

I. Set up / Adoration

A. Good morning, welcome, introduction, first-time cards

B. Today we are finishing up our series on prayer, called “Talking with God.”

1. In the first week Mike defined prayer as both communication with God and also an encounter with him. He then listed seven reasons why we should pray.

2. Last week Pastor Garth looked at the reasons why we do not pray, briefly exploring some of the reasons why God might say “no” to our requests, and then he began to answer the “How do we pray?” question, principally by reflecting on The Lord’s Prayer.

C. Today the service is different – it is being shaped around the ACTS model of prayer. This A, C, T, S paradigm directs us to pray four different kinds of prayer.

1. The A stands for Adoration or praise

2. The C stands for Confession

3. The T is for Thanksgiving

4. And the S is for Supplication or requests

D. Many people use this acrostic as a guide because it helps weave together upward, inward and outward prayer.

1. Upward prayer is prayers of praise and thanksgiving, which – by the way – are different. I think of thanks as a subset of praise, but we praise God for who He is; we thank Him for what He has done.

2. Inward prayer refers to Confession, and the self-examination that accompanies it.

3. And finally, outward prayers refers to prayers of supplication – requests we make of God on our own behalf or the intercessory prayers we pray for others.

E. We are opening our service with a focus on Adoration because, while there is no rule that says we must start our prayers with praise, it’s not a bad idea.¹

F. Of course worship is more than singing, and the truth is, we are all worshipping something already – hopefully God. We worship something in everything we do, whether feeding our children, greeting people in the lobby, sitting quietly before the service starts. In one sense everything is an act of worship. But worship services officially start somehow.

1. With a song, a prayer a casual welcome or a count down on the screen.

2. We are not a liturgical church that has a formal liturgy, but our services often begin with some sort of call to stand and join in celebrating God. And sometimes a musician or pastor will cite one of the many Calls to Worship we find in the Bible.

3. This is a way of recognizing that we’ve been dispersed all over the place but we now are coming together again to join together in this time and space to worship God.

4. It also highlights that coming together isn’t our idea. We didn’t think this up. God is the one who has called us out of the world to rehearse the gospel in his presence for his glory and our good through the power of his Spirit. That should encourage us to engage fully with God because we come by invitation – His invitation. We are invited to join “the worship of the ages and the angels.” This isn’t “simply a party of friends, or a lecture on religion, or a concert... – he invites us into the presence of the King of the Universe before whom all creation will bow and for whom all heaven now sings.”²

G. I am going to invite you to stand and together we will read our call to worship today. It comes from Psalm 33:1-5³

H. RESPONSIVE READING:

1. Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy. For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.

I. Please remain standing for ??? followed by doxology????

II. Song of Praise / Doxology

III. Adoration (continued) & Confession

A. If you just walked in, our service today is following the ACTS model – the A stands for Adoration. We opened with that because: 1) The A comes first; 2) The prayer Christ taught us starts with praise – “Hallowed be thy name” is a request that God glorify himself; 3) We were made to worship – and if we get this wrong (if our loves are not rightly ordered) everything else goes south;⁴ 4) And finally, because praise helps shape the rest of our prayer – such as confession.⁵

B. In Isaiah 6 we have a great example of that. In that chapter, Isaiah opens stating:

1. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

C. And then – after that praise – he goes on to say:

1. At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

D. In other words, Isaiah’s response after seeing God was to realize, “I do not measure up.” Praise led to confession.

E. Now, we do not simply move on to confession because a clear picture of God makes us realize how small we are.⁶ We also confess because this is one of the great privileges of faith in Christ.

F. You may not have realized this before. But confessing our sins is a gift and it’s one that stands in stark contrast to what is generally modeled. Left on our own, we tend to go in one of two ways.

1. Either we dismiss sin as a small matter. “It’s no big deal. In fact, I’m still a good person, better than most and God is all love so it doesn’t bother him.” This is quite the opposite view we find in the Bible, where the people were shocked that God would be willing to dismiss their sin.

