

Lord Teach Us to Pray

By Al Felder

“And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.” (Luke 11:1)

Prayer is one of the greatest privileges, and most powerful means available to a child of God. In fact, prayer is the closest that a Christian can get to God while on this side of eternity. In Revelation 8:3-5, the Bible paints a beautiful picture of the prayers of God’s people being offered up to Him upon the golden altar which is before His throne. This was foreshadowed by the Law of Moses in the tabernacle. In the temple the golden altar stood right in front of the curtain that separated the holy place from the most holy place. (Exodus 30:1-6) The New Testament teaches us that the items in the tabernacle represented heavenly things. *“Who serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern showed to thee in the mount.”* (Hebrews 8:5) As we put all of these verses of scripture together, we understand that when a child of God prays his or her prayer comes before the very throne of God. What a humbling thought! When we pray, we are before the throne of Almighty God.

Although we have this great privilege, prayer is seriously misunderstood and neglected by many of God’s people. Man does not innately possess proper knowledge of prayer. This fact can be clearly seen by the disciples’ request that Jesus teach them to pray. We too must be taught how to properly pray unto God. This knowledge can come from none other place than God’s word.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus gives a more full set of instructions regarding prayer. (Matthew 6:5-13) That being the case, we are going to look at each verse in order to get a full understanding of Jesus’ instructions. Before we do, however, let’s look at the various words translated as prayer.

There are several Hebrew and Greek words that are translated as prayer. If you were to take the collective meaning of these words you would come up with the following definition of prayer: a desire, an asking of God due to lack, to call to one’s aid, supplication, and intercession. One of the Hebrew words for prayer has a reciprocal meaning between subject and object. Vine explains this meaning in his dictionary. *“Also, since the verb form can have a reciprocal meaning between subject and object, it may emphasize the fact that prayer is basically communication, which always has to be two-way in order to be real.”*¹ Prayer, therefore, is the way that God allows us to communicate with Him.

¹ Vine, W. E. 1996. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Nashville, TN : Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996. pp. 185, 186.

The first thing that Jesus teaches us about prayer is that it must be genuine.

“⁵And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. ⁶But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. ⁷But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. ⁸Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.” (Matthew 6:5-8)

Our prayer should not be for show. The Pharisees would make a big spectacle of themselves when they prayed. Others would look at them and think how pious they were for their constant praying, and that’s exactly what they wanted according to Jesus. Their prayers had no more value to them than the praise they received from men. When we pray to God, it should not be for the purpose of drawing attention to ourselves.

Our prayers must not consist of vain repetitions. It is easy for us to fall into a routine where we say the same exact prayer over and over again. Could you imagine a married couple having the exact same conversation, word for word, every day? There would be no real communication in that relationship, only vain repetition. As a result, the relationship would deteriorate over time. The same is true regarding our prayers to God. Our prayers must be genuine communication, not some ritualistic repetition that has no real meaning.

Second, our prayers must be addressed to the Father. *“After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.”* (Matthew 6:9) Many people today will address their prayer to whomever they chose. People will pray to Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Mary, one of the Apostles, or to some other saint. These practices, however, are foreign to the scriptures.

We must have authority for the things that we do. *“And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.”* (Colossians 3:17) To do something in a person’s name means to do it by their authority. Therefore, when we pray, we must address our prayers to the Father as we are instructed to do in the Bible. There is absolutely no command, example, or necessary inference in the Bible that would authorize prayer to be addressed to anyone but the Father.

In fact, the Bible very clearly points out the role of each member of the Godhead when it comes to prayer. Jesus serves the role of an advocate. *“My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”* (1 John 2:1) In other words, Jesus is the one who pleads our case to the Father.

“For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 2:5) He is the only one who serves this role.

It is also important to point out that it is only through Jesus that we may approach the Father in prayer. *“Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus.”* (Hebrews 10:19) In our opening we pointed out how the things pertaining to the tabernacle represented heavenly things. Under the Law of Moses incense was offered upon the golden altar located in front of the curtain that separated the holy place from the most holy place.

In the next verse we learn that the curtain represented the flesh of Christ. *“By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh.”* (Hebrews 10:20) The veil in the temple was torn at the time of Jesus’ death. Now, it is through Him that we approach the Father in prayer.

These passages point out the greatest error concerning prayer that people believe today. That error is that a person who is lost can pray to God and ask for salvation. *“Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth.”* (John 9:31) There is no avenue of prayer to God for someone who is outside of Christ. Prayer is a privilege granted to a Christian, a person who has obeyed the Gospel and is in Christ. *“For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”* (Galatians 3:27) It is only in Christ that we can pray to God, and the only way to get in Christ is to obey the Gospel.

