

29th January 2017

Luke 18. 15-17

Children make you smile with how they understand the faith. Little Jimmy had finished his nightly prayer and asked his father what prayers were. The father said they were little messages to God. Quickly he nodded. 'Oh yes! And we send them at night to get the cheaper rates!'

Another little boys' night time prayers went as follows:
'Dear God – same as last night. Amen'

Johnny was praying in a **loud** voice: 'Dear God I pray that I will get a new bike for my birthday'. His mother said 'Johnny you don't have to shout. God's not deaf'.

Johnny replied, No, but Grandma is'.

In our bible passage, parents were bringing their children to Jesus for him to bless them and the disciples rebuked them. Presumably they thought the children were unworthy of the Master's time. But instead they got a flea in their ear as Jesus said 'let the children come to me because the kingdom of God belongs to them. Anyone who doesn't receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it'.

He seems to imply that children have the kind of trust and faith needed to experience God. Perhaps it's their simple questioning yet trusting attitude that children show which Jesus highlights. Children are inquisitive, that is how they learn and grow. They are not afraid to ask questions, often awkward questions. A teachable spirit is so important in the life of faith: tell me more, no question is too silly because you want to learn more, experience more, and grow more.

This passage is set in the context of teaching about prayer so Jesus is wanting his followers to enjoy prayer by delighting in his company as a child delights to be in the company of adults they love and trust.

These last few weeks I have been looking at the topic of prayer. I have admitted my own failings in prayer and my own struggles. It doesn't come easy. I pray God gives me the childlike enthusiasm to ask and learn and experience more of prayer without being embarrassed about looking stupid or giving the impression of being all competent, wise and mature.

Last week I shared St Augustine's teaching on prayer and this week our next 'master class' on prayer is by the great reformer John Calvin. Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion was a ground breaking systematic theology that

reshaped the church in the 16th century and laid the foundations for the Reformed Church, of which we are in succession. Calvin always rooted his theory in practice and in prayer. So within this massive work is a section entitled ‘the rules for prayer’.ⁱ

Calvin’s first rule for prayer is the principle of reverence or the ‘fear of God’. Calvin calls Christians first of all to have a due sense of the seriousness and magnitude of what prayer is. It is a personal audience and conversation with the Almighty God of the universe.

There is nothing worse than to be devoid of ‘awe’. We must instead come to prayer ‘so moved by God’s majesty’ that we are ‘freed from earthly cares and affections’. Here Calvin is touching on one of the most misunderstood concepts in the bible – the ‘fear of God’. The fear of God obviously means to be afraid, but of what – and why?

It is natural to think that the fear of God means to be afraid he is going to punish us. 1 John 4.18 tells us that ‘perfect love cast out fear’ and adds that the kind of fear it drives out has to do with punishment. Paul says in Romans there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. If you don’t know Christ then you may have good reason to fear God. But if you are in Christ your relationship to God has changed: no longer enemies but friends.

What then should a Christian be afraid of regarding God?

Think of it like this. Imagine you suddenly are introduced to some person you have always admired enormously – perhaps someone you have hero worshipped. You reach out to shake their hand and suddenly it hits you. You can’t believe that you are actually meeting her. You discover to your embarrassment that you are trembling and sweating and when you try to speak, you are out of breath. What is going on? You are not afraid of being hurt, or punished. Rather you are genuinely afraid of doing something stupid or saying something that is inappropriate. Your joyful admiration has a fearful aspect to it. You are in awe, and therefore you don’t want to mess up.

The other week I met the Bishop of Gloucester. She came and sat next to me at a day conference I was on. What do you say to a Bishop? I was wearing a purple shirt. So my opening line was ‘Oh look I’m wearing a purple shirt like you!’ ‘Oh yes’, she said, whilst no doubt thinking who is this nutter I’m sat next to and how can I move seat politely.

Because of the unutterable love and joy of God we tremble with the privilege of being in his presence and with an intense longing to honour him. We are deeply afraid of grieving him. To put it another way – you would be quite

afraid if someone put a beautiful priceless, ancient Ming dynasty vase in your hands. You wouldn't be trembling with fear about the vase hurting you but about you hurting the vase.

