

ALL KINDS OF PRAYERS

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Last week, I related to you the stories of two people who, in their desperation, sought Jesus for help, and their faith was rewarded in miraculous ways. Although they approached Him in dramatically different ways, each gained His favorable attention. Clearly, there is not just one way to pray. So how should we pray?

Let me bring you to Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Perhaps you are familiar with his advice to "put on the whole armor of God," but what is that armor for? Battle, of course, but what battle?

Ephesians 6:13 Therefore, put on every piece of God's armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil. Then after the battle you will still be standing firm. ¹⁴ Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness. ¹⁵ For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared. ¹⁶ In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil. ¹⁷ Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.

The battleground on which Christians conquer is the ground of prayer. If we're "dressed for battle" but not engaging in prayer, we're really only dressed for show. And if we're praying without the proper equipment, our frustration and failure are assured.

The Amplified Bible illuminates the original language:

Ephesians 6:18 Pray at all times (on every occasion, in every season) in the Spirit, with all [manner of] prayer and entreaty. To that end keep alert and watch with strong purpose and perseverance, interceding in behalf of all the saints (God's consecrated people).

Thus, the New International Version renders verse 18 this way:

Ephesians 6:18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with **all kinds of prayers** and requests.

Today, let's learn something about "all kinds of prayer." I cannot hope to describe them all, for they are as many as the people who pray and the situations that prompt them to pray. But I hope we can unlearn some bad habits, and begin to develop some good ones.

Perhaps you have been discouraged by your experience in praying. Found it difficult to focus on a subject. Can't seem to find the right words to express your feelings.

Perhaps, when praying in groups, others have verbally walked away with the prayer meeting and left you to conclude that you're not very good at prayer.

Perhaps you could not tell if God had answered you, or perhaps you have not seen the answer you thought you had received.

Don't let the differences or the difficulties in prayer get you down. God has made prayer accessible for everyone.

As I discuss “all kinds of prayer” I will begin by noting some common prayer habits that make things more difficult.

Words — Many or Few

Everyone will not be equally verbal in prayer. Some people express a greater command of the language than others. Some people are naturally louder than others. Some people think more quickly than others, while others think more deeply.

Problems arise when we begin to compare ourselves with others (whether for better or worse). As soon as you step into that trap you have ceased praying, ceased looking to Jesus, ceased believing His Word, ceased loving His people.

Some people do love to hear themselves speak. They even imagine that *everyone else* loves to hear them speak! They may imagine their prayers are more effective, because of their facility with the language. But I will remind you today that God looks on the *heart*, not the head. He is not impressed with many or eloquent words.

Prayers for Show

Some think that knowing is equal to doing. It is not. God wants to see our knowledge of him and His ways translated into a lifestyle that brings Him honor. While it takes time to make that translation, and God is patient with us, we must remember that anything else is sham religion, so don't stop short of the goal.

The job of the tax collector in Jesus' day was despised by religious people, for the tax collector was a fellow Jew who worked for the heathen Roman government to extort money from the Jewish people, and some of them lined their own pockets at their brothers' expense. The term “tax collector” was synonymous with “wicked sinner” and was a stereotypical figure in many of Jesus' story-lessons.

One of those stories is recorded in Luke 18.

Luke 18:9 Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else: ¹⁰ “Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: ‘I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else. For I don't cheat, I don't sin, and I don't commit adultery. I'm certainly not like that tax collector! ¹² I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’

¹³ “But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

While the lesson of the story reaches far beyond prayer, it's meaning is clear: Don't make prayer a show. God will not be fooled.

As Jesus plainly taught elsewhere:

Matthew 6:5 “When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. ⁶ But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

Jesus was not forbidding us to pray together; rather, He was urging us to pray with the proper attitude. And if praying in groups causes you to focus on yourself more than Christ and those for whom you pray, better to pray alone behind closed doors, until you can get the right focus.

To Repeat or Not to Repeat

Jesus continued with another vital lesson for earnest people who pray.

Matthew 6:7 “When you pray, don’t babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again.⁸ Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!

Repetition may express our earnestness in prayer, and that is a good thing. Our prayers should be fervent (heartfelt). But if we repeat ourselves simply to gain God’s attention, we have missed the mark. He is neither deaf nor distracted; He hears you when you pray.

Then, having addressed the manner of prayer, Jesus taught His disciples “The Prayer”:

*Our Father, You are in heaven.
Your name be revered above all others.
Your Kingdom come here. Your purpose be accomplished here, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily supply for body and soul,
and forgive us our wrongdoings, as we have forgiven those who have done us wrong.
Don’t let temptation overtake us, but deliver us from the evil one.
The kingdom is Yours, and the power is Yours, and the glory is Yours forever.*

For Me or We

Jesus said, “Say, ‘Our Father... Give us... deliver us...’ ”

Genuine prayer not only acknowledges our connection to God, but our innate connection to everyone else on the planet as well. When I pray, I represent my family, my church, my denomination, the global Church, and the entire human race. Christ has made you a priest, too — a representative worshipper. Pray as such. Come to Him as an appointed representative of others.

