

Pray With Your Eyes Open

Weekly Group Talks

Spring 2008

By Jason Foster



Small Group Study based on

Pray With Your Eyes Open

by Richard Pratt

Pray With Your Eyes Open

Week 1 Talk

This is a course about prayer. But as we will see in the coming weeks, to talk about prayer entails talking about God and ourselves. It also entails confronting some difficult issues and asking some tough questions. Tonight, I want us to start the course by assessing the intimacy of prayer.

Prayer is a very intimate thing. Ideally, it is through prayer that we reveal all of ourselves to God, where we unload all of our pent-up burdens, where our darkest secrets are exposed, and where we find a level of honesty that we rarely disclose to anyone else but God. The Bible is full of such prayers (see Ps. 77).

The quality of someone's prayer life is a deeply private matter. To ask someone about their prayer life can be like asking someone about their sex life, or how much money they make, or how much they give to charity. Questions such as these touch on very intimate aspects of our lives, and are not things that many of us are comfortable talking about in public in any great detail. And this is not all bad! God has built good boundaries and limits into the created order. We often get into trouble when we try to do away with godly boundaries for the sake of 'authenticity' or 'getting real' or 'pushing the envelope'.

But this creates an immediately obvious dilemma. Here we are, embarking on a study of a rather intimate subject, prayer, while also trying to respect the legitimacy of boundaries while seeking to go deeper than an arm's length treatment. This is no easy thing and as a group, we will likely learn as we go.

In the next few minutes, allow me to share with you my general vision for this study. And I guess the best way for me to summarize this vision is to briefly talk about the trap I'd like us all to avoid. That trap being:

Studying Prayer as an Academically Detached Exercise:

It can be very tempting to study prayer within the context of technique or detached theology. This is a temptation because to reduce prayer to such things is to play it safe, and to keep the subject at arm's length. Now let's be clear; we will get into technique in this study, and I am not for a minute suggesting that studying prayer can or should be divorced from larger theological considerations. But if the depth of our study only goes as far as discussing prayer technique of talking about prayer

within the realm of theoretical theology that never gets out of the clouds, this study will largely be pointless, and might even be dangerous. Why?

Prayer is a very intimate subject, but that doesn't mean we are incapable of turning it into something impersonal and removed from our emotional and spiritual existence. One obvious contemporary example of this dynamic is the subject of sex. A biblical theology of sex is deeply personal and connective, and incorporates the physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of our humanity in deep ways. The idea of two becoming one flesh is extraordinarily profound and beautiful. This is how we should be thinking about it. But is this the way the culture thinks about sex? Absolutely not. Sex is a detached physical act, mostly devoid of commitment, emotional intimacy and spiritual connection. This is how it is thought of in schools, bars and clubs. It's how it's portrayed in our media. It is the opposite of a biblical theology of sex. Something deeply intimate and beautiful has been largely warped into something that's purely biological and unemotional.

The point is that actions are usually preceded by attitudes. When something is thought of in impersonal and arm's length terms, our actions in relation to that thing will reflect such attitudes. This danger is real, and it is the danger we as a group most need to guard against regarding prayer. Yes, we will talk about technique. Yes, we will talk about having a right theology to undergird our approach to prayer. These things are important. But they don't guarantee that we won't bring an attitude of academic or emotional detachment into this study that will rob us of the emotional warmth and vulnerability that's needed to go to the next level in our prayers.

Some suggest that the biggest problem the church has in regard to prayer is that we don't pray enough. Others suggest that we don't pray the right way. To be sure, these are real problems that need to be addressed. But they point to a much deeper problem. In this group, it is my aim to move us away from a detached view of prayer, and towards a view of prayer that stresses emotional and spiritual trust. This is a fearful thing. We will be trying to thread the needle between exalting and engaging the intellect, while spurning a detached academic approach to prayer. At one and the same time, we will be trying to enliven and cultivate our emotional and spiritual fervor for connection with God, while having such fervor properly anchored by sound theology without being stifled by it. We will be aiming for deep and abiding trust among ourselves, and especially with God. When it comes to prayer, academic detachment can be a protective front covering up a lack of trust that often fuels an anemic prayer life.

A proper and vibrant prayer life is one that fully engages every aspect of the human – physical and spiritual, intellectual and emotional. To fully embrace and explore this reality will likely cause discomfort for everyone here at some point in the course. That's okay. Being willing to seriously grapple with discomfort rather than hiding from it is to be faithful to our theological tradition. It means we're reforming rather than vegging. Prayer is God's given way of communicating with him and participating in his Kingdom purposes. The prayers of the individual and the church are paramount in seeing God's Kingdom come to earth as it is in heaven. God uses the fervent prayers of the righteous to change the world. Given the condition of our world, the importance of prayer to us today is self-evident. Let's embrace the opportunity to learn how to go to the next level in our prayers, and let's joyfully explore prayer together in a spirit of trust and anticipation.

Thanks for listening.

Pray With Your Eyes Open

Week 2 Talk (Chapter 1)

Weddings are a big deal. They are often lavish affairs, and there can literally be a million different details, both big and small, to work out. The importance of the day and the myriad of issues that are often involved in pulling it off can create a lot of pressure and stress. And in some cases, the joy of the moment can be lost in the cloud of dust.

Put simply, a wedding can be an event where we can lose the ability to discern essentials from non-essentials. It can be very tempting to elevate every little detail into a major issue or crisis, and lose sight of its non-essential nature in the whole scheme of things. Part of the reason why Helen and I never really fought about the details of our wedding and had a great time on our big day was that we didn't lose sight of what was truly important and truly essential. In a strict sense, a wedding needs a bride, a groom, and an officiant. These are the essentials of a wedding. Everything else – the location, the cake, the dress, the tux, the guest list, the seating chart, the food, the photographer, the centerpieces, the party favorites, the first song, and especially the mothers-in-law, are all non-essential. That doesn't mean they are unimportant, but it does mean that a wedding can take place even if all these other things are not in place. But if there's no groom, or no bride, or no officiant, there's gonna be no wedding.

The subject of prayer has some of the same characteristics. In Chapter 1, Richard focuses on the essentials of prayer rather than the non-essentials. Like a wedding, we can be tempted to wrongly elevate non-essential matters into essentials, and cloud up our prayer lives accordingly. In prayer, we can place undue importance on things like location (in the church sanctuary rather than the Fellowship Hall), environment (quiet vs. loud), surroundings ('sacred' space vs. 'secular' space), timing (morning vs. lunchtime), and setting (individual vs. group prayer setting). Similar to the non-essentials of a wedding, none of these things are unimportant. But none of them are essential. The decision of whether to pray or not to pray should not depend on these factors anymore than the decision to get married should depend on what the main course at the reception will be. That's because these factors are not essential to prayer. Jesus himself prayed in a garden (Mt 26), in a house (Lk 24), by a river (Lk 3), on a mountainside (Lk 6), in the Upper Room (Mk 14), in various lonely places (Lk 5), and of course, on the Cross (Lk 23).