The Bible also tells us that the Holy Spirit makes intercessions for us. *“Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.”* (Romans 8:26) This is a great comfort. We intercede for one another when we pray for each other as the Bible commands, and the Spirit does so as well. Yes, each member of the Godhead has a role in prayer.

Third, our prayers are to be according to God’s will. *“Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.”* (Matthew 6:10) The most obvious implication of this statement is that our prayers must be according to the instructions that God has given us. I cannot invent my own method of prayer, or do things in a way that suits me. I must follow the instructions that God has given in his word.

Praying according to God’s will also involves the content of our prayers. Jesus is a perfect example of this. *“Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.”* (Luke 22:42) There is not a more touching scene in all the Bible than the one in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed unto the Father as He agonized over His coming death on the cross. It is clear that a part of Him wanted to avoid this horrible death, but in the end He prayed for the Father’s will to be done.

We too must make sure that our prayers are in harmony with the Father's will. The only way that we can accomplish this task is by understanding the will of God. In order to do that, we must study His word. We must pray for things that are good, just, and godly. A person cannot pray for something that is contrary to God's word and expect God to grant that petition.

Also, we must realize that "no" is an answer. Most of us have probably lived long enough to realize that some of our requests, if granted, would have been damaging spiritually speaking. God knows what is best for us and there are times He may say no. Rest assured, when God says no to our prayers it is for our best. In such instances, we must have the same attitude that Christ displayed when He prayed, "not my will, but thine be done."

Before we move on, a quick point needs to be made about Jesus' prayer for the coming of the kingdom. This part of the prayer is time dated. Prior to the death of Jesus the kingdom had not come. The establishment of the kingdom occurred after the death of Christ. "*Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son.*" (Colossians 1:13) Prior to the death of Christ the kingdom is always referred to as something that is coming. After the resurrection of Christ, however, the kingdom is spoken of as being in existence. We know this kingdom as the Church established on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

Fourth, we are to pray for our daily needs. "*Give us this day our daily bread.*" (Matthew 6:11) Later in this setting Jesus taught that God will supply the necessary matters of life if we serve Him. "*But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.*" (Matthew 6:33) This goes back to our earlier discussion of praying according to God's will. It is God's will that the needs of His people be met. We must learn to distinguish between what we need and what we want. Many times people ask God for things that they want, and use passages such as this to convince themselves that God will give it to them. God is not a genie who will grant us our every wish.

In these instructions we also find the importance of taking life one day at a time. "*Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.*" (Matthew 6:34) It is amazing the problems we create for ourselves when we constantly regret the past or dread the future. Don't allow the past to continue to defeat you, and don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today. God wants your best now. Today, serve God the best that you can.

Fifth, we are to pray for forgiveness. "*And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*" (Matthew 6:12) In order to fully understand this point, we must recall our earlier discussion about praying to the Father through Christ. The lost person outside of Christ does not pray to God and ask for forgiveness. They must obey the Gospel of Christ in order to be forgiven of their sins.

Once a person is in Christ, a different procedure is in place.

“⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his son cleanseth us from all sin. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:7-9)

A member of the body of Christ is to pray to God through Jesus once he or she has sinned. As we have already pointed out, Jesus acts as their advocate pleading their case before the Father. His blood provides a continual cleansing for those who are in Him, and who repent and confess their faults to God.

Jesus also informs us that our forgiveness is conditioned upon our willingness to forgive others. *“¹⁴For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you: ¹⁵But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”* (Matthew 6:14, 15) Of all the commands God gives His people, I believe we struggle with the ones regarding forgiveness the most. It is hard to forgive sometimes. You see, when I forgive a person I am giving up my ability to hold it over that person’s head and cause them to suffer. I’m denying the flesh that lusts after such things. That’s a struggle, but it’s a struggle I must win if I want to be forgiven by God.

Finally, we should pray for deliverance from temptation. *“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.”* (Matthew 6:13) This is similar to what Paul told the Corinthians. *“There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”* (1 Corinthians 10:13) God makes a way of escape for us when we are tempted. We should pray that we will realize that way, and use it when the time is right.

In conclusion, prayer is to our benefit. It deepens our relationship with God. Through prayer we practice reverence for God, honor His will, and show our dependence on Him. It is a time in which we can reflect upon our life, and see the direction that it is heading. It is a process through which we grow spiritually.