

HUNGRY FOR GOD: STUDIES ON PRAYER

3

PRAYER: TALKING TO GOD

Matthew 6:5–8

By Marlene Nathan
and John Ebert

“He prayeth well, who loveth [God] well.”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

“Real prayer comes not from gritting out teeth but from falling in love.”

Richard Foster

“Genuine faith grows out of a relationship with God.... We pray not because we think our prayers earn God’s favor, but as an expression of our trust in a Father who already knows our need and merely waits for us to express our dependence on him [Matthew 6:] (v. 8).”

Craig S. Keener

“I believe the most adequate description of prayer is simply, ‘Talking to God about what we are doing together.’ That immediately focuses the activity where we are but at the same time drives the egotism out of it. ...Prayer is a matter of explicitly sharing with God my concerns about what he too is concerned about in my life. And of course he is concerned about my concerns and, in particular, that my concerns should coincide with his.”

Dallas Willard

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AIM OF STUDY

- To learn how to pray to the Father the way Jesus taught us.

KEY VERSES

“But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Matthew 6:6

PREPARATION

Read over the notes on “**How to Teach the Bible in Small Group**” and “**Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion**” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual*. Before you read over the Scripture, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then, read through the passage and the Bible study below. **You will need to go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you could eliminate if your time is limited.** Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (*). Rather than leaving these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. The authors are providing this for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to provide resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for study.

OPENERS

When you think about prayer, what comes to your mind?

Allow several people to respond. They may associate it with folded hands, closed eyes, complete silence, somber mood, etc. If you want to get to know each other better, or have extra time to spare, use the next question. Otherwise, skip to the last one.

When did you first learn about prayer, and from whom?

You don't need all group members to share their entire life stories. This question is designed to find out more about the experiences of the people in your group.

[It's helpful to try to determine people's preconceptions about a particular topic before introducing new concepts or bringing correction that is in accordance with biblical teaching].

If Jesus were sitting down with you to talk, what would you want to ask Him about prayer?

[Be on the lookout for experiences that have become major hindrances for spiritual growth (e.g., "I prayed as a child that my parents not get divorced but they did. Now I'm not sure I really want to pray."). Sometimes people need help processing a disappointment before they can move on in their relationship with God.

If there isn't time for everyone to respond, you could ask your group members to write down their answers and turn them in to you at the end of the study.]

Prayer is one of the most important things we do as Christians. Prayer can bring us close to God and help us grow spiritually. Prayer can relieve the stress and anxiety characteristic of modern life and fill our hearts with peace. And it's so exciting to see God answer prayers! Prayer can change a tough situation into a positive experience.

If prayer is so good and rewarding, why is it that it is also so *hard to do*? There seem to be so many other activities that compete for our time that prayer is often crowded out of our lives. We resort to "shooting one up" as we race off to work and pray seriously only when there is a crisis—when there is "nothing else we can do." How can we hope to develop the kind of prayer life that we should have as Christians?

Back in the first century, the disciples knew where to go to find out about prayer. They went to the one person they had seen pray for hours, the one person who seemed to have all His prayers answered, the one person whose life was amazingly free from fear and anxiety. They went to Jesus of Nazareth.

Let's study one of Jesus' famous teachings on prayer from the gospel of Matthew.

Pray that the Holy Spirit would teach you more about prayer so that you can have fruitful conversations with God.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

[This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.]

These verses on prayer were part of a larger teaching that Jesus may have given on more than one occasion. It is commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1–7:29). Jesus directed it exclusively to His followers. Therefore it was not intended for non-Christians. The sermon consisted of ethical teaching that sets a high standard for how a Christian should live. Jesus never meant for us to meet these commands on our own. We need His Spirit working in us in order to become like Him. Jesus told us in John 15:5, that apart from Him, we could do nothing. Paul encouraged the Christians in Philippi by saying that God was willingly at work in them and with them, to accomplish His good purposes (Philippians 2:12–13).

This passage on prayer was connected with other spiritual practices that were common in Jesus' day: giving to the needy and fasting. In all three, Jesus first says not to imitate the hypocrites who love attention and reputation. He then goes on to say how our Father in heaven would have us carry out these acts of righteousness.