According to Richard, there are three essential aspects of prayer. They are essential because if any one of them is absent, Christian prayer is impossible.

The first essential element of prayer is **God**. God is the one who receives our prayers, hears them, and responds to them. Our concept of God is directly relevant to every aspect of our prayer life. If our concept of God is too big, he can seem very distant, aloof, and out of touch. This will negatively impact our prayers. On the other hand, if our concept of God is too small, he can become more of a flawed friend rather than the supremely powerful Lord of the Cosmos who commands our obedience and is capable of working the seemingly impossible (Mt 19.26).

On pg. 5, Richard lists some of the aspects of God that are supported by the Psalms. The vitality of our prayer life greatly depends on having a biblically balanced and informed view of God. To reflect on the wonder of God in our prayers is to imitate the Psalms. It better informs us of who we are praying to, and this better equips us to remember the many aspects of God. This helps prevent our prayers from becoming boring or monotonous, and gives us power to recall the greatness of God to help guide our prayers.

The second essential element of prayer is the **Christian**. We are the source of prayerful communication with God. The more aware we are of ourselves, the more sincere and honest our prayers will be. As Richard points out on pg 6, the psalmists were deeply aware of their own thoughts in their prayers to God. Self-awareness adds a critical dimension to prayer. This can often mean the difference between deep abiding prayer and surface level obligatory prayer.

As the Bible makes clear, focusing on ourselves in prayer doesn't automatically make us self-centered, and it doesn't automatically mean that we are adopting a human-centered theology. It can mean this, and we need to guard against these errors. But the fact remains, we are essential to prayer and we shouldn't shrink from this. If we want a vibrant intimate relationship with God, we need to know ourselves well enough to engage in weighty and substantive conversations with God that goes below superficial niceties. We must forsake superficial prayer if we want to avoid prayer as ritual. To know and understand ourselves enables honesty and completeness in prayer. The rub is the vulnerability that comes with it.

The final essential element of prayer is **communication**. While words can be inadequate to fully express ourselves to God, our words are nonetheless important, because the all-knowing God understands us even when our words seem

insufficient (Rom 8.26). In order for prayer to take place, there needs to be communication, both verbal and non-verbal.

On pg 9, Richard stresses that the diversity of human need and concern are best met through variety in communication. One reason why our prayers can seem stale and rote is because we fail to be creative and incorporate variety into our prayers. There is no one set way to pray. While Jesus gave us the Lord's Prayer, Jesus himself employed great variety in his prayers to the Father, and so should we. A formulaic approach to communication that forces diversity into a pre-set model will drain our prayers of honesty, searching, and zeal. The many aspects of our God show us that God himself is a diverse God that cannot be restrictively reduced and domesticated. In the same way, a domesticated model of communication inhibits the ability of our prayers to appeal to the diversity of God and find comfort and relief in all that he is to us.

God, ourselves, and communication. This is where prayer starts, and no matter how sophisticated we might become, our focus in prayer should never be too removed from these basic essentials. Keeping the main things the main things will properly anchor our prayers, and instill a desire to pray more and more, not less and less.

Thanks for listening.

Pray With Your Eyes Open Week 3 Talk (Chapters 2 and 3)

It is sometimes said that variety is the spice of life. Well, as with many things, this is not always true. But in a lot of ways, variety can be a good thing. In chapters 2 and 3, Richard commends variety in our prayers to God. Specifically, he commends variety in how we address God and in how we think of God's character. Now let's be clear; Richard is not commending a free-for-all approach to thinking about God, where God is brought down to size in our prayers and is made to fit whatever we want him to be. There is a difference between being creative in prayer vs. being inventive in prayer. Throughout both chapters, Richard is stressing **biblical** variety, not variety for variety's sake. And he is also stressing biblical variety within an orientation of human dependence on God.

In chapter 2, Richard emphasizes a servant's gaze orientation to prayer. What he means is that according to the Bible, God sustains everything, including us. There is nothing in the created order that is outside his purview; there is nothing that can eternally sustain itself if God were to withdraw his providential superintendence of the creation. And this most definitely includes us. The air we breathe and the ability to breathe itself are because of God. The food we eat, and the water that replenishes the world and gives life comes from God. When we address God as 'Lord' in our prayers, we are talking to the One who all of us are dependent on for life itself. No God, no life. In our prayers, we would do well to continually remind ourselves that we are communing with our Maker (Job 36.3) and Sustainer (Ps 3.5), and how extraordinarily significant that is.

In the rest of chapter 2, Richard flushes out this significance by stressing the intensity of our gaze upon God when we pray. Richard suggests that part of why our prayers sometimes seem so shallow and haphazard is because God is not the focus of our prayers. When our gaze and thoughts become distracted, our prayers often become less focused. On this issue, variety is not a good thing. In prayer, our focused gaze should be on God and who he is. The focus should be on who we need (God), not the things we need.

But perhaps oddly, Richard suggests that a good way to maintain our focus on God in prayer is by employing a variety of addresses to God in our prayers. Again, he is not suggesting that we make this up as we go along. Instead, he is arguing that because the Bible refers to God in many different ways, so should we, using Scripture as our guide. In addition to being called 'Lord' in Scripture, God is

referred to as 'Comforter' (Jer 8.18), 'Friend' (Mt 11.19), Counselor (Jn 14), and 'Deliverer' (Rom 11.26) among other things.

The Bible is not at all constrained in how it addresses God. Therefore, we are under no obligation to self-restrict how we refer to God in our prayers. To the contrary, to become conversant with the many ways Scripture refers to God not only increases our Bible knowledge, but also increases our knowledge of who God is and intensifies our focus on him in our prayers. When addressing God, it's okay to be more descriptive than 'Lord', 'God', and even 'Savior'. To discover and use the many ways Scripture addresses God is one way to keep our prayers fresh and develop a deeper awareness of the fullness of who this God is that we are praying to. This better enables us to vibrantly refer to God in ways that might resonate with us the most in any given situation. Scripture does this all the time. It doesn't mean that we are making ourselves the center of prayer. Rather, it brings our gaze upon God into greater focus on the deepest needs and concerns of our lives. This not only clarifies how God can be glorified in our lives, it also enables us to see his work in our lives more clearly, which only intensifies our trust and love for him.

