



The Lord's Prayer: Praying with Power
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The “Who,” “Where,” and “What” of Prayer

MATTHEW 6:5–15

Has your mind ever wandered while you were praying? You want to be focused and engaged in the experience, but the next thing you know you are wondering if you remembered to turn off the stove, if you closed the garage door, or if you should take a vacation next summer. A wandering mind is something we all face as we seek to become people of prayer.

Psychologists talk about a condition they call “mindlessness.” For some of us, mindlessness is a problem we suffer occasionally in prayer and in life. For others, mindlessness is a way of life. We can be physically present, but our minds are floating off somewhere in space, on autopilot.

Jesus taught that mindlessness is one of the biggest obstacles to prayer. He said, “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words” (Matthew 6:7). Jesus knew that prayer can sometimes deteriorate into mindless babble or “sacred” worrying. We all have experienced this. We begin praying sincerely only to start rambling through a series of words with no idea of what we’re saying.

Jesus gave the prayer recorded in Matthew 6:9–13 as a tool to help us get beyond such mindlessness. He intended to give us a simple structure and some helpful themes and categories to focus on so that we could remain mindful as we pray. Sadly, in many church traditions we have made the recitation of this prayer a mindless routine. Week after week we repeat the words but our minds and hearts are not engaged. Jesus was looking for exactly the opposite. He wanted this prayer to become a springboard into the deep, refreshing waters of

intimate conversation with the God we love. Indeed, Christians have used it this way for over two thousand years.

When we pray “Our Father,” we should be moved to reflect deeply on the person and tender care of God. When we say, “Hallowed be your name,” we should be inspired to give him worship, adoration, and praise. If we dare to declare, “Your will be done,” we should be propelled into prayers of submission and surrender. As we ask for our “daily bread,” we should find ourselves humbly telling God about the needs we have in our lives and in the lives of those we love. Jesus did not give us a prayer to memorize and repeat over and over until our minds go blank. It is a launchpad from which we are lifted to high places of worship, petition, confession, and so much more. Every time we pray this prayer, something new and fresh can happen.

Making the Connection

1. If you grew up reciting the Lord’s Prayer in church or your home, how was this prayer used?

If you did not grow up with this prayer, what is your perception of how it is understood and used by Christians?

Knowing and Being Known

Read Matthew 6:5 – 15

2. As you read Matthew 6:9–13, what are the “Big Themes” that Jesus is teaching us to focus on as we pray?

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Which theme above do you find most natural for you to pray about? How do you enter into prayer about this topic or theme?

3. Which theme in the Lord’s Prayer tends to get neglected as you engage in conversations with God?

How do you hope this study will help you go deeper in this area of your prayer life?

The “Who” of Prayer

Have you ever felt guilty about your prayer life? Most of us have. The reason for this low-grade guilt is what I call a “who” problem. We get confused about the nature of the person to whom we are praying. We start to think that God is angry with us or at least a little disappointed. This “who” problem can keep us from growing more passionate, intimate, and effective in prayer.

Jesus begins this prayer with the words, “Our Father.” When we begin praying, it is important to stop our hurried minds and acknowledge the fact that we are speaking to someone. God is personal. When Jesus taught his followers to say “Our Father,” he introduced the most unique opening line in the history of prayer.

Every time we use a name, we make a statement about the nature of the relationship. That’s why names are so powerful. In formal relationships we might say “Mr.” or “Mrs.” If we are talking to a friend, we usually call them by their first name. If it’s a real close friend, sometimes we use a nickname. When we say “Father” or “Daddy,” we are expressing that we are in an intimate family relationship.

Read Romans 8:15 – 17 and Galatians 4:6 – 7

4. When Jesus invited us to address God as “Father” he understood that none of us have perfect earthly fathers. If we think of our heavenly Father as being a cosmic version of our earthly father, we will have a confused prayer life (no matter how good or bad our earthly father has been). Instead, Jesus is teaching us that we have a perfect, loving, and powerful Father in heaven. What kinds of things would a great earthly father do for his children?

