

Make Your Requests Known

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“And it came about that while He was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught His disciples.’ And He said to them, ‘When you pray, say: “Father, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation”’” (Luke 11:1-14).

It is clear that prayer was very important to Jesus. When His disciples asked for guidance in the matter, there was no hesitation. The very fact that prayer is something that must be “taught” shows that it is not just something that comes naturally, but must be honed, practiced, and perfected. Even in His personal life, Jesus would never have allowed a day to go by (perhaps not even a moment) without prayer.

- He considered it essential to accomplishing God’s will ([Matthew 6:10](#));
- He prayed before selecting His apostles ([Luke 4:42-5:11](#));
- He often prayed before performing a miracle ([John 6:11](#));
- He praised God in prayer for success ([Matthew 11:25](#));
- He prayed for His disciples during times of trouble ([Luke 22:32](#));
- His prayers were often very intense ([Luke 22:44](#));
- He was known to pray all night over important decisions ([Luke 6:12](#)).

So what are some of the lessons that we should apply to our prayers? How can we be taught to pray better?

Your Inner Room

“But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut the door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you” (Matthew 6:6). This is not to say that public prayer is wrong or unnecessary, since Jesus often prayed out loud with others present ([Luke 23:34](#), [Matthew 26:26](#), [John 11:41-42](#)) and endorsed prayers away from the “closet” ([Luke 18:13-14](#), [22:39-40](#)). What Jesus is pointing out is that we must have a healthy personal prayer life, and our public prayers must match up with the attitude we display in private. Jesus uses a common expression in Jewish literature (hyperbole) to prove His point that every prayer, from our most public to our most intimate, must be for the right reasons. Consider:

- Prayer does not need a specific place to be effective. It is not that we are supposed to literally pray in a closet, for Jesus prayed in a Garden, on a mountain, in a boat, in a house, and in the Temple. But I am comforted by the fact that if I do not have beautiful scenery, complete silence, or the grandeur of a cathedral, I can pray any time, anywhere ([1 Thess. 5:16-18](#), [Acts 16:25](#)).

- Do not make the mistake of thinking that your public prayers can be a substitute for private prayer.
- Remember that we need only ask for what we need, and God is already on the case. He knows our needs, especially with regard to salvation, and is waiting for the invitation to come in to our lives (Revelation 3:20).

God Already Knows? So Why Pray?

Two scriptures on prayer seem to suggest conflicting ideas. First, we are told in Philippians 4:6 that we should pray about everything and let our requests be made known to God. But Jesus Himself stated in Matthew 6:8 that our Heavenly Father already knows everything we need before we ask Him. C.S. Lewis summarized the supposed inconsistency, writing, *“To confess our sins before God is certainly to tell Him what He knows much better than we. And also, any petition is a kind of telling. If it does not strictly exclude the belief that God knows our need, it at least seems to solicit His attention. Some traditional formulae make that implication very clear: ‘Hear us, good Lord’ – ‘O let thine ears consider well the voice of my complaint.’ As if, though God does not need to be informed, He does need, and even rather frequently, to be reminded. But we cannot really believe that degrees of attention, and therefore of inattention, and therefore of something like forgetfulness, exist in the Absolute Mind. I presume that only God’s attention keeps me (or anything else) in existence at all”* (*Letter To Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, Lewis, p. 20).

This presents us with an interesting dilemma. If God already knows what we need before we ask Him, then why do we need to ask Him for anything? The implications of this topic are far-reaching:

- Some Christians feel rather uncomfortable praying about almost anything because they do not want to “bother God” with their trivial concerns.
- Others have such a misconstrued understanding of prayer that they believe it is their responsibility to inform God of everything they want Him to know, and step dangerously close to violating His sovereignty by dictating to Him what He should or should not do.
- How we view prayer says a lot about how we view God Himself: personal or impersonal, caring or unconcerned, reaching out to us like a father or so lofty that He cannot know our daily burdens?

“Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him” (Matthew 6:8). It is tempting to read this verse and conclude that prayer must not be very important at all, if God already knows what we need before we ask Him. Yet Jesus did not view this as a hindrance to prayer, but an incentive. *After all, what can I say to God if He knows everything?* Some might conclude that it is nothing, but Jesus says, “Everything!” The apostle elaborates when He writes, *“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God”* (Philippians 4:6). That is why these two verses are not at odds with each other at all. They are not two opposing views on prayer, but two components of a larger mechanism working in harmony.

Perhaps our whole conception of prayer rests on how we define “know”/“known” in the above verses. C.S. Lewis explained it thus, *“We are always completely, and therefore equally, known to*

God...But though this knowledge never varies, the quality of our being known can" (Lewis, p. 20). He goes on to say that we, as individuals, are known by God from the very beginning in the same way He might know everything about any other part of His creation. After all, Jesus ponders in Matthew 10:29-30, "Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from Your Father. But the very hairs of your head are numbered." God is totally omniscient, totally aware, of all things in His creation. But when we become aware of the fact of God's "knowing us" and we assent with all our will to *be known by Him*, then we respond to God as complicit persons and not entities in His creation. The change is in us – from passive to active. "Instead of merely being known, we show, we tell, we offer ourselves to view" (Lewis, p. 21). In essence, we unveil ourselves. This is why we understand that 1 Corinthians 8:3 and Galatians 4:9 are talking about a deeper "knowing" than just technical knowledge. "But if anyone loves God, He is known by Him." Since God is omniscient, He already knows everything about us. But when we accept His presence into our lives we disclose everything to Him.

Lest we mistake this for some overly-complicated theological brain teaser, let us recognize that there are some incredible practical applications:

- Because He already is an expert on our needs, God is never surprised or unprepared. He is already well-stocked. "In our Lord we have someone with whom we can share our anger, joy, fear, frustration, delight, endless struggles with sin, hurt, loneliness – our real selves. This is the powerful liberating honesty which should result from understanding God's omniscience. With God, we can be somebody: our self; we don't have to be somebody else" (*The God Who Hears*, W. Bingham Hunter, p. 43).
- If a large store existed that always stocked everything you needed, you would never conclude, "They have everything I need, therefore, I don't need to shop there." Rather, you would think, "I am always going to shop there because they already have everything I need." God is not like a small convenience store that only carries the minimum. He is an expert on you, me, and everybody else. He knows what we need to be fulfilled, happy, content, secure, and saved. He is never out-of-stock.
- We only hurt ourselves when we think that we can hide from God, or keep some of our needs away from His gaze (Jeremiah 23:23-24, Psalms 139).

Does "Everything" Really Mean "Everything"?

The next challenge we face in understanding prayer comes from within ourselves, when we wonder if a prayer is really important enough to "bother God right now." For some people, especially those raised in an environment that promoted independence and self-reliance, it can be strange – even uncomfortable – to pray to God. There is a parable in Luke 18:1-8 that speaks to this concern. Based on what Jesus says there, should any of us really feel so unimportant to God that He will be annoyed with our prayers, even those that seem inconsequential in the grand scheme of things?

Maybe we find ourselves doubting the validity of our requests because the thing that is most on our mind is kind of "self-focused". So we try to cover our bases by rattling off a bunch of other prayer requests, hoping that we can feel less selfish when we do get to our own anxieties, fears, and needs. "However, we want to know not how we should pray if we were perfect but how we should pray being as we now are. And if my idea of "unveiling" is accepted, we have already

answered this. It is no use to ask God with factitious earnestness for A when our whole mind is in reality filled with the desire for B. We must lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us. Even an intimate human friend is ill-used if we talk to him about one thing while our mind is really on another, and even a human friend will soon become aware when we are doing so” (Lewis, p. 23). Often, once our personal prayers are offered, we feel relieved and “uncluttered” enough to move on to other prayers.

