



## Praying Prayers Like Jesus

### Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You have invited and taught us to pray, promising to hear our cries as they come before You. Grant us Your Spirit that we may learn to pray aright, that we may be faithful in our praying, and that we may grow in our confidence, entrusting all things into Your merciful care; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Sing or say the first stanza of the hymn “Hear Us, Father, When We Pray” (*LSB 773*).

### Introduction

When teaching Confirmation students regarding the Lord’s Prayer, I typically begin by asking them to define what prayer is. After all, we pray each Sunday at church, we are encouraged to pray every day, many families begin their mealtimes with prayer, and we hear encouragement from others with the words, “I’ll be praying for you.” Prayer is something we do, and it is something others do for us. How would you explain prayer to someone?

Answers will vary. Many people see prayer as a conversation with God. Others may suggest that prayer is a lifeline, something to be used when things seem out of our control. Prayer can also be viewed as a response to all that God has done for us (praise), a way of crying out to God when we need something (petition), or something we can do for others when they are in need (intercession). Still, others may see prayer as something that we just do as Christians, per God’s command. There are a variety of answers, and many of them do touch on, albeit imperfectly, what prayer is for us as God’s people.

### Teach Us, Lord, to Pray

Many people view prayer as something we can do as Christians, that it is our part to play in our relationship with God. In truth, prayer is a gift given to us, an invitation to call upon the Lord in the full assurance that He hears and answers us in accord with His will. God does not need our prayers, as Luther rightly says in his explanations to the first few petitions of the Lord’s Prayer (in the Small Catechism): God’s kingdom comes, His will is done, and daily bread is given “without our prayers.” Certainly, God knows our needs better than we do, so before we ask, He knows the mercy and grace we seek. As such, prayer is really something given for our benefit and not a burden placed upon us by a needy God.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:17 and Ephesians 6:17–18. How often does Paul say that we ought to pray? What do you think he means by this?

**1 Thessalonians 5:17** Pray without ceasing,

**Ephesians 6:17-18** And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, **18** praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.

Paul says that we are to “pray without ceasing,” and to “pray at all times.” This would be a challenging task for anyone, for we all have responsibilities to care for our family, ourselves, our creation, and anywhere else God has placed us. So, we should not see this as an instruction to never do anything else but pray, nor to feel as though we have failed God in some way if we do things besides prayer. The ancient mystics sometimes believed that each breath we take could be seen as prayer, a chance to think of God and to thank Him for every moment we are given breath. While still a bit challenging, this gets at what Paul was saying. Everything we have, and everything we do really ought to be tended to with prayer. This is a faithful response to all the Lord provides, and a trust in His divine provision for our eternal salvation through the merits of Christ. This is part of the reason why there are many types of prayers to pray, for all of them are prayers that depend upon the circumstances we face in life.

Prayer, then, is a gift, and it is something we are to be doing often. This leads to the question of how to pray. This is what the disciples request of Jesus directly in Luke chapter 11: *Lord, teach us to pray* (v. 1b). Interestingly, Jesus does not give them a “how-to” manual on prayer. In fact, if you search the Bible, you will not find a guide on how to pray. Instead, what we are given in the Bible in general, and from Jesus in particular, are examples of prayer. From Jesus, we receive the Lord’s Prayer as the greatest and most complete prayer. Other Scripture reveals certain things to us about God’s design for prayer.

Read Luke 5:16, Matthew 6:6, and Acts 2:42. Where are we encouraged to pray?

**Luke 5:16** But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

**Matthew 6:6** But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

**Acts 2:42** And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Jesus would sometimes find a place of isolation in order to pray away from the crowds and the disciples. Our Lord also instructs us to go into our closets and pray in secret to the Father who sees us. The early Church in Acts gathered together, devoting themselves to the fellowship of the believers and the prayers. In conjunction with Paul’s instruction to always pray, we are encouraged to do so whether we are alone (though we never pray alone!), in our rooms or other quiet places, or with the body of Christ in small groups or in the assembly of the believers on Sundays.

Read 1 Timothy 2:1-4. What kinds of prayers should we offer? How would you define these? For whom should we pray? Would you describe your prayer life as following that guidance? Why or why not?

**1 Timothy 2:1-4** First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, <sup>2</sup> for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. <sup>3</sup> This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, <sup>4</sup> who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Paul lists four kinds of prayers: supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings. Supplications are prayers offered from an honest, yet humble heart, laying all things before the Lord that He would apply His mercy and grace. Prayers might be considered our everyday kinds of prayers which are more general, such as prayers for our world, for peace, for protection, etc. Intercessions are prayers we offer on behalf of others, interceding for them to the Father, just as Christ intercedes for us. Thanksgivings are

words of gratitude for all that the Lord has done, and promises to do, for us. Paul encourages us to pray for everyone! He especially lists governmental rulers and those in authority over us.

Answers will vary. Sometimes we fail to give thanks for what God has done for us. There are people who we find it difficult to pray for (people we think are our enemies, political leaders we dislike, etc.). Sometimes we are so focused on ourselves that we forget to pray for the needs of others. As sinners, our prayers are certainly not always what they ought to be, and yet, we stand forgiven in Christ even as we ask for help to pray more faithfully.

