

Matthew 6:5-13 New Living Translation (NLT)

<sup>5</sup> “When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. <sup>6</sup> But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

<sup>7</sup> “When you pray, don’t babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. <sup>8</sup> Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! <sup>9</sup> Pray like this:

Our Father in heaven,  
may your name be kept holy.  
<sup>10</sup> May your Kingdom come soon.  
May your will be done on earth,  
as it is in heaven.  
<sup>11</sup> Give us today the food we need,<sup>[a]</sup>  
<sup>12</sup> and forgive us our sins,  
as we have forgiven those who sin against us.  
<sup>13</sup> And don’t let us yield to temptation,<sup>[b]</sup>  
but rescue us from the evil one.<sup>[c]</sup>

## INTRODUCTION:

- When a doctoral student at Princeton asked, “What is there left in the word for original dissertation research?” Albert Einstein replied, “Find out about prayer. Somebody must find out about prayer.” Prayer is still somewhat of a mystery.
- Today I want to talk about personal prayer, not prayer as a ministry gifting. I think it is important to state up front that some people possess a God-given gift as a ministry of prayer. It is critical that we don’t observe these “intercessors” and get intimidated by them.
- They are great prayer warriors. It would be like us looking at a pastoral counsellor, or a preacher, or a person with the gift of hospitality, or property maintenance and thinking we have to do the same as them. If we do that we will get intimidated, our self-esteem will suffer, and we will no doubt fail in our attempts to do what they do.
- Personal prayer is not so much about “doing” (i.e., what we do for God) as it is about “being” (i.e., who we are in relation to God)... it is about nurturing our relationship with God
- So today is going to be a very practical exploration of what it is to pray as an ordinary, everyday Christian, without comparing ourselves with others, or having to follow a well-meaning procedural list!!
- **Prayer is primarily about developing and deepening a relationship with God as “Our Father”**
- Let’s first reflect upon the text that was read to us by Ellen today and then I want to help us understand ourselves a bit more; our personalities, our preferences; the way we most naturally function in this world

## BACKGROUND CONTEXT:

- This text comes as a part of the Sermon on the Mount, a group of teachings by Jesus, collected in chapters 5-7 of Matthew’s gospel. There are some parallels in Luke Chapter 6, and the Lord’s Prayer is also found in Luke Chapter 11, in a different context, as the disciples find Jesus praying and ask if he will teach them.
- Jesus introduces this section by telling us not to practice our acts of piety so others will be impressed. Similarly, our prayers are not to be a whole bunch of empty, meaningless words.

<sup>7</sup> When you pray, don’t talk on and on as people do who don’t know God. They think God likes to hear long prayers.

<sup>8</sup> Don’t be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask.

<sup>9</sup> You should pray like this:...

- Jesus says, “When you pray,” which assumes that prayer is already part of a life connected to God.
- “God your father knows what you need,” he says. “He knows it before you ask, so just tell it as it is.”
- Prayer trusts the nearness and readiness of God. That is worth remembering... He’s only a prayer away!
- **C.S. Lewis** says, “I pray because I can’t help myself. I pray because I’m helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn’t change God. It changes me.”

