

"WHY PRAY IF GOD KNOWS WHAT WE NEED?"

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

September 24, 2023, 6 pm

Text for Sermon: Matthew 6:7-8, 31-34; John 14:13

The Question.

Matthew 6:7-8 “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

To the casual reader of this verse it’s possible to think there is a contradiction in Jesus’ words. On the one hand Jesus says, “When you pray” and on the other hand he says, “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” This second statement begs the question, “Why pray if God already knows what we need before we ask?”

Before I answer that question, I want to make the question harder to answer. In other words, I want to be absolutely clear God really is sovereign and He really does know all things, control all things and has power over all things. Listen to God’s own Word about His sovereignty.

Psalms 115:3 Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.

Proverbs 16:9 The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.

Isaiah 46:8-11 I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please... What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.

Ephesians 3:20 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.

“To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the Almighty, the Possessor of all power in Heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purpose, or resist His will” (Arthur Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, p.11).

So now we can return to our question: Since God is absolutely sovereign and does what He has already planned (Isaiah 46:8-11) and since He knows what we need even before we ask (Matthew 6:8), why pray?

The Answer.

I want to give a comprehensive answer. Not just the quick and easy answer of a parent, “Because I said so.” The Father and the Son tell us to pray and yes, that is a sufficient answer, but Scripture gives us so much more. I will give *nine answers* from Scripture. The first two

and the last one will be longer, the others will be shorter. Whatever your reason for not praying, let these nine reasons be the incentive for a new perspective and a renewed priority for prayer.

1. Because God is sovereign.

People who use the sovereignty of God as a reason not to pray miss the point completely. It's the sovereignty of God that makes prayer possible and meaningful. In fact, the real question is not why do those who believe in the sovereignty of God pray, but why do those who don't, pray? Praying to an impotent God is meaningless.

Prayer is a theological statement about God's character and nature. We pray because of who God is.

We pray because He is omnipresent. He can hear every prayer in every place at any time under any circumstance.

Time and space limit our communication with each other. We have to be present to be heard. We are also limited by language, we have to be able to understand each other.

No prayer escapes the notice of God, His ear is inclined to every prayer.

We pray because He is omnipotent. There is no limit to His power and His ability to respond and answer.

Luke 1:37 For nothing will be impossible with God.

We pray because He is utterly and absolutely sovereign. He is the one who is in charge who directs all activity in the entire universe. He is the ultimate cause of all events.

He is the right one to talk to. He doesn't just have the power and ability (omnipotence) but He is the one who actively exercises His will over all persons, places and things.

Proverbs 21:1 The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

Never in Scripture is there any contradiction or tension between the sovereignty of God and His eternal purposes and the call to prayer. His sovereignty is never compromised even as He answers our prayers.

2. Because prayer is a God-ordained means for changing history and accomplishing His will.

James 4:2 You do not have because you do not ask.

Matthew 7:7-11 Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, ...

James 5:16-17 The prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much.

Prayer is one of many means to God's ends.

How do people get saved? Preaching and prayer.

How do people get healed? Medicine and prayer.

How do things get done? Work and prayer.

“Prayer is the coupling of primary and secondary causes. It is the splicing of our limp wire to the lightening bolt of heaven” (Piper, *Brothers, We are Not Professionals*, p. 53).

Consider the example of *Elijah* in I Kings 18:1-2 and 41-46. Elijah knew God's purpose and will, He was going to send rain, yet He still fervently prayed seven times.

That something is decreed by God doesn't make the prayers for it meaningless or fruitless.

God told *Jeremiah*: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

Does God say at this point, there is no need for you to pray and ask me for these things?

Jeremiah 29:11-14 Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. 13 You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart, 14 I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Jesus promised with absolute certainty “this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14, ESV).

But He also commanded us to “pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matthew 9:38, ESV).

“What this means is God appoints the means of finishing a mission he has promised will certainly be finished. Therefore we pray, not because the outcome is uncertain, but because God has promised and cannot fail. Our prayers are the means God has appointed to do what he most certainly will do – finish the great commission and establish his kingdom” (Piper, *A Godward Life*, I, p. 115).

God gives us the opportunity to be involved in His work which is eternally important, so pray passionately, fervently, boldly confidently, “Thy kingdom come.”

