

# On Prayer

*John Wycliffe*

Roman Catholic · Late Medieval · Treatise

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## INTRODUCTION

Written in the last years of Wycliffe's life, after his expulsion from Oxford and retreat to the parish at Lutterworth, this short treatise belongs to the body of vernacular English writings through which he sought to put scriptural teaching directly into the hands of ordinary believers. Its argument is twofold: that the prayer of the righteous sustains the commonwealth, and that prayer offered from a sinful life, particularly by negligent priests, actively harms the church. The polemic against clerical corruption that would later animate the Lollard movement is already fully present here, sharpened by Wycliffe's conviction that genuine prayer is inseparable from a just life. Expect plain, forceful exhortation in the cadences of early English prose, closer to a parish sermon than to a scholastic disputation, and meant to be heard as much as read.

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How Prayer of Good Men Helpeth Much, And How Prayer of Sinful Men Displeased God, And Harms Themselves and Other Men

From the Manuscript in the Library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

## Chapter 1

Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us to pray evermore for all needful things, both for body and soul; for in the gospel of St. Luke Christ saith it is needful to pray evermore, and St. Paul bids Christian men pray without ceasing or hindrance. And this is understood of prayer of charity, and not of men's vows, as Augustine well declares, for else no man could fulfil this command to pray evermore. For as long as a man lives a just life, keeping God's commands and charity, so long he prayeth well, whatever he does; and whoever lives best, he prays best. Also St. James saith, that the fervent and lasting prayer of a just man is of much worth. And while Moses was in the mount, and held up his hands, and prayed for his people, his people had victory over their enemies; and when he ceased to pray thus, his people were overcome, as the second book of holy writ teaches. So if priests dwell in the mount of high spiritual life, and espy deceits of the devil, and show them to the people by true preaching, and hold up their hands, that is open good works, and continue in them; and pray by a fervent desire to perform righteousness of God's law and ordinance — then Christian people shall have victory over the devil and cursed sin, then shall rest, and peace, and charity, dwell among them. And if priests cease this holy life and good

example, and this desire of righteousness, then Christian people shall be much overcome by sin, and pestilence and wars, and woe enough; and unless God help, more endless woe in hell.

King Hezekiah, by holy prayer and weeping and sorrow, got forgiveness of his sin, and fifteen years of his life; and the sun went back, or returned again ten Hues on the dial, as Isaiah's book witnesses. Also by the prayer of the holy leader Joshua, the sun and moon stood still all day, to give light to pursue God's enemies, who desired to quench God's name, his law, and his people. Therefore Christ saith to his disciples, If ye ask my Father anything in my name, he shall give it to you; but we ask in the name of Jesus, when we ask anything needful or profitable for the saving of men's souls, so that we ask this devoutly, of great desire, and wisely or humbly and lastingly, by firm faith, true hope, and lasting charity, and whatever we ask thus, we shall have of the Father of heaven.

Also Christ saith thus in the gospel, evil men have wisdom. If ye give good things to your children, which good things are given you, how much more shall your Father, of heaven, give a good Spirit to men that ask him. Then, since nature teaches sinful men to give goods to their children, how much more will God, author of goodness and charity, give spiritual goods, profitable to the soul, to his children whom he loves so much! Therefore ask of God heavenly things, as grace, will, wisdom, and power to serve God, to please him; and not for worldly goods, except as much as is needful to sustain thy life in truth and service of thy God.

Therefore, Christ teaches us that whatever we pray and ask for, we should believe and trust without any doubt, to have it, and it shall be given us; and if two or three of you consent together of anything on earth that they should ask, it shall be given to them. Therefore, Christ taught and commanded us to pray the Lord's prayer, which is the best and plainest, and most sure prayer of all; for it contains all things needful and profitable for body and soul, and no error or singularity against God's will. And Jesus Christ made it, and commanded it in short words, that men should not be weary or heavy to say it, nor cumbered to learn it. And hereof a holy man blames men that leave the Lord's prayer which is taught and commanded of God, and choose singular prayers made of sinful men. And hereby it is plain those holy men, dwelling in love to God, and all men living on earth, both friends and enemies, Christians and heathens, profit much by devout prayers, but most by holy life and fervent desire of righteousness.

