

Series: Basic Prayer

Title: Lesson 3 - Types of Prayer

Text: Matthew 6:9-13

Matthew 6:9-13 contains one of the most famous and oft-repeated passages in all of Scripture. Nowadays, the text is commonly called “the Lord’s Prayer.” That title is perhaps not the best. A study of the gospels reveals that Jesus uttered the words of the passage after His disciples made the following request of Him — “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John also taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). Luke recited the words of His famous prayer immediately after the disciples made their request (Luke 11:2-4).

Given the occasion on which Jesus issued His well-known prayer, it is perhaps best to call it something other than “the Lord’s Prayer.” His intent in giving it was to teach His disciples how to pray; thus, it is maybe more fitting to call it “the Model Prayer.” Our Lord wanted His followers to know the appropriate way to pray, so He provided them an outline for what should be contained in Christian prayer.

We know this is true when we consider the context surrounding the prayer in Matthew’s gospel. Immediately before teaching His disciples how to pray in Matthew’s account, our Lord instructed concerning how *not* to pray. He told them things like, “Whenever you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites” (Matthew 6:5). He also said, “When you pray, don’t babble like the Gentiles” (Matthew 6:7). Jesus’ mode of teaching demonstrated that His intent in giving the Lord’s Prayer was to give His disciples a mode of how they might pray. We can regard it as containing principles and precepts concerning powerful prayer.

A MODEL, NOT MECHANICAL

Perhaps you come to this study with preconceptions regarding the famous prayer before us. Maybe you grew up being taught to recite it on a regular basis. Like me, you have likely seen depictions of it in media and movies. I can remember a famous movie entitled “The DiVinci Code.” The film was based on a book by Dan Brown. In it, filmmakers depicted one of the main antagonists desperately reciting the prayer. The man was a sort of disturbed lunatic. He tried to control his murderous passions by frantically reciting Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:9-13.

Some branches of Christianity are not too different in the way they approach Jesus’ prayer. They sometimes recite it in a cold mechanical fashion. There is nothing wrong with quoting the prayer verbatim to the Lord, so long as the heart and soul does so from a posture of pure faith. However, emphases on reciting the prayer often overlook the real purpose of the prayer. Jesus gave what I like to call “the Model Prayer” in order to teach His disciples how to pray. Consequently, the prayer contained a sort of outline. It revealed that real prayer should contain certain types of prayer.

If you want to develop a strong prayer life, you must grasp this reality. Just as there are various types of conversations amongst humans, there are different types of prayer with God. In spending time with a friend, you may recount stories from your personal life, from the news, or from an event in your community. You may talk about the news, your health, current events, your family, or your faith. No vibrant relationship is limited to one dimension. Healthy interaction is multi-dimensional.

This same reality can be applied to your prayer life. The Model Prayer reveals that healthy, robust praying offers up various types of prayer. Think about the actual words of the prayer. “Your name be honored as holy” reveals that praises should be a part of healthy praying. “Your kingdom come. Your will be done...” indicates that requests and supplication are another mode of talking to God. The request “give us this day our daily bread” can reveal likewise, but it can also be regarded as a form of thanksgiving. The penitent phrase “...And forgive us our debts” proves that confession should be a part of our time with God, and the expression “we also have forgiven our debtors” may be seen as allusion to intercession.

A GUIDE FOR CONVERSATION

Do you see from what I’ve shared above that prayer should involve different types of prayer? Many never grasp this reality. As a result, times of talking to God seem sterile and stagnant. Learning to focus on topics and types of prayer can revolutionize and radically improve our experiences of personal worship.

An example from another domain of life will perhaps help illustrate this point. When I was in college, I met a girl in whom I had an interest. I asked her on a date, and we went out to eat. We both liked each other in a sense, but things never progressed beyond friendship. Sometime after our attempts at dating, she jokingly professed of how she had been nervous on our first date. Leading up to our time together, she was anxious that we wouldn’t have much to talk about. To prepare, she wrote some talking points on an index card. Unbeknownst to me, the card sat in her lap as we ate. If the conversation became dull, she simply brought up the next item on her list.

I am not trying to insinuate that God is boring and that we need to nervously approach Him with a trite list of talking points. However, I do think we can learn something from my friend’s attempts at conversing with me. There is great benefit in approaching God with an agenda. Going to our prayer closet with talking points and topics can keep us on topic. It can also ensure that we pray about what matters most.

