

The Model Prayer (Part One): Introduction

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Prayer is an intrinsic part of the religion revealed in the pages of Scripture. The Old Testament records many instances of faithful men and women humbly requesting mercy and aid from the God of heaven and earth, whether it is Daniel beseeching God to forgive Israel for her many sins (Daniel 9) or Hannah requesting a son, whom she would dedicate to God for His use (I Samuel 2). A study of the Old Testament prayers reveals a wide range of subjects, attitudes, circumstances, and styles in which God's people have communicated with the Lord of all.

In Jesus' time, the act of prayer had devolved mainly into hypocritical public prayers and memorized rote prayers. Because Jesus had shown Himself to be so different from other teachers of God's way of life, His disciples were understandably confused about how they should pray. When they ask Him to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1), Jesus responds with what has often been called—mistakenly—"the Lord's Prayer" (see Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4; the real "Lord's Prayer" appears in John 17). He does not intend us to recite this prayer mindlessly but offers an outline for our own far longer, deeper, and more personal prayers to the Father in heaven.

1. Does Jesus set an example of frequent prayer? Luke 5:16; Mark 1:35.

Comment: The apostle John provides a primary principle of living for those who follow Christ: "He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (I John 2:6). In terms of prayer, our Savior spoke to His Father often. He would often send His disciples away or go on His own into the wilderness to find a private place to pray. It seems to have been a habit for Him to rise early, well before dawn, to pray. Before significant decisions, He would pray all night (Luke 6:12)!

He instructs His disciples to pray always (Luke 21:36), that is, to make it a consistent and regular part of our worship of God. Throughout His long

conversation with the Twelve on His final Passover, knowing He would be separated from them later that night, He counsels them to ask the Father in His name for the things they need (John 14:13-14; 15:7, 16; 16:23-24, 26-27). Through prayer, they, too, had direct access to the Father, and He would respond to them in love as He had to Christ Himself. As Jesus says, “Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” (John 16:24).

2. What additional advice does Jesus give His disciples about prayer?
Matthew 6:5-8.

Comment: Jesus’ disciples had grown up in Judaism, which was dominated at the time by the Pharisees, pious laymen who observed and taught strict adherence to the law. However, as Jesus pointed out, the Pharisees put their traditions (their Oral Law, restrictions to keep them from sinning and becoming ritually impure) above the law of God. Their instruction on prayer, then, proved to be insincere, as they prayed publicly to receive the approbation of men rather than to honor God.

Thus, Jesus instructs His disciples to shun the example of these hypocrites. He teaches them to find a private place to pray, away from an audience, so that they could have genuine, one-on-one conversations with God. He also tells them to avoid going to the opposite extreme of using “vain repetitions,” rote prayers repeated endlessly. God is a real Person who desires a real relationship with those He calls. We should speak reverently and respectfully to Him, certainly, but we should not yammer at Him like an unhearing block of wood, stone, or metal, as the heathens treat their idols.

3. What broad principles appear in His model prayer? Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4.

Comment: Jesus’ simple introduction, “In this manner, therefore, pray,” indicates that He intends the prayer to guide His disciples in their everyday prayers. (In fact, the verb “pray” is present tense, imperative mood in Greek, suggesting habitual performance.) It is a kind of outline or model on which they can hang their own words as their circumstances warrant.

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Generally, the outline provides a primary focal point of prayer: the Father Himself. Praise and honor of God begins and ends the prayer, forcing us to acknowledge the Eternal God's holiness and power. We should never forget that the One listening to our words is the Almighty, Ever-living Sovereign of the universe and that we live and act by His grace.

After this, Jesus points to every Christian's goal: the Kingdom of God. It is God's goal, too, the height and culmination of His purpose for humanity. For millennia, the Father and Son have been working (John 5:17) to bring it to pass, first on earth during the Millennium and Great White Throne Judgment, then for eternity throughout the universe. It is God's will that we cooperate in making it happen, so we must ensure it is top of mind as we pray.

Christ places our personal needs in the middle of the prayer, covering daily needs, forgiveness, and help with trials and Satan's opposition. God realizes that we are still fleshly beings who need constant physical and spiritual maintenance and frequently fail to live up to His standards. We can take our needs to Him in prayer to receive the help we need, whether food for the table or a respite from the Devil's attacks.

Jesus never intended His model prayer to cover every situation or problem. For instance, He leaves out praying for the church or the healing of the sick. But it does give us our priorities: God Himself, His Kingdom, and doing His will. If we keep those things in mind, our prayers will grow in spiritual maturity, and our lives will better represent our Savior before the world.