

Teach Us to Pray

Okay, if you've got your bibles, turn with me to Matthew 6. If you are new around here, we are on the final week of a series all about prayer. We've been talking about how prayer, when we practice over the long haul, has the potential to shape and *form* us into certain types of people as a result. And to help with that, we've been praying through a number of prayer prompts together as a church. Some of us are using the booklet we put out during the series, others of us subscribed via text, and others are following along via social media. But the goal has been to put prayer into practice on a regular basis as we work through this series. And just as a heads up, those will continue for one more week. They'll go through this coming Saturday.

But then in the teaching portion of the series, we've been addressing what prayer is, why we should pray, and some of our hang-ups or obstacles *to* prayer. But one thing we *haven't* talked about a ton yet is the *content* of our prayers. Like, assume for a second that we understand *why* we should pray, we *want* to pray, and that we are slowly wrestling through some of our *obstacles to* praying. We might still be going, "okay, *what* should I pray *about*, though?" We've said throughout this series that one of Jesus' favorite terms to refer to prayer is the word "ask." Prayer, in many ways, is just *asking*. But that makes some of us wonder, "ask *what*?" Some of us, myself included, often feel like the sheer volume of the amount of things we *could* pray is wide as the sky—it's almost so wide open that it's overwhelming. So **when we pray, what should we pray about?**

Excellent question. *That*, in many ways, is what Matthew 6:9-13 is all about. **In this prayer—what we often refer to as "the Lord's prayer," Jesus is going to basically give us a *template* as to the *types of things we should pray about on a regular basis*.** He kind of gives us five different categories, or topics, that our prayers should consist of over time. If you're wondering *what to pray about*, this is what you're looking for. We're going to let this prayer from Jesus teach us what to pray *about*.

But before we do that, I need to say two things by way of set-up. First, I need us all to acknowledge together that this passage wasn't intended primarily to be recited by people at high school football games. I say that because that's often where people hear it most, but also because of a very specific personal memory I have. So in the small, southern, town where I grew up, I can still remember before every football game, there was an what they call an "invocation"—which to me was always a very confusing thing to call a prayer. But before every game, they would have a local pastor or somebody say a prayer over the loudspeaker. And then one day, for some reason, they had to *stop* doing that. I don't know if it was an angry letter that got written in, or a court case, or what, but they had to *stop* doing the invocation because people were offended by it. And I still remember that somebody, in response to that, a Christian group of some sort said "*they're* not gonna stop *us* from *praying*"—you know, how Christian groups get some times? So they started handing out these little cards with the Lord's prayer printed on them as you walked into the football games. And before the game started, as soon as they had everybody stand for the national anthem, the guy on the loudspeaker would just go silent for long enough for everybody to recite the Lord's prayer outloud together. They had an *inside* guy working the P.A.! But what would happen is that everybody would say this prayer out loud, as a way to *stick it to* whoever made us stop having an invocation. It was to—and I'm about to quote directly from the card they gave out—"show everybody that *we pray at our football games*." It was this weird, sort of retaliatory "that'll teach them" kind of thing. And I think that's similar to the reason this prayer *often* gets recited in

public—because people saying it want other people to know that they are praying people. **Not always, but often, we say this prayer in public because we want people to see and take notice that we're praying.** Now, here's what I think is *fascinating* about that. Right before the passage we're about to read, the Lord's prayer, here's what Jesus says about praying in public. This is v. 5 of chapter 6:

*And when you pray, you must **not be like** the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, **that they may be seen by others.***

Interesting. Now, I don't think that means we shouldn't ever pray in public. But I do think it's saying we shouldn't pray in public with the *primary motivation of just being seen praying*. That would seem to be a direct contradiction to what Jesus says here. All I'm saying is that it's a tad ironic that Jesus offers this prayer as an *alternative* to praying publicly to be seen by others, and then this prayer has often become *exactly* that—a way to be seen praying by others. Kind of an exercise in missing the point. So first, that is not what this prayer was intended to be.

