

## Topic 24: Prayer

### Communing with God

“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.”

—Ephesians 6:18

**W**hat if you had a friendship with someone you could call any time, night or day? A friend who met with you regularly and allowed you to talk non-stop for ten, twenty, thirty minutes—or more—and never asked you to stop? Or maybe you just send out a quick call or text now and then, and no matter what, that friend was always there to answer. Suppose as well that this friend reached out to you to give you guidance, support, love, and encouragement—even when you didn’t call and ask for it first.



You would feel deeply loved by that friend, right? Happily, that’s a description of how any of Christ’s followers can approach God.

In this lesson, we’re going to see that disciples of Jesus imitate Jesus in the way he prayed.

“Pray until you can pray; pray to be helped to pray and do not give up praying because you cannot pray. For . . . when you think you cannot pray that is when you are praying.”  
—Charles Spurgeon



## Bible Study

### What Is Prayer?

In its purest essence, prayer is simply communing with the One (see Exodus 33:11) who is nearer to us than we realize (Acts 17:28). Biblical prayer can be silence or it can be an ongoing dialogue with God (1 Thessalonians 5:17). It's less a way to get stuff, and more a way to draw close to the Father in heaven.

1. How have you experienced praying to God?

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### Why do we pray?

Prayer is a mystery. God is *all-knowing*. We can't tell him things he doesn't already know. And he is *sovereign*—working and weaving everything everywhere together to accomplish his perfect eternal purposes. These truths make us ask: Why do I even need to pray?

And yet, for reasons we can't fully understand, *God commands us to pray*: "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful" (Colossians 4:2). Furthermore, God tells us that *our prayers are eternally significant*: "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results" (James 5:16, NLT).

2. What results have you seen from praying?

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The following list surely isn't exhaustive. But here are a few reasons prayer is so essential to followers of Jesus.

#### Prayer is how we approach God.

"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8, NASB). Never forget that God longs for a relationship with us. Proverbs 15:8 tells us, "The LORD . . . delights in the prayers



of the upright" (NLT). Even if we don't know what to say, God's Spirit prays for us (Romans 8:26). When we approach God with respect, we need not worry about praying wrong.

### **Prayer aligns us with God's purposes for our lives.**

If we are wise, we recognize that God, being good and loving, desires our best. Consequently, a big part of prayer is learning to relinquish our desires and say "your will be done" (Matthew 6:10). As C. S. Lewis said, "If God had granted all the silly prayers I've made in my life, where would I be now?"<sup>1</sup> In another place Lewis said, "Prayer doesn't change God, it changes me."

### **Prayer is an expression of faith.**

"Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). Behind all true prayer is a belief that there is one who is there, one who hears; in all true prayer is an admission of "you are the One I need; you are the One who can help; you are the One I trust."

### **Prayer gives peace.**

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6–7, ESV).

### **Prayer is powerful.**

Though we don't understand exactly how prayer works—only that it isn't a magic formula or guarantee—there are plenty of examples in Scripture and in more recent history of *prayer making a difference*. For instance, when Hezekiah was dying, he prayed and wept. God heard and told the prophet Isaiah: "Go and tell Hezekiah, 'This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life'" (Isaiah 38:5).

Prayer changes things—at the very least it changes us.

### **"In the name of Jesus, amen"**

Praying "in the name of Jesus" means more than mindlessly tacking that phrase on to the ends of our prayers. Biblically, a name represents all that a person is and stands for. Doing anything in a person's name means to do that thing as if he or she were doing it. To pray in Jesus' name means praying the kind of prayers Jesus would pray. An "in the name of Christ" prayer should reflect who Jesus is—his person and works.

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (Fort Washington, PA: Harvest Books, 1973): 28



3. What specific factors motivate you to pray?

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As with any close relationship, prayer needs to be more than, “Can you give me this? And that? And that?” A running conversation with the Almighty should include the same kinds of exchanges found in any intimate relationship:

- ▶ Expressions of appreciation and admiration
- ▶ Careful listening
- ▶ Revealed hopes and dreams
- ▶ Admissions of disappointment, frustration, and struggle.

Prayer is an ongoing, back-and-forth conversation that leads to intimacy with God.

## How Should We Pray?

Take a few moments to carefully and thoughtfully read these verses that tell us *how* to pray:

<b>In faith</b>	“I tell you, you can pray for anything, and if you believe that you’ve received it, it will be yours” (Mark 11:24, NLT).
<b>In the name of Jesus</b>	“I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13).
<b>According to God’s will</b>	“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” (1 John 5:14–15).
<b>Unceasingly</b>	“Pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).
<b>Confidently</b>	“Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16, NASB).
<b>Stubbornly</b>	“Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1).
<b>With the help of the Spirit</b>	“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans” (Romans 8:26).

Stop and think about this last point for a moment. The Spirit helps us to pray. This is a huge comfort. When we’re clueless, he knows. When we can’t, he can!



