

What Should You Pray For?

It is one thing to know what prayer is. It is quite another knowing what to pray for. We all, of course, want to “pray according to the will of God,” so that our prayers can be heard and answered. And so lots of people have developed various systems and suggestions over the years for teaching Christians what to pray for. These range from prayer cards and prayer lists to praying through acronyms such as ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Many people also recommend praying through Scripture.

I am not opposed to any of these ideas and suggestions. If they work for you, use them. I would, however, propose that all such prayer systems run the risk of taking you away from what we learned in the previous lesson, that prayer is nothing more than simply communicating with God. If prayer is simply communicating with God, then you don’t need cards, lists, acronyms, or memorized passages to talk with God any more than you need such things to talk to your spouse, your children, your neighbor, or a coworker. I do not know anyone who maintains a “conversation topic list” for what they want to say when they talk to other people. So why would you use such things to talk to God? If such a list would make conversation with people unnatural, then it also makes conversation with God unnatural.

I do actually know of one person who used a “topic list” to talk to another person. It was me. I was in Junior High and there was a girl in our church’s youth group that I really liked. But I was terrible at talking with girls, so I decided that if I was going to talk to her, I needed to come up with a list of topics beforehand to help me through a conversation. So I wrote up a list of about ten items on a 5x7 notecard. Then I sneakily put the notecard in a see-through pocket of my Bible so that if I started talking to her at church, I could glance at the notecard in the pocket of my Bible without her knowing that I was getting cues from my card.

The next Sunday I got the opportunity to use my card. She was standing around after the service, so I went up and launched into my “conversation.” Much to my dismay, she was much less interested in my ten conversation topics than I was, and I blew through all ten in about two minutes. Then I had nothing left to talk about. So I stood there awkwardly for another few seconds, and then said, “Well, okay. Bye!” and walked off. I

sometimes wonder if she still remembers that conversation as being the strangest conversation she has ever had in her life. More likely than not, she forgot all about it five minutes later.

The point is that cue cards and topic lists are only marginally helpful in having a conversation with someone else, and might actually be more detrimental than beneficial. This is not only true when you engage people in conversation, but also when you engage God in conversation. Just as conversation lists and cue cards are unnatural in normal conversations, so also, they can be detrimental to your conversations with God. When prayer becomes natural and normal, you discover that like any other conversation, you can carry it out all day long.

Nevertheless, it is true that initially, it is awkward to talk with God. We are afraid of saying the wrong thing or don't know what to talk to Him about. But once again, this is exactly how it is when you first start developing a friendship with anyone else. Initial conversations are nearly always awkward as you both struggle to find areas of common interests and topics that both of you are knowledgeable and passionate about. Of course, with God, He knows all things and is passionate about all things, and so He is happy to talk about whatever is on your mind or whatever interests you. But still, for the person who is just starting out, it is helpful to have some conversation starters. Some ice breakers are helpful in any conversation, especially when it's a conversation with God.

So in this lesson, we are going to briefly look at what many call “The Lord's Prayer” in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4. This prayer is not actually “The Lord's Prayer” because Jesus is not actually praying. Instead, He is simply giving His disciples some suggestions on what to pray for when they communicate with God the Father. So for this reason, it is better to call this “The Disciples' Prayer” or “The Model Prayer.” It provides a model, or framework, for disciples of Jesus to follow when they communicate with God. Let us look at what Jesus tells His disciples about communicating with God.

The Disciples' Prayer

The most surprising thing about the suggested “prayer requests” that Jesus provides to His disciples is that every single one of these requests has the potential to turn your life upside down. There are no mundane prayer requests in the prayer that Jesus instructs His disciples to pray. Each line of this prayer is designed to invite God to overthrow, upend, and destroy your life. When you talk to God about the items in this model prayer, God enters your life like a bull in a china shop and tears everything down.