My prayer life experienced a metamorphosis when I uncovered this idea. For years, my attempts at talking to God could have been likened to a nervous college student on a first date. I was timid and I didn’t know what to say. When I discovered that God has given topics for prayer within His Word, I received clarity and boldness for prayer.

Things changed for me when I learned a simple outline for prayer. As a younger believer, a mentor shared the acrostic “A.C.T.S” with me. The technique is well-known and well-used. In sharing it, I do not pretend to convey an original idea by any means. Perhaps you have heard of the outline before. I only share it to give a testimony. Prior to be introduced to the A.C.T.S. method of praying, I had a weak and anemic prayer life at best. Most of the time I was guilty of having a life that was completely devoid of prayer.

When I learned of the aforementioned acrostic, I gained a way of looking at prayer that opened a door to a totally new experience. Things became easier and simpler. Instead of walking into my prayer closet with a blank mind, I went loaded with a list of topics and requests. My time with the Lord gained a sense of structure, purpose, direction, and meaningfulness.

Before I started using such an outline for prayer, my prayers would often stutter and stall within a few minutes. I would normally run through a list of Christian clichés and canned prayers. Once I ran through those, I didn't really know what to say next, so I would just stop. Somewhere within, I knew there had to be more to prayer. I had a sense that I was missing it.

The A.C.T.S. opened my eyes to the power of approaching prayer with topics and talking points. As I grew as a Christian and studied Scripture, I learned that the Lord basically taught the same method in the Lord's Prayer. It became obvious to me that the prayer wasn't intended as a religious formula to be recited or chanted in a ritualistic sense. It was clear — Jesus' intent was to give His disciples topics for praying!

REDEEMING THE TIME

Around the same time that I heard about the helpful acrostic I mentioned above, I also heard a staggering report about prayer. A minister at my church told of research that had been conducted around that same time. In that study, ministers and pastors throughout the nation were asked about their personal prayer lives. The exact responses were kept confidential, but the overall results were staggering. The survey revealed that the average pastor in America prayed less than 15 minutes a day.

I can remember being struck by what I heard. For a brief moment, I felt frustration toward careless pastors. How can men who had devoted their lives to the holy things of God be so negligent? About the time my indignation reached a crescendo, I felt a twinge of conviction. It was as if the Holy Spirit said, "Patrick, you are the man!" My focus on the prayer lives of others shifted to a focus on self. I realized that I myself prayed less than fifteen minutes a day.

My awareness of my negligence led to action. I knew I wanted to eventually pray more than 15 minutes a day, but I figured I should start with that amount of time. After all, I was hardly praying at all. I felt if I could start by praying a little, I could eventually increase my amount of time with the Lord.

As I considered starting my new strategy, I had a thought — what if I divided up my time between the letters of my prayer acrostic. Instead of just starting a stopwatch and randomly talking to God until time expired, I could pray a few minutes for each letter of the A.C.T.S. outline. If I prayed four minutes for each letter, that would result in 16 minutes.

To make my time even more focused, I listed out prayer topics and talking points underneath each letter of my acrostic. Underneath "A," I wrote several of God's attributes to mention in praise. For "C," I listed several areas of personal struggle, sins and shortcomings over which I desired spiritual victory. The letter "T" prompted a plethora of things, both spiritual and material, for which I was thankful. Underneath "S," I created a rather long list of personal needs. I also listed out friends, family members, ministers, and missionaries for whom I could pray.

Prior to making such a detailed list, I often wondered how anyone could pray 15 or 30 minutes a day. I had heard stories of saints who prayed for an entire hour each day. Such feats of faith seemed impossible. As I scanned my prayer list that had four parts, each of which contained several requests, praying for such timeframes began to seem more doable. In fact, I realized 15 minutes wouldn't provide enough time to get through my list.

Regardless, I began to use my newfound method. The change was immediate. I now had focus and clarity for prayer. My times in my prayer closet seemed robust, meaningful, and on point. I was less likely to delay and push prayer aside. Because I had a definite agenda, it was much easier to jump into my time with the Lord.

MAKE IT AVAILABLE AND ACCESSIBLE

To solidify my newly-minted method, I wrote my prayer outline in the back of my Bible. Doing so seemed to etch my plan in stone. Each morning when I read my Bible, I had my guide at hand. Making it easily accessible, guaranteed that I was more likely to pray. Over the years, my list in the flyleaf of my Bible has grown. Now I have such a large prayer outline, an hour spent in prayer each day does not seem unreasonable at all. In fact, all that is on my list cannot be covered in such a time frame. I don't always pray an hour a day, or even 30 minutes a day, but I am much more likely to pray now that I have a strong plan.

