

We Ought To Pray

Prayer is a very large subject in the Word of God. It is mentioned well in excess of 500 times indicating that it is a subject to which God wants us to give considerable attention. He gives us much instruction on how to pray and many examples of those who did pray. But the starting point is that we ought to pray.

When Solomon dedicated the Temple, he asked God to keep His promises and forgive the people for their sins. God responded by saying, *If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face....* (2 Chronicles 7:14). He said, “**if**,” – “**if** my people pray.” Why wouldn’t God’s people pray? He expects us to pray. He invites us to pray. But do we pray?

Why pray?

The importance of prayer can be illustrated with the biblical record of God’s specific responses to the prayers of men. One such example is when Elijah prayed over a widow’s son who had died. In 1 Kings 17:20 and 21, he *cried unto the LORD, and said, O LORD my God, hast thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son? And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried unto the LORD, and said, O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child’s soul come into him again.* In the very next verse we read God’s response, *And the LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived.*

Elijah’s prayers are said to have been effectual and fervent. When he prayed earnestly that it might not rain, it rained not on the earth for three and a half years. When he prayed again, it rained enough to make the earth fruitful (James 5:17-18). Yet Elijah is described as *a man subject to like passions as we are* (James 5:17). This is evidenced by the discouragement he experienced right after he had defeated the 450 prophets of Baal and was threatened by Jezebel. His exhaustion from the experience of the fire-from-heaven contest had left him with insufficient emotional resources to deal with the wicked queen. So he ran away and asked the LORD to end his life because he was no better than his fathers (1 Kings 19:5). He needed to be resuscitated with physical rest and a review of the divine character. Once this was accomplished, he was able to return to work with maximum vigor. All this was recorded for us so that we could see the human passions of a man whose prayers were effective in soliciting a response from God. We do not need to be perfect to have a hearing with God, we only need to be seeking Him with a genuine faith. For those who do, they have the promise that God will actually listen to what they say and take it under consideration for the decisions He makes concerning the affairs of their lives. There is no better reason to pray than the fact that our prayers can actually make a difference.

Who can and should pray?

Except for a few atheists, most people pray. People of every religious persuasion pray to the gods of their imaginations; and those who consider themselves to be of a Judaeo-Christian persuasion pray to “God.” While it is obvious that the prayers offered to false gods are vain and fruitless, it may be a surprise to some that God does not listen to all the prayers offered to Him.

The Bible divides those whose prayers are heard by God into two basic groups. One group consists of godly men and women who are diligently seeking to honor God with their lives. James 5:16 says that it is the effectual fervent prayer of a **righteous man** that availeth much. Psalm 32:6 says that **everyone that is godly** shall pray. And, John 9:31 says that God hears the prayers of them who worship Him and **do His will**.

The other group whose prayers are heard consists of those who have real needs and genuinely

seek God in faith for solutions. For example, in James 5:13 an **afflicted** person is invited to pray. Also, in Psalm 102:17, the Bible says that God *will regard the prayer of the destitute, and not despise their prayer*. And Isaiah 66:2 tells us that God always responds *to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word*.

There is a third group, however, whose prayers are not heard by God. He does not hear the prayers of those who regard iniquity in their hearts (Psalm 66:18). He refuses to listen to the prayers of those whose hands are full of blood and hypocrisy in their religious activities (Isaiah 1:15). He considers the prayers of those who turn their ears away from His Word to be abominable (Proverbs 28:9). The prayers of irresponsible husbands are hindered (1 Peter 3:7). And, God does not hear the prayers of sinners (John 9:31).

The contrast between the prayers which get through and those which do not is intended by Scripture to provide motivation for a genuine pursuit of God. When the Bible makes such statements as in Proverbs 15:8, *The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD: but the prayer of the upright is his delight*, and in Proverbs 15:29, *The LORD is far from the wicked: but he heareth the prayer of the righteous*, its intent is to convince the wicked to change their ways. If they know they are completely cut off from God as long as they remain in their wickedness, the hope is that they will turn to Him with a contrite spirit and in the knowledge of their spiritual destitution diligently seek Him. There is an implied promise in Hebrews 11:6 that God is a rewarder of anyone that does so in faith.

So the invitation to pray is open to anyone who will come to God on His terms. Whether we come in the contriteness of confession seeking the forgiveness of sins or in the boldness of obedience seeking some moving of a mountain, God will hear our prayers and seriously consider what we say as He makes His decisions concerning the circumstances of our lives.

When is the right time to pray?

The Bible makes it clear that there is never a wrong time to pray. Consider by example, the times people in the Bible chose to pray.

