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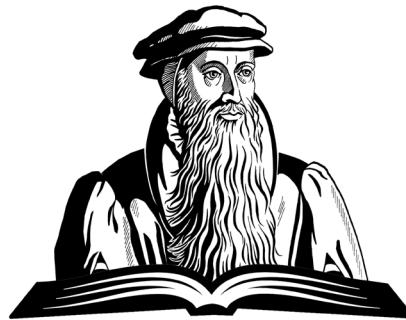
by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

Lecture #52

Means of Grace:

Prayer

Catechism Questions 98 and 99



The John Knox Institute
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Lecture #52

Means of Grace: Prayer

Question 98: *What is prayer?*

Answer: *Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.*

Question 99: *What rule hath God given for our direction in prayer?*

Answer: *The whole word of God is of use to direct us in prayer; but the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which Christ taught his disciples, commonly called The Lord's Prayer.*

We have seen that the primary means of grace Christ has instituted are the Word, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and prayer. In previous lessons, we've looked at the Word of God and how it's to be read and heard; we've looked at baptism and the Lord's Supper; and now we come to prayer. When we come into the *Catechism's* treatment of prayer, we actually come to the section that ends the *Catechism*. Questions #98 to #107 all deal with prayer in one way or another. Questions #98 and #99, which are taken for our lesson today, set forth what prayer is, and what God has given to guide us in our prayer. In each Question, from #100 to #107, takes up a part of *The Lord's Prayer*. If you have not done so already, I encourage you to commit to memory *The Lord's Prayer* as found in Matthew 6, verses 9 to 13. It's a short passage, and you can learn each part of it as you go. But it's a very helpful passage, whereby Christ teaches us how to pray. And as you do, you'll discover how rich this instruction is. Additionally, in the lessons that follow, you'll see how each part of that instruction Christ has given joins together to form a comprehensive guide to prayer. We'll look at each of those parts in the remaining lessons. But for now, we look at the two Questions which help set the foundation for our understanding of prayer, Question #98 and #99.

Question #98: "What is prayer"—"Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies."

Question #99: "What rule hath God given for our direction in prayer?"—"The whole word of God is of use to direct us in prayer; but the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which Christ taught his disciples, commonly called *The Lord's Prayer*."

Now, we'll get right into our lesson, and we'll look at three things. Firstly, *The Meaning of*

Prayer; secondly, *The Parts of Prayer*; and thirdly, *The Acceptance of Prayer*.

So first then, *The Meaning of Prayer*. Too often, we're tempted to focus only upon the words or phrases of prayer. We settle into our routine wording. We sometimes fall into familiar patterns of expression, and know our tongue is moving, yet our hearts are not engaged. Well, it's certainly not wrong to have learned phrases from the Bible that help express what we should desire. In fact, as you memorize *The Lord's Prayer*, you'll start to learn those phrases, and you'll use them in your prayer.

However, when we begin to understand the meaning of prayer, we'll discover that true prayer is much more than merely using right or familiar words. True prayer is a matter of our desire, our heart being expressed to God. Notice the *Catechism*, "Prayer is an offering up of our desires." The word translated in the Bible as "to pray," and "prayed," or "praying," is a word that means to express our desires. In some sense, it could be translated as "wish." Although it's far more dignified than the world's way of wishing for things. In other words, it's expressing what we want. This makes sense, of course, because you already realize that in prayer, we're not merely reciting memorized words. We're approaching God, and we're doing so with our delights, and our needs, and our sorrows and sins, our confusion even. And we're asking him for things. We're asking him to provide what is needed. We ask him for help, for forgiveness of our sins, for growth in grace, for guidance and direction, for protection, and so many other things that we cannot go through them all just now. But all of this is expressing our heart's desire.

You can see throughout the Bible, of course, this connection, but one example that helps clarify this is in Colossians 1, and verse 9. Paul had heard of the Lord's work at Colossae, and he writes to the Colossians, and he says, "For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding." Now, the verse itself is quite encouraging, to see a true minister of the gospel hearing of one coming to faith, many coming to faith, and saying, "Now my desire is that they will grow in that faith." But notice the link that Paul provides between praying and desiring. He says that he is praying for them, and desiring these things for them. These are closely connected in prayer. When we're truly praying, our heart is truly desiring the things that we are saying, or thinking for that matter, as we commune with God in prayer. This is something that helps us, because one has written that in prayer, the mouth follows the heart. In other words, we don't read our prayers. We don't just read and recite. But rather, our hearts are filled with desires. And so we read in the Psalms about pouring out our hearts unto the Lord, our desires. It's as if all of our desires are filling up, and we come to the Lord, and we pour them out before him. And so we read the Bible, of course, and our mind must be understanding these things. But real prayer is issued from our hearts to the Lord. How important then, that what our hearts desire is informed by God's Word, as we'll see.

