



Volume 5 Issue 8

West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church

“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”



August 2018

Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America

How Not To Pray: Two Correctives from Christ

As a Christian, do you want to learn how to pray more faithfully? Do you need to learn more about prayer? One of the greatest gifts Christ gives us is instruction in prayer. Interestingly, it was the disciples who asked Jesus to teach them. Luke 11:1 tells us that the disciples came to Jesus and made a clear request: *“Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”* It is also incredibly interesting that when Jesus honored the disciples’ request, he first taught them how not to pray.

Sometimes, before we can really understand how to do something important, we have to understand how not to do it.

Before You Pray: A Few Things Jesus Wants You to Remember

Do Not Pray Like the Hypocrites

The first thing Jesus tells us as we prepare to pray is *“do not be like the hypocrites.”* Jesus condemns all forms of hypocrisy but here he is speaking of a very specific, public hypocrisy. As we have seen, this display of hypocrisy is one that seeks personal attention for piety. Jesus explains the interior motive of these types of hypocrites: *“they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.”*

Of course, historically, Jesus is referring to the ostentatious prayers of the Pharisees, but we need to see this as a temptation for ourselves as well. You and I can easily succumb to the temptation to engage in hypocritical prayer that is about God in its formal address, but far from him in terms of the posture of our heart.

Jesus not only spells out what he does not want his disciples to do, but also what they are supposed to do: *“But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”* Having a private prayer room can of course be a very useful tool for personal devotion to God. Yet Jesus’ teaching here does not suggest that the primary issue is architecture. The idea in this passage is seclusion. The real issue is not so much where you pray, but praying in secret so as not to parade your piety in front of others.

When we pray in isolation, we pray because we are seeking communion with God. In that isolation we find that true prayer is going to happen because we are not posing or posturing. The result of praying like this is a reward from the Father in heaven. The Father who knows what is done in secret will reward those who pray in secret.



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How Not To Pray: Two Correctives from Christ - Cont'd

Do Not Pray to Impress

The **first** corrective Jesus offers is that we should not pray to impress people. The **second** corrective Jesus offers is that we should not pray to impress God: *“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”* God is not looking for long words, long prayers, and mindless repetition. We do not impress God with how great our prayers are. Jesus warns not only against the Pharisaical, hypocritical prayers; he also warns against the prayers of the pagan Gentiles who thought that they would be heard for their many words. They piled up meaningless phrases in meaningless repetition...

We find something similar in 1 Kings 18 at the battle of the gods on Mt. Carmel. The Pagan priests were furiously repetitive in their prayers and labored to get the attention of their gods, so much so that they even lacerated their bodies to attract their gods' interest in their activity. Elijah used this as an opportunity to give a little theology of prayer. Due to Baal's utter lack of response, Elijah mocked Baal's priests by saying, *“Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.”* Then Elijah demonstrated that God is not impressed by our many words. His prayer was simple: *“O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.”*

Matthew 6:8 is one of the most important verses in order to understand the Lord's Prayer: *“Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”* If we come to understand that our Father knows our needs before we ask him, then far from leading us away from prayer, our prayer lives will be utterly transformed. We will see a sovereign God who is ready and able to answer our prayers, and who directs all things for our good and his glory. A solid biblical theology of God informs how we understand what we are doing when we come before his throne of grace with our requests and needs. ~ **Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.** - *This article is an excerpt from his book, ‘The Prayer that Turns the World Upside Down: The Lord's Prayer as a Manifesto for Revolution’.*

The Fall of a Believer

We may live in a culture that believes everyone will be saved, that we are “justified by death” and all you need to do to go to heaven is die, but God's Word certainly doesn't give us the luxury of believing that. Any quick and honest reading of the New Testament shows that the Apostles were convinced that nobody can go to heaven unless they believe in Christ alone for their salvation (John 14:6; Romans 10:9–10).

Historically, evangelical Christians have largely agreed on this point. Where they have differed has been on the matter of the security of salvation. People who would otherwise agree that only those who trust in Jesus will be saved have disagreed on whether anyone who truly believes in Christ can lose his salvation.



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The Fall of a Believer - Cont'd

Theologically speaking, what we are talking about here is the concept of apostasy. This term comes from a Greek word that means *“to stand away from.”* When we talk about those who have become apostate or have committed apostasy, we’re talking about those who have fallen from the faith or at least from the profession of faith in Christ that they once made.

Many believers have held that yes, true Christians can lose their salvation because there are several New Testament texts that seem to indicate that this can happen. I’m thinking, for example, of Paul’s words in 1 Timothy 1:18–20:

“This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.”

