

Prayers for the Poor in Spirit

An Ancient Prayer

Our text today is an ancient Christian prayer. We will end with biblical prayers, but we will begin with an ancient prayer. It has two sentences. Here it is: *Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners. Give your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise, that our hearts may there be fixed where true joys are to be found. Amen*

The first sentence of the prayer does not ask for anything. It tells us who we are talking to: Almighty God. We are addressing Almighty God. Then we describe God. *Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners.*

We are sinners, and that means our wills and affections are all over the place. Our wills and affections are unmanageable, they are unruly. Our wills and affections are dis-orderly. At times we very much want the wrong thing. Our will does not submit to God. Even when we genuinely want to do the right thing, we don't.

For what I want to do, writes Paul, I do not do, but what I hate I do.... For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Romans 7.

Folks, this is the universal experience of all humans. New believers, mature believers, and thoughtful unbelievers. Sensitive philosophers in Paul's day could describe honourable ways of living, but they themselves could not consistently live like that. Just like us.

The first sentence again: *Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners.* This is the newest part of this prayer. It was added in 1661. The rest comes from about 650, a thousand years earlier.

Here is what we want from God: *Give your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise.* In the first sentence, we address God, and we tell him that he alone can change our wills and hearts. In the second sentence we ask him to do that. *Give your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise.* That would be a huge grace, if God could work in us that way. Miraculous.

Then we have the goal, the reason for the request: *so that our hearts may there be fixed where true joys are to be found.* Jesus told us to lay up treasure in heaven, because our hearts would be where our treasure was. *That our hearts may there be fixed where true joys are to be found.*

We need to ask some questions. First of all, do we even need this? Can't we fix this ourselves? Aren't we *supposed* to fix this ourselves? We live in a world that loves books like "The seven habits of highly effective people." We make ourselves better people.

If we are having trouble with our wills and affections, surely we just need to learn better habits of self control. Surely, we just need to try harder. Or we need counselling. In our world, our self is on its own. We just need to be more determined to improve ourselves, and more skilled.

This prayer has an entirely different view of humans. The *only* way our wills and affections will line up with God is if he acts on us to change what we love and desire. This is what the Bible teaches, as we will see. For all of us who already knew that we were unruly and unmanageable, this is truly good news. For all of us who already knew it was hopeless, now there is hope.

Is it even possible for us to love what God commands and desire what he promises? That's a stretch, isn't it? That people like us would get to that? Is this really one of the things that God offers? Yes, he does! Psalm 23 says that God leads us in paths of righteousness *for his name's sake*. God thinks his good reputation requires him to keep us on righteous paths. Paul writes to the church at Philippi: "*It is God who works in you to will and to do what pleases him.*" Php 2.

Our problem is not that our God is too small, it's that he is too far away, and we are left on our own in these matters. From far away, God loves us and forgives our sins. From far away he gives us eternal life and he tells us how to live. After that, we're on our own. How can that not be enough? Pressure! Guilt! The bad news is that this is not enough to change us. The good news is that he does not leave us on our own.

You see, our wills and affections *are* disorderly, they *are* unruly, they *are* unmanageable. If God just forgives our past sins and tells us what the Christian life looks like, and now go live that way, we're sunk. We cannot do it. Sometimes, yes, but not even close to always.

Many of us privately believe that we are a disappointment to the Lord, because we cannot do what he expects us to do. People, we need a bigger gospel than just forgiveness and then instructions, because if that's it, if God forgives us and he tells us what to do, it is not enough good news. But there really is more good news. With this ancient prayer, we tell God that he alone can change us. We are poor in spirit, so would he give us the grace of changing our loves and desires.

The First Three Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

The twelve step program of Alcoholics Anonymous takes this approach. Two men in Ohio began AA in about 1935, and they were believers. They developed twelve steps. Let's take a look at the first three steps. We would think, if this was for alcoholics, it would be twelve steps to better self control. We would be completely wrong. AA does not teach self control.

Step One: We are powerless over what is wrong with us. Our lives are unmanageable. We are hopeless. I am hopeless. Step one.

Step Two: There is a Power greater than ourselves, the God of the Bible, that can restore us to right living. God has power like that. Step two.

Step Three: We will turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.

Now listen to our ancient prayer again: *Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners. Give your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise.* The first three steps of AA could have come right out of that prayer.

The Oxford Group

There was a Christian movement that began in England in the early 1920s, 15 years before Alcoholics Anonymous. These believers wanted to live the Christian life just as the New Testament taught it, and they wanted to live this way every day. They came to be known as the “Oxford Group,” because Oxford University students took hold of this movement and its teachings in a big way.

By the 1930s, the Oxford Group had spread to the USA. Two Christian men who struggled with alcohol addiction met each other. Both of them had been part of the Oxford Group in the USA. They decided to begin Alcoholics Anonymous, and they based their twelve steps of AA on the principles they had been taught in the Oxford Group.

What that means is that the twelve steps of AA began as the way ordinary believers lived a godly life. At the start, those principles had nothing to do with addictions of any kind. It how believers who wanted to please the Lord lived their daily lives. These were not principles for desperate people, not principles for addictions. These were principles for every believer.