Afterwards, of course, God takes the shards of crystal glass scattered all over the ground and, from these shards, makes the most beautiful mosaic you have ever seen. This truth is taught all over the Scripture. If you want God to work in your life through prayer, the beginning stages of God’s work will feel an awful lot like destruction. But if you bear with Him through the demolition, He will raise your life up from the ashes and rubble into something far better than you could ever ask or even imagine. The truth we see in the prayers of Jesus and the pages of Scripture is that death precedes resurrection. This is something to be aware of as you listen to Jesus about how to pray.

Before we look at His instructions, though, note that this model prayer from Jesus is not a prayer to be memorized and recited. You have not prayed the Disciple’s Prayer if you mindlessly recite the words of this prayer once or twice a day. I once stayed overnight with a family where the children had been taught to recite this prayer before bed. As the children climbed into bed, their father said, “Don’t forget to say your prayers!” The children knelt at their beds and said this:

*Our Father who art in heaven hallowed by thy name
thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven
give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us
lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil
for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever amen.*

It took them all of ten seconds. Then they climbed into bed having said their “prayers.” But this is not why Jesus gave us this prayer. It is not simply a set of words to memorize so that you know exactly what to say when you pray, and the quicker you get it over, the better. No, Jesus taught this prayer to show the sorts of things you can say to God when you are in a conversation with Him. The Disciple’s Prayer provides a few conversation topics to get you started. But these are not the only topics you can talk to God about. Since prayer is a conversation with God, you can talk to Him about anything that is on your heart and mind.

Below is a quick summary of how each line in the Disciple’s Prayer will upend, overturn, and destroy your life as you know it. I am using the prayer found in Matthew (Matt 6:9-13) because it is familiar to most people.

Our Father in heaven

Praying to God as our Father is revolutionary in itself. Many people view God as a Ruler or King who sits on His throne and stares down at us as we grovel at His feet. But Jesus invites us to think of God as our Father, and to speak to Him as a loving, caring Father. Don't think of God as a high and lofty Judge, staring at you with a scowling face. Instead, think of God as a strong, kind, and caring man who loves to chat with you about life and share His wisdom as the two of you take a walk in the country, go for a drive into the city, or watch the football game. He is the man who wants to hear about your day and is genuinely interested in everything you say.

As a side note, many people pray to Jesus or to the Holy Spirit. This is not necessarily wrong, since prayer is simply a conversation, and we can have conversations with Jesus and with the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, don't neglect your ongoing conversation with God, your Father, for when Jesus told us what to pray for, He instructed us to direct our prayers to God, our Father.

Hallowed be Your Name

This is a declaration that we want God's name to be glorified. When you pray, tell God that you want to let people know how amazing He is. The danger in this is that when we pray for God to be glorified, and for His name to be praised among the people, what we often subconsciously mean is that we want *our* name to be praised and glorified among people. Oh sure, when this happens, we imagine how we will stand in front of the adoring crowds and point our finger to heaven saying, “Give God the glory!” while we bask in the glory for ourselves. Yes, we want God to be gloried, but we often want to ride His coattails to some glory of our own.

But Jesus doesn't say this will happen. This first prayer item is for God's name to be glorified; not ours. And if Scripture is any guide, God often chooses the strangest ways to glorify His name. He uses shepherds, children, and donkeys more than the rich, powerful, and popular. So while it is okay to expect that God will glorify His name through you, just know that God's movement toward glory might involve a lot of downward momentum for yourself. When you follow God toward glory, you are more likely to be led toward obscurity and poverty than toward riches and fame.

Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven

To pray for God’s kingdom to come means to pray for God’s will to be done. The concepts are one and the same. The Kingdom of God is the rule and reign of God, and so when God is ruling and reigning, His will is being done. This means that when you talk to God, make it plain that you want to be involved in helping Him carry out His plans and desires on this earth. This is what it means to pray for His will to be done. And this is something we all want, right? Some people even include the phrase “Not my will, but Yours be done” in their prayers (following the example of Jesus in Luke 22:42).