1. Thomas Merton says something similar: "We do not want to be beginners [at prayer]. / But let us be convinced of the fact / that we will never be anything / but beginners, all our life!"
  2. "For most of us the prayer in Gethsemane is the only model. Removing mountains can wait."
    - meaning, we are more likely going to pray for our immediate needs, and the Christ prayer, ... "help me through this season of suffering but nevertheless, not my will but yours be done!" than a miraculous faith prayer or what we might call a warfare prayer against the forces of evil.
  3. "We must lay before him what is in us; not what ought to be in us." - that is, let's be transparent!
  4. F.B. Meyer says, "The greatest tragedy in life is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer"
- Personal prayer with God should mirror any other more intimate human relationship: Sometimes our conversations are deep & meaningful; at other times, shallow & trivial; regular communication is the key
  - Jesus then tells us how to pray by giving us an example. His lesson has become one of the most famous prayers in the world; what we now call, "The Lord's Prayer" or "The Kingdom Prayer".
  - The structure of the Lord's Prayer is worth noting, not as a vacuous formula, but as a helpful model:
    1. We should begin our prayers with **Praise for the Person of God**  
*Our Father in heaven,* = "our Father" not "my Father" shows both "community" & "intimacy"  
*help us to honor your name (keep it holy).* = we offer praise, worship, reverence, adoration to Abba
    2. **Then we should pray that God's Primary Purpose for this world will be established:**  
<sup>10</sup> *Come and set up your kingdom,*  
*so that everyone on earth will obey you,*  
*as you are obeyed in heaven.* = *The ultimate purpose of God is that his Kingdom rule will be established on the earth (the "already, not yet")*
      - Matthew knows that the world is not as it should be, that unjust, manipulative, dominating power holds the throne, and that there is a real need (not just a pious inclination) to ask that God's gracious dominion come and that God's just will actually be done on earth.
      - Someone has called this type of prayer, "Rebelling against the status-quo"... the "upside-down" Kingdom has already come upon the earth in the Incarnate Christ. Now we must pray that it comes fully, when the lion will lie down with the lamb; injustice of every kind will be vanquished; peace will reign over conflict; heaven will come to earth and every tear will be wiped away!
      - But perhaps we are now moving to "intercessory prayer" that goes beyond mere communication
    3. **Finally, bring our Petitions to Our Father:**  
<sup>11</sup> *Give us our food for today.* = ask that our daily needs (not wants) be supplied  
<sup>12</sup> *Forgive us for doing wrong, as we forgive others.* = be reconciled with others & them with us  
<sup>13</sup> *Keep us from being tempted and protect us from evil.* = protection from temptation & evil
      - These are just helpful categories. Praying for the concerns that occupy our minds is important
      - I used to pray like presenting a big "shopping list" every morning, and I'm not sure how God survived running the world when I stopped giving Him his early morning "to do list" ☺
      - God knows our concerns, but praying about them brings them to the surface so that we can lay them down at our Father's feet and let go of them. If we don't "let go & let God" we are likely to just worry about those things.
      - How can we be present enough to listen to God if we are consumed with anxiety, or worry, or bitterness or temptation?
      - As Erma Bombeck says: "Worry is like a rocking chair: it gives you something to do but never gets you anywhere."
- But the main theme for today is not what we say to God but how we might listen to God in prayer and position ourselves to hear from Him
  - That leads me to ask you: "How has God created you as a unique human being?"
  - I want you to now use your imaginations a bit to perhaps clarify who you really are and how best you might connect with God in prayer... you may even want to pause the audio to get a pen & paper:  
 So here are a series of questions about yourself...
    1. If you were to describe yourself as an animal, what animal would you be and why?

2. Are you better at the arts (reading, writing, drawing, painting, craft) or the sciences (maths, chemistry, physics, biology, etc.)?
  3. Are you a “big picture” person who likes to spawn new ventures or a “details person” who likes to maintain & organize things?
  4. Would you describe yourself as primarily “task oriented” or “people oriented”?
  5. Do you like being inside or outside?
  6. Do you like talking or listening; doing or thinking; noise (music) or silence; games or puzzles?
  7. Do you regenerate by being with people or by being alone?
- Chester Michael & Marie Norrisey have written a book called “Prayer & Temperament” where they outline the four temperaments based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, as a way of praying.
  - I’m not going to identify the Myers-Briggs technical terms but just the four broad categories, and I hope you can identify with at least one as your preferred way of connecting relationally with God...
    1. **Meditation:** Maybe engaging in creative exercises involving imagery & journaling. For example, address a Scripture passage to yourself. “Come to me, John/Jan, and I will give you rest”. Or resting in a quiet place, & in the silence (or soothing music) allow your thoughts to centre on God
    2. **Investigation:** Ask questions of Scripture, or your circumstances, or a chosen topic: Who, what, when, where, why & how? You may like to make a list!! Then apply it to your life, by asking what area of my life will this help me with?
    3. **Imagination:** Use your 5 senses to see, hear, smell, touch, taste. Read a story in Scripture as if you are actually in the scene experiencing all those senses. Stare at a painting, a photo, a piece of clothing, food that holds meaning for you and utilize your 5 senses to “hear/sense” God’s voice
    4. **Activation:** Fishing, hiking, playing sport (golf), bike riding, jogging, swimming, walking, gardening, cooking, wood or metal working, cleaning, washing dishes, etc. Allow your mind to find its own “voice” as you perform any of these activities and then direct that “voice” toward God in prayer & listen for His response.
  - In summary, know how you are created; how you are wired. Also reflect on how you relate to people and you will surely discover how best to relate to God, our Father, in prayer. You are likely to utilize a mixture of the above options. There is no strict ritual you need to follow. Be yourself, be open & transparent; God knows you & He is ever-present with you.
  - I want to finish with his poem by **John Newton**, called: *These Inward Trials...*

I asked the Lord, that I might grow  
In faith, and love, and every grace;  
Might more of His salvation know,  
And seek more earnestly His face.

T’was He who taught me thus to pray  
and He I trust has answered prayer,  
but it has been in such a way  
it almost drove me to despair.

I hoped that in some favored hour  
At once He’d answer my request,  
and by His love’s constraining power  
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel  
the hidden evils of my heart;  
And let the angry powers of hell  
Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with His own hand He seemed  
Intent to aggravate my woe;  
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,  
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

‘Lord, why is this?’ I trembling cried,  
‘Wilt thou pursue Thy worm to death?’  
‘This in this way,’ the Lord replied,  
‘I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I employ  
From self and pride to set thee free;  
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,  
That thou mayst seek thy all in Me.’

AMEN.