Early morning:

And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he [Jesus] went out, and departed into a solitary place, and prayed. (Mark 1:35)

All night:

And it came to pass in those days, that he [Jesus] went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. (Luke 6:12)

Night and day:

And she [Anna] was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. (Luke 2:37. Compare 1 Thessalonians 3:10; 1 Timothy 5:5; 2 Timothy 1:3)

Evening, morning, and noon:

Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I [David] pray, and cry aloud: and he shall hear my voice. (Psalm 55:17)

Three times each day:

Now...Daniel...went into his house; and the windows being open in his chamber toward

Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God... (Daniel 6:10)

Seven times each day:

Seven times a day do I praise thee because of thy righteous judgments. (Psalm 119:164)

At meal time:

And when he had taken the five loaves and the two fishes, he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and brake the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before them; and the two fishes divided he among them all. (Mark 6:41)

On the spur of the moment:

Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I [Nehemiah] prayed to the God of heaven. And I said unto the king.... (Nehemiah 2:4-5)

Without ceasing:

Pray without ceasing. (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving. (Colossians 4:2)

From this wide range of Scriptural examples, a man may pray at anytime. The prayer line to God is never closed or turned off. One might have specific designated times when he prays regularly. In addition to these the need to pray may arise on a moments notice, even in the midst of a conversation such as in the case of Nehemiah. There is no lack of opportunity to pray and there ought to be no laxness in taking the opportunity to pray.

Where is the right place to pray?

The Bible also gives examples of a multitude of places where people prayed.

Alone and in the privacy of their closet:

Jesus said, ...when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. (Matthew 6:5-6)

He then set the example of private prayer as recorded in such places as Matthew 14:23 where it says He sent the multitudes away and then *went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone.*

In a group:

And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord.... (Acts 4:24)

And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying. (Acts 12:12)

In the Temple

Two men went up into the temple to pray.... (Luke 18:10)

At home:

Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime. (Daniel 6:10)

On a mountain:

And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray.... (Matthew 14:23)

In a garden:

Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder. (Matthew 26:36)

In the wilderness:

And he withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed. (Luke 5:16)

By a riverside:

And on the sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made.... (Acts 16:13)

On a lake shore:

...and we kneeled down on the shore, and prayed. (Acts 21:5)

So there is never a wrong place to pray. Your location is never a hindrance to prayer. When the need arises, you do not have to run and hide. As a believing Christian, your body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. God is always with you because he has promised never to leave you, nor to forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). On a moment's notice, wherever you may be, God is ready to listen to those who diligently seek Him and come to Him with the right heart attitude.

Conclusion

It is amazing that Peter was able to walk on water. He was just a plain ordinary human being like you and me. Yet when he stepped out of the boat, he stayed on top of the water and was able to step toward Jesus. It was only when he took his eyes off of Jesus and began to look at the waves around him that he began to sink.

It is equally amazing that men of ordinary human passions can have such a privilege as prayer. But prayer is the means by which we are able to keep our heads above water in the sea of life. As long as we are praying, we are able to keep our minds stayed upon Him and our hearts in tune with His Spirit. It is only when we stop praying and become distracted with the busy-ness of less important things that we begin to sink.

For as far back as I know anything about churches, prayer meetings have been poorly attended compared to Sunday services. This appears to be symptomatic of an overall deficiency of prayer in the church today. Many church services include only brief obligatory prayers. Board meetings and congregational meetings often do the same. In many cases, the lack of substance in these prayers makes it seem like worshipers and board members cannot wait to get the praying out of the way so that they can go on to the "more important" matters at hand. Years ago I heard of a Pastor's conference that took a survey among attendees and found that the average daily time spent in prayer by the Pastors present was five minutes. It is little wonder that we see such little emphasis on prayer in churches when those who provide spiritual leadership show such little interest in it themselves.

If there is such a dearth of prayer in the public services of the church, there may well be the same in the personal lives of Christians. It is really too bad, because the Bible says that *the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much* (James 5:16). For many Christians, prayer is an empty religious exercise. They know they are supposed to pray and so at the appropriate times, they bow their head, close their eyes, and mumble some repetitive words. But it is one thing to say our prayers, and another thing to pray. It is not the ritual that avails much at the Divine Throne, it is the genuineness of a

submitted heart to which God listens with a keen interest.

