No Christian would deny that the Scriptures command the people of God to pray. In fact, this may be one thing in which all Christians from every different background and denomination holds to. Most, if not all, Christians would also hold to the fact that the Scriptures teach that prayer is to be done in the corporate gathering of the saints in worship on the Lord's Day. In fact, if you were to look at the Westminster Confession of Faith in the chapter concerning religious worship you would see that prayer is listed as the first element of worship spoken of. However, what is a point of disagreement among the various different traditions within the whole of Christianity is the way in which prayer is to be done and what it is to contain. There are some churches that have responsive prayers where the minister will read a portion of a prayer and the congregation would respond with another portion of a prayer. Some churches have a set list of prayers that they go through on a regular basis. The most common form of this would be the Book of Common Prayer found within the Anglican tradition. Other churches do only extemporaneous prayers, prayers made up on the spot, and allow for a time of people within the congregation to pray out loud during the service. There are churches which permit women to lead in public prayers within the assembly. Then there are the more off the wall prayers offered in some corners of Christianity like prayers for

the dead or prayers in some unknown tongue. The question we should be asking ourselves when we come to the topic of prayer as an element of worship ought to be the same one we ask concerning any other element of worship, how has Jehovah commanded this to be done. Remember, the regulative principle of worship is the undergirding principle upon which we are building this theology of worship and its parts. God regulates each element of worship uniquely, and we must consider that when we come to this topic. So the theme we will consider this morning is that the New Testament Church is to be a house of prayer. We will consider this theme under three heads: first, the basis of prayer; next, the act of prayer; and finally, the necessity of prayer.

If we are to pray, and everyone would agree we are to, then there must be a foundation for our prayers. Let's consider first the basis for prayer. If prayer is an element of worship then the basis for prayer must be the exact same as the basis for any other element of worship: the Scriptures alone. It is the Scripture alone that is our only infallible rule for faith and life. And so it is there that we find the basis for prayer. It is the Word of God which regulates our worship, and so we must understand that it is the Word of God which regulates our prayer. This is clear from 1 John 5:14, "And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us." Prayer must be done according to His will, not ours. And His will is only found in the revealed Word of God. And so prayer is to be Scriptural. This can be done either by using the actual words of Scripture or by paraphrasing or alluding to passages of Scripture. The book of Psalms is a great place to go to in order to pattern your prayers after Scripture. Yes, the Psalter is a songbook, but it is also a book full of prayers for every kind of situation we face in life. Psalm 17:7-8, "Shew thy marvellous lovingkindness, O thou that savest by thy right hand them which put their trust in thee from those that rise up against them. Keep me as the apple of the eye, hide me under the shadow of thy wings." Psalm 19:14, "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer."

Psalm 51:1-4, “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.” Psalm 86:11-12, “Teach me thy way, O Lord; I will walk in thy truth: unite my heart to fear thy name. I will praise thee, O Lord my God, with all my heart: and I will glorify thy name for evermore.” This list could go on and on. We could learn so much about how to pray simply by being immersed in the Word and meditating upon the Psalms.

But this does not mean that God regulates His prayer such that only prayers of the Bible can be used. He makes it clear in the Lord’s Prayer that this isn’t the case. Matthew 6:9-13, “After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.” This is a pattern for prayer. We are told to pray after this manner. That doesn’t mean that these exact words must be prayed, though there is nothing wrong with praying the Lord’s Prayer. The fact that the recording of the Lord’s Prayer in Luke differs in the exact wording from the recording in Matthew proves this point. It is not the specific words that we are being commanded to prayer, but that we are commanded to pray in that manner set before us. 1 Timothy 2:1-2 is another passage which proves this point, “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.” How can intercessions be made for all men if we are to only use the prayers found in Scripture? How can we pray for kings and all that in authority if we never specifically pray for

those in authority because they are not mentioned in the prayers of the Bible? We can't. This is one reason why the strict use of liturgical prayers ought not be done in the church. They neglect the clear Scriptural command that is given here in this passage. It is sheer laziness to use these as your regular prayers and to use them as the prayers in corporate worship. It takes no investment into the lives of your brothers and sisters to do so. It takes no careful understanding of the hurts and struggles and needs of the people. It is sheer laziness and negligence.