In chapter 3, Richard extends the idea of variety into the character of God. Again, Richard is not encouraging us to make up our own god and fill this manmade god up with whatever character traits we'd like him to have. Instead, Richard once again encourages us to look at the totality of what Scripture says about God and to have this be our frame of reference in contemplating his character. Similar to how we address God, we can sometimes reduce God to a handful of characteristics and fail to see the considerable diversity that the biblical authors give us about God. When this happens, we run the risk of dampening what ought to be our endless fascination and wonder of God in our prayers. When we feel under attack, do we call upon the God whom Scripture repeatedly describes as one who protects his people (Pr 2.8)? When we're feeling lonely and isolated, do we contemplate in prayer how Scripture repeatedly describes God as one 'who will be with you' and 'will never leave or forsake you' (Deut 31; Heb 13.5)? When we feel like life isn't being fair to us, do we gain comfort in knowing how Scripture describes God's ways as 'just and true' (Rev 15.3)? When we feel exposed and vulnerable to the elements, do we seek the 'shelter' (Ps 31.20) of God to which many biblical authors attest? When we feel overworked, overcommitted and at the end of our ropes, do we long for God's 'rest' (Heb 4) that Scripture repeatedly says is available to us? Better knowing the many qualities of God takes the shackles off our prayers and brings the character of God directly to bear on our circumstances.

Scripture is also replete in describing God in metaphor. In doing this, the Bible threads the needle between the view that God is so 'totally Other' that nothing in the created order reveals anything about God, and the view that God is no different than the created order. In Scripture, God is likened to a rock (Gen 49.24), but that doesn't mean that God is our pet rock. God is likened to a horn (2S 22.3), but that doesn't mean that when Karl Mailand plays his horn on Sunday mornings that he has God in his hands.

Good and right metaphors are those that correctly compare something with something else. When the Bible talks about God as a rock, it is using an illustration to stress the unshakeable sturdiness of God. It is not somehow arguing that like a rock, God is inert, impersonal, and made with strong physical substances. As Richard notes on pg. 33, metaphors conjure the imagination, and our imagination needs precision in order to correctly grasp the significance of the comparison. But as with titles and characteristics, becoming ever more aware of the many metaphors that Scripture uses to describe God better enables us to personalize God's presence in our lives, and to appeal to God on that basis.

To advocate variety in God's titles, characteristics, and metaphorical descriptors is simply to advocate considering all that the Bible says about God as part of focusing on God in prayer. God has revealed himself to us in the Bible, and it behooves us to consider all that it says as part of developing a God-focused approach to prayer. To do so will not only cultivate an expanded understanding of God, it will also cultivate a commitment to being instructed by the whole counsel of God.

Thanks for listening.

Pray With Your Eyes Open

Week 4 Talk (Chapter 4)

The statement, "It's not what you say, it's what you do" is common in our day. The statement not so subtly asserts that actions are more telling and authentic than words. But with God, he has both spoken and acted. His words are trustworthy because his actions are in perfect accord with them. His actions are trustworthy because they reaffirm the truth of his words. With God, our trust is based on what he says and what he does, both of which are based on his perfect character. In God, there is no dichotomy between them as is often the case with human beings.

Last week, we talked about exploring the full measure of God's character in energizing our prayers to him. This week, we focus on God's actions and how they affirm his character. Chapter 4 of Richard's book is what I like to call the "Where's the beef?" chapter. It is here that we are encouraged to reflect on God's mighty acts when speaking to our mighty God. But as with God's titles and character, we are encouraged not to pick and choose, but to embrace the totality of God's actions in history in developing an unquenchable fascination with this God to whom we pray.

As Richard remarks early in the chapter, 'acts' of God are not just the big attention grabbers like parting the Red Sea or suspending the sun in the sky. The common and even 'mundane' activities of divine providence over the world reveal an intimately active God that moment by moment is caring for his creation and creatures. This means that when we focus on God's actions in our prayers, our focus is not purely on mighty acts in the distant past. God still acts today in many ways, and this brings our focus on God's actions in prayer into very personal terms.

In the remainder of the chapter, Richard focuses on two generic categories of God's divine activity. The first category is God's activity in salvation history. It is in this category where we see many of God's most fantastic acts, some of which are listed by Richard at the top of page 42. When Richard says 'salvation history', it is important to understand what is meant. 'Salvation history', or 'redemptive history' as it is more commonly referred to, is the factual story given to us in Scripture of God proactively intervening in history to reclaim for himself a people that was lost as a result of the intrusion of sin into the created order.

But why would God do this? The pat answer to this question usually focuses on God's love and/or sovereignty, and these characteristics are undoubtedly essential in any proper understanding of why God cares so much about redemption. But I

would like to suggest a slightly different emphasis that might help us not only understand God a bit better, but also greatly increase our fascination with him in our prayers, daily thoughts, and daily ethics.

In Genesis 1.26-27, the Bible's opening salvo about human beings is that we have been created in the image of God. This status is reaffirmed in Col 3.10, where it is said that God's present work in us is redeeming the image of God within us. The person of Jesus Christ reflects this story as well. The Bible says that Jesus is the 'image' of the invisible God (Col 1.15, 2C 4.4), but is also fully human and the same as us in every way except sin (Heb 2.17, 4.15). The salvation of humanity through Christ is an act of God redeeming a creation that he once declared 'very good' (Gen 1.31). There is an intrinsic dignity that God has bestowed on us as an act of grace (Ps 8) by virtue of creating us in his image. His salvation is also an act of grace that not only redeems hopeless sinners, but also redeems God's sovereign decision to create in the first place by gloriously repairing the shattered image of God in us. In saving us, He is redeeming his own image.

When we understand that, we better understand why God is so passionate and covenantally committed to this end, and this makes us appreciate his grace, love and power even more. God's actions are rooted in his glory, and how amazing it is that our redemption is one of God's most grand expressions of his glory! The mightiness of God's redemptive acts testifies to the lengths God is willing to go to proactively redeem us. These acts tell us a great deal about God's power, love, care, and passion. When we think of God's acts of redemption in prayer, our thoughts will naturally focus on the character of God, as well as our own human constitution. God is passionate about us because he's passionate about redeeming humanity to its true state – a state where his image in us is no longer polluted by sin. Our redemption brings glory to God.

