

What Prayer Is *Not*

First, a few comments about what prayer *is*

In the Bible, prayer takes on a variety of forms. Some of these include: *adoration, confession, making requests, intercession, thanksgiving, praise, entreaty, meditation* (thinking about God and what he has done), and sometimes even *objecting* to something.

There are also many words used to describe the *act* of praying. Some of the common words used in the Bible are: *prayer, request, ask, supplication, vow, entreaty, thanksgiving, praise, worship, beg, confess, beseech, intercession, and appeal*. (Some Bible translations may use other words.)

The Bible contains many examples of people praying. When we read such accounts, we discover that many of the words used to describe the act of praying are a normal part of everyday life. For instance, when a person asks for something, he would use the same language when asking God, as he would when asking a person. Confession of sin and expressions of thanks would use the same language, whether they were directed toward God or toward people. In time, a word might develop a special significance in prayer; but even then, the original concept would have been a normal part of life.

What does this mean to us? To start with, prayer involves "normal" language, not some special "religious talk." Though it may be associated with various activities, such as worship, studying Scripture, and singing, the prayer itself does not involve "holy language" or special ceremonial rituals!

Below, we are going to focus on what prayer is *not*. Future studies will focus on more of what prayer *is*.

Prayer Is Not ... Trying to Manipulate or Control God

Prayer is not an attempt to "harness" God's power for our purposes, so that he will give us what we want! This is called "ego-centric" praying - prayer that is centered around *us*.

This is the way the *pagans* pray! Tribal animists, often motivated by fear, attempt to engage divine power for their own prosperity, long life and protection.

- We would *never* do that... or would we? Do we pray out of love and trust in a Father who we know will take care of us? Or do we pray out of fear for what the future holds - issues related to our financial well-being, our safety and health, long life, and other things related to prosperity and happiness? We don't need to use the chants and potions of a tribal animist; there are more "sophisticated" ways of doing this! Many of the modern-day techniques that people use in prayer could be compared to the magical words, formulas and "recipes for success," that the pagans might use, when they attempt to get their gods to "move" in their favor.

Below are examples of how we might do this. *Note that some of the things listed may be perfectly legitimate at times, and wrong motives may be the main issue.*

1. Doing things to "bribe" God

Do I try to "bribe" God by what I do? ("If I do something for God, then God will 'answer' my prayer." "If I'm good and don't sin much, then I'll get answered.")

- This is an issue of motives! Do we obey and serve God, just because of what *we* will get? (This is what Satan accused Job of doing - Job 1:9-11.)
- If we love God and want God's will to be done, we will want to obey simply because *obedience is God's will for us!* It won't be because of what we can get out of doing so!
- Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane is a wonderful example of praying with the right motives. "Not my will, but yours be done" - Luke 22:42. (See also 1 John 5:14.)

2. Trying to influence God with the "quantity" of prayers

If I really want something, do I "bombard" God with lots of prayers throughout the day? Or do I think that getting lots of people to pray for my request will get God to move faster in answering it?

- Again, the primary issue is motives.
- "Prayer chains" are sometimes misused this way, almost like a magic formula. Yet they *can* be legitimate. (Esther 4:16 describes something like a "prayer chain." Queen Esther ordered all the Jews in the city to fast for three days and three nights, before she went into the king's presence. Though the word "prayer" isn't mentioned, fasting is often connected with prayer, in the Old Testament.)

3. Impressing God with repetition

Do I rely on repetition of words, phrases, or even entire prayers?

- Merely reciting prayers (such as the "Lord's prayer"- Matthew 6:9-13) is *not* praying! It's more like quoting poetry.
- The constant repetition of God's name can almost become a "mantra" (a technique used in various eastern religions). It's OK to use God's name in prayer, but *never* in a trite or irreverent way (Exodus 20:7).
- The phrase "in Jesus' name" can easily become be a ritual, a "prayer ending" that's supposed to somehow cause the desired results. (Do you have any idea what that phrase means? Essentially this: "My prayer is in agreement with everything that Jesus' name represents." If we use this term, the *we had better be careful what we pray about!*)
- Jesus forbids the use of constant repetition - which he calls "babbling." That's what *pagans* do (Matthew 6:7-8)! The constant repetition of "spiritual-sounding" words does not make one's prayer "spiritual."

4. Using unnatural language and strange speech patterns

Do I think that praying requires a "spiritual-sounding" tone of voice that doesn't match normal life? Or, do I pray with strange jargon or phrases that would *never* be used in any other context? (An example would be praying for "journeys' mercies." *Who* uses that term in normal life?)

- Prayer that is based on the New Testament involves *normal* talking, not a special "holy language." There's nothing in the Bible to suggest that God is impressed by "spiritual-sounding" prayers, or by strange "religious" words. Such things are more compatible with impressing people.

A few comments about the Bible's focus in prayer requests

The whole idea of trying to manipulate God to accomplish our purposes is totally foreign to the Bible. In the Bible, the primary focus of prayer is *God-centered*, not *self-centered*. There *are* legitimate prayer requests that focus on the individual; but they are not the *primary* focus. And as mentioned in the initial comments about prayer (above), asking for things and getting "answers" are *not* the only aspects of prayer that exist!

