

PRAYER

“ask what you will believing”

Key question

What is the Biblical teaching on prayer?

Key text

Colossians 4:2

“Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving;”

Key Definition

Prayer

Prayer is the creature expressing to the Creator his or her heart in petition or praise.

Introduction

1. Prayer is one of the most basic spiritual disciplines of the Christian life.
 2. Prayer raises many questions:
 - a. How does prayer effect the decreed will of God?
 - b. How can we know God’s will in prayer?
 - c. How can God promise to answer prayers made in faith when different people are praying for opposite action? (The farmer prays for rain while the family prays for sunshine.)
 - d. How are we to understand prayer promises in the Bible?
- A. **There are two primary reasons for every Christian to pray.**
1. **To commune with God:** It is an expression of my personal relationship with God.
 - a. A personal relationship with God is cultivated primarily through devotional Bible study (God speaking to me) and prayer (I speak to God).
 - b. Prayer is simply man expressing himself to God.
 1. Man’s words of prayer must express an attitude.
 - a. Words alone (vain repetitions—Matt.6:7) are worthless.
 - b. The Scripture teaches that we are to “lift up our hearts” (Lam.3:41) to Him and “call upon Him in truth” (Ps.145:18) “casting our anxieties on Him” (I Pet.5:7).
 2. Prayer demands an “I-Thou” awareness.

- a. God, as a person is distinct from man and this means that prayer is not “self-realization or reflection”, but rather “the pouring out of oneself to another.”
 - b. The significant difference between Man and God is moral (Rom.3:23 — sin). Sin is the only barrier between the man in prayer and God (Ps. 66:18, Isa.59:2) and it is for this reason that “confession” (awareness of sin with personal repentance) is a crucial part of man’s life (Prov.28:13, Ps.51, Dan.9:3-19, Lk.18:9-14).
3. Prayer is not an option for man but should be his vocation.
- a. It is a sin not to pray (I Sam. 12:23).
 - b. We are to be constantly in an attitude of prayer (I Thess.5:17-18) as it delights God (Prov.15:8) and is the most natural form of worship (Heb.13:15-16, Jn.14:13).
2. **To change the world:** It makes my relationship with God powerful.
- a. Prayer is our channel of deliverance
 1. from temptation (Matt.26:41).
 2. from discouragement (Lk.18:1).
 3. from circumstances (Acts 12:5, 12-17).
 4. from ignorance (Jas.1:5, Col.1:9).
 5. from physical sickness and death (Jas.5:14-15, Acts 28:8, 15).
 6. from any need (Jas.4:2-3).
 7. from unbelievers (Rom.15:30-33).
 8. from Satan (Eph.6:18).
 - b. Prayer is a channel for spiritual ministry
 1. for boldness (Acts 4:29, Eph.6:18-19).
 2. for the free course of the Word (II Thess.3:1-5, Matt.9:37-38).
 3. for the salvation of the lost (Rom. 10:1, 11:26).
 4. for spiritual growth (Eph.1:1-11, 15-20, 3:13-21, Col.1:9-14).
 - c. It has been well said that we have no right to talk to men about God until we have talked to God about men.

B. Prayer should not be neglected because it is a great privilege.

1. Man was created with the unique capacity to commune with his creator (Gen.1:26-27, Ps.8).
 - a. If he fails to avail himself of that privilege he will degenerate to nothing more than a sophisticated animal (Rom.1:18-32).
 - b. All men have the capacity and responsibility to pray to their creator (Rom. 1:19-23).
2. The Christian can boldly come into the presence of God because of the work of Jesus Christ (Jn.14:13-15, 15:16, 16:23-26).
 - a. He has established a new covenant through His blood (Heb.9:19-22).
 - b. He intercedes for us continually (Rom.8:34, Heb.7:25).
 - c. His Holy Spirit aids us in our prayer (Rom.8:15, 26, Gal.4:6).
3. We will spend eternity in praise of God (Rev.4:9-11) and we have the privilege of starting now (Ps. 148). His Word has been given to us to instruct us in praise (Ps.119:175).

