

Prayer and the Gospel

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The Gospel Coalition

BY

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Principles

One of the most basic things that the gospel does is change prayer from mere petition to fellowship and the praise of his glory. Galatians 4:6-7 teaches us that when we believe the gospel, we not only become God's children legally, but we receive the Spirit in order to experience our sonship. The Spirit leads us to call out passionately to God as our tender and loving Father. The Spirit calls out 'Abba' (4:7). In the very next verse Paul refers to this experience as "knowing God" (4:8). We do not just know and believe that God is holy and loving, but we actually experience contact with his holiness and his love in personal communion with him.

No one had a deeper insight into the gospel and prayer than Jonathan Edwards. Edwards concluded the most essential difference between a Christian and a moralist is that a Christian obeys God out of the sheer delight in who he is. The gospel means that we are not obeying God to get anything but to give him pleasure because we see his worth and beauty. Therefore, the Christian is able to draw power out of contemplation of God. Without the gospel, this is impossible. We can only come and ask for things-petition. Without the gospel, we may conceive of a holy God who is intimidating and who can be approached with petitions if we are very good. Or we may conceive of a God who is mainly loving and regards all positively. To approach the first "God" is fearsome; to approach the second is no big deal. Thus without the gospel, there is no possibility of passion and delight to praise and approach God.

Pathologies

There are two fairly common distortions of prayer that arise from a lack of orientation to the gospel in our prayer lives. We touched on them above. Here is a more practical description.

1. On the one hand, our prayer can have "light without heat."

There can be long lists of things that we pray for, and long lists of Bible verses we read, and long lists of things we thank him for. Yet there is no fire. Why? If we lose focus on the glory of God in the gospel as the solution to all our problems, then we devolve into a set of "grocery list" prayers, made rather desperately. When we are done, we only feel more anxious than before. The presence of God is not sensed because God is really just being used – he is not being worshipped.

Instead, we should always remember that the first thing we need is a new perspective on our needs and problems. We should always intertwine with repentance over our unbelief and indifference to God's grace. On the one hand, we must "pray into" ourselves that the thing we are asking for is not our Savior or God or glory! But, (on the other hand) after we repent and refine our desire, we should "pray into" ourselves that God is our Father and wants to give us good things, so we can ask in confidence. Also, intertwined with our petitions should be praise and marveling that we are able to approach God, and be welcomed in Christ.

This is gospel-centered prayer, rather than anxious petitioning. Our desires are always idolatrous to some degree, and when we pray without dealing with that first, we find our prayers only make us more anxious. Instead, we should always say, in effect, "Lord, let me see your glory as I haven't before, let me be so ravished with your grace that worry and self-pity and anger and indifference melt away!" Then, when we turn to ask God for admission to grad school or healing of an illness, those issues will be put in proper perspective. We will say, "Lord, I ask for this because I think it will glorify you – so help me get it, or support me without it." If the overall focus of the prayer is on God's glory and the gospel, our individual petitions will be made with great peace and confidence.

2. On the other hand, our prayer can have "heat without light."

Unlike the "light without heat" prayer, focused on anxious personal petitions, there is a kind of prayer which is its direct opposite – "heat without light." This is prayer with lots of "fire" and emotion. It focuses on boldly claiming things in Jesus' name. A lot of military and conflict imagery is usually used. Often the prayers themselves are said (either in your head or out loud) in a very unnatural, dramatic kind of voice and language.

Now, if (as stated above) prayer focuses on the gospel and glory of God, and if by the Spirit's help, that glory becomes real to us as we contemplate it, there will be passion, and maybe strong and dramatic emotion. But "heat without light" prayer always begins with a lot of drama and feeling automatically. I think that many people who pray like that are actually reacting against the very limp kind of prayer meetings that result from anxious personal petition. But they respond by simply trying to directly inject emotion and drama into prayer.

This kind of prayer is also not gospel-centered. Just as the anxious-petitioning is often legalistic and fails to base itself on God's grace, so the bold-claiming is sometimes legalistic and fails to base itself on God's grace. There is a sense that "if I pray long and without any doubts at all then God will surely hear me." Many people believe that they must suppress all psychological doubts and work up tremendous confidence if they are to get answered.

