

Lord's Day 45b

December 9, 2018

Willoughby Heights CanRC

Rev. R.C. Janssen

Read: Luke 11:1-13

Psalm 77:1,4,5

Text: Lord's Day 45b (q&a 117-119)

Amen-song: Psalm 123:1,2

Dear children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, and guests, last Sunday we paid attention to the necessity of prayer. You must pray. For prayer does not come automatically to humans. While it may happen at a point in time that a person will speak to God, it's not what we might call prayer. Prayer is something we need to be taught. Something to which we need to be driven. We also learned that God does not give automatically. God wants to be asked. Prayers are the ladders by which God's blessings descend.

Now last week we were left with quite a number of unanswered questions. For example, if not all speaking of man to God is prayer, when is it prayer? When are our words spoken to God to God's honour? How should we pray if we want to have the assurance that our prayer will be heard?

That's question 117 of the Catechism: what belongs to a prayer which pleases God and is heard by him? Especially the second half of this question is an issue for many people. Does God indeed hear our prayers? Sometimes we have this sense that God is not listening. It may make us pray even more. It may also see us give up on praying. Does God hear our prayers? In the backs of our minds we have the notion that it's quite possible for God not to hear our requests. Last week we heard, not all communication with God is prayer. What is the right way to pray?

We listen to God's Word as summarized in our confessions with this theme: God will certainly hear our prayers. The three points of the sermon point out the three conditions for this to be so. (1) If we ask the right Person; (2) if we ask in the right manner; and (3) if we ask for the right things.

1) First, God will certainly hear our prayers if we ask the right Person.

You might wonder, do we really need to pay attention to this? Surely Reformed Christians don't have a tendency to pray to someone other than the only true God?

We do understand that the Heidelberg Catechism pays attention to this matter. When it was written, almost 450 years ago, church people did not pray to just God. Christians would pray to angels, like Gabriel and Michael. Christians would pray to saints, especially to their so-called patron saints. Saints, those are people who had been extra-good Christians during their earthly lives, had more good works than sins, a super-abundance of righteousness, and thus could help a sinner get into God's good books. One saint in particular enjoyed much prayer: Mary, the mother of Jesus. Ave Maria was originally a song describing the visit Gabriel paid to Mary to announce that she would be the mother to the Messiah. During the time of the Great Reformation it became a prayer to Mary seeking her intercession with God. A Dutch Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church written in 1555 included the line "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners" and in 1566 the Council of Trent included it in the Trent Catechism. So when our Heidelberg Catechism was written, a lot of church people were praying to persons other than the one only true God. It *was* an issue *back then*. And it's still an issue we have with Roman Catholics: they still pray, not just to God, but also to Mary and to other saints.

But is it still an issue among us Reformed folks? Does the whole first point of this sermon need to be devoted to the topic "praying to the right Person"? Reflection on our situation today indicates it is good to do so. For the danger is always there that we do not pray to the one true God only who has revealed Himself in His Word. *Who has revealed Himself in His Word*. You see, God's people often pray to God as

they imagine Him to be. Think of the people of Israel, just liberated from Egypt. At Mount Sinai they had heard God speak. They had God's law. Also the commandment not to worship God by means of a graven image. And yet they made a golden calf. They felt a need to make God tangible. They hadn't switched Gods, but they no longer prayed to God as He had revealed Himself.

We run that danger as well. It's quite easy for us to pray to God while the God we are praying to is not God as He has revealed Himself but God as we think of Him. Two illustrations to make this clear.

There's a tendency to think of God as the powerful autocrat. He is the almighty and righteous God who is angered by man's sin. He punishes man according to their sins, and all will die. It's almost impossible for a person to be saved from God's wrath. And there are indeed few who will be saved. Most will perish. And with this there's a tendency to assume that you yourself belong to those who will perish. I am a sinful human being who deserves eternal condemnation. God is a devouring fire. I have no right to put my requests to God. In prayer, all the emphasis is placed on the almighty, righteous God.

But this is a one-sided view of God, an understanding of God that has prayer shrink to a cry of fear. A person who sees God in this way is actually just scared of God. This is not how God has revealed himself in his Word. It denies God's love and mercy.

There's also an opposite tendency, the tendency to think of God as the kind, gift-giving grandfather. All you need to do is ask God for something, and you get what you want. Pray, and you will receive, right? Prayer is then all about: "may I have this, and this, and this?"

