

# Private Prayer as a Means of Grace

Adult Sunday School – New Life Burbank

Instructor: Lee Irons

Feb. 3 – Mar. 9, 2008

Background: “Developing a Personal Relationship with Christ, Or How to Regain your First Love” (Jan. 6, 2008)

Prayer is the key to having a personal relationship with Christ

Christ dwells in our hearts *through faith* – Eph 3:17

And such renewed actings of faith are essentially prayers,

i.e., talking to God through Christ, or talking to Christ directly

I had three practical exhortations:

1. Talk to God about anything & everything that causes anxiety
2. Don't wait for formal time, but continually do “arrow prayers”
3. Pray for the good things your heavenly Father wants to give you

Four problems that hinder us from praying as we ought:

1. Not understanding the theological, Trinitarian framework of prayer. This is important because rather than praying to a Unitarian, nameless God, we learn to pray to the Father through Christ or to Christ directly. Prayer is relational. It is talking to a person. As such prayer is an acting of faith.
2. Thinking prayer is something arduous and requiring tremendous amount of discipline and effort, instead of seeing it as something easy – just talking to the Lord, shooting up arrow prayers throughout the day, walking with Christ. Prayer ought to be a natural part of your daily life, as natural as eating, breathing, and sleeping.
3. Not knowing how to have a relationship with God. In any relationship, there is a give and take – we talk to someone, that person listens and responds to what we're saying. But with God, it's not so easy. How can we have a give-and-take and receive God's answers to prayer when God doesn't speak to us like he did in former ages?
4. The final obstacle is common in Reformed circles and that is that we are reacting against the individualized, privatized spirituality of evangelicalism that we move in the opposite direction and turn spirituality into something totally objective and corporate. I have heard it said that grace comes exclusively through the means of grace, the word and the sacraments, in the context of the corporate church gathered for worship. Taken to its extreme, there would be no room for private prayer. This is patently unbiblical since Jesus commanded us: “When you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Matt 6:6). How does our private prayer life relate to the public means of grace, the word and the sacraments, in the context of public worship?

## Course description:

We all fall short in the area of private prayer, and many of us feel guilty that we don't pray as much as we ought. The aim of this class is twofold: (1) to develop a theological framework for understanding how prayer functions as a means of grace [lessons 2-3], and (2) to learn practical ways for deepening our relationship with Christ through prayer [lessons 4-5]. We will also examine how private prayer relates to the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments in the context of public worship [lesson 6].

Shorter Catechism Q. 88. What are the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption? The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially **the word, sacraments, and prayer**; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

## Overview of the course:

- Week 1 (Feb. 3) Introduction
- Week 2 (Feb. 10) Prayer and the Trinity
- Week 3 (Feb. 17) Prayer and Faith
- Week 4 (Feb. 24) How to Pray
- Week 5 (Mar. 2) Receiving Answers to Prayer
- Week 6 (Mar. 9) Prayer and Public Worship

## Week 1 (2-3-08): Introduction

### Overview of Scriptural teaching on prayer

Patriarchs "called on the name of the Lord" (Gen 4:26; 12:8; 21:33; 26:25)

### Great prayers recorded in OT

- Moses' intercession on behalf of Israel (Exod 32:11-14)
- Hannah's prayer for a son (1 Sam 1:9-11; 2:1-10)
- David's prayers (1 Chron 16:8-36; 17:16-27; 29:10-19)
- Solomon's prayer at dedication of temple (1 Kings 8:22-61)
- Hekeziah's prayers (2 Kings 19:14-19; Isaiah 38:9-20)
- Daniel's confession of sin in exile (Dan 9:4-19)
- Ezra's prayer of confession (Ezra 9:5-15)
- Nehemiah's prayers (Neh 1:4-11; 9:5-38)
- Isaiah (12, 25-26), Jeremiah (12, 20), Habbakuk (3), etc.

