

How Do We Pray?

Matthew 6:5-15

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We've looked at descriptions of prayer and motivation for prayer. Today, we're talking about how we actually pray.

One person asked, "How do I keep prayer from becoming a routine daily litany of: Thank you for...; Please bless so and so...; Help me to...?" Really, that's not too bad! But, our praying can be richer and more meaningful. That's the aim of the patterns I'll share in a little bit. Also, we need to remember who we're talking with in prayer: the Lord God who made us, who loves us, who rules over all, who came to us in Jesus Christ and who is present in the Holy Spirit. That should stir us up to see prayer as more than just a dull routine. And, remember that prayer starts with God. We want to pray because God stirs the desire in us. We then offer prayer to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit (see Ephesians 2:18).

Someone else asked about a different aspect of prayer: "Why is praying in public so frightening?" My first guess is that someone who's scared about praying in public probably sees it as a form of public speaking. Many people are more scared of public speaking than of dying. Practice is a way to overcome that fear. And, if you know you're going to be praying in public, compose a prayer. Think about what you want to say and even write it down. Or at least write the main ideas. Years ago, I started writing my pastoral prayers. I still "ad lib" some, but I have the main idea written.

Speaking of written prayers, using them is a good way to learn to pray. Being spiritual doesn't always mean being spontaneous. Reading and praying what someone else has written can help us think of things we might not have on our own. Something I've done for a while is write a short prayer that expresses something I've read in the Bible and asking to experience it.

Here's another question someone wrote:

I struggle with praying for needs and forgetting to praise. I try to ask for things like patience, strength, compassion, but I fall into selfish sounding prayers. I also think that people throw around “I’m praying for you” too casually—like it’s something that you have to say and I think it starts to sound trite. [Especially] on Facebook. Sometimes this is a result of people saying, “Pray for me” without being specific. How do we get more specific? Do we need to be specific? How do we make sure it’s meaningful?

The main part of today’s message addresses some of these concerns. On the Facebook deal, if someone I know posts a specific prayer request, I will sometimes post a short prayer instead of just saying “praying for you” or whatever. There’s an old tradition of “unspoken prayer requests” that allows us to ask for prayer without going into detail, trusting that God knows. So, pray as specifically as you can, but also know that God knows the situation and can deal with it.

Then someone said, “I hope to hear about praising and glorifying our Lord, confession of sins and receiving forgiveness, petitions for people and needs, and thanksgiving for blessings.” That’s roughly the outline for this sermon!

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus introduces the Lord’s Prayer—really, the disciples’ prayer—as part of his teaching about discipleship and life in God’s kingdom.

Jesus gave his disciples content for their prayers and a pattern for prayer. We looked at this outline last week, so I just want to give you another way to see it. There is power in this prayer, especially when we pray with faith and understanding. The prayer includes six phrases that can become phases or stations in our praying.

- The Person of God—who God is: heavenly Father, holy
- God’s Program—kingdom and will
- God’s Provision—daily bread
- Pardon—forgiveness
- Protection—keep us from temptation, deliver us from evil

- Praise—we conclude like we began, focusing on God and recognizing God’s rule, power and glory

That’s a wonderful example and model of prayer that we can use personally and together. Now I want to share some other patterns for praying—models to help us pray and pray more effectively, with greater focus and attention on God in prayer.

These outlines come from Maxie Dunnam’s *Workbook of Living Prayer*. He adapted them from W. E. Sangster, a British Methodist pastor who was prominent in the middle twentieth century.

There are many outlines, models and patterns for praying. These are only suggestions. We’re not laying some legalistic bondage on ourselves. We don’t have to go through all of these every time we pray. But, over time, all of them need to be part of our praying.

Sangster recommended these patterns for morning and evening, but you can use them any time. I remember praying along these lines when our children were babies and I took my turn rocking them in the middle of the night. Sometimes driving alone for a long distance I’ve used these patterns for prayer.

Ideally, you’ll have some quiet time when you can spend several minutes moving through the pattern. Sometimes you may simply think through it quietly on the run. Let’s explore each of these stages of prayer.

Adoration Remember, prayer starts with God. Not only does God give us the impulse to pray, but God is the focus of our attention in prayer and we begin by praising God.

In adoration we worship, honor, and praise God. In this stage we seek only to magnify and exalt God. Think of the best things you know about God—and praise God for who God is. You might want to choose one attribute or characteristic of God and give praise that that’s the kind of God God is. Holiness, Majesty, Love, Mercy, Faithfulness, for example. Choosing a different aspect of God’s character to praise him for each time gives some variety to your prayer time and stretches your thinking about God and your experience of God.

If you have a hard time getting started with this, use a psalm or hymn to focus your attention and move you in the direction of praise. The scriptures listed under Adoration on the handout can help with this. The first section of hymns in the *UM Hymnal* is about “The Glory of the Triune God.” Read one or two of those to get started adoring the Lord.

