

Jonathan Edwards' Telos of Prayer

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Humans are fundamentally teleological beings. Everything we do is directed at some end that we perceive to be good. Identifying something's telos is useful because once you know why something was created, then you can know how to utilize it in the best way. This paper will focus on Jonathan Edwards' view of the telos of prayer. In his sermon "Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival" Edwards writes, "There is no way that Christians in a private capacity can do so much to promote the work of God, and advance the kingdom of Christ, as by prayer."¹ Edwards clearly thinks prayer is impactful and essential in the Christian life, so understanding his view of its ends is necessary to gain a greater understanding of Edwards himself. The ultimate end of prayer is to give God glory. This ultimate end is reached by means of several subordinate ends. Before examining Edwards' telos of prayer, it is necessary to first distinguish between different types of teloi and second to define prayer according to Edwards.

Edwards delineates between types of teloi by categorizing them as subordinate or ultimate. In "The End to Which God Created the World" he explains that subordinate ends are dependent upon ultimate ends because they are valued as an end insofar as they help one to reach the ultimate end.² Ultimate ends are the final ends which one seeks, making them independent. This is similar to Aristotle's distinction between teloi

¹ Jonathan Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England," in *Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen, vol. 4 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 518.

² Johnathan Edwards, "A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World" (1765), 4.

in which he classifies them as instrumental or intrinsic. Instrumental ends are pursued as a means to reach a further end, while intrinsic ends are pursued in and of themselves.³ Edwards believes the ultimate and chief end for which God created all things is His own glory; prayer is no exception to this. Thus, the ultimate end of prayer is to bring glory to God. However, Edwards also identifies several subordinate ends of prayer which help it reach the ultimate end. These subordinate ends are first, to acknowledge our dependence on God and second, to shape our hearts to align with His. Both the ultimate and subordinate ends play a role in Edwards' notion of the telos of prayer. Before examining the telos of prayer, it is necessary to first define prayer according to Edwards so that we have a basis from which to discuss the purpose of prayer.

Edwards believes prayer is a genuine coming before God. In "Hypocrites Deficient in the Duty of Prayer" Edwards says that prayer is a duty of religion and he defines it as "calling upon God."⁴ Making prayer a necessary duty of religion can cause it to become a box that people check in order to fulfill their Christian duties. But defining it as a calling upon God necessitates that it go beyond a mere obligation and instead be a true act of faith. This is the tension that Edwards wrestles with in his examination of prayer. This is exemplified in Edwards' miscellany 1165 where he writes of Paul's prayer life. "Not that he had never prayed before externally that strict sect of

³ Michael L. Morgan, *Classics of Moral and Political Theory, 5th ed* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011), 259.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, "Hypocrites Deficient in the Duty of Prayer," 1.

the Pharisees of which Paul was abounded in prayer, constantly attended it every day at the stated hours of prayer, besides extraordinary prayer at their fasts (which often were twice a week,) & at other times. But these were not counted worthy of the name of prayers because they were not prayers of faith.”⁵ Simply speaking words directed at God does not necessarily qualify as prayer. Prayer necessitates words and a sincere heart. The Pharisees spent countless hours addressing the Lord multiple times a day, yet because their prayers lacked a heart to back the words, they were not counted as prayers of faith. In “The Most High a Prayer Hearing God” Edwards says, “In words they seem humble and submissive, but in heart they are proud and contentious; there is no prayer but in their words. [...] Such prayers as those which I have just now been mentioning, are not worthy of the name of prayers; and they are so accounted in the eyes of him who searches the heart, and see things as they are.”⁶ Here Edwards goes so far as to say that prayers which are not offered in faith, should not be called prayers at all. Glenn Kreider, associate professor of Theological Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, writes, “Edwards insisted that God hears only prayers offered in faith. If God does not answer a prayer, it is perhaps because He, who sees the heart, knows that the petition was not offered in faith.”⁷ In summation, Edwards believes that prayer must be done

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellany 1165,” <http://www.westblade.info/JE/Misc/1156-1173.htm>.

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, “The Most High a Prayer Hearing God” (sermon, Boston, January 8, 1735-6), 62.

⁷ Glenn Kreider, “Jonathan Edwards’s Theology of Prayer,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160 (2003): 448, <https://content.ebscohost.com/ContentServer.asp?EbscoContent=dGJyMMv17ESeqLQ4v%2BbwOLCmsEmep7VSsq44TLWWxWXS&ContentCustomer=dGJyMPGutk%2B0qLBJuePfgexy9Yvf5ucA&T=P&P=AN&S=R&D=lsdar&K=ATLA0001368869>.

with a genuine heart for God, not out of insincerity or rote obligation. With this basis of the meaning of prayer, it is now possible to assess Edwards' telos of prayer.

