

Praying Properly

Devotional Reading: Psalm 4
Background Scripture: Matthew 6:5-15

Matthew 6:5-15

⁵ “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ “This, then, is how you should pray:

“ ‘Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.’

¹⁴ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.



Key Text

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. —Matthew 6:10

Introduction

A. Hallowed, Not Hallows

The seventh and final book in the Harry Potter series is *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. These “hallows” are three magical objects central to the final plot of the story. When I first saw the title of this last book, the word *hallows* lit up one thing in my mind (as it did for many people): the unusual phrase from the Lord’s Prayer, “Hallowed be your name.” To be sure, the hallows of Harry Potter and the “hallowed” of the Lord’s Prayer are unrelated. But what do we mean when we say, “hallowed be your name”? That is one topic of today’s lesson.

B. Lesson Context

One of the things we know about Jesus is that he was a man of prayer. He would rise early in the morning so he could spend time alone in prayer (example: Mark 1:35). On at least one occasion, he spent all night in prayer (Luke 6:12). When Jesus knew his death was close at hand, he spent a significant portion of his final evening praying in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-43).

What we call “the Lord’s Prayer” is found in Matthew 6:9-13, with a shorter version in Luke 11:2-4. That title can be misleading because there’s no record that Jesus himself prayed this prayer. Instead, these were guidelines given by Jesus to others about how they should pray.

Matthew’s version is recorded as being part of the famed Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-7:29). The version in Luke arises from a request by one of the disciples in Luke 11:1. We can safely assume that Jesus’ disciples were already men of prayer, but they wanted to pray more effectively.

The disciples’ interest in learning about prayer was sparked by their awareness that John the Baptist had taught his own followers the correct way to pray (Luke 11:1). While we don’t have any of John the Baptist’s prayers, we do have examples of Jesus’ prayers (example: John 17:1-26, which consists of a lengthy prayer given by Jesus in the upper room during the Last Supper).

The church tends to use the Lord’s Prayer from Matthew more often because it is more detailed

A King

Forever and Ever

Unit 3: Life in God’s Kingdom

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List Jesus’ key teachings about prayer in Matthew 6:5-15.
2. Explain the purpose(s) of the prayer’s four couplets.
3. Resolve to devote more prayer time to one area identified in Matthew 6:5-15 that may currently be lacking.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Hallowed, Not Hallows
- B. Lesson Context

I. Directives for Prayer (Matthew 6:5-8)

- A. For Public Praise (v. 5)
- B. In Personal Privacy (v. 6)
- C. Without Prattle (v. 7)
- D. With Purpose (v. 8)

II. The Prototypical Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13)

- A. Proper Address (v. 9)
- B. Proper Alignment (v. 10)
- C. Proper Asking (vv. 11-13)

Daily Bread

The Right Source

III. Addendum on Forgiveness (Matthew 6:14-15)

Conclusion

- A. Sincere Petitions or Mere Repetitions?
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

than the wording in Luke's Gospel. It has long been considered one of the church's treasures, perhaps the most famous prayer in history. In some traditions, it is referred to as the "Our Father," reflecting its opening phrase. A similar version of this calls the prayer the *Paternoster*, Latin for "Our Father." An early manual on Christian practices called the *Didache* includes Matthew's version of the prayer with the instructions that it should be prayed three times a day (*Didache* 8).

Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer has a multi-part address to God, several petitions or requests, and a concluding acknowledgment of God's sovereignty. We notice the value of the prayer when we contrast it with the ways one should *not* pray. That's where today's study begins.

I. Directives for Prayer

(Matthew 6:5-8)

A. For Public Praise (v. 5)

5. "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full."

Before the time of Jesus, the word *hypocrite* was used to describe actors on the stage, people who pretended to be what they were not. That is Jesus' point: some people are respected for their devotion to God, but they are not devoted to God at all. Instead, they want other people's attention and approval.

Matthew records the use of the word *hypocrite(s)* 15 times, Mark once, and Luke four times—all 20 on the lips of Jesus. In Matthew 6, Jesus gives three contexts for such wrong-hearted behavior: giving for the relief of the poor (Matthew 6:2), praying in public (6:5, today's text), and fasting (6:16). Jesus did not condemn the practices of giving, public prayer, or fasting as such; instead, he was condemning self-seeking motives behind them.

