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WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH CORPORATE PRAYER IN CHURCH?

BY JEREMY KIMBLE

Corporate prayer in a local church setting can feel like a mundane item in the midst of a worship service. However, such a practice allows for a unique opportunity for the leadership of the church to instruct and intercede for the congregation in specific ways. This is a part of the worship service that is often overlooked and given very little thought, but I would encourage pastors to be intentional and thorough as they approach this sacred moment with their people. Here are some key thoughts on the practice of corporate prayer.

PLAN AHEAD. There are certain denominations that utilize a specific liturgy, and thus their services are planned well in advance. However, in the free-church tradition prayers are more extemporaneous. If that is the case for your church, it does not mean we cannot think ahead about what will be said in those prayers. We spend hours each week preparing our sermons; we should spend time thinking over how we pray with and for our people. This is a unique moment for your congregation and an important way for them to benefit each week. So pray specifically and intentionally by planning ahead.

USE DIFFERENT TYPES OF PRAYER. So often, especially if we rely on extemporaneous prayers, our corporate intercession can sound strangely familiar from week to week. One way to bring variety is to recognize there are different kinds of prayers one can bring before God. This can include prayers of confession, praise to God, thanksgiving, as well as specific requests. Be sure to focus on different aspects in your corporate prayers.

USE APPROPRIATE RESOURCES. Learn from key resources on prayer, such as *The Valley of Vision*, or your denomination's creeds and confessions. These are helpful ways to expand your horizons as you pray for your people, causing you to think about praying for them in ways you may not have otherwise thought of.

BE BIBLICAL. Don't just ask God for what you want, but let him teach you what you should want. Immerse yourself in Scripture, study the prayers of Jesus, Paul, Moses, Solomon, and others, and see how they prayed to God. Read *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, by D. A. Carson, and note how you can and should meditate on Scripture in such a way that it shapes the way you pray.

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The biblical command to “pray without ceasing” is not to be taken literally, because that would be impossible (1 Thess. 5:17). What it means is that we should continue praying for things even when God does not answer us the first time round. The Bible provides many examples of people who had to pray several times before God responded, but the reason for this is that we must be taught patience and faithfulness. God wants us to worship him in a spirit of humble obedience, and not simply because he can give us whatever we ask him for. Scripture promises us that the cry of the righteous person will be heard, and that assurance should keep us faithful in the duty of prayer (Luke 18:1-8).

The second section of the homily reminds us of what James wrote in his epistle, that every good and perfect gift comes from God alone (James

1:17), and as the prophet Joel said, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Joel 2:32, quoted in Acts 2:21). That ought to be sufficient incentive for us to persevere in our prayers. However, it is also essential for us to understand whom we are praying to and why we should pray to him and to nobody else. For prayer to be effective, it must be directed to someone who is able to fulfil our desires, who is willing to help us, and who understands better than we do what our real needs are. If he were to answer us only in the terms in which we address him, we would run the risk of getting what we ask for, which may turn out not to be what we really need. The only person who meets these criteria is God himself, which is why it is wrong to pray to the saints as popular devotion long encouraged us to do.

The saints are not able to fulfill our requests even if they want to, and although it is possible that they are praying for us in heaven, we cannot and need not rely on that. God is not like an earthly potentate who can only be approached through intermediaries. By sending his Son into the world to unite us to himself and to die for us, the Father has allowed us into his presence (Eph. 2:6). We must believe this and understand that prayer is an affection of the heart, not a form of lip service. Only God knows our hearts – not the saints, nor the angels, nor other people, nor even ourselves. He reaches more deeply into our lives than words can express, which is why our attitude toward him is so much more important than what we actually say.

We are commanded to pray for one another because we are commanded to love one another and prayer is the most important way in which

we manifest that love. Prayer is primarily an expression of love – our love for God and the love that he has commanded us to have for our fellow men. Whether praying for ourselves or for others, our first concern must be for the needs of the soul, not the body. Jesus taught his disciples this and we must understand why it should be our priority, too. Seek first the kingdom of heaven, he said, and all your earthly needs will be taken care of, too (Matt. 6:33). Material things are for this life only, but spiritual things are for eternity, and it is in heaven that our treasure must be stored.

Furthermore, we must pray for God's appointed ministers, because they are the ones who are meant to teach us how we should grow in our spiritual lives. We must pray that they will understand the Scriptures, that they will preach their message effectively, and that they will see the fruits of their labors in the changed lives of their hearers. It is by the preaching of the gospel that God has chosen to bring people to salvation. But preaching is only effective when it is rooted and grounded in a life of prayer in which we can all share, whether we are called to be preachers or not.