Prayer is supposed to be a spiritual experience. It is that exercise by which we human beings can communicate directly to the Creator who gave us the gift of life. It is the means by which we can have an audience with the Holy One who sits upon the throne of Heaven. It is our opportunity to have a hearing with the Sovereign King who rules over all that is. It is the vehicle by which we can open our hearts to the Lord God who is the source of all we have and need. It is the gateway we may enter to confess our iniquity to the Merciful Divine who never tires of forgiving repentant sinners. It is the channel by which we can make our requests known to our Heavenly Father who keeps our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus with His indescribable peace. It is the avenue by which we can intercede for others to the God of all Comfort who is ready to comfort us in all our tribulations. It is the thoroughfare by which we can cry out to the Rock of Ages who is a very present help in time of trouble. It is the voice with which we can praise the Almighty who saved us and keeps us with His immeasurable power.

How much we miss when we do not pray.

Lord, Teach Me

Lord, teach me to pray –
not, primarily, for my own needs,
not out of duty,
neither frantically, nor carelessly.

Help me to pray
without ritual,
without self-consciousness,
without an eye on the clock.

Help me to *know* You,
to think Your thoughts after You,
to want what You want.

Let me listen to the Holy Spirit,
and when I am beyond words, beyond tears,
bewildered and confused,

may I rest in the knowledge that
The Blessed Spirit prays for me.

Let my responses to You be
not simply emotional, but practical,
not impulsive, but thoughtful,
not shallow, but life-changing.

Lord, as I pray, let my commitments be made:
with wisdom, with a plan, with delight,

Let me never take lightly what is serious to You –
sin – any sin,
Satan and his wiles,
the preciousness of time,
people without Christ,
Your love for me, Your glory and honor.

Let me develop a genuine concern
for the needs of others –
feeling their burdens,
sharing their sorrows,
identifying with their limitations,
considering the past that has scarred them.

Let my prayers for my own needs be tempered –
with patience,
with contentment,
with a knowledge of Your Word,
with purity of heart and motive,
with a faith in the unfailing character of a loving, righteous God,
with a commitment to do Your will no matter what...Lord –
Let my prayers be bathed in love –
for those who are dear to me,
for those whom I do not understand and
Who do not understand me,
for those who struggle with sin.
Help me to care about the whole weary,
damaged world needing a Savior.
More than anything, Lord,
Let my prayers be an outpouring of
my love for You.
Let praise be my second language,
my conscious and unconscious communication
with others, and with You.
Crowd out of my thoughts, my prayers, my life,
Everything that is petty and trite.
Be enthroned in me.
– *Jessie Rice Sandberg*

How Should We Pray?

If we ought to pray, then we need to know how to pray. This was the subject of a question the disciples asked Jesus in Luke 11:1 when they said, “*Lord, teach us to pray.*” They were not asking that He teach them the need to pray. Rather, they recognized in Jesus a skill in praying that was unmatched; and since John the Baptist had taught his disciples to pray, they wanted Jesus to convey to them the ability to pray effectively.

Jesus taught his disciples much about prayer, not only in response to this specific question, but many other times as well. Sometimes He taught them by explaining the elements of effective praying. And sometimes He taught them what to avoid.

How Not To Pray

1. Do not use vain repetitions.

It is ironic that the very words Jesus used to teach the disciples how to pray have been turned into something He wanted His disciples to avoid. When Jesus gave a sample prayer (which we erroneously call the Lord’s Prayer – but should be called the disciples prayer), He also instructed His disciples to avoid using vain repetitions (Matthew 6:7-13). The heathen thought their gods would listen to them simply because of the volume of words they repeated (verse 7). Jesus explained that it is not the sound of the voice in repeating empty ritual prayers that gets the attention of the true God. It is conversational prayer coming from a sincere heart that catches His ear. He never intended that the so-called Lord’s Prayer should be the actual words we repeat over and over again. He meant for them to serve as an example of the various things to include in our prayers as we *talk* to our Heavenly Father. That is why He said to pray “after this manner” meaning for his example prayer to be only a pattern and not the actual prayer we would use (verse 9).

2. Do not pray arrogantly.

Jesus told a story about two men, one a Pharisee and one a publican, who went into the temple to pray (Luke 18:10-14). It is interesting to note how Jesus described the Pharisee's effort at praying. He said he *stood and prayed thus with himself*. With such an expression, we might wonder whether this man was concerned at all about whether God actually heard his prayers, or if he was content simply to hear himself use the device of prayer as a means for boasting to anyone around him who might listen. His "prayer" consisted entirely of compliments to himself, contrasting his own accomplishments with the failures of others. Jesus evaluated this man's prayer as completely worthless. He said that he would return to his house unjustified and abased (verse 14). We do not need to impress God with our credentials. We are transparent creatures in His sight and He sees right through us. We must also be careful not to use prayer as a means to impress others. God honors a contrite spirit, which ought to be the dominant attitude of our hearts as we approach Him in prayer.

