

How to Pray

Not Like the Pagans

Prayer is so natural that virtually everyone prays – even atheists! But Jesus very clearly tells us NOT to pray like unbelievers pray:

"When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." Matthew 6:7-8

"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."
Matthew 6:31-33

Jesus says that bringing our basic needs to God in prayer is not a sign of faith, but of unbelief! It means we do not trust that God cares for us out of His love.

Jesus says that worrying and praying about our basic needs is what pagans do, and we should not behave like them. Jesus tells us that we should simply trust our heavenly Father to provide for our needs according to His love and wisdom.

Instead of long or frequent prayers about our personal or family needs, we should trust God for those and instead be praying for His Kingdom to come to our family, our community, our nation and the world.

Prayer is Not Magic

When looking to God for a breakthrough in prayer what do we do? This is what happened when the disciples needed a breakthrough and they prayed:

"Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. (Acts 4:29-31)

Sometimes we see the answer come immediately, even if the building doesn't shake. But what about those many times when we don't immediately see the breakthrough?

Well then we need to get serious. We need to show God that, like Jacob wrestling all night with the angel, we will not take "no" for an answer. We send out the call to pray, urging as many people as possible to fast in preparation and then gather to pray. We prostrate ourselves, we cry out in loud and passionate appeals for God to hear and act. We pray all night.

This is an account of such a prayer meeting:

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention. (1 Kings 18:26-29).

This prayer meeting was a gathering of 450 prophets of Baal. Notice how Elijah mocks them: "Perhaps your god needs waking. Shout louder!" The devil has taken Elijah's taunts and he uses them against the church. "Fast longer, pray harder, gather more people, pray all night, get more serious, show God you really mean business..." The devil wants us to treat prayer like magic.

Magic is hateful to God. Magic is the attempt to manipulate supernatural forces through the use of ritual or special words. The devil wants us to think that to get our prayers answered we need to **do the right things**, and **say the right words**.

In our eagerness to have our prayers heard and answered we too easily fall for the lie that there are special "techniques" or "keys" that will get our prayers answered. We may believe there is *power* in large numbers, or fasting or praying all night or in using certain words or phrases, like "In Jesus Name", or "the blood of Jesus", or binding and loosing, or naming and claiming. This is magic-mentality.

I can be helpful **to us**, to do certain things, adopt certain postures and say certain words, but if we think that they make our prayers more *powerful*, we are treating prayer like magic, and that is offensive to God.

Pray like Jesus prayed

When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, He made this very simple prayer:

Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me." John 11:41-42

This is how we should pray: with the complete confidence that our Father has heard our prayer, and always hears our prayers. Later in this study we will see the promises for God to answer our prayers. Let's stop praying like pagans, and start praying like Jesus...

Prayer is How God Works

The first thing to understand about prayer is that it is **not about humans getting God to do things**. Prayer is the *internal* communication *within* the trinity:

"You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance." Psalm 2:7-8

And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me." John 11:41-42

"I pray for those you have given me, for they are yours." John 17:9

Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.
Hebrews 7:25

These verses show us how Jesus prays to the Father. In other words, this is God praying to God! **Prayer is how God communicates within the Trinity.**

Jesus tells us what the Father has commanded Him to do:

"And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day." (John 6:39)

And so He prays to the Father:

"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." (John 17:15).

This heavenly intercession is a mystery, but one we must whole-heartedly embrace. Asking and giving and receiving through prayer is how the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit relate to one another in love and complete unity. So what can we say about prayer within the Godhead?

- There is no reluctance
- There is no need for persuasion
- There is no need for one to inform the other about needs
- There is complete agreement
- Asking and giving and receiving through prayer is always a delight
- Even though God always knows all things He still functions through prayer
- Prayer is God's "Language of Love"

Prayer is Sharing in God's Language of Love

Couples who love one another usually develop a secret language of love - small actions or special phrases that each understand to be a special message of love. That is what prayer is like within the Godhead. It is how they share love between them.

