

A walk with Mr O (28)

Longings and yearnings

Mr O, how can I improve my prayer life? And yes, before you answer, I know how you're going to start. You're going to tell me that I'm asking the wrong person! But I've already asked the Lord this question, and ever since then I've had a strong desire to talk to you about it.

Fair enough. So, tell me this, what do you believe about prayer? What is it?

It's simple, isn't it? Ever since I was a child I've been taught that 'prayer is talking to God'.

Oh dear. That definition isn't really very good. It's true that prayer usually involves talking to God, but that's not what prayer is.

Really? What is it then?

Prayer is something inward. It is all about our longings and yearnings. Prayer can exist without words, but it can't exist without inward aches. What we pine for most is God Himself, and with all our other yearnings churning away inside us we throw ourselves upon Him.

Some of our desires can be put into words, and these we pour out in spoken prayer. But there our other Spirit-given longings that are so deep that they can't be put into words. All we can do with those is groan, knowing that our Heavenly Father understands.

But Mr O, isn't it a fact that many of our inward desires are ungodly and sinful?

Sadly, yes. But the Word of God, and especially the six petitions of the Lord's Prayer, tell us which yearnings and longings are pleasing to God. Those are the ones that we bring to Him. And because what we long for corresponds with what He longs for, we can be certain that those requests will be granted. So, we pray with confidence for the exaltation of God's name, the coming of His kingdom, the doing of His will, the supply of our daily needs, the forgiveness of our sins, and His support and deliverance when faced with temptation and the devil.

When our requests are granted, of course, we have an overwhelming desire to thank Him. Thanksgiving is an important part of biblical prayer. But our greatest craving is to know the Lord, and to know Him better, and then to know Him better than that. He reads our hearts, responds to our longings, and reveals Himself. By faith we see Him and we are overcome. Vanquished and awed, we are lost in wonder, love and praise. The Bible calls this worship.

Yes, Mr O, but you still haven't said what we are to do with all those ungodly desires that plague our thoughts?

These too we bring to the Lord. We don't ignore them. We don't excuse them. All that is sinful we confess as sinful, because it is sins that the Saviour promises to forgive. Our confession is not general, but detailed. We hide nothing. We come to the Lord with every personal sin that we know about, even if it means coming to Him again and again with the same thing. Confession of our sins is a major part of biblical prayer.

That is why all prayer must be in the name of Christ. Even our holiest yearnings are not as holy as they should be. Everything about us is stained by sin. If Christ had not died in our place, and if His righteousness had not been imputed to us, our very best prayers would be sinful enough to send us to hell.

Our eternal salvation does not depend on our prayers, but solely on the Person and Work of the Eternal Son of God. So, we come with our yearnings to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit.

Thank you, Mr O. We've covered a lot of ground and I don't know how I am going to remember it all!

Can't you see what I've been doing as we've talked together? I've simply been explaining the Bible's teaching about prayer, as summarised in the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Q.98. What is prayer?

A. 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.