

WHEN PRAYER BECOMES PERSONAL

by Ray C. Stedman

On the subject of prayer the words of Jesus himself are of first and paramount interest to us. These meditations on his words are not, strictly speaking, a lecture series on prayer, but I do not think it would be out of line to review what we have learned about this great theme.

We began in Luke 18 with the parable of *The Importunate Widow* that persistent woman who found a way to handle reluctant judges who discovered the key to release the power she needed. Luke gathers up the whole point of that parable in his introductory statement when he said Jesus gave this that men might learn they must either pray or faint one or the other. Prayer is an absolute imperative in the Christian experience for it is the only channel man has to the power of God. James reflects this when in his blunt way he says "You have not because you ask not," {Jas 4:2b RSV}. If we do not ask we will never receive, so the first and most important lesson is that prayer is essential; prayer is a necessity.

From there we went on to the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, *The Parable of the Two Prayers* -- "Two men went up into the temple to pray." Here we learned something of the nature of prayer. Prayer is not a parade of our accomplishments before God with what we are, nor is it an attempt to bring pressure upon him to constrain him to move in order to fulfill his debt to us because of what we have done for him. But, as we saw in the prayer of the publican, prayer is ever and only the cry of a helpless child in need to a wholly adequate, willing, and eager father. Prayer is an awareness of need in our own life or in the life of someone else for whom we are praying.

Then in Luke 11 we examined our Lord's own practice in this matter of prayer and the attitude of continual expectation that marked his perpetual prayer, plus, of course, extended deliberate periods of prayer. So impressive was this that his disciples, watching him pray, saw that here lay the secret of his amazing power and wisdom. At the close of the prayer, one of them said to him "Lord teach us to pray."

Then we listened to our Lord's words on how to pray, beginning with *The Model Prayer*. We considered the first three petitions of this prayer indicating that prayer begins with a concept of God: his fatherhood, his hallowed, unsullied name, his right of Kingship over every area of our lives, and over every human heart. Prayer begins with a yearning to satisfy God's heart and to realize his purposes in human life.

Now we come to the part of prayer that directly concerns us, this last section of our Lord's model prayer which takes in the whole experience of life:

"Give us each day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins as we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; and lead us not into temptation." {Luke 11:3-4 RSV}

You will notice that this is a prayer for the whole of man: body soul and spirit. With magnificent accuracy he puts his finger squarely on the area of paramount need in each of these areas so that if we understand this prayer properly, and pray it as it should be prayed, there is really nothing further to be said. This magnificent prayer covers every aspect of life.

This is one of the amazing things about the Bible -- how the writers of Scripture were able to reduce to the simplest terms some of these mighty themes of life, stating them in just a word or two, so that we can grasp what they mean. As we will see, however, this prayer is not intended to be merely repeated over and over in some mechanical rote-fashion like a Christianized prayer-wheel; though, unfortunately, it has become that in some circles. This prayer is intended to become a guide to prayer. Each of these areas is capable of infinite expansion as to detail, but, in principle, this is a completely adequate prayer. Nothing more needs to be said if we have genuinely prayed as our Lord indicates. There is no essential area of life neglected. God's interest and love for man touches the whole of our lives every single area. That is why Paul says "Pray about everything."

And do not forget," he adds, "to thank him for the answers," {cf, 1 Th 5:18}.

Jesus begins this section of the prayer with the needs of the body. I like that! I find that we have such distorted concepts of prayer that we often feel there is something wrong with praying about physical needs. I am afraid this is a reflection of a pagan concept of life. The Greeks regarded the body as coarse and unworthy of redemption and they therefore mistreated it. They beat their bodies tortured and tormented them. You find this philosophy widespread in the Orient today, this idea that the body must be subdued by physical torment or suffering, but you never find this in the New Testament nor in true Christian faith. Oh, I know there is that verse in Philippians which in the King James' Version speaks of looking for "the coming of the Lord Jesus who shall change our vile body" {Phil 3:21}, but all you can say about that is that it is a very vile translation! The word does not mean *vile* at all, it means "a body of lowliness, of humiliation" that is not yet glorified. It has not yet entered into the ultimate state that God has designed for it. But Paul is not saying there is anything wrong with the body.