It is this final sense of the word that Jesus intends in this prayer. When you pray, "Our Father who is in the heavens," you are saying, "Our Father who is all around me," "Our Father who is closer than the air I breathe," "Our Father who is right here, right now." God is that close! We are never alone.

7. What makes us feel that God is far away and that there is a great distance between us and him?

8. How have you experienced God's nearness and presence in your life?

9. If God were sitting in a chair right in front of you, what would you ask him? What would you tell him?

How might your prayer life change if you knew God was sitting beside you, ready to hear what is on your heart?

The “What” of Prayer

Most of us have times when we are not exactly sure what we ought to pray about. This “what” problem can get in our way. We’re not sure what God might be interested in. Does he really care about the little stuff of life? Is he all that interested in the things that matter to me? The truth is that there is no concern, no matter how small, that God does not care about. There is no request, no matter how silly or trivial it may seem, that God doesn’t want to hear. He wants us to talk with him about everything, even our daily bread. God cares about the little things and the big things of life.

However, at this point I want to note the very first request included in the Lord’s Prayer is, “Hallowed be your name.” A name in the Bible is never just a label. It’s a reflection of the person, his or her character and identity. We are to “hallow” or give the honor that is due to the name of God. To God himself! We are to praise, revere, and exalt the name of God.

Read Exodus 20:7 and Psalm 66:1 – 4

10. Why do you think God is so concerned that his name not be misused?

What are some of the ways the name of God is abused and misused, and how can we seek to honor his name in a world that tends to trample on it?

11. Throughout the Bible there are many names for God. What is a name for God that you love and what does this name express about God's character and nature?

Celebrating and Being Celebrated

Take time as a group to pray, using the Lord's Prayer to guide you. First, recite the prayer in unison together. Here are some guidelines for this reading:

Rule #1: Read in monotone without any hint of emotion.

Rule #2: Keep your mind vacant. Don't actually think about what you're reading. Pretend you are reading numbers from the phone book.

Rule #3: Whatever you do, don't be the first one to start reading a new line. Nobody else might join you and you'll be speaking all alone.

No ... don't actually use these rules! Read the Lord's Prayer together with minds that are engaged, hearts that are open, and lips that are expressing some of the most beautiful words ever spoken.

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.” (Matthew 6:9–13)

Next, have someone read each line of the Lord's Prayer and then offer up brief prayers that grow naturally out of that portion of the prayer:

Read: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
Prayers . . .

Read: your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is
in heaven.
Prayers . . .

Read: Give us today our daily bread.
Prayers . . .

Read: Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
Prayers . . .

Read: And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the
evil one.
Prayers . . .

Loving and Being Loved

In our human relationships we express love through our bodies. We give hugs and kisses. We smile. We give a wink or a nod to say “I love you and you matter to me.” In a very similar way we can express love to God through our body language. In particular, our posture in prayer can be a way to communicate love to the God who loves us without reservation.

What posture do you use when you pray? What do you do with your eyes? What do you do with your body? How do you use your hands?

Some people have grown up in a tradition where they heard, “Every head bowed, every eye closed,” when it was time to pray. This might feel like a hard and fast biblical rule, but the truth is, the Bible never tells us to close our eyes and fold our hands. These are things we teach children so they won’t get distracted or poke other kids during prayertime.

According to the Bible, Jesus’ common posture for prayer was “he stood and looked into the heavens.” Scripture also records, among other stances, people praying as they knelt, as they lay prostrate on the ground, as they sat with their hands stretched out, and with faces lifted toward the sky or bowed down toward the earth. The point is that there is not an exact posture of prayer, but we should engage our bodies in our expression of prayer.

Experiment this week with different physical expressions as you pray. Find something that feels right as you do your best to express love to the God who calls you his child.

Serving and Being Served

If you have children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, or young people you can influence, consider teaching them to pray the Lord’s Prayer. Don’t just help them memorize the words and repeat them over and over. Teach them to use this great prayer as a springboard into deep and refreshing places of conversation with God.