

PURPOSE OF PRAYER

From John Mac Arthur's Matthew 6:5 Sermon

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This article will be an overview of what is commonly called "The Lord's Prayer." It would be more appropriate to call it "The Disciple's Prayer" since it was given by Jesus as a lesson on how His disciples should pray (see Matthew 6:5-15). The prayer which should really be called "The Lord's Prayer" is found in the book of John, chapter 17, where Jesus Christ, our Lord, prays for Himself, for His disciples, and for all believers.

Once people come to believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, they next must become disciples in order to properly grow in their faith. A disciple is one who studies the Word of God (The Holy Bible) and regularly prays, developing a personal relationship with God. To pray properly, it is important that we first study God's Word. We will not know how to pray unless we know what the Bible teaches about God, about God's will, about our lives and our problems, therefore it is the study of the Word of God that gives birth to a meaningful prayer life. If we'd study the Bible a little bit, we could probably cut down the time we need to pray, because we'd eliminate a lot of superfluous stuff.

Let me show you what I mean. There are people who plead with God to give them the Holy Spirit; they already have the Holy Spirit. There are people who plead with Christ for strength, but the Bible says, "You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you." I've heard people stand up and say, Lord be with us, and the Bible says, "Lo, I am with you always." What I am saying is that unless we understand the truth of the Word of God, we don't really know how to pray. The two ultimate tests for spiritual maturity, or spirituality, are the study of the Word of God and as a corollary prayer, prayer that is guided by a comprehension of God's truth. And when we study God's Word and discover God's truth, we discover also the real condition of our own hearts, the real condition of our own spiritual lives and that drives us into a private personal prayer where we open up our hearts to God.

People say that this prayer is something brand new, a new teaching from Jesus and not found in the Old Testament, but in total it really is not new. It is simply a reaffirmation of something very old. Let's look at some *historic Jewish perspectives on prayer*. The Old Testament (OT) Jews believed that the Word of God revealed that God wanted to hear their prayers, that God wanted to hear their hearts cry. The rabbis believed that prayer was not just communication, but that it was a mighty weapon, that in a way it released God's power. The OT Jews also believed that prayer is not some kind of an emergency appeal, it is an unbroken conversation built around a living, loving fellowship with God. They had the right perspective - prayer was communion, fellowship, unbroken; prayer was to a God who really wanted to hear them, who really cared and whose mind was uncluttered by the multitude of prayers.

The OT Jews believed that prayers should incorporate certain elements. **Number one**, they thought prayer should incorporate *love, adoration and praise* toward God. **Secondly**, they felt that prayer should incorporate *gratitude or thanksgiving*. They said this, "All prayers will someday be discontinued, except the prayers of thanksgiving." They were right. When the day comes that we have no more to ask for, we will have everything to be thankful for. **Thirdly**, they believed that their prayers should incorporate *a sense of God's holiness, a sense of awe, a sense of reverence*. They realized that when they entered into prayer, they came face to face with God. In many of David's prayers, before he can ever come to the place of request, he affirms the nature and the character and the majesty and the holiness of God.

Another thing, **fourthly**, the Jews felt that in their prayers there should be a patent *desire to obey God*, that you did not pray unless your heart was really right. A true Jew went with a spirit of obedience desiring to please God. Further, **fifthly**, Jewish prayers incorporated *a sense of confession of*

sin. When they went to God they knew that they were unclean. **Sixthly**, they believed that prayer was to *be unselfish*. The Jews had a sense of community that I don't think we really understand. They had a sense of the national. They were a theology ruled by God, and the nation was essential. Theirs were prayers that encompassed the whole, they were not isolated out to the individual. A true believing Jew in the Old Testament would say "Lord, don't do something for somebody that messes up what needs to be done for the majority, and do what advances Your cause among Your people, not what I want personally." You find no singular personal pronouns in this Matthew 6 prayer, it always says, "Our Father," "our daily bread," "our debts," "our debtors." Why? Because true prayer encompasses the community of faith, it never isolates one individual out to have their needs met no matter how it affects everybody else.

Seventhly, the Jews believed that their prayers included *perseverance*; they believed you were to just continue to pray, you don't give up. Finally, **eighthly**, an element of their prayers was *humility*. A true Jew was coming into prayer to submit himself to the will of God. Even Jesus, the truest Jew that ever lived, prayed in the garden "Nevertheless, not my will, but thy will be done." Listen (Mac Arthur says) prayer is not asking God to do my will, it is bringing myself into conformity with His will. It is asking Him to do His will and give me the grace to enjoy it. Mac Arthur also said that all 8 of the elements listed above were part of the traditional Jewish prayer life of a true Jew. The Jews said all of these elements belong in prayer, but not superficially, instead with a great commitment and a great intensity and a great concentration and a great devotion.

By Jesus' time the Jewish leaders had gotten their prayer priorities messed up. They had become hypocritical, selfish, and self-serving. So what you have in verses 9 to 13 is Jesus reaffirming what right prayer is; He is reiterating the ingredients of the traditional Jewish prayer.