Friends, you must take great care to ensure that your prayers are regulated by the Word of God and according to His will as revealed in the Scriptures. To frivolously offer up prayers that have no basis in the Word of God is to offer worship outside of what He has commanded and is thus strange fire. One Presbyterian minister writes, "It would be better to spend an hour in the Word discovering whether what we desire is according to God's revealed will, and five minutes praying Biblical prayer, than to spend all day assaulting heaven for something God has not promised to give." How much time are you spending in the Word to know what the Lord's will is? How much of the Word have you hidden in your heart in order to use it as the framework upon which you build your prayers? Without this our prayers oftentimes descend into vain repetitions and stuttering and stammering over words. Take the time to collect your thoughts and your petitions and weigh them against the Word of God before bringing them to Him. Let the Scriptures be your guide in this sacred duty which belongs to all believers, for they are the basis of prayer.

With the firm foundation of the Word of God as the basis of prayer, let us now turn our attention to the act of prayer. Look at our passage once again, "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God." It is by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving that we make our requests known unto God. That's what prayer is. The Larger Catechism says, "Prayer is an offering

up of our desires unto God, in the name of Christ, by the help of his Spirit; with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.” It ought to include adoration, or a devout celebration of the perfections of God, and of His works; confession of our sins to God; thanksgiving for the favors which we have received from Him; and petition for those things which we need. Oftentimes the acronym ACTS is used of what should be done in prayer: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. Our prayers must be filled with adoration for Jehovah, for the works of His hands, for the mighty things He has done. Pray as the psalmist did in Psalm 8, “O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens.” Follow the pattern that Christ Jesus gives you in Matthew 6, “Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.” We have apostolic example of this found in Acts 4:24, “And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is.” If you truly are amazed at your God, if you truly stand in awe of His wondrous deeds, then your prayers ought to reflect it with deep adoration for Him.

Next, confess your sins unto the Lord. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Examine the depths of your heart, search out the hidden places and see the sins that remains there and confess it to the Lord. Christ says in the Lord’s Prayer, “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” And when we consider prayer as part of the corporate worship of the Church, confession of sin should include confession of corporate sins. We ought to ask ourselves as a group of believers how we have sinned against the Lord corporately and confess those sins as well. While we as a congregation try to be in accord with the will of God, we must also be ever reflecting upon how we must reformed according to His Word. When reformation takes place, when previous sins are corrected, we must confess those sins as a people unto the Lord. We must also confess the sins of the nation, praying for those who are in

positions in the magistrate that they would repent of the national sins and turn unto Christ. This is what is meant by that petition, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” Our prayers must also be with thanksgiving. See what the Lord has done in you and in this congregation and give thanks unto Him for His grace and mercy which has been shown unto you. Daniel Ritchie writes, “If prayer is the means by which we ask God for His blessing upon us (James 1:5; 4:3) then it is right and proper that we return thanks to God when we receive these blessings. So when the Lord instructed us to ask God for our daily bread (Matt. 6:11) it is noteworthy that He also intended us to give thanks for it when we receive it (Mark 6:41).”

And finally our prayers ought to make the requests and desires of our hearts known through supplication. We are to let our requests be made known unto God, as the Apostle Paul tells us. “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” Remember, these requests must be according to the will of God. He does not promise to give you whatever you want. You can pray for more money or a nicer car or for your favorite sports team to win the game, but God is under no obligation to even hear those prayers, much less answer them. But if it is His will that is the desire of your heart, if it is His will that is the primary motivator behind your prayers, then He will hear them and He will answer your prayers according to that most wise and holy will. Calvin explains, “Those things which are necessary for us ought to be desired by us from the Lord in such a way, that we, nevertheless, subject our affections to his good pleasure, and give thanks while presenting petitions. And, unquestionably, gratitude will have this effect upon us – that the will of God will be the grand sum of our desires.” When any thing burdens your spirit, you must ease your mind by prayer. When things in this life are perplexing or distressing, you must seek His direction and support through prayer. It is in prayer that we offer up of our desires to God, making them known to Him.

