

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST, PART 13: PRAYING UNDER HIM

Matthew 6:7-13; Acts 12:1-3, 27:20-24; Luke 24:14-18, 33-39 (NASB)

David Bruce Linn, Pastor-Teacher

27 November 2011

All Rights Reserved

The 2007 film *Facing the Giants* tells the story of Christian school football coach Grant Taylor and his wife Brooke. They are faithful Christians who pray about everything, but the pile of things which do not seem to be working out has gotten so high that it has become a mountain. Answers to prayer seem few and far between. The team keeps losing, finances are difficult, the car keeps breaking down, and their best players keep switching schools just to play on better teams. More deeply troubling is their inability to have children as a couple, and the surprise knowledge that a group of parents and assistant coaches is planning to force Grant to resign as coach.

One night Brooke awakens to see that Grant is not beside her in bed. She peers through the door frame into the other room and sees him fully dressed reading his Bible in the golden light of a single floor lamp. She prays for a bit herself, falls back asleep and does not awaken until just after dawn. Grant's place in the bed is still cold. Brooke searches the house for him and finds that he is not there. She looks outside and sees him standing in the field next to their house, looking toward the morning sun with his Bible in his hand, praying. He has apparently been doing that all night.

Brooke slips her robe on, pokes her toes into her slippers, and goes out to him in the field. As she sidles up to him he wraps his arms around her. Grant looks at his wife with deep emotions of love, personal distress, and concern for her, and asks a question upon which their whole spiritual lives have come to turn: "If God never gives us children, will you still love him?"

Many believers in Christ have faced similar dilemmas of prayer and devotion, and we all eventually will do so. On the one hand, the supremacy of Christ means that virtually anything we ask could potentially be done for us. Some people take this to an extreme and come to view God as the "Super Santa" in the sky. They see praying for what we want as our job, and giving us what we want as his job description. When he does not give us what we want we conclude that he is not doing his job.

Of course, that is not what the word "supremacy" means in relation to Christ. Paul wrote to the Ephesians that God "**works all things after the counsel of His will**" (Ephesians 1:4b). The reality is a long way from a Super Santa who merely fulfills human desires. The last things we should assume when we address the King of Kings is that we are asking for the right things or that we know exactly what he should do. On the contrary, the Biblical pattern of prayer is an adventure which ought to surprise us constantly. It should push us beyond our understandings and limits all the time. We have been told point blank that the God who works in and through us "**is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think...**" (Ephesians 3:20b). So while we pray through him to see his power working in us (cf. Ephesians 2:4-6), we also pray under him with regard to his supremacy over all things. How do we go about prayer which properly reflects the supremacy of Christ?

ALWAYS PRAY UNDER HIM

What better way to discover the true nature of prayer than to study the instructions Jesus gave to his disciples? There are many such words of guidance, but the sample prayer from the Sermon on the

Mount reveals that all effective prayer arises from under him: **"Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen'"** (Matthew 6:9-13).

Every line in the Lord's prayer teaches us that we must pray from a position which recognizes Christ's supremacy over all things. The reason God is called the Father from heaven is to remind us constantly that we are under him and there is no getting over him. We pray that his name will be "hallowed," which means that his nature and works be given the place of prominence in all things. And be cautious when you pray for his kingdom to come, because that means his rule over everything and everyone. The first question God will ask when we pray that prayer is: "What about you? Are you under my oversight?" You cannot be saved until you are. Jesus is both Savior and Lord.

When we are praying for anything at all, we must remember that our prime concern must be the same as his, which is for his will to be done. Sometimes that is easy for me and sometimes it is dreadfully difficult to stop pushing for what I want, humble myself, and accept his will. Even Jesus Christ struggled in his humanity when faced with the suffering of the cross. He voiced his human desire for the unthinkable pain to be avoided somehow, yet he submitted himself to the will of the Father. Of course, Christ's position under the Father is a functional one only, since Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all equal.