Edwards' ultimate telos of prayer is to bring glory to God. This is the ultimate telos of prayer because it is the ultimate telos of all of creation. In "The End for Which God Created the World" Edwards says, "Thus Isa. 48:11, 'For my own sake, even for my own sake, will I do it. For how should my name be polluted; and I will not give my glory to another.' Which is as much as to say, I will obtain my end; I will not forego my glory; another shall not take this prize from me. It is pretty evident here, that God's name and his glory, which seem to intend the same thing, as shall be observed more particularly afterwards, are spoken of as his last end in the great work mentioned."⁸ This is one example of many in scripture which refer to God's name and His glory as the end for which all things are done. Seeing as prayer is a created means of communication between God and man, it too must be intended to bring glory to God as its ultimate purpose. "As God hath made all things for his own glory, so he will be glorified and acknowledged by his creatures; and it is fit that he should require this of those who would be the subjects of his mercy."⁹ Prayer is an acknowledgement of God as the supreme Lord and Savior of whom we are completely reliant on. It is for his glory that we enter into his presence in prayer.

⁸ Edwards, "The End for Which God Created the World," 29.

⁹ Edwards, "The Most High a Prayer Hearing God," 56.

One specific way Edwards explicates that prayer brings glory to God is by elevating Him above false gods. Edwards describes the true God as “the God who heareth prayer; which is here mentioned as what distinguishes the true God from the gods to whom the nations prayed and sought, those gods who cannot hear, and cannot answer their prayers.”¹⁰ False gods lack the capacity to hear and answer people’s prayers and they lack the disposition to help those who pray even if they could. On the contrary, God promises to hear the prayers of his people. He does so because his heart is inclined towards those who call upon his name out of faith.¹¹ God is owed all glory because he is the one and true Lord who willingly condescends to converse with his people. This ultimate telos of prayer, being God’s glory, is sought by means of two subordinate teloi.

The first subordinate telos of prayer is to acknowledge one’s dependence on God. Prayer is essentially coming before the Lord in surrender, asking for his presence and mercy. It is a vulnerable and dependent act which speaks of God’s authority and power. Edwards says, “With respect to God, prayer is but a sensible acknowledgement of our dependence on God, to his glory.”¹² We are granted free access to him. We are not only permitted but encouraged to seek his presence and ask for his grace. By admitting of our dependence on God for our every need, we bring glory to him as our Lord and Savior.

¹⁰ Edwards, “The Most High a Prayer Hearing God,” 45.

¹¹ Kreider, 444.

¹² Edwards, “The Most High a Prayer Hearing God,” 56.

It's important to emphasize two things that prayer is not. First, it is not something that God needs from his people. "It cannot be from any need that God stands in of us; for our goodness extendeth not to him."¹³ God is all-powerful, full of grace, and entirely self-sufficient, so prayer is not any kind of service to him. Second, it is not a work which man can do in order to earn salvation or good grace with God. In "Justification by Faith Alone" Edwards writes, "We are justified only by faith in Christ, and not by any manner of virtue or goodness of our own."¹⁴ This means that nothing man tries to do, even the most beautiful and sincere prayers of faith, can earn us justification. Prayer is evidence of our faith in that it is a necessary consequence of true faith; but prayer itself is not a means which we can use to obtain the grace of God for ourselves. We are wholly dependent on him. True prayers of faith recognize this as they humbly ask for forgiveness for their sins and submit to God's will.

The second subordinate end of prayer is for God to shape our heart and desires. God does not need prayer in order to know our heart. Edwards writes, "God is so perfect in knowledge, that he doth not need to be informed by us, in order to a knowledge of our wants; for he knows what things we need before we ask him."¹⁵ Although we do come before him to show him our heart and tell him our desires, this is not because he did not already know them. Bringing our hearts before the Lord allows us to surrender

¹³ Edwards, "The Most High a Prayer Hearing God," 57.

¹⁴ Jonathan Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone" (sermon, November, 1734), <https://www.biblebb.com/files/edwards/justification.htm>.