In many churches today, we recite this "Lord's Prayer" in our services. Was this Jesus' intent – for this prayer to just be recited? Mac Arthur says "No, I don't think so, I think its fine to recite it, just as its fine to read any part of the Bible, but I don't think it is a prayer to only be recited. I'll give you several reasons. **Number one** – this prayer is recorded twice in Scripture, one in Matthew 6 and one in Luke 11, and it differs in both places. It is substantially the same but the words are different. If the Lord was giving us a prayer to be memorized and recited, He wouldn't have given us different words the two times He gave it, He would have given it the same way each time. **Secondly**, in Luke 11 they said, "Teach us to pray." They didn't say teach us a prayer. The Lord was not giving them a prayer, He was teaching them to pray. And by the way, wouldn't it seem a little silly if in Matthew chapter 6, verse 7 it says, "And when you pray, use not vain repetition, as the pagan," and then immediately follow it by giving us a prayer we're supposed to repeat? That would be totally ridiculous; it is vain repetition that He's trying to avoid. **Thirdly**, there is no occasion in the entire New Testament where this prayer is ever repeated by anybody. It is not a prayer to be made a ritual.

What Jesus is giving here is a prayer outline with the basic elements of prayer. This prayer covers everything; it teaches us so much about prayer and there are so many ways to see this prayer. Now let's look at a few ways to view this prayer. This prayer unfolds the *relationship* that we have with God. "Our Father" means that we have a **Father-child relationship with God**. "Hallowed be thy name" is a **deity-worshiper relationship with God**. "Thy kingdom come" is a **sovereign- subject relationship with God**. "Thy will be done" is a **Master-servant relationship with God**. "Give us our daily bread" is a **benefactor-beneficiary relationship with God**. "Forgive us our (trespasses or our) debts" is a **Savior-sinner relationship with God**. "Lead us not into temptation is a **guide-pilgrim relationship with God**.

Let's look at it another way. It defines the *spirit*, or attitude, in which we are to pray. "Our," that's an **unselfish spirit**, then "Father" is a **family spirit**; "Hallowed be thy name" is a **reverent spirit**; "Thy kingdom come" is a **loyal spirit**; "Thy will be done" is a **submissive spirit**; "Give us our daily bread" is a **dependent spirit**; "Forgive us our trespasses" is a **penitent spirit**; "Lead us not into temptation" is a

humble spirit; “Thine is the kingdom” is a **confident spirit**; “and the power” is a **triumphant spirit**, “and the glory” is a **exultant spirit**.

This prayer could be divided simply into three elements, and then three more elements. The *first three* deal with **God**, the *second three* with **man**. The first three (“Hallowed be thy name,” “Thy kingdom come,” and “Thy will be done”) deal with **God’s glory**, and the second three (“Give us our daily bread,” “Forgive us our debts,” and “lead us not into temptation”) deal with **man’s needs**. All prayer is to begin with the character of God, putting God in His supreme place. When God is put first and made the priority in our prayer, prayer makes sense.

Another way to look at it – the first three **show the purpose of prayer**: to hallow the name of God, to bring in His kingdom, and to do His will. The second three **show by what means** His name is hallowed, His kingdom is lifted up and His will is done: by His providing for us (giving us our daily bread), by His pardoning us (forgiving our trespasses and debts), and by His protecting us (leading us not into temptation). As God provides, pardons and protects, He consequently is exalted in His glory, in His kingdom and in His will.

Still another way to look at it: first of all God is a **Father** (“Our Father”) who provides for our needs – our daily bread, then he is a **King** (“Thy kingdom come”) who forgives our debts and pardons us, and He is a **Master** (“Thy will be done”) who leads us not into temptation. Remember prayer is never an attempt to bend the will of God to my desire; prayer is to bend me to fit the will of God.

This little prayer encompasses the **three time dimensions** of life: the **present** is represented by our daily bread, the **past** is the forgiveness for our sins (our debts), and the **future** is the leading us not into temptation. Bread is for our **physical** needs, forgiveness is for our **mental** needs (it relieves the anguish of guilt), and leading us not into temptation is for our **spiritual** needs.

The whole of this model prayer focuses on God: “Our Father who art in heaven” – that’s **God’s Paternity**, “Hallowed be thy name” – that’s **God’s Priority**, “Thy kingdom come” – that’s **God’s Program**, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” – that’s **God’s Purpose**, “Give us this day our daily bread” – that’s **God’s Provision**, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” – that’s **God’s Pardon**, “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil” – that’s **God’s Protection**, “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever” – that’s **God’s Preeminence**.

Everything in this prayer seeks to glorify God, seeks to lift up His name, seeks to exalt His holiness – that’s the purpose of all prayer. If you think prayer is for you, you have missed the point. That’s why we get so messed up, we’re praying for ourselves; we don’t take into account the whole community of faith and we don’t take into account the whole will of God and the perimeters of His own Kingdom.

The reason you pray and the reason God answers is to put Himself on display, to put His glory on display, that’s it. When you have a physical need and you pray and God gives it, the meeting of that need isn’t so you can have what you want, it is so that you will know that God meets needs. His glory is the issue. So when you pray, what you’re doing is submitting to His sovereignty, and that’s the affirmation of the Disciple’s Prayer. That’s the way we want to look at it. It begins with adoring God – “Our Father, who art in heaven,” and it ends with adoring God again – “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.”

Reciting this prayer is alright if it helps us memorize it; and if we memorize this prayer, we can use it as an outline. Thinking about the meaning of each section, we can use it as a guide. Recite a section then elaborate in your own words what is on your heart. If you repeat this pattern of recitation and elaboration for each section till the end of the prayer, you will have prayed a powerful and comprehensive prayer.