LOVE, NOT LEGALISM

Before we move on to talk more specifically about the various types of prayer, I want to talk about an important issue related to all I have discussed up to this point. I am aware that many people shy away from using methods similar to the one I've advocated for one reason in particular. Plain and simple, they are afraid of being dry, mechanical, and legalistic. They don't want to be confined to a regimen or set rule. Believing that prayer should be spontaneous, they avoid anything that hints of a schedule.

I would agree that prayer can and should have an element of spontaneity to it. However, I would strongly advise against a perspective that dismisses any sort of planning. Think about these things like you would think about any relationship. In order to talk with a boss or supervisor, do you not schedule a meeting and prepare pertinent talking points? When you engage your children in instruction and correction, is not a similar method employed? Even the relationships that require the most spontaneity — our spouses, family members, and close friends — call us to engage in a bit of planning and preparation.

Personally, I don't see my advice as bordering on legalism. Such an issue is concerned with motives and the state of one's heart. Either spontaneous prayer or scheduled prayer can be done in a legalistic fashion, if one's intent is to earn God's favor through his or her prayer. In the same way, even the most regimented prayer approach can be done in a non-legalistic way, so long as the prayer is confident that the gospel is his or her means of finding acceptance and favor with God.

The issue with legalism is an issue of the motives of the heart. I prefer to think about my approach to prayer through the lens of love. My outlines and lists aren't regarded as means of earning favor with God. They are simply seen as a method for making my prayer time more focused and on point.

For me, my prayer approach can be likened to how I maintain a strong relationship with my wife. Though our relationship was once characterized by a greater degree of spontaneity and romance, we currently have a more organized and systematic way of relating to one another. Life is busy. Work, church, extracurricular activities, and the demands of parenting can easily squelch our relationship, squeezing out any time we might have for one another. As a result, we are careful to plan and

prepare. We have time reserved each evening for talking to one another. Fridays are set apart for a lunch date. At times, we come to our mutually-agreed upon times for meeting with lists of items for discussion. We realize we may slowly drift apart if we don't employ such strategy.

Why is it so strange to think of time with God in a similar way? Why do we allow ourselves to be duped into thinking our spiritual lives can't have any structure? Even a cursory reading of Scripture reveals that many of God's choicest saints (Psalm 55:17; Daniel 6:10; Revelation 1:10), and even Jesus Himself (Mark 1:35), had a regimented approach to prayer. Don't get unnecessarily hung up on fears of legalism. Realize that legalism is mostly concerned with motives of conduct, not modes of conduct. You can use a prayer outline, timer, stopwatch, prayer list, and the like without being legalistic.

SIX TYPES OF PRAYER

I realize my methods aren't for everyone. Take what you can use. Don't feel you need to fit in my box. You may function better with a spontaneous approach. That's alright. A lot of what I'm saying may be based on personality and temperament.

Still, most saints can benefit from a more systematic and scheduled approach. For that reason, I want to provide you with an overview of the six types of prayer you can include in your outline. What I will give provides an expansion of the aforementioned A.C.T.S. approach. I will include two more types of prayer that are on my outline for prayer. By using the outline that follows, and setting times for each type of prayer, you can be well on your way to developing a strong, effective prayer life that will serve as a great blessing for you, the Lord, and others.

1. Prayer

It may seem strange to use the word "prayer" to refer to our first category; however, there is a reason for doing so. When we study Scripture, we find the Bible uses a special term to speak of the overall activity of prayer. In the New Testament, the Greek word "proseúchomai" is found. It had the idea of "to come" or "to approach" within its meaning. The preposition commonly translated "to" served as a prefix to the word. Used in first-century religious contexts, it spoke of the act of approaching a deity.¹ Jesus Christianized the term when He said, "Therefore, you should *pray* like this" (Matthew 6:9). He revealed that Christian prayer is first and foremost a simple act of drawing near to God. To emphasize this point even further, He told us to address the Lord as "Our Father in heaven." The title "Father" revealed that prayer is indeed a relational activity through which one approaches a loving God.

Making a distinction regarding this first type of prayer can be helpful. When we go to our private times of worship, we should remember that prayer is a conversational activity. Some overthink things. Sure, we may use various types of prayers, and we may employ lists and other tools to guide our times with the Lord, but we should reserve time for pouring our hearts out in a spontaneous fashion (Lamentations 2:19).