This too, is a one-sided view of God. Prayer becomes a selfish activity. Nor is it true that whatever we ask will be given us. Three times the apostle Paul prayed the Lord to remove a thorn from his flesh. We don't know what that was, but whatever it was, Paul was convinced it was a hindrance in the spreading of the Gospel. And God said, "No, my grace is sufficient for you."

Brothers and sisters, old and young, when you pray to God, how do you picture God? A powerful autocrat, an almighty dictator, who punishes you for every wrong you do? A friendly grandfather, a Santa Claus with a sleigh that's never empty?

The Catechism points out that we need to pray only to the only true God who has revealed himself in His Word. We need to turn to God's revelation, to our Bibles, to understand who God is. How does God reveal Himself? What is God like?

God reveals Himself as a king. In Hebrews 4:16 we read: "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." A throne of grace, God is seated on a throne. In Scripture we read of people who were allowed to see God in heaven. They always see something like a throne. Many of the psalms – and psalms are prayers – refer to God in a royal manner.

However, God is not a tyrannical king. The throne is a throne of grace. The King is a Father. He cares for His subjects for He loves them. This royal fatherly care of God is brought to expression in the Old Testament by God's personal Name: Yahweh. He is present, He is near.

When we pray, we enter a throne room, the throne room of God. We bow down before the throne of grace. A throne: God is the boss here. Of grace: we will be received by God. God is neither a dictatorial autocrat nor a doting grandfather. Rather, our God is a Fatherly King, a Royal Father. Boys and girls, that exactly what the Lord Jesus taught us when He taught us to pray: Our Father—there's the Father—who is in heaven—there's the throne of God.

The only true God is a Royal Father, a Fatherly King. When we address our prayers to Him, the only true God, then we can be sure that we will be heard. For, as our Saviour Himself indicated, if earthly fathers, who are sinful, know how to give good gifts to their children, how much more will our Father in heaven, our Royal Father, given the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.

Brothers and sisters, for prayers to be heard you need to know well whom you are praying to. And to know that, you need to know what God has told about himself. So study the Scriptures to know your God.

Then you will pray to the right Person, so that your prayer may be heard.

2) However, there are more conditions that must be met for a prayer to be heard. Not only must we pray to the right Person. We must also pray in the right manner. That's our second point: God will certainly hear our prayer if we ask in the right manner.

For most people prayer does not come easy. How do you put into words what you experience and what you need? Prayer has been referred to as the language of the soul. The language of the soul: can what lives in your innermost being, what is most 'you', can that be put into words?

Prayer is the language of the soul. This makes clear that prayer is in fact much more than words. When we speak of praying "in the right manner", it's not just about the right choice of words, the right order, etc. Nor is it just about the correct posture in prayer: should you kneel or not, fold your hands or raise your hands, close your eyes or open your eyes, bow your head or not. Praying in the right manner is first of all about our mind-set, our heart. Our actions reveal how things are.

Boys and girls, imagine a child, four-year old, who wants a candy. We'll call him Jeffrey. Jeffrey wants a candy. So he goes to the kitchen, puts his right hand out, stamps his foot, and yells at the top of his voice: "I WANNA CANDY!" Do you think he'll get one? I think not. I can hear mom respond, "Jeffrey! You can't demand a candy like that." Now imagine, brothers and sisters, if we were to pray like that. "LORD, I WANT A JOB." "LORD, I WANT TO BE MARRIED." I'm not saying we can't ask for such things. But there is a right manner in which to put the question to God. A manner which reflects a humbled heart. A humbled heart. The Catechism teaches us "We must thoroughly know our need and misery so that we may humble ourselves before God." Humble yourself. That means to be small, to be inferior, to be the lesser, to show respect. To show respect. Yes, that's the problem with little Jeffrey, right boys and girls? When Jeffrey yells at the top of his voice "I WANNA CANDY!" he's not showing any respect. How respectful are we pray? Do we feel we ought to be respectful to God? There's a habit in evangelical Christianity when it comes to prayer that's beginning to creep into our circles as well. It's a casual attitude to prayer. We may be thankful that people in our circles today pray more freely than they did thirty years ago. However, let's not make prayer become something casual. "God, I just want to thank you that we can be together tonight." "Just want to thank you?" "I want to thank you?" I've seen people lead a public prayer with their hands in their pockets. Let's not become casual in our prayer. The manner of prayer reflects what lives in our hearts, for prayer is the language of the soul. Yes, you may indeed approach the throne of grace with confidence, Hebrews 4:16. Thank God for that. But the same letter also tells us, "let us worship God acceptably with reverence and awe" (Hebrews 12:28b). God said "Among those who approach me, I will show myself holy" (Leviticus 10:3).