3. Do not use prayer as a means to some ulterior motive.

Jesus used the errors of the Pharisees again to teach another matter to avoid in prayer. He accused the Pharisees of using long prayers as a pretense (Matthew 23:14). A pretense is a pretend motive which hides the real motive. The Pharisees were using long prayers as a means to impress widows so that they would donate their inheritance from their deceased husbands to the Pharisees' own pet projects – and their own pockets. The Talmud tells how some of these Pharisees would pray as much as nine hours per day in order to gain a reputation for being devout men. Yet their long prayers were not intended to impress God, but those poor unsuspecting widows who might relinquish their entire estate to these pretentious religious vultures. If prayer is to be of any value at all, it must be offered sincerely and without pretense. God is not fooled by words. He sees clearly the thoughts and intents of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).

How To Pray

1. Pray conversationally.

The opposite of using vain repetitions is to pray conversationally. God is a person. Prayer is the act by which a human being talks to the person of God. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray (Matthew 6:9-13), he instructed them to begin by addressing God in a personal way as *Our Father*. Then He gave them a list of things to include in their prayers all of which have personal elements to them. He told them to speak respectfully [*Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name*], to show submission [*Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven*], to give requests [*Give us this day our daily bread*], to make confession [*And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*], to express commitment [*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*], and to offer praise [*For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever*]. This was given as a pattern that was to be applied by each individual to the things that related to the particulars of his own heart and mind and experience. Memorizing these words and repeating them mindlessly as a ritual prayer cannot be compared to the value of a spontaneous yet thoughtful prayer that emanates from the heart that is devoted to real communication with a personal God.

2. Pray with humility.

The second of the two men Jesus described as praying in the Temple was a publican. Publicans were outcasts as far as the respected classes among the Jews were concerned. They had sold out to the Gentiles by becoming part of their system of exploitation. Yet the prayers of this publican were respected

by God because he approached the divine ears with a spirit of humility and contriteness. Jesus described how he stood afar off, remaining inconspicuous and out of public view. He could not lift his eyes up to heaven, he was so distressed about his own worthless condition. He smote his breast because he was genuinely repentant and he confessed his sinfulness to God with honesty and sincerity. The result, Jesus said, was that he went to his house justified and exalted. God is ready to listen to a person who recognizes his own spiritual poverty and comes to Him with an attitude of transparency, knowing what God will see when he opens his soiled heart to Him (Isaiah 66:2). The marvel of it is that a person who comes to God in such a manner never stays poor for very long. Jesus said the poor in spirit are blessed because they are the ones who come into possession of the Kingdom and end up being the richest of all (Matthew 5:3).

3. Pray in faith – believing.

Prayer, of course, is not necessary for God to know what is going on in our lives, *For the ways of man are before the eyes of the LORD, and he pondereth all his goings* (Proverbs 5:21). He also knows what we need before we ask (Matthew 6:8). Prayer is rather a means by which we express our dependence upon God. This is why one of the qualifications Jesus gave for effective prayer was, *And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive* (Matthew 21:22). This raises an interesting question, though, as to why anyone would pray without believing. We have already seen that some people pray not to be heard of God but to be heard of men. In such cases, believing God is made irrelevant because it is displaced by the desire to convince men. Others pray out of desperation because they do not know where else to turn. They often remain doubtful that it will actually do any good, but they adopt the attitude that it cannot do any harm. For example, a person who lacks wisdom may pray for some, but because his faith is wavering, he has no real expectation of receiving any (James 1:5-7). Doubt always cancels out the possibility of a positive answer to prayer. It is like the man who wished the mountain outside of his bedroom window would go away so that he would have a better view. One night he prayed that God would remove the mountain; but the next morning he awoke, went to the window, opened the curtain, and said, "I thought it would still be there." He never expected the mountain to be removed and he was not disappointed in his lack of faith. Others pray with selfish motives. The idea of real dependence upon God never crosses their minds because they are clouded with the desire to consume things upon their lusts (James 4:3). As James puts it, they ask, but they receive not because they ask amiss. Jesus said, *What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them* (Mark 11:24). Embodied within this principle is much more than a presumption that God will give us things just because we ask for them. It implies that prayer tempered by faith is an expression of real dependence upon God for His provision of genuine needs.