And then second, really quickly, I want you to know some of the *context* of this passage. So over in Luke 11, there is a slightly *abbreviated* version of this exact same teaching on prayer from Jesus. But in that passage, we see some of the *context* around it. We see what situation led to Jesus teaching his disciples to pray this way. Take a look on the screen with me at Luke 11, v. 1:

*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."***

Notice *what makes* this disciple ask Jesus to teach them to pray. It wasn't because Jesus was God (even though he is), and it wasn't just because he was a spiritual authority over them (even though he was that too). **What prompts him to ask Jesus this is that he saw Jesus praying.** Do you see that? What happened was that they observed the pattern of prayer in the everyday life of Jesus—they saw how much he *prioritized* it, they saw the *fruit of it* in his life—and then as a result of seeing all that, they want *him* to teach *them* how to pray like he does. This right here is actually how we all learn best: by *example*. That's the context for what we call the Lord's Prayer. It's actually Jesus trying to teach his disciples to pray like he does, after they ask him to teach them.

So I would say that means that if you want to know where to start with prayer, this right here is where the money's at. Jesus is about to give us a glimpse into the types of things *he prays about* on a regular basis. **Not that his prayers include these exact words every time or in this precise order every time, but that these are in general, the types of things he prays about.** This literally a prayer workshop with Jesus himself. It's a prayer *lab*. And so we're going to go about it in very much that fashion. We're going to do things just a little bit different today. What we're going to do is talk for just a bit about each line in this prayer—each *category* as it were—and then we're actually going to take some time, right here in the Gathering, to pray through that line. We'll talk some about what it *means* to pray each line, and then we'll actually pray it.

So with that said, let's take a look at the first line. Matthew 6, starting in v. 9. And try your hardest not to read it outloud with me—I know that's gonna be tough for some of you. Verse 9:

[9] *Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, **hallowed** be your name..."*

The first phrase in the prayer is “our Father.” Now I’m not going to repeat myself a ton here, since this was what week 2 of this series was all about, but that word *Father* is so very important. **Seeing God as Father has to be the foundation of prayer. Not some vague relationship with an undefined deity—with some spiritual force out there in the universe—but with a personal, relational, affectionate, interested *Father*.** That’s where Jesus starts things off.

And then *on* that note, he says that the name of that father should be “hallowed.” That’s probably not a word you used this morning in casual conversation. What it means is essentially *special* or *unique*. It shares a root with the word “holy.” To call something *holy* is to say that it is *other*, it’s *special*, it’s *unique*, it’s *set apart* from other things in some way. So saying to God “hallowed be your name” is us acknowledging the *uniqueness* of the person we’re talking to. It’s acknowledging that God is truly unlike anyone else. So it’s a reminder that **when we talk to him, we’re not just talking to anyone—we’re talking to the God of the universe. We’re talking to someone who has capabilities that no one else has. And that should inform *how* and *what* we ask when we pray.** It’s an opportunity to remember *who God is* as we begin to pray to him.

We could call this category of prayer *the character of God*. So here’s what I want us to do for the next minute: let’s pray through the character of God.

- What things about God are unique?
- In what ways is God’s character different from our own?
- What is God capable of that no one else is?

Amen. Okay, let’s keep moving through this prayer, v. 10:

[10] ***“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”***

So notice here that before Jesus gets to asking for anything else—**before he gets to asking God to provide, before he gets to asking for practical things—he first asks that God’s kingdom to come, and God’s will to be done.** I think this a way of acknowledging that ***what God wants to accomplish on planet earth is request #1 of prayer.*** So, we are to ask God for things that we need, and he wants to answer many of those prayers—but let’s first ask that *God* would continue to accomplish what *God desires* to accomplish on planet earth. **The most important thing, and the best thing possible for each of us, is that God does what God desires to do on planet earth.** So we ask and acknowledge that *first*.

