

God-Centred Prayer

By David de Bruyn

It might strike you as redundant to say the words ‘God-centred prayer’. You might ask, “Isn’t it obvious that prayer is God-centred? Isn’t prayer by definition an activity that focuses on God?”

And the answer would be, “Yes it should, but no, it doesn’t always”. Prayer ought to be God-centred, but many pray without being God-centred. Jesus mentioned this when He said in Matthew 6:7:

“But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.”

This statement shows us that there can be something other than God-centred prayer. Notice, according to that verse, the heathen pray. The word heathen is the word for Gentile, which used in the Gospel of Matthew written to Jews, refers to an unbeliever. Now to whom and why does an unbeliever pray? If he is an unbeliever, then by definition, he does not believe in the true God, which means his prayer is not God-centred. It might be directed at a false god, or even toward himself. But Jesus is stating a fact – unbelievers pray. We all know that. But if even unbelievers pray, it is clear that there is prayer that is God-centred, and prayer that is not.

But notice something else. Jesus is speaking to Jews, who claimed to know the true God. His instruction is: ‘do not be like the unbelievers in their prayers’, implying that there is a danger that believers can slip into exactly the same error – prayer that is not God-centred. His warning was “do not heap up empty phrases in your prayers, thinking that the more you speak, the more you will be heard.” Clearly, Jesus is saying, there is a right way to pray, and a wrong way to pray. The wrong way is not God-centred; it is man-centred, and empty and showy and ritualistic. It becomes dry and dead, nothing much more than the incantations and repetitive chants of the pagans. Prayer becomes prayer because it is God-centred. The God-centred God is the source, the guide, the power, and the answer, not merely ‘God’ as in the monotheistic deity that some like to call the Source, but God the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.

God-centred prayer is the kind of prayer that glorifies God, and edifies man. What else could be the reason to pray? We pray so that God is glorified and we are helped. If God is at the centre of prayer, it does not become a selfish thing, while still retaining its purpose, man asking and receiving grace.

We wish to look at this thing called God-centred prayer. We’ll look at its purpose, its power, its practice and its priorities. Let’s begin with the purpose of God-centred prayer.

True prayer can have many purposes, but if it is God-centred, they will all come back to this one thing – to glorify God. For prayer to be God-centred – God is the purpose of the prayer. Certainly man receives help, strength, provision and protection by praying, but this all rebounds back to God as the Helper, the Strong one, the Provider, the Protector. God has given us quite a few examples of prayer that is not God-centred in His Word.

Jesus gave one of them in Luke: *“Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortionists, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”*

Notice the Pharisee prayed with *himself*. He was really just talking to himself about how great he thought he was. This was not a God-centred prayer which honoured God. It was a self-centred prayer that exalted himself.

The next kind of wrong praying is founded in Matthew:

“And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” (Mat 6:5-6)

Here Jesus gives the reason for this kind of prayer: to be seen of men. In other words the praise, the admiration, the reverence of people. Many people pray to impress people. They pray to stand out from the crowd. They use special phrases that will make them sound like seasoned experts in prayer. This, like the first example is not God-centred, it is man centred.

Another form of wrong praying is found in James 4:

“Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.” (Jam 4:2-3)

Here James speaks about the selfishness in humans which causes so much conflict. Men make idols out of their desires, and rage against those who deny them their idols. He says men do not pray, and when they do, they often ask wrongly. They want things from God to spend on their own passions. In other words, they want to use God. It is not wrong to ask things from God, if our ultimate joy and gratitude terminates in God. But if our ultimate joy and gratitude terminates in someone or something else that we have asked God to give us – that is not God-centred. That is consumerist. That is asking our husband Christ to provide us with the means to chase a love relationship with someone or something else. No wonder the very next verse says:

“Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.” (Jam 4:4)

This kind of prayer is not God-centred, it is thing-centred. It wants something, something other than God as its ultimate joy, and wants God to provide it.

A final example of prayer that is not God-centred is found in Ecclesiastes 5:1-2

“Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.”

This is similar to Christ’s words “, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen *do*: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking”. Here is prayer that is described as foolish, rash, hasty, and ultimately evil. What is the real sin here? It is approaching prayer as a ritual. If prayer is simply a ritual - then the more, the better; the more elaborate, the longer, the better.

In pagan religions, the more you speak, and the louder you speak, the better the prayer. We need only recall the prophets of Baal as they opposed Elijah. They felt that the longer they went on, the wilder they got, the more excessive and demanding they got, the better. When someone prays in a ritualistic, rash, and even disrespectful way, it is safe to say they are not God-centred. They are praying to simply pray. They have a god of their own imagination they are praying to. Some are merely praying for the sake of praying. They are doing the business of religion. They are being brash and cocky, and revealing their prayer is not God-centred, it is religion-centred. And religion-centred prayer probably drives the majority of prayer in the world. People agonise in prayer to gods that are not gods, and hope that the more they do it, the more they will be heard.

