

When it comes to prayer, God's priorities must be our priorities. When we take our car into the mechanic shop, though we have *our* list in hand of all the problems *we* think need to be addressed in the repair, we are told by the technician that *his* list of needed repairs must take priority. So it is in prayer. We often have in mind the areas of improvement which we assume will help our prayer lives. But God knows best, and He directs our attention away from our prayer to-do lists in order to get to the heart of the matter. May this week's notes on the "heart of the matter" in prayer create in us a far deeper appreciation of what God is determined to do to increase our love for Him when we pray.

Monday: Read Psalm 18:1 & Deuteronomy 10:12, 11:1, 13 & 13:3

Start with Love

The believer's duty in any area of responsibility is most closely tied to the great command of the Law, namely, to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and souls. Love from God the Father is the engine of prayer, and our response with love to God is the heart attitude which moves us to pray boldly. As we saw in earlier notes, we must learn to be bold with God: bold in believing that "the Father Himself loves you" (John 16:26-27), and bold in returning our love to Him as David does in Psalm 18:1.

Meditate and Pray: *If* heartfelt expressions of love to our Father are so paramount in Scripture for vital, believing prayer, why are Christians often so sheepish in speaking out-loud of their love to the Lord? Laundry lists of prayer needs are common, and many Christians are skilled at rattling off the list of prayer needs for the church body. But how is it even some of the most educated and eloquent of pray-ers seem to shy away from simply saying: "I love you, Lord"?

Thank you again, Lord Jesus, for challenging us through this week's Bible notes on the most basic level of our devotion to God the Father in love. Let us strive to be open and expressive in prayer, speaking to You of the love of our hearts. We confess that, far too often our prayer-times and even our church prayer meetings are lacking in precisely this area. Lord, please make us more child-like and direct in our prayers to you. Help us not to lose the *devotional* aspect of our times with you in prayer.

Tuesday: Read Psalm 18:1, Proverbs 23:22-26 & Psalm 63:3

Delight in the Father

Just as a godly father and mother have a right to expect a return of loving devotion from their children (Prov. 23:22-26), even gently demanding of their offspring, "My son, give me your heart" (Prov. 23:26), so God the Father has a simple goal when it comes to His fatherly relationship with us: that we would "love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind" (Luke 10:27). As John Owen points out, "this is what the eternal love of God aims at in us, and works us up unto", that we would enjoy above all else this loving relationship with Him as our Father. Now it is true that God has a right to demand our obedience in all things – but God wants far more from us than our mere obedience to Him as our Sovereign. He wants our delight in Him as our Father. He wants our hearts. He wants us to rest contented in His love for us, and wants us to sing from the heart His praises as we return our love to Him. "Wait, Pastor Carl," you may say, "I thought these Bible notes were on prayer!" Ah, yes, but you see, singing out of loving devotion to God is actually the first and most noble form of prayer. No wonder the David's book is called both a "book of *Psalms*" (meaning "*songs*"), and also a book of David's "*prayers*" Psalm 72:20!

Meditate and Pray: Thank you, Father, for reminding us today that, in the midst of all our important life activities, there is one thing better than all that life can offer. "Your love is better than life; therefore, my lips will glorify you" (Psalm 63:3). Help us to be encouraged at how invigorating and effective even the simplest prayers of devotion and love to God can be. Help us to be content, when we cannot find words to say, or when

griefs and trials cause us to “lose our voice” of faith, to simply give you the love and devotion of our hearts. Amen.

*Jesus, Thou Joy of loving hearts,
Thou Fount of life, Thou Light of men,
From the best bliss that earth imparts,
We turn unfilled to Thee again.*

*Our restless spirits yearn for Thee,
Wherever our changeful lot is cast;
Glad when Thy gracious smile we see,
Blessed when our faith can hold Thee fast.*

*Thy truth unchanged hath ever stood;
Thou savest those that on Thee call;
To them that seek Thee Thou art good,
To them that find Thee all in all.*

*O Jesus, ever with us stay,
Make all our moments calm and bright;
Chase the dark night of sin away,
Shed over the world Thy holy light.*

Bernard of Clairvaux, 12th century, Hymn # 646:

Wednesday: Read Psalm 18:1, Psalm 116:1-2 & Galatians 4:19

Mother Love

We always should begin in prayer by stirring up our love for the Lord by *remembrances* of His past goodness to us and *resolutions* to declare our devotion. The Psalmist said he would love the Lord because “He heard my voice” (Psalm 116:1). But, beyond our celebration of God’s mighty deeds on our behalf, there is something from the work of the Spirit of God within us that makes our communion with God far more intimate than just a salvation-history lesson. David’s love is not merely repayment for debt that he owes God for saving him. David brings this out in Psalm 18:1, where he says, “I *love* you, O Lord,” using a word for love which actually is the word for a mother’s womb, expressing the tenderness of David’s devotion. He loved the Lord with something akin to a mother’s delight in the most precious fruit of her body. This is precisely the difference between all other religions and biblical Christianity: intimacy with the exalted God and Creator of all.

