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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 12.11 – The Doctrine of Sanctification

Wrong Ideas Concerning Prayer

Non-Christians are not the only ones who have wrong ideas concerning prayer. False notions about prayer have entered in also among Christians. One such false notion is the idea that Christians should pray for those who have already died in an effort to help them attain eternal life or to bring some other blessing to them. The Bible contains no examples of prayers for the dead. God has neither commanded us to pray for the dead nor has He promised to hear or answer any prayers for the dead. Such prayers cannot benefit the dead, for their life has been their time for repentance and faith. It is written: **“It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment”** (Hebrews 9:27). Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic Church encourages prayers for the dead, for it teaches that there is a place called purgatory where believers in Christ go after they die, and prayers on their behalf can shorten their stay in purgatory and hasten the day when they can be taken to heaven. But God’s Word says nothing at all about any such place as purgatory. The Bible teaches only two destinies: heaven and hell, and a person’s eternal destiny is determined at his death.

The Holy Spirit teaches us that our prayers should be directed only to God, that is, the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Prayer is a form of worship, and Jesus said in response to Satan’s temptation: **“You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve”** (Luke 4:8). When the apostle John was about to worship a created angel whom God sent to him, the angel replied: **“See that you do not do that! I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!”** (Revelation 19:10). When the apostle Peter was sent to the home of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, the book of Acts says: **“As Peter was coming, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, ‘Stand up; I myself am also a man’”** (Acts 10:25-26).

There are no commands or promises from God with respect to prayers addressed to departed saints, such as Mary or any of the apostles or past heroes of the faith. Yet in the rosary and other official prayers, the Roman Catholic Church claims that Mary should be invoked as a mediator between the sinner and the Savior Jesus Christ. The idea seems to be that it is good to go to Jesus’ mother to ask for her assistance before going to the Son of God Himself. But the apostle Paul told Timothy: **“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). We have full access to God through Christ, and we need no other mediator. **“Having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus ... and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith”** (Hebrews 10:19-22).

We are forbidden to worship any idols or images or pray to any god other than the Triune God. Any worship or prayer to any deity that is not defined or described as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is idolatry. Such idolatry is common among many who claim to be Christians, however, for they are willing to worship and pray to some kind of god together with those who do not believe that Jesus is God, such as Jews, Muslims, and practitioners of various heathen religions. But the apostle John wrote: **“Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either”** (1 John 2:23).

Christians can and should pray to God at all times and in all places, and we should pray for all people as well, for Christians and non-Christians alike, for friends as well as for enemies. But this does not mean we should pray for the success of enemies of the Gospel, for that would be praying for the

success of the devil and his cause, rather than for the success of Christ and His cause. Whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer and say: **"Hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, and Thy will be done,"** we are praying for the overthrow of all false teaching that does not honor God's name, we are praying against the kingdom of Satan and all evil causes, we are praying that Satan's will will not be done.

Our Lord warns us to **"beware of false prophets"** (Matthew 7:15). In following this, the apostle Paul instructs us: **"Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? ... Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you"** (2 Corinthians 6:14-17). Conducting a worship service or praying a prayer together with those who do not share our confession of Christ is putting things together that should be separated.

The apostle Paul also warns us against worship and prayer with those who teach or promote any kind of teaching or practice contrary to His Word: **"I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple"** (Romans 16:17-18).

On the other hand, it is good when confessing Christians pray with and for one another regularly, as we do in our church services. Jesus said: **"If two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them"** (Matthew 18:19-20). The apostle Paul pleaded for the prayers of the Christians in Rome for his ministry: **"I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me"** (Romans 15:30). To the Colossians he wrote: **"Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving, meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ"** (Colossians 4:2-3). Likewise he wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica: **"Brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified"** (2 Thessalonians 3:1).

Through prayer great things are accomplished in the world, both in connection with the preservation of the world and in connection with spiritual matters, for God does indeed answer the prayers of His children. The psalmist Asaph assures us that God answers the prayers of His children when he writes in God's behalf: **"Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me"** (Psalm 50:15). Thousands of believers have learned by experience that God answers their prayers and delivers them from many different kinds of trouble. Many nations and peoples have enjoyed periods of peace and prosperity because of the prayers of God's children. The prophet Jeremiah gave this advice to the Jews who were carried off as captives to Babylon: **"Seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace"** (Jeremiah 29:7).

One of the strongest encouragements to pray comes from Jesus' own younger brother James, who gives us this assurance: **"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit"** (James 5:13-18).

No doubt the greatest sin in connection with prayer is our failure to pray. Or perhaps it is our tendency to pray for selfish goals rather than for wanting God's will to be done above all else. James also wrote: **"You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures"** (James 4:2-3). Another fault in connection with prayer is that we don't believe that God will really hear and answer our prayers. James has this to say about that: **"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways"** (James 1:5-8).

Since we tend to focus our attention on physical problems and on earthly needs, we need to follow the example of the apostle Paul, who prayed especially for the spiritual needs of the congregation in Colosse, a congregation he had never visited personally. Notice the focus of his prayer: **"We ... do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God, strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light"** (Colossians 1:9-12).

There are some Christian churches that consider prayer to be a means of grace. But a genuine means of grace is something God does to give us the forgiveness of sins and to strengthen our faith in Christ. God's Word and Sacraments are His means of grace. Our prayers are a response on our part to His means of grace. Our prayers need to be accompanied by the faithful use of the means of grace. God's talking to us precedes our talking to Him. It is always a mistake to pray about something without at the same time considering what God has to say about it in His Word. Some Christians urge unbelievers to pray a prayer to be saved, but it is impossible for an unbeliever to pray to God and ask Him for faith. God must first bring us to faith in Christ through the means of grace before we can pray to Him. As soon as there is the tiniest spark of faith in Christ, however, the new believer will ask God to strengthen his faith. Notice what the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: **"How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?"** (Romans 10:14).

Saying the words of a prayer without meaning them is a wrong use of prayer. This is the kind of worship that the Old Testament prophets Amos and Isaiah condemned. Amos wrote: **"I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments"** (Amos 5:21-23). Why did God despise their offerings and prayers? They were not sincere, and their actions proved it. Amos therefore adds: **"But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream"** (Amos 5:24).

Isaiah spoke similarly: **"When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood"** (Isaiah 1:15). Jesus quoted the following words of Isaiah against the Pharisees, who were among the hypocrites of His time: **"These people draw near with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me"** (Isaiah 29:13).

Being able to talk to God in Jesus' name is a great privilege. It is possible only because Jesus has taken away the sin that separated us from God. **"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand"** (Romans 5:1-2). Our God wants His children to use this access that Jesus has won for us. Let us pray.

Questions

1. What should we not pray for people who have died?
2. Why should we direct our prayers only to the Triune God?
3. Why should we not consider Mary to be a mediator between Jesus and ourselves?
4. What does the Bible say about praying together with unbelievers?
5. What does the Bible say about praying with those who promote false teaching?
6. With whom should we pray?
7. For whom should we pray?
8. Against whom are we praying when we pray for God's name and kingdom?
9. Give some examples of prayers that were answered in the Bible.
10. If you can, give examples of your prayers that have been answered.
11. List several sins that one may commit in connection with prayer.
12. Why is prayer to God not a true means of grace?
13. Why did God not answer some prayers in the days of Amos and Isaiah?
14. What is meant by free access to God?
15. How should we use this access to God?
16. What things need to be corrected in your prayer life?