

The Christian's Pattern for Prayer

PRAYER IS TWO-WAY CONVERSATION WITH GOD. A dialog with our Maker and Savior is one of the greatest privileges a person can experience. Having a consistent prayer life is essential to an intimate friendship with the Lord. Spiritual maturity requires ongoing communication with God.¹ Prayer is also the key to using the authority that Jesus gives us to tap into his power and release his Holy Spirit to work in us and our world.² The Bible contains many prayers—often without using the word *pray* to describe them. In fact, most of the Psalms are prayers. Anytime a believer speaks or listens to the Lord, prayer is taking place. Scripture is full of examples of prayer to model and learn from. The best-known prayer pattern comes from Jesus and can be found in Matthew 6:9-13 or Luke 11:2-4. Careful attention should be given to what Jesus taught about praying in the verses preceding and following the prayer. These passages answer many common questions we have about prayer.

THE DISCIPLE'S PRAYER

What is popularly called the *Lord's Prayer* could more accurately be renamed the *Disciple's Prayer*. In this prayer, Jesus provided an outline in reply to his follower's request, "Lord, teach us to pray..."³

Why pray? The simplest answer is—Jesus did. We follow his example. It is clear from the disciples' request for prayer lessons that they understood praying was extremely important to Jesus.⁴ Who he was and all he did depended on it. The disciples did not ask for a course on performing miracles, preaching sermons, or even witnessing, but they did ask to be taught how to pray.

Jesus is willing to help us learn as he was to help them. Matthew's account tells us that Jesus had more in mind than giving Christians a prayer to repeat. Both before and after the prayer, he shares important principles describing what prayer is and isn't. He corrects many common misunderstandings and sets the record straight.

PRAYER IS A MATTER OF HEART, NOT APPEARANCES

And when you pray do not be like the hypocrites...⁵

Prayer is not a religious show. We shouldn't try to impress others with our praying and we certainly cannot impress God. For prayer to be authentic, it must be sincere and honest. Psalm 62:8 says, "Pour out your hearts to him." Nothing should be hidden or held back from the One who knows all our thoughts and the words we think about saying. God isn't shocked or fooled. What we're doing and feeling may not be right, but at least we can be real about it. Being transparent before the Lord is how we discover what is wrong with our beliefs and behaviors. It's how

1 Matthew 7:11
2 Luke 5:16
3 Luke 11:1
4 Luke 5:16
5 Matthew 6:5a

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we recognize our need for forgiveness and help. The outward posture we adopt for prayer isn't as important as the inward condition of our spirit. He requires truth at the core of our being.⁶

PRAYER IS A MATTER OF LOVE, NOT LANGUAGE

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like the pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.⁷

Silent tears are enough for God to respond. He loves to hear prayer, and he wants us to pray.



We don't have to speak well to pray well. An eloquent prayer does not necessarily make for a great prayer. It's not about fluency but intensity. Passion counts more than pronunciation. In prayer, we seek the Lord rather than present a speech to him. In fact there are times when prayer doesn't have to be put in words at all—whether silent or spoken. Romans 8:26 describes this process. “We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the [Holy] Spirit intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.” A baby doesn't have to know how to say “hold me” to get his or her parents' attention. Crying out is sufficient to bring them running. Silent tears are enough for God to respond. He loves to hear prayer, and he wants us to pray.⁸

Jesus did not oppose public prayer. He often prayed aloud for others to listen along. What he disliked was empty repetitions of words without meaning. The unified declaration of the Lord's Prayer can be a powerful expression of worship when voiced from a passionate faith. But when it is recited as a mindless ritual or sacred superstition it provides no value. The prayer is then misused in a way that contradicts the precise principle Jesus established. When praying in front of others, the fact that they are listening in and should be included does not change the conversation between us and the Lord. We should keep our attention on him rather than them.

PRAYER IS A MATTER OF OBEDIENCE, NOT PREFERENCE

Therefore prayer is an obligation for a disciple, not just an option—a priority not just an extra.

Christians are not just asked to pray, they are instructed to pray.⁹ We are commanded to pray as well as invited to pray. “Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you.”¹⁰ Obeying God is the real proof of loving God. The only parts of the Bible that we really believe are the ones that we put into practice by living them. Therefore prayer is an obligation for a disciple, not just an option—a priority not just an extra. We have a responsibility to pray whether we feel like it or not.