Jesus' hearers would have recognized this type of person from their own experiences, particularly on trips to Jerusalem (compare Luke 18:9-

14). Some may have even recognized themselves in this description. Jesus pronounced that such phony people *have received their reward*: the short-lived admiration of others, not the eternal recognition of God. This is the wrong way to pray.

B. In Personal Privacy (v. 6)

6. "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Rather than make a public performance of prayer, Jesus stressed the need to retreat to a private place. Note again that the issue is not "private prayer" versus "public prayer" as such. Instead, it's an issue of "private prayer" versus "public performance." Jesus wasn't stressing *where* a person prayed, but *why*. A valid prayer is directed to God alone and is not concerned with whether others notice.

What Do You Think?

How can believers exercise humility in their spiritual actions while also expressing boldness to be a witness for Jesus when the opportunity arises?

Digging Deeper

In what ways does the example of Daniel in Daniel 6:10 inform your response?

C. Without Prattle (v. 7)

7. "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words."

Jesus' mention of the excesses of hypocritical, performative praying suggests its practice in his day. Prayers of this nature are no better than prayers of the *pagans*. In the cultures surrounding Israel in Jesus' time, the "gods" were often considered unpredictable and selfish, like powerful human rulers. Praying to such gods was a matter of begging them not to harm or nagging them for a gift. Further, many pagans thought of their gods less as personal beings and more like unseen forces that could be manipulated.

For pagans, prayer was a matter of saying



GOD, DO YOUR WILL
ON EARTH AS IN HEAVEN!

Visual for Lessons 9 & 10. Have this visual on display as you conclude class by praying the Lord's Prayer together.

certain words and phrases that were thought to have the power to make those forces bend to one's will. In either case, such prayer involved vain *babbling*—saying the same *words* repeatedly. We consider Elijah's confrontation with the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel. There, Elijah sarcastically encouraged them to pray more and louder because their god might be asleep (1 Kings 18:25-29).

D. With Purpose (v. 8)

8. "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

Next, Jesus informed his hearers of an important "given" that should undergird all prayers: our heavenly *Father* knows our needs before we even pray to him. We are not telling him anything he doesn't already know. This does not mean we should not ask or that we should assume prayer is unnecessary. Prayer reflects the measure of the faith we have in the fact that God does indeed listen (James 1:6; 5:15).

II. The Prototypical Prayer

(Matthew 6:9-13)

A. Proper Address (v. 9)

9a. "This, then, is how you should pray:

A cup of coffee consists of two things: the cup that holds the coffee (the "form") and the coffee itself (the "content"). Prayer also has a form

and content. We have discussed the *form*; we now move to prayer's *content*.

9b. "Our Father

This establishes the prayer's recipient (see Lesson Context). Unless you know to whom you are praying, your prayers may be pointless at best and a violation of Exodus 20:3 at worst (compare Isaiah 45:20b). By definition, *prayer* is a conversation with the God of all creation. As Christians, we do not launch our prayers into the void, hoping that someone will be listening. Instead, we pray in faith, addressing the one true God who creates, rules, and redeems.

Jesus teaches us to address God in two ways. Beginning our prayer with *Our Father* is to acknowledge that very fact. During Jesus' time, Jewish people had various terms to describe God, but this specific description was rarely used. God as Father appears less than a dozen times in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 32:6; Psalm 89:26; Isaiah 9:6; 63:16 [twice]; 64:8; Jeremiah 3:4, 19; Malachi 2:10). By contrast, the Gospel of Matthew alone use the terms "heavenly Father" and "Father in heaven" more than 40 times.

9c. "in heaven,

Continuing from above, we come to the second part of properly addressing God. We might ask, Where is *heaven*? Heaven is where God is, and we are barely able to scratch the surface in understanding that (compare and contrast 2 Corinthians 12:2). Yet there is an important truth for us in Jesus' words: God is the "God of heaven," a phrase used about two dozen times in the Bible, all but two of which occur in the Old Testament (examples: Ezra 1:2; 5:11-12; compare Revelation 11:13; 16:11). He is not part of the physical, created universe. God is separate. We are on earth; God is in Heaven (Ecclesiastes 5:2). Even so, we mortals are privileged to speak with the God of Heaven (Hebrews 4:16).