2. Or we go beyond that to say whatever we need to say in order to feel really good about ourselves. We want to have high self-esteem. We want every child to understand that they are the best, certainly that they are better than average so let's hand out trophies to everyone, let's inflate grades and job titles. Let's remove any objective standards and call bad good so everyone feels good about themselves."⁷

G. The Gospel doesn't say, "I'm OK, You're OK; we are all OK." It calls on us to look at a holy God, realize our sin and confess it, realizing that when we do, we are forgiven because God will take your sin upon himself.

H. Christianity is the only religion in the world that does something about sin. The way forward is not to deny our sin but to confess it. Sin, confession and forgiveness are a critical triad that lie in the heart of our message.

1. We confess that we not only have fallen short of our hopes and of the Law's demands, but we have sinned against God. We have rebelled. We are selfish and full of pride and lust and greed. So, in prayer we pause and reflect and invite the Holy Spirit to bring to mind our sin – not in general but in specific – so that we will face it, own it and confess it. We review the last day and as sin comes to mind, we wince as we think about it and ask God for his forgiveness.

2. We do this knowing that when we confess our sins he forgives us.

I. Now let me be clear. We are not talking about having that sin removed so that we go to heaven. The suggestion is not that if we died without confessing the last sin that we would be lost. When we come to faith we are adopted into the family of God. That is a finished thing. We remain his children. We are confessing our sin in order to keep the relationship with God fully open.

J. If we do this right we find release. There is nothing like understanding, "He knows the worst and loves me anyway. I don't have to try to hide it. I don't have to act like I am better than I am!"

K. This past week I was re-reading Psalm 51. It is David's prayer of confession after he was confronted by Nathan the prophet for committing adultery and then murder. It's a rich, rich Psalm. Almost every line is worth meditating on. What struck me this time was how odd it was to have this prayer in the Bible. David is the quintessential Jewish hero. He is king, general, poet, superstar. He could have suppressed this. He could have made sure it was struck from the record. But he doesn't. The Bible is making the point – we all have feet of clay. Face it and confess it. Call sin, sin and receive forgiveness.

L. I am going to give you a moment to quietly confession your sins to God and then invite you to join me in a corporate prayer of confession, which will show up on the screen. Let's pray...

M. I invite you now to stand as you are able and join with me in a corporate prayer of confession

1. Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen.

N. And now hear this Assurance of Pardon – it comes from I John 1:9

1. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

IV. Thanksgiving

A. As we noted earlier – giving thanks is a subset of praise; there is overlap between them.⁸ But they are different.

B. I hope you see how naturally thanksgiving fits after confession.

C. We start by focusing on how great God is. Coming out of that we are fully aware of how far short we fall of him – faults of both commission and omission (things we have done that we shouldn't; and things that we should have done that we didn't). We confess our sin and then realizing that we are forgiven we thank God for all that He has given us, starting with a clean slate.

D. Now, having said that, it doesn't happen quite so easily. Left to ourselves we tend to find our way to confession and petition.⁹

1. We sin and experience guilt or shame and so we pray fervently, hoping to find some relief for our soul. Life leads to confession.

2. And it also leads to petition (or supplication – the S in ACTS). We ask for help because of a desperate need or crisis: a friend or family member is diagnosed with cancer; we lose our job – so we pray, asking for God's help.

E. In those cases prayer is fueled by external circumstances and our sense of need. It would be nice to think that when things go well we'd automatically be thankful. But that is seldom the case. When things go well we think: they should, because I'm good. I worked hard. I'm smart. I deserve this. In Romans 1:18 Paul describes the darkness of the human heart. He says:

1. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.

F. One of the results of our sin is that we take credit – we do not give thanks. We are so desperate to feel good about ourselves – our pride lies so deep inside us – that we want to think we are self-sufficient, when we are not. We depend on God for everything. You need God for the next breath you take.

G. We are never as thankful as we should be. We cannot fathom the scope and depth of what we owe to God.

H. We want to take credit and we will unless we make giving God thanks part of the disciplines we cultivate.

I. I am going to give you a minute to silently offer God thanks for the many ways he has blessed you, then we will close this section with a Song of Thanks.

