

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #69: “LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY”

By John Temples

Luke 11:1--”And it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, that one of His disciples said to Him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.’”

These words must have been a sweet sound to Jesus. Sometimes His disciples disappointed Him. They argued among themselves about which of them was greatest; they misunderstood the nature of the kingdom. But every now and then they would come up with something like this. We know their request was pleasing to Him, because He responded by giving them the beautiful model prayer and a discourse on the willingness of God to answer our prayers (verses 2-13).

What does this request from the disciples show us?

The power of example. Notice what prompted this request--”As He was praying.” Sometimes we wonder if our example, our stand for the Lord, is noticed or accomplishes anything. Rest assured, it is and it does. If someone sees you genuinely and humbly praying to God (and it’s OK for people to SEE you praying), it will make a deep impression on them.

This request demonstrated humility and willingness to be taught. The disciples realized they did not really know how to pray. They had heard the canned, stale prayers of the rabbis and the Pharisees, but “no one ever spoke like this Man.”

It shows the seriousness and importance of prayer. Evidently the disciples never asked Jesus how to preach, or how to interpret the Old Testament writings, or how to answer thorny theological questions; but they did ask for help to know how to pray.

This request shows that real prayer is a learned art. I’m sure we could all agree that none of us prays as often or as well as we should. But maybe also we feel a

sense of inadequacy as we pray--we feel unworthy to approach God or afraid to express ourselves. We're worried that we'll "mess up." And it's easy to get disillusioned about prayer. "I prayed once and God didn't answer." Maybe what you mean is, "I prayed once and God didn't give me what I wanted." If you prayed, God answered--He promises that--but you just didn't like the answer.

Let's let the Lord teach us to pray as He taught His disciples.

WHAT PRAYER IS NOT:

Prayer is not a gold-plated Mastercard--a means of instant gratification. James 4:3 says, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures." Asking for material things is not wrong, but our motives for asking can be wrong. Besides, God would rather give you spiritual blessings.

Prayer is not a means of bypassing your own effort. God will not do for us what we can do for ourselves. When the Israelites left Egypt, God did not magically transport them to the Promised Land. We can and should pray "Give us our daily bread"; but we also have to remember 2 Thessalonians 3:10--"If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat." It is wrong to ask God for an evil habit to be removed and then do nothing about it. It is wrong to pray that a loved one be saved and do nothing within your own power to accomplish it. If you need money, pray to God about it--that is certainly acceptable--but then get busy to earn it!

Prayer is not a means of self-glorification--a way to impress others or "score points" with God. "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites; for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men" (Matthew 6:5). Remember the Pharisee who prayed--I'm paraphrasing--"God, aren't You impressed with me? I'm not like other men. How lucky You are to have me!" (Luke 18:9-12.)

Prayer is not a panic button or escape hatch, to be used only in emergencies. A long-unfaithful Christian was out in a boat fishing. A storm came up and the boat was about to sink. The man cried out, "Lord, I haven't asked anything of You for

15 years, but I need you now. And if you will help me get safely to land, I promise I won't bother You again for another 15 years!" No, Paul tells us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Pray when you are *mad*, pray when you are *glad*, and pray when you are *sad*! The most valuable asset you can have in a crisis is a long-standing, close prayer relationship with God.

Prayer is not a way to get God to make an exception to His own law. A man jumped off a bridge, intending to commit suicide. On the way down, he changed his mind and prayed for God to save him. Will God suspend the law of gravity for him? Jesus already answered that question in Matthew 4:7 when the devil tried to get Him to throw Himself off the temple. Nor can we pray, "God, I know you said to repent and be baptized, but my loved one will not do those things. Can't you just save her anyway?" Asking God to do something contradictory to His revealed will is a sure way to get a "no" answer.

And speaking of a "no" answer, sometimes we get disillusioned about prayer because we won't take "no" for an answer. God said "no" to Paul about removing his thorn in the flesh, but He gave him something better: an extra measure of grace to bear it. God even said "no" to Jesus when He prayed, "If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me." "No" is an answer, even if we don't like it.

SO WHAT DOES CONSTITUTE ACCEPTABLE PRAYER?

