

## How to Pray

[Michael Jr. – Pray with Your Neighbor]

Any of you feel that way sometimes? Well, this is your day! Actually, this is your next five weeks because we are starting our Fall Focus Series called The Master's Class. And no, I am not the prayer master and I will not be teaching the master's class. Instead, we will be learning from the real master. I promise we will not make you pray with your neighbor here in worship service.

No, we will be learning about prayer from the best to ever do it. In Luke, chapter 11, we have the account of the disciples waiting around for Jesus to finish praying. They must have been interested or impressed with his prayer because when he finished one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples." Now, in Luke we have a shortened version of what he taught—in Matthew, though we have the longer version that we use when we pray what we call "The Lord's Prayer" together.

I know we read it earlier, but just to get some practice, let's go ahead and recite the Lord's Prayer together. It will be up on the screen.

"Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
<sup>10</sup> your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
<sup>11</sup> Give us today our daily bread.  
<sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

<sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from the evil one.'  
and we always add at the end "For yours is the Kingdom and the Power and  
the Glory forever. Amen"

Notice that the ending of the prayer isn't in Matthew, but it was added by the early church in the Didache—the worship guide used by the early church. Most people couldn't read at the time, so they said it as a prayer and added the benediction to the end to wrap things up. In any case, we are going to use the Lord's Prayer as the model for the kinds of things we should pray about—since this is how Jesus told us we should pray. Over the next few weeks, we'll also pull in some other prayers we see in the Bible as examples.

Now, how we pray is always determined by what we believe prayer is. In Eastern Religions God is an impersonal force, so prayer is often used as a sort of good-luck charm that controls fate. But many Christians pray like this, too. When things are going badly for them, they'll have a hunch it's because they haven't been praying enough. So, they start praying more and expect God will be happy with them.

For others, prayer is mostly about asking God for to make their lives better—like a spiritual vending machine. You put in your prayers and receive what you want in return. A number of years ago, a book came out called *The Prayer of Jabez* and it was a hit, not just among Christians, but I have a friend who said it was being passed around his office by people who didn't even claim to be devout Christians.

Now the book was about a passage from the Old Testament book of 1 Chronicles and it encouraged people to pray the prayer of Jabez. Here's the prayer, **"Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain."** **"And,"** it says, **"God granted his request."**

The passage says that Jabez was honorable and God answered his prayer, but people who had no desire or intent to serve God were using prayer as a magic wand. Of course, it didn't work for them, so they moved on to the next thing.

Here's how a former member of the British Parliament described his life with God, *"I spoke to him politely, visited his premises intermittently, occasionally asked him for a small favor or overdraft to get myself out of difficulty, thanked him condescendingly for his assistance, kept up the appearance of being one of his reasonably reliable customers, and maintained superficial contact with him on the grounds that one of these days he might come in useful."* This is how many people treat prayer.

Others view prayer as a good *psychological technique* to bring health and inner peace. Now, it's well documented that there are health benefits to prayer, which leads to articles like the one in the Huffington Post from 2012 that said, *"It doesn't matter if you pray for yourself or for others, pray to heal an illness or for peace in the world, or simply sit in silence and quiet the mind — the effects appear to be the same. A wide variety of spiritual practices have been shown to help alleviate the stress levels, which are one of the major risk factors for disease. They also are powerful ways to maintain a positive outlook*

*and successfully weather the trials which come to all of us in life.*" I'm sure there are health benefits to prayer, but that's also not what prayer is.

And for some, prayer is only a *last resort*. When they've done everything they can to get themselves out of trouble, they'll pray and make a deal with God. None of these is really what we're talking about when we talk about prayer. So, what IS prayer, then?

Maybe you've noticed that there's a huge, fairly new building in downtown Minneapolis. [US Bank Stadium pic] It looks a bit like a gigantic ship. Shortly after it was built, I wanted to see how big it really is. So, I drove my motorcycle downtown, parked right across the street and marveled at it a while.

It seats 66,000 people on gameday and expandable to hold 73,000 people—that's more than the entire population of the city of Maple Grove. At 1.75 million square feet, it's twice as big as the old Metrodome. Its highest point is 270 feet from the ground and took 3,500,000 worker hours to build.

When I was sitting right next to it, I thought, "Wow! It's so amazing what people can do. Engineers, manufacturers, high-steel workers, huge machines...It's really amazing what people can accomplish. This is my view of the world.

A few months later, I got in an airplane on my way to Sierra Leone. As we took off, I watched out the window and saw downtown—the stadium and all the other buildings. I saw the sprawling city—all of it—get smaller and smaller as we ascended to 20, 25, 30,000 feet. As the monstrous stadium I stared at in awe at, slowly became a speck on

the landscape, my eyes adjusted to the patchwork of farmland and the curve of the horizon and I realized that the stadium didn't seem so impressive anymore.

