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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 12.10 – The Doctrine of Sanctification

Prayer in the Life of the Christians

As soon as someone becomes a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit in them leads them to talk to God in prayer. The apostle Paul tells us: **“As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father’”** (Romans 8:14-15). “Abba” is the Hebrew child’s way of addressing his earthly father. It is also the way God’s adopted children address their heavenly Father. If we think of God as a cruel monster who wants to punish us, we will not want to pray to Him. But when we realize that in His love for the human race our heavenly Father sent His Son to save the world from its sins (as the Holy Spirit teaches us in His Word), then we are moved to speak to Him in words of praise and to ask Him for His blessings and His gifts. Paul says: **“Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’ Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ”** (Galatians 4:6-7).

Old Testament believers in the coming Messiah also talked to God in prayer. In fact, the book of Psalms is God’s own prayer book; David and others spoke and wrote these prayers as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. Among the last words of David was this statement: **“The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue”** (2 Samuel 23:2). As we read the accounts of Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Samuel, and the rest of the prophets, we find them speaking to God very often, bringing not only their praise and their requests to Him, but also their cries of lament and desperation. These men were emboldened to pray to God based on God’s covenant with them that promised mercy and forgiveness through the Seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15).

Read to Daniel in his prayer recorded in Daniel 9:3-19. Here are some excerpts: **“O Lord, great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and mercy with those who love Him, ... we have done wickedly. ... O Lord, to us belongs shame of face, ... because we have sinned against You. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him. ... We do not present our supplications before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies. O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God.”** Notice the awareness of our unworthiness and our dependence on God’s covenant and His mercy. At the same time Daniel was bold in His asking for great things: forgiveness from God for himself and his people, deliverance from their enemies, and speedy action in keeping with God’s own promises.

Our Lord Jesus, although He was Himself God on earth, prayed as a man to His heavenly Father. His disciples often found Him in solitary prayer. They recorded some of His prayers. They asked Him to teach them how to pray, and He answered their requests by giving them a model prayer (the Lord’s Prayer) as well as by giving them instructions concerning prayer and a strong encouragement to them to talk to God in prayer.

One of the things Jesus repeated to them often was that they should pray to God in His name, that is, in the name of Jesus. In fact, the only reason we can even dare to pray to God is because God sent His Son to remove the sin that separates us from God. We sinners have access to God only through Jesus, our Mediator. **“For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all”** (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

On the evening before His death on Friday, Jesus had much to say about prayer in His name. He assured His disciples: **“Whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it”** (John 14:13-14). **“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you”** (John 15:7). **“Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full”** (John 16:23-24). **“You will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I shall pray the Father for you; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from God”** (John 16:26-27).

Praying in the name of Jesus means that we pray as unworthy sinners, daring to approach God only because Jesus, God’s Son, is our Savior and Lord who has opened the way for us to pray to God by His suffering and death for our sins.

Since there is only one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, those who do not believe in this one God cannot really pray to Him at all. When they pray to a god of their own choosing, their prayers may seem to be as fervent and devout as the prayers of the apostles and prophets of Christ. We have an account of such unbelieving prayers in 1 Kings 18. The true prophet Elijah of the true God proposed to the false prophets of their idol god, Baal: **“I alone am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal’s prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Therefore let them give us two bulls; and let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other bull, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it. Then you call on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD; and the God who answers by fire, He is God”** (1 Kings 18:22-24).

The prophets of Baal made their attempt first. All day long they cried out: **“O Baal, hear us!” “They leaped about the altar which they had made. ... They cried aloud, and cut themselves, as was their custom, with knives and lances, until the blood gushed out on them. ... But there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention”** (1 Kings 18:26-29).

Did God hear these prayers addressed to Baal? Of course He was aware of them, for He knows all things. But He did not hear them in the sense that He regarded them with favor or was moved to make any response. The apostle Paul wrote: **“What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? Rather that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God”** (1 Corinthians 10:19-20). By their prayers to their idols the unbelievers are actually praying to demons (evil spirits, Satan’s angels), and not to the one true God.

Jesus said this about the prayer of unbelievers: **“When you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words”** (Matthew 6:7). On the other hand, Jesus said to His believers: **“Do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him”** (Matthew 6:8). The purpose of prayer is not to inform God of anything, for He knows us and He knows our needs better than we know ourselves.

For this reason, God does not always answer our prayers in the ways we would like or expect. He says: **“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”** (Matthew 7:7-11). Since our Father gives His children only good gifts, even if we ask for bad gifts, we sometimes get something different from what we asked for, but when that happens, we trust that His gifts are better than our requests. That is why John writes: **“If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us”** (1 John 5:14). Even Jesus Himself prayed: **“Not My will, but Yours, be done”** (Luke 22:42). How much more necessary it is for us to ask God to grant our requests only if it is according to His will!