Step One: We are powerless over what is wrong with us. Our lives are unmanageable. Step Two: There is a Power greater than ourselves, the God of the Bible, that can restore us to right living. Step Three: We will turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.

Prayers for the Poor in Spirit

Now we’ll go to the handout that you’ve been given. This first set all come from Psalm 119.

Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees. In this line we just express longing. All of us who trust the Lord and have the Spirit long for this. *Oh that my ways were steadfast.*

Do not let me stray from your commands. At the end of Matthew, Jesus tells the apostles, *teach them to obey everything I commanded you.* We are taught to obey the Lord’s commands. But we can turn that back into prayer: *Lord Jesus, help me with this, do not let me stray from your commands.*

Keep me from deceitful ways. God tells us to always be truthful, but we can turn around and ask him for that. *God, keep me from deceitful ways.*

Give me understanding so I will keep your instructions and obey them with all my heart. God, we need you to do this for us.

Direct me in the path of your commands. In John 14 Jesus says, *If you love me, keep my commands... Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me.* So we say back to Jesus, “Lord, will you please direct me in the path of your commands.”

Turn my heart toward your ways. Turn my eyes from worthless things. It is so good that we have prayer like this. God tells us what to set our heart on, and what not to set our heart on. But God also invites us to pray, “God, you turn my heart toward your ways; God, you turn my eyes away from the wrong things.” God gives us these prayers so we will use them, and that means he intends to answer them.

May I wholeheartedly follow your decrees. Direct my footsteps according to your words; let no sin rule over me. (Psalm 119:8, 10, 29, 34–37, 80, 133) *Keep your servant from wilful sins, may they not rule over me.* (Psalm 19:13)

In Genesis 4, when Cain was angry enough to kill his brother, God said to Cain, “*Sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must rule over it.*” God says that to us, as well. So we say back to God, “God, don’t let any sin rule over me. Keep me from wilful sins, God, may they not rule over me.” God gives us prayers like that.

Psalm 141 *Set a guard over my mouth, LORD, keep watch over my lips.* How many times does the Bible warn us to be careful about our speech, be careful what we say. There is a prayer for that, too. “*You set a guard over my mouth, LORD, you keep watch over my lips, you make sure nothing bad gets out.*”

[Omit: *Do not let my heart be drawn to what is evil.* (Psalm 141:3–4)]

Here’s one that fills me with longing: *Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me* (Psalm 51:10). There’s a fine song based on those words.

I’m going to skip over the rest and go to the very last one, the Hebrews 13 benediction. Every prayer on these pages asks God to do in us what he already told us to do. God shows us his way, and we respond in prayer: “God, you alone can change me so that I do what you ask.”

--*May God turn our hearts to him, to walk in obedience to him and to keep his commands.* (1 Kings 8:58)

--*I will put my law in their minds and write it in their hearts... I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me.* (Jeremiah 31:33; 32:39)

--*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you... I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my law.* (Ezekiel 36:26–27)

--*I pray that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and all insight, so that you will choose what is best.* (Philippians 1:9)

--*It is God who works in you to will and to do what pleases him.* (Philippians 2:13)

--*We continually ask that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and always please him.* (Colossians 1:10)

--*Epaphras always wrestles in prayer for you, that you would stand firm in all the will of God, mature and confident.* (Colossians 4:12)

--*May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else.* (I Thessalonians 3:12–13)

--*May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through.... The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.* (I Thessalonians 5:23–24)

*** The last one is a favorite: *May the God of peace equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.* (Hebrews 13:20–21) Can you feel God's kindness and love in this? God knows very well that we can't do the good we want to do.

We are so poor in spirit. We're spiritual beggars. This God knows better than we know it. Because he loves us, *he* will equip us with everything good for doing his will. *He* will work in us what pleases him, *through* Jesus Christ. And we have to be patient with this. He's rarely in a hurry, as you know. Keep praying like this, for yourself and those you love. It's prayer he wants to hear.

Here's a story from about 20 years ago. Our church gives money to Providence, and one year the Providence director of development had this policy, that if a church gave a financial gift to Providence, this director would take the pastor out for lunch. So he took me to lunch.

After some small talk he asked, "So, Ed, how is your church doing? Do you have a five-year plan? Or a ten-year plan?" My heart sank. Such a thing never crossed my mind. I said, "This week I am praying that God would work in our church so we'd *want* to do what pleased him, and so that we would *do* it. I plan to pray that every week for five years."

He laughed at me. He was not mocking me, he was genuinely amused. Which made me bristle just a little. I said, "Would you like to hear my ten-year plan?" He did not laugh. Uncomfortable silence. Then we talked about safer things.

I don't know how else to pray for a church. Nothing else makes sense. If God will actually do that, if he will work in the church so that we *want* to do what pleases him, and so that we *do* it, maybe some things won't get done, but do they matter? No! If we pray for other things, and God does *not* work in us to will and to do his good pleasure, what have we gained? We have lost ground. People, if we're going to pray, let's pray for the important things. Amen.

PRAYER: Father in heaven, thank you. The prayers you've given us in your word show us that you know we're the poor in spirit. You know how much help we need to live in your ways. Thank you for how much of this you have already done in our lives. We ask, Father, that you will use these Scriptures to shape our prayers and shape our lives. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God of peace equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in you what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.