Well, notice that true prayer is only offered to God; it's an "offering up of our desires unto God." We cannot find a single example of prayer offered to an angel or a departed saint. All true prayer in the Bible is always offered to God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Preeminently, of course, it is a focus upon the Father, and yet it's always through the mediation of the Son, and by the power of the Holy Spirit. And yet, likewise, we'll see of course, that men call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so it is that prayer is always offered to God.

This should be obvious, but consider why that's the case. Only God is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. You can start to see connections, can't you, with those foundational Questions earlier on in the *Catechism*, and how they're filled with all sorts of practical instruction when we

get to these things? A departed saint is not infinite. A departed saint is not eternal and unchangeable in his wisdom, and power, and so on—only God is. And so only God can hear all of our prayers, at all times, without confusion. Only God has the power to answer all of our issues, and the ability to provide us exactly what’s needed in perfect wisdom. Only God is able to answer our prayers rightly. He may employ angels, or fellow believers, or even enemies, as the instruments he uses to answer them. Remember that he was able to use a raven to bring food to Elijah, as the Bible tells us (1 Kings 17:6). But it’s God who is providing the answer. Therefore, only to God do we go and ask him for these things. Only he can answer. You could think of a room filled with hundreds of people, and one person in the middle. And at one and the same time, those hundreds of people asked that one person for something specific. There would be no hope of that person in the middle even being able to understand all of what was requested; much less would they be able to provide all that was requested.

And so it is, when we think about praying to an angel, or praying to a departed saint. They’re still creatures. They don’t have infinite understanding. But God is God! And so, whether you and I or all creation at one and the same time ask for specific things, God is able to understand and to provide—only God can hear and answer prayer. Never are we to pray to dead people, or to loved ones, even, who have died. We’re not to pray to angels or saints. We’re not to pray to Mary, or Peter, or Paul. But rather, prayer is to be offered to God. Remember, when Christ instructed his disciples to pray, he taught us to pray “Our Father which art in heaven.” And so it is, we pray to God.

While true “prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God,” we must quickly notice the helpful words of the *Catechism* that follow, namely, “for things agreeable to his will.” Unfortunately, as there’s still sin in us, not all of our desires are appropriate for prayer. Each of us still struggles with sinful desires. If prayer is holding fellowship with God, think of how wrong it would be to ask God for something or to do something for us that is against his revealed will. How wicked and inappropriate it would be to ask him, “Would you please allow me to steal something without getting caught, from the store?” Or how wrong would it be to ask him, “Would you help me to make a beautiful idol to worship?” Well these examples are obvious, but they help remind us that true prayer is to ask God for things that honor him, things that are agreeable to his will.

In Question #99, we’re given some help in understanding this. Question #99 asks, “What rule hath God given for our direction in prayer?”—what standard, what measurement, what is that which is to guide us in prayer? The Answer, “The whole word of God is of use to direct us in prayer; but the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which Christ taught his disciples, commonly called *The Lord’s Prayer*.”

Remember, the Word of God, the Bible, is God’s revealed will. If we’re to pray according to his will, we have to know the Bible. Through its history, its commandments, its prophecies, and promises, it shows us God’s will. And if we’re to ask for things agreeable to his will, it has to be in accordance with the Bible’s teaching. This means that if we’re going to offer right desires to God, our desires must be informed by his desires, as he’s given to us in the Scriptures. This means we need to study the whole of God’s Word, the Old and the New Testaments, the historical books, the prophetic books, the poetical books. We need to read from Isaiah, and the Psalms. We need to read from Matthew and Luke, and we need to read from Romans and Revelation. The whole of the Bible helps us to understand God’s revealed will. And so we are to grow in our understanding of God’s commandments and promises, his law and gospel. The whole Bible helps us know God’s will. And as we ask for things that are patterned after the Bible, that are commanded by the Bible,

approved by the Bible, then we are asking for things according to his revealed will.

Additionally, there are many excellent prayers in the Bible. Some are very short. Remember the thief who believed on Jesus Christ while he was crucified. He prayed to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom” (Luke 23:42). The prophet Elisha once prayed, “LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see” (2 Kings 6:17). So there are short prayers. Some are longer. I encourage you to read through Solomon’s prayer, in 1 Kings, chapter 8. In that chapter, Solomon prays from verses 23 to 53, as he seeks the Lord’s blessing. Daniel, similarly, in chapter 9 of his book, there’s a record of his prayer from verse 4 to verse 19. And many more examples might come to your own mind. Each of these are helpful examples—the short ones and the long ones. They show us different aspects and emphases of prayer. They show us an example of what it means to labor in prayer. When Jacob said to the angel of the Lord, “I will not let thee go, except thou bless me” (Genesis 32:26)—there is wrestling in prayer. Some emphasize a particular need. Some focus on thanking the Lord for mercies, others focus on pleading his promises. Some labor much in the confessing of sin. We can learn, and we will learn much by studying the prayers of the Bible, and by them, seeing models for true prayer.

