

KNOWING & DOING

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Growing in Prayer Part 2: Learning to Pray to Your Father

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“Lord, teach us to pray.”

Luke says this simple request came after Jesus’ disciples had seen Him praying (11:1). Jesus, they had observed, was a man of prayer. Each of the Gospel writers emphasizes this point.

Mark describes the press of people coming to Jesus to be healed. On the next day, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed” (1:35).¹

Matthew writes that on one occasion Jesus, after preaching to great crowds, “went up on a mountainside by himself to pray” (14:23).

Luke draws attention to Jesus’ prayer life most of all. Eleven times in his Gospel he refers to Jesus praying. At Jesus’ baptism, it was as He was praying that the Holy Spirit came upon Him like a dove (3:21). Luke tells us that Jesus “often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (5:16). On one occasion, before He chose the twelve apostles, Jesus “went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God” (6:12). It was “as he was praying,” that “the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning” (9:29). And Luke tells us that in the Garden of Gethsemane, “being in anguish, [Jesus] prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (22:44).

John in his Gospel devotes an entire chapter (17) to the text of one of Jesus’ prayers.

Jesus prayed. For Him prayer was a priority; prayer was a passion; prayer was a part of Him, like lifeblood. We can say that Jesus lived a life of prayer. We might be tempted to wonder why. Wasn’t He the Son of God? Why did He need to pray? But that line of question gets it all wrong. Jesus lived a life of prayer precisely *because* He was the Son of God. For that’s what prayer is about. Prayer is engaging in a living relationship with God, communing with Him in love, as a child to a father.

That’s one thing His disciples couldn’t miss when they heard Jesus pray. He addressed God as His “Father.” The Aramaic word they heard was *Abba*. It was so distinctive that Mark, in recounting Jesus’ prayer in the garden, left it untranslated, just bringing it over into Greek: “*Abba, Father,*” Jesus said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (14:36).



For the Jews of Jesus' day, Abba was a very unusual way of addressing God, almost unheard of. It was a familiar form of addressing one's earthly father, often used in more informal family settings, almost like "Papa" or "Dad" but not quite. On Jesus' lips it always had a respectful tone. Jesus joined it to terms like "*Holy Father*" (John 17:11) or "*Righteous Father*" (John 17:25) or "Father, Lord of heaven and earth" (Luke 10:21). But it was still intimate and personal. Jesus prayed as one who really knew the One to whom He was praying. He knew Him as His Father. That's how Jesus prayed—like no one they had ever before heard. It is no wonder that His disciples asked Him, "Lord, teach us to pray like that. We want to know God as You do."

And that's a request we share—at least I do. So what was it that Jesus taught them in response to that request, "Lord, teach us to pray"?

Let's briefly consider Jesus' best-known words on prayer, found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:5–15), as there we will see that the key to praying like Jesus is found in our relationship with God as our Father.

"But when you pray," Jesus says,

do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matt. 6:5–6)

Pray to the Right Person

In His instructions about prayer, the first common problem Jesus addresses concerns who is at the center of our praying. For hypocrites the focus is on self, rather than on God. They would rather be seen by others than be heard by God. They desire the reward of human accolades, and that, Jesus says, is all the reward they will get.

According to Jesus, performing a prayer is no meritorious act. Who do you think is impressed? Authentic prayer must come from a humble heart, not one interested in exalting itself. Authentic prayer must come from an honest heart, recognizing that God sees what is done in secret, in the secret recesses of the heart—the real you—not some pious mask you wear when you do something religious. Jesus speaks here of prayer as essentially a private matter. It's a personal conversation, not a talk show.

Jesus is not ruling out public prayer. He engaged in public prayer Himself. He regularly participated in the worship of the synagogue, which included the public recitation of written prayers. And we need prayer in fellowship with others also. But even in public prayer, the focus must not be on the human listeners but on God.

When you pray—whether you literally enter into a closet or are among others in fellowship—you pray to God alone. We must pray to the right person. We must see God as our audience.

