

WHY AND HOW SHOULD I PRAY?

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Resources for Christ-Centered Discipleship

Matthew 6:5-13

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ⁶But 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. ⁷And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us today our daily bread. ¹²Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

Before I was a Christian I only prayed when in crisis. The prayer I most often prayed was, "O Lord, please don't let me get caught." After receiving Christ as my Lord and Savior, I began to learn how important prayer is.

I saw on the news last week that President Bush has appointed former Senator John Danforth of Missouri as the new ambassador to the United Nations. It reminded me of an answered prayer.

Connie and I were living in Topeka, Kansas and serving in our first church when we became convinced that God was leading us to go to graduate school at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. We had been serving for four years in a small struggling church and had almost no money saved, no job waiting for us in Saint Louis, and no place to stay once we arrived. Regardless, we loaded our beat up old Mazda and drove to the seminary where they let us stay in a little guest room while we went out looking for work and a place to live.

We couldn't find anything. We looked at dilapidated apartments in dangerous neighborhoods and even in those we could hardly afford a security deposit. We didn't have jobs, and we couldn't find a place to rent. I became more and more frustrated as we hit dead end after dead end. One afternoon I pounded the steering wheel with my fist in frustration not understanding what we were going to do and what was going to happen to us. We felt we were doing what God wanted us to do. We had left everything, now had nothing, and nothing was working out. That night we prayed fervently and specifically that God would provide. After going to bed I was still so concerned I could not sleep. I decided to get up, read, and pray some more.

The next morning we received a phone call. The seminary administrative office had heard about an opportunity we might be interested in. The secretary

was speaking with Connie and asked if we had ever heard of the Danforth family, of whom we had not. She explained that Senator Danforth of Missouri was one of three brothers who were heirs of the Ralston Purina Company. The company had many holdings: Ralston Purina, Chex Cereals, hospitals, and restaurants. One of the brothers, Donald Danforth, who was the executive vice president at Ralston Purina, was looking for someone to live in a guesthouse on the grounds of his estate in one of the most exclusive sections of St. Louis.

That afternoon we turned up a private road and marveled at large, well-landscaped grounds and beautiful mansions as we drove to our new home. Our job was primarily to hang out with a seven-year-old boy for one hour every afternoon, and throw the soft ball or play fetch with the Labrador and have fun. The house came with a great cook, a rose garden, gardener, and pool. They treated us very well and that wasn't all. Soon after we moved into our new home we received a call from a little church out in the country that needed a seminary student to drive out on Sundays and serve as a part time pastor. It was beyond my wildest dreams. All of our needs had been dramatically met. We had a beautiful, comfortable, restful place to live for free as well as an opportunity to serve in a very enjoyable and supportive little local church that gave us ongoing ministry experience and income for our continued schooling. One day I had felt so desperate and frustrated with no prospects or visible opportunities, and the next all my needs were met and Connie and I were thanking God.

God had answered our prayer. Sometimes when people pray about something and God answers, they try to explain it away and say it was just a coincidence. It's remarkable though how many of those coincidences happen when we pray.

The Lord wants us to Pray

He gave us the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 to teach us how to pray.

If you look carefully at the Lord's Prayer, and not only the prayer itself but what Jesus said in the verses that surround it, you get some pretty good answers to the question "Why and how should I pray?"

If we ask "Why should I pray?" What Christ tells us in Matthew 6 is that we should pray because...

I. Prayer is an Important Part of our Relationship with our Father in Heaven

Notice how Christ bases his entire teaching about prayer in Matthew 6 on a father child relationship. Beginning in Matthew 6:6 He says: *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.⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.⁹ "This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, ...

A. Jesus tells us that prayer is based on a relationship with God the Father.

We have to be the children of God and know Him as our Father in order to pray with confidence in God. In the Bible the only way to know that God is your Father is through faith in Christ as your Savior. In John 1:12 the Bible says, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." Through faith in Christ as your Savior you receive the right to pray to God as your Father.

Because God is your Father, prayer strengthens your relationship with him. Prayer isn't just asking for things, it is the natural expression of a real relationship. Prayer includes praising your Father in heaven, thanking him, pouring out your heart to him, and confessing your sins to him.

Prayer develops and deepens your relationship with God.

B. Prayer enables you to receive the help of your father in heaven.

Christ teaches us to pray for daily bread and protection from temptation, because when we pray for these things our father in heaven will hear us and respond to our prayers with His help.

There are at least four ways that the Bible teaches us that God hears and responds to our prayers.