Another aspect to praying in the right manner is meaning what we pray. For example, when we pray for our missionaries, do we pray for them because we *want* to pray for them? Or do we pray for them because we feel we have to? We are to call upon the only true God "from the heart", our Catechism tells us. There's an awful lot to pray for. And we may ask much, for "[God] is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20b). God invites us to pray to him. But then we truly have to long for the things we ask for.

Let me put it this way.

Do we ask for forgiveness of sins because we feel we need to, or because our sins trouble us? In our prayers, the request for forgiveness may come across as an afterthought, especially when we say: "all this we ask, in the forgiveness of all our sins, for Jesus' sake." Kind of like "Oops, almost forgot that." At least, I find myself sometimes doing that...

Do we pray for our daily bread, because we feel we should, or because we recognize that the bread

before us on the table is God's gracious gift?

Do we pray for the holiness of God's Name because we know we should, or because we find that Name all important?

Let's think about our prayers. From this perspective, form prayers are not a bad thing. In the back of the Book of Praise you'll find a section with examples of prayers. Have a look in the Book of Praise, page 639. The first six are for worship services and the last three are for church meetings. But there's 6 prayers which are meant for personal use, during a visit, or for family use. On page 639 and following we have Prayer 7 and 8: a prayer before meals and thanksgiving after meals. Prayers 9 and 10, two prayers for the sick and spiritually distressed. Prayers 11 and 12, a morning prayer and an evening prayer. Pray these prayers, or use them as models for your own personal prayers. Just as we may use the prayer the Lord Jesus himself taught us as a model for our prayers.

Pray from the heart, mean what you pray. There's a third aspect to praying in the right manner. Are you confident that God indeed hears your prayer? Why do we pray? Is it with an attitude of "We can always pray. It never hurt anybody and maybe it helps." The Catechism urges us to have faith in God. "We must rest on this firm foundation that, although we do not deserve it, God will certainly hear our prayer." And why? "For the sake of Christ our Lord, as He has promised us in His Word." This is the "confidence" of which Hebrews 4:16 speaks. We come to the throne of grace in Christ. We come, clothed with Christ. When we approach God's throne, God sees Christ standing there, the innocent and righteous Christ who paid the price for sin. That's why, boys and girls, many prayers end with a line like "All this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ." If our prayers were in our own names, then God might well not hear us. But because we come in Christ, God will receive us. God the Father will never, ever reject His own Son. We should not doubt whether our prayers are heard.

Pray: in humility, from the heart, and in faith. Those three things come to the fore in Psalm 123, which we're to be singing after this sermon. In humility, from the heart, and in faith. That is the right manner of prayer. God hears us when we pray.

3) We transition now to our third point: God will certainly hear our prayers if we ask for the right things.

God hears us when we pray. That was the point which the Lord Jesus made after he had taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer. Allow me to tell the parable in a somewhat more modern way. I do that because the notion of having no food in the house late at night doesn't connect with our experience. We don't feel what Jesus' hearers would have felt.

Daniel Peterson is in bed. The lights are off. The house is alarmed. It's 11:30. Then the doorbell goes. It's the neighbour from across the street. He's got a guest over who needs a bed. They've got a bedframe and bedding, but their only spare mattress turned out to be totally soaked because of an open window and a rain storm. Could he borrow a mattress? What will Peterson do? He might not like going through all the trouble of hauling a mattress from the spare room to the front door. But imagine what the people will say tomorrow when they hear he was not willing to help a neighbour out? And so Peterson gets the mattress.

The point our Lord Jesus made was: if this is how things are on earth, it will also be that way in heaven. If you truly need something, and you ask God for it, will not God, for the sake of His own Name, give you what you've requested?

And remember, where God is concerned it's not just about His Name. But the other factor is His love for His children. If earthly fathers give good gifts to their children, would the heavenly Father not do so?

Ask and you will receive. God hears prayer, for the sake of His Name and to supply the needs of his children.