So prayer can have many things it truly centres around: self-exaltation, the praise of other men, the desire for other things more than God, and the desire to be religious. But none of these things are God-centred, and therefore, none of them can be true prayer.

We can understand what we mean by God-centred when we read a key text in:

Psalm 50:15: *“And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me.”*

Here is a one-sentence verse explaining the real purpose of prayer: man centres his cries for help on God, God then gets the glory as the deliverer, and we get the help.

Prayer is the wonderful tool whereby man centres all his hope on God, God therefore gets the glory as the final trust and treasure of man’s heart, and men gets the help. You could say it like this: the true purpose of prayer is for the glory of God and the joy of man. In fact, you see these two thoughts made parallel by Jesus Himself in the Gospel according to John:

“Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.”

(Joh 16:24)

“And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.”

(Joh 14:13)

Notice those two thoughts are made parallel. If you ask in Jesus name, the Father will be glorified. If you ask in Jesus name – you will receive and your joy will be full. This is the true purpose of God-centred prayer: it glorifies God and satisfies man. Now, we might rightly ask – how does it do this? Understanding this will greatly help us to pray in the right way.

We might take a few moments to remind ourselves what it means for God to be glorified. God's glory is His supreme value – it is the fact that He is the most unique, valuable, Supreme Being of all. His glory is this excellence being displayed. God wants His value to be known and enjoyed. God-centred prayer displays God's value. How does it do this? **When we abandon self-sufficiency and ask for His sufficiency it glorifies Him and helps us.**

Prayer, at its heart, is a cry to God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We are calling on Him, on the basis of His gracious character, to give us some help, meet some need, provide something we require – be it salvation, or food, or protection or wisdom, or life itself. God-centred prayer is the most humble posture a human can adopt. God-centred prayer is where a human acutely recognises his or her neediness, helplessness, sinfulness – and turns to God as the Source, as the help, as the salvation.

When an unbeliever cries out to God for salvation, or when a believer cries out to His Father to meet some need – this glorifies God. How? Because in looking to Him, His value as the Supreme Source, or Strength, or Life-Giver, or Saviour is exalted and displayed. When HE chooses to grant the request, He is further glorified. When the humans in turn thank Him, He is further glorified. His value is displayed. In fact, the more we ask, the more He is glorified.

Now, the mistake we make here is that we tend to superimpose our dealings with other humans onto our dealings with God. In human relationships, no matter how great your need, and no matter how wealthy another human may be – to repeatedly ask for help is eventually looked down upon as being weak or lazy, or being a leech. With humans, not asking makes us seem noble. Asking too often makes us seem like a leech. When you have a need, and instead work your own way up instead of asking someone else for help, this is admired. Continually asking for help is seen as being slacker. But it is wrong to apply this to our walk with God. The reason people get annoyed if you ask them for help all the time is that their resources are ultimately limited. People can at some point exhaust their supplies. And when you ask someone for help, or even if they give it to you without you asking, it is in some way a drain on them. But this is not true with God. God is an inexhaustible fountain. He cannot run dry or be made poorer.

Moreover, in human terms, to always ask for help and never work is rightly looked down upon as lazy. But we also know when this is pressed too far – when someone needs help, and we remark, 'he's just too proud to ask'. Unfortunately, in the realm of God, not asking is always a sign of pride. When it comes to God, to act as if you are self-sufficient does not impress God. If you had been lost in a desert without water and suddenly came upon an oasis of water, how would you glorify that oasis? By saying, "Oh, I'm not that thirsty. I won't trouble this oasis. I'll just carry on from here without drinking". Would this attitude honour the oasis, would it display its value as a thirst-quencher? No, all it would honour would be your supposed willpower, and

physical stamina. And that would in time, collapse, and you would kick yourself for your self-sufficiency. You honour the oasis by getting down and drinking deep. You display its value not by pretending you do not need it, but by drinking huge gulps of water. When you are a thirsty traveller needing water, humility is not saying, "I don't need water". That's in fact pride. Humility is admitting your thirst, and self-forgetfully running to what can quench it.

When we put on airs of self-sufficiency, it does not honour God. Since we are essentially thirsty in all areas of life and since He is an inexhaustible Fountain – we do not glorify Him by **not** asking. We glorify Him by asking. *And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me.*"

Over and over, God tells us the problem is not His supply; it is our airs of self-sufficiency that do not ask.

"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened." (Mat 7:7-8)

Why does God invite us to ask Him? Because He is then glorified as reliable, One to turn to in need.