But in basking in the glorious acts of God in redemption while in prayer, we should not ignore another category of God's activity in the world. Richard refers to this as God's activity in providence. This refers to God's moment by moment care over his creation. Let's be clear; the Bible does not describe God's relationship to the world as passive or indifferent. The Bible doesn't teach that God created the world and has been on vacation ever since. The Bible scoffs at the notion that God is uninvolved in the maintenance of the world. Col 1.17 is clear that everything was not only created by God, but that everything holds together through Christ. God feeds the birds (Mt 6.26), brings water to nourish the land (Ezk 31), cares for the lilies of the field (Lk 12.27-28) and the sparrows (Mt 10.29). God has numbered the hairs on our head (Mt 10.30), knew us before we were born (Jer 1.5),

knows us by name (Jn 10.3), has named the starry host (Is. 40.26), and commands the sun and moon to shine at their appointed times (Jer 31.35). The Bible's picture of God is one who is intimately involved in every aspect of sustaining his creation. As Richard says on pg 47, God's providential care is all around us, and his blessings are too numerous to count.

When in prayer, recall God's blessing in his everyday provision for us. Reflect on the food he has provided you. Feel blessed by the friendships God has orchestrated. Rejoice in the life he has given you. Even in the tough times, it is God who is sustaining you.

God is constantly acting in the world at large, and in our lives. As with God's character, our prayers will be enhanced if we contemplate the totality of God's acts. Some of us focus intently on God's redemptive acts, and lose sight of his daily provisional activity. Others are attuned to God's providential activity but largely don't focus on his mighty acts of redemption. What needs to be understood is that these two categories of divine activity are linked and are rooted in the common source of God's character. A serious reflection on God's activity in our prayers will result in an appreciation of divine blessings that will be inexhaustible, because God's blessings are inexhaustible.

Thanks for listening.

Pray With Your Eyes Open

Week 5 Talk (Chapters 5-6)

Many of us are likely familiar with these refrains: "God feels so far away." "My prayers seem to hit the ceiling and bounce back toward me." "Why does everything have to be so hard?" In the last year and a half, Helen and I have regularly rehearsed each of these sentiments regarding our adoption of an international girl. In the midst of the excruciating and even maddening details of the adoption process, it has been easy for us to lose sight of God's nearness. We have sometimes felt like we are wandering in the wilderness just like the Israelites of the exodus period. And like them, we too have been tempted to join the 'Back to Egypt' club. We have routinely been anxious, burdened, confused and in pain. We know God knows the kind of pain we're in, yet it doesn't always seem that our prayers for relief and comfort are being heard. The entire adoption process has put us on the frontier of patience and waiting, and I in particular have often wondered why something as wonderful as an adoption has to be so hard. Why does blessing so often entail suffering?

In chapters 5-6, Richard addresses the issues of God's presence, our sin, and coping in prayer with the unique period of history we find ourselves in. He doesn't offer easy foolproof answers; nobody can do that. If psalm after psalm speak to the agony of God's seeming distance from us, what we need to do is attempt to better understand why this is so, rather than expect to be forever delivered from it in this life. It is in chapters 5-6 that Richard begins to present some theological concepts that I hope will be helpful in better understanding our situation.

At the beginning of chapter 5, Richard addresses the subject of God's presence. Here, he talks about three different kinds of presence that Scripture presents to us concerning God. God's general presence is everywhere at all times (Pr 15.3). But there is a more localized presence of God in the life of his people – mainly in the church (Eph 2). Lastly, there is a still more localized presence of God in the individual spiritual experiences of the believer (Ex 3.12). The first kind of presence never ceases. God never stops being generally present over all the cosmos. But the last two kinds of presence are more variable than the first. God can indeed withdraw his presence from the church, as he did when the spirit departed from the Temple at the height of the people's wickedness (Ezk 10; see also Rom 11.22). And, as Richard mentions, the experience of God's nearness in our lives comes and goes. But why is this?

It is here that we must address the issue of sin as Richard begins to do on pg 56. For better or worse, Scripture is very clear in suggesting that sin can be a barrier between us and God that impacts the efficacy of prayer and God's experiential presence in our lives. There's a reason why Paul urges us not to grieve the Spirit through sin (Eph 4.30), and why Peter commands husbands to treat their wives with respect lest their prayers be hindered (1P 3.7). Biblically speaking, there is little doubt that sin can be a hindrance to experiencing God's presence in prayer. As uncomfortable as it is, if we are feeling like God is far away and that our experiences of him are dry and arid, we have to be willing to ask if our sin might be the reason.

But as Richard also says, the variability of God's experiential nearness can also be traced to neglect on our part. We can't neglect God in prayer and expect experiential blessings from him. Psalm 42-43 is very instructive in this regard. This combined psalm starts off with the psalmist in deep agony. He is lamenting the seeming absence of God. For the first 7 verses, the psalmist is engaged in soliloquy with himself, as he goes around and around in his lament about God. But starting in v8, the tone of the combined psalm starts to change, and the reason for the change of tone is because starting here, the psalmist stops talking to himself about God, and starts talking to God. By the end of Psalm 43, the psalmist is almost triumphant, which is the complete opposite of his state of mind at the beginning of Psalm 42. The Psalm does not answer the question of why God seems to be absent sometimes. But it is very instructive in showing us that part of how we combat such loneliness is not to neglect God by endlessly talking with ourselves, but to release our burdens to God through prayer. When the psalmist starts doing this in v8, his misery gradually transforms into confidence, because divine absence has been replaced by divine nearness.

Importantly, Richard cites James 4.8 – "Come near to God and he will come near to you." This indicates that we are not at all passive in this relationship we have with God. We are to be proactive in seeking God's face in prayer, not reactive. Seeking after God wholeheartedly in prayer is a heartfelt indication of our desire to be intimate with him. I often have to ask myself if the seeming dryness of my prayers is indicative of a deeper lack of desire to be close to God. Perfunctory and formulaic prayer can be impersonal prayer devoid of passion. That's not what God wants. He wants us to be like Jacob and relentlessly seek after the blessing of God (Gen 32.22-32). He wants us to be like David and be people after God's own heart (Acts 13.22). He wants us to be like Mary who's 'soul glorifies the Lord' (Lk 1.46).

How are we to do this? Richard suggests that our prayers should be focused on heaven. This, of course, is entirely consistent with Paul's command to set our hearts on things above (Col. 3.1-2). This makes sense in light of James's observation that every good and perfect gift is from above (Jm 1.17). To focus on heaven is to not only fall in love all over again with Scripture's depiction of the glory of our future home, but also to be infused with joy and appreciation for the Lord who is currently preparing a glorious place for us by his grace (Jn 14.1-2).

