

# Jesus on Prayer

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## Introduction.

When you get right down to it, prayer is a very simple thing. It's just talking to God. One would think that such a simple thing would be hard to mess up, but such an optimistic outlook forgets both about the foolishness of mankind and the cunning of the devil. In fact, all around us, we see prayer being done wrong. One TV preacher might teach the false doctrine of what's been called "name it and claim it", which says that once you pray for something, God has to give it to you. Another denomination might teach its members that what God really wants are rote, mindless prayers that are repeated over and over again without thought, yet somehow gain some kind of favor with the Most High.

Of course, problems with prayer don't exist only outside the brotherhood. Many Christians, even, miss the point of prayer entirely or simply make it less powerful and useful than it can be. I'm not any kind of mind reader, but it may well be that there are Christian men in this auditorium right now who lead the church in prayer more than they lead their families in prayer, and more than they pray privately. On a subtler but equally problematic level, our view of prayer may be so limited that the only time we really go to God is when we're in trouble and we need something.

Thankfully, we serve a God who does not require 100% perfect obedience from us. Because He is rich in mercy, He is willing to bear with our follies and failures for as long as we're willing to struggle to serve Him. Our prayers may never be what they could be, but we can always work to make them better. With this in mind, let's consider our Lord's instructions on prayer. The same problems that exist in our time existed in His time too, but He can help us to rise above those things to be more pleasing. Let's turn our attention, then, to what Matthew 6 reveals about Jesus on prayer.

## Audience and Understanding.

Jesus begins this exploration of prayer by telling us who **OUR AUDIENCE** should be. This information appears in Matthew 6:5-6. As was often true during His ministry, Jesus here is condemning the behavior of the Pharisees. These outwardly righteous Jews often pursued righteousness not out of any genuine regard for God, but simply as a way to gain status with the other Jews around them. In this instance, Jesus is critiquing their practice of saying long prayers in public, not to talk to God, but to impress any bystanders with how religious they were.

Instead of engaging in prayers like that, Jesus encourages His disciples to pray in private, where only God can hear, so that they will only be seeking reward from God. Some people take this too far and say that public prayer is wrong. For instance, several weeks ago, I read about a woman who is suing the Houston City Council to keep them from leading prayers before they met. The basis of her argument was that Jesus never intended prayer to be public, and she based it on this passage. Of course, that's not what we see when we consider all that the Bible has to say about prayer. In fact, public prayer in the assembly is encouraged, in 1 Timothy 2:8. We also see many places in Scripture where Christians did pray together. Jesus never means to discourage that practice. Instead, His point is that even when we pray in public, our focus should be the same as when we pray in private. We should be seeking to please God, not men.

It can be a challenge for Christian men to remember this when we are called upon to lead a public prayer or to lead our song worship, which is often directed to God as a prayer as well. We can't simply sing as we sing in private, or pray as we pray in private. I know that when I pray in private, my prayers are often rambling, disconnected, and very personal, and if I lead public prayers like that, I'll be the only one getting anything out of it. As important as the congregation is, though, they can't be our primary focus. We can't be so concerned about following just the right prayer outline and using just the right words that we forget that we are addressing our Father. What an irony it would be if we lead our brethren in worshiping Him, but fail to worship ourselves! Our prayers always have to be for God first.

Likewise, we have to pay attention to what **OUR UNDERSTANDING** of prayer is. Jesus tells us how our thinking needs to inform our prayer in Matthew 6:7-8. On one level, it seems rather bizarre that Jesus would have to warn us against repeating meaningless, empty prayers. Having one stock thing that I say to God over and over again makes about as much sense as having one stock thing that I say to my wife and repeat over and over again. That's not the kind of communication that either shows a relationship or builds a relationship. Nonetheless, billions of people in all kinds of different religions go down this false path. It happens all over the world. The prayer wheels that we see in pictures of Buddhist monasteries in Asia are essentially a way of sending prayer spam to heaven, of filling up the prayer inbox with thousands and thousands of mechanically generated prayers. We can doubtless think of examples of prayer closer to home that are just as repetitive and meaningless. Jesus tells us that God has no interest in any of that. It's not like the thousandth rote prayer is going to break through because He wasn't paying attention before. Instead, God already knows what our needs and wants are, better than we do, before the thought to pray even crosses our minds.