9d. "hallowed be your name,

Following the issue of how to address God, Jesus instructs on the proper way of thinking about God. The word *hallowed* speaks to the issue of God's holiness. When we pray *hallowed be your name*, we are saying, in effect, "May your name be holy." This is a commitment to honor

the third commandment: “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name” (Exodus 20:7). But it’s more than just being correct at *not* doing something; there’s a positive element as well. When we pray “hallowed by your name,” we reaffirm our resolve to uphold his holy nature.

What Do You Think?

What can our congregation do to help people better understand the concept of the holiness of God?

Digging Deeper

How might this understanding help us recognize our need for holiness?

B. Proper Alignment (v. 10)

10a. “‘your kingdom come,

This petition may be challenging to understand because the underlying Greek verb is a third-person imperative, and the English language doesn’t have this grammatical option, strictly speaking. The closest we can come is by using the word *let*, as some older versions, like the *King James Version*, use in this verse. We see this in our translations of third-person imperatives in John 7:37 and Revelation 22:17. But the idea is more forceful than taking the word *let* to mean “allow.”

Think of the song “Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!” The desire expressed by the title isn’t one of merely “allowing” snow to fall (as if one could stop it!). Instead, the sense is an urgent need that must be met. And that’s the sense of the verse at hand—expressing an urgent need for God’s *kingdom to come* in its fullness. In this kingdom, there will be no temptation, sin, pain, sadness, or death. God will rule over everything, and his followers will worship him forever (see Revelation 11:15).

10b. “‘your will be done,

This partial verse contains another third-person imperative in the underlying Greek. As mentioned above, the idea is an implied use of the word *let* in a stronger sense than merely “allow.” For examples of the word *let* equating to the word *allow*,

see Acts 5:38; 17:9; for more examples of the word *let* in the stronger sense, see Matthew 11:15; Galatians 1:8.

10c. “‘on earth as it is in heaven.

These twin petitions are all-encompassing. To pray for the establishment of God’s kingdom *is* to pray for the carrying out of God’s will in every place as God reigns over his realms. Or perhaps we should use the singular word *realm* instead. The two locations of *earth* and *heaven* should not be unduly separated since the qualifier unites them *as it is in*. In using that phrase, Jesus depicts Heaven as a place without opposition to God’s will.

When we pray these petitions, we pray that God’s kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, will come to earth. To pray this is to pray that God’s sovereign will, as realized in Heaven, will prevail in the present world where we live. We are praying that all opposition to God will cease. And most of all, we are praying this for ourselves. We are saying, “Lord, I want your kingdom to be fully present in my life. I want my life to be a perfect reflection of your will” (compare Jesus’ prayer in Matthew 26:39).

What Do You Think?

Through what tangible ways can you help speed the inbreaking of God’s kingdom?

Digging Deeper

How do 2 Peter 3:12; Revelation 11:17; and 22:20 help frame your decision?

C. Proper Asking (vv. 11-13)

11. “‘Give us today our daily bread.

There are two important points to note about this request. First, the word *give* has a broad sense of “provide” when associated with God. Second, the idea of *bread* in the Bible is more than a reference to baked loaves. The word may indeed refer to that, but context determines if the concept of “food in general” is meant (examples: Matthew 14:17-19; 15:26). The word may have the even larger sense of “things necessary for life” (John 6:33). When we say this prayer, we acknowledge that we rely on God. It is not about informing him

of things we think he might not be aware of (Matthew 6:31-32). We are affirming our belief that God will meet every need.

What Do You Think?

What steps will you take to practice gratitude to God for the “daily bread” that he has provided?

Digging Deeper

How can you turn that practice into a daily habit of gratitude?

Daily Bread

Sadly, my business failed in the summer of 2004, and we lost all our material assets. Our house, cars, and every other possession were sold to the highest bidder to settle our financial obligations. We retained only our children, dog, clothes, and an old car of no monetary worth.

We found a small apartment, and my wife got a job as a cashier at a grocery store, working the night shift. One benefit to the job was discounts on food. Because she worked nights, she had the first shot at day-old bread and other perishables that were about to expire. This challenging time made us appreciate our “daily bread.” It also made me see the Old Testament stories in a new light, for example, the one where God gives the Israelites manna every day and the one where he helps the prophet Elijah and a widow by giving them flour and oil daily.

