

MORNING WATCH

A HERALD OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE, AS BRIDEGROOM, REAPER AND KING!

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Putting Prayer in its Proper Place

Modern Americans seem bent on putting prayer in its place. First, the Supreme Court's ruling was popularly understood to outlaw prayer in public schools. More recently, the Supreme Court let stand a Court of Appeals ruling on a Georgia case that school-sponsored prayers before football games violate the constitutional separation of church and state. Many want us to believe that American democracy is gravely threatened by the practice of prayer in public places.

We have serious differences with the atheist and other skeptics, but we Christians also wish to give prayer its proper place. We may disagree concerning just what that place is, but we are concerned to give prayer an appropriate place in our lives.

Understanding Prayer

We must first understand what "prayer" is, or we'll never discover where it belongs. This means ridding ourselves of certain false ideas about prayer. Genuine prayer is not simply a ritual, speaking the right words at the right time in a religious liturgy. This the priests and prophets of Baal did at Mt. Carmel, but without any profit to themselves or their cause (1 Kings 18:25-29). Nor do the proper words constitute prayer even if addressed to the true God if our hearts are far from him. Remember what Jehovah said through Isaiah to a wayward nation: "Your... festivals... have become a burden to Me. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood..." (Isaiah 1:14-15).

We are not closer to true prayer if we merely multiply words. Jesus warned us about this practice: "When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans,

for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Don't be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (Matt. 6:8). Prayer is not a means of impressing God with our zeal nor is it an attempt to inform Him of our needs. Neither is prayer, by itself, a means of winning God's favor. It is not a human accomplishment, by which we put God in our debt so that He is obligated to do what we ask. The source of God's blessing rests in divine grace, never in human goodness.

What then is prayer, if not a religious ritual, a multiplying of words, or a means of getting God to do what we want? Prayer is coming to God as a dependent child comes to a parent. Jesus prayed, "Abba, Father" and He taught His disciples to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven." That is, our Lord spoke to God as His Father and urged us to have the same intimacy with God. The apostle Paul understood this when he pointed out that Christians have "received the Spirit of sonship. And by Him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Rom. 8:15-16). It is to the expressions of this child/parent relationship that we need to give its proper place.

Prayer Belongs in the Human Heart

If we give prayer its proper place, it belongs in our hearts. In biblical terminology, the heart is the seat of the personality, the very center of the individual. The word "heart" occurs 830 times in the KJV, mostly bearing this meaning. Human beings can look only on the outward appearance, but God observes our hearts (1 Sam. 16:17). In other words, God sees our inmost person. The center of our personalities is naturally self-ish and evil for the "heart is deceitful above all

things” (Jer. 17:9). Life’s key question, then, is “Is your heart right?” (2 Kings 10:15). God is willing to give us a new heart of flesh to replace the old heart of stone (Ezek. 36:26). Hence, we are commanded to love God with “all your heart” (Deut. 6:5), and to “keep your heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” (Prov. 4:23). And, “out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34).

Prayer belongs primarily then to the inner center of our personalities, to the deepest and most serious area of our interests and concerns. Too often we treat prayer as only a perfunctory, superficial, and thoughtless routine. It belongs, however, not to the mouth, but to the heart. Prayer is the relationship and the attitude that precedes the words we speak. When retired Surgeon General C. Everett Koop was asked whether he prayed over specific things when in that office, he responded: “I am not a great prayer. But, I go to work with the attitude that says, *God, You’re sovereign. You’ve given me a mind and I want you to use it today. If I start to do anything against what You want, stop me just like that* [snaps his fingers]. I simply acknowledge my relationship to Him.” If prayer is not an inner relationship to God, an attitude of submission to God’s will and purpose, a child-like trust in our heavenly Father—then it is not real prayer.

Prayer Belongs in Every Moment of Our Lives

Again, if we give prayer its proper place it belongs in every moment of our lives. Have you ever noticed how pervasive prayer is in the New Testament picture of the Christian life? Jesus spent whole nights in prayer; arose a great while before dawn to pray; prayed before He chose His twelve closest associates; prayed before meals (like feeding the 5,000 and the Last Supper); prayed at the tomb of Lazarus; and prayed while dying on the cross. And in all these cases, it was clear that He was no stranger to the discipline of child-like communion with His Father. So Christians are commanded to be “faithful in prayer” (Rom. 12:12); to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions” (Eph. 6:18); to

“devote yourselves to prayer” (Col. 4:2); and to “pray continually” (1 Thess. 5:17).

Prayer is to be the underlying attitude of the believer’s life, the general framework in which we understand and by which we live our lives. Just as I know that I am married or that I am an American and this colors all my actions and guides my conduct, so I should know myself as a child of God who is living in the sight of my heavenly Father.

Prayer is like the lifeline, the umbilical cord that stretches between the space-walking astronaut and the space capsule he has just left. The cord transmits oxygen and voice communications, while keeping him from drifting outward into the stark silence of space. So prayer binds us in a dependent relationship to God, carrying our messages to Him and receiving His provisions for us. It needs always to be present. But at times rather than being in our conscious thoughts it will rest on the border of our awareness that “it is well with my soul.”

Prayer and Peace

In this sense, prayer is very close to what the Bible means when it promises peace to the children of God. “Peace I leave with you;” Jesus explained, “My peace I give you. I do not give you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27). Paul echoes this thought, “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). He further says this peace is the result of prayer, “The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7).

As the old gospel song puts it, “There is nothing between my soul and the Savior.” This is peace, and this is what happens when we give prayer its proper place.

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