

Orthodoxy: Learning to Pray

New City Catechism Question 40: What should we pray?

Answer: The whole Word of God directs and inspires us in what we should pray, including the prayer Jesus himself taught us.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. - Ephesians 3:14–21



The Christian life is a praying life. Jonathan Edwards wrote, “Prayer is as natural an expression of faith as breathing is of life.” We come into the kingdom of God praying - “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Lk.18:13), and we live as children of the King praying always - “He told them a parable to the effect that they [Jesus’ disciples] ought always to pray and not lose heart.” (Lk.18:1). But how do we learn what we ought to pray?

As the catechism instructs us, “The whole Word of God directs and inspires us.” The apostle Paul describes the Christian life as one of warfare in Ephesians 6. In warfare there is a defensive and offensive position. In these positions Christians “do not wrestle against “flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places.” (Eph.6:12) The offensive weapons Christians use in this spiritual warfare is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.” (Eph.6:17-18). Therefore, the Christian who lives by faith in Jesus Christ, being filled with the Spirit, prays at all times using God’s Word as her prayers and as inspiration for his prayers. What does this look like practically?

A Christian might have a conversation with another Christian from church. In that conversation there is a moment of vulnerability in an expression of spiritual poverty. One of the Christians shares how their heart is captivated by greed and it’s expressions in a self directed life that is not loving those who they have the privilege and responsibility to love. They are confessing that they love good things too much and that their love to Jesus and his people is overshadowed by their over love for more of what they already have a sufficient provision of. As the other Christian listens to their brother or sister in love they can offer to come alongside them in prayer, carrying them to God’s throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in their well timed need of help (Heb.4:16). In the Scripture from Ephesians 3:14-21 (above) they can be inspired and instructed to pray for them with a prayer that may sound like this:

Dear Father, I thank you that we can sit here together as your children, brothers / sisters in your household of faith through Jesus Christ. I thank you that we share in all the riches and glory of your Son and our Savior Jesus Christ. And I thank you that out of the riches and glory of Christ and his power you can do more abundantly than we can think or ask. And that we can see that power at work in our lives, even when we feel so powerless or under the power of sin in our lives. I ask you Father of mercy and grace that you would strengthen my brother / sister with your power at work in your Spirit in their inner being so that Christ will dwell in their heart through faith. They feel far from you in their greed and lovelessness. Their heart is set on loving these other things more

than you. Father I struggle with this also. Help us that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith, rather than the more we want that we already have. And Father we know that if Christ is going to dwell in our hearts by faith then we have to know your love for us in him. So Father, please reveal to my brother / sister and me the breadth and length and height and depth of the love that you have for us in Christ Jesus. Let us see how far you came to love us. Let us see how far you will go to love us. Let us see with the eyes of our hearts how high you have ascended in your rule to love us. And let us see how deep your love is for us in that you suffered our sin, guilt and hell in our place. Give us grace to know your love in Christ so that we're filled with all the fullness of you God, and then we can rest satisfied and content in you, not needing more, and not seeking to be satisfied in the things you have not made to satisfy our deepest longings. Forgive us our greed and our unloving hearts and lives. Thank you for your grace and your love, and we trust you now to do more abundantly than all we ask or think according to your power at work within us through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Christians eat the Word of God and breathe the air of God's Word in prayer. God's Word is the fuel the Spirit uses to inspire and direct our prayers of praise, thanksgiving, confessions, and supplications. Are you breathing in prayer as you walk by faith in Jesus Christ? If not, let one of your elders, the pastor, or a godly friend at church know so that you can be helped in learning to pray. Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them to pray. Martin Luther's barber asked him to teach him to pray. We all need to assume the place of humility in learning to pray from God's Word.

GOOD WORKS ARE AN EXPRESSION OF FAITH

by J. I. Packer, excerpt from *Concise Theology*

In the New Testament, faith (believing trust, or trustful belief, based on testimony received as from God) is crucially important, for it is the means or instrumental cause of salvation. It is by faith that Christians are justified before God (Rom. 3:26; 4:1-5; Gal. 2:16), live their lives (literally "walk," 2 Cor. 5:7), and sustain their hope (Heb. 10:35-12:3).

Faith cannot be defined in subjective terms, as a confident and optimistic mind-set, or in passive terms, as acquiescent orthodoxy or confidence in God without commitment to God. Faith is an object-oriented response, shaped by that which is trusted, namely God himself, God's promises, and Jesus Christ, all as set forth in the Scriptures. And faith is a whole-souled response, involving mind, heart, will, and affections. Older Reformed theology analyzed faith as *notitia* ("knowledge," i.e., acquaintance with the content of the gospel), plus *assensus* ("agreement," i.e., recognition that the gospel is true), plus *fiducia* ("trust and reliance," i.e., personal dependence on the grace of Father, Son, and Spirit for salvation, with thankful cessation of all attempts to save oneself by establishing one's own righteousness: Rom. 4:5; 10:3). Without *fiducia* there is no faith, but without *notitia* and *assensus* there can be no *fiducia* (Rom. 10:14).

Justification by works (things we have done) is the heresy of legalism. Justification, as Luther insisted, is by faith only ("faith apart from observing the law," Rom. 3:28), because it is in Christ and by Christ only, and depends on what he is as distinct from what we are. But if "good works" (activities of serving God and others) do not follow from our profession of faith, we are as yet believing only from the head, not from the heart: in other words, justifying faith (*fiducia*) is not yet ours. The truth is that, though we are justified by faith alone, the faith that justifies is never alone. It produces moral fruit; it expresses itself "through love" (Gal. 5:6); it transforms one's way of living; it begets virtue.

When James says that faith without works is dead (i.e., a corpse), he is using the word faith in the limited sense of *notitia* plus *assensus*, which is how those he addresses were using it. When he says that one is justified by what one does, not by faith alone, he means by "justified" "proved genuine; vindicated from the suspicion of being a hypocrite and a fraud." James is making the point that barren orthodoxy saves no one (James 2:14-26). Paul would have agreed, and James's whole letter shows him agreeing with Paul that faith must change one's life. Paul denounces the idea of salvation by dead works; James rejects salvation by dead faith.

Though the believer's works do not merit salvation and always have something imperfect about them (Rom. 7:13-20; Gal. 5:17), in their character as expressions of the love and fidelity that faith calls forth they are the basis on which God promises rewards in heaven (Phil. 3:12-14; 2 Tim. 4:7-8). For God thus to reward us according to our works is, as Augustine noted, his gracious crowning of his own gracious gifts