

How to Pray

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Date: 17 May 2020

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[0 : 00] No matter where you are in the world right now, everyone is dealing with the coronavirus to a greater or lesser degree. As humans, it's obvious that we are weak and we're not really in control of our lives, because an invisible virus has essentially paralysed the whole world, and it is a matter of life and death.

And that's why there's been a renewed interest in religion across the world. A recent article in the Guardian newspaper had the title, British Public Turn to Prayer as 1 in 4 Tune into Religious Services.

It reports on a survey where a quarter of adults in the UK have watched or listened to a religious service since the coronavirus lockdown began. And it also reports how 1 in 20 have started praying during the crisis.

People want to pray all of a sudden, and there's even been a surge in Googling the word prayer. This was discovered through some research by Jeanette Sinding Benson of the University of Copenhagen.

Benson is the Associate Professor in Economics and the Director of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics and Culture. And she published a paper last month called, In Crisis We Pray, Religiosity and the COVID-19 Pandemic.

[1 : 24] Her thesis is basically that in times of crisis, humans turn to religion for comfort and explanation. And that's exactly what we're seeing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

And so she points out that Google searches on prayer skyrocketed during the month of March 2020, when COVID-19 went global. Her research looked at daily data on Google searches for 95 different countries, and it demonstrated how COVID-19 has increased Google searches for prayer to the highest level ever recorded.

Benson argues that the rise is due to the intensified demand for religion. She says that we pray to cope with adversity.

And it's fascinating research. But we've probably all been conscious of this renewed desire to pray. Whether it's a sense of our own need for help, or the needs of our family, friends, neighbours and colleagues, I've certainly discovered that far more people are asking for prayer.

Because crying out to God in the traumatic experiences of life seems to be instinctive. It's something we want to do. And so the question is, how do we pray?

[2 : 46] Because it's one thing, Googling prayer, but how do we do it? And more importantly, who do we pray to? Jesus gives us what's known as the Lord's Prayer.

It's right in the heart of his Sermon on the Mount, where he's teaching us how to live. And so knowing how to pray is crucial in knowing how to live.

But what if you wouldn't say that you believe in God, or just aren't sure what you believe? Well, the Lord's Prayer is a massive help to all of us.

Because Jesus doesn't just teach us how to pray. He helps us know and understand the God we pray to. What he's like and what his priorities are.

So if you're wondering about prayer, but don't know how or need help, then the Lord's Prayer is the model of true prayer for everyone.

[3 : 41] And that's why we're starting a new series on the Lord's Prayer. And so today we are looking at the when, the who, and the how of prayer in Matthew chapter 6, verse 5 to 9.

So the when, when you pray. The who, who you pray to. And the how, how you pray. First of all, when you pray. Jesus begins to teach on prayer by saying, and when you pray.

He's assuming that all his followers will pray. And so he repeats it, but when you pray. And then he repeats it again, and when you pray.

So prayer is vital if we're going to follow Jesus and relate to the God who made us. It's as vital as breathing is for living. Because you can't know God without prayer.

How can you have a relationship with someone if you don't communicate with them? And prayer is essentially talking to God. And so what Jesus does, first of all, is he highlights the dangers when it comes to praying.

[4 : 47] And the first danger is hypocrisy. And so when we pray, we should keep it sincere. Jesus says, 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.

Jesus is talking about the religious people of his day who were hypocrites. Hypocrites because they loved to show off when they prayed. They wanted to be seen so they could look good and be well thought of by others.

And so they put on this pretentious act in the synagogue and on the street. And you've probably heard of playing to the crowd. Well, Jesus is talking about praying to the crowd.

Obviously, Jesus wasn't condemning public prayer. He's not saying never pray in front of other people. But Jesus is challenging the hypocrisy of a kind of prayer that's done to be seen.

[5 : 47] Where it's intended for people rather than God. And so it's a performance done for effect rather than sincere prayer to God.

And that's why Jesus goes on to describe the right approach to prayer. He says, But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your father who is unseen.

And your father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. Jesus is telling us how we should relate to God. In our room, on our own, with the door closed, praying in secret.

Now, obviously, Jesus isn't saying prayer must always be an isolated activity. He's not suggesting all prayer meetings should be cancelled. No, the physical location isn't the issue.

The real issue is the spiritual condition of our hearts. Because the best gauge of what we're really like isn't when others are around.

[6 : 48] But it's when we're on our own with God. That's a far better indication of our true self. It's not how erudite or pious we sound in front of other people.

But how we relate to God in secret. Because private prayer is something that nobody sees. People can see us going to church. People can see us caring for others.

