

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH?: LESSON IN PRAYER

INTRODUCTION

Think about how you pray. Are you truly talking to God, respecting Him, remembering that it was Christ who died on the cross for all of us? Or does it seem more like words flying out into the open air, without a true focus or a solid idea? Often, Christians find themselves at a lost of words when it comes to speaking with God. So what does the Bible instruct about prayer, and even more importantly, how did Christ teach us to pray? The Lord's Prayer is recited often and memorized by many, but who actually takes the time to sit down and understand it? Well, you and I will for the next few minutes.

PONDERING PRAYER

Before we begin, take some time and collect thoughts about prayer. Some questions to ask yourself and others are provided below. Think about these questions as you go through the Bible study.

- Have I faithfully committed to praying continually for something only to find God silent?
- Have I ever believed God would answer your prayers a certain way, only to be disappointed with the outcome?
- When I pray, do I pray for my own needs and wants more than the needs of others around me?
- Am I afraid to pray for something specifically because I'm afraid that God's specific answer may not fit into my own plans?
- Do I pray "courteous prayers" more than truly pouring out my heart before God's throne?
- Am I satisfied with the prayers I present to my Heavenly Father?

INDUCTIVE ANALYSIS LORD'S PRAYER (MATTHEW 6:5-13)

Verses 5-6: Actions

Why would Jesus say these things about prayer? Does it mean large gatherings in public, such as the annual Meet You at the Pole event on schools nationwide or football players kneeling together at the end of a game, are forbidden? Does it mean we

shouldn't stand up when we pray? Why does Jesus tell us to go pray in secret?

Let's focus on Christ for a few minutes here. Think about how He prayed. Did He pray in public? Sure, Jesus prayed for the five loaves of bread and two fish out in the open. Did He pray in secrecy? Christ often sent His disciples off so that He could go to a secluded spot to pray. So think about it, why would Jesus tell us to pray in secrecy?

One of the main topics that's not mentioned, but more so inferred is the condition of your heart. Does your heart seek to please others while you pray, thinking it'd be better out in the open and for show? Or is your heart guarded and in that "secret" place where the only focus is on God?

Take a look at how Daniel prayed. Without confusing praying with other Christians with praying out in the open, Daniel is a man of God who would go to an upstairs room (Daniel 6:10-11), above all the activities of the world into his quiet place. In this upper room, Daniel was able to let the distractions of the world fade and let God be his only focus. In essence, when we pray today, shouldn't we also go to that secret place in our hearts and in our houses to let our focus fall upon God and nothing else?

Verses 7-8: Words

So why does Jesus instruct us not to babble like pagans? Think about it; some of the most meaningful conversations you've probably had with anyone took a while, maybe even hours. So why are we told not to just talk and talk?

Think about how a meaningful conversation would go. Would there be a lot of useless drivel mixed in? I doubt it. They're usually very informative, straight to the point, and cordial. So how are your prayers? Are you drabbling on and on about something you probably don't really care about or think much about? Or are you truly giving your all to God and not "wasting" His time? God already knows our needs. Are you willing to tell Him your heart's desires?

Verses 9-10: "Our Father in heaven..."

Possibly one of the better-known verses in the Bible, we begin our education of prayer here. What do these two verses say when it comes to approaching prayer? What attitude should be given when we approach the Lord through prayer?

The first is worship. We should enter into our talk with God with reverence before the throne. Is there awe when you begin your talk or is it something you've come to take granted for?

The second is humility. Perhaps Fran Sciacca sums it up best when he writes "Rather than pursuing personal comfort and peace, I increasingly seek what my Incarnate Lord sought: the passion and pleasure of glorifying the God the father in and through my life."

The third is allegiance – devotion to God's will. Perhaps the Gospel of Mark is a good way to understand the type of unconditional devotion Christ asks of us: "Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.' "

Verse 11: Intercession

Some of the most successful churches had pastors and dedicated congregation members get on their knees and pray continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17). You can read more about the Brooklyn Tabernacle or the Brownsville Revival. Praying for others is not only instructed of us, but something we should seek to do in our daily walk to glorify Christ and to ask God for His provision and power.

So you're probably asking how one could interpret intercession out of this single verse, these six simple words. Why don't you take some time to highlight all of the references to the body of Christ (i.e. – "us"). Now highlight all of the references to your personal self (i.e. – "me"). You begin to sense that maybe prayer should be more than our own simple world and environment. Prayer is more than one. There is a power when the church gathers together and prays (Matthew 18:19) – in fact the root word that is used in the original text of the verse is similar to a word we hear often today, a "symphony" of petitions that we send up to our Heavenly Father.

So think about how you pray for others. Do you only ask God for your own needs and desires? Or do you glorify Christ by following His example of praying for others?

Verse 12: Confession, Repentance, and Forgiveness

Where do we see confession in this verse? Where is repentance? What is so blatant about the message of forgiveness? Many Christians are pretty good at the confession aspect of prayer – we often ask that those we had wronged forgive us, especially if they

are capable of harming us. But isn't prayer more than that? Doesn't forgiveness stretch farther?