The key here is becoming so conscious of God that we cease being self-conscious. That's why great teachers on prayer through the centuries have agreed that the first step in prayer ought to be what is called recollection; you start to pray by saying nothing, but recalling whom you are addressing.

Frequently the biblical prayers of God's people begin with a recollection of who God is. And who is the God to whom we pray? Jesus says to His disciples, to those who have joined themselves to Him in faith, "Pray to your Father, who is unseen." "This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven" (Matt. 6:6, 9).

This is an amazing statement! Jesus is saying that we are to make His God our God. We are to make His Father our Father. He is inviting us to address God as He did—"Abba, Father." "Our Father"—He is the one who has graciously adopted us into His family; He is the one who gave His own Son so that we could be His sons and daughters. He is the one who longs to hear our prayer and who desires to lavish us with good gifts. This great God is our Father.

And He is our Father *in heaven*. That is, He is the perfect Father, not liable to the failures and shortcomings of all earthly fathers. He is the transcendent, holy, almighty, and majestic God. He is the Creator of heaven and earth; He is the ruler of the nations; not a sparrow falls without His knowledge; not a king makes a decree apart from His will. "Everything is possible" for Him (Mark 14:36). That great God is our Father, and it is to Him that we pray.

Praying to God as our Father—that’s the starting point of real prayer. As followers of Jesus, His Father is our Father. And like Jesus, we are to come to God as a Father who deserves our love, our honor, our respect.

I grew up in a home where my earthly father was greatly respected. One of my fundamental motivations in life was to bring him honor, to make him proud of me. I wanted to please him. And I grew up with a sense of security in the love of my father. I knew he would take care of me; he would be there in my time of need; he would come to my rescue. This is what sonship means—having a sense of dependence and trust resulting in a ready obedience with a desire to bring honor to one’s father.

My father was not perfect—no earthly father is. All fathers make mistakes; our motives are mixed and our actions are sometimes foolish or worse. Some people have wounds from their earthly fathers. But even those wounds are pointers to what a father ought to be—and therefore what God really is. He is a Father who always acts for our ultimate good, which also corresponds to His ultimate glory. He disciplines His children in perfect love; He never responds to us out of frustration or petty anger. His will is always wise beyond measure. He can be trusted, so He is worthy of our obedience. And He longs for us to come to Him in prayer.

That’s the relationship Jesus had with His Father—“The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing” (John 5:19). “I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38). Jesus prayed, “Father, glorify your name!” (John 12:28). “Abba, Father”—this is the God to whom we pray.

Put aside all desire to develop a reputation as one who prays. Beware of the dangers of the hypocritical ones who want to look good to others so that they may think well of themselves. The one you should think well of is God, your Father in heaven. And from Him you shall receive a reward—the hidden reward of knowing the fatherly love of God almighty, of having your soul refreshed with His presence, experiencing the peace that surpasses comprehension as you entrust your cares into His hands. There are rewards in prayer for those who pray to the right person—who pray to your Father in heaven.

Pray with the Right Understanding

Continuing our look at Jesus, He says in Matthew 6:7–8, “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

Not only must we pray to the right person, but we must also pray with the right understanding. If the sin of the hypocrite is selfishness, the error of the heathen is mindlessness.²

The pagan approach to prayer is one of empty words: they “babble on” or they “heap up empty phrases” (RSV). Prayer must be thoughtful, Jesus says, engaging the mind. Avoid Eastern mystical meditation which seeks to disengage and empty the mind. That’s not Christian prayer at all. *Empty* words don’t mean anything to your heavenly Father.

Nor do a *multitude* of words. Prayer is not magic. We do not manipulate God by some incantation. We can’t twist His arm by overwhelming Him with verbosity. “The pagans imagine that the more they say, the more likely they are to be heard”; it isn’t so, Jesus says. That is a misunderstanding of what Christian prayer is all about.