C. The Bible teaches us how to pray.

1. The Trinity and prayer:
 - a. We are to pray UNTO the Father (Eph.2:18).
 - b. We are to pray THROUGH the Son (Heb.10:19, Jn.14:6).
 - c. We are to pray IN the power of the Spirit (Eph.6:18, Jude 20).
2. The teaching of Christ on prayer:
 - a. Privacy (Matt.6:5-6, Mk.1:35).
 - b. Persistence (Matt.7:7-12, Lk.11:5-13, 18:1-8).
 - c. Pride (Lk.18:11-13).
 - d. Pattern (Matt.6:5-15).
 1. Proclamation: “Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be Thy name”
 2. Petition:
 - a. God’s Program: “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”
 - b. Our Needs:
 1. Physical: “give us this day our daily bread.”
 2. Spiritual: “and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.”
 3. Praise: “For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.”
3. A suggested guide: A C T S
 - a. Adoration: personal worship — ascribing worth to God (Ps.29).
 - b. Confession: recognizing my unworthiness (Ps. 51).
 - c. Thanksgiving: recognizing God’s grace (I Chron.16:4-36).
 - d. Supplication:
 1. Intercession: prayer for another’s needs (Gen.18:23-33, I Tim.2:1-4, Jn.17).
 2. Petition: prayer for specific needs (Ps.70).

D. Prayer promises in the Bible should be a great encouragement to us.

1. From the Old Testament:

Ex. 6:5	Ps. 37:4-5	Prov. 15:8, 29
Ex. 22:23, 27	Ps. 38:15	Prov. 16:1
Ex. 33:17-20	Ps. 50:14-15	Isa. 19:20
Deut. 4:7, 29-31	Ps. 55:16-17	Isa. 30:19
I Chr. 28:9	I Ps. 56:9	Isa. 55:6
II Chr. 7:13-15	Ps. 65:2, 5	Isa. 58:9
Job 8:5	Ps. 69:33	Ps. 65:24
2Job 12:4	Ps. 81:10	Jer. 29:12-13
Job 22:27	Ps. 86:5-7	Jer. 31:9
Job 33:26	Ps. 91:15	Jer. 33:3
Ps. 9:10	Ps. 102:17-20	Lam. 3:25
Ps. 10:17	Ps. 145:18-19	Ezek. 36:37
Ps. 18:3	Prov. 2:3-5	Joel 2:18-19, 32
Ps. 32:6	Prov. 3:6	Amos 5:4-6
Ps. 34:15	Prov. 10:24	Zech. 10:1, 6

2. From the New Testament:

Matt. 6:5-9	Jn. 9:31	Heb. 4:16
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Matt. 7:7-11	Jn. 14:13-14	Heb. 10:22-23
Matt. 18:19-20	Jn. 15:7, 16	Heb. 11:6
Matt. 21:22	Jn. 16:23-27	Jas. 1:5-7
Mk. 11:24-25	Acts 22:16	Jas. 4:8, 10
Lk. 11:13	Rom. 8:26	Jas. 5:16
Lk. 18:6-8	Rom. 10:12-13	I Jn. 3:22
6Lk. 21:36	Eph. 2:18	I Jn. 5:14-15
Jn. 4:10, 23-24	Eph. 3:20	

E. Prayer is both a discipline and an indicator of one's spiritual condition.

1. Direction

- a. Start a personal Bible study on prayer.
- b. Integrate prayer and Bible study. Let God's Word set the theme of your prayer time and pray God's Word back to Him.
- c. Look at prayer as a ministry responsibility. Organize your prayer life. Pray faith-sized requests.
- d. Prayer is not only the natural response of a Spirit controlled life but it is also the means of obtaining that life.

2. Discipline

- a. A man's faith and motivation to pray are related.
- b. Start a prayer diary that will enable you to observe God's faithfulness as well as your own.
- c. Finding a prayer partner may be the help you need to launch an effective prayer ministry.
- d. Establish a pattern in your prayer life — in terms of time, place, and etc.

F. The Lord's Prayer (Matt.6:5-15) provides a model for us.

1. Invocation

- a. "Our" - prayer respects the community among God's people.
- b. "Father" - God is seen as a caring, protecting, providing, parent.
- c. "who art in heaven" - God transcends this world.