It is important that we see that prayer must quite properly begin on this level. God likes bodies. That may startle you, but it is true. God engineered and designed them, and he likes them. It is perfectly proper then that we pray about the need of the body. Bread here is a symbol of all the necessities of physical life. It includes more than mere bread; it stands for all that our physical life demands -- shelter, drink, clothing -- anything that the body requires. The vital concern in this area is that there be available to us an immediate unbroken supply. So this prayer moves right at the issue when it says "Give us this day each day our daily bread." The only limit in this prayer is that we are never to pray for a warehouse a full supply for a year ahead. There are no giant economy packages available to us in this are of life. We are to pray for one day's supply.

Now I would like to put this simply to your own heart as I have asked my own this week. Do you pray daily for your physical needs? I wonder if any really do this. Do we pray about the supply of our food, clothing, shelter, and all the physical necessities of life? Do we take time to ask God for them or at least to give thanks for them? Perhaps this has become such a familiar request in the repeating of *The Lord's Prayer* that it has lost any real meaning to us, and we do not take it seriously. It may therefore be that this is the most flagrant and frequent area of Christian disobedience. For, after all, our Lord meant it when he told us to pray "give us each day our daily bread."

"Oh," you say, "I say grace before every meal." Yes, so do I, but unfortunately I find that it is often so perfunctory so mechanical it really sounds like a sanctimonious way of saying "Let's eat." When I was in high school in Montana we had a neighbor who was a self-confessed atheist, a godless fellow, but with a very engaging personality. We boys often went out to his place because he was a very generous man and let us do many interesting things on his ranch, but he had no use for the gospel or for Christian things. At meal time he engaged in a form of ribald mockery in this matter of giving thanks. I think he did it to shock us. But he would sit down to the table and before anyone could start to eat he would say "Now we are going to say grace," and he would fold his hands and say,

"Pass the bread and pass the meat,
Pitch in, you gol-darn fools, and eat."

Of course he intended it as mockery, but I wonder if our own graces, repeated perfunctorily, mechanically, are not equally as blasphemous? I do not wish to be negative at this point, but I am sure that there must have been some good reason why the Lord told us to pray this way.

I know there are many who are ready to argue that Jesus said elsewhere, "Your Father knows that you have need of these things even before you pray" {cf, Matt 6:8}, so it is not in order to inform God of our needs. And there are others who say it really makes little difference, whether they pray about physical things or not. They get the necessities of life regardless. Furthermore, some say there are many people who never bother to pray at all and who are eating steak and ice cream while we Christians are trying to get along on hamburgers and jello. What is the point, then, of praying?

The answer to that question really touches the central value of prayer. It is very illuminating. Obviously, prayer is not something by which we inform God of our needs or influence him. But prayer is designed to influence

us. It is we who are in need of this kind of prayer, not God. Of course, he knows what we have need of, for he knows everything about us. But prayer is something we need. God does not need to be told, but we need to tell him, that is the point.

If you want to see why, ask yourself the question, "What happens to me when I neglect this area of prayer?" If you are honest and look at your life over an extended period of time, you will see that, inevitably, a slow and subtle change occurs in the heart of a Christian who does not pray about material things, who does not take time to thank God for his daily supply of food, shelter and raiment -- the necessities and the luxuries of life.

What happens is that we take these things for granted, and gradually we succumb to the quite foolish delusion that we actually can provide these necessities ourselves. We become possessed with the incredible vanity that our wisdom and our abilities have really made these things possible, that we can supply these things quite apart from God. And when we begin to think that way, we find pride swells within us and a kind of blindness settles upon us, a blindness which darkens our spiritual insight, and we become moody, restless and depressed.

The book of Daniel vividly describes this type of thinking in the story of Nebuchadnezzar, that proud monarch of Babylon, the greatest king of the greatest nation of his age. He walked out in the evening hours upon the battlements of his palace in the city of Babylon, looked out over the city, and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have made? My wisdom has built this, my ability has brought it to pass," {Dan 4:30}. He revelled in what he thought were his powers, inherent in himself, by which all this came to pass. As a result of that defiant assumption of basic powers of supply in his life, God brought upon him the judgment of bestiality. He became a beast, and was turned out to grass, to eat in the fields like an animal, which is simply God's dramatic way of saying that ingratitude causes men to become animal-like, to become beasts, with all the ferocity and self-centeredness of a beast growling over his food.