Today, we have enough food on hand for a few weeks. Whether we are unsure about where our next meal is coming from, or we have plenty, the words of Jesus still hit home for us: “Give us today our daily bread.” In light of what we’ve been through, these simple words keep reminding us that God knows what we need daily and that he can provide for us. What personal experiences have you had that make the words of this prayer resonate deeply with you? —J. M.

12. “‘And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.’

This petition is unique in being conditional. As we ask for God’s forgiveness, we promise to be for-

giving of others. This is the only petition in the prayer that receives an additional comment from Jesus at the end (Matthew 6:14-15, see below). For an extended discussion on this expectation, see Matthew 18:21-35.

13. “‘And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’

These final petitions of the prayer are two sides of the same coin: to *lead us not into* is to *deliver us from*. The first part of this request has troubled those who think it raises the possibility that God himself can be responsible for tempting us to sin. Jesus did not intend this understanding, and James 1:13 is definitive on this point: “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” God may allow temptation (Job 1:12; 2:6), but he does not initiate or cause it. Still, there are moments when God saves us from difficult situations or “trials” (see 1 Peter 1:7; 2 Peter 2:9). Taking the two petitions of this verse together gives the sense of “give us power over”—and he does (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Some late manuscripts of Matthew’s Gospel include the following ending to the prayer: “For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” This ending is not found in the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel. But with echoes of 1 Chronicles 29:11-13, it nevertheless expresses a biblical idea. It is very fitting for the themes of this prayer as it doubles down in emphasizing God’s sovereignty, with which the prayer begins.

What Do You Think?

How can believers prepare themselves for the inevitable temptations that arise?

Digging Deeper

Who will you ask to be your accountability partner for when you face temptations?

The Right Source

In September 2013, things got chaotic at the airport in Fairbanks, Alaska. A car was cruising down the taxiway and across the runway to get

to the terminal. Surprisingly, another driver did the same thing. The cause was a bug in a navigation app that mistakenly guided people through a gate meant only for aircraft! Thankfully, there were no accidents, and the app was eventually fixed.

Even though signs clearly stated it was a restricted area, the drivers did not notice these warnings and unthinkingly followed what the app told them. Even when it seemed pretty clear that something was wrong and that they should not be driving on an airport taxiway, they continued crossing the runway because they trusted the app more than their own judgment.

This story highlights how easily we can take a wrong path when we heed directions from a defective source. That was the problem of being led into temptation in Genesis 3. When you face a sinful temptation, be sure of one thing: it's not from God. But as the drivers on the runway reveal, we may be so used to following a seemingly authoritative source that we do not question how or where we are being led. How can you be sure that it is God who is genuinely guiding you and that you are not just going the wrong way because you ignore the signs that you are listening to a defective source? —J. M.

III. Addendum on Forgiveness

(Matthew 6:14-15)

14-15. “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

After describing how to pray, Jesus gives more information on the need to *forgive*. This conditional petition is so important that Jesus later clarified it with a lengthy parable in Matthew 18:21-35.

In the addendum on forgiveness before us, we note that Jesus has switched from the words *debts* and *debtors* in Matthew 6:12 to the word *sins*. The word translated “debts” might include other kinds of obligations (examples: Matthew 18:24-25; Romans 1:14).

Conclusion

A. Sincere Petitions or Mere Repetitions?

A couple started dating. In due course, they began to take turns attending each other's church. Her church recited the Lord's Prayer every Sunday as part of the worship service; his church never did. When she asked him why his church never did so, he responded that his church didn't want the Lord's Prayer to become a repetitious chant.

He had a point. Mere repetition of the Lord's Prayer without regard to its message and challenge is of negative value. To do so runs the risk of being condemned as those who honor God with their lips but whose hearts are far from him (Matthew 15:8 quoting Isaiah 29:13).

But that danger is true of anything we do regularly when the church meets. Some churches have communion services only once per quarter because it might become “too common” if observed every Sunday. (Few churches, however, would apply the same reasoning to the collection of offerings!)

Perhaps a good middle ground would be different prayers every Sunday that nevertheless reflected the categories in the Lord's Prayer. Would that work in your church? Why, or why not?

B. Prayer

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Pray as if God is listening—because he is.

How to Say It

Didache	Did-uh-key, or Did-uh-kay.
Gethsemane	Geth- <i>sem</i> -uh-nee (G as in <i>get</i>).
Paternoster	Pah-tur-naw-stir.