4. Pray according to the will of God.

One of the wonderful invitations God has given us in the Bible is to make our requests known unto Him (Philippians 4:6). But in making those requests, faith is not the only prerequisite to our being confident that God will give us what we ask. We must also qualify our requests by asking for things within God's will. 1 John 5:14 says, *And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us*. This may puzzle some and cause them to wonder how we can know what God's will is for our lives before we pray. After all, isn't that one reason we pray, to find out what His will is? Jesus explained that *If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you* (John 15:7). In other words, the more we walk with Christ by immersing ourselves into the Word of God, the more sensitive we become to the desires of God's heart. His desires then become our desires (Psalm 37:4) as we grow up into Christ in all things (Ephesians 4:15). The requests we make in our prayers then conform to the things that God desires for us and we have absolute confidence that He will give us what we ask because we know He already wants us to have it.

5. Pray with supplication.

Another ingredient that gives our prayers some fervency is the element of supplication. Philippians 4:6 says that our requests should be made with prayer and supplication. Supplication adds emphasis to our prayers and makes them more than academic exercises. When we approach God with earnestness, He sees the intensity of our soul and the resolution of our spirit to see the things for which we ask come to pass. He is more responsive than to the requests of those who pray with passion.

6. Pray persistently.

There are three possible answers from God to our requests we make in prayer: yes, no, or wait. When we receive quickly the things we prayed for, we are generally quite exuberant. When the answer is delayed, we are easily confused as to whether God is saying no, or just insisting that we wait. "No" answers do occasionally come with some decisiveness. For example, it became clear to Paul that God was saying no to him after he had asked only three times for the thorn in his flesh to be removed (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). But God's indications to wait are a little more difficult to decipher. We might wonder if He is not answering our prayers because he does not want us to have what we asked for, or if He wants us to wait awhile before He gives it, or if He is not yet convinced of our resolution in the matter. Concerning this last matter, Jesus taught that persistence is a good quality in prayer. He told a story about a widow who desired that a certain judge might avenge her of her adversary. For a while, the judge put her off and ignored her pleas. Finally, because of her continual coming, he grew weary of hearing her repeat her request and ruled in her favor. Jesus then followed the story with this lesson. *Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily* (Luke 18:6-8). Jesus' point is that if an unjust judge can be persuaded by persistence, then a just God can be as well. If help is genuinely needed and it seems like God is in no hurry to respond, the advice of the Savior Himself is to *cry day and night* and keep asking until you get your answer. No disrespect is intended by such action, only sincere determination.

7. Pray with the right posture.

This might seem like an unusual element to include in a discussion about how to pray, but the Bible does give some hints as to the significance of the physical posture one assumes when praying to God. When Solomon prayed at the dedication of the Temple, he ascended onto a scaffold he made for the occasion and publically knelt down upon his knees to lead the nation in prayer (2 Chronicles 6:13). For a king to do this before his people was a dramatic demonstration of reverence and respect to the Holy God. But the same effect can be produced even if no one else is watching. For example, Daniel prayed on his knees in the privacy of his bedroom (Daniel 6:10). And, Paul went so far as to equate the very idea of praying with the physical gesture of bowing the knees (Ephesians 3:14). The idea is that we being physical creatures, have at our disposal a visible means of illustrating the attitude of our heart. And if we have this means available, it is reasonable to use it. Jesus Himself went a step further when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, falling on His face to make His plea to the Father (Matthew 26:39). This is not a necessary element of prayer as evidenced by Nehemiah's spontaneous prayer in the middle of his conversation with King Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 2:4). It is obvious that he did not bow down on his knees before the king and pray. Nevertheless, when the occasion allows it, it is reasonable to show in whatever way we can, including kneeling upon our knees, that we have the greatest possible respect for the Holy One who gave us life and we humbly submit ourselves to Him.

8. Pray in the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is in every believer all the time because he is permanently indwelt by the Spirit when he receives Christ as Savior (John 1:12; Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:9). But can it be said that every believer is in the Spirit all the time? Romans chapter 8 suggests that walking in the Spirit is related to minding the things of the Spirit. This is in contrast to minding, or focusing our thoughts upon, the things of the flesh. The carnal, or flesh focused mind, is enmity against God (Romans 8:7). Such thought patterns grieve (Ephesians 4:30) and quench (1 Thessalonians 5:19) the Holy Spirit's activity within us.