But sometimes there is no response. It seems as if God has not heard our prayer. We may begin to wonder: may I ask for this? I once had a couple ask me, this was back in one of the congregations I served in Holland, when you have no children, does there come a point in time when you should stop praying for children?

Praying for the right things. Answer 117 mentions it already: we are to pray “for all that God has commanded us to pray.” Answer 118 expands on this. “What has God commanded us to ask of him?” The answer reads: “All the things we need for body and soul.”

For body and soul. There’s a tendency to see this phrase as referring to two separate parts to man. There are bodily needs, like daily bread, and soul needs, like forgiveness of sins. However, the expression “body and soul” seeks to express totality. “Body and soul” is everything that is you. Prayer relates to all spheres of life. One may pray for a child, like Hannah the wife of Elkanah did. One may pray for health, the way King Hezekiah did. One may pray for forgiveness of sins, like Daniel did. One may pray for anything you personally need.

Anything. But there is a catch. Because we are sinful people, we do not even know our own needs. And thus it will happen that we will pray for things we do not need. There is a difference between what we want to have and what we need to have.

So what should we be praying for? Answer 118 adds yet “as included in the prayer which Christ our Lord himself taught us.” The sermons of the coming weeks will outline what the needs for our body and soul truly are. Hence, we won’t get into that right now.

We do want to take the opportunity yet to look at the Lord’s Prayer as a whole. Future Catechism sermons look at the individual elements to the Lord’s Prayer. Now is a good time to look at the Lord’s Prayer *as a whole*, to see how the various elements fit together.

The prayer begins with a respectful address. Then follow six petitions or requests. These requests or petitions are put in a certain order. One might compare the structure to a house, with three layers in the roof and three columns in the bottom half of the building. The first petition or request is primary: the request for God’s Name to be honoured above all. God’s Name is honoured when his Kingdom comes, that’s the second petition. God’s Kingdom is coming wherever people obey God, that’s the third request. Now for people to obey God (so that his kingdom might come, so that his Name is honoured) three things are needed: daily food, forgiveness of sins, and strength for the battle against evil. These three are parallel to each other. You can tell by the first word of the fifth petition, the word “and”. That may seem insignificant. But it is important. Not only the sixth petition begins with “and”, the fifth one does too. You see, the fourth, fifth, and sixth petitions are actually three parts to the one petition. Finally, the close of the prayer might be called the foundation of our prayer. We place our petitions before our heavenly Father, for the Kingdom is his, the power is his, and the glory is his. In other words, he has the right to do these things, he has the ability to do these things, and it is his task to do these things.

We are to pray for the right things. Central to our prayer is the glory of God’s Name. Last week I pointed out how Daniel in his prayer emphasizes the need for God to act on account of his Name. Every request we put before God should be put to God in that framework. Hannah prayed for a son, not just that she might have a child, but that Israel might have a leader. Hezekiah prayed for health, not just to enjoy life again, but so that the royal line of David might be continued – you see, when Hezekiah was sick, he had no children. Before we place our requests before God, let us think over the things we are asking. How will passing that exam, finding someone to share life with, having a paid job, how will that advance the glory of God’s Name? Of course, we don’t always know what is to God’s glory. But rest assured, as we saw last week, our prayers are perfected by the sighs of the Spirit that cannot be expressed in words (Romans 8:26).

And so my response to those parents was: of course you may continue to pray for children. As long as

your prayer is not, to use the words of James, “asking with wrong motives, that you may use what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:3). And our greatest need is the Holy Spirit, to focus our existence on the glory of God. That’s why our Saviour said: “Your Father in heaven will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.” By the way, when I was asked that question, those parents had received three children after many years of receiving none.

God will certainly hear our prayers.

We’ve seen three conditions for prayer to be heard. We are to pray to the right Person: the only true God. We are to pray in the right manner: in humility, from our heart, and in faith. And we are to pray for the right things: every request is to seek the glory of God’s Name. Then God will hear our prayers.

Are we sure? Sometimes it can take so long. Those who are single may wait years to be married. Someone with a chronic illness may continue to struggle on and on.

In such a situation, first of all reflect on your prayer. Is it focused on God’s glory or your own desires? And if in all honesty you can say, it’s about God’s glory, do not give up praying. Israel, for centuries they prayed for the coming of Messiah. It took a long time, but Messiah came. The church, for centuries we have been praying for the return of Messiah. And he will come.

Persevere in prayer. For remember, prayers are the ladders by which God has his blessings descend. Amen.