

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 20 – Part 10

PRAYER WHICH IS THE CHIEF EXERCISE OF FAITH

In this chapter Calvin offers us an in-depth look at prayer. Though people often think of Calvin as a dry, intellectual theologian, he was in fact a man deeply devoted to prayer. His faith was not merely intellectual, but driven by a desire to personally connect with God. In this section Calvin offers an in-depth look at the Lord's Prayer. In the previous article, we examined "Our Father, who art in heaven." Here we look at the final three (out of six) petitions which make up the prayer.

Calvin begins by reminding his readers that prayer always begins with the first three petitions; petitions that draw us into God's presence. Only after having done so do we then turn to our own needs.

Summary: Give us this day our daily bread (petition 4) – There are four aspects to this petition. The first is that it allows us to see that it is God who provides and that we ought to seek and receive in an attitude of thankfulness. Second, this petition is not simply about food but it is about "*...all things in general that our bodies have need to use...not only for food and clothing but also for everything that God perceives to be beneficial to us...*" (pg. 908). Third, this portion of the prayer is a reminder that we ought not to be anxious about our lives because God cares not only for our souls but also for our physical lives. Fourth, that we are to only ask for what we need for this day (even when we have plenty in store) as a means of trusting that God will care for us daily.

Forgive us our debts (petition 5) – Calvin begins by explaining why we use the term debts. "*He (Jesus) calls sins debts because we owe penalty for them...*" (pg. 910). In a sense, it is like a spiritual balance sheet where sin creates a debit to our account, and somehow we need to find a credit to offset it. The good news is that this credit is provided by Jesus who offers us the credit free of charge, thereby cancelling a debt we could never pay. Even so, Calvin argues that we need to be continually praying for forgiveness because "*...it pleases God gradually to restore his image in us in such a manner that some taint always remains in our flesh...*" (pg. 911). So even though we know that we are going to be forgiven, we need to seek it daily, to be continually reoriented to God. Though many churches use trespasses instead of debts, the concept is the same...we have transgressed God's law/will and need to be forgiven for it.

As we forgive others – Calvin describes forgiving others in this way. "*...namely as we spare and pardon all who have in any way injured us, either treating us unjustly in deed or insulting us in word...this rather is our forgiveness: willingly to cast from the mind wrath, hatred, desired for revenge, and willingly to banish from oblivion the remembrance of injustice*" (pg. 912). Calvin even goes so far as to say that if we do not do these things to the best of our ability then we are asking God not to forgive us. "*This indeed, is to petition him not to do it to us unless we ourselves do it*" (pg. 912). He adds a note however, that our forgiving others does not earn us God's forgiveness. As noted above, that forgiveness is a gift.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil (petition 6) – Calvin understands how difficult it can be to be faithful to God and describes the two main types of temptations. The first is that of lusting after power, riches and the like. The second, is giving up hope when things go badly. Both, he implies, will lead us away from God. Thus, we pray that God will equip us, through the Spirit, with everything that we need to stay the course.

Reflection: The second half of the prayer reminds us that we are people who need. We need sustenance. We need forgiveness. We need to forgive. We need support. The second half of the prayer also reminds us that God desires to give us these things; that God desires that we live whole, abundant lives, that reflect the blessings all human beings are supposed to have. Thus, we are encouraged to pray for them, believing that God wants us to have them.

Questions:

1. What practical things do you pray for?
2. Why is it (if it is) important for you to pray for forgiveness on a regular basis?
3. What temptations do you need help resisting?