**Calvin’s *Institutes of Christian Religion***

Lesson 25: Prayer, Pt. 1 (Book 3, Chapter 20, Sections 1-27)

**Chapter 20: prayer, which is the chief exercise of faith, and by which we daily receive god’s benefits**

1. Having discussed faith and justification, Calvin now moves to prayer. He writes, “Just as faith is born from the gospel, so through it our hearts are trained to call upon God’s name.” See Romans 10:14-17 in which prayer is the logical outcome of hearing the Gospel preached.

*The Necessity of Prayer*

1. By prayer “we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father.” “Nothing is promised to be expected from the Lord, which we are not also bidden to ask of Him in prayer. So true is it that we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord’s gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon.”
2. But if God already knows everything, why pray? “The Lord ordained prayer not so much for His own sake as for ours.”
   1. “That our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love, and serve Him, while we become accustomed in every need to flee to Him as to a sacred anchor.”
   2. “That there may enter our hearts no desire and no wish at all of which we should be ashamed to make Him a witness.”
   3. “That we be prepared to receive His benefits with true gratitude of heart and thanksgiving, benefits that our prayer reminds us come from His hand.”
   4. “Having obtained what we were seeking, and being convinced that He has answered our prayers, we should be led to meditate upon His kindness more ardently [passionately].”
   5. “That we embrace with greater delight those things which we acknowledge to have been obtained by prayers.”
   6. “That use and experience may, according to the measure of our feebleness, confirm His providence, while we understand not only that He promises never to fail us and of His own will opens the way to call upon him…but also that He ever extends His hand to help His own, not wet-nursing them with words but defending them with present help.”
3. In other words, prayer is about changing us and sanctifying us than about waking God from sleep, giving Him new information, twisting His arm to give us what we want, etc.
4. Psalm 145:18 – “The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.”
5. 1 Peter 3:12 – “For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer.”

*Rules for Prayer*

1. Pray with Devout Detachment: “That we be disposed in mind and heart as befits those who enter conversation with God.” In other words, it is inappropriate to pray without concentration. We are not to have wandering thoughts which seek to distract us and draw us away from God. “I say that we are to rid ourselves of all alien and outside cares, by which the mind, itself a wanderer, is borne about hither and thither, drawn away from heaven…” “The harder we find concentration to be, the more strenuously we ought to labor after it.” Also included in this is not asking beyond what God allows. “Many dare importune [pester] God with their improprieties and impudently [impolitely] present before His throne whatever in dreams has struck their fancy.” 1 John 5:14 – “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.” In order to assist us in this, “God gives us the Spirit as our teacher in prayer, to tell us what is right and temper our emotions.”
2. Pray from a sincere sense of need & with penitence: “That in our petitions we ever sense our own insufficiency, and earnestly pondering how we need all that we seek, join with this prayer an earnest – nay, burning – desire to attain it.” So any prayer offered without thinking or merely out of sense of duty dishonors God. We must pray in earnest. What about set/written prayers? Those can be prayed with earnest and thoughtfulness, but we can’t think that the mere habit of reciting them accomplishes anything. “For the sake of mere performance men often beseech God for many things that they are dead sure will, apart from His kindness, come to them from some other source, or already lie in their possession.” We also should pray in repentance. Isaiah 29:13 – “this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me…” “Let each one, as he prepares to pray be displeased with his own evil deeds and take the position and disposition of a beggar.”
3. Pray without any confidence in ourselves & humbly plead for pardon: “That anyone who stands before God to pray, in his humility giving glory completely to God, abandon all thought of his own glory, cast off all notion of his own worth, lest if we claim for ourselves anything, we should become vainly puffed up and perish at His presence.” Daniel 9:18 – “we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy.” “The beginning, and even the preparation, of proper prayer is the plea for pardon with a humble and sincere confession of guilt.” Our assurance that our prayers “will be answered rests solely upon God’s clemency [mercy], apart from all consideration of personal merit.”
4. Pray with confident hope: “That, thus cast down and overcome by true humility, we should be nonetheless encouraged to pray by a sure hope that our prayer will be answered.” Mark 11:24 – “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” We just saw this in James 1:5-8 about praying without doubt but in faith. “It is fitting that the godly man’s prayer contain both of these emotions: that he groan under present ills and anxiously fear those to come, yet at the same time take refuge in God, not at all doubting He is ready to extend His helping hand.” Hebrews 4:16 – “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Matthew 7:7 – “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” We are both commanded to pray and the Lord joins His promise to bless us to this command. Both the command and the promise ought to motivate us to pray with confidence.
5. In sum: We pray confidently without terror but with reverential fear, putting no confidence in ourselves, but embracing God’s goodness, kindness, and the promises in His Word. “Our most gracious Father will not cast out those whom He not only urges, but stirs up with every possible means, to come to Him.”