PRAYER IS A MATTER OF DELIGHT, NOT DUTY

When you fast, do not look somber...put oil on your head and wash your face... and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.¹¹



6 Psalm 51:6

7 Matthew 6:7

8 Jeremiah 33:3

9 Luke 18:1

10 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

11 Matthew 6:16

It is an error to see prayer as all work and no play. Those who hunger for God find it a delightful exercise. Once people have experienced his presence and power in prayer, they'll not only desire to meet with him more frequently, they'll find it essential.¹² Drawing near to God recharges and restores us. Jesus promoted prayer as something uniquely and personally rewarding. He likened it to a secret that the heavenly Father wants to share with each of his children. Along with everything else that we can find in prayer, we will also sense peace and fulfillment. "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."¹³

A PATTERN FOR PRAYER

As we turn to the Lord's Prayer, we should notice how Jesus introduced it—this is how you should pray rather than this is what you should pray.¹⁴ He does not teach us to quote this prayer as the only one that works. He demonstrated the elements that go into effective prayer. We can think of the Lord's Prayer as a template to be filled in or an outline to be fleshed out. In its 60-plus words that take about 20 seconds to say, we find an appropriate pattern that we can work from to personalize our prayers. Christians have developed a number of ways to organize and express the main elements that the Lord's Prayer reveals about the kind of praying that touches God's heart. One of the clearest and easiest patterns to remember is built around the acronym for PRAY. It identifies four major components of a balanced prayer life.

"P" REPRESENTS PRAISE

Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name.¹⁵

Jesus' model prayer begins and ends with worship. Therefore, we should not be in such a hurry to bring a shopping list of requests or place a rush order from God's divine catalog. Jesus excludes all personal wants in the opening sentence but rather focuses on pure worship. God is recognized and honored for who he is and all that he does.

Each name that God reveals for himself in Scripture teaches us something about him and gives us another reason to lift him up above everything and everyone else. Using a variety of God's names in prayer glorifies him and reminds us of all the reasons that we possess to be grateful and joyful before him.

Because Jesus has granted us the permission to address the Almighty as our father, we are assured how near and dear we are to God despite his greatness. We are unmistakably regarded as God's own children. Through faith in Christ we've been adopted into his family and encouraged to address God as Abba, which means Dad.¹⁶ Therefore our conversations with him are not distant and terrifying—they are firsthand and comforting. We can come to the throne of grace with the confidence of being part of his royal family, knowing that the king is always our daddy. We are welcome there at all times, because the Father's house is a house of prayer. Praise

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12 Psalm 42:1; Psalm 73:25

13 Psalm 16:11

14 Matthew 6:9a

15 Matthew 6:9b (KJV)

16 Romans 8:15-16

Genuine prayer is more concerned with getting closer to God than getting stuff from him. Praise reminds us to prefer the Giver to his gifts.



Yet the purpose of prayer is not to bend God to see things our way, but rather for us to be changed to see things his way.



This is so crucial: People who won't show grace to others can't fully experience it for themselves from God. When we tolerate our sin rather than taking responsibility for it, our communication with God is inhibited.



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"R" STANDS FOR REPENTENCE

**Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven¹⁷
...and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.¹⁸**

Praying for God's kingdom expresses our desire for Jesus to rule in our lives and reign over the whole world. It embodies our conviction that he lives and is coming again. Praying for God's will to be done on earth underscores that our prayers must be driven by his agenda rather than our own. Sometimes God chooses not to do certain things in advancing his plan until we ask him.¹⁹ Yet the purpose of prayer is not to bend God to see things our way but rather for us to be changed to see things his way.

In response to prayer, the Lord gives us wisdom to see where he is working in our world along with the willingness to join him. The longing Jesus felt in Gethsemane lies at the heart of every prayer—"not what I will, but what you will."²⁰ It is also this same concern that alerts us to the fact that God's will is not always done. Things on earth are still a far cry from things in heaven as evidenced even within our own lives. Jesus is not yet the king over every action and thought. And so prayer uncovers our sinfulness and reveals the gap between the way things ought to be and the way they really are.

When we discover something wrong about us, we need to own up to it before the Lord and ask for his mercy. We must confess (or admit) the wrongs we have done and repent (or turn away from) them. Then he'll clean us up as if it never happened.²¹

When we ask God to forgive us our debts, we confess that we've broken his law and deserve the proper penalty. Repentance in prayer is not trivial—we should note the condition within the prayer: Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. This is the only part of the prayer that Jesus felt compelled to elaborate on—"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."²² Jesus warned us that an unforgiving spirit blocks our communication, rendering our requests null and void. Bitterness and resentment can prohibit us from enjoying fellowship with God as we should. A lack of forgiveness leaves us feeling guilty and unclean and puts our spiritual growth on hold. Our faith will remain powerless until we release the grudge. Therefore, grace—undeserved mercy and kindness—is essential to a relationship with Jesus. This is so crucial: People who won't show grace to others can't fully experience it for themselves from God. When we tolerate our sin rather than taking responsibility for it, our communication with God is inhibited.²³