While your own needs will often be the prompting to pray, there are surely others with similar feelings and needs. Include them also in your prayers. It’s never just about you.

Head or Heart

Generally, “whatever is in your heart determines what you say.” (Matthew 12:34) But there are times when people simply fake it, for the sake of impressing others. This is hypocrisy. God once recognized this in His chosen people:

Isaiah 29:13 They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

Peterson’s *The Message* simply says:
They act like they’re worshipping me but don’t mean it.

Hearts and lips must agree. And when they do, whether clearly spoken or mumbled, spoken loudly or softly, or altogether silent, God gets the message.

Faith or Foolishness

One thing that must make it from your heart to your lips is your faith. God can endure whining and complaining, but He does not promise to act on such. The prayers He promises to answer affirmatively are those that correspond to His own will. In other words, He does not answer because our need is so great, but because His purpose and power are so great. Prayers of faith consider God's purpose and ability.

If you don't trust God when you pray (to hear you and to reward you) then you are behaving foolishly — beating your gums to no avail. So many people are “into” prayer these days — but without a faith-link to God, such prayer is just foolishness. Are you believing God when you pray? If not, why do you bother? Better to admit, “God, I have no confidence that You are on my side right now. Please help *my unbelief!*”

Mark 11:24 I tell you, you can pray for anything, and if you believe that you've received it, it will be yours.

Dammed Grace

God's love and grace are like a river — they must flow. If you stop the outflow (from you to others), you will also block the inflow (from God to you). If you hope to receive God's grace, you must first pass along what you have to others. That's why Jesus told the rich man, “First, go and sell what you have and give it to the poor. Then come and follow me.”

It's not just “things” that we withhold. More often it is emotional support and encouragement.

Mark 11:25 But when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too.”

Don't Give Up

Prayer is not an “instant-gratification” sport, but a “long haul” discipline. Don't give up because if it does not yield the results you hoped for right away. There are often many elements beyond our sight or knowledge that God must adjust and arrange before our desire can be displayed. Enter this battlefield for the long term — *until* God says, “Well done.”

All Kinds

So, on the positive side, what kinds of prayer should we offer?

James 5:16 The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.

Among the “all kinds of prayers” that God urges upon us are always those that are faithful and earnest. Always be sincere, not merely about your need, but also about your relationship with God. And always check whether your prayer expresses faith in God or merely personal need. The Bible will inform your needs of the promises from God on which you may stand. Quote them to the Lord (not because He needs reminding, but because they anchor your faith).

Even silent prayers are among the “all kinds,” when we cannot speak, or when it is not appropriate. Don’t hesitate to offer silent prayers to God when you must. There is no need to wait for a “better time.”

Fervent prayers are certainly one of the “all kinds,” whenever the situation deems them appropriate. Some kinds of prayer of faith take on a commanding tone, declaring God’s truth and insisting on its fulfillment from the circumstances for which we pray. These cases often demand a fervent attitude. Give it all you’ve got!

Paul wrote, *“I will pray in the spirit, and I will also pray in words I understand”* (1 Corinthians 14:15). Both are needful. When my words come to an end and yet my heart has more to express, I turn to the “voice of the spirit” and pray in tongues.

Pray in other tongues, when your understanding or your native language is insufficient. When I don’t understand what God is doing or why, I will tell Him so, and then pray in tongues until my confusion or anxiety subsides.

When my mind is overactive and easily distracted, making focused prayer especially difficult, I pray in tongues, until my mind becomes settled again.

Prayer with fasting is yet another kind of prayer that God responds to. Fasting is not a hunger strike; I do not fast to provoke God, as if to say, “I’m going to die if you do not answer me!” I fast to quiet my own flesh, so that my spiritual life grows more sensitive to God and more in control of my being.

Finally, I want to emphasize praying in small groups. While it offers a whole set of different challenges to praying in private, praying in unity and agreement also offers great effectiveness.

Matthew 18:19 “I also tell you this: If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you.”²⁰ For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them.”

It is well worth the effort to learn the unique “ins and outs” of group prayer. It may be the most effective way to learn to pray, period.

A life of prayer — all kinds of prayer — begins with a decision. Decide to become a person who prays. Decide to pray, not just when circumstances demand it, but because God asks it of you. Make the decision, and ask for the Spirit’s help. Then, make a point of experimenting with all kinds of prayers throughout the day. It’s a great adventure!