

The Way of Jesus

Week 19

The Community of Prayerful Love

Part 2 (pp. 239 – 69)

Matthew 6:9-13

Prayer is the part of an interactive relationship with God in which we can bring our concerns to God and ponder issues God is concerned about. Although prayer involves walking and talking with Abba, we learn from the Lord's Prayer to treasure God's name and ask that the kingdom of the heavens be present everywhere. Daily we need simple provisions as well as copious pity for our offenses. We begin to recognize God as the one who takes away irreparable trials and who walks us through the ones that will make us the person God wants us to become.

Key Terms:

Reigning: To be free and powerful in the creation and governance of what is good (see p. 250). Ponder Rev. 22:5.

Kingdom of the heavens: The phrase "Our Father always near us" (p. 257) presents in a concrete manner the ideas in the study guide key terms, chapters 1 and 3. More explanation about the kingdom of God appears in chapter 7 of *The Divine Conspiracy*, explaining "the range of [God's] effective will." God's "effective will" is the place where what "he prefers is what actually happens" (p. 259). It is the place where God's intentions rule or reign.

Culture: Encompasses "what people do unthinkingly, what is 'natural' to them and therefore requires no explanation or justification." This is important to understand because culture permeates our automatic responses without our thinking about them. These self-focused or condemning attitudes seem normal. "For culture is the place where wickedness takes on group form, just as the flesh, good and right in itself, is the place where individual wickedness dwells" (p. 260).

Reflections on Prayer

As we continue in our study of the Sermon on the Mount, we stay focused on the importance and power of making requests of God. Asking is the essence of prayer because it illustrates the dynamic nature of the relationship we have with the creator of all things.

What we come to learn from Jesus is that we have a wonderful God who wants to hear what we think and how we feel. He is one "who can be *prevailed upon* by those who faithfully stand before him." Not everything in the mind of God is an eternal fixity. "His

nature, identity and overarching purposes are no doubt unchanging. But his intentions with regard to many particular matters that concern individual human beings are not. This does not diminish him. Far from it. He would be a lesser God if he could not change his intentions when he thinks it is appropriate" (p. 246). This truth about God's character reveals the depth of responsiveness as the heart of God, much like a parent to a child. God's desire is that we would have a mutually cooperative relationship in which he listens to us, but in which he also teaches us to rule and reign with him in his kingdom.

Prayer is also a crucial instrument for our own character formation. Through prayer "what God gets out of our lives – and, indeed, what we get out of our lives – is simply the person we become" (p. 250).

This kind of formation of our being becomes fully realized as we learn from Jesus to pray with passion and understanding the grandest prayer of all, the Lord's Prayer. The beauty of Jesus' teaching in this prayer is its profound simplicity. Jesus began with the important recognition of the "nearness of God." Again, his intention was that we understand that the kingdom is not "out there," but "right here," as close as our breath. Jesus then listed five requests. The first two concern God's position in the human realm. He first asked that the name of God be held in high regard, or treasured above all things. Next, he requested that God's rule would be realized in all earthly places where it is not now present.

Jesus understood the practical dilemmas of life as well. The next three requests concern personal needs we all need help with: food and basic sustenance; relational hurt and injury; the trials of life. Understanding the depth of these requests and practicing them help us live a life within the Lord's Prayer.

This community of prayerful love is the fruit of discipleship to Jesus. It is within this kind of life, a life filled with a clear sense of prayer-filled confidence, that we experience the life of God in its truest sense.

Notes:

MEDITATION

Read the final section of chapter 6, "The Enduring Framework of the Praying Life," from *The Divine Conspiracy* (pp. 268-69). Use Willard's insights as your own personal reflection. Then read aloud his paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer (p. 269), pausing after each line, adding your own requests and confessions. Wait in silence for God to speak to you of his sufficiency and power. Use the prayer for several more days, recalling what you learned in *The Divine Conspiracy* and this experience.

Discussion Questions

ON NOT GETTING WHAT WE ASK FOR

1. Jesus could have "fixed" Peter by causing Peter not to deny him, but he didn't. As a result, Peter's failure helped him become "the person he needed to become" (p. 240).

Think of a relative, acquaintance or public figure who is failing. What could you pray for that person that would match what Jesus prayed for Peter in Luke 22:32 ("that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers")?

PRAYER IS BASICALLY REQUEST

2. Which of these ideas about prayer would you like to incorporate more in your prayer life?
 - Prayer flows out of an experientially interactive relationship between God and myself.
 - Praying about what I'm truly interested in.
 - Praying that *my* concerns may coincide with God's concerns.
 - Talking to God about what we are doing *together* (which means I would really be partnering with God somehow in the work of the kingdom).

CAN WE CHANGE GOD?

3. Based on the many things that concern us but that we don't pray about, many of us seem to believe that prayer doesn't and can't really change anything. Why is it difficult for people to believe that God might change his mind to answer their appropriate requests?

