

How to Pray Effectively

God is the source of all our blessings (James 1:17), and He expects us to pray—but we must be careful not to think of Him as a great big “Santa Claus” who can be bent into serving us according to our selfish wishes. Some look at prayer as a device for coaxing God into giving them all their wants. Many others look at prayer as a before-meals ritual and a bedtime habit, and that is about the extent of their praying.

Some persons never pray at all. They eat and sleep and rise. They go forth to labor and return to their homes again. They breathe God’s air and see God’s sun and walk on God’s earth and enjoy God’s mercy—but they never speak with God in prayer. When there is some kind of difficulty, and they can’t get by on their own cleverness, or with their own resources, then of course they pray. One lady acknowledged that her prayer-life was almost nonexistent. She **did** pray at bedtime (the little prayer), “Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray thee Lord my soul to keep.” She said, “When I’m awake, I can take care of myself,” but she says, “I do want protection when I’m asleep.”

Whenever things are going well, we tend to feel self-sufficient, and are inclined not to pray more than mere token prayers. But when we are in tight circumstances, then we cry out to God for help. Our heavenly Father desires reliance upon Him at all times, when things are bright as well as when the way seems dark.

Prayer is simply a conversation between the child of God and the heavenly Father. Prayer is an activity that involves a number of ingredients—adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. The first letters of each of those words form an acrostic—the word ACTS.

True prayer involves **adoration**. Adoration is praise to God for who He is. Adoration is a higher form of worship than thanksgiving is. When we thank God, we express appreciation for what He has done for us, but when we show adoration, we give Him glory for who He is! The Lord’s Prayer starts out with adoration: “Our Father who art in heaven; hallowed be thy name.” Those words convey a sense of praise to the heavenly Father simply because of who He is.

A second ingredient of prayer is **confession**. Confession is naming the sins that muddy up our minds—ugly, critical words; wrong attitudes; feelings of resentment; struggles with lustful thoughts; etc. These need to be named before God.

A third ingredient is **thanksgiving**. Thanksgiving is grateful appreciation for the benefits received from the Lord. We should thank God for our breath, for sins forgiven, for the light of God’s Word, for peace of mind, for the hope of Heaven, etc.

True prayer also involves **supplication**. Supplication is simply asking God for those things which we need and which will benefit the church of Christ. Ask in order to receive (not always what we request, but what is ultimately best for us).

Jesus says that it is His desire that each disciple should “pray, and not faint” (Luke 18:1). The Apostle Paul wrote, “I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and

doubting” (1 Timothy 2:8). And so we want to examine a few factors taught in the Bible that should help strengthen our prayer lives.

1. The Privilege and Ministry of Prayer

Some think that the Christian life must really be a dull experience, and that one who steps out on the Lord’s side gives up every joy and every privilege. But the child of God has many wonderful privileges, and one of those privileges is access to God through the avenue of prayer. Think of it! We have the authority to come before the high and holy Creator of the universe—and talk with Him! To have an audience (even once in a lifetime) with a king of a great nation (or the president of one’s country) would be a special favor, and we would never forget it. But ours is an even greater privilege. We may have audience with the God who made us—not merely once in a lifetime, but day-in and day-out. Certainly the avenue of prayer is a great privilege.

But prayer is not only a great privilege; it is also a great ministry. Prayer is concerned in part about the needs of others, and thus prayer is one way by which we can serve God in behalf of our fellowmen. Some say, “What can I do? I don’t have many talents.” In Luke 2:37 we are told about the aged woman at the Temple, and Luke says, “Anna served God with fastings and prayers night and day.” We read about the same kind of ministry in 1 Timothy 5:5.

Prayer is a “ministry.” It is a way to serve God. It not only strengthens our own hearts, but becomes a vital means of intercession for others. The prophet Samuel said, “God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you” (1 Samuel 12:23). Each of us has a duty to pray for others. Abraham pleaded with God, asking Him to spare the righteous persons in Sodom. Moses interceded for Israel when Aaron and the people had worshipped the gold calf. Moses says, “And the Lord was angry with Aaron, to have destroyed him, and I prayed for Aaron also” (Deuteronomy 9:20). We should pray for the son (or the grandson) who is spending the day in elementary school; for the married daughter who is raising a family of her own; for those who are sick and confined to hospital rooms; for missionaries who live and serve hundreds of miles from the nearest doctor. Prayer is a privilege, and also a ministry in behalf of others.

2. The Place and Time For Prayer

The environment in which we pray should be conducive to prayer, and yet we can come to God even if outward circumstances are less than ideal. People in Bible times prayed in many unique places. The elders from Ephesus prayed along the seashore (Acts 20:36). Peter prayed on a housetop (Acts 10:9). Some women were praying by a riverside (Acts 16:13). Jesus prayed in a high mountain (Luke 6:12). David prayed while hiding in a cave; Hezekiah prayed from a sick bed; Peter prayed from a storm-tossed ship; Jonah prayed from the belly of a fish; and Daniel prayed before an open window in his room. Wherever we are we can approach the throne of grace.

