

# PRAYER

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**M**y normal method of driving is with my car's gas tank as near empty as possible. I stop at a gas station only as a last resort. Anytime my wife, Lois, has to drive my car, she first asks if there is anything in the tank because she knows I drive on fumes.

One reason I do this is that I've gotten away with it so often. I can't tell you how many times I've pulled into the gas station just in the nick of time.

One time when Lois was with me in the car, she was telling me I was going to get in trouble someday driving around with an empty gas tank. Sure enough, the car started to cough and run out of gas, but I was able to exit the highway on a downhill ramp, and there was a gas station at the bottom.

So I said to Lois, "See what happens when you know Jesus?"

Well, I wasn't as fortunate the next time my car ran

out of gas. I wound up stranded on the side of the road, standing by my car feeling very embarrassed.

Take it from me. You won't get very far driving around on gas fumes. That's a very powerless, frustrating way to travel.

A lot of Christians are trying to operate their spiritual lives the way I drive my car. They are running on fumes—trying to get somewhere for the Lord without using the fuel that provides the spark that energizes the power of God resident within us through the Holy Spirit.

The fuel that provides the spiritual spark is *prayer*. You can't get very far in the walk of faith without a prayer life, yet many Christians are doing it because they think they're getting away with it. They're like me in my car, ignoring their need to pray until their tanks go empty and they wind up on the side of the road looking for help.

Many of us struggle with the spiritual discipline of prayer. Some believers know how much they need to cultivate a prayer life as a vital part of their daily lives. To others, prayer is more like the national anthem at a ball game. It gets the game started, but it is not seen as having anything to do with the action on the field.

It helps to know we are not the first people to struggle with prayer. Jesus' disciples watched Him pray one day and said, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1).

That's interesting because they didn't ask Jesus to teach them how to preach. But when the disciples watched Jesus pray, and saw the intimacy between the

Son and the Father and what the Father did for the Son, they said, “We need to get in on this.”

Jesus answered the disciples’ request by offering a model prayer we call the Lord’s Prayer. That’s actually a misnomer, because this is not a prayer Jesus would pray. Jesus had no “debts” or sins to be forgiven.

This is really the disciples’ prayer. Jesus didn’t mean this was the only prayer we are to use, or that we need to pray these exact words. The Lord’s Prayer is a marvelous example, an outline, of how to pray. It gives us a pattern for prayer.

### THE PARAMETERS OF PRAYER

Before we begin a detailed study of this amazing prayer, let me give you a basic definition of prayer. *Prayer is a believer’s communication with God the Father, through the authority and Person of Jesus Christ, assisted by the Holy Spirit.* Let’s break this down.

The key word is communication, not just talking. God is a Person to be communicated with, not someone for us to talk at. The test of prayer is whether God is the audience of your conversation.

Our prayer is to be offered through Jesus Christ. The only reason you and I have access to God is that the door was opened by the blood of Christ. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6).

We can’t come into the presence of a holy God unless we are escorted by the Son. That’s why we pray in Jesus’ name. That’s not a nice religious tag to tack on to

the end of our prayers. Jesus is our access to God, and because of what Jesus did on the cross we can “draw near with confidence to the throne of grace” (Hebrews 4:16).

Prayer is also assisted by the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:26–27 says the Holy Spirit helps us in our prayers because we are weak and don’t always know how to pray as we ought. Sometimes we don’t know what to say, and other times we’re hurting too much to say anything.

But look what the Holy Spirit does for us. “The Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (v. 26b). When all we can do is groan and grope for the right words, the Spirit interprets those expressions and turns them into intelligible requests before the Father. The Spirit knows what we mean even when we don’t know what we mean.

In other words, the Holy Spirit’s ministry in prayer is to take what cannot be clarified and clarify it. That’s why you’re not wasting your time praying even when you don’t know what to say, because the Spirit is at work organizing your confusion.

True prayer is limited to the sphere of the Trinity—but that means the parameters of prayer are limitless because we are talking about the infinite God.