PRAYER TRAINS US TO REIGN

4. Suppose you prayed for an end to a family feud. How might the truth of these statements work itself out in such a conflict?
 - "Prayer is a means of forming character."
 - Prayer "combines freedom and power with service and love" (p. 250).

5. Which statement in *The Divine Conspiracy* about waiting was more helpful to you?
- It's not an insult to wait; it's appropriate to stand and wait on God.
 - Waiting occurs because what we ask for involves changes in other people, in ourselves, or in the spiritual realm outside human affairs.
 - It's important to stay with a request.

DOES THIS OFFEND GOD'S DIGNITY?

6. Look at the chart below, which summarizes this section of *The Divine Conspiracy*. Then consider two scenes of sisters praying for an alcoholic brother. The first sister simply pleads. The second sister prays an intricate and eloquent prayer, using the right phrases and carefully presenting herself as one humble enough to deserve to get her prayer answered. Why would the second sister's prayer be degrading, but the first sister's prayer would not?

7. What fallacy is behind the idea that God is degraded or is a less magnificent God if he listens to your request and grants it?

The Grandest Prayer of All

8. What do you think this phrase means: "When we pray we enter the real world, the substance of the kingdom, and our bodies and souls begin to function for the first time as they were created to function"? (p. 254).

GOD MUST BE ADDRESSED

9. When you are worrying out loud, why does it help to stop and formally address God and begin to pray to God? What is the difference between turning to God and worrying out loud? (If you don't worry out loud, why would you guess it would be different?)

OUR FATHER, THE ONE IN THE HEAVENS

10. Of the passages of Scripture and gestures mentioned in *The Divine Conspiracy* (pp. 256-57), choose one of each that would help you in "warming the heart" for prayer.

"HALLOWED" BE THY NAME

11. Why does a disciple of Jesus have such an earnest desire that God's name be treasured and uniquely respected among humanity?

THY KINGDOM COME

12. How might you paraphrase the request "Thy kingdom come," remembering that it flows out of these presuppositions: God's kingdom is always present; other "kingdoms" are in power for a time?
13. If you were to ask God to break up the patterns of evil within your home, your neighborhood streets, your workplace or school, or your favorite place of leisure (a gym, golf course, or shopping mall), what would you guess God might say to you about who you are? About what you do?
14. How might you pray about breaking up the patterns of evil in the "culture"? (Perhaps you'd like to underline key phrases on page 260 of the text to word your prayer.)

GIVE DAILY BREAD DAILY

15. How does the following idea fit – even logically follow – the earlier phrases of the prayer: Ask God for provisions on a daily basis because our trust is in God, not in the provisions?

DON'T PUNISH US FOR THINGS WE DO WRONG

16. What are the subtle ways we make people suffer when we have not forgiven them? (For example, gossiping about them, avoiding them, harboring negative thoughts about them.)
17. When pity becomes the atmosphere in which we live, we understand that
- We live on the basis of others' pity for us (since others have good reason to be upset with us, but they are not)
 - We become willing to show pity to others – not just giving them a break from our condemnation, but having a heart of mercy for them.

Why would this atmosphere of pity give us astonishing clarity and a willingness to "work for the good things all around us"? (p. 265).

DON'T PUT US TO THE TEST

18. We pray, "spare us from bad things that might happen to us," not only because we want to avoid pain, but because we are so humanly frail that we might fail under the pressure. What "bad things" would you like to pray to escape?

19. Praying to escape trails that are too weighty gives us eyes to see
- How God helps us escape trails too great for us
 - How the trails God allows us can be viewed as offerings from the hand of God

In this past week, how has God walked you

- Out of the way of certain trails?
 - Directly through other trials (you may still be walking)?
20. Why would a "false view of God" (p. 267) make it difficult to ask for the items mentioned in the Lord's Prayer?

TRANSFORMATION EXERCISES

Journal Exercise: Make two columns with these headings: "My Concerns" and "God's Concerns." Don't indict yourself if the lists seem different. Just make your lists honestly. Then look at the items that appear only on your list of concerns and ask God, What do you think about these things? Journal about the items that appear only on the "God's Concerns" list and ask God, How am I involved in these issues? How could I be involved? Sit in the quiet for a while and see what comes to you.

Activity: Memorize Willard's paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer on page 269. Recite it throughout your day at various times, remembering that your life is "hidden with Christ in God" and that "in [Jesus] you may have peace" (Col. 3:3; John 16:33).

Journal Exercise: Read Phil. 4:4-9 and then reread page 266 of *The Divine Conspiracy*. Write about how viewing yourself in God's hands and believing that God "has something better in mind for us than freedom from trials" (p. 267) would affect your response to a particular (difficult?) situation in your life.

Readings for Next Week

Celebration of Discipline, chs 6 & 7