

MAKING A PROPER CONNECTION

Series: Plugged into Prayer

Matthew 6:7-13

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Well, I ain't no electrician, but I do know there's a right way and a wrong way to go about making electrical connections. Some of you aren't electricians either, but you know that from experience! Well, just like you can go right and wrong with making electrical connections, so there are some right and wrong ways in trying to connect with God in prayer. That's sort of what we want to talk about today as we come to the second message in this series on prayer: how we need a good and proper connection with the Lord when we pray. We talked about last week how prayer is all about relationship and relationships struggle when there isn't good communication, including our relationship with God. So how should we pray? Fortunately, the disciples asked Jesus that very question. They actually said, "*Lord, teach us to pray*" (Luke 11:1). And Jesus taught them how to pray in Matthew 6:7-13. This is one of the most helpful passages on prayer because it gives us a model for prayer. He teaches us how *not* to pray, and then how to pray.

I. HOW NOT TO PRAY: THE LORD'S WARNING AGAINST MEANINGLESS, REPETITIOUS PRAYER. (VV. 7-8)

7 "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Therefore, do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."

So Jesus warns against repetitious, thoughtless praying. It's important to note that He did not warn against *repeated* prayer. We repeatedly thank God for some things daily, like our food. He is also not teaching against *persistent* prayer. We can and should pray persistently for many things, such as the salvation of our lost friends and family. We'll talk more about persistent praying later. In the context, the warning is directed against the **Gentile**, or pagan, forms of prayer where gods were often stirred or aroused to answer someone's prayer because of their **many words** or their **long prayers** where there's not really any thought put into it. They weren't relational or authentic. One only needs to think of some religions maybe like Buddhism where people rock back and forth, muttering and stuttering the same things over and over with **mindless repetition**.

The image that immediately comes to my mind is the idolatrous worshippers of Baal that were challenged by Elijah on Mt. Carmel in 1 Kings 18. Elijah challenged 450 prophets of Baal to a spiritual showdown. Both the prophets and Elijah were going to invoke their god through prayer to burn up an offering on an altar and whichever God answered was the real God. Well, the prophets of Baal danced and cried out from morning till noon, but Baal never answered. Elijah mocked them, telling them to shout louder—maybe he's sleeping or busy or relieving himself! In the afternoon, they became even more frantic and started to cut themselves trying to get him to

respond. That's a graphic picture of pagan prayer. They're praying to the wrong god. They have no connection with God. And there's no relational element—they're just trying to manipulate their god. By the way, the one true God responds to Elijah's prayer in miraculous, fiery fashion even when the altar is dowsed in water.

But pagan prayer like that had rubbed off on many of the Jews in Jesus' day, making for strange religious practices and long, flowery prayers. It has rubbed off in many circles today that take the name of Christ as well. Growing up Roman Catholic, I was taught to pray the Rosary with all its 72 recited prayers, 56 of which are the "Hail Mary" and 8 of which are the "Our Father" or the Lord's Prayer—the prayer that we will read in the next few verses—right after Jesus said not to use meaningless repetition. Not to mention, I prayed the Rosary for forgiveness of my sin. Praying that rosary was not only pagan, it makes a mockery of the gospel of Christ and what a true relationship with God is like.

We pray thoughtfully.

Jesus didn't want the disciples to fall into prayer practices that characterized pagans, where they believed that the length and repetition—the sheer quantity of words—made the prayer more effective. Most of us understand that here, but we too can fall into meaningless repetition. It's really easy to say the same prayer before a meal with little or no thought as to what we are saying.¹ We're just so used to doing it, it becomes routine. And the reason given for why you do not have to go on trying to get God's attention like that is because of what He says in verse 8: **He knows what we need before we ask.** He's omniscient. He knows everything perfectly.² When we pray, we're not making Him aware of our needs. We're seeking His will and guidance and intervention.

After Jesus teaches the disciples how *not* to pray, He then teaches them how to pray properly.

II. HOW TO PRAY: THE LORD'S MODEL PRAYER. (VV. 9-13)

9 *"Pray, then, in this way:
'Our Father who is in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.
10 Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us this day our daily bread.
12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
13 And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'"*

So this is what is traditionally called *The Lord's Prayer* in the sense that it is from Him and was given to the disciples. It might be better rendered *The Disciples' Prayer* since it's for disciples to pray. But notice how different it is from the Gentile prayer concept. It's short. It has structure and thoughtful sequence. It's relational. It has deep significance for our lives. It addresses real needs,

both physical and spiritual. And it is God-centered, not man-centered. It includes adoration and confession, not just our wants and needs. This prayer is a bold contrast to what He called Gentile prayer and serves as an example for our own prayers. When He says to “*pray then this way*” He isn’t saying pray this pray this repetitiously. He’s saying use this prayer as a **pattern** for the structure of your own prayers. Pray in this manner. It mainly serves as a **guide** for our own prayer.