*God’s Graciousness and Our Prayers*

1. God even listens to our prayers though they may be defective in emotion/attitude and mixed with faith and error. God heard the prayer of Jotham (Judges 9:20) and Samson (Judges 16:28) even they were aroused by their emotions beyond the bounds of righteous zeal. But these specific examples do not nullify that it is better to follow the above principles laid out in Scripture. Mark Beach writes, “If God sometimes answers the misconceived prayers of the ungodly because He is graciously disposed, all the more we should take consolation in knowing that this give evidence how easily God is entreated toward His elect when they come with true conversion to appease Him.”
2. “There is no prayer which in justice God would not loathe if He did not overlook the spots [defects/sins] with which all are sprinkled.” In other words, the fact that He even hears and answers our prayers as weak as they are is due to His grace and forgiveness. We all fail to pray rightly, forget things to pray for, wander in our thoughts, pray from an apathetic or unrepentant spirit, etc. We all fail these four Scriptural principles either by omitting them or not doing them perfectly.
3. “Since no man is worthy to present himself to God and come into his sight, the Heavenly Father himself, to free us at once from shame and fear, which might well have thrown our hearts into despair, has given us his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, to be our advocate [I John 2:1] and mediator with him [I Tim. 2:5; cf. Heb. 8:6 and 9:15], by whose guidance we may confidently come to Him, and with such an intercessor, trusting nothing we ask in His name will be denied us, as nothing can be denied to Him by the Father.”
4. In other words, Jesus alone is the way we come to the Father and His forgiveness and acceptance of our prayers is through Jesus and His intercession alone. Yet we’re not to think of it as if the Father’s will is one way and Jesus is beggarly pleading with the Father to act another way. It’s in Jesus’s death that acts as an everlasting intercession on our behalf.
5. Even when we ask others to pray for us, even those prayers only enter the throne of God through the blood of Jesus Christ. “Christ does not by his intercession hinder us from pleading for one another by prayers in the church. So, then, let it remain an established principle that we should direct all intercessions of the whole church to that sole intercession.” If you ask somebody to pray for you make sure they know to pray through Jesus Christ. It’s not going to work if you ask a Buddhist or Muslim or heretic to pray for you because they do not do it through Christ Jesus.
6. Carl Truman – “If you are a Christian, you have probably done so many times; and thus you have practically acknowledged your belief in the intercession of the saints. What is crucial, however, is that you understand such intercession neither supplements the intercession of Christ with the Father, as if that were lacking in some way; nor does it stand over against it, as if your prayers and those of Christ were somehow in competition with each other to find a hearing with the Father. Rather, your prayers ascend to God the Father in and through the mediating intercession of Christ.”
7. Calvin here is going to again rail against the Roman Catholic Church. Praying to dead saints and asking for their intercession robs Jesus of the honor of mediation. “It was the height of stupidity, not to say madness, to be so intent on gaining access through the saints as to be led away from Christ, apart from whom no entry lies open to them.” In this way, they teach that Christ’s death and blood are not sufficient; that it is somehow defective.
8. Calvin quotes the church father Ambrose approvingly: “Christ is our mouth, through which we speak to the Father; He is our eye, through which we see the Father; He is our right hand, through which we offer ourselves to the Father. Unless He intercedes, there is no intercourse [conversation/communion] with God either for us or for all saints.” The supposed prayers and merits of the dead cannot be mixed with the merits of Christ lest we profane His intercessory work for us.
9. “In Scripture do we nowhere read that they [dead saints] have been bidden to pray for us. Scripture often urges us to do our duty by one another but has not one syllable of the dead. Indeed, James by joining these 2 exhortations – to confess our sins to one another, and to pray for one another [James 5:16] – tacitly excludes the dead.”