## THE PRECAUTIONS OF PRAYER

The Lord’s Prayer is set in what I call a precautionary context. That’s because before Jesus gave His disciples their model for prayer, He taught several

important principles about prayer that we need to consider.

The first principle is that we need to pray *regularly*. Jesus said, “*When* you pray” (Matthew 6:5, italics added). Notice He didn’t say “If you pray,” or “It’s up to you whether you pray.” Our need to pray is the unstated assumption behind Jesus’ statement.

Prayer must be a regular part of our lives because it’s such a critical part of our lives. One reason prayer is so important is that it is an expression of faith, and the Bible says, “Without faith it is impossible to please [God]” (Hebrews 11:6).

Jesus also said we need to pray *sincerely*.

When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. (Matthew 6:5)

This takes us back to verse 1, where Jesus said, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.”

Most of the Jews in Jesus’ day prayed three times a day. The hypocrites who prayed only to be seen and heard by others went to the most crowded, public places to pray.

They were like the little boy whose grandmother was visiting. He was praying in his bedroom one night

while his mother and grandmother were sitting in the living room. His mother heard him say very loudly, “And Lord, please give me a bicycle for Christmas.”

She went into the bedroom and said, “Son, you don’t have to yell. God can hear you.”

“I know, Mom,” the boy answered. “But Grandma can’t hear very well, and she’s got the money to buy me a bike.”

How do you measure sincerity in prayer? Jesus told us, “When you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:6). We must pray *secretly*.

Jesus wasn’t just equating being alone with effective prayer. Praying in secret means refusing to make a show out of prayer. It means shutting out anything and everything that keeps you from concentrating on God. A closed door refers to an undistracted environment for prayer.

Obviously, shutting yourself off from other people and distractions is one way to achieve secrecy in prayer. This is crucial because it doesn’t take much to drown out God’s voice. God is a spirit, so if you are going to connect with Him you must connect spiritually.

When God sees that you want to be in His presence so much you’re willing to remove all distractions—when He sees you in secret and knows you are not playing to the crowd—then He shows up.

God also wants us to pray *thoughtfully*. “And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as

the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words” (Matthew 6:7). “Meaningless repetition” means babble, and babble means thoughtless verbiage, saying the same words without any thought behind them.

If I asked you for your home address, you could probably rattle it off without even stopping to think about it. You’ve given out your address so many times you have it down cold. That’s the way some people pray.

I remember when I was a boy, if my mother had fried chicken for dinner and it was my turn to pray, I prayed with my eyes open and my hands on the far side of my plate. That way, I was ready to grab the piece of chicken I wanted.

I can tell you, I wasn’t thinking about God. My mind was on that fried chicken. I just had to get past the prayer to get it.

Sometimes, prayer is just words we toss out to salute God so we can get on to the real deal. *Hurry up and pray so we can start the meeting and get to the real issues.*

The best way to avoid meaningless repetition is to continue getting to know God. The better you know a person, the more the two of you have to discuss. Whenever you learn something new about our great God, include that in your prayer life.

Jesus added, “So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him” (Matthew 6:8). You don’t have to inform God of any-

thing in prayer. As a good Father, He already knows all about you, including what you need.

### PRIORITY ONE: GOD'S WILL

When we begin to understand how vital it is to pray regularly, sincerely, secretly, and thoughtfully, we are ready to learn more about how to pray. That was the next subject Jesus addressed with the disciples as He taught the Lord's Prayer.

Let's go through this great prayer phrase by phrase as we seek to understand what Jesus is teaching us about prayer.

#### The Paternity of Prayer

You probably know the first two words of the Lord's Prayer. This is a child addressing a loving Father. Jesus said, "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name'" (Matthew 6:9).

Notice this is "Our Father," not "My Father." You're not an only child in this family. The Father wants us to know that when we come to Him other siblings are involved. We can't be selfish in prayer.

Since only believers can pray and expect God to hear, "Our Father" means God is not everybody's Father. Jesus said to the unbelieving religious leaders of His day, "You are of your father the devil" (John 8:44). Only those who receive Christ as Savior and are born from above are given the right to be called the children of God (John 1:12).

The fact that all believers are invited to pray to the