Paul writes this verse that echoes throughout the generations: "Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (Colossians 3:13) It's easy to ask for forgiveness, but isn't it so much harder to forgive? It takes a great deal of humility at times to really settle down and open up our hearts to God. When was the last time you confessed to our Heavenly Father and asked for repentance? What about forgiveness – is there anyone you need to pray for and forgive as our Lord Jesus forgave us?

Verse 13a: Deliverance

"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." (Matthew 26:41) It sure seems like common sense, but how many Christians actually practice this aspect of prayer? In a world filled with the desires of life, the temptations of riches, flesh, and power, of a world filled with distractions from the glory of God, how do we keep from falling into the cesspool of our sin?

Think about some hidden sins you have in life – lust, desire for glory, sexual immorality – and see if you need to ask God for a stronger will. Ask yourself this question "do I glorify Christ in all I do?" Do you reflect the holiness demanded of us by the Father? If not, is there anything you should ask God to deliver you from?

Verse 13b: Thanksgiving

Robert Coleman writes, "Despite the assault of treacherous principalities of evil, His church will emerge victorious, not merely surviving assaults, but taking the offensive, gaining mastery over the enemy, until every foe is defeated. However fierce the battle in this present age, His church is triumphant." Victory is assured and on that day Christ will stand with full glory and power. So are you thanking God for everything He's provided and praising Him with all your might?

PRAYER VITAMINS

No, I'm not trying to sell anything. Besides the Lord's Prayer and what Christ has instructed of us, the Bible also presents various nuggets of what prayer has potential to become and how we can approach God. I call these prayer vitamins, supplements to the main chunk (the Lord's Prayer) that also help us in our walk to communicate with God.

Do you pray in faith and ask according to God's will?

The Bible tells us in 1 John 5:14-15 that “this is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, he hears us. And if we know that He hears us-whatever we ask-we know that we have what we asked of Him.” It also says in James 5:15 “And the prayer offered in faith will make a sick person well...” and in Romans 12:12 “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.”

How can you pray for yourself?

Solomon is a good example for how you can pray for yourself and those you really care about. Look at his prayer in 1 Kings 8:54-61. “He had five basic requests: (1) for God's presence (verse 57); (2) for the desire to do God's will in everything (verse 58); (3) for help with daily needs (verse 59); (4) for the desire to live good and perfect lives (verse 61); (5) for the ability to obey God's laws and commandments (verse 61). These prayer requests are just as appropriate today as in Solomon's time.” (*Excerpts from A to Z Guide to Bible Application*)

What if God seems silent or distant when I pray?

James 1:2-4 says “Consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may mature and complete, not lacking anything.” Philip Yancey writes “If the Voice is too loud you begin to tune it out and ignore it (Father). The second Voice spoke with authority, but no one fled. Rather they debated, shouted down, and eventually killed (Son). The third Voice will not remove all disappointment, names like Comforter show this to be true, but a deposit guaranteeing what is to come (Spirit) seen in Ephesians...Do you right away look for the answers or do you tend to work through your questions?”

Sometimes there are other reasons for the silence. There is a spiritual war going on and sometimes it takes longer to break through. But in God's timing, there will be an answer, be it: yes, it is the will of God and it will happen or no, it is not the will of God, but there is something better. And at times there's a “wait” – God's delay is not His denial.

The idea that silence is golden reigns true at times because it allows us to grow in faith. Remember, endurance is not just the ability to bear a hard thing, but to turn it into glory.

When Should I Pray?

Ephesians 6:18 says “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” Take a look at the life of Nehemiah through (the appropriately named) the book of Nehemiah. Did this man of God always seek God on all occasions? I’ll let you find out.

Other Ways to Pray?

The following (excerpted from *In Touch* ministries and the *Billy Graham Evangelical Association*) are certain things and ideas you can include in your daily prayers, for yourself, your church, or anyone you have a heart for:

- Presence of God – Psalm 46:1
- Wisdom - James 1:5
- Clear Mind – 2 Timothy 1:7
- Guidance – Psalm 32:8
- Courage – Joshua 1:9
- Diligence – Colossians 3:23
- Persistence – Galatians 6:9
- Discernment – Philippians 1:9
- Peace – Philippians 4:7
- Patience – Psalm 33:20
- Resist Temptation – 1 Corinthians 10:13
- Protection – 2 Thessalonians 3:3
- Encouragement – Proverbs 11:25
- Angels for Spiritual Battle – Psalm 34:7
- Inner Strength – Ephesians 3:16
- Service – 1 Corinthians 10:33
- Fellowship – Hebrews 10:25
- Zeal – Romans 12:11
- Unity – 1 Peter 3:8

CONCLUSION

Perhaps nothing says it better than Kay Arthur when she says “True prayer is nothing more and nothing less than communion with the Father. Whether you are involved in worship, intercession, petition, or thanksgiving, it is all directed to God the Father.” Are you ready to approach Almighty God in prayer?