In addition, often personal problems are treated abstractly. People may say: "Lord, I ask you to come against the strongholds of worry in my life." Or "Lord, I claim the victory over bitterness," instead of realizing that it is faith in the gospel that will heal our worry and bitterness. Ironically, this is the same thing that the "anxious petitioner" does. There is no understanding of how to "bathe" the needs and petitions in contemplating the glory of God in the gospel until the perspective on the very petition is combined with joyful yet profound repentance, e.g. "Lord, I am experiencing such fear – but you are the stronghold of my life. Magnify your name in my sight. Let your love and glory ravish me till my fear subsides. You said you will never forsake me, and it is sheer unbelief that brings me to deny it. Forgive and heal me."

So, ironically, we see that "heat without light" prayer and "light without heat" prayer both stem from the same root. They come from works-righteousness, a conviction that we can earn God's favor, and a loss of orientation with respect to our free justification and adoption.

Practice

How can we very practically move toward a gospel-centered prayer life that aims primarily at knowing God? Meditation and communion.

This essential discipline is meditation on the truth. Meditation is a "crossing" of two other disciplines: Bible study and prayer. Meditation is both yet it is not just moving one to another – it is a blending of them. Most of us first study our Bible, and then move to the prayer list, but the prayer is detached from the Bible you just studied. But meditation is praying the truth (just studied) deep into your soul till it catches "fire." By "fire" we mean – until it makes all sorts of personal connections – with YOU personally, so it shapes the thinking, it moves the feelings, and it changes the actions. Meditation is working out the truth personally.

The closest analogy to meditating on the truth is the way a person eagerly reads a love letter. You tear it open and you weigh every word. You never simply say, "I know that" but "what does this mean? What did he or she really mean by that?" You aren't reading it quickly just for information – you want to know what lies deep in the clauses and phrases. And more important, you want the letter to sink in and form you.

Augustine saw meditation, "the soul's ascent into God," as having three parts: *retentio*, *contemplatio*, *dilectio*.

First, *retentio* means the distillation of the truths of Scripture and holding them centrally in the mind. This means study and concentration on a passage of scripture to simply understand it, so you see its thrust. "Retentio" is thus learning what a passage says. The many books on Bible study and interpretation can help us here.

Second, *contemplatio*, means "gazing at God through this truth." It is to pose and answer questions such as:

- what does this tell me about God; what does it reveal about him?
- how can I praise him for and through this?
- how can I humble myself before him for and through this?
- if he is really like this, what difference does this particular truth make to how I live today?
- what wrong behavior, harmful emotions, false attitudes result in me when I forget he is like this?
- how would my neighborhood, my family, my church, my friends be different if they saw it deeply?
- does my life demonstrate that I am remembering and acting out of this?
- Lord, what are you trying to tell me about you, and why do you want me to know it now, today?

Above all, the purpose of *contemplatio* is to move from a kind of objective analytical view of things to a personal dealing with God as he is. It is to deal with God directly, to stretch every nerve to turn this "knowing about" into knowing – to move from knowing a fact about him to actually "seeing" him with the heart – to adore, to marvel, to rest in, or to be troubled by, to be humbled by him. It is one thing to study a piece of music and another to play it. It is one thing to work on a diamond, cutting and polishing it; it is another to stand back and let it take your breath away.

Third, *dilectio* means delighting and relishing the God you are looking at. You begin to actually praise and confess and aspire toward him on the basis of the digested and meditated truth. If you have moved from learning to personal meditation, then, depending on your spiritual sharpness, the circumstances of your life at that time, and God's sovereign Spirit, you begin to experience him.

Sometimes it is mild, sometimes strong, and sometimes you are very dry. But whenever you are meditating ("*contemplatio*") and you suddenly find new ideas coming to you and flowing in, then write them down and move to direct praising and confessing and delighting. That is (as Luther would say) the "Holy Spirit preaching to you."

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