

Prayer Is Not a Performance

Study

Part One — Entering the Father's Presence

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“And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” **Matthew 6:5-6 (KJV)**

Prayer is among the greatest privileges bestowed upon mankind. It is the sacred invitation to enter the presence of the living God, to commune with the Creator of heaven and earth as children speak with a loving Father. No earthly monarch grants such unrestricted access to his subjects, yet through Jesus Christ every believer is welcomed into the throne room of Divine grace. Prayer is therefore not merely a Christian discipline; it is the very expression of a living relationship with God.

Yet it is striking that when our Lord began teaching about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, He did not begin by explaining *how* to pray. Instead, He first addressed **why** people pray. Before correcting words, He corrected motives. Before teaching the posture of the body, He examined the posture of the heart. This reveals an enduring truth: God is never impressed by eloquent language, impressive vocabulary, lengthy petitions, or outward displays of spirituality. He searches the hidden motives that lie beneath every spoken word.

The greatest danger in prayer is not distraction, nor even ignorance. It is hypocrisy. It is possible to appear deeply spiritual while remaining far from God. A person may pray beautifully in public while seldom seeking the Father in private. Such religion satisfies human observers but leaves heaven unmoved.

Jesus therefore begins with a solemn warning.

“And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are...” **Matthew 6:5 (KJV)**

Notice that Jesus did not say, *“If thou prayest.”* Prayer was expected. Every disciple would pray. The issue was never whether God’s people should pray, but whether they would pray sincerely.

The Pharisees: Religion Without Relationship

Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus repeatedly confronted one particular group — the Pharisees. They were admired by society as guardians of religious tradition. Their knowledge of Scripture was remarkable. Their outward morality appeared exemplary. Their ceremonial observance was meticulous.

Yet Jesus exposed a tragic reality hidden beneath this outward appearance.

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness.” **Matthew 23:27 (KJV)**

Nothing reveals the heart more quickly than prayer.

The Pharisees transformed prayer from communion with God into a public performance. They deliberately positioned themselves where they would receive maximum attention. They prayed loudly, elegantly, and at great length — not because God required it, but because people admired it.

Jesus declared:

“For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men.” **Matthew 6:5 (KJV)**

Their audience was never God.

It was the crowd.

Prayer had become theatre.

Their reward was precisely what they desired — the admiration of men.

Therefore Jesus added these sobering words:

“Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.” **Matthew 6:5 (KJV)**

Those words are among the most tragic in Scripture. God owes nothing further to those who seek human applause. They have already received the only reward they wanted.

The Hypocrisy Jesus Condemned

It is important to understand that Jesus was **not** condemning public prayer.

He Himself prayed publicly before raising Lazarus.

“Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me.” **John 11:41-42 (KJV)**

He prayed publicly in the Upper Room.

He prayed openly before His disciples.

The early Church prayed together continually.

The problem was never public prayer.

The problem was **publicity**.

Prayer becomes corrupt when its purpose shifts from pleasing God to impressing people.

This danger remains as real today as it was in first-century Jerusalem. One may pray eloquently in church, lead powerful prayer meetings, or speak with moving emotion, yet secretly desire admiration more than communion with God.

The heart quietly asks:

“Did people notice how spiritual I sounded?”

When that becomes our concern, prayer ceases to be worship and becomes self-promotion.

The Father’s gaze immediately moves beyond our words to our motives.

The Secret Place

Jesus now offers one of the most beautiful invitations found anywhere in Scripture.

“But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet...” **Matthew 6:6 (KJV)**

The “closet” is far more than a physical room.

It symbolises a life that seeks God even when no one else is watching.

The secret place is where masks fall away.

There, reputation has no value.

Titles carry no importance.

No congregation applauds.

No audience listens.

Only the Father remains.

It is in that hidden place that genuine intimacy with God is born.

Many believers desire public usefulness while neglecting private fellowship.

Yet throughout Scripture, God consistently prepares His servants in solitude before sending them into public ministry.

Moses spent years in Midian.

David learned dependence while tending sheep.

Elijah stood alone before God.

John the Baptist grew in the wilderness.

Paul disappeared into Arabia.

Even Jesus Himself repeatedly withdrew from the crowds.

“And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed.” **Mark 1:35 (KJV)**

The public ministry of Jesus flowed naturally from His private communion with His Father.

If the sinless Son of God considered solitary prayer indispensable, how much more should His disciples?

