

Prayer  
*“How to Pray”*  
Matthew 6:5-15

June 20, 2010  
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**How to Pray**

It’s a summer of prayer. We’re spending the whole summer exploring the Biblical teachings on prayer so we can drill down more deeply into this Christian practice that is so important to Columbia Church. There’s great power in a praying church. That’s what the background represents this week – it’s a thunderstorm. There’s great power in a thunderstorm, along with a clarity that the blue sky represents. Prayer is a source of tapping into the power of the Holy Spirit. It also gives a vantage-point, or perspective on life. So let’s learn how to pray, and the best way to learn how to pray is to do it.

In order to help with that, every week this summer, there’ll be a prayer-assignment. No one is going to check up on you about these, but I encourage you to try them—it can’t hurt, can it? Here was the assignment from two weeks ago

- **Make prayer your top priority.** Take your calendar and schedule in at least 10-15 minutes of prayer in to your daily schedule before you schedule in anything else.
- **Pick the time when you are most available to God without interruptions** – and that’s different for everybody – though I don’t recommend when you crawl into bed at night...
  - Or too early if you’re not a morning person...
- **Pick a favorite place**
- **Share this with those who need to know** – so they can support you in a life of prayer

For the next three weeks we will be looking at what is called the Lord's Prayer. It's called that because the Lord Jesus taught it to his disciples as an outline for the practice of prayer.

But it should be called the *disciples' prayer* – it's the how to on prayer for disciples.

### **How NOT to Pray**

In the best tradition of good teaching, Jesus begins by teaching us how NOT to pray.

- **Don't pray for *Show* – For God has eyes**
  - Two weeks ago I talked about how spiritually exhilarating it was to be around a group of students who prayed specifically and extemporaneously, out loud with each other. It was scary, because I was afraid of not knowing if I was praying correctly or not. It was exhilarating, because it was prayer of simple faith.
  - But after a few months of this prayer-meeting, I began to notice that quite a few people weren't praying to God, they were praying to each other. Under the cloak of talking with God, they would send signals to each other about things they didn't like. It was weird. It was also what Jesus was talking about here – always pray to God, and focus on God completely when you pray.
    - We can go into our prayer closet with God anywhere – go within, focus on God, and pray. It doesn't have to be a literal room, but a spiritual place with God.
  - This doesn't mean we don't ever pray in public.
    - But when we do, like in worship, we lift our prayers and hearts to God.
    - This is why we pray WE, not I.
  - Once, the commentator Bill Moyers, who is also an ordained pastor, was praying to open the national prayer breakfast during the presidency of Lyndon Johnson. Moyers was an aide to Johnson. During the prayer, Johnson interrupted him and said, “Bill. We can't hear you. Moyers immediately responded, “Mr. President. I wasn't speaking to you...”
- **Don't pray for *Quantity* – for he is wise.**
  - Far too much thinking about prayer in various traditions around the world throughout has held the false notion that we must impress God with our sincerity by praying a lot – God or the God's are busy, or

high and mighty, and thus you have to get their attention, or impress with eloquent or many words.

- Jewish practice at the time was laden with prayer-ritual – almost to the point of spiritual obsessive compulsive disorder –
  - The 18 Benedictions – then three times a day, then proper prayers before, during, and after meals, then doxologies throughout the day – the people had become beasts of burden.
- This notion is pagan, not Christian. Paganism is the attempt to control God by rituals or cajoling prayer.
- Jesus changes prayer by declaring that it should be simple, direct, and trusting – we aren't spiritual beasts of burden.

### **Our Father**

So how do we pray? Jesus shows us:

**First – begin with God, not our concerns or prayers.** I don't know exactly why this is, but when I begin prayer with my requests, I almost always get lost in the thicket of concerns, and anxieties – and my mind wanders. But when I begin with God, everything seems to stay on course. Begin with God.

In particular, begin with Who God is: our Father. We are used to the concept of the Creator as 'Father'. But before Jesus no one had come up with this. To be sure, there are a few references in the Old Testament to God as a father, but they are precious few, because the Israelites were trying to avoid any association of Yahweh with the sky gods of baalism – thus, they almost never spoke of God as a Father. They spoke of God being *like* a father, they spoke of God being *like* a mother hen who gathers her chicks under her wing – but these were images.