I remember Dr. Ironside telling of an occasion when, as a young man, he went into a cafeteria to eat. When he took his tray and looked around for some place to sit down he found that all the seats in the room were taken except for one chair opposite a man already seated at a table. Ironside went over and asked if he might sit down and the man looked up and grunted something. So Ironside sat down, and, as his custom was, bowed his head and began silently to give thanks for his food before he began to eat. When he looked up he saw the man was eyeing him, almost glowering, and the fellow said to him, "What's the matter, anything wrong with your food?" Ironside said, "No, I don't think so. It seems all right to me." "Well," he said, "have you got a headache or something?" And Ironside said, "No, I haven't. Why do you ask?" "Well," he said, "I noticed you bowing down, and putting your hand up to your head, and closing your eyes. I thought there was something wrong with your head." The tone of voice he was using indicated he wanted to make an issue out of this, but Ironside said to him, "Well, I was simply returning thanks to God for my food." The man snorted, and said, "Oh, you believe in that bosh, do you?" And Ironside said, "Don't you ever give thanks?" He said, "No, I don't. I don't believe in giving thanks for anything. I just start right in." And Ironside said, "Oh, you're just like my dog. He never gives thanks, either, he just starts right in."

After all, it is we who need to give thanks to God, it is we who must always be reminding ourselves that everything we have comes from his hand, and that any moment he can turn it off if for any reason he may choose, that it is only his grace and his goodness that keep it flowing unhindered to us. The only way, therefore, that we can avoid this terrible sin of ingratitude, which the book of Proverbs calls "the sin that is sharper than a serpent's tooth," is to pray daily. Remember that,

Back of the bread is the snowy flour,
And back of the flour, the mill,
And back of the mill is the field of wheat,
The rain, and the Father's will."

The second request of this prayer moves in the area of human relationships, our conscious life, our emotion, intellect, and will; in other words, the soul or man. Immediately our Lord touches upon the central thing in this area of life -- forgiveness.

"Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us;" {Luke 11:4a RSV}

Here is the need for a cleansed conscience, for a sense of peace, of rest with God and man. That is the central thing in this area of life. This is the arena where the emotional clutter of our life takes a very deadly toll. Who of us has not experienced something of the painful results of imagined illnesses? Not that they are really imaginary; for they are physical symptoms that come from a disarrangement in our emotional life. They are heart palpitations, flutterings, shortness of breath, skin rashes, throbbing migraine headaches that seem to split the skull, stammering, stuttering, nervous compulsions, and a whole host of vague, undefined reactions that we call by invented names, as the "flim-flams," the "heebie-jeebies," and the "squizzels," and the "gruts." I have not even mentioned yet the really troublesome mental symptoms, the morbid depressions, unreasoning fears and insecurity, the lapses, the psychic shock that can be ours. Where do all these grinning demons arise from? Both Scripture and modern psychology, in its groping after truth, agree that underneath these symptoms lurk two frightening monsters: Fear and Guilt. If we can find a way to slay these fiery dragons, the whole emotional atmosphere of our life will pass into peace. And in this simple prayer that Jesus gives we find a mighty sword.

When we pray, "Forgive us our sins," we are asking for the reality that God promises to every believer in Jesus Christ, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus," {Rom 8:1a KJV}. I do not know anything that troubles Christians more than a sense of guilt. Guilt is the most frequent problem behind the distressing ailments evident in many a Christian's experience. But in this simple prayer is a fully adequate answer, for if we have laid hold of the forgiveness of God, we know there is nothing any longer between us and the Lord. Our hearts there are absolutely free before him and the result is a pervading sense of peace. A wonderful sense of rest grips our life.

But notice, now, Jesus immediately adds a limitation to this. In the realm of the physical, we could pray only about this day's needs, so here we cannot say to God, "Forgive us our sins," unless we are willing and have said to others that they are forgiven for their trespasses against us. I do not think there needs to be any confusion at this point. Jesus is certainly not referring here to that divine forgiveness that accompanies conversion. *The Lord's Prayer* is meant for Christians -- for only Christians can really pray it intelligently. No non-Christian ever receives forgiveness from God on the basis claiming to forgive everyone else. It is simply impossible for him to forgive until he himself has first received the forgiveness of God, and that forgiveness is offered on the basis of the death of Jesus. Paul says, "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace," {Eph 1:7 KJV}. Grace, that is all. We come thanking him for what the death on the cross has already done in taking away the awful burden of our sin.

