

Prayer Foundations

Personal Prayer

(Distributed by *PrayingForRevival.net*)

Prayer begins at the personal level.

In simplest terms, prayer is conversation; a conversation with God.

This is at first both encouraging and daunting. Encouraging, because even a child can have conversation. Indeed, children pray easily and with faith! But it is also daunting, because “fellowship with the Unseen and Most Holy One” – as prayer is described by Andrew Murray – is a deep thing of the spirit, and we are unfamiliar with how to proceed.

Proceed we must! Prayer is not optional in the life of the Christian. Jesus expects us to follow his example; to establish this personal conversation with God in our lives.

Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer.

– Luke 5:16

When you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

– Jesus (Matthew 6:6)

Notice in the verses above, that Jesus prayed *often* – even though he led a busy life of ministry and travel. The phrase “when you pray” reveals that Jesus *expects us to pray*. He did not say, “If you pray...” This teaching is part of Jesus’ instructions to all the people who had gathered to hear him speak. It is not only for “church leaders.” Jesus expects *all of us* to pray regularly.

Paul the apostle strongly reiterates this requirement for the follower of Jesus.

Don’t worry about anything; instead, *pray about everything*. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.

– Philippians 4:6

Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.

– 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18

Suggestions for Growing in Personal Prayer

How do we proceed? Start right where you are!

One mistake people make is to set unrealistic goals. Praying for an hour a day is a worthy goal! But if you are not praying for 5 minutes a day yet, you will soon be discouraged and give up.

God knows where you are, and he is happy for you to simply take the first (or next) small step!

When we first begin, our conversation with God may feel awkward. This is normal. Know that the conversation will become natural over time, and God is not bothered by the initial awkward attempts.

Establish a Time and Place for Prayer

This is one of the core teachings of Jesus about prayer. It is simple, and yet has profound impact to all our efforts.

But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.
– Jesus (Matthew 6:6)

Andrew Murray expounds on this verse in his book, “With Christ in the School of Prayer”.

“The first thing the Lord teaches His disciples is that they must have a secret place for prayer; every one must have some solitary spot where they can be alone with God. Every teacher must have a schoolroom. We have learned to know and accept Jesus as our only teacher in the school of prayer.... And He wants each one to choose for themselves the fixed spot where He can daily meet them. That inner chamber, that solitary place, is Jesus’ schoolroom. That spot may be anywhere; that spot may change if we have to change our abode; but there must be that secret place, with the quiet time in which the pupil places themselves in the Master’s presence. There alone, but there most surely, Jesus comes to us to teach us to pray.”

It makes sense that establishing the same time and place for daily prayer will help to reinforce it as a habit. It also helps to eliminate distractions when we are in a familiar and quiet place. This is the best approach to make progress.

Tips For Focusing:

- Silence your cell phone! If your phone is distracting you even when silenced, put it out of your reach during your prayer times. (I silence my phone, but keep it handy for the Notepad app ... I have found it is easier for me to keep prayer notes on my phone than in an actual notepad.)
- Let your family know when you will be praying and ask them to not interrupt you unless it is important.
- Playing quiet worship music in the background can help you stay focused. I sometimes allow myself to sing along for a minute in between prayers. Worship is a form of prayer too! (For some, the music can actually distract from praying, so do what works. Instrumental music may be the best option.)

- Use a moment of silent meditation to quiet your thoughts. (This is a whole topic!)
- If you are distracted by thoughts of everything you need to do today, keep a notebook next to you, and write those things down in a list when you think of them. This will help your brain to let those thoughts go, because you know you won't forget them later.

Begin With Worship and Thanks

Jesus begins his example prayer (The Lord's Prayer) with this:

This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...'
– Jesus (Matthew 6:9)

The phrase *hallowed be your name* is a declaration that our God is to be set apart from every other person or thing, to be honored above all others as uniquely holy. Other modern English translations say "may your name be kept holy" or "may your holy name be honored."

This is how Jesus teaches us to begin our prayers. It is worship; a declaration that God is holy.

I put my focus first on God, and tell him that I know he is holy and righteous above all others. I thank him for being loving, kind and merciful to me, and for listening to my prayers. This only needs to take a minute, but it can take more time too. Beginning with this worshipful focus on God sets the proper tone and position for our conversation with God. He is God, and we are his beloved creation. From this perspective our personal prayer is most effectual.