To have a heavenward focus also helps us gain perspective on our present situation. Chapter 6 is devoted to flushing out the biblical/theological idea of what is commonly known as the 'already/not yet'. In simple terms, Richard argues that we are living between the first and second comings of Christ, thus, we are living in a somewhat unusual period of history. It is clear from the Gospels that the Kingdom of God came in its infancy through the first coming of Christ. The sick were healed, demons were cast out, and violence in nature was subdued (Mk 1-8). Jesus announced that the Kingdom was at hand, and that now was the time to repent and believe (Mk 1.15). The first coming of Christ ushered in the kind of supernatural blessing that began to reverse the darkness and displays God's love and glory. But the Kingdom of God is not yet here in its fullness. Revelation makes clear that it is not until the second and final return of Christ that sin and evil will be permanently eradicated. So in this phase of 'salvation history', we live between the two comings of Christ, where we experience present blessings of God (the 'already') but not in their totality (the 'not yet'). It is not an accident that the Bible ends with the plea, "Come Lord Jesus."

Because of this, Richard urges us to maintain equilibrium and not have our present-day expectations in this world be either too positive or too negative. The reason why things seem so hard is because we haven't yet arrived. But that doesn't mean that 'everything' is hard, or that anything is as hard as it might be. This is because God's blessings are indeed real in our world today. We experience both blessing and suffering in this in-between period of history, and our prayers should reflect both realities. We should be attuned to the blessings that God bestows on us and thank him profusely. And we should not be afraid to cry out to God in anguish when we suffer. By better understanding what Scripture teaches about the coming of the Kingdom, the more we will understand our present circumstances and possess a better grasp of things when we pray.

Thanks for listening.

Pray With Your Eyes Open Week 6 Talk (Chapters 7-8)

Two of my favorite passages in Scripture are:

Nahum 1.7 – The Lord is good; a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.

Deut 16.15 – For the Lord your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete.

These passages talk about both trouble and joy, and God's loving presence in both. In chapters 7-8, Richard talks about prayer in times of both trouble and joy. What I'd like to do in this talk is to focus a bit more on joy than trouble. I'm doing this because it is my sense that we as Presbyterians in particular tend to focus less on joy than on trouble, and that in doing so, we are experiencing negative unintended consequences in both our individual lives and the corporate life of the church.

But first, let's focus briefly on prayer in times of trouble. Richard begins chapter 7 by suggesting that many Christians are hesitant to approach God with their troubles. While this is no doubt true and may well have been very true back in the 1980s when Richard first wrote the book, I'm not sure this is our big problem in prayer anymore. In my private prayer experience, in my small group prayer experiences, and in my corporate church prayer experiences, most of us seem quite willing to talk to God about our troubles and difficulties. We appear to have mostly gotten over whatever hang-ups we may have had about coming across to God as a grumbler or complainer. Nonetheless, Richard does offer some very helpful guidance on the manner and motive with which we approach God in times of strife.

Richard indicates that our troubled hearts are usually focused on either ourselves, our world, and/or our God. And in expressing our trouble in prayer, Richard encourages the use of vivid imagery to describe our seeming desolation. By doing this, we are encouraged not to adopt a superficial or formulaic attitude about our troubles, but to delve deep and through prayer, to really get in touch with the level of anguish that is troubling us. This kind of honesty in prayer is one way that God helps us become more self-aware and more dependent on him. One reason why so many psalms start off very negatively and end quite triumphantly is because of the vivid honesty employed by the psalmists in laying themselves bare before God.

But in doing this, Richard also helpfully warns us about biblical limits to our negative expressions. It's okay to be troubled, distraught, frustrated and angry in

our prayerful expressions to God. What's not okay is to impugn the goodness or justice of God (Rev 15.3-4), or have our anger rooted in greed or self-centeredness, or be unwilling to respond to God in gratitude even when his ways are not our ways. Richard's comparison of Ps 22 with the grumblings of the people during the exodus wanderings are particularly helpful in understanding the freedom we have in prayer, but also the boundaries within which we need to operate.

In chapter 8, Richard turns to the subject of joy. But interestingly, in turning to joy, he does not leave troubles behind. Richard argues that there are two kinds of joy, and the first is the quiet joy that comes with peace in times of trouble. Again, remember Nahum 1.7 – God cares for those who trust in God during times of trouble. This kind of joy is not the exuberant joy that comes with getting a needed raise at work, meeting that special someone, or watching the Redskins beat the Cowboys. But it is the very real joy of somehow knowing that things will be okay even in the midst of darkness because God is the source and root of our joy. This is the kind of joy that sustains the Smith family right now. It is the joy that enables us to persevere in times of toil rather than giving in to despair and defeat. It is the kind of joy that sustains the Mackeys while Lacey is overseas and Kirby is battling cancer. This is the kind of joy that James and Peter talk about when discussing joy in times of trials, because it is the joy that fortifies perseverance.

The second kind of joy is the exuberant joy of overflowing praise and celebration. This is the joy of the Philippian jailer in Acts 16.34, and of David in 2S 6. This kind of joy is an irrepressible delight in God that crowds trouble out of view. But as Richard notes on pp 94-95, this kind of joy often seems to be in short supply for many. And he correctly says that the lack of this kind of joy is actually dangerous, because it makes us susceptible to an unceasing pessimism that can warp our ideas of God, the world, ourselves, and the Christian life. And this, I fear, is where too much of God's church currently resides.

Life is full of troubles and pitfalls for failure. It is only natural that we would be on guard against such things. The danger is in focusing on them so much that they become the only things we see and reflect on. A consequence of this can be a loss of exuberant joy. I know I'm guilty of this. Even when God graciously extends blessings to me, I know how easy it is for me to be less than joyful. It is often the case that even when we are blessed, we can still find ways to diminish the joy we should feel by complaining about the perceived inadequacy of the blessing. My job is a blessing for a number of reasons. But I rarely if ever think of my job that way. It is a blessing to be living in an area where there is so much to do, so much to experience, and so many ways to make a difference and live a fulfilling life. But

instead, we tend to think about the bad traffic, the high taxes, the stressful jobs, the pollen and the frenetic busyness of life in this area, and our joy becomes stunted.

Richard offers prayer as both a path to joy, and an expression of joy. This is very instructive to us not only individually, but in the corporate life of the church. How often do we focus on real and tangible joy when we pray? Are our prayers more focused on our problems, concerns, and needs than they are about expressing our joy for the over-abundance most of us already enjoy? Are we as specific in our prayers about the blessings in our lives as we are with the problems we experience? When we pray together each Sunday in our worship service, are the prayer times just as concerned with expressing joy to God as they are with petitioning God with the needs of the church?