We need not wait for a specially designated sacred place, in order to pray. There is nothing wrong with entering the quiet chapel in a hospital to pray, but God will hear your prayer just as clearly if you pray

while walking down the hall of the hospital. Some places are more conducive to prayer than others, but any place will do.

Each of us too must learn to take time for prayer. Some say they have such a full daily schedule that there just isn't much time for prayer. It is just as sensible for the pilot of a jet plane to say that he has no time to take on fuel, as it is for the Christian to say, "I don't have time for prayer." Jesus seems to have devoted himself especially much to prayer at those times in His life when His days were unusually full of work and activity. We make our busy schedules reasons for **not** praying; Jesus made a busy schedule a reason **for** praying. Those who have been most mightily used of God, are persons who had made prayer a notable feature in their lives.

We are, in fact, to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). That does not mean that we mumble some words of prayer all through the day, but it does mean that our prayer-life should be constant. We ought to pray whenever we sense a need for communing with God. In addition, there should be a regular pattern of prayer. For example, Daniel knelt in his room (facing Jerusalem) and prayed three times each day. If we limit prayer to those moments when we feel a special urge to pray, too often we will fail to pray altogether. The Psalmist David (like Daniel) prayed in the morning, and at noon, and in the evening (Psalm 55:17).

Praying morning, noon, and evening can be a good model for us. There should be "a morning watch." The opening of the day is one of the best times for prayer. Some of the earlier Christians used to say, "If your first transaction of the day is prayer with God, your day will go better." Then—there should be "a noontime upward glance." At noon, the two hands of the clock point in the same upward direction. No matter where we are, at noon each day, it is a good practice to pray silently and thank God for His continual kindness. Finally—there should be "an evening sacrifice." Psalm 141:2 says, "Let my prayer be set forth as an evening sacrifice." It is proper to close the day with confession, and with thanksgiving to God, for seeing us through the events of another day. In addition to these structured times for prayer, there are dozens of times during the course of a day, when each of us should be sending up brief prayers to God.

3. The Content and Scope of Prayer

What are some of the things we should pray for? We have some examples of the scope of prayer given to us in the Bible. We should pray for a spirit of wisdom (Ephesians 1:17). We should pray for a deep sense of God's presence (Ephesians 3:17). We should pray that our lives might abound in love (Philippians 1:9), and be filled with the fruits of righteousness (Philippians 1:11), and that we might increase in the knowledge of God (Colossians 1:10). We have examples in the Bible to pray for the unconverted (1 Timothy 2:1), to pray for laborers in the harvest field (Luke 10:2), to pray for kings and rulers (1 Timothy 2:2), to pray for Israel and the peace of Jerusalem (Romans 10:1), and to pray for all the saints (Ephesians 6:18). Jesus prayed for Peter when he had backslidden. Luke records the words of Jesus: "I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not" (Luke 22:32). Thus it is our duty to pray for those who have walked away from the Lord and have grown indifferent to holy things.

Some say, “But surely prayer can’t make much difference. After all, if God in His sovereign will has already foreordained what is going to happen anyway—why even bother to pray?” A proper response is this: God sees every situation. He knew (in the past) if we would pray, and He worked our prayers into His plans. God (in His foreknowledge) has taken our prayers into consideration. True—we don’t understand fully all that is involved, but we have been instructed and encouraged to pray—to pray about big things and little things, and to pray for our own needs as well as for the needs of others. I am thoroughly convinced that the Lord would never have put so much emphasis on praying, if indeed prayer had not been worthwhile.

We can be confident that prayer does change things. In Numbers 14, the Children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron, and God was going to wipe them out. But Moses prayed! He said, “I beseech thee Lord, pardon the iniquity of this people” (Numbers 14:19). And the Lord responded to the prayer of Moses. There is no question about it. The Lord changed His announced intentions in response to Moses’ prayer. The Lord foresaw Israel’s disobedience, but He also foreknew that Moses would pray. And so the Lord worked the prayer of man into the plan of God. None of us can really explain it, but God has certain laws that only go into operation when we sincerely pray!

4. Some Keys To Success in Prayer

There are some factors which each of us should keep in mind as we speak with the Lord in prayer.

One key to success in prayer is **a blameless heart**. One of the most common stumbling-blocks in the path of those who seek to pray effectively, is a life contaminated with sin. The Bible says, “If I regard (hold to) iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me” (Psalm 66:18). Some ignore God in their daily lives, and harbor resentment toward others, and then expect God to forget all their wickedness and wrong attitudes, and become a puppet to supply their shopping lists of requests during a time of real need.