Of course we really can't harm God, but a Christian should be intensely concerned not to grieve or dishonour the one who is so glorious and holy and who did so much for us. That came out in our look at the book of Leviticus this week and the sense of the Holy God and the preparations need to approach the presence of this God.

Calvin says this sense of awe is a crucial part of prayer. The very fact that we have access to God's attention and presence should concentrate the thoughts and elevate the heart.

Calvin's second rule for prayer is the 'sense of need that excludes all unreality'. Calvin is here referring to what could be called '**spiritual humility**', a strong sense of our dependence on God and readiness to repent of our faults.

Calvin rejected the medieval idea that you could appease God with your devotions when you put on your best spiritual clothes and do a mere performance. We need to

be ruthlessly honest about our doubts, fears and emptiness. We should have the disposition of a beggar. Calvin is simply telling us to drop all pretence, to flee all phoniness. Like children who haven't yet learnt the games that adults play about trying to impress others - you just take them for how they are.

Unless we recognize the chaos within all of us, which the bible calls sin, we live in what Calvin calls 'unreality'. Counsellors will tell you that the only character flaws that can really destroy you are the ones you won't admit. Crucial to true prayer then is confession and repentance. This reveals your insufficiency which drives you to seek God even more for forgiveness and help. Calvin quotes the prophet Jeremiah (29.13-14) that 'those who seek him with all their heart will find him'.

Calvin's third and fourth rules for prayer can be paired together. **His third rule is that you should have a submissive trust**. 'Anyone who stands before God should abandon all thoughts of their own glory'. We are to trust him even when things are not going as we wish them to go. The trust of a child. 'Here's what I need – but you know best!' That transaction brings a comfort and rest that nothing else can bring.

And yet. **The fourth rule is just as crucial and just be kept alongside the third. We are to pray with confidence and hope.** Calvin writes ‘though cast down and overcome by true humility, we should be nonetheless encouraged to pray by a sure hope that our prayer will be answered. He immediately acknowledges that these are indeed things apparently contradictory’. Then he goes on to argue why the contradiction is apparent, not real.

If God’s will is always right, and submission to it is so important, why pray for anything with fervour and confidence? Calvin lists reasons: God invites us to do so and promises to answer prayers – because he is good and loving. Also God, often waits to give a blessing until we have prayed for it. Why? Good things that we do not ask for will usually be interpreted by our hearts as the fruit of our own wisdom and diligence. Gifts from God that are not acknowledged as such, are deadly to the soul, because they thicken the illusion of self-sufficiency that leads to overconfidence and sets us up for failure.

Finally Calvin argues that these two balancing truths are not contradictory but complimentary. On the one hand, we know that we have not because we ask not’ (James 4.2). There are many goods that God will not give us unless we honour him and make our hearts safe to receive them through prayer. But on the other hand – what thoughtful

persons, knowing the limits of their own wisdom, would dare pray if they thought God would invariably give them their wishes? Endless stories of genies, lamps and wishes illustrate the almost clichéd truth that our desires are, as we have seen, ‘discordantly arranged’ and often fatally unwise.

A man discovered a bottle on a beach and gave it a rub and out popped a genie. ‘Your wish is my command’ said the genie. Knowing that Valentine’s Day was coming up the man said ‘Can you make me irresistible to women?’ There was a puff of smoke and the man changed in a box of chocolates!

However, with God there is nothing to fear. God will not give us anything contrary to his will, and that will always include what is best for us in the long run (Romans 8.28). We can, therefore, pray confidently because he won’t give us everything we want. Calvin says: ‘He so tempers the outcome of events according to his incomprehensible plan that the prayers of the saints, which are a mixture of faith and error, are not nullified.’

Billy Graham’s wife, Ruth, said she was so glad God didn’t answer all her prayers because otherwise she would have married the wrong man.

If we hold Calvin's third and fourth rules of prayer together, it creates a great incentive to pray. 'Ask and you shall receive' (Matt 7.7-8). Ask with confidence and hope. Don't be afraid that you will ask for the wrong thing. Of course you will! God 'tempers the outcome' with his incomprehensible wisdom. Cry, ask and appeal – you will get many answers. Finally when you do not get an answer, or where the answer is not what you want, use prayer to enable you to rest in his will.