Finally, the first homily on prayer ends with a warning that we cannot pray for the dead. That practice makes sense only if there is a purgatory where souls go after death before they are fit to enter the kingdom of heaven. But Christ has promised us that if we believe in him we shall be with him wherever he is, and that means heaven (John 12:26). Purgatory is meant to be a place of cleansing for the soul, but Christ's blood is our cleanser and our true purgatory. Our prayers should therefore be directed to him and not diverted to obtaining something that he has given us already.

WE MUST PRAY FOR GOD'S APPOINTED MINISTERS, BECAUSE THEY ARE THE ONES WHO ARE MEANT TO TEACH US HOW WE SHOULD GROW IN OUR SPIRITUAL LIVES. WE MUST PRAY THAT THEY WILL UNDERSTAND THE SCRIPTURES, THAT THEY WILL PREACH THEIR MESSAGE EFFECTIVELY, AND THAT THEY WILL SEE THE FRUITS OF THEIR LABORS IN THE CHANGED LIVES OF THEIR HEARERS. IT IS BY THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL THAT GOD HAS CHOSEN TO BRING PEOPLE TO SALVATION. BUT PREACHING IS ONLY EFFECTIVE WHEN IT IS ROOTED AND GROUNDED IN A LIFE OF PRAYER IN WHICH WE CAN ALL SHARE, WHETHER WE ARE CALLED TO BE PREACHERS OR NOT.

WHEN AND WHERE SHOULD I PRAY?

The second homily takes us on to the practical questions of when and where we should pray. We owe God our thanks at all times, of course, but it is also necessary to set aside special times when this can be expressed more directly and without interference from the stresses and strains of everyday life. God provided for that

need in the Old Testament by appointing the Sabbath as a day of rest and worship. The Sabbath commemorated the completion of creation and reminded the people that it was a gift from God that they were meant to enjoy. Christians follow the same principle, but with two important differences. The first is that our Sabbath is the first, and not the last, day of the week because it marks the resurrection of Christ and the beginning of a new creation. It is not the fulfilment of something already achieved but the start of a journey which will bring us to the perfection of the kingdom of heaven.

The other difference is that we are set free from the laws that governed the Sabbath so strictly that weightier matters of the law were forgotten. Christians must keep Sunday observance in proportion and not allow it to become an excuse to avoid the demands of love for our neighbors, but at the same time we must be prepared to set it aside in order to worship God together. The Christian Sabbath can be desecrated in one of two ways. Either it can be treated as a normal working day, in which case its special character is ignored, or it can be regarded as a day of leisure, in which case its special character is perverted, which is even worse. This was a real problem in the sixteenth century, because Sundays and other feast days

were often occasions when merchants would turn up at churches to set up their stalls, and when the men would play those games that have since developed into football, baseball, and cricket. These things were not wrong in themselves but they distracted people from the proper business of worship, and so they had to be curtailed. Prayer was meant to be conducted in a reverent spirit, and that required an equally reverent atmosphere for the spirit to flourish as it should.

It was the need to encourage reverence that lay behind the construction of places intended exclusively for the worship of God. The Reformers recognized that the patriarchs of ancient Israel and the early Christians had not had buildings to worship in, but they put this down to the exceptional circumstances in which the patriarchs lived. Abraham and his family were nomads who did not stay in one place long enough to build anything. The early Christians were persecuted, and so were forced to improvise and conceal their places of worship. The New Testament tells us that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and it is in them that we pray above all (1 Cor. 6:19). Buildings are secondary to worship, but when people are settled and are free to worship God as they please, buildings can be a logical and important aid to it. The construction of the Jerusalem Temple was not the beginning of Israelite religion, but it was commanded and overseen by God, not for his benefit but for ours.

The Reformers pointed out that King David rejoiced to go into the house of the Lord, even though the Temple had not then been built, because it was there that he would worship God, there that he would be able to meditate properly on him, and

there that he would get a glimpse of God's power and majesty (Pss. 122:1; 138:2; 63:2). In support of this assertion, the homilist reminds his hearers of Simeon and Anna, two pious Jews who spent their lives in the Temple waiting for the Messiah to appear, and that it was there that Christ was revealed to them (Luke 2:25-38). The house of God was, therefore, meant to be regarded not just as a refuge from the world but as a place of expectation, where God would show himself to his faithful people in a special way. To profane it is to insult God and to cut ourselves off from his blessing. Times of worship are to be regarded like the great feast which the Gospels tell us the Lord prepared for his servants (Luke 14:16-24). Only those who were properly dressed would be admitted, but those who gained entry would discover that the feast was prepared for them. We must therefore come prepared, come expecting great blessings, and above all come full of love for God and for our neighbors as we feast on his goodness.

In part 2 of this article we will continue by looking to the third homily on prayer and discover what private and public prayer should look like. ▀