J. Hymn: Now Thank We All our God

V. Offering

A. Just as adoration led us into a Call to Worship at the opening of our service, thanksgiving leads us to a time of offering – which is both an act of worship and one small act of thanksgiving.

B. The offering is frequently misunderstood.

1. Some see it as a move to buy God's favor. That's not the way it works.

C. Giving is rightly understood as an act of worship – we are acknowledging that it is all his. And there is also an act of thanking God, of showing thanks.

D. If you start with the premise that the money we control is ours then we really can't end at the right spot. If it's ours then we might think that we're being generous giving any of it away. But the understanding is rather: every-thing belongs to God. He has provided for me. And I am allowed to have some and expected to acknowledge his great care for me in part by giving back the first ten percent of what I have been given as a sign that it's all his.

E. Let me pray for us now and then we will collect the offering.

F. IT WOULD BE A GOOD IDEA TO PRAY FOR BALTIMORE, NEPAL AND INDIA – AMONG OTHER THINGS

VI. Communion:

A. Earlier I noted that there is little that happens in life that naturally leads us to give thanks – when things go well we take credit. This table is an exception. What we rehearse here should lead us both to confession and to thanksgiving.

B. We confess because we realize that God the Father had to send God the Son to His death because of our sin. When we remember that we should acknowledge our sin and also give thanks. We are reminded that everything that needs to be done for our slate to be cleared was done by Jesus.

C. Earlier – during the Assurance of Pardon – I recited I John 1:9, “If we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Let me remind you, the verse does not say, “If we confess God is merciful and will forgive us.” It says, “he is just.” That is because, if we turn to Christ, Christ has already paid for our sin and so it would be unjust for anyone to pay for it again.

D. Holy Communion focuses our attention on the sacrificial death of Christ. As we approach this table we prepare our heart – which include confessing our sin – and as we come out of communion we are thankful for what God has provided.

E. As those who are going to distribute the elements come forward, let me remind you that:

1. This table is open to all who have made Christ their Lord

2. Please take both the bread and the cup

F. Please join me in prayer now before the elements are distributed.

G. Distribute elements

H. Words of institution

VII. Supplication

A. The final part of prayer focuses on our needs and the needs of those around us. In some ways, this is prayer at its most basic and primal. It's a cry for help. But as others¹⁰ have noted, "looks can be deceiving." In James 4:2 we are told:

1. You do not have because you do not ask. And when you do ask you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives.

B. One of the ways we can jump the tracks here is to not understand is that what we want to want is his will. Our petitionary prayers can actually do us more harm, or go nowhere at all, if what we are doing is asking God to indulge our appetites. If we are telling God in no uncertain terms how he should run the universe.

C. In *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis's book about heaven and hell – where a group of people from hell take a bus ride up to heaven and discover that because of the way their sin has deformed them and all of the choices they have made, they do not want to stay. Heaven is too real for them. They are shadows who can't walk on the grass in heaven because they do not weigh enough to bend the blades of grass under their feet and instead they get cut.

D. It's typical Lewis – a dive into a very interesting and theologically rich imagination. But the big line in the book is this:

1. In the end, there are only two kinds of people. Those who say to God, "your will be done." And those to whom God says, "your will be done."

E. The book is fiction. I'm not wanting to defend all of its implications. But I do think that line is gold, and that that thought should inform our prayers.

F. And by the way, I'm not sure I could pray nearly as passionately if I didn't keep coming back to it. Think about it. What we want to know is:

G. two things:

1. First, that God hears our prayers. And we are promised that he does. In ways I can't understand, our prayers matter to God. We are told that over and over. So pray. Pray for what you want. Wrestle with God in prayer – in other words, build your case for what you want.

2. However – second – we also need to hear that God is in charge – and that He will edit my prayers in the ways that He sees are best. I would be paralyzed to pray if I thought all of my prayers would be answered exactly as I asked, because I've asked for some pretty stupid things in the past and I'm very glad they were not answered.

