

How Should I Pray?

How should we pray? Why does God want us to speak to him? What words should we use? Who would dare to make a request of the Creator of heaven and earth? It doesn't take many such questions to overwhelm us when it comes to the important topic of prayer. Very quickly we realize that whether we have been praying for 70 years or are attempting to pray for the first time, there is much more that we don't know about prayer than we do.

Because the subject of prayer is so deep and complex, it is refreshing to find that Jesus worked to make it simple. If anyone ever knew how to pray, it was the Savior. He prayed constantly, often in the early morning hours before anyone else had awakened, and sometimes he prayed through the night when facing a major decision or challenge (Luke 3:21; 6:12; 9:29; 22:39-46). Jesus understood the importance of prayer and built his ministry around it. That is what makes the story in Luke 11 so impressive.

One day Jesus was praying and when he had finished, a disciple made this earnest request:

Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples (Luke 11:1).

What follows is a shortened version of what is commonly called "The Lord's Prayer."

He said to them, "When you pray, say:

"Father,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation" (Luke 11:2-4).

Jesus' sample prayer is impressive both in its brevity and in its simplicity. Instead of making us think that prayer is only for religious experts, it helps us believe that we, too, can pray. These 34 words provide a clear outline and an understandable guide for a lifetime of prayer. In each line, Jesus teaches us something important about how we should talk to God.

Father

"Father" or "Abba" (a tender term also meaning "father") was commonly used by Jesus in his own prayers (Matthew 11:26; 26:39, 42; Luke 10:21). Prayer, at its core, is a child talking to his or her loving father. Our heavenly Father loves us and wants what is best for us. He rejoices in our successes, feels our pain when we fail and waits patiently for us to return home when we leave him (Luke 15:11-32). By starting his sample prayer in this way, Jesus teaches that even when we don't know what to say to God, we can run into the arms of our "Father" and begin pouring out whatever is in our hearts. A loving father always wants to hear his children express their hearts.

However, for some people the term "father" is a problem in itself. Their human father was cold, critical, hateful or even abusive. For such people, "father" is a frightening word that leaves them confused and hurting. What should they do? Should they look for another description of God? Surely not!

The very fact that we describe some fathers as "bad" indicates that we know fathers were not intended to be that way. Some people have longed all of their lives for the father they didn't have – someone who was kind, supportive, caring and who always protected them. Instead of letting a bad example of a father stand in the way of a close relationship with God, doesn't it make more sense to let God reshape our understanding of what "father" should mean? That seems to be what Jesus was doing as he said later in the same chapter,

"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead: Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:9-13).

A bad father points us away from God; a good father points us toward God. But God is much more than even the best human father. That is why it is significant that we begin our prayers with the realization that we are children speaking to the most loving, understanding, forgiving, patient and kind Father we have ever imagined!

Hallowed be your name

This is a statement of reverence and respect. The psalmist once wrote,

Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture (Psalm 100:3).

God is God, and we are not. In prayer we remember that we are not speaking to a peer, someone just like us; we are speaking to the one who created the universe and who will one day judge the world.

"Hallowed be your name" is basically saying, "God, I respect you and bow before you."

Your kingdom come

Every person who ever lived has demonstrated selfishness. From the first time we grab another child's toy or demand to get our own way, we all have a deep desire to do what we want to do. "Your kingdom come" is a way of saying to God that we want his will more than our own. Jesus teaches us with these words that an important element of prayer is submitting to God and his will for our lives. This is the same spirit of humility he demonstrated himself on the night before his crucifixion when he prayed,

"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' model prayer includes an additional line that helps to explain the words, "Your kingdom come." They are: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). In prayer, we tell God that we commit to follow his will even when it runs counter to what we want.

Give us each day our daily bread

Jesus shows us that asking God for what we need is an important and fitting part of prayer. God wants us to come to him with our requests. Just as he takes care of the animals and plants in this world, he has promised to take care of his children (Matthew 6:25-34). However, this is often a confusing aspect of prayer. For what is it appropriate to pray?

While the Lord wants us to bring "everything" to him in prayer (Philippians 4:6), James warns us not to ask God for things "with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (James 4:3). Praying to win \$10 million in the lottery is a far cry from what Jesus teaches about praying for "our daily bread."

Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive
everyone who sins against us

When we pray to God, we are more aware of our sins than at any other time. As long as we are looking at other people and comparing ourselves to them, we can feel very smug about how good we are.

However, in prayer we remember the goodness and holiness of our God, and we see what sinners we truly are. That is why in prayer we find ourselves always crying out for forgiveness. The Apostle John wrote,

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:8-9).

Jesus also makes it clear that God expects us to forgive others in the same way he has forgiven us (Matthew 18:21- 35). Jesus said, 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 (Matthew 6:14-15).

And lead us not into temptation

This is a plea for strength and deliverance when facing the desire to do wrong. Just as Satan tempted Jesus in the desert (Luke 4:1-13), he is constantly looking for a way to destroy us (1 Peter 5:8-9). Here Jesus teaches us to cry out to God for help in resisting temptation. Later, the Apostle Paul wrote that God is faithful in answering this prayer.

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).

TEACH US TO PRAY

Jesus' simple prayer provides us with clear instruction on how to pray. Prayer, according to Jesus, is not something that only experts can understand. He tells us to speak to God as a child speaks to a loving father. We are to recognize that the Lord is God and we are not. In prayer, we submit to his will, ask him to provide for our needs, seek forgiveness of our sins and request his help in resisting the devil.

If we pray for 80 years, we will never understand all there is to know about prayer. However, even a new Christian who is attempting to speak to God for the very first time knows enough to pray. Our loving Father longs for us to talk to him, and Jesus has taught us all we need to know to begin.

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