

The Essentials Of Effective Prayer

Prayer can be defined as “drawing near to God.” In prayer, we can be honest about our concerns and entrust them to God. As reassuring as that is, it brings up some new questions: if prayer is that simple, why do so many of us have weak prayer lives? Is it possible for an “ordinary” Christian to pray with the passion of David and the power of Elijah? This week we will begin to answer those questions.

Observe: Prayer, conversation with His Father, was a hallmark of Jesus’ life on earth, a fact that didn’t escape the disciples’ notice. Let’s begin today’s study by looking at **Luke 11:1**.

Discuss:

- We learn from this verse several things. We learn that Jesus prayed, and that John also taught his disciples to pray. We also know that at least one of Jesus’ disciples wanted to learn how to pray.
- Have you ever been intimidated by the prayer life of someone else, perhaps thinking, I could never pray like that? Can you imagine how the disciples might have felt after hearing Jesus pray?
- By the disciple asking to be taught how to pray, it showed that he had a desire to communicate with the Father and to learn how to pray, perhaps more effectively.
- What about you and me? Do we have the desire to pray? The desire is the most important part of learning how to pray.

Observe. In **Matthew 6**, part of the Sermon on the Mount, we find Jesus’ classic teaching on prayer. His instructions here will form our outline for the next few weeks as we learn how we are to pray. Let’s look at **Matthew 6:5-8**.

Discuss:

- Notice that in these four verses, Jesus said, “When you pray.” He didn’t say if you pray. Jesus expects His followers to pray.
- Jesus gives some do’s and don’ts about prayer and praying:
 - Don’t be like the hypocrites, loving to stand in the synagogues and on the corners to be seen of men. A *hypocrite* is a person that puts on a false appearance of virtue or religion.
 - When you do pray, go into your inner room (closet), close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret. Jesus is not speaking against public prayer. Prayer is more about private communication with God than public style. There is a place for public prayer, but it is not just to gain attention.
 - In verse 7, Jesus said do not use vain repetition. He is speaking of using words over and over again as if it is a magic formula, or words to impress the crowds. It is not wrong to come to God with the same request—Jesus encourages *persistent* prayer. But He condemns the shallow repetition of words that are not from a sincere heart. We can never pray too much if our prayers are honest and sincere.
- We can avoid meaningless repetition in our prayers by making sure we mean what we say, before we start to pray.

Observe: Next we will look at what is often called the Lord’s Prayer, which many students of Scripture view as a model for prayer. Let’s continue **Matthew 6:9-13**.

Discuss:

- In light of what we read earlier in **Matthew 6:7**, do Jesus' words in verse 9 indicate that He intended His disciples to repeat these exact words on a regular basis? I don't think so. I believe that there are elements in prayer that bear remembering and repeating.
- If the Lord's Prayer provides a basic structure for our conversations with God, we should note the key elements it suggests. Let's read through the passage again, watching for these elements listed, and next to each key element listed below, note the verse number(s) where it appears.
 - _____ Worship—showing reverence.
 - _____ Declaration of allegiance—stating where your loyalties lie.
 - _____ Petition—making a request.
 - _____ Confession of sin—seeking forgiveness.
 - _____ Request for deliverance—pleading for protection.
- The element of worship begins and ends this prayer. This signifies that worship is a very important part of our prayer.
- Prayer is not just about our needs and wants. But it is about our worship to God, our dedication to God, and about His Will being done.

Observe. We've seen that Jesus gave His disciples a model prayer that began and ended with worship, with acknowledging God in heaven and exalting His name. Let's see what we can learn from others who incorporated worship in their prayers, starting with Jehoshaphat, an ancient Jewish king from the line of David and Solomon. Turn to **2 Chronicles 20:1-4**.

Discuss:

- We learn from verses 1 and 2 that King Jehoshaphat had a large number of enemies that were waging war against him. In fact, the word was spreading, it was a "great multitude" and they were on their way.
- Jehoshaphat's initial response was fear (vs. 3), but he overcame the fear by turning his attention to God. To "seek" the Lord means longing for Him with all your heart.
- Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast throughout the land and gathered the people together to seek help from God. Sometimes to give God our full or greater attention we need to lay some things aside. There was a very urgent matter at hand and all the people needed to seek God's intervention.