The Father Who Sees in Secret

Jesus then makes an extraordinary promise.

“...thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” **Matthew 6:6 (KJV)**

God sees what nobody else sees.

He notices every whispered prayer.

Every silent tear.

Every sigh too deep for words.

Every act of hidden devotion.

Nothing offered in genuine love escapes His notice.

The world celebrates visible achievements.

God treasures invisible faithfulness.

Many believers worry that their quiet life of prayer accomplishes little because no one recognises it.

Jesus assures them otherwise.

Heaven records every unseen moment spent in fellowship with the Father.

Often the greatest works of God begin where no human eye has ever looked.

History remembers sermons.

Heaven remembers prayer.

History celebrates platforms.

Heaven celebrates secret places.

Public ministry may influence multitudes.

Private prayer moves the heart of God.

Prayer Changes the One Who Prays

Prayer is often misunderstood.

Many imagine prayer exists primarily to persuade God to act.

Jesus teaches something far deeper.

Our Father already knows.

He already loves.

He already cares.

Prayer is not informing an ignorant God.

Neither is it persuading an unwilling Father.

Rather, prayer transforms us into people capable of receiving His will.

As we remain in His presence, pride gradually disappears.

Self-centred ambition loses its grip.

Fear gives way to trust.

Restlessness becomes peace.

Prayer is therefore not merely asking God to change circumstances.

It is allowing God to change us.

The person who spends much time with Christ increasingly begins to resemble Christ.

That transformation is the greatest answer to prayer.

Part Two — Vain Repetitions, the Lord's Prayer, and the Heart of True Prayer

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“But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him.”

Matthew 6:7-8 (KJV)

Having exposed the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, Jesus now turns His attention to another error that had infiltrated religious practice. If the Pharisees sought the admiration of men, the heathen sought to manipulate their gods. One error was born of pride; the other of superstition. Both misunderstood the very nature of prayer.

The Lord's teaching is beautifully balanced. Prayer is neither a public performance nor a mechanical exercise. It is the intimate conversation of a redeemed child with a loving Father.

Vain Repetitions: When Words Lose Their Meaning

Jesus warns,

“Use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do.”

The emphasis is not upon repetition itself but upon **vain** repetition. Scripture records many occasions when godly men and women repeated the same prayer. Our Lord Himself, in the Garden of Gethsemane,

“...prayed the third time, saying the same words.” **Matthew 26:44 (KJV)**

Persistence is therefore not condemned. Meaningless repetition is.

The pagans of the ancient world believed their gods could be persuaded by endless incantations, elaborate formulas and multiplied words. The prophets of Baal cried from morning until evening upon Mount Carmel.

“O Baal, hear us.” **1 Kings 18:26 (KJV)**

Yet there was no answer.

Their tragedy was not merely idolatry. It was their false understanding of deity. They imagined gods who were indifferent, forgetful or reluctant.

Jesus reveals a completely different God.

Our Father is neither inattentive nor unwilling. He neither sleeps nor forgets. He needs no persuasion to love His children.

Prayer is therefore never an attempt to overcome Divine reluctance. It is the joyful expression of confidence in Divine love.

Many believers unknowingly fall into the same trap. Prayers become memorised phrases rather than heartfelt communion. Familiar expressions are repeated while the mind wanders elsewhere. Lips continue moving after the heart has fallen silent.

God listens to hearts before He listens to sentences.

A few sincere words spoken with faith carry greater weight in heaven than thousands uttered mechanically.

Our Father Already Knows

Jesus then makes one of the most comforting statements ever spoken.

“For your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him.” **Matthew 6:8 (KJV)**

This verse immediately raises an obvious question.

If God already knows everything, why pray?

The answer lies in the nature of our relationship with Him.

Parents often know what their children need before they ask, yet they still delight in hearing their children speak. Conversation deepens relationship.

Likewise, prayer is not primarily about transmitting information to God. He already knows every circumstance.

He knows every hidden sorrow.

Every temptation.

Every unanswered question.

Every anxious thought.

Even before a burden reaches our lips, it has already reached His heart.

Prayer therefore is not informing God.

It is drawing near to Him.

The Father invites us to participate in His purposes through loving fellowship.

Prayer changes the atmosphere of our hearts because it draws us into the presence of the One who never changes.

The Perfect Pattern of Prayer

Jesus now gives what has become known as the Lord's Prayer. More accurately, it is **the Disciples' Prayer**, for it was given as the pattern by which His followers should pray.

