

Prayer in Focus II
Matthew 6:7-15

Introduction:

Keeping the main thing the main thing in any organization is simultaneously the most important and the hardest thing to do. In athletics, the most important thing and the hardest thing is to remain committed to the fundamentals. In any business culture, the most important thing and the hardest thing is to remain focused on your core business values that fuel profitability. In the church, the most important thing and the hardest thing to remain focused upon is our God-centeredness.

God is the first priority of the church. Not people. Not ministry. Not growth. Not success. God and God alone occupies the place of ultimate and absolute priority in the church...From our preaching, our writing, and our lifestyle, it would appear that today's church is preoccupied with other matters. ...The great need of the church today is neither to cling to old or to create the new forms and formats. Our greatest need today is to recover the priority of God in our worship and in the whole of life.

Bruce H. Leafblad (Worship 101: Recovering the Priority of God)

The Lord's Prayer reminds us that **prayer is God-centered.**

We start with who He is so that we can understand who we are.

So often we think about God's role in our lives like going to the doctor or the dentist. We have our annual checkups and regular cleanings. Worship is one of the duties of my week. Once accomplished, I can put it behind me. Effectively, we put God in our rear view mirrors. God is just "one other thing" about the bigger thing, which is "my life".

However, a God-centered life means that God remains on the horizon of my life, always in focus. Worship is not something I put behind me; it is what orients me to everything else in my week. When we are finished with worship, our need for God is not over for the week. Rather it is enflamed and ignited so that I see everything else in my life in orbit around God and his purposes.

When this happens in our lives, not only are we zealous to pray for God and his Kingdom but our God-centeredness also rightly related us to our concerns.

Because we start with who He is, we can understand who we are. In other words, our God-centeredness gives us the Right Perspective on Our Concerns.

God's priorities do not mean that he has forgotten about us. Just because God is concerned with himself first, does not mean that he has left us in the dust. Focus in our prayer means that we come to God with the concerns that only God can really address. In essence we come to God not as a child does to Santa Claus, to manipulate the system. Rather, we come as a son to his father, asking him to address the concerns that he alone has the resources to manage: our provision, our pardon and our protection. Our God-centeredness means that we look for answers that are rooted in him and not ourselves.

1) Need Provision, not Our Prospects

Therefore, when we come to our needs the focus is not upon my wants, but upon his provision. Yes; God encourages us lay our requests before Him. God is He who gives to us everything we need in terms of material necessities for the carrying out of our Kingdom duties.

It seems right to understand that Jesus is not just speaking of food here, but every material need we might have. Jesus longs for us to bring before him our legitimate material needs. We are not less spiritual for doing so. We are simply acknowledging that every good and perfect gift comes down from God our father. In prayer we come seeking his bountiful supply of good gifts.

But there are two important things for us to remember:

- It is daily provision, not endless prospects. Provision for the day means we recognize that God is chief actor in our life and not we ourselves. Asking God for provision means that I am always conscious of my position of dependence. I am not to relate to this material world in terms of "wants." My "wants" lead me down a dangerous path. The worst thing that can happen to us in America is for us to get "what we want."

"America is in conspicuous need of unselfing." Eugene Peterson

“...give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, ⁹ lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the LORD?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.” Proverbs 30:8-9

- This also means that our provision is to be managed according to God's Kingdom priorities. We are not to pursue our plans, without a view towards God's priorities. If we have abundant provision, then God intends for us to address the needs of others. Our goal is not simply to expand our prospects for advancement (c.f. ¹³ I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴ your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness” 2 Corinthians 8:13-14).

2) Need Pardon, not Power

“A person has to get fed up with the ways of the world before he acquires an appetite for the world of grace” (Eugene Peterson). In other words, it is not enough to know something of our need. Sometimes our “needs” are part of the problem. Therefore, God-centered prayer moves from an awareness of our needs to dealing with our condition. True prayer is never far from contemplating our condition of sin. Our need is not only for stuff it is for pardon. True prayer puts us on the path of grace as we look for pardon.