Then my mind turned to the fact that this is just what my eyes can see. Look out into space at night and things take on a different perspective. [Universe pic] I was trying to find some way to talk about or visualize the size of the universe, but there's just no way to do it justice. They say the universe is 28-billion light years in diameter. You know what that means, right? It takes light 28 billion years to get all the way across it. Let that sink in for a moment! This is God's view of the world. *As I grow in prayer, it becomes less about me trying to get God to see things from my perspective and more about my willingness to consider things from his perspective.*

Here's another way to look at it. Isaiah chapter 40 was written to the Jews who had been conquered and taken into Exile in Babylon. God allowed them to be taken into exile because of their unfaithfulness, but God knew the people would be tempted to believe that they were taken because the Babylonian gods defeated their God. So, at the beginning of chapter 40, he tells them he would bring them back to Jerusalem. In the second half of the chapter, he reminds them that he is *able* to bring them back.

Here's what he writes, <sup>25</sup>**"To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?"** says the Holy One. <sup>26</sup>**Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. <sup>27</sup>Why do**

**you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God”?**

**<sup>28</sup>Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.”**

But even though God was giving them some perspective, the point of this passage in is to remind them that God sees them and knows them. Isaiah continues, **<sup>30</sup>Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; <sup>31</sup>but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”**

Rather than thinking of prayer being the ritual I perform to get God to help me accomplish what I want, *prayer reorients me to see my smallness and acknowledge my utter dependence on God and it reminds me that God sees me and cares about me.*

That kind of prayer changes us. Richard Foster writes, *“To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives.”*

The Bible describes God as a heavenly father who *knows* what’s best and *wants* the best for his children. That doesn’t mean he will always give us what we want. *It’s critical for us to know the God we’re praying to* because it determines how we pray.

If we think of God as the great Santa in the sky, our prayers will largely be a Christmas list. If we think of God solely as an angry judge, we’ll be obsessed with doing

the right religious stuff so he won't smite us. But if we see him as he is—as our gracious father (who also happens to be the creator of the universe), not only will we want to please him, but we'll feel we can approach him with reverent confidence.

Over the next few weeks, we'll talk about *what* Jesus told us to pray for, but today, I want to talk about *how* to pray, because I know many of you don't even know how to get started. So, here are a few suggestions. Much of this will seem pretty elementary to some of you, but if you're not in the habit of regular prayer, here's how to get started.

First, *choose a good time and place*. In the passage we read today, Jesus sets the stage for His prayer. In verses 5-6, he says this, **“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”**

Now, I've heard people say, “Well, I pray continually like the Apostle Paul told us to, so I don't need to set aside any time to do it.” Well, I'm pretty skeptical of that. Why? Because the gospels tell us that Jesus needed regular times of prayer. Mark 1:35, **“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.”** Mark 6:46, **“After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.”** When Jesus knew his arrest and crucifixion were coming, he went to the garden of Gethsemane and asked the disciples to wait while he prayed.

Think about it. Jesus—God incarnate—needed intentional time alone with his father. So, why do we think we can really know God and be able to follow him if we don't have that. So, like Jesus, find a private place where you can have some time alone.

Now, people have two common excuses today. The first is, "I'm too busy. I can't find enough time in my day to pray." Let me just say, I *doubt* that. For 99.99% of us, the reason we don't have time to pray is because we don't *make* time to pray, we don't make it a priority. But if you really believe you need prayer, then you will make time for it.

The second excuse people make today is, "These kids!" Some of you are in a season of life where kids not only take up a lot of your schedule, but it's harder than calculus to try to find some peace and quiet. Let me just say, if it's a priority for you, you can do it.

John Wesley's mom had 10 children that made it through infancy. And yet, she was a faithful pray-er. This was her quiet place...she sat in a chair and pulled her apron over her head. And when she did, the kids were not to bother her because they knew that was mom's time talking with God. As parents, the most effective way to teach our kids is to model what we want them to learn. They learn most everything from us. So, you give them a huge advantage if prayer becomes a part of their life when they're young.

Make a regular time and place where you can be alone and pray. It should be a place that's quiet, maybe even comfortable—maybe even a place where you can kneel, because posture can be very helpful for your concentration.



That brings us to the second help. *Do whatever helps you focus.* I want to see some hands—how many of you ever sit down to pray and have a hard time concentrating? Don't be shy. You're not alone. We live in a distracted age—that's the norm for people today. So, we have to find ways to deal with distractions. You can experiment for yourself, but there are some good ways to do this.

One is to *start with some worship music.* Most people won't be able to pray with music going on, but starting by playing a worship song or two can help focus your mind.