He introduces it simply:

“After this manner therefore pray ye.” **Matthew 6:9 (KJV)**

Notice His words carefully.

He does not say, “Repeat these exact words.”

He says,

“After this manner...”

The prayer provides a Divine pattern rather than a compulsory formula.

Every phrase reveals profound spiritual truth.

“Our Father which art in heaven”

Prayer begins not with our needs but with God's relationship to us.

He is not merely Creator.

He is Father.

What astonishing grace!

Under the Old Testament, God was certainly known as Father in certain contexts, yet Jesus brought believers into an intimacy never before experienced.

The Creator of galaxies welcomes us as sons and daughters.

The word **“Our”** also reminds us that Christianity is never purely individualistic. Every believer belongs to one family.

When we pray, we carry one another before the throne of grace.

“Hallowed be Thy name.”

Before asking for daily bread, Jesus teaches us to honour God's holiness.

His Name represents His character, His majesty, His righteousness and His glory.

Prayer begins with worship.

Too often our prayers begin with ourselves.

Jesus begins with God.

Every true prayer first lifts our eyes from earth to heaven.

When God's greatness fills our vision, life's problems assume their proper perspective.

“Thy kingdom come.”

This is a prayer of surrender.

We are asking that God’s reign become increasingly visible both in our own lives and throughout the world.

It is the longing that every human heart should acknowledge Jesus Christ as King.

It also anticipates His glorious Second Coming when His Kingdom shall be fully established.

Christian prayer is therefore profoundly missionary.

It seeks not merely personal blessing but the advance of God’s Kingdom.

“Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.”

These words strike at the heart of fallen human nature.

Our instinct is to persuade God to adopt our plans.

Jesus teaches us to submit ourselves to His.

Nothing reveals spiritual maturity more clearly than this prayer.

Our Lord Himself prayed these very words in Gethsemane.

“Nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt.” **Matthew 26:39 (KJV)**

If the sinless Son joyfully submitted Himself to the Father’s will, how readily should His disciples do likewise?

True prayer is not bending God’s will to ours.

It is joyfully yielding ours to His.

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

Having first honoured God, Jesus now turns to human need.

Daily bread symbolises every legitimate necessity of life.

Food.

Strength.

Wisdom.

Health.

Grace.

Provision.

Notice again the word **daily**.

God teaches continual dependence.

He desires children who trust Him one day at a time rather than living independently upon yesterday’s blessings.

Every sunrise becomes another invitation to trust.

“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

No prayer can remain healthy while bitterness is cherished.

Forgiven people become forgiving people.

Jesus reinforces this truth immediately afterwards.

“For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” **Matthew 6:14 (KJV)**

Again He warns,

“But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” **Matthew 6:15 (KJV)**

An unforgiving spirit poisons prayer.

We cannot seek mercy while refusing to extend mercy.

Forgiveness does not excuse evil.

Neither does it deny justice.

Rather, it releases personal vengeance into God's righteous hands.

Nothing resembles our heavenly Father more than a forgiving heart.

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

Jesus recognises the spiritual conflict surrounding every believer.

We do not possess sufficient strength to overcome temptation alone.

Accordingly, we pray for Divine protection and sustaining grace.

Later, in Gethsemane, Jesus repeated this very principle.

“Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation.” **Matthew 26:41 (KJV)**

Prayer is therefore one of God's appointed means for strengthening His children against spiritual attack.

Those who neglect prayer inevitably discover how weak they really are.

Those who walk closely with God discover His sustaining power.

“For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.”

Prayer concludes where it began.

With God.

His Kingdom.

His power.

His glory.

The Christian life exists ultimately for God's honour rather than our comfort.

Every answered prayer magnifies His greatness.

Every blessing points back to His goodness.

Every victory proclaims His power.

The final word is **Amen**.

Not merely “the prayer has ended.”

Rather,

“So be it.”

A declaration of confident faith in God's perfect wisdom.

Prayer Is the School of Transformation

Every petition of the Lord's Prayer changes the one who prays.

“Hallowed be Thy Name” teaches reverence.

“Thy Kingdom come” teaches vision.

“Thy will be done” teaches surrender.

“Give us this day” teaches dependence.

“Forgive us” teaches humility.

“Deliver us” teaches vigilance.

“Thine is the Kingdom” teaches worship.

Prayer is therefore God's classroom in which He shapes believers into the likeness of His Son.

The more faithfully we pray according to this pattern, the more completely Christ is formed within us.