"For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him." (2Ch 16:9)

In fact, God is most glorified not when we serve him out of our own supply of determination, goodwill and duty, but out of humble hearts that cling to His power.

"...if any man [serve], let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever." (1Pe 4:11)

In the spiritual realm, not asking is pride, and asking is humility. Someone might object – but doesn't that make prayer self-centred? I ask God to benefit me? I remember a preacher who made the boast that he never asked for personal things, he only praised God in his prayers, and prayed for others. That sounded really spiritual to me at the time, but as I went along, I saw the fault in that idea. It's actually a sign of pride to pretend you never need to ask God for things. It is not consumerist or man-exalting to ask God to meet our needs, so long as we look no further than God. As we mentioned before, when prayer wants the thing or things we are asking for more than God Himself, we have become idolatrous. That's why the health, wealth and prosperity Gospel is false, because it makes God a means to an end. It exalts money and health as being the greatest treasure of all, and makes God simply a means to get those things. That is not God-centred prayer. God centred prayer asks for things according to His will, things which most display His value.

"For thus saith the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel; In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength: and ye would not." (Isa 30:15)

Secondly, God-centred prayer is when we abandon self-satisfaction and come to Him for satisfaction. When we do that – it glorifies Him and satisfies us. When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well, this was the exchange:

“There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw water: Jesus saith unto her, Give me to drink. Then saith the woman of Samaria unto him, How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans. Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water. (Joh 4:7-10)

The woman says, *“How can you, a Jewish man, be asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink of water?”*

Jesus effectively replies, ‘The surprising thing is not that I am asking you for a drink – the surprise is that you are not asking me for a drink. If you knew who I was, you would be asking me for water that will satisfy you forever’. Jesus is saying the reason she did not pray to Him, was that she did not know who He was. When people understand who Christ is, they pray, seeking satisfaction in Him. Prayer becomes a time of having our heart’s need for love and joy and strengthening met. Prayer is not only admitting we are not self-sufficient, it is also admitting we are not satisfied. God-centred prayer makes God the ultimate satisfier.

Again, we can adopt the proud posture: “Oh, I don’t come to God to be satisfied. I come to unselfishly pray for others” Then you reveal something about yourself. Firstly, it shows that you secretly seek satisfaction somewhere else, but not God, and that is idolatry. Prayer is the offering up of our desires to God, because God is our final and chief desire. The Psalmists backed this up:

“Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.” (Psa 73:25-26)

“One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple.” (Psa 27:4)

And if you don’t see prayer as the satisfaction of your soul, you admit there is something or someone else other than God that you desire more. You admit that something or someone else satisfies you more than communion with God.

It furthermore shows that you secretly think that prayer benefits God more than it benefits you. But God does not benefit from our prayers if we view them this way. God is pleased only with God-centred prayers – prayers of hungry hearts that admit their hunger and come to Him. *“For he satisfieth the longing soul, and filleth the hungry soul with goodness. (Psa 107:9)*

It was always the false gods that needed people to do things for them. Prayer to false gods was always bringing fruits and berries and putting them in front of the stone idol. Isaiah and Jeremiah mock the idols of the pagans – they need to be carried, and set upright. People must serve them in a way that meets their needs. But the true God is not served as if He needed anything. God centred prayer does not see itself as a

benefit to God, it sees God as the greatest benefit to man. Therefore, humility is not pretending you do not seek satisfaction, as if that is some sign of strength, It is admitting you crave the joy of fellowship, and coming to God in prayer for it.

“That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.” (1Jo 1:3-4)

Speaking of abiding in Him, Jesus taught that prayer was an integral part of this fellowship.

“If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.” Knowing God’s Word, and praying according to His will, would bring answered prayer, which would sweeten the fellowship of abiding. John 15:7

To balance the man who boasted that he only prayed for the needs of others, we should add that God-centred prayer abandons self-centredness and prays for His purposes for others. We delight to see Him work and be glorified in others’ lives – this further fills us with joy and satisfaction.

So, we can sum up this way. God-centred prayer abandons self-sufficiency, and comes to God, craving His need-meeting power. This glorifies Him as reliable. Secondly, God-centred prayer abandons self-satisfaction and comes to Him for satisfaction – for purpose, joy, guidance, leadership, meaning, all the things that satisfy our restless hearts. This glorifies God as desirable.

This is the true purpose of God-centred prayer – the glorification of God as desirable and reliable, and the edification of those who ask according to His will – who receive His help and enjoy His all-satisfying nature.

Self-sufficiency, and being satisfied elsewhere, are the roots of prayerlessness. If you do not pray, it is because your pride is relying on something else, and desiring something else. Humility drops all these airs of being noble and pious and sanctimonious, and runs with empty hands and a hungry, repentant heart to God, and speaks to Him as a little child.