Here, in the midst of instructions and admonitions related to Timothy’s life and ministry, Paul warns Timothy to keep the faith and to keep a good conscience, and to be reminded of those who didn’t. The Apostle refers to those who made *“shipwreck of their faith,”* men whom he *“handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.”* This *second* point is a reference to Paul’s excommunication of these men, and the whole passage combines a sober warning with concrete examples of those who fell away grievously from their Christian profession.

There is no question that professing believers can fall and fall radically. We think of men like Peter, for example, who denied Christ. But the fact that he was restored shows that not every professing believer who falls has fallen past the point of no return. At this point, we should distinguish a serious and radical fall from a total and final fall. Reformed theologians have noted that the Bible is full of examples of true believers who fall into gross sin and even protracted periods of impenitence. So, Christians do fall and they fall radically. What could be more serious than Peter’s public denial of Jesus Christ?

But the question is, are these people who are guilty of a real fall irretrievably fallen and eternally lost, or is this fall a temporary condition that will, in the final analysis, be remedied by their restoration? In the case of a person such as Peter, we see that his fall was remedied by his repentance. However, what about those who fall away finally? Were they ever truly believers in the first place?

Our answer to this question has to be no! First John 2:19 speaks of the false teachers who went out from the church as never having truly been part of the church. John describes the apostasy of people who had made a profession of faith but who never really were converted. Moreover, we know that God glorifies all whom He justifies (Romans 8:29–30). If a person has true saving faith and is justified, God will preserve that person.

In the meantime, however, if the person who has fallen is still alive, how do we know if he is a full apostate? One thing none of us can do is read the heart of other people. When I see a person who has made a profession of faith and later repudiates it, I don’t know whether he is a truly regenerate person who’s in the midst of a serious, radical fall but who will at some point in the future certainly be restored; or whether he is a person who was never really converted, whose profession of faith was false from the start.



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The Fall of a Believer - Cont'd

This question of whether a person can lose his salvation is not an abstract question. It touches us at the very core of our Christian lives, not only with regard to our concerns for our own perseverance, but also with regard to our concern for our family and friends, particularly those who seemed, for all outward appearances, to have made a genuine profession of faith. We thought their profession was credible, we embraced them as brothers or sisters, only to find out that they repudiated that faith.

What do you do, practically, in a situation like that? First, you pray, and then, you wait. We don't know the final outcome of the situation, and I'm sure there are going to be surprises when we get to heaven. We're going to be surprised to see people there who we didn't think would be, and we're going to be surprised that we don't see people there who we were sure would be there, because we simply don't know the internal status of a human heart or of a human soul. Only God can see that soul, change that soul, and preserve that soul. ~ **Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.**

Resolved by the Grace of God

When I was nineteen years old, I joined the staff of a large evangelical church. A few of the pastors on the staff became wonderful friends and mentors, but as I encountered some of the pastors at that church and at churches in the area, I became deeply saddened by what I observed. As I got to know some of the pastors more intimately, I observed that their love for the ministry seemed to supersede their love for God. It appeared that over the years, the ministry had become a god. Their own kingdoms had displaced the kingdom of God. Their prayers had become focused on success in ministry rather than on faithfulness to God in ministry. Consequently, one-by-one, over the years, several of those pastors left the ministry on account of the fact they simply could no longer live under unreasonable, unforgiving, and self-imposed legalistic demand.

I recognized that by itself, without God at its foundation, ministry is utterly futile. Without remaining resolved in steadfast surrender to God, ministers living for the ministry will either leave the ministry, or, what's worse, the ministry will leave them. Sure, a minister might continue to preach, pray, and program while he attempts to play the man, but in due time his feet will slip and his ministry to the ministry will begin to eat away at his soul from the inside out. Such ministry corrupts the man and metastasizes throughout the church body. It leads to cynicism, apathy, and burn out. It knows no grace and seeks only its own ends. Without God at the very heart of ministry, ministry is not only a fool's errand but is impossible; thankfully, that's just the way God designed it — to be impossible without Him.

At nineteen, as a ministerial student preparing for the pastorate, I grew concerned that someday I could get to the point in ministry that my passion for ministry would usurp my passion for God — that ministry would become my religion, that the idol of success in ministry would replace my heart's desire to be faithful to God.

With all of this weighing heavily on my mind, early one morning, I slid from my bed onto my knees and cried out to God that He would equip me for ministry, sustain me in ministry, and give me passion for ministry — a passion that would flow out of my love and passion for God Himself. That morning I penned the following words in the front of my Bible: "I shall live for God, not for the ministry."