Thanksgiving In adoration we praise and honor and give glory to God for who he is in himself. In thanksgiving we give glory to God for what he has done for us, for the gifts we’ve received from him. This is where we count our many blessings, name them one by one, and thank God for them.

Health, home, love, work, friends, family, fun, church, life, peace, salvation—thank God. Even when we are suffering or ill or misfortunate we can find something to be grateful to God for—how about God’s promise always to be with us?

Dedication Even if we have given our heart to Jesus or dedicated our life to God at some time, every day gives us a fresh opportunity to renew our dedication to God.

Someone has said that being a Christian means giving all I know of myself to all I know of God. Every day I can know more of myself to give and every day I can know more of God to give to.

When I made my first conscious commitment to God, I was about eleven years old. Since then, I’ve grown and changed. I’ve married and had three children; completed several stages of education; served a number of churches. I’ve grown in my self-understanding and understanding of God. My commitment to God now involves things my commitment as an eleven year old didn’t.

Mouzon Biggs relates a story from the days of Queen Victoria and the British Empire. The queen once visited the Punjab in India. A young prince from a minor province wished to make a presentation to the queen. She invited him in.

The young man—really, just a boy in his teens—knelt before the queen. Then he stood, reached into his pocket, and held out a small cloth bag. The queen’s attendant opened the bag. A brilliant, polished diamond fell into his hand. The audience gasped and whispered about the size of the stone.

Queen Victoria thanked the young man and promised him that his gift would become a permanent part of the Crown Jewels in London.

Years later, the young prince made a trip to England. He asked to see the aging Queen Victoria. She was reminded of his gift and granted him an audience almost immediately. After proper introductions, the man asked if he might see the diamond he had given to the queen. It was brought from the vault and handed to him. He said, "Your Highness, years ago when I was still a boy, I gave this diamond to you with all my heart. Now I am a man and I know how much this stone is really worth. May I give it to you again, with all my heart?" (*Moments to Hold Close* 36-37)

In dedication, we give ourselves again and again to our Lord.

Guidance We need to seek God's guidance for the day. Hold yourself before God as if reporting for duty and waiting for your orders.

Sangster suggests thinking through your whole day slowly with God. As far as you know what will happen—where you'll be, whom you'll be with, what you'll do—see God in those situations. Also, see God in the unknown and unexpected situations. Try to be aware of how God is calling you. Pray to be aware of and able to grasp the opportunities God gives during the day.

Intercession The prayer Jesus taught his disciples involves asking. In intercession, we are asking on behalf of others. This is praying for other people.

Intercession is one of the greatest things we can do for each other. Richard Foster says, "If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer. Intercession is a way of loving others" (*Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* 191).

Because God chooses to work through people—people who pray—our intercession makes a difference.

We're not alone in our intercession. The Bible says that Jesus is at God's right hand interceding for us (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25). It also tells us that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us (Rom 8:27). Seek to listen and overhear the intercession that is already going on. Then pray what Jesus prays; pray as the Holy Spirit guides.

Petition This is asking on our own behalf. We pray for ourselves and our needs and concerns. Again, the prayer Jesus gave his disciples is mostly petition. God is pleased with our asking and wants to meet our needs as we ask.

We pray in the name of Jesus. This means, first, that we pray in full assurance of the great work that Jesus accomplished. We don't approach God on our own merits or in our own adequacy. We come to God on the basis of what Jesus did for us in his incarnation, death and resurrection. To pray in Jesus' name also means to pray according to the way and nature of Jesus. We pray what Jesus would pray.

Meditation Spend some time thinking about what you've been doing, what it means, and any new insight you've gained. Give your mind to God and learn to think with him.

The pattern for evening prayer is spelled out ACTS. The "acts" of prayer are adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication (that's another word for asking, combining intercession and petition).

The new element here is confession. At the end of the day, go back over the day, reviewing it with God. Admit where you blew it. Confess the sins of the day.

Lloyd Ogilvie tells about being in Israel studying in preparation for one of his books. On the Mount of Beatitude, where tradition says Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount, he was sitting in a garden studying. He became aware that someone else was in the garden—a woman who was obviously distressed. As she walked about, her face showed strain and tension. Lloyd prayed that if the woman's need was on the Lord's agenda he was ready and willing to help.

Later, she walked by Lloyd's makeshift desk. He smiled and said, "Hello." Her cautious response was in a lilting Irish brogue. She was from Belfast, Northern Ireland and was the head of pediatric nursing in a hospital that cared for many victims of bombing and sniping incidents in that troubled city. It was during the time when Protestants and Catholics there were killing each other. One of my seminary professors was from Northern Ireland and he said they referred that time as "the troubles."