Second, *you can walk while you pray.* This is one of my preferred ways. For some of us, sitting still is like torture and we have to spend more mental energy trying to stay still. So, if you go outside, do a prayer walk. If you can't, pace in your room.

Third, *pray out loud.* I know this could make you self-conscious, but this is probably the best way to avoid distraction. Talk to God like you would talk to a friend. *"Lord, thanks for creating today and thank you that even though you created the universe, you still know me and care about me. You know I've been really worried about the kids this week, so help me to trust in you..."* If you're in a solitary place, then you don't have to worry about anyone thinking you're crazy. And even if someone does hear you, who cares? You're talking to your father in heaven.

Fourth, *write your prayers.* Get yourself a journal. Then you can write them like a letter. You can just write down a word or name or sentence and use that to keep you focused on what you're praying about. The other advantage of writing while you're

praying is that you can go back through the previous days and continue pray for those requests or go back and see answers to your prayers.

Finally, *work to develop an undistracted life*. This isn't something that will happen immediately, so it's not a short-term solution, but I believe it's something our society needs. Richard Foster, in his book *A Celebration of Discipline* writes this, "*Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.*" Our world doesn't produce deep people.

It produces people who value speed, life-hacks, youth, convenience and instant-gratification. This is not a life that's conducive to prayer, because it trains our brains to crave stimulation and change. So, a life of prayer is counter-cultural.

If you're on social media a lot or scroll through the internet to occupy your brain, it will take a while for prayer to seem natural to. It will be really hard, but a life of continual social media use and a life of deep, intimate prayer are mutually exclusive. If you want to have a distracted mind, continue to preoccupy yourself with things that don't matter, but if you want a life characterized by the peace of God, prayer has to become a priority. These are some short-term and long-term strategies to help you focus on prayer.

Finally, in prayer, we should *pay more attention to our heart than our mouth*. One of the big differences between Christian prayer and pagan prayer is that pagan prayer tended to try to invoke magic—not like David Blaine, but the magic arts. They believed

that if you said the magic words, you could speak something into existence. So, the focus was on saying the right words or saying them the right number of times.

But, we don't believe in magic, we believe in a personal God, so that changes how we pray. Here's what Jesus says, **"<sup>7</sup>And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup>Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."**

Here's his point. Christians do not have magic words. Your prayers won't be more effective if you use "thy" instead of "your" or because you can recite all the Old Testament names for God. It might make you feel better, but it doesn't much matter to God. In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul even says that sometimes we'll be at a loss about what to pray for. But he writes, **"<sup>26</sup>...the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. <sup>27</sup>And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God."**

Instead, what matters is your heart. In fact, the attitude of your heart can hinder your prayers. For instance, if you want God to forgive you, then you need to be willing to forgive others. Verse 14, **"<sup>14</sup>If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."** In Matthew 5, Jesus says if you're offering a gift at the altar and you remember you're not reconciled with someone, go do that first, then go

offer your gift to God. The Psalmist writes this, **“<sup>18</sup>If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.”** James says sometimes our prayers are unanswered, **“You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.”** (James 4:3) Here’s what Proverbs says, **“Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, Will also cry himself and not be heard.”** (Proverbs 21:13)

Note that none of them say that God won’t listen because you don’t use the magic words. You don’t have to be perfect, but the *orientation* of your heart has to be right. If you’re only interested in getting what you want out of God, he *will not* be used that way. But God will even hear people who are far from him if they want to align themselves with his heart. Psalm 51:17 says, **“<sup>17</sup>The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God.”** Approach him with a sincere heart, and he will listen. You might not always get what you want, but he will give you what you need.

If you have your book—on page 2, we’ve listed some goals for this Focus Season. Some of them are individual—we want each of you to understand prayer and learn to pray effectively. And some of them are for us as a church—we want to be a church that is empowered by prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit. So, not only do we want you to learn to pray individually, but to learn to pray together.

So, we have opportunities for you to practice and even immerse yourself in prayer over the next five weeks. Of course, be here on Sundays where we’ll talk about it, but get your Focus Book and follow along in the devotionals. There’s a lot of repetition, and

that's intentional. Make sure you set aside a time daily for prayer. Over the course of the next few weeks, you'll learn more about the content of prayer.

In your small groups, make sure you spend plenty of time, not just talking about prayer, but praying together. Also, on Sunday mornings, we want to invite you to come at 9 am—before service—to pray. Holly Almhjeld will be leading that time and guiding you through it. So, we'd love to have as many of you there as we can.

The point is not just that you'd become more skilled in praying for praying's sake. But that through prayer, you'll begin to see things from God's perspective and that you'll get to know God more personally and intimately. Maybe in a way you never have before. That's our prayer.