

The First Priority

Matthew 6:9

Luke 11:1 “Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”

Jesus’ answer to that request is what we so commonly call the Lord’s Prayer. And he does teach us to pray, though not with a formula. Surely there is a danger in utilizing this prayer as a mere formula with empty repetition, as I did growing up as a child. Certainly a mere repetition of these words is not the point nor the intention of Jesus, so how, then, do we apply the Lord’s Prayer?

Well, first of all, the words themselves are good and we continue to use them at the conclusion of our prayer during the morning worship service. But still we need to understand the form and the actual words of the Lord’s Prayer as a pattern. A pattern, or structure that does, indeed, teach us as God’s people to pray. So our catechism gives us an explanation for each petition, each request, in the Lord’s Prayer. I find those questions and answers very helpful. So, in explanation and exposition of what the Bible teaches, the Catechism would instruct us that, “In the first petition, which is, Hallowed be thy name, we pray that God would enable us and others to glorify him in all that whereby he makes himself known; and that he would dispose all things to his own glory.”

So in the most broad sense, what Jesus is teaching us about prayer is the most important thing is God’s glory. The first priority in prayer is God’s glory. The ultimate objective whenever we pray is God’s glory, that God would enable us to glorify him and that he would “dispose all things to his own glory.” So we pray first, “hallowed be your name.”

I expect you know what the word “hallow” means. It means to set apart, to sanctify, to make holy. So it is that we set apart God’s name for particular honor and reverence, his name representing God himself. God is his name, and so to speak of God’s name is to speak of God. Never separate those two things. Thus we pray, “Hallowed be God!” To God be the glory. In the specific language of the Bible,

1 Cor.10:31 “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

That’s how we begin to pray as Jesus’ disciples. And that brings us into the context of worship, so if you have noticed my outline, I’m actually focusing more upon worship this afternoon than prayer. What is true of prayer is true of worship, since worship is the fullest expression of our conversation with God. Worship is a meeting with God, a meeting in which God certainly speaks to us, but also one in which we speak to God. Hence, prayer. So this first petition of the Lord’s Prayer is the foundation of our worship as well. And the starting point is to emphasize that,

I. GOD ALONE IS WORTHY OF OUR WORSHIP.

I hope that is obvious to you, but I want to emphasize it today because of the crying need of our day, a day in which worship is so often reduced to our own entertainment, or reduced to an event designed around our own pleasure or enjoyment. So often, way too often, the church of our day designs worship to satisfy the needs of those members who are present. And we measure the experience of worship in terms of our own reactions and even emotions. How I feel, what I like, what makes me comfortable. And all of that misses this most basic point. When we come to worship God, we come to recognize his honor, to hallow his name.

And the motivation must be derived from the sense of his worth. That's the root of our English word for worship, worship. We ascribe to God his worth. Because he is worthy!

Rev. 4: 11 "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

That is the fuller demonstration of this first petition in the Lord's Prayer. "Hallowed be your name." Worthy are you to receive glory. And note the reason why.

A. God himself alone is exalted as creator.

What a necessary distinction that is, between creature and creator. That's what gives us the right foundation for worship. You see, the creature worships the creator. The creature ascribes glory and honor to the creator. In that context, it is easy to understand that the essence of idolatry to worship the creature rather than the creator.

We read in of man's sinful idolatry in the words of,

Rom. 1:18 "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."

True worship means that you never do such a thing, you never

exchange God's glory for the supposed glory of any creature which God has made. God alone is the creator, and God alone is worthy of our worship. That worship might be best summarized by the words of,

Rom. 11:36 "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever."

Let me read that whole passage as the very heart of what it means to worship God. That is the heart of true biblical religion. It is the essence of all Christian faith and worship. Here is the fullness of what it means when you pray, "Hallowed be your name."

