



"All my discoveries have been made in answer to prayer."
—Isaac Newton

13-Mar-20

Avoiding Prayer? Consider Carefully

The alarm sounds, jolting the sleeper from deep slumber. He lifts his head and peers through slitted eyelids at the bedside clock. Five-thirty am. Hitting the snooze button, he sighs as his head falls back onto his soft pillow. The room is dark and warm. His foggy brain murmurs a promise to doze for only a few more minutes, but even before he convinces himself that his schedule can absorb ten or fifteen minutes of extra sleep, he is already out.

He jerks awake, and before he looks at the clock, he knows he is late. "6:15 am," the giant red numbers on the clock inform him, and the glow of dawn has begun to spread light around the curtains. As he rushes to the bathroom, he calculates that he has a little more than an hour to exercise, eat, pray, study, shower, shave, and dress himself. He decides to exercise in the evening, pray in the shower, and read a chapter of the Bible while he eats breakfast. It will have to do.

He mentally kicks himself as he starts the water in the shower. This morning is not the first time he has overslept this week, nor the second. Stepping under the hot water, he promises to do better. His mind plays tennis with a few ways he can ensure that he will get out of bed tomorrow morning once his alarm rings, and that leads to other ideas about time-saving measures. As

he dries off, he remembers he was supposed to pray while showering. He decides to pray as he shaves instead or perhaps during his commute. Then his favorite song comes on the radio. . . .

Sound familiar? Instead of the promised increased leisure time, modern life has only become busier over the last few decades. The whole world is in hurry-up mode, and Christians, too, have had to speed up to keep up. What have often suffered are prayer and its companion, Bible study—and ultimately, the individual's relationship with [God](#).

The Bible is full of prayers. Prayer, at its most basic, is communication from human beings toward God with an emphasis on making an earnest request or entreaty. Contrary to unbelievers' certainty that a Christian's prayers rise no further than the ceiling, prayer is the means of speaking one on one to the great God of all the universe. Many of the psalms are prayers of David, and he frequently tells us that God heard his prayers ([Psalm 3:4](#); [4:3](#); [6:8-9](#); [18:6](#); etc.). He will also hear the prayers of those who put their trust in Him ([Psalm 10:17](#); [34:15](#), 17; [69:32-33](#); [145:18-19](#); etc.).

When Jesus' disciples ask Him to teach them to pray, He instructs them, saying, "*when* you pray," not "*if* you pray" ([Luke 11:1-4](#); emphasis ours), and in [Matthew 6:5-7](#), He says, "when you pray" three times! So, we have no doubt that our Savior commands us to make prayer part of our Christian routine. His command to ask the Father for "our daily bread" implies that we are requesting this of Him each day ([Matthew 6:11](#); [Luke 11:3](#)). [Luke 18:1](#) says that He taught "that men always ought to pray." In His Olivet Prophecy, He advises us to "[pray always](#) that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man" ([Luke 21:36](#)). It is plain to see that, from Jesus' perspective, prayer is an integral part of the Christian walk. The gospels frequently show Him praying to His Father.

Contrary to the basic idea of prayer, it is far more than asking God for stuff, as Jesus' model prayer testifies. The first item in the prayer after addressing the Father, "Hallowed be Your name" ([Matthew 6:9](#)), is an instruction to both acknowledge and praise God for His [holiness](#) and all that His name represents, particularly His perfect character. Doing this when we engage in prayer makes us consider the awesome and almighty God whom we worship

and should put us in a humble, deferential attitude to speak with the Most High before His throne.

[Jesus](#) then counsels us to include in our prayer, "Your kingdom come" ([Matthew 6:10](#)). This sentence is not as much a request as a statement of solidarity with Him as He works out His plan of salvation. By telling Him this in our frequent prayers ([Psalm 55:17](#)), we recommit daily to what He is working out both in us ([Philippians 2:12-13](#)) and in [the world](#) ([Acts 17:30-31](#)). It reminds us of our goal, eternal life with the perfect moral character of our Savior in His Kingdom. In this way, it helps to orient our lives in the proper direction.

His next instruction concerns God's will: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" ([Matthew 6:10](#)). Like the two prior guidelines, this one is not a request but a statement of belief. We are telling God, "I submit myself to Your will and desire that You accomplish Your purpose until heaven and earth are one under Your sovereignty." If we believe what we are saying—and not just making "vain repetitions," as Jesus warns us against in [Matthew 6:7](#)—we rise from our prayer with a proper, submissive attitude toward God, determined to fulfill His will in our every thought, word, and activity.

We could continue with Jesus' instruction in Matthew 6, but His point is well-taken. What we see in the model prayer is that prayer's benefits are immediate, personal, and primarily spiritual. As Christ reminds us in [Matthew 6:8](#), the Father knows our needs before we ask Him, and in many cases, He has already provided us with what will fulfill them (see [Matthew 6:25-34](#)). Praying for daily needs is covered by a single line in verse 11, "Give us this day our daily bread," and even it can allude to the "bread" of God's Word.

No, Christ's teaching on prayer barely mentions physical things. The model prayer focuses Christians on what is truly important, our personal relationship with God, reminding us in every session that the almighty and holy God is in charge and has everything under control and headed in the right direction and that we have committed to His great plan of salvation for all eternity. Done right, our time spent speaking with God orients or reorients us toward Him and His work, and in doing just this, it strengthens and prepares us for the day ahead.

The last thing we should want to do is to avoid prayer. If we do, we are doing ourselves and our Christian growth a grave disservice. In effect, we are telling God that other things—sleep, exercise, work, a book, a movie, etc.—are more important than He is. We are signaling the weakening state of our hearts and breaking "the first and great commandment": "You shall [love](#) the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" ([Matthew 22:37-38](#); [Deuteronomy 6:5](#)).

So, if we find our prayer life is foundering and about to sink, consider carefully and right the ship with sincere, fervent, and regular prayer. The sailing will not suddenly become smooth and untroubled, but if we trust God and prioritize our relationship with Him, He will surely bring us safely and securely to port.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[The Prayers of Jesus](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Even as a craftsman could not function without the tools of his trade, a Christian cannot function without spiritual tools or a spiritual instructional manual. We have to learn to use the spiritual tools God has given us, including prayer. We need to look to Christ's example to learn how to pray properly. Christ's model prayer contains a nine-part format, including petitions for our daily needs, pleas for guidance, and pleas for forgiveness. Prayer, largely a private matter, is not for God's benefit, but for us to achieve access to God, enabling Him to form His mind in us. Following Christ's example, we need to pray persistently and humbly in a multitude of situations, including decision making, resisting temptation, acquiring spiritual strength, giving thanks as well as praise, and submitting and yielding to God's sovereignty in adoring acquiescence.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Out of the Abundance of Our Prayers](#)

by John O. Reid

Jesus remarks that our lips tell the tale our hearts try to hide. Using this proverb as a foundation, John Reid asks us to consider our prayers in a similar way. What do they tell God about us?

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