People see the quality of our work. People see us appreciating others or thanking others. Like clapping for the NHS. But nobody sees the quality of our private prayer.

It's hidden from everyone. Because it's one thing we do when no one else is watching. And so we might give the impression that we're doing things for God. And yet we might just be doing them to be seen by others.

But Jesus says you can't do that with prayer. Because the only motive for spending time in private prayer is to talk to God. So Jesus helps us see whether we're a hypocrite or not.

[7 : 51] And so the first danger in prayer is hypocrisy. So when we pray we should keep it sincere. The second danger in prayer is babbling. And so when we pray we should keep it simple.

Listen to Jesus again. The word babbling in the original refers to the heaping up of empty phrases or using vain repetitions.

We might say prattling on and on and on. So Jesus is not saying that we shouldn't use set words or repeat our prayers. He's condemning the kind of repetition that thinks God can be manipulated through the sheer volume of our words.

Jesus says that's what the pagans do. They think they can pester their gods to give them what they want with all their empty words and their vain repetitions.

And so Jesus here is warning against a kind of prayer that's an unthinking, mechanical, disengaged heaping up of phrases. Instead Jesus urges a simple kind of prayer.

[9 : 08] So it's not the length of our prayers that makes them effective. Because Jesus says God knows what we need before we ask him. And so whether you're familiar with prayer or you're unsure about prayer.

Jesus doesn't want to complicate or confuse prayer for us. He keeps it simple. And so should we. So that's the when of prayer.

That's our first point. When you pray. Secondly, the who of prayer. Who you pray to. When Jesus teaches us how to pray, the primary thing that we need to know is who we're praying to.

Because it's the basis for all prayer. That's why the first thing Jesus tells us to say in the prayer is our father in heaven. Because that's who we're praying to.

We'll look more at this next week. But here Jesus says to his disciples that God is your father. He says it once. Verse 6. Pray to your father. He says it again in verse 6.

[10:10] Your father. And he says it a third time in verse 8. Your father knows what you need before you ask him. So prayer is important. Not simply because of what we pray.

But because of who we pray to. And so if we're going to understand prayer. We need to know the God we're praying to. So many of the problems with prayer come from a failure to understand the one that we have the privilege of praying to.

And so that's the first and basic lesson Jesus teaches us about prayer. We're able to pray to God as our father. That's why so many are confused about prayer.

What it is. Why it matters. What it achieves. How it's done. People are confused about prayer because they're confused about God. And so if you're not sure whether God exists or if he's all powerful or if he's personal or loving or good or knows the details of your life or cares about you or can forgive you when you've failed.

If you're not sure or confused then prayer will seem like a waste of time. And we'll never be convinced of the need for it if we don't know how to relate to the one who's the reason for it.

[11:31] And so while many might turn to meditation or to mindfulness, attempting prayer-like techniques, searching for a deep experience of the soul. It will only ever be a poor substitute for prayer.

Because Jesus is telling us we won't be helped by looking inwards, but by looking upwards to the one we can call our father in heaven.

Because he knows what we need before we ask him. And so the vacuum that many feel and try to fill with other things can only be filled with prayer to God.

That's why nothing can ever substitute prayer. Because through Jesus Christ, God enters into a relationship with us. We become his children and we can call him our father.

And it's a relationship that's based on grace. We can't enter into a relationship with God through anything that we do. We're only accepted by God because of what Jesus has done through his death for our sins.

[12:37] There's a famous photograph of President John F. Kennedy in the Oval Office of the White House. He's working at his desk and he's looking over some important documents.

And underneath the desk at his feet is his little boy, John F. Kennedy Jr. And he's playing away without a care in the world. Not many would manage to get that close to the President.

But his son could waltz in and out of the most important office in the world. Why? Because of his relationship with the President.

He called him Daddy. And he had a level of intimacy and access that wasn't possible for anyone else. Now, incredibly, Jesus invites us into his Father's presence.

And he gives us a status as children of God. And so the relationship Jesus has with his Father, he shares with us. In Jesus, the holy, unapproachable God becomes our open-armed Father.

[13:47] And so we have access to our Father at any time without needing to go through any special rituals before we can talk to him. And so the only way we'll be helped by prayer is by knowing who it is we're praying to.

So question, do you know God as your Father? Because Jesus is telling us and teaching us about prayer to remember who God is.

He is a Father who delights to hear and to help his children. So who do we pray to? We pray to the Almighty God who made the universe.