But, if we have received that forgiveness, then we will never receive forgiveness for the defilements of our Christian walk unless we are ready to extend that same forgiveness to those who offend us. That is what he is saying here. This forgiveness keeps us enjoying unbroken fellowship with the Father and with the Son, which is, of course, the secret of emotional quietness and rest. Jesus is simply saying that, if you are a Christian, then there is no use praying "Father, forgive my sins" if you are holding a grudge against someone else, or burning with resentment, or filled with bitterness, eating your heart out over some real or fancied slight that has come to you. What he says is, first, "First be reconciled with your brother, then come and offer your gift at the altar," {Matt 5:24b RSV}. Forgive him, and then the healing forgiveness of God will flood your own heart and you will find there is nothing then that can destroy the God-given peace down at the very center of you being. If we refuse to forgive someone else we are really withholding from another the grace that has already been shown to us. It is only because we have already been forgiven the great and staggering debt of our own sins that we can ever find the grace to forgive the relatively paltry slights someone else has heaped upon us.

A man once said to me, "I know that I am a Christian, but so-and-so did this thing to me and I can't forget and I can't forgive him." I said to him, "Are you sure that you can't forgive him?" He said, "No. I can't. I have really tried to forgive this man but it keeps coming back and I simply can't forgive him." I said, "You know, I have discovered that we oftentimes use the word *can't* when what we really mean is *won't*. Is it not possible that what you are saying is not 'I can't forgive him,' but 'I won't forgive him,' because, if it is really true that you cannot forgive this man, then it indicates that you yourself have never been forgiven, that you are only

kidding yourself about being a Christian." This shook him a bit. He thought it through, and then, with rather a sheepish grin he said, "Well, I guess you are right. I guess it is *won't*." It was not long before there was a real forgiveness extended to the man who had injured him. If we take these words seriously, what a revolution this will make in our lives, in our homes, and in our churches, for we will never discover what God means in terms of the sweetness of forgiving grace moving out in our own life and heart if we are not willing to melt the black frost of years that has withered other relationships of our life. When we are ready to forgive others, then he says this great grace is ours as well.

The third area of prayer is in the realm of the spirit, "Lead us not into temptation." Again, the vital thing is touched. In the unseen war of the spirit, the greatest needs of our life are deliverance and protection. But an immediate problem arises here, for Scripture reveals that temptation is necessary to us and no one escapes it in the Christian life. Furthermore, though God himself never tempts us to sin, yet he does test us with difficult and discouraging circumstances and these things become the instruments of God to strengthen us, to build us up and thus to give us victory. When we read this prayer, then we are confronted with this question: "Are we really expected to pray that God will not do what he must do to accomplish his work within us?" After all, even Jesus, we are told, was led of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. What then does he mean, "lead us not into temptation"?

I confess I have puzzled and prayed and read about this, and I am convinced that what he means here is that this is a prayer to be kept from unrecognized temptation. When temptation is recognized as such, it can be resisted, and when we resist, it is always a source of strength and growth in our life. If I am filling out my income tax and I find that some income has come to me through other than ordinary channels and there is no way of anyone checking it, I am confronted with a temptation to omit it, but I know it is wrong. No one has to tell me; I know it is wrong. When I resist that, I find I am stronger the next time when a larger amount is involved. You see, when we recognize lust as lust and hate as hate and cowardice as a temptation to be a coward, this is one thing. It is a rather simple matter to resist obvious evil, if we really mean to walk with God. But temptation is not always so simple. There are times when I think I am right, and with utmost sincerity and integrity of heart I do what I believe is the right thing, and, later, look back upon it and see that I was tragically and horribly wrong. Now that is what he is talking about here.

Peter is an example on this. In the Upper Room, with brashness and confidence and utter naivete, Peter said to the Lord, "Though others forsake you, I will never forsake you," {cf, Matt 26:33}. They walked out of the Upper Room with the words of our Lord ringing in his ears, "Peter, before this night is over, before the cock crows in the morning you will have denied me three times," {cf, Matt 26:34}. Still confident, Peter went into the Garden of Gethsemane, and when the soldiers came he had a sword ready, and struck off the ear of the High Priest's servant in his eagerness to show his faithfulness to the Lord. Jesus had said to him there in the Garden, "Peter, watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation," {cf, Matt 25:41}. But Peter did not heed that word. Instead he slept, and our Lord came and woke him again and asked him to pray, not for the Lord, but for himself, Peter. But Peter did not pray, and when he came into the court of the High Priest and was standing before the fire, Satan took him and wrung his courage out like a dish rag and hung him up limp, to dry in the presence of a little girl. There, with cursing and swearing, he found himself trapped, and denied his Lord, and in the awful realization of what he had done he went out into the blackness of the night and wept bitterly.