In my personal prayer life, it is helpful to keep this type of prayer at the forefront. I love to devote time to things like praise, confession, thanksgiving, requests, and

¹ Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 333.

intercession, but I also like to carve out time for simple conversation with God. I think of this as being similar to the type of extemporaneous, yet heartfelt, conversation you might observe between two friends. When I engage in this type of prayer, there is no preset agenda. I simply aim to tell the Lord how I feel, what's going on, and what I need. I advise that you have time for such personal, free-flowing prayer in your regular prayer routine. It may be best to both start and conclude your times of prayer with this first type of prayer.

2. Adoration

The second type of prayer involves giving praise to God. Our Lord implied that we should engage in such activity when He told us to pray, "Your name be regarded as holy" (Matthew 6:9). Notice from Jesus' instruction that adoration should be centered in on God's character. Proper praise gives attention to the attributes of God. We learn of the attributes of God by studying the Bible.

In becoming more acquainted with who God is, you will be more able to ascribe proper praise to Him. When I offer up prayers of adoration, I like to focus on the Lord's holiness, goodness, righteousness, justice, and truth. I give Him praise for His omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience. His past works in history, in the church, and in my life are also brought into focus. Adoration serves the purpose of giving the Lord the glory and honor He deserves, but it also has a way of giving us a proper perspective concerning who God is, who we are, and what's important in life. An example of one praying a prayer of adoration can be found in 1 Samuel 2:1-3.

3. Confession

Though believers are positionally forgiven of sin at salvation, they need practical cleansing from time to time. Jesus implied such through a famous incident in which He washed His disciples' feet. After He took upon Himself the posture of household servant and began to perform a menial and dirty everyday task, Peter protested, saying, "Lord, not only my feet, but also my hands and my head" (John 13:9). Our Lord replied, "One who has bathed...doesn't need to wash anything except his feet, but he is completely clean" (John 13:10). Through a metaphor, our Lord meant to convey the idea that subsequent spiritual washings are needed after one is initially made spiritually clean at salvation.

Confession and cleansing comes our way through prayer. It is for this reason that Jesus said we are to regularly pray, "forgive us our debts" (Matthew 6:12). During your time of prayer, take time to confess sin. There is hardly a time in which I pray in which I am not aware of sin I need to confess. Praise be to God, when we confess our sin, the Lord is ready and willing to forgive. The Bible says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). An example of one praying a prayer of confession can be found in Daniel 9:4-6.

4. Thanksgiving

J.C. Ryle once said, “Never was there an eminent saint who was not full of thankfulness.”² All of our prayers should be marked by gratitude and giving of thanks. Scripture instructs us in this regard, saying, “Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert in it with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2).

There is a hint of thanksgiving in the Lord’s Prayer in the mention of “daily bread” (Matthew 6:11). When you pray, thank the Lord for your salvation, your health, your church, your family, your work, your home, your cars, your clothes, your food, and so forth. We have a lot to be grateful for. An example of one praying a prayer of thanksgiving can be found in Psalm 138:1-8.

5. Supplication

Supplication is the act of making requests to God. When you pray, tell God what you need. Be bold. Know that Jesus has given you specific instruction in this regard. He said, “Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8).

A precedent for supplication is found in the Lord’s Prayer through Jesus’ instruction for us to pray, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done” (Matthew 6:10). When you pray, tell the Lord what you need spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Ask for help with your work, worries, and witness. Make requests on behalf of your family, your church and your community. Healthy prayer involves asking. Don’t be shy. An example of one praying a prayer of supplication can be found in 1 Kings 8:22-53.

6. Intercession

Intercession is the act of praying on behalf of others. The Lord’s Prayer set a standard for us in this regard. In it, Jesus told us to pray concerning “our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). In addition to Jesus’ instruction, Paul told first-century churches to engage in intercession. He said, “I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all those who are in authority” (1 Timothy 2:1-2). During your times of prayer, pray for your family, your pastor, your local leaders, your friends, missionaries, and others. An example of one praying a prayer of intercession can be found in Job 42:10.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Now that you are familiar with six of the most common types of prayer, it’s time to put them into practice. Make some sort of prayer list. Create a plan of action. Start practicing using the different modes of prayer. Do what works best for you and your personality and temperament, but make sure you engage God with the various modes I have mentioned above. In doing so, you will experience a more robust and rewarding prayer life. All along, know that there is clear Scriptural precedent for such variety in prayer. Consider the following words of Paul to the Philippians — “Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6). Do you see how Paul espoused the use of different

² Ryle, J.C. *Practical Religion*. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 88.

types of prayer? Follow his instructions and you will be well on your way to becoming stronger in your communion with God.