### Prayer in the Psalms

- Lament (Pss. 13, 22, 60, 69)
- Confession (Pss. 32, 51)
- Supplication (Pss. 5, 25, 61)
- Thanksgiving (Pss. 30, 34, 40)
- Adoration (Pss. 33, 96, 145-50)

### Jesus and prayer

Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, had unbroken communion with his heavenly Father  
Jesus was engaged in prayer during his baptism (Luke 3:21)  
Jesus' private prayer life (Matt 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 5:15-16; 6:12; 9:18)  
He called his disciples to engage in secret prayer (Matt 6:5-6)  
He taught his disciples how to pray (Matt 6:7-13 || Luke 11:1-4)  
He exhorted us to be persistent in prayer (Luke 11:5-8)  
"Ask and it will be given to you; seek ..." (Matt 7:7-11 || Luke 11:9-13)  
He taught that we ought to pray at all times and not lose heart (Luke 18:1-8)  
Jesus emphasized that we must pray *believing* (Matt 21:20-22 || Mark 11:20-24)  
"Ask whatever you wish" (John 14:13-14; 15:7; 16:23-24)  
He prayed for his disciples of all ages (John 17)  
Before going to the cross, Jesus agonized in prayer & submitted to the Father's will

### Prayer in Acts – early Church

Continually devoted themselves to prayer (Acts 1:14; 2:42)  
Prayer meetings (Acts 4:24-31; 12:12)  
Peter went up on housetop to pray (Acts 10:9)  
Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns in prison (Acts 16:25)  
Paul's tearful prayer with the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:36-37)  
Paul prayed with the disciples at Tyre on the beach (Acts 21:5)

### Prayer in the Epistles

Paul's constant, continual prayers for his churches and converts  
(Rom 1:9-10; Eph 1:16; Phil 1:4; Col 1:9; 1 Thess 1:2; 2 Tim 1:3; Phm 4)  
A couple of great Pauline prayers (Eph 1:15-23; 3:14-21)  
Paul's exhortations to be devoted to prayer, to pray without ceasing  
(Rom 12:12; Col 4:2; Eph 6:18; Phil 4:6-7; 1 Thess 5:17; 1 Tim 2:8)  
James (1:5-8; 4:2-3; 5:13-18)  
Peter (1 Pet 3:12; 4:7)  
1 John (3:22; 5:14-15)

What can we take from all of this?

1. The *importance of prayer* – as indicated by the fact that it is pervasive in all genres of Scripture (historical books, poetical books, prophetic literature, the Gospels, the epistles)
2. The *variety of prayer* – private, public, lament, confession, praise, supplication, etc.
3. The *duty of prayer* – the multitude of examples in Scripture provide a clear warrant for prayer; Jesus' own prayer life sets an example for us (Luke 11:1); Jesus taught his disciples how to pray; and Paul specifically commands us to be devoted to prayer, to pray without ceasing

But it is a different kind of duty. Not one that needs to be commanded, like a law. For prayer is the most natural thing in the world for a Christian. Robert Dabney:

“Prayer is the vital breath of religion in the soul. It cultivates our sense of dependence and of God’s sovereignty. By confessing our sins, the sense of sin is deepened. By rendering thanks, gratitude is enlivened. By adoring the divine perfections, we are changed into the same image, from glory to glory. From all this it is apparent that prayer is the Christian’s vital breath. If God had not required it, the Christian would be compelled to offer it by his own irrepressible promptings. If he were taught to believe that it was not only useless, but wrong, he would doubtless offer it in his heart in spite of himself, even though he were obliged to accompany it with a petition that God would forgive the offering. To have no prayer is, for man, to have no religion.” (p. 716)

4. The *power of prayer* in the teaching of Jesus – this is truly striking and amazing. Jesus repeatedly and emphatically promises that “All things that we ask in prayer, believing, we will receive” (Matt 21:22). The call to faith, to believe that he wants to grant our requests, thus bringing glory to the Father.

Calvin: “That we lie on earth poor and famished and almost destitute of spiritual blessings, while Christ sits in glory at the right hand of the Father, clothed with the highest majesty of empire, must be imputed to our slothfulness and the narrowness of our faith” (Commentary on John 7:37-39)

#### Week 2 (2-10-08): Prayer and the Trinity

WLC # 178: “What is prayer? 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”

John Owen, *Communion with God*

“The saints have distinct communion with the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit (that is, distinctly with the Father, and distinctly with the Son, and distinctly with the Holy Spirit).”

- (1) Each member of the Trinity is a distinct person and has a distinct role:

Matt 3:16-17

Rom 5:5, 8

1 Cor. 12: 4-6: “The apostle, speaking of the distribution of gifts and graces unto the saints, ascribes them distinctly, in respect of the fountain of their communication, unto the distinct persons” (Owen).