The point of prayer, then, is not to clue God in. The point is to clue us in. Every prayer that we pray is an acknowledgment that God is the center of the universe, that He is the One who is in control of our lives and not us. The more we pray, then, the more we teach ourselves to submit to Him and not trust in our own abilities. However, it's possible to take this view of prayer too far. I've run into Christians before who believed that prayer was just a mental exercise, that God has already decided what He is going to do, and we can't change that by praying. That's not what the Bible teaches either. Look at 1 John 5:14-15. God isn't just acting without regard to us. He is hearing our prayers and responding to them. Our prayers can change things more profoundly than we can imagine, not because God wasn't aware of the need before, but because He rejoices in the display of our faith, and it moves Him to help us.

### **Prayers and Forgiveness.**

From there, Jesus moves on to discuss the content of **OUR PRAYERS** themselves. This appears in Matthew 6:9-13. There is probably no four-verse chunk in all of Scripture that is more widely known and memorized than this one. We encounter people reciting this prayer in settings ranging from funerals to football games, even when it doesn't have a thing to do with the activity at hand. Sadly, all of that well-meant repetition is missing the point. When Jesus says, "Pray in this way," He doesn't mean, "Recite this formula." Instead, He means for us to look at the ideas and the content of the prayer and recognize that these are important things we should be praying about too.

The first big prayer idea here that should be part of our prayers too is that God needs to be in charge. That's the point of the language about the coming of the kingdom and God's will being done. In this context, the coming of the kingdom doesn't refer to the establishment of the church. Instead, it refers to the coming of the kingdom in the human heart, which occurs when anyone gives control of his life over to Jesus. That has to be what we want for ourselves, that each day, we are less self-centered and more submissive. That can be hard to pray, but it is essential that we do so.

Second, we should pray for our physical needs to be provided for. We live in a land of astonishing prosperity, even in the middle of a recession, but none of us could sustain ourselves without the blessing of God. He provides for us because He loves us, but we should never take that providence for granted. Note also that the request that Jesus makes is modest. He's not interested in a five-course meal. He just wants bread. Sometimes, it's easy for us to get caught up in a five-course meal mindset, to pray repeatedly and fervently for physical things that we want, not need. It's not sinful for us to pray like that, but we need to see that when we do, we are seeking more than the blessing God has promised.

Finally, we should pray for our spiritual needs. All of us are aware that food is vital to our continued existence. By including forgiveness and protection from the devil in the same context, Jesus is emphasizing that they are on the same level of importance. Just like we need food to exist from day to day, we need forgiveness to continue to live. Just like we will die without food, we will die unless God defends us from Satan. Too often, we take our spiritual protection for granted, or we just don't think about it. Too often, we toss in the tagline "and forgive us of our sins" at the end of every prayer we pray, without thinking about what we're asking for or how precious that forgiveness is.

We also shouldn't forget what protection from the devil means. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10 that we will not be tempted beyond what we are able, and God keeps that promise by not allowing the evil one to tempt us beyond what we are able. Satan would love nothing more than to crush us, but our Father won't let His children be treated like that. I have no idea how that works, but I know that it does, and we need to pray that it continue.

There is one element from us, though, that needs to be present in our spiritual provision, and that is **OUR FORGIVENESS**. The Lord emphasizes the importance of forgiveness in Matthew 6:14-15. As Christians, we are cleansed and sanctified by the blood of Jesus. We have a right that no one else does, the right to approach God in prayer, but we can forfeit that right when we nurture an unloving, unforgiving heart. When someone wrongs us, injures us in some deep, hurtful way, and then skips over five minutes later and chirps, "I was wrong. Will you forgive me?", that's hard to do. In just the wrong circumstances, any of us can be tempted to hold on to our anger and our sense of being wronged. I've known elders' wives who said, "God might forgive him, but I won't." However, clinging to rage like that will poison us, and it will poison our relationship with God. When we are forgiven so much, we dare not be unforgiving.

Jesus gives us some practical advice about how this ought to work out in Luke 17:3-4. Notice what the first rule is here. When someone sins against us, we need to rebuke them. This does not come easily to us. When someone sins against us, it's much easier for us to go to our friends instead, and gossip about how bad the sinner is and how much wrong he's done us. The problem is, that behavior shows as little love for the sinner as the sinner has shown to us. If he has truly sinned, he's in danger of losing his soul over it, and if we allow him to continue down the path to hell, we're accomplices in that. Love won't let a soul be lost. Love will speak up and point out sin, even when it's hard to do.

When we do, though, and the sinner sees his wrong and repents, we need to forgive him, even if this is a performance that has been repeated over and over again. Other people may struggle with repeated sin against us, just as all of us struggle with repeated sin in our lives. I'd imagine that God gets bored sometimes with how repetitive my spiritual struggles are. Let's extend to others the same grace that we need so much and forgive as often as necessary.