And Jesus commands us to call him our Father. So we've looked at the when of prayer. We've just considered the who of prayer. Next, Jesus goes on to the how of prayer.

So first of all, when you pray. Secondly, who you pray to. And now thirdly, how you pray. Jesus says, verse 9, This then is how you should pray.

[14:54] And we get the Lord's Prayer. It's a model of what genuine prayer is. And so we need to pray this prayer, as well as use it as a pattern for our own prayers.

And we'll look at each phrase in the coming weeks. Because what Jesus does is he gives us a masterclass in prayer. He teaches us how to pray in a profoundly simple and yet comprehensive way.

Profoundly simple because the Lord's Prayer is short and can be easily memorised. And yet comprehensive because it helps us better understand God and his ways in each of the phrases. We said earlier that Google searches for prayer have skyrocketed as a result of the coronavirus. And it's because people want to know how to pray.

And so while the desire to pray is natural, because that's how God's designed us or wired us, prayer doesn't always come naturally. And that's why we need Jesus, the expert, to tell us how. [15:58] And so while this is Jesus' prayer, it's not a prayer that he prayed or could pray. Why? Because Jesus didn't need to ask for forgiveness for his sins.

He didn't have any. But it's a prayer he gives to us. It's a prayer that we are to pray. And it's also a pattern to help us pray. In other words, Jesus identifies the substance of what should shape our prayers by giving us six simple and direct petitions.

The first three focus on God and his kingdom. Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And then the final three petitions focus on ourselves and our needs. Give us today our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. Because prayer should always be directed towards God and his kingdom, first of all, before it's directed towards ourselves and our needs.

[17:12] But this isn't just a personal prayer. It's a family prayer. It's for all God's children. That's why we pray our Father. We never say I or me over and over again.

And the prayer Jesus teaches us to say our and us. So this is how Jesus teaches us to pray. It's simple enough for children to pray, but it's substantial because of the rich truth about God we discover in every phrase.

It's a prayer for every situation and circumstance. And it's a prayer that God delights to hear and to answer. It's what to pray when we're feeling weak or in desperate need.

But it's also what we need to remember when we're well. It is a vital lifeline. But you'll know this if you call God your Father in heaven.

You'll know it's a lifeline. You'll know you need it. Because while everyone can say this prayer, it's only possible for those who know God to mean it.

[18:17] Only Christian believers will want God to be honoured by all and want his kingdom to rule over all and want his will to be obeyed by all.

And only Christian believers will trust God to provide all their daily needs and want God to pardon all their sins and want him to protect them from all temptation and evil.

The prayer is saying that the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever belong to God and to God alone. No one else. And so can you pray that and mean it?

If not, have you really understood what Jesus tells us to say? Someone has said the Lord's Prayer, properly understood, is meant to be offensive.

It's like the national anthem being played in an enemy country. Now, a few years back, an advert featuring the Lord's Prayer was banned from cinemas in the UK.

[19:18] It was a Church of England advert, but it was banned because it might offend or upset people. The ad basically had different people reciting the lines of the Lord's Prayer.

And the Church of England said that it was bewildered by the ban and warned of possible legal action. Whereas the secularists, they were delighted because they got what they wanted.

So was the advert really that offensive? Well, yes, because if what Jesus says doesn't disturb us, then we haven't really been listening to him.

The Lord's Prayer, when you really read it, isn't bland or wishy-washy or tame or weak or a nice set of meaningless phrases.

The Lord's Prayer is disruptive and it is offensive to our lives. Because if you don't worship the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord's Prayer is highly offensive and deliberately disruptive from beginning to end.

[20:20] So Jesus isn't just teaching us what to do when we pray or who we pray to or how to pray. He's teaching us that we exist.

We are here to honour God and to submit our lives to him. So Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer because we need it.

Whoever we are, it teaches us what God's like and it teaches us what we're like. And it drives us to Jesus because it tells us that we're more sinful and hopeless than we ever dared believe. And yet at the same time, we are more loved and accepted in Jesus than we ever dared hope. And so it's only when we grasp how life's purpose is knowing God through Jesus Christ that we'll pray in Jesus' way.

Because only when we're able to call God our Father will our deepest longings and our greatest needs be met. Let's pray.

[21 : 25] Thank you, Father God, for sending Jesus Christ into this world to be our Saviour and our Teacher. We thank you that through his life and death and resurrection, we can be accepted by you.

We can become your children and have the privilege of calling you our Father. We pray that as we consider this great prayer, that it would change our lives from the inside out as we discover who you are and how we should relate to you.

And so we give our thanks in Jesus' name. Amen.