2 Cor 13:14

Gal 4:6

(2) Communion with the Father through Christ:

John 14:6

Eph 2:18: “Our access unto God (wherein we have communion with him) is *dia Christou*, ‘through Christ,’ *en Pneumati*, ‘in the Spirit,’ and *pros ton Patera*, ‘unto the Father; – the persons being here considered as engaged distinctly unto the accomplishment of the counsel of the will of God revealed in the gospel” (Owen).

Heb 7:25

Heb 10:19-22

Heb 13:15

Walter Marshall: “It is the gospel that makes prayer possible. Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant, by whom justification and sanctification are promised, is also the Mediator who makes your prayers accepted by the Father (Hebrews 4:15-16).”

This is why we are to pray “in Jesus’ name” (John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23)

WLC # 180: “What is it to pray in the name of Christ? To pray in the name of Christ is, in obedience to his command, and in confidence on his promises, to ask mercy for his sake; not by bare mentioning of his name, but by drawing our encouragement to pray, and our boldness, strength, and hope of acceptance in prayer, from Christ and his mediation.”

WLC # 181: “Why are we to pray in the name of Christ? The sinfulness of man, and his distance from God by reason thereof, being so great, as that we can have no access into his presence without a mediator; and there being none in heaven or earth appointed to, or fit for, that glorious work but Christ alone, we are to pray in no other name by his only.”

(3) Communion distinctly the Son:

1 Cor 1:9

John 14:1, 23

1 John 1:3: “the particle ‘and’ is both distinguishing and uniting” (Owen)

Rev 3:20

(4) Prayer and worship addressed to the Son:

Dabney, *Systematic Theology*: “Prayer is usually addressed to the Father through the Son, and by the Spirit. Eph 2:18. But we must not imagine that one person is more properly the object of prayer than another. All are made alike objects of worship, in the apostolic benediction, 2 Cor 13:14, in the formula of baptism, and in Rev 1:4. But more: we find Jesus Christ, so to speak, the separate object of worship, in Gen 18:23; Josh 5:14; Acts 7:59; Rev 1:17; 5:8; Heb 1:6, etc. These examples authorize us to address a distinct petition to either of the Persons” (p. 714).

John 5:23

Acts 7:54-60  
Rom 10:13 & 1 Cor 1:2  
2 Cor 12:8-9  
Rev 1:5b-6, 17  
Rev 5:8-10

(5) The Spirit's role

Eph 6:18; Jude 20 – “praying in the Spirit”

Walter Marshall: “The Holy Spirit, who gives you the new birth, who unites you to Christ, who sanctifies you, and who shows you the things of Christ, is a Spirit of prayer (Zechariah 12:10, Galatians 4:6). He is like a fire inflaming your soul, and He makes you mount upward in prayer to God.”

Abba: Jesus' prayer (Mark 14:36) → ours (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6)

Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections*, on the testimony of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:15-16). Not an inward immediate suggestion, as though God inwardly speaks to us, and testifies that we are his children, by a secret voice or impression. Rather: “We have received ... a spirit of love, which naturally *disposes us to God as children to a father*, and behave towards God as children ... The spirit of bondage works by fear for slaves fear the rod: but love cries, Abba, Father; it *disposes us to go to God, and behave ourselves towards God as children*; and it gives us clear evidence of our union to God as His children, and so casts out fear. So that it appears that the witness of the Spirit the apostle speaks of, is far from being any whisper, or immediate suggestion or revelation; but that gracious holy effect of the Spirit of God in the hearts of the saints, the disposition and temper of children, appearing in *sweet childlike love to God*, which casts out fear or a spirit of a slave” (pp. 163-4).

Rom 8:26-27 – “The Spirit intercedes for us in groanings too deep for words”

(6) Conclusion

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*: “An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get into touch with God. But if he is a Christian he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also knows that all his real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the man who was God – that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying – the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on – the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. So that the whole threefold life of the three-personal Being is actually going on in that ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary man is saying his prayers” (pp. 142-3).

Week 3 (2-17-08): Prayer and Faith

Faith is increased and strengthened by means of prayer: WCF XIV:1 “The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word, by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened.”

