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Most books on prayer, the Bible excluded, give plenty of advice about how, when and where to pray. The Bible's lack of detail on the matter is revealing, but perhaps rather frustrating for 20th Century would-be pray-ers. We are rather interested in details and are keen to listen to anyone who has a new theory or technique which we think might boost our flagging spirits.

Is there anything in the Scriptures about how we pray? There is, but perhaps not what we might expect. The Scriptures teach us to pray:

### Humbly

As we have said in an earlier article, the main reasons we don't pray are Satan and sin—an enemy without and a traitor within. Real prayer (as opposed to showing off for others or conning ourselves) is portrayed in the Bible as part of our spiritual battle (as in Ephesians 6:10-20). And in this battle, the position God wants us to adopt is not sitting, standing or kneeling, but humility. We are wrestling against the spiritual powers of the universe and we are weighed down in the fight by our own sin. We are all sinners. We know it only too well. However, it is remarkable how often we minimize the scope of the problem. We trivialize it, or rationalize it, or ignore it, or make excuses for it, or comfort ourselves by looking at other more blatant offenders. Long-time Christians find it easy to go through the motions of Christian living, avoiding heinous sins, but gradually becoming blind to the deep-seated corruption and selfishness that is at the centre of our being. We need to keep hearing the Bible's reminder:

“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”

(Jeremiah 17:9).

And our experience bears this out. We keep doing things that we can't understand, that we know are wrong, that we don't really want to do at all – and yet we keep doing them. Even in our better moments, our motives are often strange mixture of godliness, selfishness and pride. As the Prayer Book puts it, we are 'miserable sinners'. We have no strength to change our ways and, outside of God, no prospect of improvement. We turn over a new leaf only to find the same words written on the other side. If it were only my hand that was the cause of sin, then I could follow Jesus' advice, and cut it off. But the problem is in my heart. I can often hide it from my friends, and sometimes from myself, and even (rarely) from my wife, but never from God.

Why all this stuff about sin? Because prayer, by definition, involves approaching the awesome, blindingly holy, Creator of the Universe and asking him to grant our requests. Prayer is not a trivial matter; it is not something we can be casual about. It involves dealing with the living God, the one who is too pure to look on evil (Hab 1:13), who judges the wrongdoer and calls on his people to be holy (Lev 19:2; Heb 12:14), who will not tolerate our wilfulness, selfishness and rebelliousness. It is a sober picture, and one on which we meditate too rarely: our own sin and God's perfect holiness. Given this potentially lethal combination, how can we pray?

## In Christ as Sons

God, in his holiness, is not only the judge. He is also the merciful, long-suffering Saviour. How, then, can we pray? Because of God's salvation.

As we think about the salvation that is ours in Christ, we see how much sin matters. Unlike us, Jesus lived a holy life (1 Pet 2:22; Acts 4:3). And yet, though not deserving of death, he willingly and obediently submitted to the plan of God. It meant separation from his Father; it meant the painful fracture of a perfect relationship. These are familiar words, but they are (or should be) the foundation of all our prayer – that God reconciled us to himself in Christ. Jesus brings us into the family of God so that we can approach God and call him 'Abba' – 'Dad'. The remote, holy, 'aloof' God is now readily accessible. We can gladly and humbly come into his throne-room and speak to him with perfect confidence, because of the assurance we have that we are 'sons' (Rom 8:9-17; Eph 2:18). This restored relationship allows us to talk to him whenever we like, ask him whatever we like and cry out to him in our need. We don't deserve this relationship, but through Jesus' death and his pouring of the Spirit into our hearts, we can call God our Father.

## How to Pray

You may have approached this article hoping for a little more detail. You may not have been expecting an exposition of sin and salvation. And yet, this is what prayer is all about, and in failing to maintain this emphasis, we fall into error. The doctrine we have (very briefly) outlined above should spell the end of our search for the perfect prayer 'system'. If we believe in grace, in the free access of the sinner to God through the mercy of Christ, then technique is largely redundant. We don't come any closer to God or gain better access to him by praying in a particular posture, or by using special words or meditative techniques. Our access is assured, not on the basis of method, but by the merits of Christ. If we believe in sin and the holiness of God, there is no way of gaining an audience with God, apart from through the mediation of his Son. The physical apparatus of prayer is largely a matter of personal preference and expediency:

- Some like to kneel; others find sitting, standing or lying preferable (although, for me, the horizontal position usually results in a particularly quiet 'quiet time');
- Some like to pray aloud because it helps them to avoid distraction – others prefer to keep the conversation in their heads;
- Many people find it helpful to read a passage of Scripture as a stimulus to prayer (e.g., from the Psalms); others like to supplement this with devotional writings, hymns, and so on;
- Some like to follow a pattern (e.g., the ACTS pattern of Adoration, Confession, thanksgiving, Supplication), while others prefer a more spontaneous conversation;
- Many find that any pattern or system becomes 'stale' after several months and requires a change.

These are matters of freedom. We can help each other (on a pragmatic level), but there is no biblical basis for laying down the law.

To summarize what we have said so far in this series on prayer:

1. We should pray because of God;
2. We don't pray because of our sin;
3. The only effective method of prayer is through the grace of Christ.

In the final article of this four-part series (DP3.06), we'll get down to the nitty-gritty of 'For What Should We Pray?'