Meditate and Pray: Thank God for the domestic intimacy of a true, living life of prayer and worship within a loving church-fellowship. No wonder Paul can speak (even to the “foolish” Galatians) like a mother in childbirth, anxious to bring her beloved child into the world in Galatians 4:19. It is because Paul knows that God loves His church in just this intimate way that he agonizes as the church’s apostle until the Christ-life of faith is born in them. Ask God to give your church fellowship the same kind of fruitful, agonizing prayer-life that prays until “Christ is born” in those for whom we pray!

Thursday: Read Galatians 4:12-20 & Matthew 11:28-30

Bed Rest Recovery

If love to God is the pinnacle of prayer, then Paul’s letter to the Galatians is surely one of the key antidotes for the loveless, prayerless religion which can infect so many churches – even ones that start out with promise. In Galatians 4:12-20, Paul pleads *with* the Galatians (and we can be sure, with God *for* the Galatians) to find again the loving joy which had moved them even to a willingness “to give their eyes” to the afflicted Apostle (Gal. 4:15). Where had their loving joy in the Lord gone? It had been swallowed up by a misplaced zeal for the legalistic good works of the flesh. They substituted outward observances of religious days (Gal. 4:10) and rituals such as circumcision (Gal. 5:2) in place of a joyful submission to the “Grace Alone” foundation of their salvation. Paul’s solution? They needed, like expectant mothers, to go back to Gospel “bed rest” until “Christ be formed in them” (Gal. 4:19). In other words, they had to go back to first principles, to realize that all their outward appearances of religious zeal and good works could not replace a resting in Christ alone for salvation.

Meditate and Pray: Thank Jesus for giving us the most basic of commands with which to begin every prayer: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30). May the Lord make us see that the *heart* of real prayer begins not with the content of our prayers, nor with the method or length of our prayers, but with the position of our hearts as we pray. Let us ask God to give us the ability to pray with the simplest of agendas, namely, simply obeying Christ’s command to “come to Him.” He will then show us how we should pray and give vitality to our prayers.

*I heard the voice of Jesus say, “Come unto Me and rest;
Lay down, thou weary one, lay down Thy head upon My breast.”
I came to Jesus as I was, weary and worn and sad;
I found in Him a resting place, and He has made me glad.*

*I heard the voice of Jesus say, “Behold, I freely give
The living water; thirsty one, stoop down, and drink, and live.”
I came to Jesus, and I drank of that life giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in Him.*

*I heard the voice of Jesus say, “I am this dark world’s Light;
Look unto Me, thy morn shall rise, and all thy day be bright.”
I looked to Jesus, and I found in Him my Star, my Sun;
And in that light of life I’ll walk, till traveling days are done.*

Hymn # 304, Horatius Bonar

Friday: read Acts 4:23-24, Galatians 5:13-15 & 5:25-26

School of Prayer

What happens when a church fails to pray with and for one another and resists God’s call to “pray with one accord” (Acts 4:24), i.e., together in prayer to God? Well, to a large or lesser degree, sometimes publically and sometimes more privately, disunity and factions may well be the result. The Galatians, indeed, were in danger of divisions so deep and conflicts so real, that they could be described as “biting and devouring each other” (Gal. 5:15). How unnatural but surely the result of a prayerless Christianity! As John Gill points out, we would expect wolves from outside the church to come in and fall upon the sheep... but Paul describes the Galatians as sheep that bite and distress each other. How dangerous! The result could be the destruction of the individual peace and security of the Galatians believers and, eventually, the dissolution of the whole church.

Meditate and Pray: How can our churches be protected from such terrible, destructive behavior? Only by walking in formation with the Spirit (Gal. 5:25-26) could the pride and envy which lies at the root of all destructive behavior be rooted out. This is why we must stress in every study on prayer how God uses prayer to humble us into mutual care and love for one another. Humility is key to unity in a church, and prayer a crucial means of nurturing such Christ-like humility.

Only by remembering in prayer what we once were apart from Christ (Eph. 2:11) will we treat each other graciously, and overlook one another’s faults. Only by prayerfully holding each other before the Throne of Grace and viewing each other, despite all our blemishes and sinful imperfections, in light of the Lamb on the Throne (Rev. 5:6-10) will we love each other deeply and consistently. May God answer this, our deepest prayer for the love and unity of the church:

*I love Thy kingdom, Lord,
The house of Thine abode,
The church our blessed Redeemer saved
With His own precious blood.*

*For her my tears shall fall
For her my prayers ascend,
To her my cares and toils be given
Till toils and cares shall end.*

*I love Thy church, O God.
Her walls before Thee stand,
Dear as the apple of Thine eye,
And written on Thy hand.*

*Jesus, Thou Friend divine,
Our Savior and our King,
Thy hand from every snare and foe
Shall great deliverance bring.*

And let us pray with commitment two other verses of this hymn:

*If e'er to bless Thy sons
My voice or hands deny,
These hands let useful skills forsake,
This voice in silence die.*

*Should I with scoffers join
Her altars to abuse?
No! Better far my tongue were dumb,
My hand its skill should lose.*

Hymn # 353