Rom. 11:33 "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" 35 "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" 36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen"

In that broad context, let me mention a second way in which we understand that God alone is worthy of our worship. Which is to say,

B. God himself alone is perfectly holy.

We acknowledge the holiness of God's name because we acknowledge that God himself is holy. Worship is expressing that holiness, ascribing that holiness to him. So for a specific example and expression of true worship, consider,

Ps. 99:1 "The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! 2 The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. 3 Let them praise your great and awesome name! Holy is he! 4 The King in his might loves justice. You have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. 5 Exalt the Lord our

God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he.”

I emphasize all of this to emphasize the desperate need of our day to rightly understand the nature of worship. This doesn’t solve all the problems regarding worship or answer all the questions that God’s people might have, but you won’t solve those problems or answer those questions until this point is completely settled in your heart first. God alone is worthy of our worship, and the very essence of that worship is to ascribe that glory to him.

That awareness also puts us in the right frame of mind, which is humility. It gives us a broken and contrite heart, as we consider our own sinfulness and lack of glory. The application of this emphasis upon God’s glory is to bring us to consider our lowliness. And those two things are connected by the prophet Isaiah when he declares this,

Is. 57:15 “For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.”

So a recognition that God alone is worthy of our worship humbles us as his people. And when we are humbled, then we are ready to worship. Only when we are humbled are we ready to worship. God who is holy dwells in the high and holy place of heaven. And he dwells with him who is contrite, a broken and contrite spirit. Just listen to David’s prayer,

Ps. 51:14 “Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. 15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. 16 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. 17 The

sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

So all of that is included in this first petition of the Lord’s Prayer. God alone is worthy of our worship, and we come to him for the very purpose of ascribing glory to his him. Hallowed be your name. Which brings me to my second point.

II. GOD ALONE MUST BE THE RECIPIENT OF OUR WORSHIP.

Again, I am expressing very important lessons about worship in very simple terms. God alone is the recipient of our worship. He is the audience, as we are the worshipers, the performers if you will. In 1 Chronicles 16, David is offering his praise to God on the occasion of the ark of the covenant being returned to the worship of God’s people in Jerusalem. The ark represented the presence of God among his people, and that is the reason for his sacrifice of praise. Note how thoroughly the attention is given to God, and to his name.

1 Chron. 16:8 “Oh give thanks to the Lord; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples! 9 Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wondrous works! 10 Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.”

The point is this, that,

A. The honor and exalted glory of God’s name must be the subject and content of our worship.

The song of praise continues,

1 Chron. 16:23 “Sing to the Lord, all the earth! Tell of his salvation from day to day. 24 Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! 25 For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and he is to be feared above all gods. 26 For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens. 27 Splendor and majesty

are before him; strength and joy are in his place. 28 Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength! 29 Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering and come before him! Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness; 30 tremble before him, all the earth; yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved.”

1 Chron. 16:35 “Say also: “Save us, O God of our salvation, and gather and deliver us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise. 36 Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting!” Then all the people said, “Amen!” and praised the Lord.”

In other words, “Hallowed be YOUR name.” That’s worship. That’s the beginning of our prayer. That’s what God saved us to do. Above all else, God is seeking worshipers. “Save us, O God of our salvation...that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise.”

That’s what we are doing here this afternoon. That’s why we assemble ourselves together every Lord’s Day. That is our calling as worshipers. That is my charge to you today. “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering and come before him! Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness.”

God is the subject of our worship. God is the content of our worship. And,

B. The honor and exalted glory of God’s name must be the context of our worship.

Which is to say, the chief attitude of God’s people must be reverence. The chief motivation for our worship must be reverence toward God. And that’s the context. Not informality. Not familiarity. Not comfortability. Not anything to do with our

own preferences and desires. But this emphasis upon the holy name of God means that we come into his presence with fear and trembling. Or, as the writer of Hebrews put it, “reverence and awe.”

Heb. 12:28 “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.”

Reverence and awe. That must be the context of our worship. That is to define the personality of our worship, because above all else, when we worship, when we pray, we begin with a preoccupation with the exalted glory of God’s name. Worship is not to be designed to make unbelievers comfortable. It is not designed to meet the needs of so-called seekers. It does not have as its chief purpose the fulfillment of our own desires. The exalted glory of God is what stands out. “Thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.”