Praying in the Spirit requires that a person keep his mind focused on the things of the Spirit. When James rebuked believers for sloppy praying, he admonished them to submit themselves to God (James 4:1-7). Ezra stands as a great example of this principle. When he heard about sin in the land, he prayed, and the effect of his prayer was a great movement of repentance (Ezra 9:3-10:1ff). The reason his prayer was so effective was because Ezra was a man who had prepared his heart in the Word of God (Ezra 7:10). Praying in the Spirit is not an ecstatic experience in which you lose control of your faculties and are caused to act erratically. Praying in the Spirit is made possible by keeping your mind focused on the things of the Spirit so that you can pray in the will of God. As we diligently seek to do that, the Spirit gives us special assistance when we are not able to determine precisely what we should pray for. As Romans 8:26-27 explains, *Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.*

9. Pray with a watchful attitude.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus told His disciples to *watch and pray* (Matthew 26:41). He added a warning to this – *that ye enter not into temptation*. Jesus wanted the disciples to be concerned about two things: the immediate, or what they were doing in the present moment, and the imminent, or what was about to happen next. His intent was that in their present prayer they would be preparing themselves for the unknown of the moments that were about to occur. Unfortunately, the disciples consumed the present moment with unproductive drowsiness and when the crises came they were not ready to deal with it properly. When we, like the disciples, isolate ourselves into a present moment mentality, we become anesthetized against future realities and can then only react to events as they spring upon us. Watchfulness in prayer causes us to consider the possibilities of things to come in light of the grace and power of God and prepares us spiritually to respond to events with confidence and patience. Peter said, *But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer* (1 Peter 4:7). Watchfulness in prayer helps us to guard against being surprised and overwhelmed by the unexpected and assists us in being faithful in our anticipation of things to come, including the coming of the LORD.

10. Pray in Jesus' Name.

To be called a Christian is a special privilege granted to those who have called upon His name and received Jesus Christ as Savior (Acts 11:26; John 1:12; Acts 4:12; Romans 10:13). Thus we are able to bear His name and be associated with Him in a very personal way in public places. The use of the name of Jesus Christ is also a very important resource to all believers for a variety of purposes. We are to give thanks in Jesus' name (Ephesians 5:20); we are to admonish one another concerning our Christian conduct in Jesus' name (1 Corinthians 1:10; 5:4; 2 Thessalonians 3:6); and in fact, we are to do everything in Jesus' name (Colossians 3:17). And just so there would be no confusion about the matter, Jesus Himself instructed us that the requests we make to God the Father should be offered in His name. He said, *Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full. These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs: but the time cometh, when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs, but I shall shew you plainly of the Father. At that day ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you: For the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God* (John 16:23-27). The disciples understood perfectly what He meant as they responded by saying, *Lo, now speakest thou plainly, and speakest no proverb* (verse 29).

Jesus was explaining that this was a change from what had been before. Previously, no one asked anything in His name, but now His disciples were supposed to ask everything in His name. He made it clear that our prayers will not be relayed to the Father by Him, but that His name gives us access directly to the Father and secures for us a hearing from Him. The use of Jesus' name in praying to the

Father serves as a recognition that we can come unto God only by Jesus Christ, first of all in salvation (John 14:6) and then continually because of what Christ did for us (Hebrews 10:19-20). It acknowledges our identity in Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 2:19; 1 Corinthians 1:2) and the advocacy of Jesus Christ on our behalf (1 John 2:1; 1 Timothy 2:5-6). It is also a means by which the Father is glorified (John 14:13-14). It is only reasonable that we approach the Father in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, because if it were not for Him, we would have no access at all to the throne of grace. In respect for Jesus' own instruction and all that He has done for us, all our prayers ought to be offered to God the Father in the name of Jesus Christ His Son.

Conclusion

We can only imagine what it was like to hear Jesus pray while He was here on earth. To be able to eavesdrop on the personal conversations between the divine Father and Son must have been a very profound experience indeed. But in trying to imagine what that was like, we ought to gain some sense for what shape our prayers to the Father should take. We cannot think that those divine conversations were cold, formal, rigid, ritualistic or consisted of repetitions of memorized liturgies. They were undoubtedly personal, conversational, meaningful exchanges of words from the heart. We should echo the request of those first disciples when they heard the Master pray, *Lord, teach us to pray*, (Luke 11:1). Indeed, Lord, teach us to pray like you prayed. Give us the skill to pray with depth of passion, sincerity of thought, and personal attachment to our Father, who not only dwells in Heaven, but lives in our hearts.

What Should We Pray For?

Prayer ought to be a priority in our lives. We ought to pray, and we ought to know how to pray.

But having established the imperative of prayer in our thinking, we must also learn that there are priorities within prayer. As we talk to God, what are the things we should bring up to Him? What kind of things should we include in our prayers? What does the Bible say we should pray for?

We should begin our prayers with praise and thanksgiving.