¹⁵ Edwards, "The Most High a Prayer Hearing God," 53.

to him so that he can take our heart and shape it to match his. In addition, prayer is not intended to persuade God to act in a way that aligns with our will. In “A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections” Edwards writes, “We are not appointed in this duty [of prayer ...] to inform God of these things, or to incline his heart, and prevail with him to be willing to show us mercy; but suitably to affect our own hearts with the things we express, and so to prepare us to receive the blessings we ask.”¹⁶ The purpose of prayer is to inform ourselves of our hearts and to allow us to see God’s heart for us. Prayer affects us, not God. By seeking God’s presence in an intimate way such as prayer, we are able to offer up our desires to him and ask that his plan will prevail.

A confusing tension regarding this subordinate end of prayer is how to ask God for the desires of our heart whilst also surrendering to his will. Verses like Matthew 7:7 which claim that what we ask for will be given to us, complicate most Christians’ view of prayer when they face unanswered prayers. Edwards seeks to address this tension in “The Most High a Prayer Hearing God.” He offers three responses to unanswered prayers. First he says, “It is no argument, that God is not a prayer hearing God, if he give not to men what they ask of him, to consume upon their lusts.”¹⁷ In this first category of unanswered prayers, those praying ask for the wrong thing. If God granted lustful and evil prayers, He would become an enemy to himself which is clearly counter to his nature. Thus, a prayer of faith must not ask for temporal things which may

¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards, “A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections in Three Parts,” (International Outreach Inc, 1746), 15.

¹⁷ Edwards, “The Most High a Prayer Hearing God,” 60.

become man's idol. Second he says, "It is no argument that God is not a prayer hearing God, that he heareth not insincere and unbelieving prayers."¹⁸ God does not only consider our words, he also takes notice of our heart. If a man's prayer asks for things which he does not truly desire or asks for things without any belief that God will grant it to him, then that is not a prayer of faith. Man must come before God with confidence in his power to grant prayer if his prayer is to one of faith. Third he says, "It is no argument that God is not a prayer hearing God, that he exercises his own wisdom as to the time and manner of answering prayers."¹⁹ God is not going to answer our prayers exactly the way and time that we want him to. If he did that, then our exercise of influence over him would negate his omnipotence, meaning that he would not truly be God. As it says in Isaiah 55, the Lord's ways and thoughts are higher than the ways and thoughts of man. Thus, we must surrender to him in obedience and ask that his will be done above ours. This does not mean that we cannot ask boldly for our desires. There are ample instances throughout the Bible which tell believers to cry out to God and ask him for things. However, Edwards says in the "Religious Affections" that "holy boldness is not in the least opposite to reverence."²⁰ God encourages his people to boldly ask for the desires of their heart but he also requires that they ultimately submit to his will. Jesus exemplifies this dynamic when he asks for the Father to remove the cup of suffering from him. He then surrenders and says not his will, but the Father's will be

¹⁸ Edwards, "The Most High a Prayer Hearing God," 61.

¹⁹ Edwards, "The Most High a Prayer Hearing God," 62.

²⁰ Edwards, "Religious Affections," 136.

done. This is what Christians are expected to do. God wants to know our hearts, but we must also surrender to him knowing that his ways are above ours.

Even though God's will ultimately prevails over ours, we should still pray because prayer allows our will to align with the Lord's. Kreider writes, "Prayer builds a believer's faith. Prayer prepares the believer to receive God's provision with thanksgiving and to glorify Him."²¹ Prayer gives man a means of communicating with God which allows one to grow closer to our heavenly Father. It is impossible to be in consistent fellowship with someone and to not be influenced by them. Being with God in prayer allows him to influence us. In "Hypocrites Deficient in the Duty of Prayer" Edwards writes, "Sinning and praying agree not well together. If a man be constant in the duty of secret prayer, it will tend to restrain him from wilful sinning. So, on the other hand, if he allow himself in sinful practices, it will restrain him from sinning."²² The more that a man is in prayer, the less he sins because prayer aligns our hearts with God. This subordinate end of prayer attains the ultimate end of glorifying God because prayer helps us to live holier lives that emulate God's character.

In conclusion, the ultimate telos of prayer is to glorify God, just as everything else we do, and this end is sought by acknowledging our dependence on God and allowing him to shape our heart to align with his. Edwards thinks prayer is the most impactful thing a Christian can do in private life to promote the kingdom of God

²¹ Kreider, 444.

²² Edwards, "Hypocrites Deficient in the Duty of Prayer," 6.

because prayer has the power to fundamentally change our hearts and the ways that we think about things. It is an incredibly powerful tool which God uses to reach his people and draw them close to him so that his glory may be magnified.

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