Now, if that sounds super big picture and vague to you, that’s understandable. But here’s what might help bring it down to earth some: **an awful lot of the time, the way God chooses to bring his kingdom and accomplish his will on earth is through his people, the Church.** This is a theme that runs all the way through the New Testament. As one example, 2 Corinthians 5 talks about how we—God’s people—have been given the ministry of “reconciliation.” Which is really just Paul’s language for God’s kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven. And Paul says explicitly that God is “making his appeal *through us*” to do that. So **a central piece of how God does what he wants to do is *through us*.**

So I hear people say sometimes “well I can’t be Jesus to that person.” And if we just mean “that person doesn’t need to be *codependent* on me, I can’t be their *savior*,”—I think that’s fine. But the point of a lot of the New Testament is that you, as a follower of Jesus, might be the only *picture* of Jesus some people ever see. Because God makes his *appeal, through us*. A central piece of God’s kingdom coming is that it is coming through *us*.

~~So we have these bumper stickers around town that you may have seen before, that say “in Knoxville as it is in heaven.” What those are saying is that we see it as *our responsibility* as followers of Jesus to help bring God’s kingdom to bear on earth. So in praying “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” part of what we’re also praying is “God, use *us* to do this.” Use *us* to bring your kingdom here in Knoxville, in our world, as it one day will be in heaven.” We love our neighbors, we serve each other, we do justice, we make disciples—we do all of those things because we want to see God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.~~

So let’s take time to pray through that now, what we might call God’s work in the world:

- Where does God’s kingdom need to come; where does his will need to be done?
- Where is he inviting me to be a part of that, and how do I come alongside him in that?
- Where is he using others to be a part of that? How can I pray for their continued success in it?

Amen. Okay, next up, v. 11:

[11] “Give us **this day our daily bread.**”

So it’s probably helpful to know that bread was the *daily sustenance* for most people in Jesus’ day and age. Most meals consisted mainly of bread and a beverage. Really only periodically, on special occasions, would meals include meat and elaborate fixings—be grateful that you live today and not back then. Most of the time, your diet consisted of bread, more bread, and then a little more bread to go with your bread. This was back before we knew gluten was a thing. But in light of bread being the daily sustenance for most people, “bread” also became shorthand for something like “all of the things that we need on a regular basis.” Saying “give us our daily bread” was a way to communicate “God, give us all the things that we need to survive.” That’s one layer to it.

But there’s another layer too that I think helps us understand this verse. This language is also likely a nod to the bread that the Israelites received in the desert, back in the Old Testament. There’s this story where God would give them just enough bread for each day, and if they gathered any extra—if they stockpiled it—it would literally rot before they had a chance to eat it. It was God’s way of teaching them what they needed and what they didn’t need.¹ So praying “give us our daily bread” isn’t the same as saying “give us everything we *feel like* we need.” It’s actually most likely a vivid reminder of what God *has* promised to provide, versus what he *hasn’t* promised to provide. It’s a way of remembering and reminding ourselves that **God can be trusted to give us what we need, but shouldn’t be expected to give us everything we want**. More directly, he shouldn’t be expected to appeal to our greed or overconsumption—which I think is something that we really need to hear in modern America. This line is a way of saying “God, give us our daily bread—give us what we need, and also help us *learn* and

¹ You can read this story in Exodus 16.

acknowledge what we don't need."

So let's pray that next, what we'll call provision of needs:

- What needs do you currently have, and how can God provide for them?
- Are there ways you are currently expecting God to give you things that are *not* needs?
- Are there expectations you have of God that he hasn't promised?

Amen. Okay, keep going, v. 12:

[12] ***"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."***

So, something that is so easy to forget in our culture is that **following Jesus is by definition relational. Following Jesus necessarily includes navigating the day-to-day ins and outs of relationships with other people.** Other people who *are going* to sin against you, and whom you *are going* to sin against. You *will* be sinned against: just be *encouraged* by that this morning. But seriously, if you're new to following Jesus, I just want you to know what you're getting into. People will sin against you, people will wrong you if you're living life closely enough with them. And here in this verse, **Jesus is saying that *that reality—that you will sin and be sinned against—is so much a part of everyday life for followers of Jesus, that we should include it regularly in our prayers.*** That we should pray, often, "God, forgive us, as we forgive others."