STUDY THE PASSAGE: Matthew 6:5–8

1. Let's read Matthew 6:5–8. What was wrong with the way "the hypocrites" pray (v. 5)?

You may want to define what a hypocrite is before using the term. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be something he or she is not. It is derived from the Greek word for "actor." In Greek dramas, actors used larger than life sized masks to indicate whom they were portraying (Richards, p. 348). In the New Testament, Jesus always uses it in a negative way for someone who pretends to be what they aren't morally or spiritually (Burdick, p. 790).

Hypocrites, in the moral sense, hide behind a mask of respectability. They are more concerned about outward appearances than inner integrity. But God is always interested in our hearts, since our motives, actions and words spring from it. Throughout this "sermon," Jesus suggests that even if a person's visible behavior does not violate the law, one is still sinning if one's thoughts and desires are not right. Jesus introduces this section in Matthew 6:1 by saying, "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them." Then He illustrates this with examples of giving to the needy (verses 2–4), prayer (verses 5–6) and fasting (verses 16–18). While He criticizes those who want to impress other people, He does not say we should stop giving to the poor, praying, or fasting.

In Jesus' day, it was customary for Jews to pray three times a day, usually at the temple. This presented many opportunities for a person praying to be seen publicly. Jesus mentions standing, which was a normal posture for

prayer. However, He talks about the hypocrites who love being in a public place—the temple or even a street corner—where they can obtain the most notice (Keener, p. 138). Jesus is not condemning public prayer, whether it is scheduled or spontaneous. He is condemning prayer that is done to show off—praying that is only for making an impression. The Pharisees were in the habit of praying publicly so that they would look good to others.

2. Where might we pray today to be seen by others?

Today few Christians would want to be seen praying in public, since being “religious” in some cultures is either held in low regard or unsafe. Fellowship meetings, small groups, church services, etc. are the kinds of places that Christians today might want to make an impression by praying. Many see prayer as a merit badge to measure or demonstrate spirituality.

3. What kinds of things might we Christians pretend when we pray?

We might pretend to be more committed to Christ than we really are or to know more than we really do. We might want to leave the impression that we pray all the time and are really close to God when we aren't. While it may be possible to fool the people around us, we can never fool God. He knows all about us and is more concerned with our heart than our outward behavior (1 Samuel 16:7). All of our secret motives, our hidden desires and ambitions, and our private thoughts are “laid bare” before His eyes (Hebrews 4:13).

4. What will/would the hypocrites receive for their prayers (v. 5b)?

Jesus says they have already gotten the reward for what they have done. They wanted to impress others or gain their approval, and that's all they will reap. This may imply that God won't even reward them with an answer to their showy prayers since they honor Him with their lips but their hearts are far from Him (Isaiah 29:13).

5. What *did* Jesus tell His disciples to do when they pray (v. 6)?

Obviously Jesus was making a contrast with the behavior of the hypocrites since He began this verse with the word “But.” He told His followers to go off alone, shut the door, and pray. The emphasis is not on the room itself. Here the Greek word suggests a storeroom, usually the only room in a normal Palestinian home with a door (Keener, *Matthew*, p. 138). But it could be any room at all. Jesus is stressing that you take time to speak privately with God, not the place where that occurs.

Taking verse 6 literally, one might think that Jesus is forbidding all praying in public. However, “if Jesus were forbidding all public prayer, then clearly the early church did not understand him (e.g. [Matthew] 18:19–20; Acts 1:24; 3:1; 4:24–30). ...the person who prays more in public than in private reveals

that he is less interested in God's approval than in human praise. Not piety but a reputation for piety is his concern" (Carson, p. 165).

Anytime we pray when other people can hear us, we may be concerned with how they perceive us. One solution would be the radical approach that Jesus' words literally suggest: never pray around other people. However, even if other people were not present, we still might think about how wonderful our prayers are, how nice it would be if others could hear how well we pray, or even how superior we are for not praying where others could hear us. The problem is not where we pray, but what is in our heart.

Additionally, the Vineyard prayer model for healing is specifically directed towards praying for other people when they are present and can hear what we are praying. And one of the aspects of the Vineyard model is that even if God chooses not to answer our prayer, we should pray in such a way that our prayer blesses the person we are praying for. Consequently, we do need to take into account the effect the words we pray have on the people who hear them, especially the people for whom we are praying. However, our primary focus should not be on these people, but on God, the One we are addressing with our prayer. Granted, we are always likely to have mixed motives—partly focusing on God and partly distracted by trying to impress other people. We still need to try to lay hold of God in our prayers, and allow Him to strip away our vanity that wants to turn our attention back to how we are perceived by other people.