All of this is applicable to both private and corporate prayer, but when we consider prayer done during the worship service it is quite unique. The whole congregation does not audibly pray during our time of corporate prayer in the service. This would violate the Scriptural principle that all things must be done decently and in order. So how are you, as the congregation, to engage in this element of worship during the service? One thing that can be done is simply praying the prayer of the minister along with him silently as he prays. Remember, the minister does not pray as an individual but as a representative of the people. His prayer is your prayer. At the very least you should be praying silently in agreement with him and give your assent to his prayers with a hearty amen at the end. You can also pray your own prayer that is alongside the ministers silently as he prays. Either way, you must be sure that you are not a distraction or causing disorder during the prayers. There is no reason to have outbursts of ‘yes’ and ‘amen’ or even grunts of approval. Simply express your agreement with an amen at the conclusion of the prayer. You must also recognize there is a great danger, a great temptation, in time of public prayers to allow the mind to wander. Be diligent and disciplined during this time to stay focused on prayer. This is the appointed means of communing with the Lord. Do not let it slip by because of a wandering mind.

Lastly, I want to spend the remainder of our time together considering the necessity of prayer. Why is all of this necessary? Why are we to make these prayers and supplications known unto the Lord? The quick and easy answer is because Scripture commands us to. To not be a people of prayer is to directly disobey the commands of the Lord. In the verses leading up to the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6 Christ Jesus commands prayer four times, “And when thou prayest... But thou, when thou prayest... But when ye pray... After this manner therefore pray ye...” That command of the Lord is crystal clear here in just a few verses. Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, commands, “Pray without ceasing.” We must pray. Occasional prayer is not enough. Prayer during just times of crisis is insufficient. We must pray without ceasing. We must be

constant and fervent in our prayer. Paul adds in Colossians 4:2, "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving." He gives a very simple imperative here: pray. You must pray. You must be a people of prayer. And corporately as the Church you must be a people of prayer. In Mark 11:17 Christ says, "My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer." Oh that the world would look on us as believers, on us as the Church, and even on us as Westminster and we would be known to them as a house of prayer.

Another reason prayer is necessary is because it is speaking to the God of the universe, the creator and sustainer of all things, your heavenly Father, and making your requests known. It is a sign of humble reliance upon Him and His sovereign hand to cause things to come to pass according to His will. Robert Shaw makes this very point, "What, then, can be more reasonable than to acknowledge our constant dependence on him, and make daily application to him for the supply of our wants?" Are you trusting in Jehovah to provide for the needs in your life, or are you trusting in yourself to be able to make these things come about? I can promise you that if you are trusting in yourself then things will only get worse, your needs may not be provided for, and you will only grow further and further away from the Lord. You must realize that you are fully incapable of providing even the very breath that you breathe. How then could you be so vain, so arrogant, so haughty as to think you can provide for other needs in this life. There is no greater act who express your absolute reliance upon the Lord than to constantly, fervently, go to Him in prayer. He is your heavenly Father, and He will provide for you. "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?"

Finally, I want to very quickly address the objection of both the Arminian and the Hyper-Calvinist against the necessity of prayer. Both of these groups have constructed a false understanding of what we as Reformed believers hold to concerning the sovereignty of God. Their objection goes something like, ‘If God is absolutely sovereign over all things then why should we even pray? He is going to do His will no matter what. It’s then pointless to pray.’ Friends, this objection is not merely absurd, it is outright wicked. Just because God is absolutely sovereign over all things does not mean that He does not hear and answer the prayers of the saints. It is not only the ends that have been ordained from eternity past, but the means as well. The means which God has chosen for His people to commune with Him, to express the deepest desires of their hearts, to cry out to Him for help is through prayer. This objection against praying completely ignores what is absolutely plain to see in Scripture. Time and time again the Lord commands His people to pray. Time and time again we have examples of the saints, both old and new, praying unto the Lord. How is this objection anything other than that same lie which the serpent told to Eve in the garden, “hath God said”? Do not fall for this wicked scheme of Satan, but instead be on your knees before your God in heavenly making your prayers known unto Him.

Brothers and sisters, while this element of worship is widely acknowledged I fear it is not widely understood. If we truly understood what prayer was, that it is commanded of us in Scripture, if we truly understood what we are doing when we go to the Lord in prayer, then we would tremble at the thought of neglected such a sacred duty. Be a people of prayer. “Pray with an awful apprehension of the majesty of God, and deep sense of our unworthiness, necessities, and sins; with penitent, thankful, and enlarged hearts; with understanding, faith, sincerity, fervency, love, and perseverance, waiting upon him, with humble submission to his will,” as the Larger Catechism instructs us. And recognize that the New Testament Church is to be a house of prayer.