## Chapter 2

See now how wicked men's prayers displease God, and harm themselves and the people. God himself saith in this manner to evil men that pray to him in need; I have called, and ye have forsaken and have despised all my blamings, and I shall despise in your perishing, and shall scorn you. When that which ye have dreaded shall come to you, then ye shall call and I shall not hear, they shall raise heresies and they shall not find me, for they hated discipline, that is learning, and chastising. They retained not the fear of the Lord, and they assented not to my counsel, and they depraved and misdeemed all my correction — that is reproving, warning, and chastising of sin. And by the prophet Isaiah, God saith thus to wicked men; Ye princes of Sodom, hear the Lord's word; people of Gomorrah, perceive with ears the law of our Lord God. Your incense is an abomination to me. I shall not suffer your new moon, which is a principal feast and Sabbath, and other feasts. Your companies are evil, my soul hath hated

your feasts of months, and solemnities. They are made to me heavy and troublesome, and when ye shall hold forth your hands I will turn my eyes away from you. And when ye shall make many prayers, I will not hear, for your hands are full of blood; that is wrong, slaving of men, and foul sins.

Also, God saith that the prayer of that man who turneth away his ear that he hear not the law, is abominable and cursed. Also God saith by the prophet Malachi, and now to you priests, in this commandment. If ye will not hear, if ye will not put on your heart to give glory to my name, saith the Lord of hosts, I shall send unto you neediness, and shall curse your blessings, and I shall curse them, for ye have not set this commandment on your heart. Lo, I shall cast toward you the arm, and spread abroad upon your face the filth of your solemnities. By the same prophet, God also saith to priests and ministers of the temple. Who is among you that will sit and incense mine altar willingly and without reward ? The Lord of hosts saith, There is no will to me among you, and I shall receive no gifts of sacrifice of your hand. And God saith to priests by the same prophet, Ye have covered the altar of the Lord with tears, and weeping, and mourning widows and poor men whom ye oppress and deceive; so that I shall no more beholden to the sacrifice, and I shall not receive any pleasant thing of your hand. Therefore David saith, If I have beholden wickedness in my heart, the Lord shall not hear by grace; that is, if I willfully and gladly do wickedness. God saith to the sinful man, Why tellest thou my righteousness, and take my testament in thy mouth ? And the Holy Ghost saith of Judas Iscariot, His prayer was made into sin; and our Lord Jesus saith. These people worship me with lips, but their heart is far from me, but they teach learning and commandments of men, worshipping me without cause — that is such men as teach and charge men's laws and traditions and commandments, more than holy writ and God's commandments; vainly and falsely worship God. Also Jesus saith to wicked men, Why say ye to me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things that I commanded; for Jesus saith. Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, that devour widows' houses, praying long prayers, therefore ye shall receive greater judgment. And in the gospel of St. John is written thus, Ye know that God heareth not sinful men, but if any man worships God, and doeth his will, God heareth him. And when a priest, void of good life and charity, sayeth his service and maketh the sacrament, he eateth and drinketh his own condemnation; not considering wisely the body of our Lord, as St. Paul teaches, and holy writ. Therefore Chrysostom, on the gospel of St. Matthew, saith, " As a thing may be without odour or savour, but there may not be odour without something, so a good deed without prayer is somewhat, but prayer without good deed is nought." St. Augustine, on the Psalter, saith, " If you pass the measure in meat and drink, and live in gluttony and drunkenness, whatever the tongue speak, the life blasphemeth God." Therefore St. Paul saith, Many men acknowledge that they know God, but by their deeds they deny God. St. Gregory writes thus in many books, A man that is in grievous sins, while he is overcharged with his own, he doth not put away other men's sins; for it is known to all men, that when he that despiseth is sent forth to pray, the heart of him that is worthy is stirred to more displeasure.

Truly it is written, The sacrifices of wicked men are abominable to the Lord, the vows of sacrifices of just men are pleasant. For in the doom of God Almighty it is not sought, what is given, but of whom. Therefore it is written in holy writ, The Lord looked to Abel and his gifts. When Moses would say that the Lord took reward to gifts, he carefully set before, that God beheld Abel; whence it is shown plainly that the offerer pleased not of gifts, but gifts pleased of the offerer or giver.