Our position under Christ's supremacy is seen in the Lord's prayer by our need to depend on him for daily provision, daily forgiveness of our sins, and daily protection from the temptations of sin. And all the glory goes to him for these things. We conclude that the only possibility for effective prayer is to take our place under his supremacy.

Some have said that since God is sovereign there is no need for prayer, reasoning that he will do whatever he wants with or without us. I agree wholeheartedly that we cannot understand how our prayers interact with the will of an Almighty God. What is clear to me is that if there is any god who can effectively answer the prayers of powerless human beings, it is Christ, the Lord! So I am vastly encouraged to take my place of weakness so that he might do great things as I pray. Christ has given us both great promises regarding prayer and clear commands to do so, and they all hinge on our trusting him and taking our place under him.

PLACE NO TRUST IN FORMULAS FOR PRAYER

Even before Christ answered the question about how to pray he told his disciples how not to pray: **"And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him"** (Matthew 6:7-8). Christ wants us to see that prayer is all about relationship, not formulas. Formulas become magical incantations apart from relationship. So our prayers bank on the desire of a heavenly Father to take care of his children, as Christ said later in the Sermon on the Mount: **"Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things"** (Matthew 6:31-32). The pattern is simple: take your needs, even the seemingly mundane ones, to your heavenly Father because he cares for you and will

provide what you need.

The opposite of praying in relationship is praying by mechanical formula, which is the belief that if we say certain words in a certain way we will get what we need. But when Christ prohibited repetitive prayers, what exactly was he prohibiting? He could not have been prohibiting long prayers, since he personally spent entire nights in prayer. He could not have been against repeating prayers that have not yet been answered, since he commanded his followers to keep asking, keep knocking, and keep seeking. He could also not have been prohibiting the use of the Biblical principles of true prayer. There are many things to learn about effective prayer!

What he could not allow were meaninglessly long, mindlessly repetitive prayers. That is what the false religions and cults do to induce a state of trance which makes people susceptible to abuse by the religious leaders. Even worse, these trance states make people vulnerable to demonic influences. And what an insult to an attentive Father, to have us repeating things mindlessly to him!

Let us be sobered by the Lord's word to us through Isaiah about prayers which arise from people who are not living in holy relationship with their heavenly Father: **"I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. /I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, /They have become a burden to Me; /I am weary of bearing them. /So when you spread out your hands in prayer, /I will hide My eyes from you; /Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. /Your hands are covered with blood"** (Isaiah 1:13b-15). Do not trust formulas for prayer, trust the Lord!

SUBMIT TO THE DIVINE "NO"

The next truth about praying under the supremacy of Christ takes us to the book of Acts: **"Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread"** (Acts 12:1-3). Sometimes, when we pray for something, God just says no.

How do I know that they prayed for James? Believe me, when the new church in Jerusalem saw their leader arrested, they prayed for him. Beyond that, we can be certain that James prayed for himself. This did not become one of the glorious stories of earthly deliverance. Herod was a twisted man who used his great power with no scruples, so running a man through with the sword for political ends was no problem for him. No angel stopped this sword, the blade was not miraculously broken when it touched James' skin, no earthquake happened, and no human intervention prevented James' execution--murder, really.

If we think of God as our Super Santa in the sky we will take every such negative answer to prayer as a failure. When this happens there are only a few possibilities. Maybe God doesn't exist after all. Maybe he exists but does not care about us. Maybe we did not pray using the right words or technique. The possibility we prefer not to think about is that maybe God heard our prayer and said: "No, my child."

By the same token, we cannot always be certain that a matter is over. Sometimes when God says no the problem just continues, so we should keep praying. Other times, such as in a death, we can see the answer clearly. Either way it is an act of self-humbling to say, like Job: **"The LORD gave and the**

LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21b).

EXPECT DRAMATIC ANSWERS

If Christ is supreme, then we should also expect dramatic answers to prayer. As Paul was on board ship bound for Rome as a prisoner, an unrelenting storm threatened to send them all to the bottom of the Mediterranean. We pick up the story mid-way to see the result of Paul's prayers: **"Since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing us, from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned. When they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, 'Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete and incurred this damage and loss. Yet now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you'"** (Acts 27:20-24).