4. Based on these verses and truths, how would you evaluate your prayer life of late?

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5. The Bible gives some explicit warnings about how *not* to pray. What actions or attitudes cited in the following verses are clear hindrances to God-honoring prayer? Write your answer on the blank spaces in the chart.

Passage	What's the snare to God-pleasing prayer?
<b>Luke 8:9-14</b>	
<b>Psalm 66:18-20</b>	
<b>James 4:2-3; 1Peter 3:7</b>	
<b>Matthew 6:5-8</b>	
<b>James 1:5-7</b>	
<b>Isaiah 29:13</b>	



## Are there “rules” regarding the details of praying?

The short answer is no. In Scripture we see:

### Prayers from all kinds of people:

- ▶ Children (1 Samuel 3:10)
- ▶ Elderly widows (Luke 2:36–38)
- ▶ Kings (Psalm 139)
- ▶ Frightened people (Jonah 1:14)
- ▶ Military leaders (Joshua 7:6–9)
- ▶ Broken adults (Judges 16:28)

### People praying:

- ▶ Alone (Matthew 14:23)
- ▶ In groups (Acts 1:14)

### People crying out to God:

- ▶ In bed (Psalm 63:6)
- ▶ On the beach (Acts 21:5)
- ▶ On mountainsides (Luke 6:12)
- ▶ Outdoors (Genesis 24:11–12)
- ▶ At the temple (Luke 18:10)

### Time people prayed:

- ▶ Fixed-hour prayers (Psalm 55:17)
- ▶ Midnight prayers (Acts 16:25)
- ▶ Morning prayers (Psalm 5:3)

### People praying while:

- ▶ Sitting (2 Samuel 7:18)
- ▶ Standing (Mark 11:25)
- ▶ Kneeling (Acts 9:40)
- ▶ Lifting hands toward heaven (1 Kings 8:22)

## The Prayer Life of Jesus

- He prayed in the early morning (Mark 1:35).
- He prayed in the evening (Mark 6:46–47).
- He spent whole nights praying (Luke 6:12).
- He prayed in lonely places (Luke 5:16).
- He agonized in prayer (Luke 22:39–46).
- He died praying (Luke 23:46).
- He praised the Father in his prayers (Matthew 11:25).
- He thanked the Father in prayer (John 11:41).
- He prayed for the will of the Father (Matthew 26:39).
- He prayed for his followers (John 17:9).
- He prayed forgiveness for his enemies (Luke 23:34).
- He prayed for children (Matthew 19:13–15).
- He prayed for himself (John 17:1).

### Believers praying:

- ▶ Silently (1 Samuel 1:13)
- ▶ In a loud voice (Ezra 3:11–13)
- ▶ With joy (Philippians 1:4)

### Jesus prayed:

- ▶ Through tears (Hebrews 5:7)
- ▶ While looking up (John 11:41)
- ▶ With his face to the ground (Matthew 26:39)

Basically, there are no hard and fast rules to follow. What matters is engaging God. Giving him your attention. Talking to and communing with him—everywhere and all the time.



6. How do you like to pray—when, where, body posture, etc.?

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## What should we pray about?

Jesus gave his followers some guidelines for prayer in Matthew 6:9–13—not a mantra to memorize and repeat mindlessly, but a short outline for conversing with God. Look at the parts of the so-called “Lord’s Prayer:”

“Some people think God does not like to be troubled with our constant coming and asking. The way to trouble God is not to come at all.”—D. L. Moody

Statement or Request	Focus	Explanation
“Our Father in heaven . . .	God’s nature	Our prayers are directed to a loving father who wants the best for his children and whose heart we can trust.
hallowed be your name . . .	God’s glory	Our prayer should always focus on bringing honor and praise to God.
your kingdom come . . .	God’s kingdom	Our prayers ought to seek the righteous rule of God in every part of life.
your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven . . .	God’s will	Our prayers must always submit to the higher plan and wiser purposes of God.
Give us today our daily bread . . .	God’s provision	Our prayers need to be humble and dependent, looking to God to meet our needs.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors . . .	God’s mercy	Our prayers acknowledge our constant need to receive and dispense grace.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”	God’s protection	Our prayers recognize the sobering reality of evil.

7. How could you apply Jesus’ “Lord’s Prayer” outline to your own life today?

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## Take-Home Reflections

It's easy to get so preoccupied with "answers" to prayer, we forget that the goal is communing with God. Inherent in all prayer is an acknowledgement of God. Permeating all prayer should be an enjoyment of God. Prayer is trusting that God knows what is best for us, even if we can't see it.

Prayer is lingering in the divine presence. It can be wordless. The point is to pay attention to God. Draw near. When you get right down to it, he is our hearts' truest, deepest desire, not some lesser blessing he can provide.

Go ahead and offer up prayers for needs and "stuff." But remember: even if God's response is "Wait" or "Not yet" or even "No," the biggest blessing is that you are getting to spend time with your Creator!