Jesus came along and started calling God 'Father' – but he made sure we all had the right idea of the fatherhood of God:

God is neither a stern lawgiver who metes out inevitable fate, nor the indulgent, sentimental, detached 'daddy' of modern thinking. Instead, God was portrayed by Jesus to be like a good father – with whom the adult children lived their whole lives (no sense of getting away from home at 18). Thus, the Father we see revealed through Jesus relationship with him is

- Bountiful in his provision
- Reliable in his promises,
- And faithful in his love

The response to THIS Father is a response of trust, obedience and love – for one’s whole life.

### **Father’s Day**

What timing! This was planned some time ago, without Father’s day in mind! But here we are. The importance of fathers is now more widely known than ever before. It used to be assumed that mothers were crucial for childhood development. But now we know that dads are equally crucial.

We’ve learned that a fatherless society is one in which there is less and less ability to control impulses, where insecurity leads to widespread anxiety, and anger gets worked out inappropriately; where aimlessness abounds.

I heard a psychologist a few years ago remark that few children ever doubt their mother’s love. But few children believe their father’s love. All this is mixed with a frenetic pace to life that makes the presence of a father like a ghost figure at night, or a buffoon or unspeakable horror as portrayed in entertainment.

Fathers! Your role and job is crucial for what God wants to do in rescuing us. The source of all good parenting from both fathers and mothers is God. Turn to him in prayer for this job. But dad’s – today it’s your day. The source of all fathering is God’s, not you – depend totally on God for your role and duties as a father.

I think we all know that, sometimes, human fatherhood can get in the way of trusting, obeying, and loving God if our earthly fathers have failed in bad ways.

The remedy is not to downplay the fatherhood of God, but to let Jesus’ understanding of God’s father-work to redeem our experience of and understanding of God. A fatherless society is not helped by removing God as father, but by receiving the gift of the good fatherhood of God.

When we pray, we begin with this side of who God is – the wise, faithful One to whom we owe our existence; our whole lives. When you pray, start with being with God the father, in whose household you live your whole life.

### **In the Heavens**

Then Jesus says, In the heavens. We remember this part as “who art in Heaven.” But in the original, it’s more simple and direct. Our father in the heavens.

This is about perspective. When we know that the heavenlies are the sphere of God's effective reign of holiness, justice, and love – we know that coming to God first in prayer and focusing on his greatness gives us the perspective of heaven. Of life with God as Lord of it. Life the way it's meant to be.

Before I request anything of God, I need to know what God requests of me! I need to look at my life, the life of my family, the life of the world from God's heavenly perspective. Once again, this is where regular Bible reading comes in. How do we gain this perspective? From this narrative and these stories and words. They give God's perspective.

We'll look at them more later, but one of the best ways to get into the heavenly perspective is by using the Psalms to start your day. They will center you in God's view of things.

### **Your Name – Well Thought Of**

Then, Jesus goes one step further – by telling us always to begin this prayer-focus on God, by asking him to make his own name well-thought of. This is more important than we may be aware of. You see, God's reputation isn't always that great. The reason it isn't is usually because of mistakes and sins we make. In response, there's an inner tug we all get from time to time to defend God's reputation.

We can certainly enhance or mar God's reputation by our failures, our judgmentalism, and above all by our lack of love.

But what God doesn't need is us trying to rescue his name. The Lord can take care of that – and does. But we can certainly pray about it – and in praying, become more aware of ways in which we might detract from the Lord's name.

I hope and pray that God's name will be well-thought of. That God's holiness will be made known for what it is – a bright and shining hope of good for all people; that God's gentle grace – like rain – would permeate the hardest rock of a soul; that the beauty of the Lord would be seen everywhere, by everybody.

### **The View From Above**

Phillip Yancey, in his excellent book on prayer gives an image of this whole point – prayer begins with focusing on God. He tells of hiking up a creek close to his house. The creek is big down below, but up top, where it begins in a tiny pools and rivulets, it's gentle, even surprising. Yancey says that prayer is like that – we

should start upstream where the flow begins, not downstream, where our concerns swirl around.

When we begin with God, we learn that God cares more than we do about the concerns we will bring before him in prayer. “Grace, like water, descends to the lowest part. Streams of mercy flow.”

- **So here’s your Prayer Assignment for the week:**
  - **Write a prayer of Adoration and Worship** – then use it every day this week. Careful! This can take more time than you think. Give yourself enough time to reflect on God’s fatherhood and tender love – God’s flinty holiness that will not yield. God’s wisdom that exceeds the skies; God’s splendor that is palely reflected in the glories of the stars; God’s faithfulness in sustaining his people.
  - **Make it at least 500 words...** work at this!
  - **You might need the Psalms to help you.**
  - **Or Revelation chapter 4**
- **Write it, and share it with someone – but use it every day to begin your prayer time**