Observe: Jehoshaphat and his people faced a grave threat, so the king turned to the Lord. As you read his prayer in this next passage, watch carefully to see how he incorporated the element of worship. Let's continue with verses 5-12.

Discuss:

- Jehoshaphat, although he puts some of it in the form of questions, is affirming that God is: God of their fathers; God in heaven; the ruler over all kingdoms and nations; that power and might are in His hands.
- He also talks about what God has done for the people in the past. How God had driven out the inhabitants of the land and given it to the descendants of Abraham, God's friend forever.
 - He also reminded God how the people had built a sanctuary in the land for God's name to be there.
 - They also reminded God about His promise to deliver the people when they cried out to Him and stood before the house and before God, for His name was in the House.
- In verse 12, Jehoshaphat asked God to Judge the people that were coming against them.

- We can learn a lot from Jehoshaphat. But, a few things are that we can worship God in our prayers, we can turn from fear and being afraid by calling on God, and also we can remind God of His promises and praise Him for previous victories.

Observe: We saw that part of Jehoshaphat's prayer was devoted to reminding God of His promises and then asking for His deliverance. But first, like Jesus, he opened his prayer by honoring God and acknowledging who He is.

If we're going to follow Jesus' example by incorporating worship into our prayers and exalting God's name, we need to be familiar with who He is. The Bible uses numerous names for God, each of which reveals something about His character. Let's look at several Old Testament passages to consider three of God's names and to learn what they imply for our worship.

First, let's go to Genesis 14:18-20. Abram, whose name was later changed to Abraham, had just returned from a battle where he defeated five kings and rescued his nephew, Lot, along with several others.

Discuss:

- The name *God Most High* is used three times in this passage of Scripture for God's name. Also, in verse 19, Possessor of heaven and earth, is used to give a different description of God.

Insight: The term *God Most High* is the English equivalent of El-Elyon. It is a name that speaks of the sovereignty of God.

- God has delivered Abram's enemies into his hands according to Melchizedek.

Let's look at **Psalm 91:1-9**.

- The name Most High is used twice in this passage to describe God.
- There are several other descriptions of God in these verses—refuge, fortress, and a dwelling place.
- Knowing these things about God can build our confidence in God. Knowing God as Most High is worship of God. This can help us focus on God and His power and strength.

Other Passages:

- In **Psalm 23:1-6**, the writer attributes to the Lord the role of a shepherd.
 - The psalmist lists several of God's actions on our behalf.
 - Through past experiences with God we learn how to depend on God.
- In **Exodus 15:26**, God says that He is our healer.

Insight: The Hebrew name used to describe God as healer is *Jehovah Rapha*, which literally means "the Lord who heals."

- In Psalm **107:17-21**, we see references to *fools* and their ways, yet God still hears their cry and delivers them.

Wrap It Up

In Matthew 6:5-15, Jesus gave us a model for prayer that includes several key elements, the first of which is worship: "Our father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name." Someone has defined worship as our response to the grace and mercy of God. We worship God by acknowledging who he is and how he acts on our behalf, which we learn by studying His character as revealed in His Word.

For example, the Bible reveals Him to be God Most High, completely in control of the circumstances of our lives. Nothing escapes His awareness: no circumstance is beyond His reach. He is able and willing to hear your prayer and answer you in your time of trouble. As your Shepherd and your Healer, God offers to restore your soul and save you out of your distresses.

Please note that when you look at prayers in the Bible, you never find God's faithful servants repeating the same word or phrase over and over such as "Praise You, Jesus; Praise You, Jesus." Instead the worshiper rehearses the character of God and His ways, reminding Him of His faithfulness and His wonderful promises. The pagans often worked themselves up through excited and frenzied repetition of a phrase in the worship of their gods. But not the children of God! Our worship is based not on emotion but on truth; not on the fervency of our words but on the faithfulness of God.

As we close with a time of prayer, worship God by simply acknowledging who He is. Use a phrase or a single word to describe in prayer who God is.

Take the time to read Psalm 107:1-13.