Richard Foster gives advice about dealing with our mixed motives when we pray.

"The truth of the matter is, we all come to prayer with a tangled mass of motives—altruistic *and* selfish, merciful *and* hateful, loving *and* bitter. Frankly, this side of eternity we will *never* unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure. But what I have come to see is that God is big enough to receive us with all our mixture. We do not have to be bright, or pure, or filled with faith, or anything. That is what grace means, and not only are we saved by grace, we live by it as well. And we pray by it" (Foster, *Prayer*, p. 8).

Nevertheless, Jesus' emphasis is on the sincerity of the one praying. Are we approaching the Father because we need to talk? Are we willing to speak to Him in secret and not look for human reward? If there is no audience watching and applauding, if the only one who knows what you're doing is God, if you don't go around afterward boasting about how much time you spent praying "in your closet," then you are following Jesus' instructions about prayer. [Note: Of course, family members or roommates may know that someone habitually spends time alone with the Lord. Parents often have to ask their children not to interrupt unless there's an emergency. We might need to request some silence in order to listen to God. Such communication

or general awareness doesn't jeopardize the benefit of private prayer unless we carry on with a superior attitude or make frequent references to this habit.]

***Jesus was more interested in His disciples' motives for prayer rather than where they prayed. What are some of the things that motivate you to pray?**

There may be a wide variety of answers. Allow people to share whatever they believe are their reasons for spending time in prayer. Certainly some will seem self-centered, but that's healthy for us to admit. [Remember the hypocrites?]

Others may talk about seeing needs in the lives of people they care about, including the sick, those facing temptation, people laying their lives on the line for the gospel, and those without Christ. Some in your group may feel it's our duty to pray because we are expected or urged to (Matthew 6:5; Matthew 7:7; Ephesians 6:18–20; Philippians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; 1 Timothy 2:1–2; James 5:13–18).

Hopefully someone will mention the idea that prayer is responding to God, communicating by listening and talking with Him because we are in a two-way relationship. Richard Foster sees prayer as a result of our “falling in love” with God and conversing with Him out of response to God's “overwhelming love” (Foster, *Prayer*, p. 3). This is a key thought we hope you will repeat throughout this series of studies on prayer. **Prayer is listening and talking to God who graciously has offered an intimate but holy relationship to us through the Lord Jesus Christ.**

At some point in this study, you will also want to emphasize that an appropriate motive for praying (in fact, one of the best motives for praying) is **need**. We need God. He does not need us; He is perfectly sufficient in and of Himself and does whatever pleases Him. Nor does He need our prayers to inform Him of our needs. Jesus even tells us in Matthew 6:8, “...for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.” He is not lonely without us, and we are not earning heavenly “brownie points” by praying. We, however, need to pray because this is a primary way we communicate with our “heavenly” Father. We need Him to live as much as we need food, water and shelter. We acknowledge our dependence on Him by reverently and regularly admitting our life and everything we have comes from Him. We turn to Him for the things that sustain life, in repentance for the things that hinder our relationship with Him and for His help with things that we are unable to handle.

6. How does Jesus tell us to think of God (v. 6)?

Jesus says to pray to “your Father.” Although God used the image of being a Father to Israel (Isaiah 63:16, 64:8; Jeremiah 3:19, 31:9; Hosea 11:1–4; Malachi 1:6, 2:10) and to King David's heir, Solomon (1 Chronicles 22:9–10), some scholars think it was used by way of analogy, not a way to speak to Him

(Carson, p. 169). After their second exile, Jews revered the Lord so much that they would not pronounce His special covenant name, which many translations refer to as “Yahweh” or “LORD” (Harris, p. 157).

Keener writes that there is evidence that Jewish people prayed to “our Heavenly Father.” But it was a radical notion for people of Jesus’ day to hear Jesus use the intimate “Daddy” or “Abba” such as in Mark 14:36 (Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, on Matthew 6:9–10). Jesus referred to God as “Father” throughout the “Sermon on the Mount” and elsewhere (Matthew 11:25–27, 18:10, 14, 19, 35, 23:9, 26:39, 42, 53; Luke 23:34, 46; John 4:12, 21, 23, 5:17, 19–23, 25, 43, 14:6–21, 17:1–12, 20:17, 21).