This is what our Lord refers to in this phrase. This prayer is the recognition of our foolish weakness and our tendency to stumble on into blind folly. It is what we desperately need to pray. This month, in the current issue of *World Vision* magazine, is a story out of the life of Hudson Taylor, that intrepid missionary to the inland of China. When he was but a young man, earnestly trying to do the will of God in China, he journeyed from Swatow, in the south of China, up to the great city of Shanghai, intending to get his medical instruments and his medicines and then take the ship back down to the city of Swatow where he expected to labor with a Scottish missionary who had formerly been his companion there. When he got to Shanghai he discovered, to his tremendous disappointment and chagrin, that the building in which he had left all his medical supplies and instruments had been burned to the ground and everything was destroyed. He was vexed and puzzled by it and he sat down to think of what he could do.

He had hardly any money but he decided to beat his way down the network of canals to the city of Ningpo

where he could buy some supplies from another missionary, and then take a boat back to Swatow. It was a terribly hot summer and in the awful heat of those days he worked his way down the canal preaching as he went, often journeying by foot many long, weary miles with the little, tight Chinese shoes upon his feet. When he came to the end of the canals he had to engage coolies to carry his baggage and everything went wrong. He engaged one group of coolies and started out ahead of them and had to wait through a long, hot afternoon for them to catch up and when they finally arrived he found they were all opium-smokers and really unable to bear the burden. So he dismissed them and leaving the chief coolie to hire another group, he started out in advance, and this time he never saw the coolies or his baggage again. All he heard was some rumors that they had taken the baggage and headed for the hills. He was completely discouraged. He hardly knew what to do. He went into an inn to try to get some sleep and found it a rat-infested, bedbug-ridden place where he spent a miserable night.

The next morning he decided to press on to the coast and after a long, terribly discouraging march through the sun, he entered a city to find some place to sleep. He was turned out of several inns because he was a foreigner. Then the police began to shadow him and he did not know where to turn. Finally a young man offered to help him. He led him around through the city until one o'clock in the morning and then abandoned him. He had to spend the rest of the night on the steps of a temple with three thieves lurking in the shadows, waiting for him to fall asleep so they could murder him and take his effects. He kept himself awake all night long, singing songs and repeating Bible verses to himself, until, finally, they gave up in disgust and left, and he managed to catch a few moments' sleep. In the morning, the young man who had taken him through the city streets came back and demanded that he pay him a tremendous amount for his "guide service." This was too much. Hudson Taylor lost his temper, grabbed the fellow by the arm and shook him and told him to shut up and sent him away. Weary, broken, and dispirited, he started the long, painful journey back to Shanghai with his feet blistered and weary, and for eight long miles he dragged himself along in spiritual rebellion, wondering why God had abandoned him in this way.

Then suddenly it broke upon him that what had happened was that he had, in effect, denied his Lord. All his anger and pain melted into tears of repentance as the truth broke through to him that he had never asked God's guidance and protection along the way. He had been so intent upon his own trouble, that he had forgotten to commit the matter to the Lord. He relates in his journal that, as he went along, he confessed the whole thing, and asked the Lord to forgive him, and there came flooding into his heart a glorious sense of the presence and the forgiveness of Christ. The initiative and control passed once again from Hudson Taylor to the Lord, where it belonged. This was what God was after. When he got to Shanghai he found a letter waiting for him with a check in it for the exact amount to cover his loss. And he learned soon that if he had gone on to Swatow he would have arrived just in time to have been imprisoned and perhaps executed. All the fretful worry, gnawing fear, the despair and the perplexity that he experienced was totally unnecessary. The events might have been the same, regardless of whether he prayed or not, but the emotions he experienced would have been far different if he had prayed, "Lord, lead me not into temptation."

All three of these requests reflect the one great truth that Jesus labors to impress upon us, that we are forever in need -- body, soul, and spirit. Only as we walk, step by step, in a continual sense of dependence upon a living God can any of this need ever be adequately met. When we fail to pray this simple, childlike prayer out of our hearts, expressing it in whatever words we choose, we are simply exposing ourselves to unnecessary disturbance, upset and failure.

Prayer

Our Father, this morning we can but echo these words our Lord Jesus taught us. Give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our sins, lead us not into temptation. In Christ's name, Amen.

Title: When Prayer becomes Personal
Series: Studies in Prayer from the New Testament
Scripture: Luke 11:3-4
Message No: 5

Catalog No: 60
Date: March 15, 1964

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