Part Three — The Life of Prayer: Faith, Humility, Perseverance and Communion with the Father

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“Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.” **Luke 11:1 (KJV)**

Remarkably, the disciples never asked Jesus to teach them how to preach, heal the sick, cast out devils or perform miracles. Yet they did ask Him to teach them to pray. They had watched Him withdraw from the crowds before dawn. They had seen Him spend entire nights alone with His Father. They recognised that the extraordinary power of His public ministry flowed from His hidden life of prayer.

The greatest lesson Jesus ever taught on prayer was not merely spoken — it was lived.

Ask, Seek and Knock

Having taught the pattern of prayer, Jesus next encouraged His disciples never to lose confidence in their heavenly Father.

“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” **Matthew 7:7 (KJV)**

These three verbs reveal increasing earnestness.

To **ask** is to present our request.

To **seek** is to pursue God with a heart that longs for Him.

To **knock** is to persevere until the door is opened.

Prayer is therefore active rather than passive. It calls us into a growing relationship with God. As our fellowship with Him deepens, our desires become increasingly aligned with His will. We begin by asking for His gifts, but we gradually discover that the greatest gift is God Himself.

Jesus immediately reassures us:

“For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth.” **Matthew 7:8 (KJV)**

These promises are not blank cheques for selfish ambition. They are the assurances given to children who trust the perfect wisdom of their Father. God answers every sincere prayer, though not always in the manner or timing we anticipate. Sometimes His answer is “Yes.” Sometimes it is “Wait.” Sometimes, in His infinite wisdom, it is “No,” because He intends something far better.

The Goodness of the Father

Jesus strengthens our confidence with a simple illustration.

“Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?” **Matthew 7:9 (KJV)**

Earthly fathers, despite their imperfections, delight in caring for their children.

How much more does our heavenly Father delight in giving what is truly good?

Jesus concludes,

“If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask Him?” **Matthew 7:11 (KJV)**

Prayer is therefore built upon confidence, not uncertainty.

We approach neither a reluctant judge nor a distant ruler.

We approach our Father.

Every prayer should begin with that assurance.

The Friend at Midnight: Perseverance in Prayer

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus tells the parable of a man whose unexpected guest arrived late at night. Having no bread to offer, he went to his neighbour and persistently knocked until his request was granted.

Jesus concludes,

“Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth.” **Luke 11:8 (KJV)**

The lesson is not that God is unwilling.

Quite the opposite.

If even an unwilling neighbour eventually responds, how much more readily will our loving Father answer His children?

Perseverance does not overcome God’s reluctance.

It demonstrates our faith.

Persistent prayer also changes us. As we continue waiting before God, impatience matures into trust, anxiety becomes peace, and self-will gradually yields to Divine wisdom.

The Persistent Widow

Jesus reinforces this truth in another parable.

“Men ought always to pray, and not to faint.” **Luke 18:1 (KJV)**

The widow repeatedly appealed to an unjust judge.

Eventually he granted her request simply because of her persistence.

Jesus then asks,

“And shall not God avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him?” **Luke 18:7 (KJV)**

Again, the comparison is one of contrast rather than similarity.

The judge cared nothing for justice.

God delights in righteousness.

The judge was indifferent.

God is compassionate.

The judge acted reluctantly.

God acts lovingly.

Therefore believers must never conclude that delayed answers indicate Divine neglect.

God’s delays are often preparations.

He is shaping both circumstances and character.

His timing is always perfect.

The Pharisee and the Publican

Perhaps nowhere does Jesus expose false religion more powerfully than in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican.

The Pharisee stood confidently before God.

“God, I thank Thee, that I am not as other men are.” **Luke 18:11 (KJV)**

His prayer sounded religious.

Yet it contained no confession.

No dependence.

No humility.

He compared himself with others rather than measuring himself against God’s holiness.

He listed his achievements.

He celebrated his own righteousness.

Although addressed to God, the prayer revolved entirely around himself.

By contrast, the publican stood afar off.

“...would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.” **Luke 18:13 (KJV)**

He brought no credentials.

No accomplishments.

No claims.

Only repentance.

Jesus concludes with astonishing words.

“This man went down to his house justified rather than the other.” **Luke 18:14 (KJV)**

Prayer begins where pride ends.

God does not reject broken hearts.

He welcomes them.

The door of heaven opens most readily to humble souls.