Subsequently Jesus’ disciples also talked about being His child if one has put his or her trust in Christ’s dying for one’s sins (Ephesians 5:1; 1 John 3:1). The Holy Spirit is God’s Spirit who conveys to us the experience of being adopted as God’s children and enables us to cry “Abba” (Romans 8:15–16; Galatians 4:4–7). Thus we should follow their example of approaching God intimately but reverently when we come to Him in prayer.

***How do you usually approach God when you pray? What images or names come to mind?**

Be aware that some people have not had positive father figures due to death, divorce, absenteeism, neglect, addiction, or abuse. Because of this, we sometimes project all the shortcomings of our earthly fathers on to God. If our earthly fathers were distant or aloof, we might think God is distant and aloof. If our earthly fathers were abusive, we may think God is going to hurt us rather than care for us. Without trivializing such problems, a helpful approach is to reverse the projection. Note: some people may need to confess their wrong beliefs, receive prayer for the Holy Spirit to heal them, undergo counseling if they feel stuck with the negative image, and time to work through such difficulties.

In reversing the projection, ask why do we think that our earthly fathers have come up short? We recognize this because we are comparing our earthly fathers against the ideal Father. In the Bible, Jesus identifies that ideal Father as God. The predominant theme of Jesus’ teachings about His Father was His kindness, His compassion and His accessibility to those who need Him. So while God the Father never ceases to also be God Almighty, as New Testament believers we have the privilege of relating to Him primarily as beloved children who are cared for and cherished.

Through faith in Jesus, we are reunited with God and find the ideal Father that our earthly fathers were unable to be, no matter how hard they may have tried. As we grow in our relationship to God, the Holy Spirit may continue to reveal to us ways in which our idea of what a father is does not match God’s idea. So while we may start from our perspective on what it means for God to be our Father, we should remember that God, as Father, will teach us what a father truly should be, and will be that Father for us.

Ultimately, we should help our group members understand that a person living in Jesus' day had a positive feeling about the term "father." This was someone whom his children would respect as a good provider and as a very dependable adult. He would love them but not indulge them to the point of avoiding discipline for their good (Keener, *Matthew*, p. 141).

7. What other type of prayer did Jesus warn His disciples against (v. 7)?

A "pagan" or "heathen" is someone who has no knowledge of or relationship with the true and living God. The word "babble" implies meaningless, repetitive words. Jesus characterizes "pagan" prayers as wordy and ineffective. This type of praying is the product of a faulty view of God. It is the view that God is not good or generous—that in fact, He begrudges us everything He gives us. So we must put on a good show when we pray if we hope to get anything from Him at all. Underlying this is fear and a lack of trust in the Lord. Prayer becomes twisted into a way to manipulate God in order to obtain the desired goal.

Part of the problem seems to be that "the pagans" view the words or even the sounds of the words as having power in themselves. This approach might include "magic words" or a secret formula to get what one wants. But Christians cannot force God to do anything, since the Bible teaches that God is completely sovereign and free (Isaiah 46:8–10; Psalm 115:3; Isaiah 43:10–13; 1 Timothy 6:14–16). God is not even obligated to do what we want because we have prayed "the promises" of Scripture! Paul reminds us, "Who has ever given to God that He should repay him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:35–36).

Neither is Jesus condemning long prayers (1 Kings 8:22–61; John 6:12–13; John 17:1–25) or repeated requests (Matthew 7:7–8; Luke 18:1). In contrast to the Jews, pagans prayed long prayers because they believed it would increase the chances of their prayers being answered (1 Kings 18:25–29). In the Bible, some of the most famous prayers are actually quite short (Exodus 32:31–32; 1 Kings 18:36–37; Luke 18:13; John 11:41–42). This reveals genuine faith in God's goodness, attentiveness, faithfulness, and power.

