

WHAT JESUS TAUGHT ABOUT PRAYER

(Taken and adapted from 'The Red Bits – A Study Guide' by Michael Button)

The Disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, and in reply He gave them what is commonly known as *The Lord's Prayer*. We shall be looking at this Prayer to see what we can learn for our personal and corporate praying.

INTRODUCTION

When a father and his children are in a good, loving relationship, it is natural that they will often speak to one another. It is to be expected, then, that the Son of God will have often spoken to His Father in Heaven. On occasions Jesus slipped away to a lonely spot to pray at length.¹ At other times, His disciples heard Him pray and recorded some of His words (*read* Luke 10:21 and Luke 22:42). His longest recorded prayer was that at the Last Supper, shortly before His crucifixion.² Since His disciples were aware of His practice of prayer, and they knew that John the Baptist had taught his disciples to pray, they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray (*read* Luke 11:1). In reply Jesus gave them the model prayer that is commonly known as The Lord's Prayer, though many Christians justifiably prefer to call it The Disciples' Prayer.

We shall look at this model prayer later. First let us see some of the things that Jesus taught about prayer itself.

A. JESUS' TEACHING AND EXAMPLE

1. Jesus expects us to pray (*read* Matt 6:7-8 and Luke 12:30-31). Some may raise the question, "Since God knows all things, He knows what we need; so what is the point in asking Him?" Jesus was aware of this question but, rather than God's foreknowledge being a reason for ceasing to pray, it ought to be reason for praying more intelligently – not mechanically and repeatedly reminding God of what He already knows but asking in the realisation that He knows the matter and its solution better than we do. So we are to ask with confidence that what we receive from God will be for the best (*read* Luke 11:9-13).

Our relationship to God in prayer can be similar to that which Jesus had with His Father. He knows our needs and wants the best for His children.

2. Pray to our Father. Prayer arises from the relationship we have with God, through Jesus – as children of a loving Heavenly Father. Jesus said to pray to *Our Father* both in corporate and in private prayer.³

¹ Mark 1:35.

² John, Chapter 17.

³ Matt 6:9; Luke 11:1.

Some Christians find it easier to address Jesus in their prayers. This is understandable, since Jesus came to make God more fully known through showing us the character of God by living in our human form. The relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the Trinity is such that when we speak to one, we are in effect speaking to all three (as we saw in Study 2), so our prayers are being heard and received by the Father when they are heard and received by Jesus. In fact, when Jesus said we can ask *in His Name*, He said that *He* (Jesus) will do it (*read* John 14:13-14). Therefore we should not be too anxious if we find we are directing our prayers to Jesus (or for that matter to the Holy Spirit) instead of to the Father.

3. Pray in Jesus' Name (*read* John 16:24). Perhaps it would be presumptuous for us who have been disobedient to God to ask Him for anything, but it is no presumption for the obedient Son of God to ask. Believers are given the great privilege of asking on the merits of Jesus. As Herbert Lockyer describes it: "In reliance upon all that He is in Himself and all that He has accomplished on our behalf."⁴ An illustration of the principle might be seen in the case of a company employee, who is unknown to a supplier, placing an order on behalf of their employer who has a good reputation with the supplier. The order is accepted on credit in the good name of the employer, not in the name of the employee who places the order.

4. Pray specifically and sincerely (*read* Matt 6:7). Prayer is not reciting words as though they were a magic formula but using specific words to which we have given thought – just as when we are speaking to one another. That is not to say that written prayers do not have their place. Sometimes we can use the words of a psalmist or of someone who is gifted in verbal expression. The key is to make the thoughts being expressed sincerely our own and not to say them without proper attention to their meaning.

5. Keep Praying. For reasons better known to God, we sometimes need to pray for a long time before our prayers are answered. Jesus expected this, and told a parable to illustrate the need to keep praying when necessary (*read* Luke 18:1-8). The point of the story is not that God is reluctant to answer our prayers (the judge's reluctance is merely for emphasis) but that we should keep pressing through with a prayer. Perhaps, like me, you have prayed for many years before an answer came, or you have received a calm assurance in your spirit that God has the matter in hand and you can stop asking. If you have received neither an answer nor assurance, keep your prayers going.

Jesus Himself repeated the same prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, just prior to His crucifixion (*read* Matt 26:39, 42 & 44).

The repetition needed for such continual prayer is different to the *vain repetitions* we mentioned in point 4 above, provided we do not let the familiarity of our repeated request become words spoken with little thought.

⁴ (Herbert Lockyer, *What Jesus Taught About ...*, vol 3, page 70.)

6. Pray in Faith (*read* Matt 21:21-22). These words of Jesus cannot be taken in isolation from other Scriptures concerning faith and prayer. The faith we bring to our requests must be that of confidence in God's will, not determination to satisfy *our* will (*read* 1 John 5.14). We not only need to *know* God's will but to be *doing* God's will (*read* 1 John 3:22).

Commenting on these words of Jesus, D.A. Carson writes: "Belief in the New Testament is never reduced to forcing oneself to 'believe' what he does not really believe. Instead it is related to genuine trust in God and obedience to and discernment of his will. Though exercised by the believer, such faith reposes on the will of God who acts."⁵

7. Do not harbour unforgiveness (*read* Mark 11:25-26). Our attitude to our brothers and sisters in Christ must be in accord with the attitude of our Heavenly Father to all of His children. His desire is to forgive and for His forgiven children to be in the harmony of having nothing against one another. The principle can be seen in a family where the children are squabbling with one another and coming to their parents, wanting to justify their own points of view. Their parents are likely to send them away to sort out their differences before bringing their requests.