However, there’s one part of the Bible that is particularly useful to teach us to pray. It’s given to us as an instruction in prayer from the Lord Jesus himself. This is why it’s called *The Lord’s Prayer*. It’s not that Jesus himself prayed it; rather, it’s a guide he taught his disciples to help them learn how to pray. We find it in two different passages. The first place is in the middle of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew chapter 6, particularly verses 8 through 13. Remember, those verses you can memorize, and it will help you. You can also find the same guide in Luke 11, verses 2 to 4, although it’s in a different context. Christ’s disciples come to him, in Luke 11, and they say, “Lord, teach us to pray” (verse 1), and then Christ gives to us this form of prayer, albeit with a bit of an abbreviation (verses 2 through 4). In both places, Christ was giving his disciples a helpful guide to direct them how to pray. In other words, it’s Christ’s basic treatment on what we should pray for. It’s simple, but we will see in the coming lessons, that each part is full of meaning, and is quite broad in its expression. Just like the Ten Commandments are rather small when you compare them to all the other specifics of the Bible, yet they’re full and comprehensive of all God’s moral requirements. Remember, “Where is the moral law summarily comprehended?” (Question #41), where is it summarized?—the Ten Commandments. So the six petitions of *The Lord’s Prayer*, with its preface, “Our Father which art in heaven,” and its conclusion, they are small, but they’re full and comprehensive of all that we can and ought to desire before the Lord in prayer.

This doesn’t mean that we should only pray the strict words of *The Lord’s Prayer*. Rather, the Lord presents this to us to help guide and instruct us in the things for which we should pray. We can use it to assess, “Am I praying in a balanced way for all of these different things?” This is why memorizing and meditating upon this part of God’s Word is very helpful to help us to learn to pray. Well, we’ll look at *The Lord’s Prayer* in the remaining lessons. For now, simply note that it is a great help to show us what God would have us desire and seek in prayer.

Well second, *The Parts of Prayer*. Any desire we have that is agreeable to God’s will is to be offered up in prayer. Every prayer has this in common. It is a desire from our heart, according to God’s revealed will, that we offer to him. You can notice a few different parts or kinds of desires that we should and do have. Question #98 expresses this a bit when it says that we offer up our desires, and we make “confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.” In general, we see three parts of prayer: petition, where we make requests; confession, where we confess our sins; and thanksgiving. A petition is to request something. When we lack something we

need and realize God has promised to give that thing to us, it is right for us to ask God to provide it. He's created a desire within us for something according to his Word, so we should come and ask him, offering up our desire to him. We'll see much of this in *The Lord's Prayer*. This can refer to healing that we need, or help. It may refer to things the church stands in need of, and so on. Whatever we need, we approach God for it. Yet, as in all prayer, we submit to his great wisdom and goodness, knowing that his way is best. Faith always, in the end, says, "Not as I will, but thy will be done" (Luke 22:42).

Confession—this is to say the same thing about our sin as God does. And so we don't justify our sins or excuse our sins, but we come, and we say, "Oh God, I see that I have sinned against you in this way, and you would be just to condemn me. But I ask, forgive me, pardon my sin." If you want some help in that, you can look at Psalm 51, and you have a great example of confessing our sins.

Thanksgiving, to give thanks to God for his mercies. This expresses our delight and gratitude: "Thank you, God, for the food we've eaten. Thank you, God, for the health we've enjoyed. Thank you, God, for the church you've given, for the pastor you've called here, for the Bible you've maintained." We rejoice in his mercies. He's treated us kindly. His mercies are innumerable. Some are temporal, they are bound to our life, our food, our health, and so on. Some are spiritual, they address our souls' needs. Some are everlasting, they carry on forever—heaven, fellowship with Christ, glory to come. All of these are mercies, and each of them call us to thank God.

Now, we can add within thanksgiving, there's adoration, whereby we draw near to God and we adore him for what he is in himself, "Great is the Lord! Merciful is the Lord! Faithful is the Lord!" We adore him, and thank him, praising him for these things.