***How might we err today and pray like the pagans?**

We might pray with the mindset "if we just say the right words, God will answer our prayer" or "if we pray long enough, God will do what we want." Sometimes the phrase, "in the Name of Jesus" gets tacked on at the end of a prayer as if that would make a powerful difference. Another example, less often used by Christians, might be a "mantra" (special phrase) that is repeated over and over again in order to induce a meditative mental state. John Wimber wrote, "When we pray 'in Jesus' name,' we pray as his

representative; we ask the things that he would ask for if he were in our situation” (Wimber, p. 23).

8. What did Jesus teach as the reason for not praying like the pagans (v. 8)?

Jesus simply said that our Father knows what we need before we even ask Him. Like any loving parent or adult caring for a child, God is attuned to our needs. He is, however, superior to everyone since He knows all things. Thus even before we recognize or express our needs, God is aware of them. Jesus is saying that God is not too busy to notice or care about what we need. We don't have to beg, stage a sit-in, gather signatures on a petition, mount a public-relations campaign, or throw a tantrum in order to persuade Him to listen to or provide for us.

9. Why should we pray if God already knows what we need?

Help your group remember that prayer is simply talking to God. The purpose of prayer is to develop our relationship with Him, to express our dependence on Him, and often to help clarify what it is we want and why. Sometimes God uses the process of prayer to reveal our true motives, desires that conflict with His will, or areas of our lives that need to be transformed. For example, if we are continually complaining to God about things we don't like, we may begin to recognize a pattern of ingratitude. If we are constantly praying about worst-case scenarios that never materialize, we may finally realize that underlying our fervent prayers is a root of anxiety. [Of course, one could argue that the prayers are being answered and that's why those scenarios don't occur!]

*How does knowing that your Father knows your needs before you express them make you feel?

Some may ask, “If God already knows what I need, what is the point of my asking?” This should not make us feel resigned and unmotivated about prayer. Instead, we ought to feel **confident** that when we do ask God for something, He is both ready and willing to give us everything we need. He loves us and is therefore well aware of everything that is going on in our lives

When we pray, if we believe that God's desire is to be good to us, then we might also feel **thankful**. We might be glad that God is not like Ebenezer Scrooge before his transformation, but rather is like the father of the two sons who waits for and welcomes his prodigal home with affection, honor, and a banquet.

The Bible doesn't say there are wrong things to ask for in prayer (aside from sin) but there are wrong attitudes to have when asking, such as self-indulgence (James 4:3). Even Jesus asked the Father if He could somehow avoid the cross (Luke 22:42). His attitude in the end, however, was one of complete submission to and trust in the Father's will for Him. Therefore, we

don't need to worry that our Father will impatiently rebuke us for asking for something that may not be what He knows is best.

Finally, if we know that our Father already knows what we need before we ask, then our prayers do not need to concentrate on telling God what we want or badgering God to do our will. Instead, we can feel **peace** that He will say yes and keep His word to us. This frees us to wait and listen to Him. Our prayers can shift towards allowing God to tell us what He wants and to conform our wills and our lives to what He knows we need.

APPLICATION

***What is wrong with both the hypocrites and the pagans' prayers?**

The common thread in both of the wrong kinds of prayers is that they are not focused on God or His will. The "hypocrite" wants to impress other people and the "pagan" wants a "magic formula" to get whatever he or she asks for. Just as the "hypocrite" errs by focusing on the effect of prayer on others, the "pagan" errs by focusing on the prayer itself. Jesus' point seems to be that the true focus of prayer should be God. After all, prayer is simply having a two-way conversation with God.

***What have you learned about prayer from this passage?**

***What changes do you think you need to make in your habit of prayer?**

***How can our group support the changes we need to make in our prayer habits?**

***How frequently do you pray "in secret"? Why? Is this question even appropriate to ask?**

***What reward do you want for your prayers?**

***When have you felt you were trying to manipulate God rather than praying with confidence in His love, goodness, faithfulness, and power?**

***How can we tell the difference between persevering in prayer and faithless, unnecessary repetition?**

***Does anyone need help in seeing God as the Father revealed in the Bible rather than a replica of his or her earthly dad?**

WRAPPING IT UP

According to Jesus' teaching in this passage, the focus of our prayers is to be on God. We should resist praying in order to impress other people, and we should not think that our words are what give power to our prayers. Instead, we understand that God is our loving Father who knows what we need and invites us to participate in His work. Consequently, we ask God to do His will in us and in the world. To make that specific, we need to ask God what His will is, so we can pray for that.

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