17 Matthew 6:10 (KJV)

18 Matthew 6:12 (KJV)

19 James 4:2

20 Mark 14:36

21 1 John 1:9

22 Matthew 6:14-15

23 Psalm 66:18

“A” MEANS TO ASK

Give us this day our daily bread.²⁴

Although asking is a large part of prayer, it is not the first thing. In modeling a request for daily bread, Jesus is teaching us that our heavenly Father expects us to ask him to supply all of life’s needs. In Jesus’ day, bread was the staple food used at the core of every meal. It represented all things that people need to survive and to thrive—not only in this world but in the age to come. Our asking should not only be very personal but very practical and specific. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”²⁵

God not only knows our needs even before we do,²⁶ but he also takes great pleasure in meeting them.²⁷ He finds even greater joy in showing us the minuteness of our real needs and that all of them will be cared for if we only trust him.²⁸ One of the reasons that prayer takes on such importance is that it reveals our ultimate declaration of dependence. Prayer is an act of pure faith in which we choose to rely on God and not ourselves. At times, we are part of the answer to our own prayers. We work in cooperation with God to bring it to pass. However, many times our task is not to do something but to stand there waiting for Jesus to move. Although such faith appears to defy common sense, it can open the door for God to perform miracles.²⁹

Prayer obviously includes asking not just for ourselves but for others as well. Intercession takes place when we pray on behalf of another’s needs. So the Bible urges us to pray for workers to be sent out to reach the lost, for those in authority to allow the Church to carry out its mission, and for the rebellious prodigal to return home.

One’s whole life will be lived out under God’s gaze. Even when we can’t stop to pray, we can still be praying—whether carrying on a silent inner discussion with the Father or pausing to direct words his way as we move in and out of conversations with others. All these requests, even for today, should have tomorrow’s kingdom interests and God’s eternal concerns in view.

“Y” SIGNIFIED YIELDEDNESS

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen³⁰

The concluding theme of prayer deals with our desire to personally turn every detail of our lives over to the Lord. Like subjects before a king, we bow to his purpose and plan. We must willingly surrender to his will by submitting to his leadership and committing to obey him. This is particularly important in our individual struggle with sin. Scripture says we are in a spiritual battle in

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24 Matthew 6:11 (KJV)
25 Philippians 4:6, 7
26 Matthew 6:32
27 Philippians 4:19
28 Psalm 23:1
29 Mark 11:24
30 Matthew 6:13 (KJV)

“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

1 Corinthians 10:13



which we must choose between right and wrong.³¹ To win out over temptation (an urge or desire to sin) we need God’s constant help. By turning away from the tempter to the Savior we are empowered to pass the test—saying yes to good and no to evil. Jesus’ example shows us that while we can’t avoid being tempted altogether, we don’t have to give in to it—ever.³²

Because James 1:13 assures us that God does not tempt anyone, those who submit themselves to be led by him can avoid many temptations altogether. Christ will steer them away from high-risk situations. Even when wrong seems very attractive, we can always find strength to resist. “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful, he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”³³ Prayer reveals an exit strategy from evil and supplies us with the strength to use it. Yielding ourselves to God is the heart of holiness. “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.”³⁴

The final sentence of the Lord’s Prayer brings us back to an expression of worship and a sense of awe. The kingship of the universe belongs to him already. The defeat of sin and Satan was accomplished when the cross and tomb were emptied. Until Jesus returns it is just a mopping up operation. The glory and power belong to him and he shares them with us as needed. Victory and eternity will be ours, because they already belong to God. This brings prayer to its confident and traditional finish of Amen—a word that stands for more than a mere punctuation mark at the end of our praying. Literally meaning “so be it” or “let it be so,” it becomes the heartfelt exclamation point of living trust.

PRAY—praise, repentance, asking, and yieldedness—drive a simple framework from the prayer of our Lord that can keep our prayers fresh and growing. But the best prayer lesson of all can be summed up in the sales slogan of a brand name line of athletic wear—Just Do It.[®] To talk about prayer or even study prayer is no substitute for talking to God. Jesus didn’t use the expression if you pray, but when you pray. There will never be a better time than now to become a man or woman of prayer.³⁵ The Lord is already listening. Just start the conversation. Speak as you would to a close friend. Pause now and then so that he can reply. Even if you’ve little to say, don’t worry about the silence. Just savor your time together. “These I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer...for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.”³⁶

31 Ephesians 6:0-18
32 Hebrews 4:15
33 1 Corinthians 10:13
34 James 4:7-8
35 Psalm 109:4
36 Isaiah 56:7