Faith That Believes God

Following the cursing of the fig tree, Jesus declared,

“Have faith in God.” **Mark 11:22 (KJV)**

He continued,

“What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them.” **Mark 11:24 (KJV)**

Biblical faith is not confidence in our own ability to believe.

It is confidence in the character of God.

Faith rests upon His promises.

It trusts His wisdom.

It submits to His will.

Faith does not attempt to command God.

It confidently entrusts everything to Him.

Immediately afterwards Jesus again emphasises forgiveness.

“And when ye stand praying, forgive.” **Mark 11:25 (KJV)**

Faith and forgiveness walk together.

Neither flourishes where resentment is cherished.

United Prayer

Jesus also revealed the strength of united prayer.

“Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven.” **Matthew 18:19 (KJV)**

This is not merely agreement of words.

It is agreement of hearts submitted to God’s will.

The unity Jesus describes is spiritual rather than organisational.

Whenever believers gather with one mind, seeking the glory of Christ, heaven delights to answer.

Praying in the Name of Jesus

On the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus unveiled an extraordinary privilege.

“And whatsoever ye shall ask in My Name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” **John 14:13 (KJV)**

To pray in His Name is far more than adding the words, “In Jesus’ Name.”

His Name represents His character.

His authority.

His purposes.

His will.

To pray in His Name is to pray as His representative, seeking what honours Him and advances His Kingdom.

Again He promises,

“If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.” **John 15:7 (KJV)**

Notice the condition.

Prayer is inseparable from abiding.

The more deeply we abide in Christ, the more our desires resemble His.

The Prayer Life of Jesus

No study of prayer is complete without considering the life of the Master Himself.

Jesus prayed before choosing the Twelve.

“He continued all night in prayer to God.” **Luke 6:12 (KJV)**

He prayed after great miracles.

He prayed before feeding the multitudes.

He prayed at His baptism.

He prayed upon the Mount of Transfiguration.

He prayed for Peter before Peter knew he needed prayer.

“I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not.” **Luke 22:32 (KJV)**

He prayed in Gethsemane until His sweat became as great drops of blood.

He prayed from the Cross.

“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” **Luke 23:34 (KJV)**

Even in His darkest suffering, His thoughts were for others.

What a magnificent example!

If Jesus, the sinless Son of God, lived a life saturated with prayer, how can His followers imagine that they can flourish spiritually while neglecting it?

Prayer was not an occasional activity in the life of Christ.

It was the atmosphere in which He lived.

Prayer Changes the World Because It First Changes Us

Many believers think of prayer primarily as a means of obtaining blessings.

Jesus presents something infinitely greater.

Prayer transforms the person who prays.

It humbles pride.

It purifies motives.

It strengthens faith.

It deepens love.

It produces forgiveness.

It aligns our hearts with the Father's will.

The world has often been changed by men and women whom history scarcely remembers but who faithfully met God in secret.

The greatest revivals were conceived in prayer before they were witnessed in public.

Every mighty movement of God has first been born upon bent knees.

God accomplishes His greatest works through people who desire His presence more than public recognition.

Conclusion: Prayer Is Communion

The teachings of Jesus leave us with one unmistakable truth.

Prayer is not a religious obligation.

It is not a performance.

It is not an attempt to impress people.

It is not a means of manipulating God.

It is not measured by eloquence, length or volume.

Prayer is the joyful privilege of abiding in the Father's presence through Jesus Christ.

There, in the secret place, ambition quietly dies.

Faith is strengthened.

Forgiveness flourishes.

Character is transformed.

The Holy Spirit fashions us into the likeness of Christ.

When we rise from our knees after genuine communion with God, the world may not immediately notice our words, but it will eventually notice our lives.

May we therefore seek neither the applause of men nor the admiration of the religious world.

Instead, may we seek the smile of our heavenly Father, who sees in secret, hears every sincere whisper, treasures every hidden tear, and delights to commune with those who draw near to Him through His beloved Son.

“Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you.” James 4:8 (KJV)

Final Exhortation

Prayer is not merely one of the Christian disciplines; it is the very breath of the Christian life. As breathing is to the body, prayer is to the soul. A believer who neglects prayer gradually weakens spiritually, but one who daily communes with the Father becomes increasingly conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. May our greatest ambition never be to pray impressively, but to pray sincerely. For when the secret place becomes the delight of our hearts, the fragrance of Christ will accompany us wherever we go, and our lives will become a living testimony that we have indeed been with Jesus. Amen.