First, you must be a child of God--a Christian. John 9:31 says, "God does not hear sinners." (That is, "hear" them in the sense of responding and granting their requests.) God has no children outside His family! When as a child you wanted your allowance, did you have better luck asking the neighbor kid's parents, or your own? Prayer is a privilege of family membership.

Second, you must pray to the right Person. Philippians 4:6 says, "Let your requests be made known to God." No prayers to angels, the Holy Spirit, Mary, so-called "saints," or "to whom it may concern."

Third, you must pray through Jesus (in His name, recognizing Him as your Mediator). Paul said, "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and

men, the Man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus is your Advocate, your lawyer representing you in God’s court. Anyone who will not acknowledge Jesus or submit to Him cannot expect God to hear his prayers. No one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6).

Fourth, you must pray in harmony with God’s will. 1 John 5:14 says, “Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.” James also says, “You ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that’” (James 4:15). God has a general will for mankind, revealed in the Bible. He also has a specific or personal will for each of us. God’s general/revealed will we know by reading the Scriptures; His personal will for us we have to search out. That makes life exciting--it’s an ongoing walk with God, imbibing more and more of His spirit and becoming more and more like Him as we go.

Fifth, you must pray in faith. It does no good to pray for something and not get it, and then say, “Well, I didn’t really expect it anyway.” Remember Hebrews 11:6--”But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” And once again, James states, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:5-7).

Sixth, you must pray with the proper attitude--a spirit of gratitude and humility. Proverbs 3:34 says that God rejects the scornful and arrogant, but gives grace to the humble. The greatest people in the Bible always had an extra dose of humility: (1) Abraham--”I am but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27); (2) Isaiah--”I am a man of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5); (3) Paul--”I am chief of sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15).

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR A BETTER PRAYER LIFE:

Have a definite time and quiet place for personal prayers. The greatest people in the Bible made prayer a habit. Daniel 6:10 says, “And in his upper room, with his

windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days.” Jesus said in Matthew 6:6, “But you, when you pray, go into your room [closet, KJV], and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”

When you pray, follow the divine protocol. Prayer is just talking to God, and we can converse with Him just as we would talking with a friend. But even in our private, personal prayers, we should attend to a few rules:

- First, always begin your prayers by addressing God properly. (The characteristic word of address in the Bible is “Father.”)
- Second, always end your prayers by saying “In Jesus’s name” or something similar. (You are keeping the members of the Godhead straight--you are praying TO the Father THROUGH the Son, your Mediator.)
- Third, even though you are talking privately and personally to God, always maintain an attitude of respect and dignity.

What should the content of your prayers be? What can you talk to God about? The answer is, just about anything. Read the Psalms and notice the gamut of emotions and requests David made to God.

Here are four things that should be part of your prayers:

First, ADORATION. Prayer should begin with praise to God. In the model prayer, Jesus began by saying, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name.” No matter how bad you feel, always get into the habit of beginning your prayers with praise.

Second, APPRECIATION. “Pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks” (1 Thessalonians 5:17,18). God is like us in one respect--He appreciates hearing someone say “thank You.” We all have so many things to be thankful for, we could spend entire prayers just thanking God for blessings received.

Third, CONTRITION. Contrition means sorrow for sin. For a great example of contrite prayer, read Psalm 51.

Fourth, SUPPLICATION. This is when we finally get around to asking God for what we need or want. Philippians 4:6 says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."

I don't see any limits in the Bible on what we can ask God for (except those things contrary to His will). If you want to ask God for a new car or a new job, go ahead. Just remember, God is always going to answer those prayers according to His own will and according to what is best for you.

ONE MORE WORD OF ADVICE ABOUT PRAYER: BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU PRAY FOR!

Prayer is like dynamite--it is powerful. It is to be used wisely, not casually. Sometimes, particularly in our public prayers, we will say, "God, please use us in Your service." Be careful--God will answer that prayer! He will providentially put you in situations where you are faced with a need you can meet, a person you can help, a time to speak and take a stand for God. He will then hold you accountable for how you handle those situations, because you asked for them!

If you pray, "Lord, make me a better person," be careful--He will do it! He will change your life. He will rid you of evil practices, habits, and acquaintances. He will make you ashamed to do the things you once enjoyed doing. He will reprogram your conscience.

If we apply ourselves and let the Lord teach us how to pray through His word, we will be immeasurably blessed and drawn closer to Him. --John Temples