2. Petition

a. God's Program

1. "Thy name be hallowed" - God is to be revered.
2. "Thy kingdom come" - God's rule is to be respected.
3. "Thy will be done" - God's plans are to be accomplished.
4. "on earth as it is in heaven" - Earth and heaven are to be coordinated.

b. Our Needs

1. Physical

- a. "give us this day our daily bread" - Human needs are a part of God's provision.
- b. Note that the emphasis here is on "daily" suggesting that it is only for the immediate needs that we should be preoccupied with. This seems to be consistent with the threat that "the storing up of material wealth" brings to our souls.

2. Spiritual

- a. “and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” - Spiritual reconciliation is a part of God’s concern.
 - b. “and do not lead us into temptation,” - Protection from defilement is a priority.
 - c. “but deliver us from evil.” - The sins of others are a threat that God can meet.
3. Praise
- a. “For Thine is the kingdom” - God is Lord of all.
 - b. “and the power” - God is the source of change and life.
 - c. “and the glory” - God is the just object of praise by all.
 - d. “forever” - God’s nature and works are permanent.
 - e. “Amen”
4. Luke 11:1-13
- a. In Luke’s version of the Lord’s prayer which is abbreviated there seems to be an emphasis upon the priority of certain concerns in our prayers. We see this expressed above.
 - b. Luke then offers a parable which encourages us to not be passive but shameless and persistent in our petitioning God.
 - c. This is followed by a reminder that God will not give us bad gifts but rather that which we need (good gifts). The promise of the Holy Spirit is a reference to the desire of God to share His nature with us. This is what “Thy Kingdom come” is all about. The fruit of the Spirit represents that good gift that He want to give us.

G. **Biblical Prayer Principles that can help us in our prayer.**

1. **Honesty**

I Pet.5:7 “casting all your anxiety upon Him because He cares for you.” Phil.4:6 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

2. **Humility**

Lk.18:9-14 “the Pharisee and the Publican”

3. **In The Name Of Christ**

Jn.15:16 “whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give to you.”

4. **Righteousness**

Jas.5:16 “the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” Ps 66:18 “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.”

5. **Unity**

Matt.18:19 “if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done” I Pet.3:7 “live with your wives in an understanding way, . . . so that your prayers may not be hindered.”

6. **Faith**

Jas.1:5-8 “let him ask in faith without any doubting” Matt.21:21 “if you have faith, and do not doubt, . . . if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea, it shall.’”

7. **Persistence**

Lk.11:5-10 “the persistent friend”

8. According To His Will

I Jn.5:14-15 “if we ask anything according to His will He hears us”

9. His Word In Us

Jn.15:7 “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.”

H. A key text **Matthew 7**

“⁷ Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. ⁹ Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? ¹¹ If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!”

1. Literary structure

a. A series of commands

“⁷ Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you.

b. A promise

⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened.

c. An analogy

⁹ Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? ¹¹ If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!”

2. Observations

a. A series of commands

“⁷ Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you.

- Are we to do more than ask? Jesus’ words suggest that prayer is not the only step in being blessed with “good gifts.”
- Seeking suggests a process of following up on our desire or passion with action. It would suggest that if there is no effort to pursue the gift it will not come.
- Knocking suggest assertive effort. This is another way of asking.

b. A promise

⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened.

- The promise is all-inclusive in that “everyone” is included with no hint of their spiritual or moral condition.
- The promise also indicates that the results are certain .
- One might be tempted to apply this to human relationships as in (7:1-5) but the analogy that follows suggests that our petitioning of God is in view.

c. An analogy

⁹ Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will he give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? ¹¹ If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!”

- Jesus contrast the heart and actions of a human father (even an evil father) with that of a holy loving God to emphasize the certainty of God’s promise.
- What constitutes “good gifts?” The parallel text in Luke 11:13 indicates that spiritual (not material) gifts are in view.
- Can we always see the “goodness” of God’s gifts? Is it possible to perceive our gifts as “stones and serpents” when in reality they are the very “good things” we need for our spiritual wellbeing.