So that should immediately should make us ask a few things as we pray. First, I think it should make us ask **"am I living in close enough relationship with other people that we are sinning against one another sometimes?"** Maybe to you, that sounds like a weird question to ask. But the reality is that **you have to be around other people a good bit to start regularly getting on their nerves.** If other people—if other followers of Jesus—have at best, an *occasional appearance* in your life—if you're seeing them mainly for an hour or two on Sundays only—chances are you're not going to sin against one another in any significant ways.

But if you're seeing someone frequently, maybe multiple times a week, you're interacting with them on a regular basis, *now* we're talking. Now we're squarely in "getting-sinned-against" territory. Now we're in the category of seeing one another often enough to not like each other occasionally. And that's gonna lead you to pray, at times: *forgive me as I forgive others.* So I don't want to just move on and assume today that all of us who are followers of Jesus are currently in those types of relationships. So first, we need to ask, **"am I living in constant enough interaction with other followers of Jesus to periodically have to forgive them for things?"**

Which in turn, Jesus says, should remind you of the fact that you *yourself* need forgiveness, from God. Which means that at times, our prayers should include something called "confession": acknowledging ways that we have sinned against God and others. Saying to God in prayer, "I know this is off in me, I know this was off when it happened, and because of that I want to ask for forgiveness and grace towards me."

Which then should make us ask, "am I being an accurate depiction of God's forgiveness towards me?" You see, according to the passage, **forgiveness is not just something that we receive from God, but something that should flow from God, through us, towards others.** Do you see that? **From God's**

perspective, forgiven people forgive others in return, because they know what it feels like to need forgiveness. God is so *adamant* about this idea, that in the two verses immediately following the Lord's Prayer, he actually says "if you forgive others, God will forgive you. But if you *refuse* to forgive others, you should have no expectation that God will forgive *you*."² That's how confident Jesus is that forgiven people, forgive others.

Now, that does not mean that forgiveness is always *easy*. In fact, it often isn't. And it doesn't mean that forgiven people don't sometimes *struggle* to forgive others—they often do. But it *is* saying that **truly forgiven people don't refuse to forgive others.** Because that wouldn't be consistent with the forgiveness we've *received*. The point is that **forgiveness—both receiving it and offering it—are necessary parts of our prayer, because they're necessary parts of our lives.**

Okay, so let's pray this one, in regards to confession and forgiveness:

- What sin am I caught up in that I haven't acknowledged to God?
- Am I living in meaningful relationships with others, especially other followers of Jesus?
- Do I have unforgiveness towards anyone, and what needs to be done about it?

Amen. Okay, last verse in the prayer, v. 13:

*[13] And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.*

So what I love about this last part of the prayer is how honest *and* realistic it is. So first, it says "lead us not into temptation." In other words, "God—if I'm honest—I'd love it if you just wouldn't put me in scenarios where I'm tempted. My first prayer is just that you would keep me a million miles away from those types of situations." But at the same time, Jesus knows that that is sometimes not going to be a realistic expectation to have. In the world we live in, *never* being in tempting situations is not really an option. The reality is that we *will* find ourselves in situations where there is temptation, there is testing. And so he couples his first request with "deliver us from evil." In other words, "when we *do* find ourselves in situations where sin is appealing to us and they're unavoidable, would you *deliver* us from the power and grip of evil?" **Keep us from temptation when possible, but when it *isn't* possible, help deliver us from the midst of it.**

And actually, most literally, this line reads, not just "deliver us from evil," but rather "deliver us from *the evil one*." So Jesus includes in his prayer the reality that there is a real personal force of evil in the world who would love nothing more than to derail us and all the things we just prayed for. He acknowledges that in plain terms. And so he asks God to "deliver us" from the power, the grip and the influence of Satan's efforts against us.