Don’t you know—“your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (v. 8). Again—“your Father.” As John Stott reminds us, “He is neither ignorant, that we should instruct him, nor hesitant that we should persuade him.”³ Our Father invites us to come; He welcomes our prayer. He knows what is in our hearts even before we speak. Our Western logic might conclude that, therefore, we should say nothing. Jesus thinks differently. In His mind, it



means we can say anything.⁴ Because He already knows our needs, prayer is not about conveying information. His primary interest is in the relationship that prayer offers. He delights when we acknowledge our needs to Him and show our dependence on His provision as our Father. John Calvin notes,

*Believers do not pray with the view of informing God about things unknown to him, or of exciting him to do his duty, or of urging him as though he were reluctant. On the contrary, they pray in order that they may arouse themselves to seek him, that they may exercise their faith in meditating on his promises, that they may relieve themselves from their anxieties by pouring them into his bosom; in a word, that they may declare that from him alone they hope and expect, both for themselves and for others, all good things.*⁵

The hypocrite comes to prayer and thinks only of self. The pagan comes to prayer and doesn't think at all. Other gods may enjoy mindless and mechanical incantations. But our God—the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the sovereign Creator and Ruler of heaven and earth who is also our heavenly Father—our God wants to enter into a relationship with us as we communicate with Him and He with us in thoughtful prayer. What a magnificent thought!

Pray for the Right Things

We are to engage our minds in prayer, and Jesus continues His instruction by giving us a model prayer, outlining the categories that we ought to think about when we pray. He tells us the right things to pray for.

*This, then, is how you should pray:
Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today 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 the evil one.
(Matt. 6:9–13)*

One is immediately struck by the fact that this prayer consists of two halves, marked by the possessive pronoun. The first three petitions use the second person—hallowed be *your* name, *your* kingdom come, *your* will be done. The second three use the first person—give *us* today *our* daily bread. Forgive *us* our debts; lead *us* not into temptation, but deliver *us* from the evil one. So we are to pray, first, for God's glory, and then, second, for our good.

Praying for God's Honor

After focusing on whom we're praying to—"Our Father in heaven"—our first concern in prayer ought to be God's honor—"Hallowed be your name." God's name is His person, His character, His reputation. This is to be revered and honored and considered holy. Our first concern ought to be that God gets the respect that He deserves. It ought to grieve us when He doesn't.

Then we are to pray that His kingdom will come. That is, that His rule would be acknowledged, that He would be obeyed. We are to pray that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. What could possibly be better than this? Whatever else we ask of Him, this takes priority. And it must be a priority in our own hearts and lives. I think of the oft-quoted words of E. Stanley Jones:

Prayer is surrender—surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boathook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God.⁶

This is the kind of prayer that God honors--for it is the kind of prayer that honors God.

And this is the way Jesus prayed. This was the consuming passion of His life—"Father, glorify your name!" (John 12:28). His one desire was that all humanity might come to know that glory. And in the garden, He prays, "Not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42 KJV).

This is a revolutionary way to pray, for it turns the concerns of our selfish secular society on their head.

Praying for Our Good

We begin with God's honor, and only then do we think about ourselves, as we commit our needs to Him. First we bring our *material* needs. That is, we pray for God's provision, recognizing our ultimate dependence on God to provide our daily bread. Notice, Jesus doesn't say next year's bread, but today's bread. I don't think Jesus means that we shouldn't save for retirement, but simply that we ought to depend on Him daily.

Second, we are to pray for our *spiritual* needs; that is, for God's purification in our lives, recognizing our spiritual bankruptcy before Him, the debt that we owe Him—that debt that deserves to be punished. He's referring to our trespasses, our sins, and our need of His forgiving grace to purify our hearts and to wash us clean.

And our repentance, our turning from sin in seeking God's mercy, must be real enough to affect our attitude toward others. If I can't forgive others, then I'm in no position to receive God's forgiveness.

