

ISSUE

21.15

BULLETIN OF  
THE OLSEN  
PARK CHURCH  
OF CHRIST

# Faithful Sayings

April 14,  
2019

## Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

10:00 AM

11:00 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

## Elders:

Pat Ledbetter  
Brady McAlister  
Jeff Nunn

## Deacons:

Steve Dixon  
Ryan Ferguson  
Ben Hight  
Blake McAlister  
Walker McAnear  
Ryan Matney  
Sam Nunn  
Lance Purcell  
Justin Smiley  
Kevin Wise  
Trevor Yontz

## Evangelist:

Kyle Pope



## Perverting Prayer

By Kyle Pope

Prayer is a great privilege for Christians. John wrote, **“This is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us”** (1 John 5:14, NKJV). Assurance that God hears prayer is dependent upon asking “according to His will.” Balaam’s prayers to curse Israel demonstrate God does not grant prayers contrary to His will (Num. 22-24). One must have the proper relationship with God, and offer prayer conforming to His revealed will. James warns, **“you ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures”** (James 4:3). To ask “amiss” – Gr. *kakos* “badly” (Strong), is to ask improperly or “wrongly” (ESV). How may we be guilty of improper prayer?

### Perverting the Direction of Prayer

Under Moses, prayer was directed towards the temple, where God caused His name to dwell (1 Kings 8:29). In exile, Daniel prayed towards Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10). Under Christ, we come to the **“heavenly Jerusalem”** (Heb. 12:22). Prayer now must not be directed to Jerusalem, Mecca, or any earthly shrine, but to heaven. Mosaic prayer towards Jerusalem was not worship of Jerusalem, but of God. Now also, prayer towards heaven must not be worship of heaven, but Him who dwells there.

No man approaches a king without proper permission, escort, and authorization. The privilege of approaching the Creator in prayer is not without condition. The pagan who directs prayers to imagined gods prays in vain to things **“which by nature are not gods”** (Gal. 4:8). The ecumenical prayers of Jews, Muslims, and denominationalists assembled together in prayer ignore the terms by which man may come into the presence of the true God. In this age all prayer must come through Christ. This demands the proper relationship with God in Christ through obedience to the gospel (John 14:6). It also means prayer must be directed to the Father through the intercession of Jesus. Christ declared, **“Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you”** (John 16:23).

The simplicity of this fails to satisfy the religious world. The Roman Catholic Church looks to Mary for intercession. At the close of a Vatican

II proclamation, it speaks of offering “prayers together with all the Christian faithful that through the intercession of the Virgin Mary... the nations may be led to the knowledge of the truth as soon as possible” (*Decree on the Missionary Work of the Church*, December 7, 1965). This false doctrine rests in the erroneous belief in prayer to dead “saints” for intercession. The Catholic Catechism claims, “The witnesses who have preceded us into the kingdom, especially those whom the Church recognizes as saints, share in the living tradition of prayer—Their intercession is their most exalted service to God’s plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world” (IV. Christian Prayer, 1. Prayer in the Christian Life, no. 2683). In biblical terms a “saint” is simply a Christian (1 Cor. 1:2). The Bible never teaches that the dead may be petitioned, or that they can offer intercession for the living. All prayer in Christ is to God the Father through Christ alone (1 Tim. 2:5).

### **Perverting the Definition of Prayer**

Biblical prayer may involve **“supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks”** (1 Tim. 2:1). Jesus demonstrates these aspects of prayer in His model prayer (Matt. 6:9-13). Prayer may be silent (1 Sam. 1:12-13), audible (Acts 1:24-25), public (1 Cor. 14:16), or private (Matt. 6:6), but it is communication. This stands in marked contrast to pagan and eastern concepts of a mystical trance which raise a participant to a heightened spiritual state. Catholic and Greek Orthodox teaching intermingles pagan and biblical concepts into what they call “mental prayer.” This is not just unspoken prayer. The eighth century Greek theologian John of Damascus imagined a type of prayer which he called “an elevation of the soul to God” (*On the Orthodox Faith*, 3.24). He called mystical contemplation and meditation a type of prayer. The Bible certainly teaches value in meditating on truth (Phil. 4:8), but meditation is not prayer.