H. The encouraging news is, we are invite to bring our requests to God, with the knowledge that he will answer in the way that is best. If we knew everything he did, we'd chose for ourselves what He is choosing for us.

I. So let me give you a few minutes right now to pray - to bring your requests to God. And then in a minute or two (????) will close us and then lead us into a final song.

¹ We are not praising God because God needs the encouragement. C.S. Lewis does a masterful job of commenting on this in *Reflections on the Psalms*, noting that: “We despise the man who demands continued assurance of his own virtue, intelligence or delightfulness.” He then goes on to suggest that though it looks like God is doing this – is demanding to be told that He is great – something else is actually in play. He explains that one of the reasons we praise something is because we think others should pay attention to it – because we believe that they would be missing out without it. “You need to read this book;” or “You have to see this movie, it’s so good!” We praise things because we do not want others to miss out. And we praise things because doing so completes our enjoyment. God doesn’t gain anything by our praise – but we do. And because He loves us He doesn’t want us worshipping things that are small and that in turn, make us small.

² Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, p. 160

³ There are a number of possible Scriptural Calls to Worship: Ps. 111:1-2; Ps. 95:1-3; Is. 55:1; Phil. 2:9-11; Lam. 3:22-23, *etc.*

⁴ As Tim Keller notes, we must praise God to be who God made us to be. It’s for our own good. (Tim Keller, *Prayer*, p. 192). “To do otherwise is to live in unreality and poverty. It’s not enough to simply believe in our minds that He is loving or wise or great. We must praise him for those things – and praise him to others – if we are to move beyond abstract knowledge to heart-changing engagement. And while we are here let me point out something you may have noticed. Nice, thoughtful, joyful people – the kind of people we want to be – can find something good to say in the worst situations; they can find something kind to say about the worst meal; they can find something encouraging to say about the worst play; while cranks and misfits can find something dour to say about things that are wonderful. We do well by learning how to praise. God deserves our praise and things go better for us – we become more loving, generous, joyful, friendly, Christ-like people when we praise him.

⁵ Three reasons to start with praise immediately present themselves: 1) when Jesus taught the disciples to pray, the first of the six petitions he gave them in The Lord’s Prayer was a petition of praise (“Hallowed be thy name” is a request that God glorify himself); 2) One of the key ways we are different from every other created thing is that we worship – we love things, we organize our life around them, we pursue them, we exalt them. Our lives pivot around something or someone. And if they are pivoting around the wrong thing we have real problems. (In order for our life to work as designed, we need our loves to be rightly ordered. We need first things first. We need to love God most. When we do not – please hear this – when we do not, we not only set ourselves up for failure and disappointment, we also set up whatever we love more than God to fail as well. Your spouse or job or whatever you love most, cannot ever fully satisfy you. And if you look to it to do so you set it up to fail. When we love God first we get filled and shaped in the right way); 3) praising God helps shape the rest of our prayers - the more we praise God for his holiness and justice the more we see our flaws and are led to confess them, and the more we see God’s greatness the more we are led to ask for his help – supplication. I’m not saying that we cannot start with prayers of confession or prayers of supplication. But we are right to focus on God and praise him because that will help shape us in the right way.

⁶ An additional reason to move from adoration to confession is because we see this modeled in The Lord’s Prayer. It opens with three petitions that are directed around God’s glory: Hallowed be they name; Thy Kingdom come; and Thy Will be done. And then we move into: “Forgive us our debts.”

⁷ This often doesn’t work, but when it does, we create monsters who believe they are great and whose hearts grow calloused and unable to feel the truth. Guilt – not false guilt, but real guilt – is a good thing to feel. Because it drives us to God for forgiveness.

⁸ Psalm 135 is a call to praise God, and Psalm 136 is a Psalm of Thanksgiving to God – yet upon close inspection we see overlap.

⁹ Thanks to Keller for these helpful insights, p. 195f.

¹⁰ I am thinking here of Tim Keller in his chapter on supplication.