Syllogism:

- (1) We grow in grace and sanctification by continually exercising faith in Christ, that is, by drawing strength from Christ – drinking, eating, and thus being nourished

Alexander Comrie, quoting Psalm 34:5: “‘They looked unto Him and were lightened; and their faces were not ashamed.’ As soon as faith ceases to be exercised, grace is no longer communicated; for faith is, as it were, the pipe through which the water of grace must flow; if then the water from the fountain is to flow into the empty vessel of our soul, the pipe must be really united to the fountain” (*The ABC of Faith*, p. 81)

- (2) Prayer is an acting of faith by which faith is increased and strengthened. If we think we have faith, but we do not have a prayer life in which we are continually resting in Christ and walking with Christ, then our faith is inactive and becomes weak. By means of prayer, our faith in Christ is awakened, made active, and increased, for it by prayer that we come to Christ, abide in Christ, and draw strength from him.

John 15:1-8

Comrie: “Faith, abiding in Christ so as to bring forth fruit, makes the soul to abide continually more earnest in prayer, or in crying, and lifting up of the heart unto the Lord. This is Paul’s sweet exhortation: ‘Pray without ceasing’ (1 Thess 5:17) ... Prayer is not only the breath, but also a singular sustainer of the life of faith; the stronger in faith, the more fervent in prayer” (p. 81).

- (3) Therefore, since faith is the key to sanctification, and since prayer is the key to faith, prayer is the key to sanctification.

I’m arguing that prayers are essentially “actings of faith.” In other words, I’m trying connect prayer and trusting in Christ. We all know that we are saved, justified, by trusting in Christ alone. Yet I think we tend to forget that trust in Christ, faith in Christ, is not merely a formal state in which our minds are convinced of the truths of the gospel, but must also be experienced or exercised in the form of prayer, that is, talking to the Father through Christ or to Christ directly.

Biblical evidence that prayers are essentially “actings of faith”

The first 3 passages start off talking about *faith* and ends with a comment about *prayer*. The fourth passage starts off talking about *prayer* and ends with a comment about *faith*.

Faith → prayer

(1) Rom 10:1-13

Unbelievers need to pray the sinner's prayer as a crucial element in conversion. Most Reformed tracts provide a prayer that can be used as a model, while encouraging the sinner to use his or her own words. Of course, as Reformed people, we also stress that this must be followed by a public profession of faith, baptism, and joining a local church for discipleship, Christian growth, and attending on the means of grace. But we do not dispense with the sinner's prayer. We still believe that conversion includes humbling yourself before God, admitting your sin and guilt, and exercising faith in Christ for the very first time via a personal, heart-felt prayer. In other words, what Paul refers to as "calling upon the name of the Lord."

Well, why does this have to end at conversion? Shouldn't we continually call upon the name of the Lord? Of course we should. We must continually exercise faith in Christ, not merely in the initial moment of conversion, but throughout our lives, since we continually need the grace, the strength, and the spiritual life that flows to us from Christ. So we see, then, that there is a critical connection between prayer and trusting in Christ.

(2) Mk 9:14-29 (|| Matt 17:20 "Because of the littleness of your faith")

(3) Matt 21:18-22

Prayer → faith

(4) Luke 18:1-8

What is it about prayer that makes it an acting of faith? It is the fact that prayer is directly related to the third element of faith. The three elements of faith are *notitia* (knowledge), *assensus* (assent), and *fiducia* (trust). Without *fiducia*, or trust in Christ, knowledge and assent become an empty profession. And as Paul says in Rom 10:10 ("for with the heart a person believes"), *fiducia* is exercised not primarily with our minds but with our hearts. This is so because *fiducia* or trust is borne out of a sense of our need. It is only as we see our sinfulness, our problems, our need of a Savior, that we are in a position to come to Christ and rest in him to meet all of our needs.

- Are we conscious of our sinfulness? Then we need to look away from ourselves to Christ, to rest on Christ's finished work for us on the cross.
- Are growing weak in our battle against sin? Then we need his Spirit to empower us to put to death our sinful deeds and desires.
- Do we long for personal holiness? Then we need to come to Christ in order to receive the Spirit of holiness that flows from Christ.

- Do we want to enjoy a greater sense of God’s fatherly love for us? Then we need to draw near to the heavenly Father through his Beloved Son.
- Do we have temporal needs – food, clothing, companionship, guidance for important decisions, etc.? Then we need Christ’s provision in order to serve him and follow him. We aren’t asking for wealth, or ease, or material happiness, or health merely in order to satisfy our covetous desires. Though we may want these things to some degree, we are not setting our hearts on them. Rather, we are asking for his provision to enable us to serve him better.

