

How Did Jesus Pray?

There are numerous instances in the Gospel accounts of Jesus praying. Sometimes He prayed all night (Luke 6:12), though He also got up early to pray (Mark 1:35).

Sometimes His prayers were long; sometimes they were short (John 12:28). What we can learn from this is that even with Jesus, there was no set way to pray. For Jesus, it seems that prayer was not so much a time that He set aside to specifically talk with God, but was closer to just picking up with an ongoing conversation with God.

The same can be true with you. If you always have the lines of communication open with God, then there really is no such thing as a long or short prayer, but just re-engaging with God in a conversation that has been going on for some time. This is why special postures or places for prayer, while occasionally helpful, can also be detrimental to your prayer life. The same goes for saying “Amen” at the end of your prayer. I still say “Amen” when I pray publicly, but this is just to indicate to others that I am now talking directly to them instead of to God. But if prayer is an ongoing conversation with God, then it never really stops. You might temporarily stop talking about one particular issue or request, but the line of communication with God remains open and active, ready to be picked up at any time. This is partly what Paul meant when he wrote about praying without ceasing (1 Thess 5:16).

This is also how Jesus prayed. As you look at the various prayers of Jesus in the Gospels, it becomes obvious that the prayer life of Jesus was simply part of an ongoing conversation He had with God. He was always aware of God’s presence, and always kept focused on what God was doing through Him and around Him, and when Jesus sought to have a direct conversation with God, it was not as though He started and stopped His prayers, but rather just picked up where He left off before, or turned to God (who was already there) and simply started talking to Him about what was currently going on. Similarly, the “end” of the prayer is not the end of praying, but just a temporary lapse or pause in the discussion that would be picked up again at a later time.

Let us look at the true Lord’s Prayer in John 17 to see this in more detail, and also to learn what we can from how Jesus prayed.

The Lord’s Prayer

John 17 records the prayer that Jesus prayed in the Upper Room with His disciples at the conclusion of their last supper together. Though the Gospels frequently record Jesus going off by Himself to pray, this is the only recorded prayer of Jesus of any length which provides an indication of the sort of things Jesus might have said when He prayed. So if you want to learn how to pray like Jesus, there is no better prayer in Scripture to study. Later in this lesson, you will see how Jesus structured His prayer, the posture He used, His prayer requests, and also a few insights into how Jesus did *not* pray. It is important to note that even though these provide insights into how Jesus prayed, this does not mean that you must follow the exact same structure, outline, or posture, or even that you should pray for the same things that Jesus prayed for. This prayer in Scripture is not provided so that we might copy it, but so that we might learn more about the heart of Jesus and how He communicated with God.

The Structure of the Prayer

The prayer is divided into three basic sections. First, Jesus prays for Himself (17:1-5), then for His disciples (17:6-19), and finally for all who would believe in Him (17:20-26). The prayer of Jesus has a “concentric circle” approach to ministry, where Jesus’ relationship with God is at the center, and Jesus works His way out from there to the disciples and then to all who will believe in Jesus, which includes us today. While not all prayers must follow this pattern or structure, it is nevertheless helpful to note that Jesus does begin by praying for Himself and His relationship with God.

If you are like most people, you have found that it is nearly impossible to pray if you are not in right fellowship with God. After all, if you are not on “speaking terms” with God, how do you expect to speak with Him? So although this prayer of Jesus does not provide a universal pattern for all prayer at all times, it is nevertheless helpful to remember that since prayer is a conversation with God, it is important to make sure that you are in a good relationship with God. How can you talk to Him if you don’t want to be near Him or with Him?

So while on the one hand, you must make sure that your prayers are not self-centered and that you only pray for yourself and your needs, it is nevertheless true that the starting place for prayer is your own relationship with God. When sin, disobedience, or rebellion get in the way of your communication with God, your prayers should include

some confession and repentance. Even when your relationship with God is wonderful, it is still a good idea to include some relationship building conversation in your prayers.

Again, never forget that prayer is just like communicating with anyone else, such as a spouse or friend. In any relationship, it is wise to frequently check the pulse of the relationship, and take care of any issues that are between you so that the friendship and communication can continue. If you would do this with a friend, spouse, or coworker, how much more should you do this with God?

The Posture of Prayer

If you have ever seen an artistic rendering of what Jesus looked like during His prayers (such as the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane in Matt 26:36-56), you will likely remember that the portraits depict Jesus as kneeling before a rock, with this hands clasped in front of Him on the rock, and His eyes turned upward toward the sky. As a result of pictures like this, some believe that this is the proper posture of prayer.

Yet note that nothing much is said in John 17 (or anywhere else, for that matter), about the posture of Jesus during His prayers. The text does not tell us if Jesus was sitting, standing, or reclining. Since Jesus and His disciples are still indoors at this point, and since reclining on the floor was the typical way of eating meals in first century Middle Eastern culture, it is possible that Jesus was still on the floor while praying. Or maybe He stood up. We just don't know. One thing is for sure though: Jesus definitely was not folding His hands, bowing His head, and closing His eyes. To the contrary, the text says He “lifted up His eyes to heaven” (17:1), which indicates that His eyes were open and His head was raised.