It is an incredible thing that God invites us to share in their language of love; in prayer. Prayer is not long-distance communication. It is not like texting or emailing God, it is intimate communion. However remote God might feel to us when we pray, that is how how God sees it:

"For through Jesus we have access by one Spirit to the Father." Eph 2:18

"Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings." Hebrews 10:22

Prayer is an adventure exploring the very heart of God and sharing in His passions and purposes for the world. To truly pray is to be caught up with the Holy Spirit into God's throne room; not to plead with God but to rule with him. Prayer and especially intercession is sharing in the divine nature and as such is an expression and experience of deep intimacy with God.

Prayer therefore starts with listening, "Lord, please show me what is on your heart for this situation. Can I join in the heavenly intercession for this?"

This holy privilege of access to the throne, before whom angels bow, shielding their eyes from the intensity of the glory, is not to be taken lightly or abused by hasty or covetous requests. In that place we pray with Jesus:

"... nevertheless, not my will, but Your will be done ... May Your Kingdom come on earth." (Matthew 26:39, 6:10)

It is as we rest in Christ that we are included in this intimate relationship of prayer:

“In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (John 14:20).

“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.” (John 15:7)

There is no reluctance

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." Luke 12:32

"And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." John 14:13

There is no need for persuasion

"Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name ... Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete." John 16:23

There is no need to inform God about our needs

"Therefore do not heap up empty words like the heathen. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him." Matthew 6:8

There is no need to shout

Shouting prayers is how the unbelieving heathen behave. Elijah mocked the prophets of Baal saying:

Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened. 1 Ki 18:26-27

There is need to rest

"Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the LORD!" Psalm 27:14

"But those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Isaiah 40:31

But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. Rom 8:25

Jesus teaches us to expect "Yes" as the answer

It is quite apparent that Jesus knew His followers would have great difficulty with the idea that prayer works; at least 25 times in the gospels Jesus urged His disciples to believe that God answers prayer.

Six times in one breath Jesus reiterated this simple truth:

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.” Matthew 7:7-8

We can hardly escape the conclusion that Jesus intended His disciples to approach God in prayer with the assurance and confidence that they would obtain what they asked. This conclusion is overwhelmingly reinforced when the other recorded words of Jesus concerning answered prayer are considered. Just look at this selection:

“Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.” Mat 18:19

“And whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.” Mat 21:22

“Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.” Mark 11:24

“And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.” John 14:13-14

“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.” John 15:7

“You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.” John 15:16

“And in that day you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.” John 16:23-24

The truth concerning prayer is that God answers. Nothing more complicated than this simple truth is required as the foundation for faith in prayer. From

this truth we draw the motivation to seek God and to pursue the degree of abiding and intimacy in which answered prayer is a regular experience.

God listens to our Heart, not our words

“But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.” Matthew 6:6-8

‘But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you’ Matthew 6:33.

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!” Matthew 7:11

Prayer is how the Job gets Done

“The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest.” Matthew 9:37-38

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you." John 15:16

"Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly." Luke 18:7

"Pray for us ... so that I may be restored to you the sooner." Heb 13:18

"Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word" Col 4:3

Prayer is often difficult

It is unnatural

Believing that you are in intimate communion with the God of the Universe whom you cannot see, hear or feel is a pretty stupid delusion according to normal human reason. It's not like any other kind of relationship we have experienced. Is it surprising that we often find prayer difficult?

But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. 1 Cor 2:14

Answers may take time coming

A part of the mystery of prayer is that intercession takes time. God does not tell us why, He just tells us that it does:

"And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Luke 18:7-8

God promises to answer quickly the prayers of those who cry out day and night. The intercession of Jesus and the Holy Spirit are ongoing and persistent. As we share in that intercession we also need to share in persistence until we know we have our answer or we actually see the answer. This also is a matter of hearing God.

In the face of a delay we must be like God "who calls things that are not as if they were" (Rom 4:18) and, like Abraham, grow strong in our faith as we give glory to God.

When we don't know how to pray

Romans 8:26-27 describes the Holy Spirit interceding with groans that cannot be uttered when we don't know how to pray as we ought. This is the Holy Spirit interceding on our behalf, or through us on behalf of another. This is a kind of praying in the Spirit, usually in tongues, or sometimes with literal groans. Again it must be with faith, and it usually feels like labouring in prayer, with an eventual sense of completion.

Paul describes travailing in prayer for the Galatians as if in child birth (Gal 4:19).