Okay, last one for this morning—protection from evil:

- Is there a particular temptation you would like God to keep you far from?
- Is there a habitual sin in your life that you want God to heal you from?
- Is there a particular tactic Satan tends to use against you? How can God deliver you from it?

² Matthew 6:14-15.

Amen. Okay, so that, in a nutshell, is the Lord's prayer. That concludes how Jesus says we should pray. And all things considered, it's really pretty straightforward, right? It's not *terribly* complex. It doesn't take a ton of spiritual maturity, doesn't require a bible degree to pray any of that. I mean those things might *help*, but they aren't *required* to *start* praying the way Jesus teaches us to pray. Jesus here has made prayer extremely *accessible*. He's made prayer a very graspable, very earthy sort of thing.

So prayer should include:

1. **The character of God:** Acknowledge that the person you're praying to is someone *worth* praying to.
2. **God's work in the world:** Asking that he'd accomplish the things that he wants to accomplish, and specifically that he would accomplish that through us, his people.
3. **Provision of needs:** Ask that he'd give us the things that we need, and help us to learn what we don't need.
4. **Confession and forgiveness:** Ask that he'd forgive you and help you forgive others.
5. **Protection from evil:** Ask him to protect you from participating in destructive things.

Now, as I mentioned in the very beginning, these are really something like *categories* for our prayers to include. The goal isn't that we would recite these words verbatim each day, but rather that we would let this prayer serve as a "template" of sorts for our prayer lives. That over the long haul, our prayers would include these *sorts* of things. It's an opportunity to let Jesus teach us how to pray. An opportunity for *our* prayer lives to intentionally reflect his *own*.

And here's something you may have noticed: if you've been participating in the prayer prompts with us throughout this series, you may have noticed they *also* are modeled after the Lord's prayer. Each day was an opportunity to pray a specific part of it. In fact, if you followed along in the booklet, the headings looked a lot like these on the screen. All we did was expand two of the categories, really just to make it match the seven days of the week. So **if you've been participating with us throughout this series, you actually kind of already know how to do this**. If you've participated with us this morning, you have already done it once. All you're doing from this point forward is being a little more of a self-starter. Instead of having the prayers *themselves* given to you, you're using these categories to help you decide what to pray.

So probably, with very little effort, you could just commit those categories to memory and write them in your journal or phone each day: *character of God, God's work in the world, provision of needs...*etc. And then just glance down at them as you pray to help guide your prayer time. Again, the point isn't to pray through those categories in the exact same way every day, but rather that those categories would be key ideas for you to pray through over time.

Another thing we'll do to help: if you were one of the people who signed up to receive the prayer prompts via text, we're going to continue those throughout the year. You're welcome to unsubscribe anytime if you don't want to receive them. But we'll keep them going at least through the end of the year. But starting after this coming week, they'll get a little more generic. So instead of giving you particular *aspect* of God's character to pray through on Sundays, it will just say something like "Thank God for who he is," and we'll let you choose how you want to do that that particular day. Instead of "pray for this specific way you want God to provide," it'll just be something like "pray for God's provision." Make sense?

I think this becomes a really helpful guide for incorporating prayer into our lives. So you no longer have to sit down in the morning and go, “okay, what in the world do I pray about?” You sit down, you work your way through these categories. Sometimes maybe you do it really quickly, sometimes maybe you’ve got more time and you work through it very gradually. But you’re letting Jesus’ own prayer template shape your prayers on a regular basis. I think **by thinking about prayer in this way, we actually allow God to mold and shape and *form* our prayer lives. Over time, our prayers embody more and more of the things that they should.**

And I’d wager that **by making our *prayers* look more and more like Jesus, the Holy Spirit is going to shape our *lives* to look more and more like Jesus too.** By saying, with the disciples, “teach us to pray,” we’re actually saying to Jesus, “teach us to *be*.” By praying the Lord’s prayer, we are saying, “grow us, shape us, *form* us into who you made us to be all along.” “Teach us what it means to be more and more of who you designed us to be.” That’s what we’re actually praying.

So let me close by **asking God to do** just that. Let’s pray.