



Prayer: Rebelling Against the Status Quo [David Wells]

You will be appalled by the story I am about to relate to you. Appalled, that is, if you have any kind of social conscience.

A poor black, living on Chicago's South Side, sought to have her apartment properly heated during the frigid winter months. Despite city law on the matter, her unscrupulous landlord refused. The woman was a widow, desperately poor, and ignorant of the legal system; but she took the case to court on her own behalf. Justice, she declared, ought to be done. It was her ill fortune, however, to appear repeatedly before the same judge who, as it turned out, was an atheist and a bigot. The only principle by which he abode was, as he put it, that "blacks should be kept in their place." The possibilities of a ruling favorable to the widow were, therefore, bleak. They became even bleaker as she realized she lacked the indispensable ingredient necessary for favorable rulings in cases like these—namely, a satisfactory bribe. Nevertheless, she persisted. At first, the judge did not so much as even look up from reading the novel on his lap before dismissing her. But then he began to notice her. Just another black, he thought, stupid enough to think she could get justice. Then her persistence made him self-conscious. This turned to guilt and anger. Finally, raging and embarrassed, he granted her petition and enforced the law. Here was a massive victory over "the system" —at least as it functioned in his corrupted courtroom. In putting the matter like this I have not, of course, been quite honest. For this never really happened in Chicago (as far as I know), nor is it even my "story." It is a parable told by Jesus (Luke 18:1-8) to illustrate the nature of petitionary prayer.

The parallel Jesus drew was obviously not between God and the corrupt judge, but between the widow and the petitioner. This parallel has two aspects. First, the widow refused to accept her unjust situation, just as the Christian should refuse to resign himself or herself to the world in its fallenness. Second, despite discouragements, the widow persisted with her case as should the Christian with his or hers. The first aspect has to do with prayer's nature and the second with its practice.

I want to argue that our feeble and irregular prayer, especially in its petitionary aspect, is too frequently addressed in the wrong way. When confronting this failing, we are inclined to flagellate ourselves for our weak wills, our insipid desires, our ineffective technique and our wandering minds. We keep thinking that somehow our practice is awry and we rack our brains to see if we can discover where. I suggest that the problem lies in a misunderstanding of prayer's nature and our practice will never have that widow's persistence until our outlook has her clarity.

What, then, is the nature of petitionary prayer? It is, in essence, rebellion—rebellion against the world in its fallenness, the absolute and undying refusal to accept as normal what is pervasively abnormal. It is, in this its negative aspect, the refusal of every agenda, every scheme, every interpretation that is at odds with the norm as originally established by God. As such, it is itself an expression of the unbridgeable chasm that separates Good from Evil, the declaration that Evil is not a variation on Good but its antithesis.

Or, to put it the other way around, to come to an acceptance of life "as it is," to accept it on its own terms—which means acknowledging the inevitability of the way it works—is to surrender a Christian view of God. This resignation to what is abnormal has within it the hidden and unrecognized assumption that the power of God to change the world, to overcome Evil by Good, will not be actualized. Nothing destroys petitionary prayer (and with it, a Christian view of God) as quickly as resignation. "At all times," Jesus declared, "we should pray" and not "lose heart," thereby acquiescing to what is (Luke 18:1). The dissipation of petitionary prayer in the presence of resignation has an interesting historical pedigree. Those religions that stress quietistic acquiescence always disparage petitionary prayer. This was true of the Stoics who claimed that such prayer showed that one was unwilling to accept the existent world as an expression of God's will. One was trying to escape from it by having it modified. That, they said, was bad. A similar argument is found in Buddhism. And the same result, although arrived at by a different process of reasoning, is commonly encountered in our secular culture.

Secularism is that attitude that sees life as an end in itself. Life, it is thought, is severed from any relationship to God. Consequently the

only norm or “given” in life, whether for meaning or for morals, is the world as it is. With this, it is argued, we must come to terms; to seek some other referent around which to structure our lives is futile and “escapist.” It is not only that God, the object of petitionary prayer, has often become indistinct, but that his relationship to the world is seen in a new way. And it is a way that does not violate secular assumption. God may be “present” and “active” in the world, but it is not a presence and an activity that changes anything.

Against all of this, it must be asserted that petitionary prayer only flourishes where there is a twofold belief: first, that God’s name is hallowed too irregularly, his kingdom has come too little, and his will is done too infrequently; second, that God himself can change this situation. Petitionary prayer, therefore, is the expression of the hope that life as we meet it, on the one hand, can be otherwise and, on the other hand, that it ought to be otherwise. It is therefore impossible to seek to live in God’s world on his terms, doing his work in a way that is consistent with who he is, without engaging in regular prayer.

