

812 Help Me to Pray

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

From time to time, I believe all of us feel the need to re-enroll the school of prayer. Recently a friend asked me to help him learn to pray more effectively. As I pondered his question, I thought about my own prayer life and how I need to improve. Today we're going to the Bible to find out how to pray more effectively. In Luke 11:1-4 the Bible says: Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." And he said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation." Jesus in this instance wasn't trying to teach the disciples a ritual prayer to say but helping them to know what to pray in addressing God, the Father. Like the disciples, we all need to know how to pray to our Father.

Most of us have heard the Lord's Prayer at one time or another. Luke's version is a little shorter than the one we read in the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 6, but there are many of the same points. Jesus taught us to pray in this way. This passage is worth a very close examination. It is our task to go to the Bible and see what Jesus our Lord desires from us—not looking at what Jesus will accept, but what He desires. Our task is to do what pleases God and to pray in the way that He desires. Worship to God is when holy people praise a holy God in a holy way. We should be such people.

The first thing we should know, if we wish to make our prayers more effective, is to recall that we are praying to God, our Father. God is occasionally called a father in the Old Testament. He is called the Father who created us in Isaiah 63:16 and Malachi 2:10, but for the most part the Old Testament rarely speaks of God the way Jesus does as a Father. More importantly, Jesus uses the phrase "our Father, who is in heaven." Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus refers to our Father who is in heaven. Have you ever thought about that? When we pray, we are not talking to a peer, an acquaintance, or even to a boss. We are speaking to a Person greater than a governor, a senator, or the president. We are speaking to the God who created us and who is the ruler of the entire world. We should give Him our utmost respect.

Jesus was indeed the Son of God, the only begotten Son. Throughout his life, Jesus called the God of heaven his Father. The relationship of father and son is different than merely a creature to his creator. God is not some strange and distant "Force" out in the universe; He is close like a father to his children. When we become Christians, we also become children of God. John said about Jesus in John 1:11-13: "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." Through Christ, we can say to the God of all, "our Father." He is indeed "our" Father in Christ.

Then, have you considered the phrase, "Hallowed be your name"? The word "hallowed" is an old word that means to make holy or to consecrate as sacred. I fear we have lost the sense of the sacred in our day. We have forgotten that things holy are to be revered. God is God, and we are not gods. We are speaking to the One who has all power and authority in prayer. We are speaking to the One who will one day judge our souls. We are speaking to our God, who knows all things, who is all-wise, all-loving, and entirely pure and holy. When Isaiah came in to the presence of God in Isaiah, chapter 6, he saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. The seraphim called out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" My friend, when you pray, do you think of the holiness of God?

Isaiah then said in chapter 6, verse 5: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" When we consider the greatness of God and our own sinful lives, we realize that on our own none of us can stand righteous before God. We are all lost without Christ. We are all sinful people living in a sinful land. The wonderful thing is that because of Jesus and his blood, we can be cleansed from that sin. God's grace should not encourage us to take God for granted. Rather it should make us appreciate God all the more.

The apostle Paul by inspiration said in Titus 2:11-14, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works." Approaching God in prayer has as much to do with how we live as anything. God wants us to pray to Him with reverence in our hearts and in our lives. We cannot live like pagans and expect God to come running to hear our prayers. James said in James 5:16, "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." Reverence is not merely to be in our tone of voice; it also must be in our lives.

Second, Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The kingdom of Jesus, of course, came in the church. Paul said in Colossians 1:13-14, "He [God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." The kingdom, or the church, is where the King Jesus rules. Jesus taught us to pray that the will of God be done on earth as it is in heaven. How I wish and pray that were true! How I wish every person were doing the will of God on earth! Can you imagine how much better this world would be, if everyone followed God's will?

This would be a world without crime or war or violence. This would be a world that honored father and mother, honored marriage, and valued children. This would be a world where people treated others the way they wanted to be treated, keeping the Golden rule of Matthew 7:12. Our world wouldn't be so selfish and self-centered but would care for the poor and the downcast. We'd live in a world that gives much thanks and makes no complaint, a world that has much trust and no deception, a world where people are genuine not fraudulent, and a world that lifts up rather than tears down. It is easy for us to want everyone else to pray and to live out the prayer "Thy will be done." But what of each of us? Can we pray that? Are we willing to live by the will of God? It would be futile to pray something we don't mean.