Pray for Your Needs Last

After beginning with worship, Jesus teaches us to ask for God's will and his kingdom to be established in our lives.

' May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. '
– Jesus (Matthew 6:10)

It is natural for us to think first of our own needs in prayer, and it is not wrong for us to ask God to meet our needs. But the best way to pray is to first ask God to work out *his* plans in the world and in our lives. In prayer I ask God to help me see what he is wanting to accomplish. I tell God that my desire is to know his will and to be aligned with his purposes.

Andrew Murray stresses the value of this point:

"The lesson is of more importance than we think. In true worship the Father must be first, must be all. The sooner I learn to forget myself in the desire that HE may be glorified, the richer will the blessing be that prayer will bring to myself."

After we take a moment or two to pray for the plans of the Father to be accomplished, we then have full confidence to ask for the things we need, which is the next part of the Lord's Prayer. Our conversation with God now touches on all our own needs and concerns, but our prayer is unselfish because we maintained a proper focus on God's will.

Read the Bible Too

An important point in prayer is that we must learn to pray for things that are within God's will to answer. If we are asking for things that are actually against his plans, then we will not get the answer we are seeking.

Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.

– James 4:2-3

Agnes Sanford elegantly makes the point in her book, *The Healing Light*:

“The objective must of course be in accordance with God's will, for it is as difficult to make God's power operate contrary to His will as it is to make water flow uphill. A wise engineer studies the laws of flowing water and builds his water system in accordance with those laws. A wise scientist studies the laws of nature and adapts his experiments to those laws. And a wise seeker after God had better study the laws of God and adapt his prayers to those laws.”

The best and most profitable way to study the laws of God, is to read and study the Bible. This should actually be done separately from personal prayer times. Regular study of God's Word enhances personal prayers, as we gain knowledge of what is truly important to God.

Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path.

– Psalm 119: 105

Within the context of personal prayer, including a brief scripture reading can help align your prayers with God's will. One approach I use at times is to read a couple verses before praying, enough to get the meaning. Then when I pray for God's will to be done, I can specifically pray for what the Bible verses were teaching me. I know that my prayers are aligned with the will of God because I am actually praying for what is in the Word of God.

Don't Forget to Listen

This point is important since prayer is *a conversation*. If we only talk and do not pause to listen, then our one-sided conversation will not be as impactful as it could be; it will lack a true *connection* with God.

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

– Jesus (John 10:27)

Listening for God's voice is a whole topic in itself, but as you practice listening during or at the end of your prayer time, God will participate in the conversation and you will learn to hear him. Most often in times of prayer we hear further clarification of truth, or affirmation of God's love toward us.

Sometimes a Bible verse will pop into your mind in the silence, and it will say a truth that you need to hear. Maybe some lines from a worship song will come to mind which provide deeper understanding of God's character. Often God's response will be to give one of the fruits of the Spirit, such as a strong feeling of peace or joy (see especially Galatians 5:22-23, and also Romans 15:13, Ephesians 4:2, Colossians 3:12-15). In rare occasions you may receive a thought that is so clear and strong and unexpected that you know it was not your own thought.

One word of wisdom is necessary here. In personal prayer I expect *conversation*, and I am not usually looking for specific life-changing instructions. (*Sell your house and become a full-time missionary!* would be an unusual thing to hear "out of the blue" during a daily time of personal prayer.) Any life-changing direction or call to ministry that comes from your time of prayer can be shared with other trusted believers for confirmation. In these cases, we know that God will confirm such direction through mature Christians and leaders in the Church (See Acts 6:1-5, Acts 13:1-3, Acts 15:22, Acts 18:27, 1 Timothy 4:14).

The Blessings of Prayer

Look again at what Jesus says about personal prayer.

But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.
– Jesus (Matthew 6:6)

There are rewards from God *that are only given to those who pray!*

Although nobody else will see the hours that you spend in the prayer conversation over days and months and years, Jesus declares that God will reward us for this commitment to spend time with him. What are these rewards? The blessings of God are as varied as the people of God! But we can be sure that he will give us answers to our prayers, along with other good gifts as any loving father will do.

Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened...

If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him.

– Jesus (Mathew 7:7-8,11)