God has done some pretty spectacular things for us. He has made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints (Colossians 1:12). That is, He made it possible for us to participate in an incorruptible and eternal future. He did this by declaring us to be righteous (Romans 3:22, 4:5) solely on the basis of our faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:28), which is something we could never have done for ourselves (Romans 3:10-18, 23, 28). He also delivered us from the power of darkness (Colossians 1:13). That is, He rescued us from the authority of the Devil which held us in bondage to the evil course of this dark world. He also translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son (Colossians 1:13). He did this by redeeming us through His blood, granting us forgiveness of sins, making peace for us through the blood of His cross, reconciling us to Himself and bringing us into submission to the One who is Head over all things (Colossians 1:14-20).

This sounds like sufficient enough reason that gratefulness ought to be overflowing from our heart. Therefore, the very first thing that ought to come out of our mouths when we address the Heavenly Father is "thank you" (Colossians 1:12). Of course the most important thing to be thankful for is the nature of God. Praising Him for who He is, and for all His wonderful attributes acknowledges that everything else comes out of the reality of who and what God is. The next most important thing to be thankful for is all that He has done for us in saving us and filling our lives with an abundance of spiritual blessings (Ephesians 1:3). After these things can come expressions of thanksgiving for the temporal

blessings which are beyond enumeration. Too often our list for thanksgiving consists almost exclusively of temporal blessings. We need to put the spiritual things first, because without them, the temporal blessings are insignificant.

**The next thing we should do in prayer
is confess our sins.**

God has feelings. And just as it is possible for us to offend each other as human beings, it is also possible for us to offend God in our daily relationship with Him. What do we do when we offend another person? If we do not make it right, we gradually build a wall between us which limits our ability to live and work together. So we must go to the one we have offended, confess that we were wrong, say we are sorry and ask forgiveness. The same thing is true in our relationship with God. When the Bible tells us not to grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30) it is explaining that our disobedience to the Word of God can actually make Him sad. If we do not make things right with Him, the Spirit can be quenched within us (1 Thessalonians 5:19) and our fellowship with God greatly hindered. Just as we must apologize to people we have offended, we need to apologize to God on a regular basis so that our relationship with Him can remain healthy and the activity of the Holy Spirit within us can continue without interruption. If things are not right between us and God, there is no use going beyond this point in prayer and asking for anything, because we probably will not receive what we ask for anyway (James 1:6-8; 4:1-3; 1 Peter 3:7).

**Then can come the list of things
for which we ask.**

This likely will be the larger part of our prayers. But unless our list of requests is preceded by praise, thanksgiving, and confession, this part of our prayers will be less effective. In Philippians 4:6, God invites us to make our requests known unto Him. However, He qualifies this by telling us first to rejoice evermore (verse 4) and to package our requests in the context of thanksgiving (verse 6). In the same context are admonitions unto integrity through moderation, focused thoughts, and obedient behavior (verses 5, 8, 9).

With these matters properly cared for, we can then decide what things to ask for. Unfortunately, we often concentrate on ourselves and our basic temporal needs. As a result, our lists of requests tend to be shallow and selfish. The Bible is full of examples of spiritual prayer requests and from these we can compile a better list of the things to pray for.

1. Intercessory prayer: the prayer of asking on behalf of others.

The Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution reads:

In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right ... to have the assistance of Counsel for his defense.

Just as the U.S. Constitution gives every citizen the right to have legal counsel before a judge, every human being has been given the privilege to have intercessory assistance before The JUDGE. As a royal priesthood, one of the duties of believer priests is to intercede for others. The Bible gives us a list of those for whom we should intercede. Some of these are as follows:

- 1 Timothy 2:1 - pray for all men
- 1 Timothy 2:2 - pray for kings and all in authority
- James 5:14-16 - pray for the sick
- Colossians 4:3 - pray for ministers of the

Gospel

2 Timothy 4:16 - pray for those who reject you
Luke 6:28 - pray for those who
despitefully use you.

As we pray on behalf of other people, there are two things we are supposed to do. First, we are to mention these people unto God (Ephesians 1:16; Romans 1:9). Secondly, we are to make requests for them (Romans 1:10; Philippians 1:4). Such requests may be temporal as in the desire for healing from physical illness (James 5). But more often, such requests should be spiritual. The Apostle Paul set a wonderful example of making spiritual requests for the believers under his care. The following is a list of some of those requests:

1. Now I pray to God that ye do no evil;
2 Corinthians 13:7
2. And this also we wish, *even* your perfection.
2 Corinthians 13:9
3. That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man;
Ephesians 3:16
4. That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith;
Ephesians 3:17
5. That ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what *is* the breadth, and length, and depth, and height;
Ephesians 3:17-18
6. And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge,
Ephesians 3:19
7. That ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.
Ephesians 3:19
8. And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and *in* all judgment;
Philippians 1:9
9. That ye may approve things that are excellent;
Philippians 1:10
10. That ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ;
Philippians 1:10
11. Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.
Philippians 1:11
12. For this cause we also, since the day we heard *it*, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding;
Colossians 1:9

13. That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing,
Colossians 1:10
14. Being fruitful in every good work,
Colossians 1:10
15. And increasing in the knowledge of God;
Colossians 1:10
16. Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and
longsuffering with joyfulness;
Colossians 1:11

God evidently pays very close attention to intercessory prayer. He tells us pointedly in His Word, to *pray one for another, that ye may be healed* (James 5:16). As a father, I am sensitive to my children and when they ask for something I seriously consider whether or not I should give it to them, even though I would not have voluntarily decided to do so. If my wife intercedes for them and requests the thing on their behalf, that adds tremendous influence to how I decide. This is exactly the process that occurs when requests are brought before our Heavenly Father on behalf of others. Consider this: if people received from God only what we asked for on their behalf, how much would they have? Before we make a long list of requests for ourselves, it would be well for us to make requests on behalf of others. In fact, a very long time ago, the prophet Samuel suggested that our failure to pray for others is actually sin against the LORD (1 Samuel 12:23).

2. The prayer of asking for ourselves.

Personal prayer requests ought to follow this same line. In fact, a lot may be understood about ourselves if we looked honestly at our own prayer list. What kinds of things do we regularly wish for? What do we spend our precious time before the throne of grace asking for? If we have truly set our affection on things above, and not on things on the earth (Colossians 3:2) then our personal request list will look something like this:

1. Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in *your* prayers to God for me; That I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judaea;
Romans 15:30-31
2. And that my service which *I have* for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints;
Romans 15:31
3. That I may come unto you with joy by the will of God, and may with you be refreshed.
Romans 15:32
4. Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints; And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel,
Ephesians 6:18-19
5. For which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.
Ephesians 6:20
6. Withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds:

Colossians 4:3

7. That I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.
Colossians 4:4

8. Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have *free* course, and be glorified, even as *it is* with you:
2 Thessalonians 3:1

9. And that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men: for all *men* have not faith.
2 Thessalonians 3:2

In addition to these ministry oriented prayer requests, there are other things to pray for which relate to our life in general society.

1. I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, *and* giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and *for* all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.
1 Timothy 2:1-2

2. If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all *men* liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.
James 1:5

3. Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you.
Romans 1:10

4. Give us this day our daily bread.
Matthew 6:11

Conclusion

We may not always know exactly what to pray for in specific situations (Romans 8:26), but these biblical prayer requests are certainly a place to start. In fact, powerlessness in the church today may exist because we have failed to ask for these spiritual things (James 4:2 - *ye have not, because ye ask not*). In fact, Jesus taught a simple principle:

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?
Matthew 7:7-11

Assisting one another in asking for things is even more powerful because the Bible says that two agreeing together in prayer gets a ready response from God (Matthew 18:19). And there is considerable evidence in Scripture that God responds to intercessory prayer (Deuteronomy 9:26; 1 Samuel 7:5; 2 Kings 4:33; etc.)

Of course, it is possible to ask for the wrong things (James 4:3a - *Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss*). And it is possible to ask for things with the wrong motive (James 4:3b - *that ye may consume it upon your lusts*). And it is possible to ask for things without really believing that God will provide them (James 1:6 - *But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering*). Under such circumstances, asking

does not make any difference (James 1:7 - *For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord*).

We certainly believe though that prayer bears some influence on the decisions God makes, or else we would not pray, nor would we be told by Scripture to pray and make such requests. So we ought to pray and ask for things in Jesus' Name, believing with all our heart that our Heavenly Father will seriously consider granting our requests. If they fall within His will, He will grant them. If the timing is wrong, we might have to wait. But let us not waste this wonderful resource that God has given to us – the privilege to approach Him directly and make our requests known unto Him.

We can be confident that God will listen to what we have to say. One of the most wonderful realities recorded in Scripture is that He hears us when we pray (Psalm 5:3). In fact, He is waiting to hear from us because He knows what we need even before we ask for it (Matthew 6:8). And when our requests are too small, He so often supplies beyond what we can even think to ask for (Ephesians 3:20). What a wonderful God! What a wonderful opportunity prayer is! Don't miss out. 📖