

MATTHEW 6:9–13. (EHV)

“Therefore pray like this: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.’”

A man is shipwrecked at sea, floating for several days on a piece of wreckage. He sees his life drawing to a close and decides to pray: “God, if you could just have a ship pass by, I will give a generous gift to the church I attended in my youth.” Just then, a ship appears on the horizon.

“God, if you could just point that ship in my direction, I will faithfully attend church every Sunday for the rest of my life.” The ship immediately veers from its course and starts heading straight for him.

“God, if you could just have someone on that ship notice me so that the people on board come to my rescue, I promise I will read the Bible every day for the rest of my life.” Suddenly there is a commotion on board, and seconds later, someone throws him a lifebelt.

As the lifebelt floats towards him, the man says, “Never mind, God, I got this myself.”

The joke, while humorous, illustrates well how badly people misunderstand true prayer. It illustrates how many people think that any person whatsoever can pray to God whenever he or she decides it’s appropriate. It highlights people’s tendency to view God as cold and stingy, someone who will only throw them a bone if they first get his attention by offering to do something for him. And it especially illustrates how people tend to pray to God only as a last resort, and then forget about him when things are going fine again.

Prayer is too important to misunderstand, brothers and sisters. When Paul gives his protégé, the young Pastor Timothy, instructions about being a pastor, he says, “I urge, then, *first of all*, that requests, prayers, petitions and thanksgiving be made for everyone.” Paul mentions prayer as the chief point of a pious life for both pastors and parishioners.

So for today’s sermon on Christian doctrine, let’s focus our attention on God’s will regarding Christian prayer.

1. Who can pray?

Let’s first ask of God’s word: Who can pray? God’s word tells us that prayer is *not* for any person whatsoever. True prayer, prayer that is heard by the true God, is the privilege of those who believe in Jesus, and of them alone. Solomon says in Proverbs, “The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous” (Proverbs 15:29). We are all wicked by nature; the only way that any of us can say that we are righteous is through faith in Christ, because through faith in Christ, Christ’s righteousness covers and clothes us. What a tremendous, unique privilege for you believers: The God of all the universe hears you when you speak to him.

Early on in the 1994 movie *Angels in the Outfield*, the main character is in his bedroom and he prays, “God, if there is a God, if you’re a man or a woman, if you’re listening, I’d really, really like a family.” That prayer, especially the end of it, might tug at our heart strings, but it is not a true prayer, because it is clearly not coming from a believer.

I remember hearing about an unbelieving woman living in a big city for whom everything was going wrong. She was praying a similar prayer, basically just asking God, whoever he might

be, to give her some sort of help, and that was right when a Wisconsin Synod pastor rang her doorbell, because he was canvassing the neighborhood to invite people to his church. That might seem at first to be a situation where God did answer an unbeliever's prayer, but we must remember that God's word remains true no matter what things seem like. The pastor ringing her doorbell at that precise moment was not an answer to *her* prayer, because she was still an unbeliever at that point. It was rather an answer to that pastor's prayer that his work would bear fruit; the Lord used the timing of his ringing the doorbell to give him an opportunity to share the gospel with a person who was going to listen because of that timing. It was also an answer to the prayers of other believers asking that God's word might reach more people.

True prayer is only the privilege of believers in Jesus.

2. How should we pray?

Next let's ask of God's word: How should we pray? That also means we need to ask: What even is prayer? There are plenty of people, even people who call themselves Christian, who think of prayer as two-directional. In other words, they think they can go out to the garden or into the field or into the woods, and that they can not only talk to God there, which is true, but that he'll also talk to them. But the Bible never defines or describes prayer that way for New Testament believers, and God never promises to speak to us in dreams or in whispers on the wind or in thoughts spontaneously occurring to us. He only promises to speak to us in his word. Even when we think he might be speaking to us outside of his word, we need to compare what we're hearing to his word, in order to know whether it comes from him.