Right at the moment when all hope was gone, the Lord sent his angel to bring Paul an answer which would have been hard to believe under the circumstances. Even with the worst winter storm screaming down upon them there would be no loss of life. If Christ is supreme, then no prayer request can ever be too big! There is nothing he cannot do, so let us not be found limiting our prayers to things we think are reasonable. Let the greatness of God determine what is reasonable! It is our job to pray for great things.

PAY ATTENTION TO THE ANSWERS GOD IS GIVING

Did you ever stop to think how many answers to prayer go unrecognized, even truly big ones? Luke tells us the story of two disciples who were traveling home after the resurrection: **"And they were talking with each other about all these things which had taken place. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus Himself approached and began traveling with them. But their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him. And He said to them, 'What are these words that you are exchanging with one another as you are walking?' And they stood still, looking sad. One of them, named Cleopas, answered and said to Him, 'Are You the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?'"** (Luke 24:14-18).

Jesus called these brothers "slow of heart," which means "slow on the uptake" for not recognizing him. These were good brothers. They wanted the resurrection to have taken place, and they had already heard evidence that it may have happened. Yet when Jesus walked with them, they failed to recognize the answer to their prayers.

I have often found it easy to criticize these beloved *Dummkopfs* for not paying attention to the answer to their prayers. But I have learned that I am them. I miss things all the time. Beyond that, if Christ is supreme, he will be doing things in answer to our prayers that we cannot even recognize. It is wise to stop regularly to thank God for what he is doing on our behalf, and then we may recognize a fraction of it all.

EXPECT TO BE STARTLED BY GOD

Finally, from this same time period of the church we learn that sometimes a supreme Christ gives answers to prayer which we may find shocking. When the two slow guys realized they had been talking

to the resurrected Christ, they went back to tell the others: **"And they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found gathered together the eleven and those who were with them, saying, 'The Lord has really risen and has appeared to Simon.' They began to relate their experiences on the road and how He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread. While they were telling these things, He Himself stood in their midst and said to them, 'Peace be to you.' But they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit. And He said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have"** (Luke 24:33-39).

When was the last time you screamed out loud when you recognized an answer to prayer? We must not assume that if we are frightened by something that it is not from the Lord! A supreme Christ does things which would put a scare in us as it did the first-century disciples. After all, he has promised to convulse both the heavens and the earth in the future. That should be frightening to anyone who is around to see it!

C. S. Lewis theorized that some people probably don't pray precisely because they are afraid that God might actually answer! If we ask, as we should, "Lord, what should I do with my life?" he might say: "Go to another country!" or "Use your charismatic gift of whatever!" or "Give money to that needy family!" or "Sell your favorite toy!" or "You need to start a ministry!" or "You should read the annual report of your church!" or "You have to love those people who hate you!"

Sometimes a delay in God's answer can also be frightening. We can feel like we are stuck in a spiritual action-adventure film where the answer to our prayer does not come until we are just about to fall off a cliff of some kind.

A Super Santa in the sky would always bring us what we ask for--except that he does not exist. The majestic Lord of All brings us whatever he wants, whatever is good for us, whatever accords with his greater plan, whatever is holy, whatever is true...you get the idea. Every answer he gives is an opportunity for us to praise and thank him.

The question Coach Taylor asked his wife, Brooke, after a night of Bible study and prayer goes right to the heart of our worship: "If God never gives us children, will you still love him?" If God delays your answer interminably, or says no, or gives you something other than what you want, or scares you half to death, will you still love him?

Are you willing to seek God all night like Coach Taylor to get the answer to your prayers? Are you willing to search the Scriptures to see if he has already given the answer? Will you love and worship him no matter what? The supremacy of Christ is the primary governing principle of prayer. All effective prayer arises from those who humbly honor him in his royal divine splendor.

[clip from *Facing the Giants* DVD, 0:32:51-0:36:01, FACING_THE_GIANTS_prayer_refuge.avi, 3:10 min.]