While it is completely right to go to God with our troubles and needs, there is a danger that comes when this kind of expression becomes our primary prayer diet. It can make us gloomy and 'doomy', and can contribute to a perception that the clouds never really lift, and the glorious sunshine never really penetrates into the world. I fear that too much of our prayer lives reinforce this perception rather than fight against it, and it shows in not only how we pray, but in how we think about God and ourselves. When taken to a corporate level, it can impact the tone and tenor of our worship service and our corporate interactions as a body of believers – both of which directly impact issues of evangelism and outreach. As individuals and as the church, Richard is forcing us to take inventory of whether our prayers might unknowingly be imbalanced and unknowingly contribute to a distorted picture of the world that saps individuals and our congregation of the kind of exuberant joy that would speak powerfully to a world filled with negativity. We must never forget that prayer should lead to joy, rather than despair.

Thanks for listening.

**Pray With Your Eyes Open
Week 7 Talk (Chapters 9-10)**

This talk was given by Len Diebert and Jon Hall.

Pray With Your Eyes Open Week 8 Talk (Chapters 11-12)

Chapter 11 of Richard's book discusses how we communicate petitions to God in prayer, while Chapter 12 discusses gratitude in prayer. The below talk focuses on the former, while the attached appendix is a short paper I wrote back in 2006 that discusses gratitude and its worldview implications.

Communicating Petitions Urgently and Making a Case before God – An Object Lesson from Moses

(Context: The below exchange between God and Moses occurs just after Aaron led the people into making the Golden Calf idol and worshipping it)

Exodus 32:7-14 ⁷ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because **your** people, whom **you** brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. ⁸ They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' ⁹ "I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ **Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.**" ¹¹ **But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. "O LORD," he said, "why should your anger burn against **your** people, whom **you** brought out of Egypt **with great power and a mighty hand?**" ¹² **Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'?** Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ **Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'**" ¹⁴ Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had **threatened**.**

Some points of application:

1) Notice vv10-11a in **brown**. God seems to announce his intention to destroy the people, and tells Moses to get lost. But does Moses acquiesce? No. Instead, he proceeds to seek the favor of God and plead with him not to destroy the people. Moses is not a 20th century neo-Calvinist who uses a paper-thin doctrine of human

responsibility as an excuse for indifference and inaction (for the correct Reformed understanding of divine sovereignty and providence and how it interacts with the human will, see WCF III.1-2, V.1-3, IX.1-5). Instead, Moses stands in the path and doesn't give up (Jacob does the same thing in Gen 32, as does Hannah in 1S 1). We are to emulate the courage of Moses in seeking God's favor when things are at their darkest. God is pleased to use the means of prayer to better conform us to his thoughts (Rom 8.26; Eph 6.18; Jude 1.20), and to enact his Kingdom purposes.

2) Notice the urgency of Moses' prayer to God. The reader can feel the intensity of Moses' appeals. As we will see momentarily, Moses is not only concerned with the welfare of the people, but he is also concerned about God's glory. His prayer is not a disinterested lecture, but an impassioned plea. So our prayers should be.

3) Starting at the end of v11, Moses begins making a case before God of why he should spare the people. In v11b in **blue**, Moses appeals to God's sovereign power in delivering his people from Pharaoh. The obvious implication is that God must deeply love these people to deliver them the way he has and to put up with them the way he has (Hint: This is us too; sadly, we're not much different than the Israelites). Moses is appealing to God's character and mighty acts here, and so should we in our prayers.

4) Moses continues making his case in v12 in **red** by expressing concern for God's reputation. Moses is essentially saying that with all the world watching, how will destroying his own people bring glory to God after going through the trouble of delivering them from Egypt. Moses is making the case that if God destroys the people, he will be handing the Egyptians (the greatest empire on earth whom God had mightily humbled) an easy way to now trash his reputation and completely tarnish the glory of his mighty acts of deliverance as part of trying to recover some of their own wounded pride. It's a powerful argument that Moses is making here. In our prayers, we too should be concerned about God's reputation and be articulating how something will or won't increase his glory in the world.

5) Finally, Moses completes his case in v13 in **purple** by appealing to God's fidelity in the promises he has made to his people. (As an aside, those who might be concerned about God 'relenting' in this passage and what that might say about his unchanging character and promises should take care to notice the last word of v14. The destruction of the people was a conditional divine 'threat', not an unconditional divine 'promise'. There's a big difference between the two, and one will try in vain to understand OT prophecy without understanding this difference.) This is, of course, an appeal to God's character. But it is also an appeal to God's

unchanging plan of redemption through the taking of a people as his own and blessing them rather than destroying them. As Christians, we are God's people as members of God's family (Gal 6.10; Eph 3.15; Heb 2.11). Jesus loves little children today just like he did 2,000 years ago (Mt 19.13-14). He heals the sick today just like he did 2,000 years ago (Lk 6.19). When we pray for our children or for people who are in the hospital, it's okay to appeal to God's character, promises, and mighty acts as given to us in Scripture's story of redemption.

To do what Moses did in Exodus 32 is essential to an effective prayer life. Why?

- It forces us to think God-focused thoughts rather than being preoccupied with our own self interests.
- It forces us to know our Bibles better. We can't make a prayerful case by appealing to God's character, promises, or mighty acts if we don't know what Scripture says about them.
- It forces us to be engaged and fully committed in prayer, rather than bored, disinterested, or distracted. It brings a focus and passion to our prayers.
- It makes God's glory the central concern of our prayer life. Blessings are outward expressions of God's glory. Inner (and outer) peace are tangible gifts of God's glory. All of this effectively counters a vending machine approach to prayer and puts our requests into a godly context rather than a self-centered wish list.
- It gives us a solid Reformed perspective on God. To pray for God to end things like war and poverty, or to save an unbelieving loved one, or to heal someone of a terrible disease assumes that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and in detailed control of the events of history. Simply put, it assumes that God can and will do what man cannot, because there's only one God, and God is that God. If God is something less than this, our prayers are not being directed to a god who is capable of answering them.

As Richard has said, if we can't provide biblically-based reasons for why God should affirmatively answer a prayer request, that might be a very good indication that we shouldn't be asking for it at all. Let's learn from Moses, and adopt the sage wisdom of J.I. Packer who rightly says, "It's not about 'letting go and letting God'; it's about 'trust God and get moving'".

Thanks for listening.

Gratitude, Christianity, and Atheism

I'm not particularly obsessed with atheism and trying to debunk it like some of my fellow brethren in the field of apologetics. I wouldn't presume to think that I could debunk atheism even if I made it my mission in life. I do think that atheism is a severely deficient ideology that is plagued with self-inconsistency, and that this has been demonstrated ad nauseum by many Christian apologists who are smarter than I. But I also know that there are presuppositional reasons why atheism will always be with us, and that such presuppositions are very difficult to dislodge, even when faced with the absurdities that arise from them.