Charismatic denominations teach a variation of this in what they call using “Holy Spirit prayer language.” Daniel Bernard explains, “Even though we may not know what the will of God is the

Holy Spirit does and prays accordingly. Therefore, pray in the Holy Spirit by using an unknown prayer language... as you pray in the Holy Spirit (prayer language), you are praying in the perfect will of God" (*Praying Up a Storm*, 37). This false concept reflects a misunderstanding of Romans 8:26. Paul wrote, **"Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."** Charismatics miss that Paul says this happens "with groanings which cannot be uttered." This is silent, unspoken, and unheard. Paul addresses how God's Spirit knows the thoughts and needs of our spirit. This is not an unknown prayer language (cf. 8:27; 1 Chron.28:9; Prov. 20:27). Paul condemns prayer that does not involve the understanding of what is said. He affirms, **"I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the understanding"** (1 Cor. 14:15).

While we might shun definitions of prayer making it a trance or "prayer language," prayer void of the understanding can happen in other ways. Jesus condemned using **"vain repetitions"** (Matt. 6:7). Scripture does not teach prescribed, formulaic prayers. We must reject rituals such as the rosary or prayer books, but this also means avoiding mindless repetition of stock phrases. We can ask God to "guide, guard, and direct us" or give the preacher a "ready recollection" so long as each time these words are spoken they are the sincere appeal of our heart. A true relationship with Christ grants the Christian **"boldness and access with confidence"** (Eph. 3:12), but audience with the All-Mighty in prayer must avoid the extremes of stoic showy formality and a loose irreverent informality.

### **Perverting the Power of Prayer**

In Christ we have confidence in the effectiveness of prayer. James affirms, **"The effective, fervent prayer**

**of a righteous man avails much"** (James 5:16). However, man often distorts scriptural teaching about the "power of prayer." Scripture does not teach that salvation comes through saying the so-called "Sinner's Prayer." God is aware of the prayers of a sinner (Acts 10:4), but alien sinners do not have access to God which allows requesting forgiveness (1 Pet. 3:12). This comes through faith in Jesus (Gal. 3:26-27), repenting of sins (Acts 2:38), confessing Christ (Rom. 10:10), and baptism for the remission of sins (Acts 22:16). Only the Christian can pray for forgiveness (Acts 8:22).

The "Sinner's Prayer" is a relic of the old Calvinistic idea that one must pray to receive confirmation of election. The nineteenth century gospel preacher Barton W. Stone wrote of his early life in Presbyterianism. Believing that only those whom God predestined could be saved, he followed the practice of his day of trying to "pray through to God" to receive evidence of his election. He wrote, "For one year I was tossed on the waves of uncer-

tainty—laboring, praying, and striving to obtain saving faith—sometimes desponding, and almost despairing of ever getting it” (*Works of Elder B. W. Stone*, p. 14). Thanks be to God, obedience to the gospel is not so complicated. Any who are **“cut to the heart”** can obey Christ now (Acts 2:37-41).

The fact that Christians can pray for forgiveness leads some to misunderstand the limits of this. Christians can’t pray for forgiveness without repentance—that is not prayer “according to His will” (1 John 5:14; cf. Acts 8:22). Christians are to pray for the forgiveness of other Christians (James 5:15-16), but this also is conditioned upon their repentance. Unrepentant sin is **“sin unto death,”** for which John forbids us

to pray (1 John 5:16-17). We cannot pray for forgiveness of the unrepentant dead. Man is judged for what is done in the body (2 Cor. 5:10). Some appeal to the apocryphal account of Judas Maccabeus prayer for the sins of Jews slain in battle as authority for prayer for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:38-45). This is no authority at all! Apocryphal books were never viewed by the Jews as inspired, nor does Jesus quote from them. The account simply records what happened and the writer’s belief. It does not prove it was acceptable to God.

A final distortion of the “power of prayer” treats the process of praying itself as if it carries power. In Christ, confidence in prayer’s power is confidence in God’s power. There is no magic in the act of prayer. Vague appeals to a “higher power” which ignore the terms of a true relationship with God are merely revived pagan animism (i. e. the belief that spirits inhabit and influence nature). God promised, **“If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven”** (2 Chron. 7:14). God wants His people to pray to Him, but this isn’t “prayer by petition.” Some speak as if prayer in sufficient numbers compels God to protect or bless when He would not otherwise have done so. If the prayer of faithful Elijah led God to stop the rain (James 5:17-18), God is not waiting in heaven for a certain number of “names on the petition” to answer prayer.



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4700 Andrews Ave.  
Amarillo TX 79106  
806-352-2809  
www.olsenpark.com

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