Lloyd began a conversation with the nurse. She noticed his Bible and books and asked what he was studying. He said he was searching for Jesus' secret of true happiness, spoken there on the mount so long ago.

"Happiness?" she exclaimed. "That's one thing I doubt I will ever know again." Then she began to tell her story. She had come to Israel to rest and regain her courage. The suffering of the children in her ward had completely drained her. She told about their mangled bodies and broken spirits. She and Lloyd discussed her hatred of the I.R.A., her confusion about the complex issues of unrest in her country, and, most of all, her bone-tired weariness.

Lloyd asked why she thought she could never be happy again. She told how one day she was walking down a corridor of her hospital and was called in to help turn a critical patient in a bed in the adult male ward. The doctor told her that the patient had massive fractures in his spine and neck from bullet wounds. Turning him on his side was necessary, but dangerous. The nurse was to turn his head as the doctor and male attendants turned his heavy body. One false move of the head would end the man's life.

She said, "I put my hands cautiously around the patient's head and then looked into his pain-ridden face. The man was none other than one of the leaders of the I.R.A. underground who was responsible for the suffering of the children I care for every day! I've never felt such hatred. With one move I could have killed him. And for a moment I wanted to! No one could have blamed me. It could have been an accident—easily explained, but never justified. Finally, the nurse in me overcame my burning anger, and I turned the man's head with skilled caution and care. When we were finished, I walked out of that ward, down the hall, and out of the hospital, determined never to go back. I realized that all that hatred had gotten to me. That's why I had to get away. Now you know why I'll never be free to be happy again. When I realize what I almost did, or even that the thought could press through my mind, how could God forgive me? I'm no better than all the rest on both sides of the conflict. The cancer of hatred is eating me alive!"

Lloyd had been studying the beatitude, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." He realized that this woman was

mourning over the whole mess—the suffering of children, remorse over what she was capable of considering, and soul-sickness over what was happening in her country.

Then he sensed God giving him a word for her, and for all of us when we need forgiveness. He developed the thought into four brief requests for forgiveness. The first is, “Lord, forgive me.” Praying that is the beginning of life in Christ and it continues to be a vital part of our walk with Christ. Then we move to, “I forgive myself.” That’s a tough one, but we need it. Then we can pray, “Lord, forgive them.” Finally, we identify with others and we are free to pray, “Lord, forgive us” (*Congratulations: God Believes in You!* 34-36). I’ve found those four movements of confession to be very helpful.

Which of these aspects of prayer draws you today? Where do you need to respond? Do you feel a need to praise and thank God? Do you need to confess something to the Lord and receive forgiveness? Do you want to renew your dedication to God? Or seek God’s guidance? Or is there someone you want to pray for or some need in your life you want to bring to God? All of these are ongoing, part of a life of prayer, but you can start now.

Patterns of Prayer

The Lord’s Prayer

- The Person of God—“Our Father in heaven, may your holy name be honored”
- God’s Program—“Your kingdom come and your will be done”
- God’s Provision—“Give us today the bread we need”
- Pardon—“Forgive us and help us forgive”
- Protection—“Lead us away from tempting situations and deliver us from all evil”
- Praise—“The kingdom and the power and the glory are yours forever. Amen.”

Morning

Adoration

Psalms 8; 95; 100; 103; Romans 11:33-36; Revelation 4, 5

Thanksgiving

Psalms 28; 30; 107; Luke 10:21; Colossians 3:15-17;
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Hebrews 12:28

Dedication

Joshua 24:14-24; 1 Kings 8:54-61; Psalms 31; 37;
Mark 8:34-38; 1 Corinthians 15:58

Guidance

Exodus 13:21-22; Psalms 25; 43; Proverbs 3:5-6; 4; 6:20-23; John 16:13-14;
Acts 10; 16:6-10

Intercession

Exodus 32:30-32; Luke 22:28-32; John 17; Isaiah 53:12; Romans 8:26-34;
Hebrews 7:24-25

Petition

Psalms 4; 5; 12; Jeremiah 33:1-3; Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:1-4; Matthew 7:7-12;
Luke 11:9-13; John 15:1-8; Philippians 4:6-7; James 1:5; 4:1-3

Meditation

Joshua 1:8; Psalms 1; 19; 48; 77; 145; Philippians 4:8-9

Evening

Adoration

Confession

Psalms 32; 66:16-20; Luke 18:9-14; 1 John 1:5-2:2

Thanksgiving

Supplication (Combination of Intercession and Petition)

Lord God, almighty and everlasting Father, you have brought us in safety to this new day: Preserve us with your mighty power, that we may not fall into sin, nor be overcome by adversity; and in all we do, direct us to the fulfilling of your purpose; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(A Collect for Grace, The Book of Common Prayer)