

Prayer

Matthew 6:9-13, "Pray then like this: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.'"

Question: How should I pray?

Key Verses: Matthew 7:7-8; 2 Chron 7:14; Num 6:24-26.

Communication is the foundation of every relationship. We need to express our needs, build friendships, ask questions, gain wisdom, and explain ourselves to other people. That's true with God as well. If we want to have a meaningful relationship with God, we need to learn how to talk to him.

That may sound strange or intimidating. However, God invited us to talk with him. Jesus put it this way: "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." (Matthew 7:7-8). This is a promise!

More than that, God created each of us with an instinct to prayer. You were designed to talk with God. With coaching and practice anyone can become proficient in prayer. Throughout the Bible we read a number of famous prayers that can help guide us (2 Chron 7:14; Num 6:24-26; John 17; Eph 1:15-23). The most famous comes from Jesus himself after his Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them to pray. He gave them a model prayer that we now call "The Lord's Prayer". The point is not to recite the words but to follow the model. This simple prayer gives us five important insights for mastering the practice of prayer.

"Father": Leverage your Connection

Far and away, the most important lesson on prayer is in the first sentence: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." It seems simple to address God as Father. However, before Jesus, no one ever did so consistently. Jesus, on the other hand, never opened any of his prayers with any other appellation save the single instance on the cross when he quoted Psalm 22:1, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." This is a power point. When we recognize that our God in heaven is our loving father, that transforms our prayers. This alone, fully realized, will overcome every deficiency in prayer. For those who don't pray enough (or at all), if they only knew God was their doting father they would get effusively chatty. For those who pray out of duty or obligation would drop the formality and speak to one of loves them and wants to be close to them. For those who pray frivolously, one glimpse at the Father would remind them that his capacity and purposes are higher than our petty demands and desires.

For those who have had a traumatic childhood this might be difficult and counseling may help. Nonetheless, even those without a father (or a cruel one) have the instinctual longing for a good father. That, in fact, is God's design—that an earthly father would be a model pointing to the greater reality of a creator God desperately interested in his human creation.

How do we realize God's divine nature as Father? "Hallowed be your name." That's a poetic way of saying, "God, we pledge to make your reputation honorable." This kind of pledge is also known as praise. It is probably more common than you think. We use praise all the time with lovers, friends, and coworkers by simply completing one or both of these sentences: (1) You are (choose an attribute). (2) You did (choose an action) with excellence. If you want to practice praising God, just fill in the blanks with as many attributes and actions of God as you can think of. God will love it as much as you do when people praise you!

All of us can raise our awareness of God's nature as Father. The prayer itself instructs us how: Through praise. The opening foray of the Lord's Prayer shows the importance of beginning prayer with praise. When we identify the nature and holiness of God, it changes the tone of prayer from mere petition to praise, from expectation to exaltation, from genie to Father whose best interest will shape our conversation. Hezekiah's prayer in a moment of severe crisis (2 Kings 19:14-19/Isaiah 37:16-20) illustrates well how praise on the front-side will improve your prayers. Putting the Father on the throne of your heart gives you boldness to speak especially at life's low-tide: Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

"Kingdom": Embrace God's Agenda

Once you open your prayer with praise, move on to purpose. Your prayers will improve if you can answer a single question: What's God's purpose for my life? That's why Jesus directed us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The power of prayer is not primarily asking God for what you want but in aligning your life with His agenda. When we know God's purpose, we can pray for things and God will say "yes".

There are a number of things people often pray for that God will never grant. These are the kind of requests you expect from Miss America. For example, if we ask him to eliminate war, the answer will be "no". The Bible says there will be wars and rumors of wars until the end of time. Or if we ask him to save every human being Jesus already told us that many will reject him. Jesus also said the poor will always be with us so save your breath praying to eliminate poverty. God will never answer a prayer that forces him to contradict what he has already said in the Bible.

On the other hand, there are a number of things God promises to say "yes" if we just ask for them: Wisdom (James 1:5); empowerment from the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13); escape from temptations (Luke 22:40; 1 Corinthians 10:13); or the ability to promote Jesus (Matthew 9:37-38). To practice this part of the prayer, choose two of these items and pause right now to

ask God for them. Use your own language. Don't try to impress God with words but express simply and honestly what is in your heart. When we get these first two areas of prayer right, then, and only then, can we begin to ask God for what we need.

“Give”: Acquire Resources

In this part of prayer, simply answers the question: What do I need to do my job? If you align with God's purpose in your life, what do you need from him to carry that out? Jesus promised that he would give us everything we need to accomplish everything God wants us to do: “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it” (John 14:14). God is ready to say “yes” to your prayers. The greatest mistake in prayer is not asking for too much but in asking for too little. Oh sure, some people pray selfishly. But most of us pray with too little imagination and boldness. Jesus' brother put it this way, “You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:2-3).

To practice this part of prayer, make a wish list for God. Cross off those items that are selfish and leave those things that would honestly make you a more effective Christian. Now, ask boldly. Next to each item, place two dates—when you first asked and when God answered. Caution: This list may last for decades and each request may have multiple waves of answers. Why doesn't God answer all our prayers immediately? Some prayers are postponed because it's not yet time or you are not yet ready. But many of our prayers are postponed because we have imposed barriers on God's approval. The last two portions of the Lord's Prayer reveals where we often get sidetracked, postponing an inevitable “yes”.

“Forgive”: Remove Barriers

Sometimes our prayers are hindered because we have not forgiven someone who has hurt us. Anger, resentment, and bitterness are mammoth barriers between us and God. It doesn't matter if your hurt was recent or long standing. It doesn't matter if you are justified in your anger or not. Bitterness never harms the person it targets as much as the person who holds it. That's why Jesus said: “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive your sins” (Mark 11:25).

Forgiveness frees us to have an open relationship with God. When we forgive others as God forgave us, our prayers will flow more freely and be answered more speedily. Consider for a moment if there is a person you are at odds with (dead or alive). Just speak their name before God and ask for the strength to forgive them. If you can't yet forgive, then ask for the desire to forgive. If you can't yet desire, then thank God for forgiving you and ask for his Spirit change your heart. Remember, your Father wants to say “yes” to this prayer.

This is so important that it is the only part of the prayer Jesus offered commentary on. Matthew 6:14–15, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also

forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” We should take these words to heart.

“Deliver”: Follow A Guide

Sin is another barrier to answered prayers. When we are actively or purposefully participating in behaviors that dishonor God and degrade our human dignity, it is hard for us to have open communication with God. Here is one example of how that happens, “Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered” (1 Peter 3:7).

To practice this aspect of prayer, simply tell God what he already knows. Don’t give him the laundry list of everything you’ve ever done. Rather, confess out loud one or two habits or activities you are not so proud of. Genuinely apologize and ask God to give you strength to resist temptation. This is not a time to beat yourself up. Jesus’ death on the cross saved you from this. Nonetheless, if you don’t try to make it right, your sin will hinder your prayers. “Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear” (Isaiah 59:1-2).

God removes sin in our lives when we confess it to him and make restitution wherever possible. The Bible calls this repentance and it comes with a promise of forgiveness and freedom from guilt: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). This takes us full-circle to the Fatherhood of God. He does not want you separated, isolated, or alienated from him. This gives us confidence to pray even if our behavior has strayed.

Key Points:

- The most important lesson on prayer is to recognize God as Father.
- When our prayers are aligned with God’s agenda, our requests are approved.
- Withholding forgiveness and habits of sin will hinder our prayers.

Action Step: Use the Lord’s Prayer as a template to guide your prayers this week.

Further Resources: Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, (2016).