Notice the **first half of the prayer deals with God**. It puts our perspective on Him. The key word is “**Your**” – Your name, Your will, Your kingdom. He’s teaching us that we aren’t to automatically go straight into prayer all the time only with our needs. That part comes in the second half of the prayer. Sometimes our prayers are (for lack of a better term) lame because they’re all about us. We have an “I” problem. I want, I need, I can’t. This prayer is balanced. It starts out by reminding us about what’s important.

We pray to God as Father.

We are to acknowledge Him as **Father**. How different to pray to God as Father rather than to the dreadful, untrustworthy pagan gods. Think of how many people, religious or atheistic, who live in fear and anxiety because they don’t believe in a loving Father God. In the Jewish culture, the father was an important family leader. The father was a role of honor, dignity, and authority, but he was also loving and caring.³ He’s an affectionate protector and provider worthy of respect.⁴ Jesus will talk about how the **Heavenly Father** cares for His children (Matt. 7:7-11). He is near, always available, and guides us (OT: 1 Chron. 29:10; Ps. 68:5; 103:13; Is. 64:5-8; Jer. 31:9). But this Father is also “**in heaven**.” That’s key. This isn’t your average father. He’s transcendent and sovereign in power. He is someone who can actually answer our prayers.

Then, “**Hallowed be Your name.**” **Hallowed** just means “to make holy” or “to sanctify”. The antonym would be “to profane.” We don’t want to profane Him with our prayers, we want to sanctify Him—set Him apart as holy (Lev. 22:32; Ezek. 36:23; Matt. 5:16).⁵ It’s so important to remember that when we pray, we are entering the presence of the Holy One. This can keep us from treating prayer too lightly or going into it with selfishly or hastily or with wrong motives. Sometimes you decide not to pray what you were going to because you remember the Holy One you’re talking too. You’re humbled by His holiness. So we want to pray with humility as well.

We pray with humility.

You know, there’s a lot of folks out there who teach believers to name it and claim it. You basically demand things from God by faith. Name it and claim it by faith, they say. But that’s not what the Bible means by coming **boldly to the throne of grace** (Heb. 4:16). We come boldly, knowing His door is always open to us in Christ, but we come humbly knowing it’s ultimately not about us and our wants or our desires. It’s not just about the here and now. It’s about His **kingdom** and **His will being done**.

We pray according to His will.

And if we're praying according to His will, we can trust God with any answer to our prayers, even if it's no or wait. We don't just want our will to be done all the time. We don't want God to answer our prayers the way we always want. Because He's in heaven and He's omniscient, He knows what the best answer is even when we don't get the answer we want. We trust He's working it all for good. **1 John 5:14** says if we pray according to His will, we can be confident He hears us. In contrast to that in **James 4:3**, James wrote that some people didn't receive what they were asking for because they were asking with the wrong motives. God didn't hear their carnal prayers.

Now about this "**kingdom come**" part, a lot of people who understand this prayer for the kingdom to come as though it's only right now in only a spiritual sense. Obviously, we want His will to be done now in many ways. We want God's kingdom to work and intervene now on this earth. We want to see people to be restored to His kingdom. But I also think in the plain sense makes perfect sense. The kingdom hasn't come yet and we're to pray for it to come— for Jesus to restore all things! A lot of the confusion about the kingdom can be cleared up by an understanding of the two aspects of God's kingdom. The **universal kingdom** of God reigns from eternity past to eternity future. That kingdom doesn't ever not reign. But then there's the **theocratic or mediatorial kingdom** that was entrusted to Adam (who was to rule on behalf of God), was lost by Adam, entrusted to Israel, lost by Israel, and rejected when they rejected Christ. That aspect of the kingdom waits until His second coming when in the future, Christ returns and reigns for 1,000 years like many of the prophets spoke of (Zech. 14; Rev. 20). If we serve Him faithfully in this life, His promise is that we will rule and reign with Him in that coming age when everything will be in conformity with the Father's will on earth **as it is in heaven** (Rev. 2:26-27; 3:21; 20:4).⁶ Jesus said when He comes again with His holy angels, *then* He will sit on His throne (Mt. 25:31). So when we're praying this, we can be showing our concern for God's will to be done now and that fuller sense.

We pray about our physical needs.

Now let's move on to the **second half of the prayer that deals with the disciples' personal needs**. The key word in the second half is "**us**." It goes from Your, Your, Your, to give us, forgive us, lead us. The first needs involves **daily bread**. And bread has greater significance in the Bible. It can reference our all of our food, all of our physical necessities, or even our income. So the prayer is just praying for God to meet your **daily needs**—not wants or luxuries. The picture is that of manna provided in the wilderness daily. It's interesting, we were in Ecclesiastes on Friday morning in men's group talking about "casting your bread upon the waters"—about diversity in investment. That's the country we live in. We have so much bread we can share and invest it. In some countries and for many in the first century, they depended on God for *daily* sustenance. Basic needs. I read in one instance where a pastor from a poor part of Africa came and served in the United States for a year. When asked about what he was going to remember most from that year, he said, "*Not having to worry about food each day.*" He said, "*In America we have food but no appetite.*" In his

country, “*people have appetite but no food, and “Give us our daily bread” is a heartfelt prayer against worry back home.*”⁷ So we pray and depend upon God for our physical needs.