After Calvin expounded his four rules of prayer he added an extended 'Coda' so significant that most readers understand it as a fifth rule. This is actually a major qualification on the very word 'rule'. He says 'what I have set forth on the four rules of praying is not so rigorously required that God will reject those prayers in which he finds neither perfect faith nor repentance, together with a warmth of zeal and petitions rightly conceived'. Although this sounds like backpedalling it isn't. 'No one has ever carried our prayer with the uprightness that was due.... Without this mercy there would be no freedom to pray.'

Calvin's fifth rule of prayer is the rule of grace. He urges us to not conclude that following any set of rules could make our prayers worthy to be heard. Nothing we formulate or do can qualify us for access to God. Only

grace can do that – based not on our performance but on the saving work of Christ.

What then is the function of 'rules?' Why does it matter how we pray if it's all by grace! The answer from Calvin is that prayer should be shaped by and in accordance with that grace. The joyful fear, the helplessness yet confidence, are all ways of approaching God that are possible only if our access is not earned but is received as a gift. Only when we see we cannot keep the rules, and need God's mercy, can we become people who begin to keep the rules. The rules do not earn or merit God's attention but rather align our prayers with how God is – the God of free grace – and thereby unite us to him more and more.

Here is an illustration that might help us think about this. When you flick on the light switch, the bulbs illuminate. Does the light switch provide the power for the bulbs? No – that comes from the electricity. The switch has no power in itself, but rather it connects the bulbs to the power. In the same way, our prayers have no virtue to procure us access to the Father, Christ has done that. Prayers that are in accord with a gracious God, however, can connect us to him. If we pray without humility – if we pray with demanding impatience – it cuts us off from God. If instead we pray without confidence or hope of being heard, that

also blocks any sense of his presence. Both of these mistakes are failures to pray in Jesus' name, to come to God on the basis of undeserved mercy.

Praying in Jesus name, then is not a magic formula. We must not think that only if we literally enunciate the words 'in Jesus name' will our prayers be answered. As we have seen, God can hear and answer prayers of anyone, even those who do not pray with faith in Jesus. God often hears and answers the cries of the oppressed poor even when they're praying to a false god. This is simply because he is a merciful God. So 'in Jesus name' is not a magic incantation.

To pray in Jesus name is to come to God in prayer consciously trusting in Christ for our salvation and acceptance and not relying on our own credibility or record. It is essentially to re-ground our relationship with God in the saving work of Jesus over and over again. You recognize your status as a child of God regardless of your inner state. God our Father is committed to his children's good, as any good father would be. You realise this when you receive the kingdom of God like a child.

The American preacher R A Torrey told about a time he was preaching in Melbourne Australia when before he was due to speak he was given an anonymous note. It read

'Dear Dr Torrey, I am in great perplexity. I have been praying for a long time for something that I am confident is according to God's will, but I do not get it. I have been a member of the Presbyterian Church for 30 years and I have tried to be a consistent one all the time. I have been superintendent of the Sunday school for 25 years and an elder for 20 years, and yet God does not answer my prayer and I cannot understand it. Can you explain it to me?'

Torrey recognized the subtext of the argument and took a plunge. He stood at the podium and said 'the problem was not hard to see. This man thinks that because he has been a consistent church member for 30 years, a Sunday School leader and elder for 20 years, that God is under obligation to answer his prayer. He is really praying in his own name. Doubtlessly the man would have been dutifully intoning 'in Jesus name' at the end of each prayer, but only as part of his project to procure God's favour through perfect compliance with all the rules.

'We must' Torrey continued, 'give up any thought that we have any claims upon God... But Jesus Christ has great claims on God, and we should go to God in our prayers not on the ground of any goodness in ourselves, but on the ground of Jesus Christ's claims'.

After the close of the meeting, the writer of the note approached Torrey and revealed himself. ‘You’ve hit the nail on the head’ he said. May we receive the kingdom of God like a child.

ⁱ Sermon taken from T. Keller, *Prayer*, Hodder, 2014, Ch. 7