In short, all spiritual blessings to come to us through prayer. As Calvin said: “That we lie on earth poor and famished and almost destitute of spiritual blessings, while Christ sits in glory at the right hand of the Father, clothed with the highest majesty of empire, must be imputed to our slothfulness and the narrowness of our faith.”

And so in all that we need, we must come to Christ in a posture of *trusting prayer* and *prayerful trust*. Coming to Christ in an attitude of need, an attitude of dependence on him, aware of our need, our weakness, our lack. We come with outstretched hands to receive of his grace, his fullness, and his provision. We come in a posture of gratitude for all that we have already received, confidence that he will provide for our legitimate needs, and trust that whatever he ordains will be exactly what he deems is best for us in our earthly pilgrimage.

All of this, then, is *fiducia* or trust, and it is expressed in prayer. How else can we express our dependence upon him? How else can we draw upon Christ for strength? Prayer, then, is the means by which we deepen our sense of need and our constant dependence on Christ and trust in Christ. Our entire lives ought to be lived in a posture of prayerful dependence on Christ for justification, sanctification, assurance, for our temporal needs, and for our usefulness in our service to him.

This, I believe, is one reason why Jesus taught us to pray believing: “All things that you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (Matt 21:22). He gave us this tremendous promise, not to give us a blank check guaranteeing that we’ll get whatever we want, but to encourage the actings of faith that we call prayer.

#### Week 4 (2-24-08): How to Pray

##### (1) The times of prayer

Pray at regular times

Meals

Bed-time

Regular devotions

Seasons devoted to prayer & fasting – Acts 13:3; 14:23

Pray without ceasing – 1 Thess 5:17; Eph 6:18; 2 Tim 1:3

Arrow prayers

Our prayers need not be limited to a set time, a set pattern, a devotional, or whatever. That is good too, but we also need to have a lively, humble, continual relationship with Christ throughout the day, as we walk through our daily lives. We need to be able to shoot up “arrow prayers” to the Lord as we go along. We need to get used to the idea that the risen Lord Jesus Christ is really alive and really present in our hearts by his Spirit. And so we must relate to, talk to, and rest up him by repeated actings of faith throughout the day and throughout the week.

“Prayer is the vital breath of religion in the soul” (Dabney)

Abiding in Christ – John 15:5

Comrie: “Faith, abiding in Christ so as to bring forth fruit, makes the soul to abide continually more earnest in prayer, or in crying, and lifting up of the heart unto the Lord” (p. 81).

Pray whenever you feel anxious about something – Phil 4:6-7

Pray whenever the thought “I should pray” occurs to you

Get in the habit of praying about everything

(2) The manner of prayer

WCF XXI:3 “Prayer, with thanksgiving, being one special part of religious worship, is by God required of all men: and, that it may be accepted, it is to be made in the name of the Son, by the help of his Spirit, according to his will, *with understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance ...*”

Understanding – think about what you are saying, talking to the Lord  
1 Cor 14:15

Reverence – not flippant; realize who you are talking to  
Eccl 5:1-2; Heb 12:28-29

Humility  
Gen 18:27

Fervency – put your heart into it  
Rom 15:30; Col 4:12

Faith – that God hears prayer  
James 1:6-7

Love – for others  
Rom 1:8-12; 1 Tim 2:1-6

Perseverance  
Luke 18:1; Eph 6:18

Thanksgiving – I added this because Paul emphasizes it  
Phil 4:6; Col 4:2

### (3) The language of prayer

My advice: rather than “praying” in formal sense, try “talking” to the Lord

The word “talking” sounds goofy, perhaps too intimate, as if we are bringing the holy and transcendent God down to our level as just another buddy that we can chat with. I don’t mean that. I use the word “talking” because it gets at the idea of having a relationship. We talk to the Father through Christ, or directly to Christ, about anything and everything that is on our minds, anything and everything that is causing us anxiety. We cast our burdens on the Lord. That is what a personal relationship is.

Why “talking” to the Lord?

- (1) Greater sense of intimacy when we remove the constraints of formality
- (2) We drop all pretence and are able to be perfectly honest with God
- (3) The Spirit leads us down unexpected roads in prayer
- (4) Can be incredibly healing and comforting to talk to the Creator of the universe

What about using formal prayers like the Lord’s Prayer, or the prayers in the Book of Common Prayer? There are certainly times when this can be beneficial, but I would discourage you from relying solely on such prayers to the exclusion of informal “talking” with the Lord.

