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PRAYER - RIGHT AND WRONG WAYS

by

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH



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PRAYER - RIGHT AND WRONG WAYS

Anyone who reads the Bible will be impressed by the amount of space that is given in it to prayer. Exhortations to prayer and examples of prayer abound. Prayer, of course, is not confined to Christianity. It is a very natural and basic activity, and people of every nation and religion believe in prayer and practice prayer. God has made us with a sense of our dependence, and prayer is the expression of this sense of our dependence. Prayer springs from a realisation of our helplessness. A sense of helplessness in itself gets us nowhere, but when we direct our thoughts to God as the source of our strength, our sense of helplessness and dependence turns quite naturally into prayer.

As I have said, the Bible abounds in exhortations and commands to pray and gives many clear examples of answered prayer. If we turn to the life and teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ we will be impressed with how central a place prayer had in His life. He told many parables to his disciples to encourage them to pray and not grow faint-hearted in their prayers. He, Himself, we read rose early a great time before dawn in order that He might be alone for prayer. As He faced crucifixion, He spent the evening before in the Garden of Gethsemane in prayer, in deep agonizing prayer. If our Lord Jesus who had perfect fellowship with God needed and valued prayer, how much more we. He urged us to pray and promised us that our prayers would be answered. This has proved true in experience. Prayer changes things, and we are fools to neglect it. Moreover, prayer glorifies God, for it shows that we believe Him to be a God who can help and will help in our helplessness. But if our prayer is to glorify God and to receive an answer from Him, it must be prayed according to His mind and character. Otherwise, it would not be God Who is being glorified either in the prayer or

in the answer. Though the activity of praying is natural to man, true prayer is only possible by keeping close to the teaching of the Bible for prayer is fellowship with God and fellowship can only exist in the area of truth. We have an example of foolish and false prayer in the story of the prophets of Baal in the time of King Ahab who were praying to their idol all day long, and who cut themselves in their frenzy, thinking that this was what God wanted. Such ignorant prayer does not glorify God, for it is based on a distortion of His character and so cannot be answered, for were it to be answered this distortion would merely be confirmed. So as we exercise and stir up this natural propensity to pray, we must at the same time be most careful to conform our prayers to the teaching of God's Word in the Bible. We must pray within the truth.

Unfortunately the Roman Catholic denomination has neglected to do this in its teaching about prayer, which contains many erroneous, non-biblical features. Firstly, Roman Catholics direct many, if not most of their prayers, not to God but to Christians who have died and who are now in Heaven. They pray to the Saints. Now, of course, it is not at all certain whether such Christians are able to hear the innumerable prayers which are directed to them simultaneously from Roman Catholics around the world. As I say, we do not know whether the Saints in Heaven can hear these prayers. St. Augustine (De Cura pro mort. 13) was of the opinion that they cannot. But more importantly it should be noted that the Bible, though it abounds in instruction on prayer, contains no suggestion that our prayers should be directed to anyone else than to God. Among the many examples of prayer in the Bible, none are directed to the saints. The Bible knows nothing of it. Indeed, our Lord told us to pray in His name, for He is the only mediator between us sinners and the Father; only through Him may we pray to God. Thus praying to the

Saints derogates from the glory of the Father, who is the only fount of blessing and from whom every good gift comes, and it derogates from the glory of the Son, who is the only mediator between God and man. Indeed, praying to the saints turns our attention away from God's graciousness, as though God required to be persuaded by the saints before He would answer our hearts' desires, or give us that protection or help that we are conscious that we need. Thus the practice of praying to the saints falsifies the Bible teaching about God. It not only lacks all support in the Bible, but obscures God's character, and thus is not to His glory nor according to His mind and will. It is not within the area of truth, and so cannot be the basis of fellowship, and this becomes even more obvious when the "saint" to whom the prayer is directed turns out never to have existed as in the case of St. Christopher. Our prayers should be offered to God alone. They will be answered and moreover will create fellowship, more important even than the answer.