If we nurse grudges toward others, how can we ask God to forgive us? If bitter discord marks our homes, God does not promise to answer our prayers. The Bible says that husbands and wives and children must live together harmoniously, “lest your prayers be hindered” (1 Peter 3:7). If the husband is grumpy and quarrelsome, and the wife is fussy and impatient, and the children pick at each other and make unkind remarks—there is not going to be any power in your prayer life. When we have confessed our sins, and cleared the circuit between us and God, **then** He will not withhold any good thing from us. The Bible says so in Psalm 84:11.

Another key to success in prayer is **a surrendered will**. We sometimes pray in such a way that our prayer is wrapped up in our own personal wills and our own selfish desires. When Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, He said, “Not my will, but thine be done.”

God answers our prayers in one of three ways. He says, “Yes,” “No,” or “Wait.” Eliezer (the servant of Abraham) was given a quick “yes.” Paul (requesting removal of the thorn) was told “no.” Moses (who wanted to see the Promised Land) had to “wait” until the time of the Transfiguration nearly 1,500 years

later. Each answer was given in kindness, intended for the benefit of the one who had prayed. When our will is in tune with God's will, we will accept the answer God gives without complaint.

An example of the surrendered will follows: Standing by the bedside of a young child, anxious parents hover over a little boy who is desperately ill. They pray for his recovery. They ask their friends to pray. They seek God's will and God's glory. If the child gets well, he will continue to live with his parents here on earth; if he dies, he will go to be with the Lord. They continue to pray, but don't seriously worry about how God chooses to be glorified.

People of the world must face the death of loved ones too—but they don't know how to do it. They become desperate and are filled with panic. And so God sometimes chooses some of us to show the world how to face the death of loved ones with a confident hope, and He lets one of our loved ones die. Our prayers can be most effective when our wills are surrendered to God's will.

Another key to success in prayer is a **believing mind**. There must be a strong faith in God—in His willingness and His power to grant our petitions. James encourages prayer, and then says, "Let him ask in faith, nothing wavering" (James 1:6). We should be able to say with the centurion (described in Matthew 8:8), "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof, but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed." The centurion had a believing mind.

We don't understand all the mysteries surrounding prayer, but a Biblical attitude is expressed in the following words of poetry: "I know not by what methods rare, but this I know—God answers prayer. I know that He has given His Word, which tells me prayer is always heard, and will be answered soon or late, and so I pray—and calmly wait. I know not if the blessing sought will come in just the way I thought; but then, I let my prayers with Him alone, whose will is wiser than my own; assured that He will grant my request, or send some answer far more blest" (Writer unknown).

A fourth key to prayer success is **an intense fervor**. It is not only the will of God that we pray, but He expects us to pray earnestly, persistently, and with desire. The Bible says, "The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16). Prayer does not necessarily involve weeping loudly and raising the voice as if God were deaf, but fervency and persistency in prayer are commendable. In Luke 11, Jesus told a parable about a man who went to the home of a friend at midnight, and requested food for an unexpected guest. And because of the man's importunity (continual and persistent asking), his request was granted.

Words for prayer used in the Bible include "crying," "knocking," "laboring," "wrestling," and "striving." We need the earnestness and fervency of Daniel, when praying. Daniel pleaded with God, "O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God" (Daniel 9:19). All of us have heard many appeals to a life of prayer. All of us know that speaking with God is a valuable privilege. But prayer (on a regular basis) is hard work, and as a result, it is often neglected. Hopefully the message you are reading will call us to a greater sense of commitment in the area of faithful praying.

At the end of the age there is going to be a great prayer-meeting. Revelation 6:13-16 describes the scene. The stars will fall to the earth. The heavens will roll back as a scroll. The islands will be moved out

of their places. In desperation and fear, the unsaved will pray! They will cry out to the rocks and the mountains, and say, "Fall on us, and hide us from the wrath of the Lamb." My friend, where will **you** be when the world is burning and the dead are rising and the judgment is setting—and all nature is engulfed in chaos? Why don't you pray, and weep your way to God today? The Bible says that Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Won't you throw open the door of your heart and let Jesus come in and reign over your life? Do it today. Tomorrow may be too late.

A Prayer For Growth

More holiness give me, more strivings within;
More patience in suffering, more sorrow for sin;
More faith in my Savior, more sense of His care;
More joy in His service, more purpose in prayer.

More gratitude give me, more trust in the Lord;
More pride in His glory, more hope in His Word;
More tears for His sorrows, more pain for His grief;
More meekness in trial, more praise for relief.

More purity give me, more strength to overcome;
More freedom from earth-stains, more longings for home;
More fit for the kingdom, more used would I be;
More blessed and holy, more, Savior, like Thee.

~Philip P. Bliss

-Harold S. Martin

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