8. Pray in Private (*read* Matt 6:5-6). Jesus is not saying that we should be ashamed to be seen at prayer but that we are not to make a show of it. Visible prayer was one of the ways in which the Pharisees used to show off their piety, proudly displaying how religious they were. We are not to do that but to be humble in the practices of our faith. Alone and quiet, we can have an intimate conversation with our Heavenly Father, expressing things that are on our hearts without being concerned that others might hear.

9. Pray Together. There are times when we are to pray with others, not for show but for solidarity. The model prayer is addressed to **Our Father**. It is when two or three are asking together that Jesus especially promises His presence (*read* Matt 18:19-20).

10. Prayer with Fasting. Regular fasting (abstaining from food for a set period) was a practice which the Jews were commanded to do under the Old Testament Law. Christians are not bound by the regulations of Jewish Law and Jesus did not instruct His disciples to fast, but He seemed to take it for granted they would do so by saying "**When you fast**"⁶ He also mentioned that, in some circumstances, fasting might need to accompany prayer for effective spiritual warfare.⁷ Fasting releases time for prayer and diverts attention from bodily needs to focus on the spiritual.

Activity 1: Which of the following statements are true regarding prayer?

(a) God knows what we want in life, so we should only pray about spiritual things.

⁵ (*The Expository Bible Commentary*, vol 8 page 446

⁶ Matt 6:16-17.

⁷ Matt 17:18-21.

- (b) It is insincere to use prayers written by others.
- (c) If we pray in Jesus' Name our request is based on His merit.
- (d) We should pray in secret but not make it a secret that we pray.
- (e) The only condition to prayer is faith.
- (f) Jesus did not tell us to fast, so He does not expect us to do it.
- (g) Only prayer with fasting is effective.

B. THE MODEL PRAYER

Let us turn our attention now to the prayer Jesus taught His disciples in answer to their request "*Teach us to pray.*"⁸ It is reported by both Matthew and Luke, but Matthew's version is slightly longer and is the one more often used in public worship. We shall study Matthew's version in Matt 6, verses 9 to 13. This will only be a brief outline of the principles taught through this model prayer. It would take several studies to cover these few verses in depth. Many books have been written about the prayer and students will benefit from reading further on the subject.

v9: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Prayer should start with acknowledging to whom we are praying. This enables us to realise the attributes of the God to whom we are bringing our requests. He is our Father, so we can put our requests to Him as children would to their father, in the knowledge of His love for them. He is in heaven, far above all and in a position to take control of the matters for which we are praying. He is holy (the meaning of *Hallowed*), so we can be sure His answers to our requests and His dealings with us will be in righteousness and with perfection. Addressing God as Holy also balances any over-familiarity we may have in addressing Him as Father – He is approachable yet He is awesome.

v10 Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We are here praying for what *God* wants before we ask for what *we* want. *Your kingdom come* and *Your will be done on earth* are basically saying the same thing, the second being a description of what it means for God's Kingdom to be established on earth.

v11 Give us this day our daily bread. Here we are praying for what is needed to sustain life (not for the luxuries we want in addition to our needs). Though God gives our daily sustenance whether we ask Him or not, it is good and proper that we recognise and acknowledge His providence. Jesus taught us to live one day at a time (*read* Matt 6:34), so this prayer asks only for *today's* needs, not tomorrow's. If we make this petition thoughtfully, we may well pray for those who are less privileged and ask for our Father to provide for their needs too.

v12 And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. The word '*trespasses*,' which is most commonly used in reciting this prayer corporately, comes from the Church of England Prayer Book rather than from the Bible but it is a correct interpretation of what Jesus means by '*debts*.' Every trespass (or sin) puts us in debt to God, a debt that He cancels over and over through the death of His Son.

⁸ Luke 11:1.

While we still live in the flesh, with the old nature within, we are constantly in need of forgiveness.

It is important to notice that asking forgiveness for ourselves is linked with the way we forgive others. If our forgiveness is shallow, we should not expect to receive the full forgiveness of God. Jesus expanded on this at the end of the prayer, reinforcing the condition of forgiving others if we want to be forgiven by God (*read* Matt 6:14-15).

v13a And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. This is sometimes translated 'from evil,' but the implication is the same. God Himself tempts no one,⁹ but He may allow Satan to put us through testing times. Our Father is not like an over-protective parent. He allows certain – though potentially dangerous – experiences so that we might mature and be strengthened by them. These requests are an acknowledgement of our frailty, asking that God will spare us from too much temptation, and a realisation that we need Him to deliver us from Satan's wiles and evil designs.

v13b For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. The prayer ends, as it began, with turning our thoughts to God – how great He is in power and glory.

Amen is a Hebrew word meaning 'surely.' We tend to use it the end of our prayers as if we were closing a two-way radio conversation with "Over and out." But its real purpose, in corporate prayer in particular, is to acknowledge that we mean what we have said or what others have said on our behalf.

The prayer is short in itself but its structure can be used as a pattern for longer prayers that cover more ground and give more attention to praise and petition.

Activity 2: Write the Lord's Prayer in your own words, using modern language. If you are studying in a group and feel able to read your version out loud to the group, please do so when the Facilitator asks.

⁹ James 1:13.