Read Luke 11:9-10 and John 14:13–14. Does Jesus really mean that we can ask for anything and we will get it? Why or why not? What does He mean by these statements and how do they impact our prayers?

**Luke 11:9-10** And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. <sup>10</sup> For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

**John 14:13-14** Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup> If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

No, our Lord will not always give us whatever we ask for, especially when such things are contrary to His will (win the lottery, get an “A” on a test we didn’t study for, etc.). Prayers made out of our sinful ambition will often get a “no” from God. Instead, we are called to pray for the things we need for each day (our daily bread), to commend all things to the care of God, and in the end, to pray that God’s will be done and not our own. Such prayers prayed in faith and in trust of God’s gracious will are the kinds of prayers that Jesus speaks about in these passages. Such prayers are promised to be heard and always answered in accordance with the will of our Father in heaven. When we understand this, we may shape our prayers and the supplications and intercessions we offer in such a way that seeks to align with God’s promises to us as His children.

### **Praying “Don’ts” and Other Pitfalls**

Aside from this guidance concerning prayer, many well-meaning Christians have added ideas and language to the practice of prayer which, on the surface, seem nice, but are not exactly Biblical. Here are a few examples:

1. “The more we pray about something, the better the outcome.” Read Matthew 6:7–8. What does Jesus say in response to this?

**Matthew 6:7-8** “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Jesus says that long prayers are not any more effective than short ones. We are not heard based on how long our prayers are, or how well they are crafted but are heard in accordance with God’s promise to us in Christ. This does not mean that our prayers cannot be long, or that we cannot pray often about something in particular. Our Lord hears all prayers. However, the outcome is not dependent upon length or brevity, volume, or lack thereof. An hour-long prayer is no better or worse before God than the simple prayer, “Lord, have mercy.”

2. “Sending prayers your way.” “We are covering you with prayer.” Read Psalm 18:6, Jeremiah 29:12, and Luke 6:12. What does this teach us about to whom our prayers ought to be directed?

**Psalms 18:6** In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears.

**Jeremiah 29:12** Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.

**Luke 6:12** In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.

In these verses, and in many other places in the Bible, our prayers are encouraged to be prayed to the Father, who promises to hear us and to act for our eternal good. Sending prayers to people who do not have the power to answer them as God does is ineffective. As the psalmist says in Psalm 141, our prayers ascend to the Lord as incense. As such, our prayers ought always go before the Father, for He alone is the One who has the power to save in Christ, and He is the One who has promised us every good thing. That is the comfort we seek to offer others in praying for them.

3. “We’re calling on all prayer warriors to intercede for this situation.” The term prayer warriors is not actually a Biblical term, but has been introduced by Evangelicals and has made its way into various other denominations, including ours. Many link that term with Ephesians 6 and the “Armor of God” passage. Read that section (vs. 10–18). How does prayer fit in with the other pieces of armor Paul talks about? What might be unhelpful in using the term “prayer warrior”?

**Ephesians 6:10-18** Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. <sup>11</sup> Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. <sup>12</sup> For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. <sup>13</sup> Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. <sup>14</sup> Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, <sup>15</sup> and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup> In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; <sup>17</sup> and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, <sup>18</sup> praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.

Prayer is not listed as one of the pieces of God’s armor which He places upon us. It is a gift given for us to use while donning the armor. With the head and heart protected, the Spirit with us and the Word to guide us; therefore we pray at all times, not as a weapon, but as an activity under the gracious protection and provision of God. When it comes to calling people “prayer warriors,” the danger lies in the confidence of something that is given to all Christians. It gives the impression that some people are good at prayer and others are not. Some may pray more than others, and some may be more faithful in their praying, but our Father’s command is that *all* people pray, and His promise is that *all* prayers are heard for the sake of Christ. As such, “prayer warrior” is setting up a classification of people which is not biblical and need not be established, for our Father hears all His children when they call upon Him in faith.

4. “Father God,” is often repeated. First, the title itself is not Biblical. With our understanding of the Trinity, we would not (and really should not) pray to “Son God” or “Spirit God.” It is an unnecessary duplication of names. Second, you will hear this, or any other name repeated many times in some prayers, almost to the point of absurdity. Other than the Psalms which may repeat “Lord” a few times, we do not do this in casual conversation in any language. We do not repeat people’s names over and over

when we speak to them. An initial address to God is all that is needed or appropriate. How many times is God addressed in the Lord's Prayer?

Once. "Our Father" is the only time Jesus teaches us to call upon the Lord in prayer, and it is a fine model for us in our prayers to our gracious God as well.

NOTE: This is not an exhaustive list. There are a few other aberrations and misconceptions on prayer that are often employed by Christians, such as the tendency to begin prayers with the phrase, "Lord, we just" or those who believe "ex corde" prayer (from the heart) is better than scripted prayer. Perhaps consider discussing some of these others with your pastor or with your zone or district's pastoral counselor.