3 benefits:

- (1) Communion with saints who prayed same prayer
- (2) Expanding the range of your prayer language & topics
- (3) Comfort in familiar words, e.g., Lord’s Prayer & Psalm 23

3 drawbacks:

- (1) Can be a loss of sense of intimacy and relationship
- (2) Set prayers are general and do not express specifics of your situation
- (3) Can more easily be “mouthing words” rather than “actings of faith”

I’m not rejecting formal prayers altogether. We need both formal and informal.

Week 5 (3-2-08): Receiving Answers to Prayer

Two great quotes re. last week's lecture on the *language* of prayer:

Calvin: "Prayer itself is properly an emotion of the heart within (*cordis affectum*), which is poured out and laid open before God" (III.xx.29).

Eugene Peterson: "The first thing we realize from the Psalms is that in prayer anything goes. Virtually everything human is appropriate as material for prayer: reflections and observations, fear and anger, guilt and sin, questions and doubts, needs and desires, praise and gratitude, suffering and death. Nothing human is excluded. The Psalms are an extended refutation that prayer is being 'nice' before God. Not at all – it is an offering of ourselves, just as we are" ("Prayer," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*).

Now for today: receiving answers to prayer – this is a crucial element in developing a personal relationship with Christ

A. Our God is a God who answers prayer

Ps 65:2: "O thou that hearest prayer"

Ps 34 – see especially vv 4, 6, 8, 10, 15, 17

Ps 145:18-19

Hebrew verbs:

*Ana* = "answer"

*Shama* = "hear"

Together these verbs used over 70x in Psalms in reference to God answering prayer

B. Jesus taught us to pray believing that we will receive answers to our prayers

Matt 21:20-22 || Mk 11:20-24

How explain this sweeping promise? Two qualifications:

(1) Jesus himself qualified the promise by teaching that all our desires must be subordinated to the will of God

Matt 6:10 ("your will be done"). Calvin: "In all prayer we ought carefully to observe that our intention is not to bind God to particular circumstances, or to prescribe at what time, in what place, or in what way he is to do anything. Accordingly, in [the Lord's] prayer we are taught not to make any law for him, or impose any condition upon him, but to leave to his decision to do what he is to do, in what way, at what time, and in what place it seems good to him. Therefore, before we make any prayer for ourselves, we pray that his will be done. By these words we subject our will to his" (*Institutes* III.xx.50).

Luke 22:42 ("yet not my will, but yours be done")

1 John 5:14 ("if we ask anything according to his will")

(2) The context makes clear that the promise has to do with fruitfulness, not just any old thing we may happen to want

Donald Hagner (WBC Commentary on Matthew): The pericope about the barren fig tree that Jesus cursed is followed by a seemingly unrelated teaching about prayer. But the two are in fact related. Jesus wants the disciples to be fruitful, unlike Israel. “The wonderful promise of vv 21-22 points ... to the miraculous power available to the disciples to fulfill their calling, that is, in the living of the Christian life in fruitful discipleship.”

Compare John 15:5-8, 16

The key is having the right motives – James 4:1-3; Psalm 37:4

And yet the promise of Jesus remains.

Why did he give us this amazing promise?

- a. The strictly theological answer. Turretin: God does not change his decree by the prayers of the pious, “but by those very prayers accomplishes what he had determined should come to pass” (1.319). True but only gets us so far.
- b. The more relational answer. God wants us to have a real, living relationship with himself – to depend on him for all things, and to delight in him when he answers our prayers. When we pray for something and then obtain what we were seeking, we become convinced that God has answered our prayers. And when we are convinced that God has answered our prayers, we realize just how much he loves us and cares for us individually. Calvin adds another interesting point: God sometimes helps us unasked, but he wants us to pray so that we will be filled with a burning desire to ask for and receive things that will enable us to serve him better. God wants us to “embrace with greater delight those things which we acknowledge to have been obtained by prayers” (III.xx.3). If we receive something without asking for it, we may not be sure if it something God wants for us. But if we prayed long and hard for something and received it, then we know it is something God wants for us.
- c. This is why the promise is so bold – “even if you say to this mountain ...” Jesus wants to stir us up to bold, believing prayer in his name and for the advancement of his kingdom. Let us not rest content with timid prayers for ordinary things like food and clothing and health, but let us pray for things that stretch our faith a bit and cause us to wait expectantly for God’s amazing providences, especially as related to the advancement of the gospel and our fruitful service for him.