In other words, prayer is one-directional, not two-directional. In prayer, believers speak and pour out their soul to God. And we can only do that properly if we have first been listening to him in his word. In fact, that is the general principle of proper prayer: Listen before you speak. It isn't so much that if you don't listen, God won't listen to you. If you are a believer, God will always listen to you. But God's concern is this: His invitation to pray isn't just a blank check that you can fill with anything you want, period. If that's what you think, you're going to be disappointed with his answers. God wants you to ask him for the right things, for the best things. And if you are to know what the right things are, you first need to listen to him.

Where does God speak? In his word, as we noted earlier. That's why one pastor advised me and others to "pray through the Scriptures." By that he meant that the best prayers will typically accompany reading of the Bible. When you read the Bible, you are listening to God, and so you are also gathering material with which to fill your prayers. For instance, if I look at another verse on the previous page, I see this: "But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Voilà! Fantastic prayer material! "Lord, help me not to respond to my enemies' hatred with hatred of my own, but with love, and please change the hearts of my enemies, especially so that they put their faith in you as their only Savior from sin."

So the general principle is: Listen before you speak. Another way of saying this is: Use the Lord's Prayer as a model. After all, Jesus didn't say, "Therefore pray this." No, he said, "Therefore pray *like* this." The content and focus of the Lord's Prayer should match the content and focus of our prayers. But we can glean more specific principles by listening to what God consistently tells us about how to pray throughout his word.

He tells us to approach him **in humility**, realizing that by nature we deserve none of the things we are asking from him, yes, realizing that we do not deserve to be heard by him at all. Jesus teaches that in the Lord's Prayer by telling us to address our Father "in heaven," and by teaching us to ask him for forgiveness. In the Old Testament, Jacob the grandson of Abraham prayed, "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant." This is also why we pray in Jesus's name, whether or not we actually say "in Jesus's name." It is only in Jesus and through his saving work on our behalf that we are able to approach God in prayer.

But in spite of our unworthiness, God also tells us to pray **confidently**. For Jesus's sake he does hear us and will answer us. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus doesn't teach us to pray, "Mighty God in heaven," or, "Just Judge in heaven." He teaches us to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven." Jesus later explains that if even evil fathers know how to give good gifts to their children, his heavenly Father will give us good gifts that much more certainly (Matthew 7:9-11). Paul tells us that if God was willing to give up his own Son's life for us, then how can he not give us all good things (Romans 8:32)? Our prayers are always powerful and effective; pray confidently.

Right along with that, God tells us to pray **persistently**: "Keep on asking, and it will be given to you," Jesus said (Matthew 7:7). He hints at that in the Lord's Prayer with words like "this day" and "daily," which imply prayer that takes place at least daily. He also told a parable about a woman who kept pestering a wicked judge to give her justice. Finally, the judge gave her justice just to get some peace and quiet from her, not because he cared about her (Luke 18:1-8). How much more will God, who does care about us, hear and answer us when we repeatedly storm his throne in prayer!

God tells us not just to pray with our mouths, but **with our hearts**. "These people honor me with their lips," he said, "but their hearts are far from me" (Matthew 15:8). That's why the Lord's Prayer has been called the greatest martyr, because countless people mangle and strangle it when they merely recite it without thinking about what the words mean. Jesus doesn't mind it when we use memorized prayers, but he does not want us to pray any prayer thoughtlessly.

God also tells us that he wants us to share all of our concerns with him (1 Peter 5:7), but **foremost** on our minds and hearts **should be the concerns of his kingdom**. How many prayers have been, "God, please give me this or that toy for Christmas!" or "God, please help us to win this game!" or "God, please don't let me lose my job!" Those kinds of petitions have their place, but their place should not be a prominent and consistent one in our prayers. Jesus modeled our prayer priorities in the Lord's Prayer. All of the petitions pertain to the affairs of God's kingdom, except for one, and that one petition concerned with our earthly affairs does not ask for toys or money or a victory for our team. It asks for daily bread, the necessities of life that we need just for today.