A case in point is a 2006 article written by Ronald Aronson that appeared in *The Philosophers' Magazine*. Aronson is a professor of Humanities at Wayne State, and he considers himself a secularist. In his article, titled 'Thank Who Very Much?', Aronson tackles the question of giving thanks when one does not believe in God. It is a refreshing article that is both thought-provoking and sad. The article begins thusly:

Living without God today means facing life and death as no generation before us has done. It entails giving meaning to our lives not only in the absence of a supreme being, but now without the forces and trends that gave hope to the past several generations of secularists. We who live after 'progress', after Marxism, and after the Holocaust have stopped believing that the world is being transformed by reason and democracy. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the modern faith that human life is heading in a positive direction has been undone, giving way to the earlier religious faith it replaced, or to no faith at all. Alone as never before, in a universe scientifically better understood than ever, we find little in its almost-infinite vastness to guide us towards what our lives mean and how we should live them.

In trying to formulate an atheology of life and ethics in this environment, Aronson turns to the notion of gratitude. He laments that gratitude, while a mainstay of theistic Christian religion, is mostly ignored in secular life and literature. This is partly because in atheistic literature, the feeling of gratitude is a serious problem. Albert Camus never felt grateful for even simple pleasures like the warmth of the sun on a cold day because he knew what the implications of feeling a sense of gratitude would mean to his view of the cosmos as empty and absurd, along with the lives we live. On the other side, atheists like Julian Baggini have suggested that feelings of gratitude are, a la Freud, merely unfortunate vestiges of the supernatural theistic worldviews humans once held onto but have now hopefully shrugged off (though obviously not in their entirety if feelings of gratitude are still floating around in the minds of secularists like Aronson). In a nutshell, feelings of gratitude in both the Camus and Baggini paradigms are very difficult to deal with and require a good bit of secularized scrambling in order to delegitimize them.

Aronson takes a different approach. He believes that gratitude is a good thing to feel and that the secular worldview would profit from such feelings. He recalls how he

himself felt "vague" feelings of gratitude while walking through a scenic wood one day. This feeling, naturally, raised the question of what he was thankful for, and even more on point, who or what should be the object of his thanks? He says that it would have been a very natural thing in this experience to give thanks to God. He believes that "thanking God out here on the trail would tie together everything I see and experience, it would direct me towards its source, and would give me a personal relationship with that being." But of course, being a secularist, God cannot be a proper object of his gratitude. So Aronson tries to find a 'third way' on gratitude by rejecting Camus' vision of cosmic absurdity and also rejecting Baggini's view that feelings of gratitude are illegitimate for those who have left supernaturalism behind.

In the end, Aronson appeals to dependence upon both personal and impersonal forces as the basis for gratitude. He, appropriately in my view, says that the atheist should feel comfortable feeling a sense of thanks toward those humans who have come before him who have enabled him to enjoy and experience pleasure in things like nature. But then he takes a more difficult road, and one that atheism as a whole has never satisfactorily flushed out. Aronson proceeds to adopt a Carl Sagan-like gratitude for the impersonal universe. He says that such gratitude "is a way of acknowledging one of our most *intimate if impersonal relationships*, with the cosmic and natural forces that make us possible." (italics mine)

The main problem with Aronson's construction is immediately obvious. While Aronson can feel gratitude for the warmth of the sun, he is unable to direct his gratitude to the sun, because the sun isn't listening. The sun, being impersonal, has no clue what gratitude even is, and Aronson knows this. So what Aronson is left with is feeling gratitude toward an impersonal agent that he can't express to that agent because the agent can't receive or process any gratitude that is directed towards it. In trying to develop an atheology of gratitude, Aronson is thoroughly confusing categories of ontology without addressing how such a dissonant mix is anything but incoherent.

Gratitude is an innate emotion that can only be experienced by the personal. When it is directed toward an impersonal agent that is incapable of feeling any emotion by virtue of its being impersonal, the meaning and significance of such expressions of gratitude are highly questionable to put it nicely. Gratitude means nothing to a tree or a pet rock, so there is no meaning or significance of the feeling on that side of the equation. So then we have to ask whether giving thanks to such impersonal agents is meaningful to the personal agent who feels the gratitude. Aronson seems to think so, but his own article betrays a much deeper longing for connection than his proposal can ever allow. He feels gratitude, and apparently wants to express it, but without saying so, he seems to realize that feelings of gratitude are problematic when they are directed toward an impersonal phenomenon or entity that lacks all intentionality. Can we really give thanks for a random, unintentional, unemotional, non-purposeful, haphazard, and impersonal event like the warmth of the sun on a cold day if God doesn't exist? Doesn't gratitude entail an appreciation of the personal intentionality of that which we are thankful? Can gratitude for the impersonal and random possibly be

as meaningful as gratitude for the personal and intentional? I don't think so, and it doesn't sound like Aronson himself is entirely convinced either.

So ironically, the only way Aronson can express his gratitude of the impersonal is indirectly through conversing with others (ie: personal agents) who are not the object of his gratitude. Given his secularism, the only way he would be able to directly express his gratitude toward the impersonal object of his thanks is to quite literally talk to trees. Since he's not prepared to do that, his atheology of gratitude fails because he can't get out of his own way. In the end, he must default to ultimately directing his gratitude of the impersonal toward other personal agents (like his readers, for example) in order for the feeling of gratitude to be meaningful. He's actually moving closer to the truth in doing this, but he's failing his own litmus test too because such a relationship with the impersonal is not 'intimate' at all, but quite dysfunctional in its passive-aggressive tendency.

A much better explanation for Aronson's predicament is what Scripture says about the human condition. Aronson is absolutely right in rejecting calls to deny feelings of gratitude. Such feelings are completely legitimate (Ps. 30.12), and the fact that Aronson feels them indicates the truth of the Biblical doctrine of general revelation in Romans 1 and the *imago Dei* theology of Genesis. People know the truth, even those who deny God (Rom 1.19-20). The only thing that's at issue is the degree to which people are willing to suppress what they know to be true and embrace a perversion instead, including the perversion of refusing to give thanks to God despite knowing better (Rom 1.21-23). Aronson is not suppressing the truth as much as his atheistic colleagues who deny the feeling of gratitude right off the bat. But Aronson is suppressing the truth by trying to make sense of his true feelings without the true God. When the Christian feels gratitude toward the beauty and order of nature, her affection and gratitude are not directed toward the creation, but toward the Creator who established it and maintains it every second. The Christian's gratitude is not only well-placed, it also makes the most sense as even Aronson seems to imply.