C. Two main ways that we receive answers to prayer:

(1) Providence

Yes, No, Not now, Not in this way  
“All the way my Savior leads me”

Continually give thanks (even when God is saying No or Not now/in this way)  
Eph 5:20; Phil 4:6; Col 3:17

(2) Spiritual impressions

Fear that this sounds too charismatic  
Shouldn't throw baby out with bathwater  
Don't focus on supernatural stuff

Yet at same time, expect God to interact with you in some way  
Why? Because prayer is an acting of faith, and the Spirit works through faith

The Spirit never tells you something that you don't already know from Scripture  
e.g., "Trust God to provide"  
Calvin – the promises of God in the gospel are like treasures that we must dig up  
by means of prayer (III.xx.2)

Phil 4:6-7 – peace that surpasses all understanding  
Rom 8:14-16 – the testimony of the Spirit enabling us to go to God as children  
2 Cor 12:7-9 – sense of the Lord's grace sustaining you through trials

D. Finally, don't forget to take note of how God answers your prayers

Comrie: "Faith, in Christ abiding, makes the soul very attentive for answers to prayer, and as to what she receives upon the exercise of her faith ... It is the sad case with many that they can bring forth many words, can desire many things in prayer, with some outgoings of heart; but, that work being done, they think no more of it from morning to midday to evening ... The right work of faith is to keep in mind what has been desired [and] whether anything has been received" (p. 81).

Week 6 (3-9-08): Prayer and Public Worship

According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, there are three means of grace: Q. 88.  
*What are the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?* A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially **the word, sacraments, and prayer**; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

It may sound high-churchy, even Roman Catholic, to say that the word, the sacraments, and prayer are the means that Christ uses to communicate the benefits of salvation to us. But as Protestants we are able to speak this way because we believe that Christ uses the preaching of the gospel, by the power of the Spirit, to create faith in the hearts of the elect (i.e., "effectual calling"), and that he uses the continued preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments to further strengthen our faith and increase our assurance. And since our salvation doesn't just have a beginning but a middle and an

end, covering an entire life of faith from the moment of conversion to the day we die, it is legitimate to say that Christ uses the public ordinances\* as means of grace. We may even say they are means of salvation, as long as we are defining “salvation” holistically to include the entire process that stretches from our initial response of faith to the gospel to our ultimate perseverance in faith to the end.

\*(I refer to the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments as “the public ordinances,” since Christ has entrusted these things to the visible church for the edification of the saints in the context of public worship.)

### (1) Public prayer and the public ordinances

All Reformed churches offer up prayers before and after the preaching of the word asking the Lord to bless his word to the conversion of sinners and the building up of the saints.

Westminster Directory for the Publick Worship of God

James 1:21; 1 Pet 2:1-2

All Reformed churches, probably all churches for that matter, offer up prayers in connection with the administration of the sacraments, praying that he would use the sacraments for our spiritual benefit. This is based on Jesus’ example, who gave thanks over both the bread and the cup.

Such prayers indicate our dependence on the Holy Spirit, apart from whose presence and power the public ordinances would have no effect. We may hear the word preached, but without the illuminating power of the Spirit, it will fall on deaf ears.

WCF X: Of Effectual Calling: “All those whom God has predestinated unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by his almighty power determining them to that which is good; and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace ... Others not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved.”

Mark 4:2-20 – Parable of the Sower and the Seed

2 Thess 2:13-14

We may attend to the administration of the sacraments, but without the Spirit’s presence, the water of baptism and the bread and wine will only be outward signs devoid of the inward reality to which they point. So public prayer has a very important role to play in connection with the public ordinances.

(2) Private prayer and the public ordinances

This is all well and good. But it is possible to be like the Jews, of whom Jesus said that they honor God with their lips but their heart is far from him (Matt 15:8). This is why Jesus taught that the priority must be on private prayer before public prayer (Matt 6:5-6).