But again, this is a dangerous thing to say to God, for while you might be fine with God carrying out His will on earth, it is quite another thing when God steps into your life and starts trying to change your plans, your goals, and your dreams. We are usually fine with God carrying out His will in the lives of other people, as long as He doesn’t mess up *our* life. If you are like me, when it comes to our own life, we want our own will to be done; not God’s. Why? Because God’s will for our life usually looks much less enjoyable than our own plans for our life. Following God’s will for our life will lead us into death, slavery, obscurity, and suffering, rather than into riches, fame, honor, and glory.

But have courage and faith. God’s plan truly is better, though it may not initially appear to be so. Note that the final statements of this prayer in verse 13 contain the same sort of ideas that Jesus states here. The Kingdom of God is God’s rule and reign on earth, and it arrives by His power and is for His glory.

Give us this day our daily bread

Don’t read more into this prayer item than is here. This is a request for God to provide for your daily needs. This is encouraging, because it once again shows that God wants you to talk to Him about what you have on your heart. Or in this case, God wants you to talk to Him about what you do *not* have in your stomach. So yes, you can talk to God about your need for food. Though it is not just about food, but also about our other physical, social, medical, financial, and psychological needs. You can talk to God about anything that concerns you.

So how is this a dangerous prayer? Well, note that Jesus only mentions *daily* bread. Daily bread means “enough for today.” This is not a prayer for a full fridge and a growing retirement account. It is not a prayer for job security or financial freedom. For most of us, this is a terrifying prospect. If you are like me, you trust God for today and

you trust God for tomorrow, but for your own peace of mind, you would like tomorrow’s provision today. So if that is how you feel, go ahead and talk to God about it. If it is a concern you have today, He wants to hear about it.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors

There is some question here about whether Jesus is talking about sins or financial debts. The word Jesus uses in Matthew 6:12 is not the typical word for sin (*hamartia*), but is the word that typically refers to some sort of financial debt or burden (*opheilēma*). However, in the parallel version of Luke 11:4, Jesus does use the normal word for sin, but then switches to the same word for debt that Matthew uses. So is Jesus referring to sin or debts? The answer is both. Jesus is referring to anything that you might have against someone else, or which they might have against you, being either a fault committed or finances owed.

When you talk to God, ask Him for release from all your burdens, whether they are moral or financial. Again, if it is something weighing on your heart and mind, then it is fair game for your conversation with God. This might sound nice when it is directed toward you, but Jesus also invites you to release other people from the faults they have done to you or the finances they owe. This is much harder to talk to God about, and is not something that most people want to do.

By the way, it is worth mentioning that the word Jesus uses for “forgive” here (*aphesis*) does not mean to simply erase. There are two words for “forgiveness” in the Bible, and the one Jesus uses here means something closer to “release.” Very often, there are conditions attached to this form of forgiveness, so that you will not experience it unless you first fulfill the conditions. (See the volume in this “Christian Questions” book series about forgiveness which explains this in more detail.) In this case, when you talk to God about being released from your addiction to sin or your burden of debt, He is not just going to wave a heavenly magic wand and do away with your addictions to sin or your burdens of debt. Instead, in communication with Him, you and He will come up with a plan of action to break free from sin and pay off your debt. The same can be true with how you interact with those who owe you money or who have wronged you.

So again, when you talk to God about these things, He does not just come into your life and erase your past and do away with your debts, as much as you might like Him to do that. He first invites you to consider how you might release other people who have

wronged you, and then He provides input and advice so you can also be freed from your own sin and debt. There are no easy fixes here, but it is something that God wants to talk with you about, and walk with you through.

Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one

God doesn't actually lead anyone into temptation (Jas 1:13), so this phrase probably means something closer to “Help us resist temptation when it comes.” At a more basic level, this is an invitation by Jesus for you to talk to God about your areas of struggle. Since God wants to talk to you about everything and anything, He definitely wants to talk to you about any areas in which you face temptation.