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Resolved by the Grace of God - Cont'd

Every year since then, by God's sustaining grace, I have surrendered myself to the Lord, imploring Him to help me live for Him and trusting Him alone to equip, sustain, and empower me for His ministry.

In order to remain steadfast in this pursuit of active surrender of living for the sake of God and not for the sake of ministry, I must not only regularly confess my sin of self-reliance I must also resolve to remain resolved every day of my life — living a life of repentance and faith, with every step and every breath, delighting in the Lord's abundant love and assurance. For if I confide in my own strength, my striving would indeed be losing.

Resolving to be Resolved

It seems that every new year, we are caught up in a whirlwind of well-intentioned resolutions. With premeditated bursts of enthusiasm, those closest to us begin to take part in peculiar, and sometimes public activities that even cause neighborhood children to look puzzled. We find ourselves bearing witness to surprising edicts and seemingly self-conscious new year's manifestos whereupon we are summoned to behold what sweeping changes may come — resolutions for impending dispositions, impossible diets, and impenetrable fortresses of discipline.

The skeptical observer may inquire: *"Is all this fervor really necessary?"* Moreover, the cynical reader may ask: *"Is it even appropriate to make resolutions? After all, shouldn't we at all times and all seasons seek to live wisely, obediently, and biblically?"*

Some may even go so far as to argue that resolutions themselves are not biblical based on the fact that the Word of God itself provides us with a complete and authoritative compilation of God's resolutions for His people. To manufacture our own list of resolutions, they would argue, is superfluous at best.

These are the sorts of questions I have always considered when it comes to this whole business of making resolutions, and I have a hunch that many of my fellow biblically-informed skeptics also ponder such questions. Nevertheless, the Word of God gives us not only permission to make resolutions, it gives us good reasons for doing so. Various biblical passages seem to provide us with reasons for resolutions and examples of men of God who resolved to live for Him in a particular manner for a particular reason (Daniel 1:8; Matthew 1:19; Acts 19:21; 1 Corinthians 10:14–32; Colossians 3:12–17; 2 Thessalonians 1:11). As such, in considering how to glorify God in all that we do in our particular circumstances and callings, we would be wise to resolve to make particular resolutions to assist us in our sanctification. This we do by the power of the Holy Spirit, resting assured that we have been declared righteous by the Father because of the completed righteousness of the Son.

The Resolve of Edwards

The nineteen-year-old Jonathan Edwards knew his weaknesses and was aware of the destructive nature of his sin, so he resolved to make and keep certain resolutions in his effort to live for God's glory. He helped pave the way for us all as he prefaced his seventy resolutions with these words:



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Resolved by the Grace of God - Cont'd

Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humbly entreat him by his grace to enable me to keep these resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to his will, for Christ's sake.

These simple, introductory words of Edwards not only provide us with a glimpse into the mind of one of history's greatest minds, they provide us with a glorious insight into the heart of a young man whose heart had been humbled and mastered by the Lord God Almighty. We would therefore do well to consider Edwards' prefatory remarks as we seek to glorify God and enjoy Him forever in our churches, our homes, and our hearts.

Resolving Sensibly

"Being sensible," Edwards begins his preface — we must be sensible, reasonable, in making resolutions. If we set ourselves about the business of hastily making resolutions as the result of our grand illusions of sinless perfection, it is likely that we will not merely fail in our attempt to keep such resolutions, we will likely be less inclined to make any further resolutions for similar desired ends. We must go about making resolutions with genuine prayer and thorough study of God's Word. Our resolutions must be in accord with the Word of God; therefore, any resolution we make must necessarily allow us to fulfill all our particular callings in life. We must consider all the implications of our resolutions and be careful to make resolutions with others in mind, even if it means implementing new resolutions incrementally over time.

Resolving Dependently

"*I am unable to do anything without God's help,*" Edwards admits. We must be sensible in grasping the simple truth that every resolution must be made in dependence on God. And while every Christian would respond by saying, "*Well, of course we must depend on God for all things,*" most Christians have been sold the world's bill of goods. They think that once they become dependent on God, then they will have immediate strength. They mimic the world's mantra: "*Whatever doesn't kill me will make me stronger.*" While the principle is generally true, such thinking can foster an attitude of proud independence. We must understand that in being able to do all things through Christ who strengthens us means that we must depend on His strength continuously in order to do all things and to keep all our resolutions (Ephesians 3:16; Colossians 1:11). In truth, whatever doesn't kill us, by God's conforming grace, makes us weak so that in our weakness we will rely continuously on the strength of our Lord (2 Corinthians 12:7–10).