1. The first way is the frequent examples of answered prayer in the Bible. In the Old Testament: People like Hannah pray for the birth of a child and a child is given (Gen. 1 Sam. 1), Hezekiah (2 Kings 19) prays for protection and is protected, Samson asks for strength (Judges 16), Solomon asks for wisdom (1 Kings 3). They received from God what they requested! In the New Testament it is the same. Nave's Topical Bible gives over 100 examples of specific answers to prayer that are found in the Bible. Why are they recorded? They are recorded to teach us that prayer is effective.

2. A second way the Bible shows us the power of prayer is through the clear statements of the Bible itself. James 4:2 says, "You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God."

3. The third way the Bible teaches us the effectiveness and power of prayer is through the definite promises found in the Bible. In Jeremiah 33:3 God says, *"Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know."* Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

4. The fourth proof is through the relationship between prayer and the kingdom of God. Matthew 6:9-10 *"This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* In the life of Jesus, prayer surrounded every major event. In the history of the early Christians every step of progress forward came as people prayed.

According to the Bible, prayer is not just a private devotional exercise by which individual children of God beg their heavenly father to help them pursue selfish goals in life. Rather, prayer is the irreplaceable human instrument by which God's people advance the cause of God's kingdom in their lives, homes, churches, and on this earth.

God wants us to understand that He will hear and respond to our prayers. But notice, Jesus teaches us that because God is our father, the help we receive from Him will be based on his wisdom and love.

Jesus says two very important things about the Fatherhood of God that cast a flood of light upon the life of prayer.

1. First, in Matthew 6:8 He tells you, *"Your Father knows what you need before you ask."*

2. Second, in Matthew 7:11 He tells you, *"Your Father gives good gifts to those who ask Him."*

In those two statements, one coming before and one after the Lord's Prayer,

Jesus says that your Heavenly Father responds to your prayers in light of two truths.

1. First, His knowledge of your deepest needs.

2. Second, His commitment to your highest good.

Sometimes we are like little children wanting something. We may be in pain or hurting and crying out, but we don't really know what we need. Our Father does. That is our confidence; the Father knows what we need.

We can be immature and foolish in our prayers. People are drowning and they pray for new swimsuits. People are starving and instead of praying for nourishing food they pray for candy! People are imprisoned and instead of praying for freedom they pray for a pretty rug to place on the floor of the cell!

Isn't it true? We can be spiritually starving for a love only Christ can give while praying for material things to distract us from our hunger! We can be drowning in our dependence on the approval of people, but instead of praying for freedom through faith in Christ we ask only to be better at pleasing everybody! We can be prisoners of our own self-pity and instead of asking for strength that comes from knowing Christ we ask for the sympathy of people who will feed that self-pity!

This is in part the comfort that comes from the Fatherhood of God. Having a Heavenly Father means that even your imperfect and foolish prayers will never divert Him from your highest good and your deepest needs.

In church history, a great illustration of this is the story of Monica, the mother of St Augustine. Augustine was a Christian who became one of the greatest theologians, authors, and ministers in the early church. He grew up in North Africa and as a young man he wanted to go to Italy, the center of the modern world in his day. Later in life he told how his mother prayed all night that God would keep her son from setting sail for Italy. She saw her son going from bad to worse. He did not share her belief in Christ and she couldn't imagine what would be in store for him if he went so far away from her influence, and especially to Italy, which in those days was known for its loose living and sensuality. Even while she was praying though, her son set sail for Italy. Do you know what happened? It was in Italy that he met a Christian preacher, Ambrose, who became his friend and mentor. It was in Italy that he became a Christian. God brought Augustine to faith in Christ in the very place from which his mother's tearful fervent prayers would have kept him. Augustine, understanding this truth about the Fatherhood of God later wrote a prayer of thanksgiving saying; "Thou in the depth of Thy counsels, hearing the main point of her desire, regarded not what she then asked, that thou might make me what she always wanted." (Nicky Gumbel, Questions Of Life, p98)

If we ask, "Why should I pray?" Christ tells us in Matthew 6 that we should pray because it is an important part of our relationship with our Father in Heaven.

If we ask "How should I pray?" Christ tells us in Matthew 6 that...

II. We Should Pray According to the Pattern Given in the Lord's Prayer

In Matthew 6:9, Jesus introduced the Lord's Prayer by saying: "*This, then, is how you should pray: ...*". Jesus was not saying that we should just repeat

this prayer by memory. He was telling us that there is a pattern in this prayer that can help us to organize our prayers guide us as we pray.