When we are not praying for the concerns of his kingdom or for things he has promised to do or give in his word, then we do well to remember John's words in the Second Lesson and Jesus's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Your will, not mine, be done."

God also tells us that he wants us to **thank** him. In fact, we heard in the Gospel Acclamation that he wants us to thank him "in *all* circumstances," good *and* bad. How often we forget to pray for safety when getting in the vehicle to take a trip, but how much more often do we pray for safety, but then forget to say thanks when we arrive safely at our destination? How

often we forget to pray for recovery when we are sick, but how much more often do we pray for recovery, but then forget to say thanks when we recover?

I once attended a seminar on depression and burnout. The presenter, a Christian clinical psychologist, gave us a list of depression prevention strategies. One of them was to write down three things you enjoyed in the previous day, then to reflect on it and write about it. Another was to identify someone still alive who did something or said something that changed your life for the better and to give them a proper thank you. Both of these strategies tend to improve happiness and fight depression. What does that tell us? God doesn't give any of his commands to burden us, but to help us, including the command to pray and to give thanks. Taking time to give thanks to God intentionally is not only right; it is also good for our mood and our health.

Did you enjoy the rain these past few days, or the sunshine or the turning of the leaves today? Thank God for that. Did one of your kids say something priceless that made you laugh? Thank God for that. Did you drive on smooth roads to get here? Thank God for that. But especially remember to thank God for making you a member of his kingdom.

Finally, God tells us that he wants us to **pray for all people**, including our enemies and those who persecute us, and he also specially mentions political leaders and others in authority. When was the last time we prayed for the neighbor or coworker who drives us crazy? For President Biden? For Governor Noem? Could it be that the regular depressing news stories might diminish if we simply took the time to pray for our political leaders and officers of the law? God wants all people to be saved. God sent his Son to give his life as a ransom for all people. Therefore God wants us to bring as many people as possible under the umbrella of our prayers.

3. How does God answer our prayers?

We have covered what prayer is, who can pray, and what we should pray about. But we still have to ask how God answers our prayers.

This won't take long. There are only one of two possibilities. James tells us that the prophet Elijah prayed earnestly that it would not rain, so that the Israelites would stop relying on false gods and turn back to the true God. And, James says, it did not rain, for three and a half years. Then, after the people saw how powerless their false gods were and confessed their faith in the true God once again, Elijah prayed that rain would return, and that's exactly what happened.

That's one way that God answers our prayers—he gives exactly what we asked. And if we have difficulty remembering when that has happened, perhaps it's because we forgot to thank him when it did. How many times have we prayed, “Lord, help me find my wallet, my keys, my purse”? For that matter, how many times have we prayed, “Give us this day our daily bread”? I'm sure if I paid any of you a visit at dinner time, I would find you gathered not in a shanty or out in the open, but in a house, and with much more food on the table than just bread. How many times have we prayed, “Forgive us our trespasses”? And he has, day after day.

But there are also times when his answer differs from our answer. For instance, the apostle Paul had what he calls a “thorn in the flesh,” and he pleaded with the Lord on three separate occasions for it to be taken away.

God's answer? “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

God didn't want Paul and he doesn't want us to view that as a no answer. If we are praying, "Your will, not mine, be done," as mentioned earlier, then when God's answer is different than ours, we will not only accept it, but also realize that his answer is actually a better yes than the yes we were asking for. Sometimes he delays, because he wants to test our faith, or he wants us to examine whether we are sincere and persistent or doubtful, or to examine whether we are asking for something that truly is good for us or others. Other times he essentially says, "If I said yes to that, dear Christian, I would be giving something that would not result in good. But I will give this better gift instead."

That means that there is not a single prayer that we pray as believers that God does not answer in some beneficial way. The hymn writer was correct: "What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!" Let us then renew our commitment to listen to God in his word, that he might also prompt us to approach him regularly in proper prayer. Amen.