There is a second error with regard to the Roman Catholic practice of prayer, Roman Catholics spend a great deal of their prayer time in praying for the dead, that, is, for Christians who have died trusting in Christ. (They do not, of course, pray for those under God's condemnation in hell). But again of this practice of praying for those asleep in Jesus we may say that the Bible knows nothing of it. Neither the Old Testament, which Christ used, nor the New Testament, which His apostles wrote, although they abound in instruction on prayer, have any mention at all of prayers for the dead. Would this have been omitted had God intended us to spend so much of our prayer time in praying for departed believers? Moreover the New Testament clearly teaches that those who die in Christ have no need of our prayers, for they have already received the fullness of the provision of God; for at

death they go to be with Christ Who is seated at God's right hand. Absent from the body, present with the Lord. This is what the Bible says, so that to pray for them as though they lacked something, dishonours God's Word, which teaches that now that they are with Christ, they have entered into God's rest and lack nothing.

Thirdly, it is a stultifying error to channel the natural desire to pray into useless forms, through vain repetition, and this in spite of the fact that Jesus explicitly warned us in Matthew, chapter 6 verse 7, saying "in praying use not vain repetitions, as the Gentiles do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask". An example of this vain repetition is the prayers of the Rosary, which consists of the Lord's Prayer said 15 times, interspersed at regular intervals with a short prayer to the blessed Virgin Mary for deliverance from sin, said 150 times. While these prayers are being said in an automatic sort of way, the mind of the worshipper recalls the various aspects of Christ's life. The use of the rosary is encouraged amongst Roman Catholics by privileges and indulgences and by promises of innumerable blessings. Pope Benedict XIII in 1726 stated that anyone who recited it daily for a year received a plenary indulgence. But apart from the impropriety of praying for deliverance from sin to one of God's creatures, however honoured, and moreover praying to her ten times more frequently than the prayer offered to God in the Lord's Prayer, 150 times to 15, the rosary comes under the clearest condemnation of being vain repetition for the same sentence is repeated 150 times, beads being used to count the number of times. Those who use this sort of prayer turn their natural impulse to pray into profitless channels. God is not honoured by such mechanical, repetitive prayer. He has indeed forbidden it in His Word.

Then again, in the Roman Catholic system, prayer is not simply the response of man to God revealed in His Word; but is turned into a human religious exercise, one among many others. This clearly follows from what Pope Pius VI stated in 1794 (cited in Denzinger 1564). The result is that it is not just the theme of the prayer which matters but the number of prayers as well. The best known example of this is the Rosary Prayer. Moreover, some forms of prayer are said to be more valuable than others. The value placed in the number and forms of prayer follows from the Roman Catholic doctrine of indulgences, according to which the Church determines the exact value of the various prayers, and so turns prayer into a religious work, which must be performed in exact conformity to the required form and number if it is to obtain the benefits of the indulgence. Thus, the emphasis does not fall on the heart of the person praying but on the correct performance of the prayer. Such prayer has ceased to be fellowship with God and has been turned into a meritorious religious work.

But in contrast to all this Christian prayer must strictly conform to what God has told us about prayer in the Bible, so that our Bible reading and our prayer must go hand in hand, one correcting and stimulating the other; because not only are we prone to pray in foolish, God-dishonouring ways, but equally we are tempted to become slack and formal in our prayers to that we fall short of God's purposes of blessing. As St. James, the brother of our Lord, wrote in his Epistle, chapter 4, verse 2, "You have not, because you ask not. You ask, and receive not, because you ask amiss". Here two weaknesses of our prayer life are focussed. We have not because we ask not. Let us stir up our wills to be more diligent in prayer, making time for it, praying for one another, praying for ourselves and our homes, praying for society. "You ask, and receive not, because you ask amiss". Let us see to it that our prayers conform to the

will of God as He has revealed it to us in the Bible; for true prayer changes things. Prayer glorifies God, for it reflects our faith in the truth of His promises and in His willingness and power to answer, and expresses our dependence on Him. We honour God by asking for His help in our helplessness; and in our thanks for the answer received we acknowledge and glorify Him as the source of our blessing. True prayer changes things, it brings blessing, it glorifies God it brings us into fellowship with Him. Therefore, "pray without ceasing."

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