Consider the following outline for prayer based on the pattern in the Lord's Prayer.

A. First, begin with prayer for God's perfections to be praised.

Verse 9 says, *"Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name."* When you pray begin by praising and thanking God for being your Heavenly Father. Give him thanks and praise. Pray that his name would be honored in your life and in the church.

To pray first that our Father's name be hallowed is to submit everything else we pray to His purpose. We come to God and have all these needs: concerns for daily bread and all our other daily needs, the forgiveness of sins, people we're having a hard time forgiving, the temptations we're fighting, and the challenges that we're facing. All of these concerns press us, but when we come to prayer we remember how Our Savior teaches us to pray. We say, "Father in heaven, Hallowed be your name...". We breathe deeply and there is a peace that has already come as we realign our hearts with their true purpose.

Begin with praise.

B. Second, after praise, comes Prayer for God's purpose.

Verse 10 says, *"your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* When you pray for God's kingdom to come you are praying for God's good and gracious rule to penetrate the lives of people and the circumstances of peoples lives. Prayerfully think about your life, ask God for wisdom and insight, and then pray specifically and distinctly for the things that God reveals to you that will advance the cause of Christ and the kingdom of God in your life and in the lives of others. Part of this prayer for God's will and God's kingdom is your surrender to God's will and your willingness to release your burdens to Him.

Prayer can change our lives when we begin to pray; "Lord, your kingdom, and your cause is the most important thing. Help me do what you want me to do. Give me the tools I need to build the things that you have put into my heart to build for your kingdom's sake! "

Pray for God's perfections to be praised and God's purposes to be fulfilled.

C. The third element in the Lord's Prayer is Prayer for God's Provision.

"Give us today our daily bread." "Daily bread" is symbolic of all our needs for today. Through the power of prayer God can help us with all these daily

needs. It can help you face life's struggles, bring physical and emotional healing, and meet financial needs. There is not an issue or problem too big or too small for prayer. So whatever your needs and concerns, pray about them.

I heard about a man who asked a new Christian how her business was going. She replied, "Not very well." He offered to pray for it and she said, "I didn't know that was allowed." Jesus Christ teaches us to pray for daily bread because he wants us to ask God to supply our needs. The words of Christ do not encourage us to expect every luxury, but they do assure us that we can count on God for all our necessities.

The prayer is not just "give me my daily bread", but "give us our daily bread". Pray for God's provision for others as well as for yourself. You may have a friend that needs a job, or is having financial trouble or is sick. Don't hesitate to pray about these things for yourself and for others.

Pray for God's provision.

D. Fourth, after prayer for God's provision, comes prayer for pardon.

"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." This part of the Lord's Prayer teaches us the very important lesson of both receiving and giving forgiveness.

When you use the Lord's Prayer as a guide and you come to these words, stop and first confess your sins to God. Ask God to reveal any areas of your life that are displeasing to Him. As God helps you identify sinful attitudes or actions, confess those sins to God, humbly and honestly admit them to him and then thank him for forgiveness. 1 John 1:9 tells us, *"if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"*.

After confessing your sins, ask God if there is anyone you need to forgive. Specifically name and forgive anyone that you are holding something against. Every day you need to go through the discipline of receiving and giving forgiveness so that God can wash the poison of guilt and unforgiveness out of your system.

E. Fifth, The Lord's Prayer concludes with a Prayer for Protection.

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." Pray for divine protection from evil, and victory over temptation. Maybe there are specific temptations you are facing, or you sense a direct attack from the evil one in some area of your life. Bring those areas to God in prayer and ask for his protection.

Conclusion

In the Lord's Prayer we are given a great pattern for prayer. It begins with God: His praise and His purpose. Then it brings your needs to God in three more requests for His provision, pardon, and protection. It touches the present, "*Give us this day our daily bread*", the past, "*Forgive us our debts*", and the future, "*lead us not into temptation*". You can pray the whole prayer calmly and slowly in 30 seconds or you can take 30 minutes and let it lead you in a time of prayer that will be enriched by its guidance.

Christ died on the cross in order to bring people like us into a real relationship with a heavenly Father. On our own we deserve God's judgment, but Christ died to pay for our sins and rose again as our Lord so that, through repentance and faith, we can receive Him. And with Him we receive not only the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, but also the right to be called the children of God. When you receive Christ you are welcomed by the Father into his family and you are promised his care and help in response to your prayers and petitions. Make the power and privilege of prayer a big part of your life. Be faithful and persistent in prayer.

God's supernatural help is available for his children when they pray. To Him belongs the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever, Amen!