But even this posture is not the “God-approved” posture for prayer. It is not as if such things as kneeling or standing, arms up or arms down, eyes open or eyes closed make any difference in whether or not God hears and answers our prayers. If God is concerned about any sort of posture in our prayers, it is the posture of our hearts, which no one can see but Him alone. So when you pray, don't be overly concerned about what your hands, your head, or your eyelids are doing. The only thing that matters to God is what is going on in your heart. As long as you are having a conversation with Him, your hands can be busy at work and your eyes can be alertly watching your surroundings (I often pray while I drive).

Just like with any other conversation with any other person, there is no “one right way” to sit or stand. The posture of prayer has nothing to do with who you are talking to, but everything to do with what the two of you are doing while you talk. God is happy to talk with you wherever you are and whatever you are doing. So whether you are vacuuming, driving, mowing the lawn, walking the dog, performing your duties at work, watching TV, laying on your bed, or taking this course, you can be in conversation with God.

The Prayer Requests

The previous lesson looked at the “Disciple’s Prayer” and some of the things you can pray for when you communicate with God. Here in the “Lord’s Prayer,” we see that Jesus prayed for some of these same things. For example, Jesus prayed that God’s name would be glorified through His own life and ministry (17:1-5). In praying for His disciples that they would carry on the work that Jesus started (17:16-19), Jesus was essentially praying that the Kingdom of God, or the rule and reign of God, would continue to spread upon the earth. He does not pray for daily sustenance or the forgiveness of debts, but He does ask that God protect His disciples from the evil one (17:11, 15).

One of the main requests in Jesus’ prayer is that those who believe in Him will live in unity with each other, just as Jesus lives in unity with God (17:11, 21, 23). I find it sadly ironic that although this is the primary prayer request of Jesus for His church, the one thing that the church is most known for is our lack of unity. When the world thinks of Christians, they often think of people who are divided. And they are not wrong. There are thousands of denominations in the world, and we are all divided over some of the silliest things. Yes, some of the divisions are necessary and important, like whether or not Jesus was truly God, but when we divide over the mode of baptism, whether women can be pastors, music styles, or church governance structure, such divisions bring great sadness to Jesus. In reality, there are relatively few things we must all agree on. A few such items might be that eternal life is by faith alone in Jesus Christ, that Jesus is the Lord and Master of the church, and that we are to love all people in His name. Beyond these, there should be nothing that divides us.

I sometimes think that if the church truly wants to rise up and bring glory to God as Jesus prays here in John 17, the best thing we could do is to stop praying for Aunt

Mabel's bunions, our neighbor's lost dog, and how the rent is overdue, and instead seek to create unity in the church as an answer to Jesus' prayer. This is not to say that you cannot talk to God about health issues, lost pets, and financial difficulties. You can and you should. Since God loves you, He wants to hear about such things. But at the same time, do not allow these relatively minor issues to cloud your vision for the unity that Jesus prayed for. In your prayer life and daily life, work to develop a broader vision for prayer than how we can use it to tell God about our aches, pains, and bills. Work toward what Jesus worked for, which is to glorify God through carrying out His will on earth, which is primarily accomplished through living with one another in love and unity. When you pray for this, you can know with certainty that you are praying according to the will of God.

Jesus Conversed with God

As you read through the prayer of Jesus, the one thing you might notice is that it is very conversational. Though there are some patterns and requests which align with the “Disciple's Prayer” from Matthew 6, Jesus also departs from that model prayer, and simply talks with God about what is on His heart. Since Jesus knows that He is about to be arrested and crucified, His concern is that God's work on earth will be continued, that His disciples will be cared for and protected, and that all who come to follow Jesus will be part of God's unified plan for the work He is doing in the world. And since these issues are on the mind of Jesus, this is what Jesus talks to God about.

Notice that Jesus does not engage in needless repetition of the name of God. Nor does He try to ward off the devil. Jesus is not concerned with including any flowery or fancy language to impress those who are present with His advanced holiness. Truthfully, if you compare the prayer of Jesus in John 17 with any of the other passages in John where Jesus is talking to humans, there is almost nothing that sets this prayer apart from any other conversation. The conversation Jesus has with God sounds pretty much just like a conversation He might have with Peter, or Matthew, or John. For Jesus, communicating with God was just like communicating with others.

Note as well that this prayer seems to be a continuation of a much longer conversation Jesus has been having with God. Because this prayer is part of a longer, ongoing conversation, Jesus does not have the need to fit everything in, follow a prayer outline, remember any prayer requests, or even begin and end the prayer with a flowery introduction and conclusion. In fact, between John 16:33 where Jesus stops talking to

His disciples and John 17:2 where He starts talking to God, the only real transition is that Jesus looks heavenward. It is so casual, it is as if Jesus had been talking to the disciples and then turned His head to start talking to God. His tone and language and posture and even the content of what He is saying does not really change. For Jesus, prayer is just continuing a conversation with God.

When understood this way, prayer becomes much less of a mystery about how to pray, what to pray for, who can pray, or where to pray, and much more like a conversation you have in everyday life. If you can talk with a friend, you can talk to God. This is how Jesus prayed, and how you can pray too.