All of these make up the basics of prayer. We come to him with our needs and ask. We come to him confessing our sins and asking for pardon. We come to him as well with rejoicing, giving thanks to him, and adoring him for his goodness. And so, we should think, "Are my prayers doing these things? Am I coming to him for the things that I need? Am I confessing my sin? Am I thanking him for his mercies?" Think of that last part. If he gives us what we need, we should thank him. In his forgiving of our sins, we should thank him. Thanksgiving should make up a large part of our prayer, because great is the Lord, and his mercies are new every morning.

Well, third, *The Acceptance of Prayer*. In one sense, the idea of prayer is universal to all men. All men instinctively know that they need God's help. Even atheists have been known to cry out for help in the midst of anguish. This is because, although sinners try to suppress the truth of God, they cannot do so perfectly. They were made in his image, and made for him. And this is something they can never escape, however hard they try. All false religions teach something about prayer. Muslims engage in prayer frequently. Roman Catholics are taught to pray many times; they pray to Mary and the saints. The ancient Greeks and the Romans prayed to their false gods. We have examples in the Bible of false prophets praying to false gods. Think of the prophets of Baal, as they cry out to Baal, in 1 Kings 18.

And yet, without hesitation, we assert that none of this is true prayer, and none of it is accepted by God. Why is that? Well, someone might say, "Well, clearly, they're earnest in expressing their desires. They really want those things." Someone else might say, "They're frequent in expressing their desires. See how regularly they pray." Well, that may be true. But one fundamental flaw is in each of them—all of that fails to draw near to the true God by faith in Jesus Christ. True prayer is only accepted by God for the sake of Jesus Christ. This is why Jesus said, in John 14, verses 13 and 14, "And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified

in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it.”

Now, it’s important to realize that Christ is not simply saying to mutter the words, “in Jesus’ name.” Now we need to be thoughtful of that. That phrase, “in Jesus’ name,” is not something we should just tack on to the end of our prayer. The whole of our praying ought to be consciously in the name and by the mediation of Jesus Christ. What Christ is getting at is, when we pray, we’re asking that Jesus would be the reason for our acceptance. When he says “ask in my name,” he’s not saying, “use the words only.” He’s rather saying that we are to approach God because of Jesus Christ, by means of Jesus Christ. It’s related to the truths stated in John 14, verse 6: “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”

Well, to come near to God by Jesus Christ, demands that we approach him with our desires, as the only mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). In prayer, we draw near to God with our desires, but we’re doing so through and by the means of Jesus Christ only. We’re confessing that we have no right in ourselves to draw near to God. Our acceptance and our prayer’s acceptance are only possible because of Jesus Christ. It also means that we’re resting all of our hope upon Jesus himself. It’s not because we pray long or fervently, or regularly. It’s not how many times a day we pray, though we ought to pray much, and many times, and frequently, and regularly, and earnestly, and all of that’s true. Our hope is based upon the worthiness of Jesus Christ.

You can think of it this way. I’m poor and I have no money in myself. And a rich man says to me, “Go to the store and gather whatever you need, and tell the store that I will pay the cost.” We enter the store confidently, because of the wealth of the rich man. And so it is, when we approach God in prayer, we’re not confident in ourselves. We’re confident only in Christ. You can think of that poor man at the checkout line, and he has no money himself. The rich man then comes behind him and says, “I’ll pay for it all.” So it is in our prayer. We come and we don’t appeal to ourselves. We point to Christ, and say, “For his sake.” There’s more that can be said, but keep this in mind—prayer is only acceptable with God as we exercise faith upon our beloved Savior.

There are many defects in our prayers. Sometimes we can’t find the right words. Sometimes we don’t feel all that we should. Sometimes our prayers are too long. Other times, they’re too short. Surely we need to seek help for this. However, the assurance of our prayers being accepted with God is only by our drawing near in accordance with the person, work, and mediation of Jesus Christ. Think of it this way. From the beginning to the ending of our prayer, if God should ask us, “Why should I give you these things?”—our answer should be, “Because I come in Jesus’ name. He is worthy for these to be given. He has purchased this for me. I do not come in my own name, or in my own worthiness. I come only in the name of your eternal Son incarnate, who offered himself up for me. It’s in Jesus’ name that I appear, and for Jesus’ sake that I ask these things. So for his sake, and his glory, and his praise, provide these things to your honor.”

Well, as we close, the rest of the *Catechism* and for the rest of our lessons will focus on *The Lord’s Prayer*. Each lesson, we’ll focus on one of the petitions found in *The Lord’s Prayer*. And so remember to memorize those few verses. And as you do, and as we progress through these final lessons, take time to turn these things into prayer. Even now, consider what desires you have according to God’s Word. Consider what mercies he’s shown you, what sins you have need to confess. And then take time to seek the Lord, and yet do so only in the name and by the mediation of Jesus Christ.