"In prayer it is better to have a heart without words than words without a heart."—John Bunyan

Think of it as a gift when God answers in a way you don't expect or even desire. It means you get to respond to God's response. If his answer is "no," you can, by faith, thank God for wisely and lovingly protecting you from something hurtful or detrimental that you can't see. If the outcome is still pending, you can bring the subject up again at a later date (Luke 18:1–8). If God gives you what you seek, you get to come back and express thanksgiving and gratitude.

The lesson in all this? God offers you marvelous gifts through prayer. But don't settle for mere gifts when the Giver also offers you himself. Focus on the Giver, not the gift.

## Life Application

An important part of discipleship is learning how to apply God's truths to your life. Below are just a few ways you can start thinking about what you've learned and apply it to your daily life.

1. Memorize our memory verse, Ephesians 6:18.

"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."

2. Read Paul's prayers in Ephesians 1:15–23 and 3:14–21.
3. Ask your group, spouse, or a friend to work through the exercise on the following page with you.

"The main lesson about prayer is this: Do it! Do it! Do it! You want to be taught to pray? My answer is: pray."—John Laidlaw





## Pray Honestly and Boldly

One great thing about group prayer times is that they give us an opportunity to pray specifically and boldly about the real issues going on here and now, in our own lives. Use the sample prayer requests below to spark or broaden your thinking, and to help *focus* your own prayer requests.

### Sample Prayer Requests

- ▶ I need more joy in my life. Would you pray that I could recapture a sense of spiritual awe and delight?
- ▶ My spiritual life is kind of blah. Please pray that I'll recapture my desire to live for God.
- ▶ I have a family member or friend who needs Christ. Pray that God will use me to reach him/her. Pray that I'll be sensitive and available.
- ▶ I'm realizing there are certain areas of my life that I need to surrender (or re-surrender) to God. I'm struggling! Please pray that I'll take this step.
- ▶ There's an unresolved conflict that is affecting one of my primary relationships. Pray that I'll do right—do everything within my power this week to begin to address it and fix it.
- ▶ I'm facing a big, life-decision. I sure could use wisdom.
- ▶ Lately, I haven't been taking care of my heart or making my relationship with Christ my top priority (Proverbs 4:23). Pray that I'll exercise the discipline to live more like Mary and less like Martha (Luke 10:38-42).
- ▶ I keep tripping over the same temptation(s). Pray that I will lean on God's strength this week to say "NO!"
- ▶ I need more boldness in my faith.
- ▶ I'm discouraged about \_\_\_\_\_. Pray that I will bounce back.
- ▶ I feel like I'm under attack. Pray that I'll be alert and wise.
- ▶ Pray that I have courage to invite \_\_\_\_\_ to church or my small group.
- ▶ I don't feel right now like I know God very well. Pray that he'll reveal himself to me and that I'll have eyes of faith to see and ears to hear what he's saying to me.
- ▶ Our/my finances are not in the greatest shape. Pray that God would show what needs to be done.
- ▶ I feel far away from God. Pray that I'll make my way back.



- ▶ Pray that I'll have the courage to look hard at my life and to identify wrong attitudes or actions. And that with God's help, I'll begin to make changes.
- ▶ My life feels chaotic and out-of-control. Would you pray that I'd find a healthier balance?
- ▶ Pray that I'd be the kind of spouse I need to be (loving, selfless, thoughtful, kind, etc.).
- ▶ Pray for me this week as a parent. I need strength/patience/gentleness/wisdom, etc.
- ▶ I'm anxious about \_\_\_\_\_. Pray that I'll experience God's perfect peace this week.
- ▶ I have an important relationship that needs some work. Pray that I will have supernatural wisdom to know what to do, the courage to do right, and that my actions will be rooted in love.
- ▶ I need to confront someone in love. Pray that I'll know what to say and how to say it.
- ▶ I feel guilty about \_\_\_\_\_. Pray that I can get to the bottom of this and resolve it.
- ▶ My faith is really weak and shaky. Pray that I'll keep clinging to God.
- ▶ I'm angry about \_\_\_\_\_. Pray that I'll process and deal with these things in a God-honoring way.
- ▶ I'm realizing I've buried some old hurts and wounds and it's affecting my life and relationships. Would you pray that I can deal healthily with these things and move forward?
- ▶ I need to ask forgiveness from someone I've wronged. Pray for the grace and courage to do this ASAP.
- ▶ I'm going through some trials just now—pray that I'll respond in a mature way—that I'll *grow* and not *grumble*.
- ▶ I pray you would heal \_\_\_\_\_. Give me the strength to help this person. If it is not your will to heal now, please give us all comfort, courage, and peace as we walk through this tough time.

If you don't know what kinds of things to pray for, let this spark your thinking. If you're reluctant to open up, take a risk. Alfred Lord Tennyson said it best: "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of."