

LEAD! C.3 Persistent Prayer

In Which We and the World are Transformed as We Pray to the Father

Prayer is the process of aligning our thoughts, desires, and decisions with the Name of God, so that His Spirit can work through us to transform our lives, our relationships, and our world.

Memory Verse: *"Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."* -- [Matthew 6:31-33](#) (NKJV)

Assigned Reading

1. [Richard Foster: *Celebration of Discipline*](#)
 - 3. Prayer
2. [Donald Whitney: *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*](#)
 - 4. Prayer
3. [Eugene Peterson: *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*](#)
 - 12. Hope: "I Pray to God ... and Wait for What He'll Say & Do"
4. [Ruth Haley Barton: *Sacred Rhythms*](#)
 - 4. Prayer: Deepening Our Intimacy with God

Anecdote

Read [Luke 18:1-14](#). How can we have confidence God will answer our prayer?

Bible

[Matthew 6](#)

Our study on prayer begins with a reminder that we should look to God, not men, for our reward:

[6:1](#) "Take heed that you do not do your [charitable deeds](#) before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no [reward](#) from your [Father](#) in [heaven](#). [2](#) Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the [hypocrites](#) do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have [glory](#) from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

Since pursuing human approval is incompatible with obtaining God's approval:

[3](#) But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, [4](#) that your charitable deed may be in [secret](#); and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you [openly](#).

Which is particularly true of prayer:

5 "And when you [pray](#), you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 6 But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who [is] in the secret [place]; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

This doesn't mean we should never let anyone see us pray (after all, Jesus frequently prayed in front of the disciples). Rather, we need to make sure that our prayers are directed towards our heavenly Father, instead of putting on a show for earthly listeners.

Or worse, putting on a show for God [C.1]:

7 And when you pray, do not use [vain repetitions](#) as the [heathen](#) [do]. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

For a Christian, prayer is emphatically **not** a religious ritual we perform to impress God with our sincerity or devotion. Nor is it telling God things He doesn't know:

8 "Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

[C.2] But if not that, then what is it?

9 In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, [Hallowed](#) be Your name.

The primary goal of prayer is to see God's name -- His [identity](#) and [character](#) -- "hallowed" (revealed, honored, and glorified) in the [world](#) around us:

10 Your [kingdom](#) come. Your will be done on [earth](#) as [it is] in heaven.

This is the heart of prayer: exercising our human will to invite God's authority to be manifest over everything we hold in our heart -- including our deepest needs:

11 Give us this day our daily bread.

Especially our need for [forgiveness](#):

12 And [forgive](#) us our [debts](#), As we forgive our debtors. 13 And do not lead us into [temptation](#), But deliver us from the [evil one](#). For Yours is the kingdom and the [power](#) and the glory forever. Amen.

To pray [wisely](#) requires recognizing -- and whole-heartedly submitting to -- our proper place in God's creation. If we fail to glorify God as He deserves, we will become puffed up with our own righteousness and self-importance, opening ourselves to all

manner of temptation and the devil's evil schemes.

And there is no better way to humbly acknowledge our need for God's mercy than to show that same mercy to others:

14 "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

Conversely, to pridefully deny forgiveness to others places us in the path of God's wrath (cf. Matthew 18:34) [C.3]:

15 But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The admonitions for prayer and alms mirror those for fasting, which we will study next week:

16 "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who [is] in the secret [place]; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

The bottom line is the same: our hearts must choose whether to pursue mortal treasure from the hands of man, or to pursue the heavenly treasure only God can give:

19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

For our souls will reflect whatever we look to for our reward [C.4]:

22 "The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. 23 But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great [is] that darkness!

And we can't have it both ways:

24 "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

It sounds reasonable enough, but the implications are quite shocking. Is it really true that we become whatever we focus on -- and we can't focus on more than one thing? If so, then no wonder Jesus forbids us from wasting our time focusing on the "mere" essentials of life!

[25](#) "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"

For several reasons:

1. It is much more important to serve God (and obtain heavenly treasure) than it is to serve mammon (to obtain earthly treasure).
2. Because God is our loving Father, we can trust Him to provide whatever earthly things we truly need:

[26](#) Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

3. Worrying our hearts by serving mammon ultimately doesn't accomplish anything of value;

[27](#) Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? [28](#) "So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; [29](#) and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

So, why worry?

[30](#) Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, [will He] not much more [clothe] you, O you of little faith?

Or rather: Don't worry!

[31](#) "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'"

Yes, we may need these things -- but God already knows that:

[32](#) For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

The basis of Christian prayer is also the basis of a worry-free life: realizing that God knows what we need, and that because He is our Father we can rest assured He desires us to have it.

But, that doesn't necessarily mean we will get it! Though God doesn't require "many words" -- or any sacrifice beyond that of Christ -- there is nonetheless a condition on His generosity:

33 But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

Unlike the rituals of the pagans, this criteria is not some arbitrary standard God imposes to put us in our place. Rather, it is the essential posture our hearts must have in order to receive all that God has for us [C.5] -- like a cup, which can only be filled when it is right-side up.

Everything God desires to give us through prayer will do us no good if our eyes are darkened by a focus on earthly treasures. It is only when we "lift up our eyes" (cf. [Isaiah 40:26](#)) that God can pour down His riches upon us and fill our hearts with His light -- and everything else we need.

34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day [is] its own trouble.

The choice is ours: will we worry, or will we pray?

Conversation

1. Do you ever feel the need to impress God with the quality -- or quantity -- of your prayers?
2. Is it hard to believe that God *really* knows (and cares) what you need? Why or why not?
3. How does unforgiveness hinder our ability to pray effectively?
4. What have you "looked to" for your security in the past? With what results?
5. Describe what it looks like to seek God's kingdom -- and His righteousness -- **first**.

Decision

- **Repentance:** What worries do you have that reflect the "kingdom of mammon"?
- **Action:** For which needs will you trust God by instead seeking His kingdom?
- **Worship:** Acknowledge that all glory, power, and kingship belong to God alone, for ever and ever. Amen!

Explore More

- [Prayer – International Standard Bible Encyclopedia](#)
- [Prayer – AllAboutPrayer.org](#)
- [National Day of Prayer Task Force](#)
- [A Transformational Take on the Lord's Prayer « Radically Happy](#)
- [YouTube – MC Hammer – Pray](#)

For Next Week

For next week, read [Joel 2](#). Why does God command the Israelites to fast?

Memory Verse: *"Now, therefore,' says the LORD, 'Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.' So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm."* --[Joel 2:12-13](#) (NKJV)

References

1. **Blue Letter Bible.** "[Matthew 6](#) – New King James Version." Blue Letter Bible. 1996–2009. 27 Mar 2009. < <http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?t=NKJV&b=Mat&c=6> >
2. **[New King James Version \(NKJV\)](#)** Copyright © 1982 by [Thomas Nelson, Inc.](#)