How does *private* prayer relate to the *public* ordinances? Perhaps we haven't given much thought to this, but I believe the question is important. My thesis is that there is an important symbiotic relationship between *private* prayer on the one hand and the *public* ordinances on the other. *We are more likely to receive spiritual blessing from the public ordinances when we are cultivating a healthy private prayer life throughout the week.* Of course we invite everyone to come and hear the sermon, and we invite all professing Christians who are members in good standing to eat at the table, even if their private prayer life is in shambles – which is most of us, most of the time! We can still benefit from the public ordinances as long as we come in repentance and faith. Thank God we are invited to come as we are, not as we should be. But I find that the spiritual benefit of attending on the public ordinances is increased if we have been consciously enjoying our relationship with Christ in the context of our private prayer life during the week. This only makes sense, because faith is like a muscle — if we haven't been using the muscle throughout the week, it will be harder (though certainly not impossible) to exercise it at church.

a. Private prayer and the Lord's Supper

One thing that we don't often discuss, but which I think is crucial, is that we enjoy communion with Christ through the Lord's Supper. We are so focused on the debates over the metaphysics of Christ's "real presence" in the Supper, that we forget the obvious: we do have communion with Christ in the Supper, and, by definition, communion involves communication or prayer.

Luke 24:28-35  
Rev 3:20

The risen Lord Jesus says to the church, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with me." We shouldn't just sit passively during the sacrament and wait for lightning to strike. We must "open the door." We must commune with Christ by addressing him privately, in our hearts, not just relying on the minister's prayer of consecration at the beginning. Such prayers can also be in the form of hymns that are addressed to Christ — there are quite a number of such hymns, e.g., "My Jesus, I love Thee." The point is, if we need to pray to Christ during communion in order to enjoy Christ's presence, or at least to enjoy it better, then we need to learn how to pray to Christ during the week in order to prepare us to do so in a heightened way as we receive the sacrament.

b. Private prayer and preaching

Similar considerations apply to preaching. To understand how private prayer helps us benefit from hearing the word preached, we need to understand how private prayer helps us benefit from private, devotional Bible reading. I think it works something like this. When we are reading the Bible devotionally, some particular verse or pericope stands out to us, and we then turn it into prayer. Either we receive a certain comforting promise, which we then thank the Lord for. Or we are reminded of something wonderful about the person and work of Christ, which causes us to offer praise to Christ. Or we are called to some Christian duty or ethical imperative, and we ask the Lord to help us grow in personal holiness and sanctification. With this habit of prayerful reading in place during the week, we can then come to hear the word preached on Sunday and do the same thing. Having the habit in place during the week helps us to do it on Sunday.

(3) The symbiosis of public and private

As we prayerfully attend on the public ordinances and receive the spiritual benefit that the Spirit promises to give us through them, we are then sent forth to our week to continue the symbiotic process. What we gained from the sermon and the Lord's Supper can overflow into Monday and Tuesday as we continue our private prayers to the Lord, seeking to apply what we were reminded of in the sermon, seeking the Lord's grace to fight against our besetting sins, or receiving his guidance as we face important decisions. And the more regularly we are drawing near to God through Christ to receive grace to help in time of need throughout the week, the more we will be spiritually prepared to take advantage of the even greater spiritual blessings promised through the public ordinances during Sunday worship.

(4) Conclusion

Both public prayer and private prayer are critical to increasing the spiritual benefits that God desires us to receive from attending on the public ordinances. And this makes sense in light of my previous lectures where I have argued that prayer is essentially an acting of faith. *Since God promises to bless the public ordinances to our assurance and continued growth in grace only when we attend upon them in faith, it follows that we must attend upon them in prayer.*

WCF XXI:6 "... God is to be worshiped everywhere, in spirit and truth; as, in *private* families daily, and in secret, each one by himself; so, more solemnly in the *public* assemblies, which are not carelessly or willfully to be neglected, or forsaken, when God, by his Word or providence, calleth thereunto."

Calvin, commenting on Matt 6:5-6 (Jesus' emphasis on the priority of secret prayer): "Prayer itself is properly an emotion of the heart within, which is poured out and laid open before God, the searcher of hearts. Accordingly ... the Heavenly Teacher, when he willed to lay down the best rule for prayer, bade us enter into our bedroom and there, with door closed, pray to our Father in secret, that our Father, who is in secret, may hear

us ... By these words, as I understand them, he taught us to seek a retreat that would help us to descend into our heart with our whole thought and enter deeply within ... The Lord himself also, therefore, with good reason, when he determined to devote himself more intensely to prayers, habitually withdrew to a quiet spot far away from the tumult of men ... Finally, we must consider that whoever refuses to pray in the holy assembly of the godly knows not what it is to pray individually, or in a secret spot, or at home. Again, he who neglects to pray alone and in private, however unremittingly he may frequent public assemblies, there contrives only windy prayers, for he defers more to the opinion of men than to the secret judgment of God" (III.xx.29).