And third, we pray for our *moral* needs; that is, we pray for God's protection as we recognize our moral weakness. We need His power to deliver us from the evil that is all around and within us. Reading the New Testament prayers of Paul, we can see that this is what he most prays for when he thinks of his fellow believers scattered across Asia Minor. I think, for example, of his prayer for the Philippians:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:9–11)

Would that our prayers were more concerned with issues of moral and spiritual health and not just material and psychological prosperity. To have daily bread, to have our sins forgiven, to be delivered from sin and the power of the evil one—God's provision, God's purification, God's protection—these three categories capture all our personal needs, as taught here by Jesus. "Lord, teach us to pray."

Take the Gospel Seriously!

If I had to sum up this whole matter of prayer, I'd say quite simply, to pray is to take your relationship with God seriously. Perhaps more specifically, to pray is to take the gospel seriously. For the gospel is the glorious good news that in and through Jesus Christ we who were alienated from God and subject to His eternal wrath have been rescued, reconciled, and restored—such that we are now sons and daughters of God. Prayer is simply the way we live out and experience this new relationship. Prayer is how we engage with God personally—and in a mysterious way we join with Him in His rule over creation.

I like how one writer has put it—prayer is simply the means God uses to give us what He wants.⁷ As the psalmist says, "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4). That's what happens when we pray.

Prayer is hard. The battle to pray is the battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil. It's the battle to make our will God's will; it's the battle to turn from our rule of our world to God's rule in His kingdom. It's a battle that we must win. So don't give up—begin again. That's what I do. Confess your sin of prayerlessness and begin again.

Reflecting on this battle, I was reminded of a dear brother who was caught in the grip of alcohol. It had become a cruel idol to him. And I urged him to engage in that battle daily, diligently saying no to that idol and yes to what Jesus Christ wanted

for him. I realize that I need to do the same thing. I have idols, too. Idols that need to be rooted out. Every day I need to say no to the world, the flesh, and the devil and yes to God in prayer.

The good news is that we aren't in this battle alone. If you have put your trust in Christ, if you are a Christian united to Christ, you are a child of God—a son or daughter—and, as Paul tells us, “Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Gal. 4:6). That Spirit within you is crying to God your Father. You have a deep longing to know Him and to love Him. The Lord is calling you to Himself. He desires your fellowship; you are His beloved son or daughter. He offers you an inexpressible and glorious joy. Don't ignore Him. Don't push Him away.

As John Wesley said—“O Begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercise . . . Whether you like it or no, read and pray daily. It is your life; there is no other way; else you will be a trifler all your days.”⁸

Do you want to be a trifler?

So don't live like a spiritual orphan. Come to your heavenly Father in prayer. We have a great treasure right at our fingertips, but too often it goes untouched. So I say, “Lord, teach us to pray.” ❏

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

² John Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1978), 151.

³ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴ W. Bing Hunter, *The God Who Hears* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 42.

⁵ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: A Harmony of the Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. A.W. Morrison, ed. David W. and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 1:204.

⁶ Kent Hughes, *Liberating Ministry From The Success Syndrome* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1988), 73

⁷ Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, 12.

⁸ John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1827), 10:247.

...relying on God has to begin all over again every day as if nothing had yet been done.

C.S. Lewis

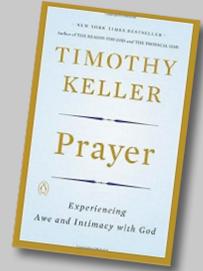


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RECOMMENDED READING

Tim Keller, Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God (Penguin Books, 2016)

Christians are taught in their churches and schools that prayer is the most powerful way to experience God. But few receive instruction or guidance in how to make prayer genuinely meaningful. In *Prayer*, renowned pastor Timothy Keller delves into the many facets of this everyday act. With his trademark insights and energy, Keller offers biblical guidance as well as specific prayers for certain situations, such as dealing with grief, loss, love, and forgiveness. He discusses ways to make prayers more personal and powerful, and how to establish a practice of prayer that works for each reader.



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