The mighty God approved not the gifts of wicked men, nor looketh on their offerings, nor shall have mercy on sinners for the multitude of their sacrifices; also the Lord is far from wicked men, and he shall graciously hear the prayers of just men. All this saith St. Gregory.

## Chapter 3

[Wycliffe here shows "how strict is man's law against sinful man's prayer," and refers at considerable length to the various laws and ordinances made against unchaste, and even against married priests, commanding the people not to listen to their prayers or saying of divine service. He then proceeds] —

Much more should these penalties be for greater sins, for the more grievous sin deserves more punishment. For pride makes men forsake God, the King of meekness, and take Lucifer for their false king, as God saith in holy writ. And envy and wrath make men forsake the God of charity, mercy, and patience, and become children of Belial, as God's law, reason, and saints, teach. Covetousness and usury make men forsake God of truth and righteousness, and worship false gods, as St. Paul saith. Gluttony and drunkenness make men to worship false gods, and forsake Almighty God in Trinity, who is God of measure and reason; for Paul saith that gluttony makes the belly its god. And evil example to Christian men is worse than bodily sin, as God's law witnesses, and as is said by Grosthead, as God's word and man's soul are better than man's body.

Manslaying is not only by deed of hand but also by consent and counsel and authority, and since priests thus consent to false wars and many thousand deaths, they are cursed mankillers and irregular, both by God's law and man's.

[Wickliff then condemns simony, and says, in strong terms] —

Whoever cometh to this order or benefice (of the Christian ministry) must by meekness seek God's worship, and the help of Christian souls, and for devotion to live in holiness and give good example. But he that comes to this order to live in pride and lusts of the flesh, as idleness, gluttony, drunkenness, and lechery, comes not by Christ but by the fiend, and is a traitor to God, and a heretic, till he amend this intent, and do well this spiritual office, as Christ taught. And full few are holy to pray for the people, for the greatness of their own sins enters here, and evil countenance and maintenance, and excusing of their sin, and other men's sin, for money and worldly praise, against God in his righteous judgment, and for hard enduring in their sins.

## Chapter 4

But against these laws, both God's and man's, and reason and saints, the fiend teaches his disciples a new gloss; to say that though men are not worthy to be heard in praying, for their own good life, yet their prayer is heard for the merit of holy church, for they are procurators<sup>^</sup> of the church. Certainly, this is a foul and subtle deceit of antichrist's clerks, to colour their sin. [Wickliff then notices again the subject of the last chapter, and "the sophistries of antichrist," which make the efficacy of the sacrament to depend upon the intention and the holiness of the priest; he then notices the Latin and choral services of the Romish church at that period.]

Wonder it is why men praise so much this new praying by great crying and high song, and leave the still manner of praying as Christ and his apostles did. It seems that we seek our own liking and pride in this song, more than the devotion and understanding of that which we sing. This is a great sin, for Augustine saith in his confessions, "As often as the song delights me more than that which is sung, so often I acknowledge that I trespass grievously." Therefore saith Paul, I had rather five words in understanding than ten thousand in tongue. Paul's will is for devotion and true understanding. In tongue, is what a man understands not, and has no devotion. The Lord's prayer, once said with devotion and good understanding, is better than many thousand without devotion and understanding. And this new praying occupies men so much that they have no space to study holy writ, and teach it. But Augustine asks who may and shall excuse himself from preaching and seeking the saving of souls for love of contemplation; since Jesus Christ came from heaven into this wretched world, to seek souls, and save them by open example of holy life and true preaching. And Gregory saith in his pastorals, They that have plenty of virtues and knowledge of God's law, and go into a desert for sake of contemplation, are guilty of as many souls as they might profit by instructing men living in this world. Where shall this new song excuse us from learning and preaching the gospel that Christ taught and commanded? Therefore ye that are priests live well, pray devoutly, and teach the gospel truly and freely, as Christ and his apostles did.

Amen.