We pray about our spiritual needs.

The specific spiritual needs mentioned include forgiveness and temptation. First, “**forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.**” Matthew used the Greek word (debt, *opheilēma*) for sin that is used for moral or spiritual debts. Sin is a moral or spiritual debt to God that must be paid.⁸ Sins are debts to God because we owe a penalty for them and need released from them by His forgiveness. We can’t repay Him so He we have to depend upon His forgiveness in Christ.

All believers, as before a Judge have been **forensically forgiven** of all our sins—past, present, and future. It’s a once and for all forgiveness. Jesus paid for our sins in full and we are justified (declared righteous). But the forgiveness in this prayer of a disciple is referring to **parental forgiveness**, God being the parent. We are His children, and we always will be, but sin gets in the way of our relationship with Him and we need to confess it, forsake it, and be restored to fellowship with Him. Our sins *as Christians* don’t affect our standing before God, but they do interrupt our joy and intimacy with Him so they need to be taken care of when we go to pray. If we don’t confess our sin, we will become hardened by it and invite His discipline. Our connection with Him gets fuzzy. One of those sins is unforgiveness: We should not expect God to forgive our sins and hear our prayers if we don’t **forgive others**. That’s the footnote in Matthew 6:14-15. Notice how Jesus is talking about forgiveness in verses 13, 14, and 15, but there’s a doxology at the end of verse 13 in some of your Bibles. That doxology in brackets isn’t in the earliest manuscripts which tells us its probably not original and indeed, it seems to interrupt the flow of things.

The last part of the prayer is, “**Do not lead us into temptation and deliver us from evil**” is praying, “*Lord, protect me from temptations inside, and temptation from the enemy outside.*” Lead me in such a way so that I do not sin or am even tempted to sin. It’s a plea from a disciple who wants nothing more than to walk with God and be protected from evil. It’s an earnest disciple’s prayer to not only to be kept from sin but from temptation to sin.

Isn’t this a wonderful model prayer? It can provide a really great pattern for our own prayer lives. It teaches us that there are some proper and improper ways to pray. But I do want to warn us not to get too carried away with the form and structure of our prayers. Some of you have probably heard of the ACTS acronym for prayer: starting with adoration, then confession, then thanksgiving, then supplication. It’s a great pattern to help you pray balanced prayers. However, be careful about getting **too mechanical** because like I said last week, sometimes you find yourself becoming more focused on the prayer itself than you are praying. But this passage also shows us though that you may not want to be too **under-mechanical** either. There should be some thought put into it.

I can only speak personally about my own prayer life this morning, but when I go to spend an extended amount of time in prayer (the Matthew 6:6 way), I'm in the habit of following the structure of the Lord's prayer or the ACTS acronym. I just want to praise and confess and give thanks before I bring my personal needs or other needs. But throughout the day, I don't pray like that. I'm praying in the unceasing sense where I'm just chatting with God throughout the day and shooting up short little prayers—what I call prayer bullets. I see someone driving down the road, I pray for them. I just blurt out things on my heart like a child. I guess my point is: use the prayer model, but don't let it become a hindrance. The goal is not polished flowery prayers, but real and authentic prayers. Prayer is about relationship and communion with God. That's what makes for the best prayer.

Pray authentically.

I have a story about authentic prayer too. The story has it three preachers were sitting to discuss the best ways to pray while a powerline man worked nearby. One preacher claimed, "*Kneeling at the bedside is definitely the best way to pray.*" "No," the second man contended, "*I think it's standing with hands outstretched to heaven is the best way.*" The third preacher spoke up and said, "*You're both wrong, I get the best results by laying prostrate, face down on the floor.*" On and on they went about the best way to pray. Overhearing them, the powerline man couldn't hold it in anymore. He said, "*Hey fellas, if you don't mind my humble opinion, the best prayin' I ever did was while hangin upside down from a telephone pole.*" That's pretty funny stuff, but it does make a good point: his prayer was authentic.

¹ John MacArthur, *Alone with God: Rediscovering the Power and Passion of Prayer* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2011), 48.

² Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Matthew* (2023), <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/matthew.pdf>, 190-191, writes, "Jesus' disciples do not need to inform their omniscient Father of their needs in prayer, since He already knows what they are. Why pray then? Jesus did not answer that question here. Essentially, we pray for the same reasons children speak to their parents: to share concerns, to have fellowship, to obtain help, and to express gratitude, among other reasons. Even though God does not need us to inform Him of our needs, He wants us to do so, partially to remind ourselves that we are needy and that He is the supplier of our needs."

³ Brad Young, *The Jewish Background to the Lord's Prayer*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶ Michael Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever* (Silverton, Oregon: Lampion Press, 2017), 524.

⁷ Lois Tverberg, <https://engediresourcecenter.com/2015/07/09/give-us-our-daily-bread/>

⁸ MacArthur, 129.