Resolving Humbly

"*I do humbly entreat him by his grace to enable me to keep these resolutions.*" In making resolutions for the glory of God and before the face of God, we must not come into His presence pounding our chests in triumphal arrogance as if God must now love and bless us more because we have made certain resolutions to follow Him more. In reality, the Lord in His providence may choose to allow even more trials to enter our lives; in His unchanging fatherly love for us, He may decide to discipline us even more in order that we might more so detest our sin and delight in Him. We should approach Him in humble reliance on His grace as we seek not merely the blessings but the one who blesses.



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Resolved by the Grace of God - Cont'd

Resolving for Christ's Sake

"So far as they are agreeable to his will for Christ's sake." We cannot resolve to do anything with a presumptuous attitude before God. The whole matter of making resolutions is not just goal setting so that we might have happier lives. We are called by God to live according to His will, not our own — for Christ's sake, not our own — for it is not unto us but unto Him that all glory belongs (Psalm 115:1). ~ **Dr. Burk Parsons** - *Editor of Tabletalk magazine, senior pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., a visiting lecturer at Reformed Theological Seminary, and a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow.*

Perseverance and Godliness

" . . . And knowledge with self-control, and self control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness" (2 Peter 1:6).

Godly perseverance is a sure evidence of true salvation

Commentator Michael Green has this to say about the believer who displays biblical perseverance: *"The mature Christian does not give up. His Christianity is like the steady burning of a star rather than the ephemeral brilliance (and speedy eclipse) of a meteor."* The Greek word translated "perseverance" in today's verse (*hupomone*) refers to consistent endurance in righteousness and faithfulness in resisting temptation.

The precise meaning for *hupomone* is hard to pinpoint. There is no exact English equivalent, and it's not common in classical Greek; but the Bible often uses it in reference to the toils and troubles that are unwelcome in life and produce inconvenience and harm. This word even includes the idea of death, as in the Jewish writings in which *hupomone* speaks of spiritual stamina that empowers people to die for their faith in God.

Despite its scriptural associations with painful difficulties and death, *hupomone* has a positive meaning. William Barclay notes, *"Hupomone does not simply accept and endure; there is always a forward look in it. It is said of Jesus . . . that for the joy set before him, he endured the Cross, despising the shame"* (Hebrews 12:2). That is *hupomone*, Christian steadfastness. It is the courageous acceptance of everything that life can do to us and the transmuting of even the worst event into another step on the upward way."

Godliness is at the heart of scriptural perseverance. The Greek for "godliness" (*eusebeia*) denotes a practical awareness of God in every area of life—a God-consciousness. The word could also be translated *"true religion"* or *"true worship."* It gives God His rightful place by worshiping Him properly, something that is not often done in the contemporary church. Genuine public worship is more than *"relevant"* programs, new rituals, or catchy music—it contains much reverence for God.

If you are truly a Christian, you will also revere God in your devotional life and obediently persevere in His will daily. You will rejoice and be aware of God in every detail of life. ~ **Dr. John MacArthur**



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Birthday and Anniversary Corner - August 2018

Birthdays

Ben S. (8)
Carrie P. (24)
Ezra P. (26)
Phyllis C. (27)
Marlin H. (27)

Anniversaries

Mike and Cheryl P. (9)

Stupidity

Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of good than malice. One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force.

Evil always carries within itself the germ of its own subversion in that it leaves behind in human beings at least a sense of unease. Against stupidity we are defenseless.

Neither protests nor the use of force accomplish anything here; reasons fall on deaf ears; facts that contradict one’s prejudgment simply need not be believed—in such moments the stupid person even becomes critical - and when facts are irrefutable they are just pushed aside as inconsequential, as incidental. In all this the stupid person, in contrast to the malicious one, is utterly self-satisfied and, being easily irritated, becomes dangerous by going on the attack. For that reason, greater caution is called for when dealing with a stupid person than with a malicious one. Never again will we try to persuade the stupid person with reasons, for it is senseless and dangerous. ~ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906—1945) “On Stupidity” - Letters and Papers from Prison*



West Suffolk Leadership

The West Suffolk Epistle is a monthly publication of West Suffolk Baptist Church.
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Please submit information to Walt Lawrence by the second Sunday of each month preceding publication by e-mail, in person or at the church office. The editor reserves the right to edit for content or space. May the Father be glorified in every word.

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