That, I believe, is the real significance of petitionary prayer in our Lord’s life. Much of his prayer life is left unexplained by the Gospel writers (e.g., Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; 9:18;11:1), but a pattern in the circumstances that elicited prayer is discernible.

First, petitionary prayer preceded great decisions in his life, such as the choosing of the disciples (Luke 6:12); indeed, the only possible explanation of his choice of that ragtag bunch of nonentities, boastful, ignorant and uncomprehending as they were, was that he had prayed before choosing them. Second, he prayed when pressed beyond measure, when his day was unusually busy with many competing claims upon his energies and attention (e.g., Matt 14:23). Third, he prayed in the great crises and turning points of his life, such as his baptism, the Transfiguration, and the Cross (Luke 3:21;

9:28-29). Finally, he prayed before and during unusual temptation, the most vivid occasion being Gethsemane (Matt 26:36-45). As the “hour” of evil descended, the contrast between the way Jesus met it and the way his disciples met it is explained only by the fact that he persevered in prayer and they slept in faintness of heart. Each of these events presented our Lord with the possibility of adopting an agenda, accepting a perspective, or pursuing a course that

To pray declares that God and his world are at cross-purposes; to “sleep,” or “faint,” or “lose heart” is to act as if they are not. Why, then, do we pray so little for our local church? Is it really that our technique is bad, our wills weak, or our imaginations listless? I don’t believe so. There is plenty of strong-willed and lively discussion—which in part or in whole may be justified—about the mediocrity of the preaching, the emptiness of the worship, the superficiality of the fellowship, and the ineffectiveness of the evangelism. So, why, then, don’t we pray as persistently as we talk? The answer, quite simply, is that we don’t believe it will make any difference. We accept, however despairingly, that the situation is unchangeable, that what is will always be. This is not a problem about the practice of prayer, but rather about its nature. Or, more precisely, it is about the nature of God and his relationship to this world.

Unlike the widow in the parable, we find it is easy to come to terms with the unjust and fallen world around us—even when it intrudes into Christian institutions. It is not always that we are unaware of what is happening, but simply that we feel completely impotent to change anything. That impotence leads us, however unwillingly, to strike a truce with what is wrong.

In other words, we have lost our anger, both at the level of social witness and before God in prayer. Fortunately, he has not lost his; for the wrath of God is his opposition to what is wrong, the means by which truth is put forever on the throne and error forever on the scaffold. Without God’s wrath, there would be no reason to live morally in the world and every reason not to. So the wrath of God, in this sense, is intimately connected with petitionary prayer that also seeks the ascendancy of truth in all instances and the corresponding banishment of evil.

The framework Jesus gave us for thinking about this was the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is that sphere where the king’s sovereignty is recognized. And, because of the nature of our king, that sovereignty is exercised supernaturally. In Jesus, the long-awaited “age to come” arrived; in him and through him, the Messianic incursion into the world has happened. Being a Christian, then, is not a matter of simply having had the right religious experience but rather of starting to live in that sphere which is authentically divine. Evangelism is not successful because our technique is “right,” but because this “age” breaks into the lives of sinful people. And this “age to come,” which is already dawning, is not the possession of any one people or culture. God’s “age,” the “age” of his crucified Son, is dawning in the whole world. Our praying, therefore, should look beyond the concerns of our private lives to include the wide horizon of all human life in which God is concerned. If the Gospel is universal, prayer cannot restrict itself to being local.

It is not beside the point, therefore, to see the world as a courtroom in which a “case” can still be made against what is wrong and for what is right. Our feebleness in prayer happens because we have lost sight of this, and until we regain it we will not persist in our role as litigants. But there is every reason why we should regain our vision and utilize our opportunity, for the Judge before whom we appear is neither an atheist nor corrupt, but the glorious God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Do you really think, then, that he will

fail to “bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry to him night and day? Will he keep putting them off?” “I tell you,” our Lord declares, “he will see that they get justice, and quickly” (Luke 18:7-8).

Study Questions

1. What relationship exists between petitionary prayer and the mission of the church?
2. Wells states that we have two problem areas with petitionary prayer: its practice and its nature. Can you restate these problems? Which is the most important? Why?
3. Take note of Wells’ interpretation of the “Lord’s Prayer.” How is this a “mission” prayer? was other than God’s. His rejection of the alternative was each time signaled by his petitionary prayer. It was his means of refusing to live in this world or to do his Father’s business on any other terms than his Father’s. As such, it was rebellion against the world in its perverse and fallen abnormality.