3. This teaching raises some puzzling questions.

- **Why does our experience not illustrate this teaching?** Many of us are struck by how seldom our requests seem granted.
- **Why does our observation of the experience of others not illustrate this teaching?** While there are many testimonies of answered prayer, no one can say that they received all that they ever asked for.
- **Does this teaching apply to all and any request?** Can I expect to receive fame, fortune and other selfish goals through asking, seeking, and knocking?
- **Do we really ask for good gifts or do we more often ask for stones and serpents?** If the good gifts are the things that nurture and develop within us a mature spiritual life, then we must expect something other than that which would hinder our development.
 1. When Paul asks that he may know Christ and the fellowship of his suffering (Phil.3:10), is he not asking for something that most of us would never ask?
 2. When Paul states that it is in his weakness that he finds God’s strength (2 Cor.12:10), is he not asking for something that most of us would never ask?
 3. When James tells us that we do not receive from God answers to our prayers because we are asking for fleshly wants (Jas.4:3), what does he mean?
- **Paul’s petitions give us an illustration of praying for “good gifts.”**

Ephesians 1 “¹⁵ For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you, and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶ do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.”

Ephesians 3 “¹⁴ For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, ¹⁶ that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.”

COMMON FALLACIES IN THINKING ABOUT PRAYER

A. **The Predestination Fallacy**

God's decretive purposes flow from His very being and no power in heaven or earth can alter their fulfillment. God cannot deny Himself. To imagine that we can change God's nature or His unconditional purposes is fallacious.

But it is equally fallacious to imagine that God has determined everything to occur unconditionally. Not all of God's purposes are decretive: some are preceptive commandments with pleasure and some are permissive disobediences with displeasure. God commands prayer and permits disobedience to that commandment. Prayer is the means chosen for accomplishing certain ends.

Decretive will: Isa. 14:24,27; Dan. 4:35; Luke 1:37

Preceptive will: Luke 7:30; Ex. 20:1-17

Permissive will: Ps. 81:12; Acts 14:16; Rom. 1:24

B. **The Foreknowledge Fallacy**

Sometimes it is assumed that if God knows our prayers ahead of time they are rendered meaningless. Foreknowledge of the Lord's Prayer does not necessarily render its repetition meaningless. A mother's foreknowledge of a sick child's cry in the night, and preparation of a glass of water and medicine near the child's bed does not make the cry unnecessary. A service man may predict the welcome home he will receive after years away from his family. The anticipation adds meaning to the warm greeting; it does not make them cold or pointless.

C. **The Single Cause Fallacy**

Some imagine that if God does something, there is nothing left for them to do. On the other hand, if they do something, then God can have no part in it. The will and activity of a single person is thought to rule out the will and activity of other persons in regard to a given event or occurrence.

In many occurrences, however, there are complex causes. It is a trick question when a history teacher asks what was the cause of the second World War. Many causal factors entered in. There are seldom single causes of things in our world; more frequently there are complex causes. In the salvation of a soul there are many influences besides the witness of a Christian who leads the sinner to the place of confession: experiences, arguments, prayers, testimonies, Scripture passages, messages frequently all converge upon a given decision. Prayer is not the single cause, but it is not therefore, unnecessary. Neither is the single cause conversational prayer, or more formal prayer! God has desired that His redeemed creatures share in prayer. So prayer is an important factor, even when it is not the only factor in the accomplishment of God's will.

D. **The Punctiliar Fallacy**

We may imagine that an answer to prayer must be identifiable at a single moment of time. We look for complete, immediate success at a given second, and if we do not see it in that way we assume our prayer has been unanswered.

God's working in the world is not limited to a given moment in a point action. God works continuously at all times. Our requests may be granted in an extended process as well as in a flash. A Commentary on Ephesians by Dale Moody pointed out that that book does not justify a punctiliar view of the Holy Spirit's ministry. For example, sometimes we tend to confine the Spirit's work too much to one point, the person's baptism. As Moody said, "The Holy Spirit, in normal Christian experience, works before, in, and after baptism." He added, "being filled with all the fullness of God

is not some sudden thing that takes place in the individual and is all over. It grows with a growth that is from God.” So it may be with respect to many things for which we pray. We ought not limit our search for answers to single moments of time.