### **When you pray, say...**

With these in mind, how ought we to pray? The answer lies in following the guidance Jesus has given us in His prayer. Remember, it is the perfect prayer and can become the very pattern we use to pray our prayers like Jesus. Here are four things to consider when praying:

1. While prayer is something we do, it always starts with what is received. Read 1 Corinthians 4:7. All things are given to us by God, including prayer. The shape of our prayers is also given to us by God. Listening first to God's Word is a good start to speaking back to God prayers that are faithful and align more perfectly with His will. Additionally, Luther writes in the Large Catechism, "God ... Himself arranges the words and form of prayer for us. He places them on our lips for how and what we should pray" (III:22). Why is this a good place for prayer to begin?

**1 Corinthians 4:7** For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

The Word is God's way of speaking to us. It is a holy Word, a Word that creates what it says and accomplishes the purpose for which it is sent. There can be no better word, then, that we could come up with to speak to our holy God than with the very Word He has given to us. This is part of the reason why we consider ourselves "confessional, Lutheran Christians." We confess back to God what He has spoken to us in faith, and in the knowledge that His Word is true and that God is pleased by it.

2. In his instruction to Peter the barber, Luther suggested that prayers could be crafted into a garland of four strands: 1) a teaching; 2) a thanksgiving; 3) a confession; and, 4) a prayer. Take a look at the Lord's Prayer. How might Jesus' words fit into these categories? Jesus gave us the Lord's Prayer, not so that we would never pray anything else, but that we would have an example by which to base our own prayers. What might be the benefit of following the pattern of Jesus or the lines of Luther's suggestion as we craft our prayers?

At the start, we pray from God's revelation to us that He is our Father and that we are His creatures, and that it is by His name that salvation has come to His people (think about the I AM statements in the Bible, as well as God's name placed upon us in Baptism). This is instructive for us. We then give thanks that God's kingdom comes to us by His grace, that His will is always done among us, even as it is accomplished in heaven. We then ask our Father to supply us with all that is needful for life here and eternally, to forgive us and help us to be forgiving, to keep us from the things that would tempt us away from Him, and to deliver us from evil and the author of it, who is the devil. In all of this, Jesus' prayer allows us to confess how we have not kept God's name holy, how we have abused His good gifts, how we have fallen prey to the devil's tricks again and again, etc.

The benefit of praying in this way is that it orders our prayers in such a way that keeps our thoughts on God and His gifts to us. It can also keep them grounded upon God's Word rather than our emotions or sinful heart, as well as keep them succinct so that we do not fill our prayers with unnecessary words. It also aids in holding dear all the promises that our Father has made and faithfully keeps and fulfills for His children.

3. We always pray out of the faith given us. Read Psalm 138:3. What do we believe happens in response to our prayers to God? What happens when we cannot put our prayers into words? Read Romans 8:26. How do we know our prayers are faithful and heard? Read John 15:7 and 1 John 5:14–15.

**Psalms 138:3** On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased.

**Romans 8:26** Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

**John 15:7** If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

**1 John 5:14–15** And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. <sup>15</sup> And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

As we call upon the Lord in prayer, we do so knowing He hears and answers us. Sometimes that answer is “yes,” while at other times it may be “no” or “not yet.” It all depends on the Lord's will and what He sees as best to strengthen our soul.

When we do not have the words to pray, or do not even know what to pray for, we can be comforted that the Spirit prays for us. This does not mean that we do not need to pray, but rather is once again the gracious gift of God to know that even when our prayers are imperfect, or without words, the Spirit intercedes for us on our behalf for our good.

Our prayers prayed through Christ, on account of Christ, and with Christ abiding in us are prayers that are faithful. They are prayed on account of and with our Savior. This, too, is one of the great assurances of prayer that Jesus gives us. He invites us to pray *with* Him to the Father.

4. Read James 5:13–16. We often hear, “Prayer is powerful.” Why is that so?

**James 5:13–16** Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

<sup>14</sup> Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup> And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup> Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

Prayer is not powerful because of us, or because we brought in the right people to do it. Prayer is powerful with those who are righteous in Christ because it is Christ who prays with and for us to the Father. The power of His promise, and the Father's promise to hear our prayers, is what makes such petitions powerful. It is all about what God gives us, and what He is doing and promises to do.

## Conclusion



Prayer is a blessing and a joy. It is a gracious gift given to us by our Father, taught to us by Christ, and powerful only in Him. As Jesus invites us to join Him in praying to the Father, we know that Christ stands as our intercessor before the Father, and that our prayers are heard and answered in accord with God's will and purpose. Grounded in the Word, and guided by the Spirit of God, we can pray prayers like Jesus, and with Jesus, trusting in the Father's grace. He knows our hearts, hears our cries for mercy, and brings us safely into the kingdom eternally.

### **Closing Prayer**

Gracious Father, in love You have sent Your Son to bear our sin and be our Savior. As He prayed to you in every need, grant us faith to cry to You in our time of need and in trust that You will supply all that is needful for us. Let Your Spirit form us by Your Word and give us hearts to pray and sing Your praise forever; in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sing or say the second stanza of the hymn "Eternal Spirit of the Living Christ" (*LSB* 769).

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