Christian prayer takes many different forms. There is no place where we cannot pray. There is no time when we cannot pray. There is no posture that we cannot use when praying. Whether we use the words of another, as when we pray the Psalms, or whether we formulate our own prayers, whether we speak the words out loud or whether we say them only in our minds, whether we only think thoughts without putting them into words or whether we write out our prayers, God is pleased to hear the prayers of His children.

The Bible gives us many examples of prayers in various circumstances. Daniel, for example, prayed “**in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem**”; he “**knelt down on his knees three times**” a day, “**and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days**” (Daniel 6:10). Jesus told His disciples: “**When you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place**” (Matthew 6:6). Jesus “**fell on His face, and prayed**” in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before His death (Matthew 26:39). “**The tax collector**” in Jesus’ parable “**beat his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner’**” (Luke 18:13).

When the woman of Samaria asked Jesus whether Jerusalem or Mt. Gerizim was the proper place to worship God, Jesus replied: “**The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth**” (John 4:23); they would not concern themselves about a specific place of worship. When Jesus prayed His majestic prayer recorded in John 17, He “**lifted up His eyes to heaven**” (John 17:1). After Jesus ascended to heaven, His disciples often gathered together in one place and prayed to their heavenly Father “**with one accord**” (Acts 1:14; Acts 4:24) Stephen prayed to God as he was being stoned to death (Acts 7:59-60).

Sometimes we do not know what to pray for. The apostle Paul says: “**The Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God**” (Romans 8:26-27). Notice that the Holy Spirit within us is also praying to our heavenly Father, and we can be absolutely sure our Father hears His prayers, “**because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of ‘God’**” (Romans 8:27). The apostle Paul reminds the Thessalonian Christians to “**pray without ceasing**” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). To Timothy he writes: “**I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting**” (1 Timothy 2:8).

There is nothing that Christians cannot bring to God in prayer. Paul says: “**Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God**” (Philippians 4:6). John wrote: “**If we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him**” (1 John 5:15).

As we search the Scriptures, we find Christians praying to God in their troubles, even as God instructs us through Asaph: “**Call upon Me in the day of trouble**” (Psalm 50:15). David prayed: “**O LORD my God, in You I put my trust; save me from all those who persecute me; and deliver me**” (Psalm 7:1). The prophet Jeremiah saw many days of trouble. On one of these days he prayed: “**I called on Your name, O LORD, from the lowest pit. You have heard my voice. Do not hide Your ear from my sighing, from my cry for help**” (Lamentations 3:55-56). During Jesus’ ministry many sick and troubled persons asked Him for help in prayers, like the prayer of Jairus: “**My little daughter lies at the point of death, Come and lay Your hands on her, that she may be healed, and she will live**” (Mark 5:23). The early Christians called on the Lord in their troubles as well, saying, for example: “**Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word**” (Acts 4:29).

But Christians talk to God in prayer also when they are not faced with any special need. The apostle Paul instructed Timothy concerning congregational worship: “**I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence**” (1 Timothy 2:1-2). We pray for ourselves, of course, for our own families, and for our friends, but here we are also told

to intercede for all those in authority over us. In fact, Jesus said: **“Pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you”** (Matthew 5:44). We should pray even for our enemies!

Our fellow-Christians desire our prayers. Ministers of the Gospel desire our prayers. The apostle Paul commands **“praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints – and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel”** (Ephesians 6:18-19). The saints in this verse are our living fellow-Christians.

The Gospel of Luke gives us the account of ten lepers who asked Jesus to help them. **“They lifted up their voices and said, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’”** But after Jesus healed them, only one returned to thank Jesus for this healing. Jesus then said: **“Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?”** (Luke 17:12-19). God is glorified and pleased when we thank and praise Him for what He has done and continues to do for us. Many of the psalms call on us to thank and praise our God. Some examples are: **“Sing praise to the LORD, you saints of His, and give thanks at the remembrance of His holy name”** (Psalm 30:4). **“I will give You thanks in the great assembly; I will praise You among many people”** (Psalm 35:18). **“Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name. For the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations”** (Psalm 100:4-5).

The entire Christian life is a life in which God speaks to us continually in His Word, as it echoes in our minds. And the Christian life is a life in which we are in contact with God in prayer. The apostle Paul encourages us with these words: **“Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God”** (Ephesians 5:18-21).

Questions

1. What is prayer?
2. How should we think of God when we pray to Him?
3. What did David say about the psalms in which he prayed to God?
4. What attitude did Daniel have in his prayers to God?
5. What can we say about Jesus’ prayer life?
6. What does it mean to pray in Jesus’ name?
7. Why did the idol Baal not answer the prayers of his prophets?
8. Why does God not give us some of the things we ask for?
9. What does it mean to pray according to God’s will?
10. List some different postures that are possible when praying to God.
11. Name some times and places when and where Believers prayed to God.
12. For whom should we pray?
13. What did most of the healed lepers fail to do after their healing?
14. Why should we praise the Lord at all times and places?
15. Why can we say the Lord is good even when we are suffering?
16. How do Christians most often pray in your area in the world?
17. How would you encourage the practice of prayer among others?