“What is to be made of all this? First, it is better to pour out your heart and soul to God in honest expression of hurt, frustration and impatience than it is to repress these feelings and think they are hidden from God. Second, when you are feeling this way, don’t withdraw from worship. When Asaph came into the sanctuary of God things began to make more sense (Psalm 73:16). Third, confess your sin – frustration does not excuse unrighteousness. Indulging in self-pity and persisting in isolation will only make matters worse. Fourth, spend time reading the Psalms and reflect honestly on your spiritual heritage. Others have been at such a point before and have come through it... Jesus has also been where you are. He knew suffering, grief and experienced injustice (Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-8)” (Hunter, pp. 176-177).

Taking It Personally

“Pray then in this way: Our Father who art in Heaven...” (Matthew 6:9). Remember that God is a person – at least, in the sense that He has uniqueness, a personality, etc. – and not just some impersonal force. He may be a spirit (John 4:24), but He is a personal spirit. Like any person, there are things we can say to Him that are offensive, rude, condescending, or selfish:

- God loathes being used by others, so praying to Him to impress other people is a prayer that will be rejected (Matthew 6:1-5). Remember the Pharisee in Luke 18:11-12.
- Praying for things that have nothing to do with God’s ultimate purpose will also be rejected (James 4:3), such as magical powers, the ability to fly, or a sports team winning. Become united in your purpose with God and you will have much to pray about (evangelism, salvation, mercy, blessings upon the righteous).
- Praying to God and then immediately engaging in evil is another way for your words to be ignored (Proverbs 21:27, 15:8).
- We hinder communication with God when we allow our baggage, or our relationship problems, to dominate our thinking (1 Peter 3:7). How would you feel if the person talking to you seemed distant, distracted, and unfocused on the conversation?
- *“Remember also that God, like the rest of us, finds it somewhat less than captivating when you fall asleep on Him while talking” (Hunter, p. 74).*
- The other side of this is that we should keep our prayers close to home and have a personal stake in them. If we realize that God is a person, and communicates personally, then He is not interested in hearing the news from you, or gossip, or the weather. Actually talk to Him, as one individual communicates with another.

Knowledge Is Not A Feeling, And Neither Is Prayer

One misconception about prayer in our culture seems to be that prayer is something that just happens and is spontaneous, or is a series of intangible feelings and thoughts. Yet, when we really consider the example of prayer that Jesus gives us in the sermon on the mount, we realize

that prayer must have substance to it. There must be real thoughts, ideas conveyed, desires expressed, specific words of praise. Consider:

- *“Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth; therefore let your words be few”* (Ecclesiastes 5:2).
- *“Devote yourself to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving”* (Colossians 4:2).
- *“Be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer”* (1 Peter 4:7).

Just like communication between people who actually care about each other, there should be thought and sobriety in our prayers. We should be prepared and have a purpose. It is interesting that these verses run contrary to the popular ideas found in eastern religions or mysticism, that communication with higher powers is best accomplished through meditation, humming, frenzies (whirling dervishes, holy rollers), or the use of intoxicants (hallucinogenic drugs, alcohol, etc.). The apostle writes, *“I shall pray with the spirit and I shall pray with the mind also; I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing with the mind also”* (1 Corinthians 14:15).

Does this somehow contradict what is written in Romans 8:26-27? Not necessarily, since even in that context Paul is clearly indicating that his unutterable prayers have definite meaning, purpose, and direction to them. C.S. Lewis explained how he often used prayers without words, not because he was looking for feelings only, but because he felt like he connected more with his real desires. *“Even in praying for others I believe I tended to avoid their names and substituted mental images for them. I still think prayer without words is the best – if one can really achieve it... To pray successfully without words one needs to be “at the top of one’s form.” Otherwise the mental acts become merely imaginative or emotional acts – and a fabricated emotion is a miserable affair”* (Lewis, p. 11). Sometimes there are prayers that we say that simply cannot be verbalized in human language. In these times we must avoid the temptation to just “feel” something or be imaginative. We must still approach the throne of God with reverence and respect, with our minds ordered and our thoughts presented genuinely – whether spoken or not.