This might be awkward for you, because maybe you think that God is so holy He doesn't want to hear about your secret thoughts, hidden behaviors, and impure desires. But if that is what you think, you are wrong. One of the main reasons Jesus became human is because God wanted to show humans that He loves us so much, He will step right into our sinful condition with us so that He can love us there and lead us out of the mess we find ourselves in. So go ahead; talk to God about your sin. It is only when you invite God into your sin with you that He will be able to begin delivering you from it.

When I try to deal with temptation by myself, I almost always fail. But I experience the most victory over temptation when I swallow my pride and realize that God is not going to be offended by what I am struggling with. When tempted, I invite God into the temptation with me to talk to Him about it. I might say, “Hey God, do you see what I'm dealing with here? What do you think? Should I do it? I really, really want to, You know.” Then we talk about it, the pros and cons of doing what I am tempted to do, and usually, He persuades me to resist.

Yet even when I fall to temptation, rather than wallow in guilt and shame for days on end (the way I used to), I try to immediately invite God back into the mess I've caused. I have a sheepish laugh with Him about it, saying, “God, look at this mess. What was I thinking? I don't know why I did that ... again. And just like every time before, it wasn't as fun as I thought it would be.” Then we discuss what happened to cause me to fall into the sin, and how I can avoid these temptations in the future.

Be aware, however, that once we invite God into the sinful areas of our life, He doesn't stop with the one area in which we asked Him for help. After He helps us sweep one room clean, He usually points to a locked closet and says, “Now what's in there?”

Anything you need help with?” God is in perpetual “spring cleaning” mode, and once He gets going, there is no stopping Him. Along with locked closets, He might find some cobwebs in the corner and trash which we shoved under our bed hoping He wouldn’t find. But He will.

This is why talking to God about our sin is so dangerous. There might be certain sinful areas of our life that we are rather attached to. It becomes somewhat painful when God turns on the light in those dimly-lit rooms and cobweb-filled basements, and starts to open up dusty boxes to see what’s inside. But if we listen to His input, get His advice, and talk to God as we go, the process will be more liberating than painful. And though God never gives up, He also is not too pushy, but gently leads to the next area He wants to clean.

The Disciple’s Prayer is Dangerous

So the Disciple’s Prayer can be quite dangerous. Later in this course we will consider ten dangerous prayers (see Lesson 5), but as we have seen here, the prayer that Jesus instructed His disciples to model is also full of life-changing and world-changing requests. So be careful about talking to God about the topics in this prayer. I am not saying you should not talk to God about them, but that you should be aware of the consequences that might come into your life as a result. Prayer is a powerful gift from God, and every phrase in the Disciple’s Prayer is a minefield just waiting to turn your life upside down ... but in a good way. Never forget that God is a loving Father who only wants what is best for His children. That means He only wants what is best for you. His plans for your life may seem scary at first, but they are always bigger and better than any plan you may have.

Imagine what your life would look like if you truly believed that God was your loving Father who only wanted what was best for your life, and so you sought to do everything possible to bring praise and glory to Him through your words and actions? What would your life look like if you sought after the Kingdom of God rather than the kingdoms of men? How would you function if you only had enough for today, and didn’t know how God would provide for tomorrow? What might happen in your life if you worked to release people from their bondage to sin and debt as God works to release you from the same things? How might your life be different if you truly saw sin the way God sees it and didn’t engage in the pet sins we think we cannot live without? Yes, this prayer that Jesus instructs His disciples to pray is revolutionary, life-changing, and dangerous.

Now although this is the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples to pray, it is not the only way to pray. We see this by comparing the “Disciple’s Prayer” with the way Jesus Himself prayed in John 17. Though there are many similarities, there are also significant differences. This is what we will see in the next lesson, where we consider the true “Lord’s Prayer.”