The issue of gratitude is a biggie in worldview conversations. One of the very basic differences between a theistic worldview and an atheistic worldview is over the question of gratitude. Because prayer is so often the setting where we express thanks to God for all things big and small, prayer is not only vital to nurturing 'gratitudinal' Christianity, prayer itself also has apologetic utility. It is high time that the field of Christian apologetics recognizes the dividing line that gratitude creates between different belief systems, and incorporates the discipline of prayer into an effective apologetic for the truth of Christianity that makes sense out of the emotions we all feel. Gratitude is a common-sense and uplifting emotion for the theist; it is a hopeless conundrum for the atheist.

~ Jason Foster

Pray With Your Eyes Open Week 9 Talk

We have come to the final week of our study of Pratt's book on prayer. As Richard says at the very end of his book, this study has merely been a beginning in our exploration of prayer and its importance. My hope has been that our time together has been helpful, or has at least provided an opportunity to drop our defenses to the point where we've been willing to ask some questions about our attitudes toward prayer that maybe we weren't willing to ask before we started. As I said in the first week, such a result means that we are reforming rather than vegging, which means we are being faithful to our theological tradition. Asking questions isn't an end in itself, but it is rather essential in our pursuit of ever-more-biblically faithful answers that inform and guide our walk. My prayer is that this study has served that end for all of you to some degree.

In our time together, we have learned the somewhat paradoxical truth that God-focused prayer firms up and gives context to our own needs and concerns. Of course, in the Christian worldview, this makes perfect sense. In God-focused prayer, we are directing our thoughts and attitudes toward the One who created us and made us in his image. Remember Calvin's spiral at the beginning of his *Institutes*, where he argues that knowledge of God is linked to knowledge of self, and knowledge of self is linked to knowledge of God. Calvin can say this because we have been made in God's image. To be focused on God in our prayers is to gain a better understanding of our true self and needs, because it is in the God-man Jesus Christ where we find true humanity untainted by sin. In this way, prayer is a critical instrument of our own sanctification and pursuit of holiness, because by definition, a pursuit of God in prayer is a pursuit of holiness. This is THE remedy to combating a self-centered prayer life that leads to a tainted humanity. How amazing it is that we find true humanity and have the deepest needs of self addressed when our focus is on God in our prayers.

Over and over again in Scripture, prayer hits on some basic themes. Consistently, biblical prayer expresses adoration and praise to God. Biblical prayer consistently offers confessions of sin and seeks forgiveness. Such prayers consistently thank God for blessings received. And such prayers consistently petition God on behalf of ourselves and others in the world. All of this can be seen in one short prayer of Nehemiah in Neh 1.

We have also seen that biblical prayer is both a public and private thing, and something to be done individually and corporately. Hopefully we have gained the sense that prayer is not a marginal activity of the Christian experience, but is something that informs our entire walk. Prayer is a central and ongoing theme of God's people throughout the Bible. When one looks at the gradual downfall of God's people in the OT which culminated in the exile, the absence of prayer during these times is glaring in its omission from the biblical account. This is no accident. Just as with God's people back then, we too are susceptible to straying far from God, especially when our prayer life is arid and not God-focused. But the consistent pattern of both the Old and New Testaments is that when God's people return to Him in prayer and confession, God forgives and restores everything their self-sufficient sin had destroyed. It is incredibly significant that it is prayer that so often triggers such radical restoration.

We have seen that prayer incorporates not only our emotional and spiritual faculties. There is a considerable physicality in biblical prayer as well. Again, prayer is all-encompassing and includes all aspects of the human. Repeatedly, Scripture incorporates physical elements and acts in its presentation of prayer. These include kneeling, raised arms and hands, bowed heads as well as looking heavenward like Jesus does in Jn 17. This is not a minor issue. A good case can be made that our prayers are negatively impacted when we either forsake all physicality in prayer in order to maintain 'decency and order', or go physically haywire in our prayers to show off how full of the Spirit we are. Both are distracting, and neither are biblical. This whole issue is a very big reason why a number of American Protestants have left Protestant Christianity in favor of what they perceive to be the prayerful and liturgical reverence of Eastern Orthodoxy. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it should be a wakeup call to Protestants that there's plenty of room to biblically reform our expressions of prayer.

We have seen that there is no inherent contradiction between a robust view of God's sovereignty and a robust view of the very real efficacy of prayer. Prayer to an impotent god is a fool's errand. But prayer to a sovereign God who can answer prayer by virtue of being all-knowing and all-powerful is just common sense. For those who continue to have difficulty reconciling how prayer can be meaningful and effective in light of the sovereignty of God, do not fret too much. Questions of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility have been around for as long as the church has been around. Your concerns are not new, and will likely always be with us to some degree. But I would encourage you to consider an analogy I once heard that while simplistic and imperfect, is fairly on point. Just as God made us as finite beings that need food in order to survive, God

also made us as finite beings that have limits on our abilities, yet desire purpose and meaning in the lives we live. Therefore, just as God ordained food as a means by which physical hunger can be satisfied, God also ordained prayer as a means by which events come to pass. Food is real, and really does accomplish something even though it is God that created and provided it. Similarly, prayer is real and really does accomplish something, even though it has been given by God as a gift, and is directed to the God who knows everything and is acting in accordance with his own good purpose. It just so happens that the prayers of his people are themselves part of this good purpose, and therefore effectual.

Lastly, we have learned that God wants real dialogue with us in our prayers, rather than rote words. We have seen that God responds positively to prayers that not only say the right things, but correctly express what we feel in our hearts. God acted upon Moses' prayer in Ex 32 because his prayer was genuine, heartfelt, and provided a true mirror into Moses' heart. But when our prayers merely sound good, but do not really reflect what's in our heart, God can and does respond negatively. Jonah 2 is a classic example of this. The Bible is clear that only God knows what's really in our hearts (1S 16.7; 2Ch 6.30; Mt 15.8; Mk 2.8). This means our prayers need to be honest and probing, rather than superficial. This dynamic is especially applicable to corporate public and liturgical prayers that are especially susceptible to rote routine rather than intense honesty.

If we consider our relationship with Christ to be deep and abiding, why in the world should our prayers do anything other than accurately reflect this status? But if we find that too often our prayers are too routine and do not really touch our hearts very much, we must reckon with the possibility that such a dynamic might be a telling statement on where our relationship with Christ really is. This is not pleasant to think about, but in my view, too much of the American church exists right here and is too afraid or prideful to truly come to grips with it. The ability of the American church to once again be a catalyst for Kingdom transformation is inextricably linked to the quality of its prayer life. The sooner we seriously reckon with this, the sooner we might once again hasten rather than delay the Great Day of the Lord (2P 3.12).

Thanks for listening, and pray with the kind of 'humble boldness' that comes with knowing that our prayers matter, and that there is nothing too hard for the God to whom we pray (Gen 18.14).