E. **The Sufficient Cause Fallacy**

Prayer is sometimes confused with magic. Magic is a power to compel the deity to exactly as we wish when we utter the magic formula. For magic to be verified, there must be invariable success. For the saying of the magic word is the sole and sufficient cause of the alleged result. No other variable such as the motivation of the magician or the will of secret powers employed enters in.

Prayer is not magic; it is a request to a personal God. Requests to persons may not be granted because of the way in which they are presented, or the person addressed may not be willing to grant the request. The request may be for something unwise. There may be a better way. It would be foolish for God to put all the resources of His infinite power at the disposal of people who were childish, selfish, lustful, power-mad, etc.

Prayer is either a sheer illusion or a personal contact between embryonic, incomplete persons (ourselves) and the utterly concrete Person. Prayer in the sense of petition (asking for things) is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold; adoration its sanctuary; the presence vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine. In prayer God shows Himself to us. That He answers prayers is a corollary from revelation. What He is is learned from what He does.

Petitionary prayer is, nonetheless, both allowed and commanded: “Give us our daily bread.” And no doubt it raises a theoretical problem. Can we believe that God ever really modifies His action in response to the suggestions of men? For infinite wisdom does not need telling what is best, and infinite goodness needs no urging to do it.

But neither does God need any of those things that are done by finite agents, whether living or inanimate. He could, if He chose, repair our bodies miraculously without food; or give us food without the aid of farmers, bakers, and butchers, or knowledge without the aid of learned men; or convert the heathen without missionaries. Instead, He allows soils and weather and animals and the muscles, minds, and wills of men to cooperate in the execution of His will. “God”, said Pascal, “instituted prayer in order to lend His creatures the dignity of causality.” But not only prayer; whenever we act at all He lends us that dignity. It is not really stranger, nor less strange, that my prayers should affect the course of events than that my other actions should do so. They have not advised or changed God’s mind—that is, His overall purpose. But that purpose will be realized in different ways according to the actions, including the prayers, of His creatures.

For He seems to do nothing of Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blunderingly what He could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye. He allows us to neglect what He would have us do, or to fail.

From C.S. Lewis, “The Efficacy of Prayer,” HIS, 19 (May, 1959), 8.

F. **The fallacy that prayer is no longer practiced by “modern people.”**

According to a 1997 Newsweek Poll:

- 82% say they ask for health or success for a child or family member when they pray.
- 75% ask for strength to overcome personal weakness.
- 87% say that God answers prayers.
- 51% think God doesn’t answer prayers to win sporting events.

- 36% never pray for financial or career success.
- 29% say they pray to God more than once a day.
- 25% pray only once a day.
- 82% say they believe that God does not play favorites in answering prayers.
- 79% say God answers prayers for healing someone with an incurable disease.
- 73% think prayers for help in finding a job are answered.
- 54% say that when God doesn't answer their prayers, it means it wasn't God's will.
- 82% don't turn away from God when prayers go unanswered.

Scientific studies on the effect of Prayer

The relationship between prayer and healing lends itself to objective (scientific) study in ways that most other religious practices do not. The first known studies on this subject were published in 1873 by English polymath Francis Galton. He found no statistical evidence that prayer prolonged life or reduced stillbirths (though his findings would not meet today's criteria for a controlled prospective study).

A. **“Healing Words” by Larry Dossey M.D.**

In 1993 Dr. Larry Dossey (M.D.) wrote a book that summarized his examination of the subject of prayer and healing from a scientific perspective. Dossey shows how prayer manifests in laboratory experiments, and how modern physics may be compatible with these actions. Dossey examines which methods of prayer show the greatest potential for healing and how one's innate temperament and personality affect prayer style. Addressing both patients and physicians, Dossey presents persuasive evidence that patients' and doctors' belief in a treatment increases its efficacy. Dossey is not a confessing Christian but believes that the studies show a statistically significant positive correlation between prayer and healing.

B. **Review of Intercessory Prayer Studies**

For a summary of studies on prayer see: www.intercessoryprayerstudies.com/

C. **The work of Gregory Fung and Christopher Fung (2009)**

In this landmark study funded by the John Templeton Foundation two respected scientists who were practicing Christians were surprised to find that intercessory prayer may even be a negative factor in healing. Christianity Today's article in the May 2009 on line issue summarizes: www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/may/27.43.html