Prayer, if genuine, *does* have power to accomplish things (James 5: 16b), because God is working through the prayer. But it focuses on *God's* will, rather than on *self* will. When the focus *is* on the individual, it's primary goal is *spiritual growth*, rather than personal gain. Consider the types of answers to prayers that are described in the following verses.

- Salvation (if the prayer is accompanied by repentance) - Luke 18:10, 14
- Receiving the gift of Holy Spirit (related to salvation) - Luke 11:13
- The ability to tell others about the good news - Ephesians 6:19-20
- The ability to overcome anxiety and to trust God - Philippians 4:6-7
- The ability to withstand temptation and the evil one - Matthew 6:13

There *are* prayers that focus on personal needs (such as food - Matthew 6:11), for they also can be in agreement with God's will. These will be examined in a future study.

Prayer Is Not ... the Pursuit of Feelings, Experiences or Reputation

Misguided views about prayer are not always oriented toward "getting" something tangible. They can also involve the pursuit of intangible feelings or experiences, or wrongly used as an indicator of a person's "spirituality"!

1. Mystical prayer

Is my prayer an attempt to get some type of "experience" that seems to make me "feel" closer to God?

- In many respects, this is the *opposite* of the types of misguided prayer, mentioned above. Here, the purpose is *not* to get goods or protection; but to transcend (or "get beyond") them, often with the goal of getting a supposed "union" with God. (This is *not* the "union with Christ" that the Bible mentions, which begins with salvation, is related to our *submission* to his will, and does *not* blur the distinction between God and humans. The "union with Christ" described in the Bible is *not* a "feeling" or an "experience on a higher level"!)
- In the early church, this was often the product of mixing Gnostic teachings with Scripture. More recent types tend to combine the influences of various eastern religions (such as Hinduism), and/or the occult, with the Bible. This type of "praying" is experiencing a resurgence among many religious people; and often promotes itself with harmless-sounding names, such as, "Contemplative prayer."
- To get such a view, a person must combine elements of eastern mysticism (or the occult) with the Bible, or get it from reading books written others who have done this. Carefully selected Scripture verses may sometimes be "pasted" into the view, and legitimate Scripture terms (such as, "the presence of God") may be *redefined* and used in a distorted way, to make the view sound more compatible with the Bible. However, it is *impossible* to find this type of "praying" by simply reading and studying what *Scripture* says about prayer! It can *only* occur within the context of theological ignorance.
- What does the Bible say? The Lord's prayer illustrates the Bible's focus. Though there is a look to the future (an anticipation of Jesus' future return, and all that it will bring), there is a strong focus on glorifying God in the "here and now" and "on *earth*," rather than going after some type of "other worldly" mystical experience, or wanting to just "feel close" to God. (A study of other examples of prayer in the Bible will confirm this, as well.)

2. Praying as "self therapy" or "spiritual release"

Do I pray in order that I can "feel better" about my problems (or even about myself)?

- Though there can be comfort and encouragement associated with prayer, this is *not* the purpose of praying! Such a motive is really no better than the attempts to manipulate God for personal benefit, described above!

3. "Answered" prayer as a demonstration of "spirituality"

If a person gets his prayers "answered," does that prove he is "spiritual"? If his prayers are "unanswered," (or at least not answered the way he wants), does that suggest he is "unspiritual"?

- Many godly people have *not* gotten the answer they wanted. The apostle Paul is such a person (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). And Hebrews 11:35b-40 says that *many* godly people did not get what they asked for. But does the passage say they were "unspiritual"? No! There are *other* issues that define whether or not a person is "spiritual" (such as their willingness to trust God regardless of what type of answer they get to their prayers).

So then, WHY PRAY?

It has already been shown that motives are a major issue. There are many legitimate reasons to pray, but the primary reason is *not* because of supposed benefits we may get. Rather it is because prayer is *commanded* by God.

- That fact alone should be reason enough for us to pray. Even if we were ignorant of any other reason to pray, we *know* that God never requires us to do anything that is without purpose or value. Even if we don't understand why we should pray, the very fact that God commands it *proves* that it is important, and that we *need* it.
- If prayer is *not* characteristic of our lives, *we are living in sin - direct and willful disobedience to God*. If we refuse to repent of this sin, like any other, we have legitimate reasons to question our salvation.

Think about it. What is *your* prayer life like? Prayer is supposed to be the distinctive characteristic that marks us out as being the people of God. Yet it is almost non-existent among most "church-goers."

- Imagine this: People who claim to know God, but don't even talk to him! What do you think it is going to be like for them, when God says to them, "Depart from me; I never knew you!" (Compare with Matthew 7:23 and Luke 13:27.)

It is important to realize that prayer takes *discipline*. It is not a "technique" or a "feeling." There will be times that you don't "feel" like praying, as well as times you will find yourself struggling with what to say. (Compare with Romans 8:26.)

- Prayer can be hard work. If you wait until you "feel" like praying, you will probably never pray!
- Most people have been so influenced by non-Christian values, that they aren't interested in "discipline." They'd rather have instant results, techniques, "How to" books, or *anything* but struggle, discipline and hard work!
- You have to deliberately set aside time for it, putting aside other things you would like to do. You will even have to discipline your *mind*, so you won't spend the whole time thinking about other things!

But after all is said and done, you will have no regrets. In the end, you will be more like your "Father in heaven," who's will you have grown to love.