3. We pray because it cultivates a clear attitude of dependence. It shows our trust and faith in God.

It says something theological about us, that we are dependent creatures, finite, limited.

The person who feels competent in himself and sufficient in his resources and strength to accomplish anything, especially anything of spiritual or eternal significance, knows neither God nor himself. Prayer says we get it, we have a clear sense of reality, of who we are and who God is and who is really in control and who really has the power.

We must cultivate a clear sense of the rhythm of a life of prayer which is desperation and deliverance. Remember the cycle in Judges of independence, sin, suffering, crying out in repentance and ask for deliverance.

Prayer is our way of saying in a million different ways, “apart from Christ I can do nothing” (John 15:5).

4. Because prayer is about relationship and is a dialogue with God, it is communion and conversation.

Again prayer says something theological about God. He is our Heavenly Father and He has adopted us to be His children. He is not only present and powerful, He is personal.

He is portrayed in all of Scripture as a personal, responsive, prayer-hearing and prayer-answering God. He is a Personal Spirit who has ears to hear and a mouth to speak.

God created us for fellowship with Him, to walk with Him in the garden in the cool of the evening. Prayer brings us into deeper fellowship with God, He loves us and wants to be with us.

I pray not out of duty; not *in order to have* a relationship but *because I have* a relationship, because I have Him and enjoy being with Him. Without taking time there is no relationship.

5. Because He alone is worthy of honor and worship and glory.

Hallowed by thy name.

Prayer is not about us or about getting what we want, it is about Him.

Prayer is an act of worship, of prostrating our souls before the throne of the living, holy God.

Psalm 116:1-2 (ESV): “I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. [2] Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.”

6. Because we seek to conform our will to the will of God and not vice versa.

Thy will be done on earth.

God is not our servant, of whom we ask things and then fully expect Him to give what we ask.

We are His servants. We come to Him, tell Him our need, worship Him as the one who is able to do all things, commit our way to Him and submit our will to Him and leave it to Him to do what He deems best according to the pleasure and counsel of His perfect and immutable will.

Isaiah 55:8-9 My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. **9** For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Prayer is the struggle of our souls to reorient our wills to be conformed to God's, "thy will be done."

7. Because He commands us to pray and to "ask of me."

Prayer is a form of obedience which is an expression of love for God.

1 Thessalonians 5:17 Pray without ceasing.

Luke 18:1 He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

Never neglect daily private prayer; and when you pray, remember that God is present, and that he hears your prayers.

Hebrews 11:6 Pray to seek and draw near to God. For the reward of relationship with God.

Jeremiah 29:12-13 Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. **13** You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

Philippians 4:6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

8. Because God has given us a mediator in Christ and He has given us His Holy Spirit who empowers and teaches us.

We have the example of Christ (He prayed Mark 1:35; John 17) and the power of the Spirit.

Romans 8:34 Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Zechariah 12:10 I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy (supplication).

Romans 8:26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

The eternal resources of the Godhead are given to us to help us pray so we will pray.

9. Finally and most of all we pray because prayer is one of the greatest means given to us to glorify God and make His glory known.

The Goal of Prayer is Glory!

What is the first petition of the Lord's Prayer? "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name."

Psalm 50:15 In the day of trouble you will call on me and I will answer and *you will glorify me.*

Psalm 37:4 Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.

John 14:13 I will do whatever you ask in my name, *so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.*

II Thessalonians 1:11 To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, **12 so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified** in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here is how God is glorified when we pray. *First*, He is glorified when we ask. He is glorified as the all-powerful God who is strong and wise. He is glorified as the creator and sustainer, as the one on whom we are completely dependent. *Second*, He is glorified when He hears and answers. *Third*, He is glorified when we praise and thank Him for what He has done and how he has answered and blessed us.

God gets the glory and we get the blessing. Every answer to prayer that Jesus gives will have the glory of God as its end and if this end is not possible then no affirmative answer will be given.

What we ask, we must ask earnestly, desiring that it will glorify God to give what we ask. If we don't ask with this end in view, we will ask amiss and miss the mark.

If it is commanded in all things, whatever we do we should glorify God, then it certainly must apply to the very heart and soul of our spiritual life and of our relationship with our Father. His glory is the aim and end of every prayer offered in the name of Jesus.

May God be glorified, may He glorify His name in our lives more and more as we believe in Him enough to come to Him often in prayer.