Here is a description of that worship, in the words of,

Ps. 99:1 “The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! 2 The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. 3 Let them praise your great and awesome name! Holy is he! 4 The King in his might loves justice. You have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. 5 Exalt the Lord our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he!”

We worship at the footstool of God, with fear and reverence. We worship at the footstool of God because he alone is worthy of our praise. We worship at the footstool of God with the honor and exalted glory of his name first and foremost in our hearts and minds.

So the focus isn't upon me, or anyone else leading in the worship. Don't expect me to make draw attention to myself, or to anyone else, when we are together in worship. God is to get all the attention. There is a danger in thinking everyone has to have some sort of leadership position as well, 'exercising your gifts' as it is often put today. There ought to be no such focus upon each other. Worship is not a time to look at each other, but rather it is a time, together, to look at God. We stir one another on to love and good works when we stir one another on to contemplate the exalted glory of God's name. And so we pray together, "Hallowed by your name." Together, we join our voices as we unite our hearts. Together, we ascribe glory to God because he alone is worthy. That might be called adoration. Together, with one voice, as a congregation of God's people, we offer to God our adoration. And we you are presence, adding your voice to the voice of the congregation, you are leading in worship, for we are all priests offering our sacrifice or praise together.

With one more point added to all of that. We ought to seek to worship God in way that meets his approval; in a way that pleases him.

C. The pleasure and approval of God must be the goal of our worship.

So if we would honestly pray, "Hallowed by your name," if you would sincerely wish for God's name and God's glory to be exalted when you worship him, then the obvious implication is that you need to offer the sacrifices of worship which he himself has prescribed.

There is such a danger within our hearts to offer that sacrifice of worship which seems agreeable to us, that which we like the most; for example, your favorite hymn. There is a danger in doing what Paul describes in Colossians as "will-worship," or self-

defined worship. Churches do that all the time today, introducing into their services of worship all sorts of elements that have nothing to do with what God has prescribed for us in Scripture.

The principle here is clearly expressed by God to his Old Covenant people of Israel in,

Deut. 12:1 "These are the statutes and rules that you shall be careful to do in the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. 2 You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. 3 You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place. 4 You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way."

Then he goes on to put it positively,

Deut. 12:5 "But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, 6 and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. 7 And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the Lord your God has blessed you. 8 "You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes, 9 for you have not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance that the Lord your God is giving you. 10 But when you go over the Jordan and live in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to inherit, and when he gives you rest from all your enemies around, so that you live in safety, 11 then to the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his

name dwell there, there you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, and all your finest vow offerings that you vow to the Lord. 12 And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your sons and your daughters, your male servants and your female servants, and the Levite that is within your towns, since he has no portion or inheritance with you. 13 Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place that you see, 14 but at the place that the Lord will choose in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I am commanding you.”

So don't worship according to the practices and traditions of the world. Offer to God those sacrifices which he has commanded, and only them. Do not add or subtract from the instructions which God has given. Instead,

Deut. 12:28 “Be careful to obey all these words that I command you, that it may go well with you and with your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God. 29 “When the Lord your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, 30 take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? —that I also may do the same.’ 31 You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. 32 “Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.”

So we follow those regulations, not because we think so-called “traditional worship” is better, but because we wish to hallow God's name. We offer those sacrifices of worship with fear

and trembling, with reverence and awe, because that is what God calls us to do. There is such a clamor today to add to worship. Such a clamor for our own excitement. Such a clamor to provide what people are always asking for, to make the experience of worship more visual, more comfortable, more conducive to our own desires. But that is the wrong priority.

The first priority is so clearly stated in this form of prayer we call the Lord's Prayer. The first petition. Our highest priority is to be the desire and the prayer for God to glorify his own name, for God to enable us to do the very same thing.

So when you pray, every time, and when you gather together to worship God, begin in the manner defined by these words, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by your name.”