Next, Jesus teaches us to pray, "Give us each day our daily bread." Have you thought lately about how dependent we are on God? All that we possess comes from His hands. I fear that life sometimes hands us a mixed blessing. People work hard, and God blesses them richly with fine houses and cars. Then, as time goes by they forget what God has done for them. No one wants to be forgotten, especially not God. Yet people go through life forgetting all that God has done for them, that every "good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17). God is good to us. He gives us the food we eat, the water we drink, and the air we breathe. The houses we own are from His hand. Indeed he gives us daily the things we need.

The Psalmist David reminds us in Psalm 103:1-5, "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's." God is so very good to us from day to day to day. We must never forget his benefits. Prayer reminds us of our own weakness before God. It is God who gives us the strength and wisdom to make a living. Moses said in Deuteronomy 8:18, "You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth." Whatever we have comes from God. Prayer helps us never to forget that.

Next, we should pray, "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us." Most people would rather forget about their sins, yet the Lord calls for us not only to confess our sins but to ask God to forgive us of our sins. Some people are saying today there is no such thing as sin, but down deep in our hearts we know there is. Our consciences tell us when we have done wrong, and we cannot escape it. Let's face it; we need God's forgiveness. We are asking God not to hold the things we have done wrong against us. None of us could want to be enemies of God. We cannot think about standing against the God who one day will hold our souls in his hand. We want the blessing and love of God in our lives, and sin stands in the way of that blessing. We need forgiveness, freedom from sin. The only way we can get that as Christians is to confess and repent of our sins and ask God's forgiveness.

John said in 1 John 1:9-10, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." Confession of sin takes away the deceitfulness. We are no longer hiding from God but revealing to Him not only that we have sinned but also our sorrow for our sins. Our godly sorrow should lead us to repentance. We should not confuse admitting our sins with repenting of them. Repentance is a change of heart that leads to a change of behavior. Just because we admit to God we have sinned doesn't mean that we will cease sinning. Repentance is turning away from sin (because we love God) and turning to God's ways. It is self-deception to ask God to forgive our sins and then keep on repeating those very sins. Let us confess and forsake sin, so that we may show God our love.

But forgiveness is not just one way. God expects us to forgive others who sin against us. If we are unwilling to forgive others, we cannot ask God to forgive us. If God's love hasn't touched our lives enough to make us open to others, how can we expect God to remain open to us? Jesus said in Matthew 6:14-15, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Really meaningful prayer comes from hearts that are willing to live what they pray. God knows our hearts.

When our hearts and our lives match our words, God hears our prayers; but when we rebel against God's will, God closes his ears against us.

Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 59:1-2, "Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear." The most important step in praying effectively is to get our souls right with the living God. Remember what James said in chapter 5, verse 16: "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." God will hear our prayers if we put Him first in our lives, if we love Him, and if we stay away from what is sinful. God invites us to pray and wants to hear from us. Let's live for the Lord and take our requests to His throne. God is waiting for us.

Abraham Lincoln said, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day." Many people cheat themselves by never praying to God. They cheat themselves out of a relationship with God, out of the help of God, and out of the blessing of God by failing to pray. We can never be good at praying if we never pray. Those who pray in the sunshine find themselves well able to pray when the clouds roll in, but those who never pray until trouble comes round hardly know how to pray. Jesus began the agony of the cross praying "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He ended his time on the cross, praying, "Father into Your hands, I commit my spirit." Jesus could not help but pray at the hardest moments. He knew how much He needed His Father. We too need our Father's love and His ear. We need God as much as we need air to breathe, water to drink, and food to eat. We can't do without Him, and we don't have to. We can have God in our lives helping us every step of the way. If you are not yet a Christian, I hope that you will not waste another day of your life waiting to become one. If you believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God; if you are willing to repent of your sins; if you are willing to confess the name of Jesus before others; and if you will be baptized in water in the name of the Lord for the forgiveness of your sins, the Lord will forgive all your sins, add you to His church, and make you His child. Why not become a Christian today and enter into a loving relationship with the Lord Jesus. Nothing is more important than this! If you are not a Christian, don't waste another day without the grace of God in your life! Don't allow sin to keep you separated from God! Get right with God. And dear Christian friend, don't complain that God is not hearing you, if indeed you are not listening to God. So many Christians today wonder why God is distant. But it isn't God who pulled away from God but you who have pulled away from God. When Christians quit the Lord, quit the church, and quit living righteously, they should not be surprised that God is not any longer close to them. They have deserted God. My friend, the Lord would love to have you come back to Him. Won't you do that today? Won't you come back to God?

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