As a result, our need for pardon means that prayer always will bring us to weakness not a feeling of strength.

➤ For Our Sins

“That evening, when I was at my lowest, confounded by obstacles, bewildered by the darkness that surrounded us, unable even to continue preaching, I discovered an astonishing truth: God is attracted to weakness. He can't resist those who humbly and honestly admit how desperately they need him. Our weakness makes room for his power” (Jim Cymbala).

That is the key. The power of God is always manifest in the pardon of our transgression. To us it never feels like power; it always feels like weakness. Today, we focus a lot on power in our prayers. Yet prayers are the actions of the impotent. It is an expression of weakness. As Christians, if we are to be effective in our prayers we have got to get a whole lot more comfortable with weakness.

That means a few things:

- ✓ Confession of sins and brokenness
- ✓ Distancing from fleshly confidences

➤ For Others' Sins

The focus here is not on getting others to confess, but in giving to others forgiveness. The Gospel upends our self-righteous categories and requires us to give grace to others rather than expect it from others. The reason is because this is the character of our Father who has bestowed upon us mountains of forgiveness before we had ever moved toward him.

Prayer in the context of alienation and separation is a contradiction. C.f. 1 Peter 3:7 “Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so *that your prayers may not be hindered.*”

- ✓ How many of us have hindered prayer lives because we have relationships that are estranged?
- ✓ Are you ready to give grace regardless of where it is given back?

The Church is the place where we hang in there with each other as we give grace to awkward and difficult people. The Church is the place where we refuse to give up on each other precisely because God has not given up on us.

3) Need Protection, not Passions

Listening and pondering God's Kingdom values—loving the poor, dealing ruthlessly with sin, sacrificing personal wealth or personal time, etc.—forces me to confront my sinful desires. *Protecting prayer* is the response to a true encounter with Jesus

and what he says is most important. If am a servant of the Kingdom, I cannot help but be engaged in a struggle with the lusts and evil of this world.

- When we pray *lead us not into temptation*, we are not praying for God to spare us from trials or testings. The Holy Spirit clearly uses both trials and tests to further our spiritual maturity (C.f. James 1:2-4). Rather we are asking the Lord to protect us from succumbing to temptation's snare. *Lead us not into temptation* is what is called a "litotes," which is a figure of speech that expresses something by negating the contrary. In other words, Jesus instructs us to pray, "Lead us, *not into temptation...*" God protect us temptation as you lead us in our lives. We know to be true from other passages of Scripture. God promises to never let us be tempted beyond what we are able to resist and also for which he will give us a way of escape (1 Cor. 10:13).
- When we pray *deliver us from evil*, we are more particularly thinking about The One who is behind such temptation. This aspect of the prayer reminds us that evil is not only circumstantial, but personal. Satan sets his designs upon us and we are called to pray for deliverance from his devices. Paul reminds us that our battle is not with flesh and blood, "but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

Application: What are the ongoing struggles of your life? I'm not talking about those things to which you need forgiveness. I'm talking about those things for which you need help too!

- What are those idolatries near to the heart?
 - ✓ Anger and misuse of the tongue
 - ✓ Lust and free reign to our appetites
 - ✓ Ambition and the kingdom of self
 - ✓ Despair and sense of being overwhelmed
 - ✓ Worldliness
 - ✓ Gentleness/Gratefulness
 - ✓ Self-righteousness
- Have you come to the place honesty? God-centered prayer is a stretch towards honest assessment of where you are!

Conclusion:

What about a regular prayer time?
How long should I pray?
When should I pray?

We all want methods and systems and formulas. Jesus gives us a model. But his model doesn't focus on a method, but a perspective:

We start with who He is so we can understand who we are.

Our God-centeredness gives us the Right Perspective on Our Concerns

Prayer is about God—his name, his fame and his mission.

Prayer is about us—our needs, our condition and our protection.