



## 05 | “TEACH ME TO PRAY”

One of the fundamental building blocks of strong faith is an intentional routine of prayer. Where Scripture is primarily a means by which God speaks to us, Prayer is primarily a means by which we share our hearts with God. However, as we do so, there are several things to consider as we approach God in prayer.

### PREPARING TO PRAY

In general, it may be helpful to consider four things as you make time to pray. There are **Four Ps of Prayer** that can help you optimize the way you spend time with God in prayer.

#### PURPOSE

To deepen your prayer life, it is important to begin with “**Why?**” Why is it that you are coming to God today?

There are numerous examples of God hearing and responding powerfully to the prayers people offer, but is the fundamental

IT IS ABSOLUTELY TRUE THAT PRAYER CHANGES THINGS, BUT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING THAT PRAYER CAN CHANGE IS US!

purpose of prayer to get what you want?

It may be helpful to think about prayer as a way of placing yourself before God as a master craftsman who can use the time to work on your heart as you open it to him. The more **honest and vulnerable** you are with God about who you are, how you think of God, and why you

are praying in the first place, the better God can form you. Prayer is a time to think about **God’s heart**, God’s **mission**, what God cares about, and to seek out what our part can be in bringing God’s will into our world. It is also a time to **share** your joys and struggles with someone who **knows you** better than anyone and **loves you** dearly.

PRAY THEN LIKE THIS:  
OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN,  
HALLOWED BY YOUR NAME.  
YOUR KINGDOM COME, YOUR  
WILL BE DONE, ON EARTH AS  
IT IS IN HEAVEN. GIVE US  
THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD,  
AND FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS  
AS WE ALSO HAVE FORGIVEN  
OUR DEBTORS. AND LEAD US  
NOT INTO TEMPTATION, BUT  
DELIVER US FROM EVIL.  
MATTHEW 6:9-13

FOR WE ARE HIS  
WORKMANSHIP, CREATED IN  
CHRIST JESUS FOR GOOD  
WORKS, WHICH GOD  
PREPARED BEFOREHAND, THAT  
WE SHOULD WALK IN THEM.  
EPHESIANS 2:10

## PLACE

As long as you are living in this world, your **physical** and **spiritual** dimensions will share intrinsic connections. One will always affect the other. As you pray, think about your **external factors**.

Consider Jesus' time of prayer in Mark 1:35 and the external dimensions which Jesus took into account.

- It was early in the morning, still dark outside
- He traveled to the place where he intended to pray
- The place he prayed was isolated
- All of this must have been intentional because he awoke early to go pray

AND RISING VERY EARLY IN  
THE MORNING, WHILE IT WAS  
STILL DARK, HE DEPARTED  
AND WENT OUT TO A  
DESOLATE PLACE, AND THERE  
HE PRAYED.  
MARK 1:35

Matthew 6:6 records Jesus' teaching that when we pray, we should go to our room and shut the door so that a significant part of our prayer life is in secret. The promise is that we will receive rewards openly for the secret ways our hearts are loyal to God.

Whether you have a favorite hike, a body of water, a bedroom closet, or just a favorite chair with a nice view, the place where you choose to pray can be significant for you, especially as you seek to form a habit. What is a place that helps you get into a good prayerful mindset?

## POSTURE

As we said above, you cannot pray without some use of your physical body. It is worth thinking about what you can do with your body that will help you to pray. In Scripture, there is no single way prescribed for our prayer posture.

For example:

- **Abraham** fell with his face to the ground, bowing before God (Genesis 17:3)
- **Moses** prayed with his hands held up (Exodus 9:27-29)
- **Solomon** knelt down as he prayed (I Kings 8:54)
- **Jesus** looked up toward the sky as he prayed on some occasions (Mark 6:41) and fell on his face to pray on other occasions (Matthew 26:39)

You may want to try out various postures as you pray and see how they impact your experience of praying. Laying with your face to the ground is a very vulnerable position, and no doubt the experience of touching the floor or the grass outside may shape the direction your thoughts go. Standing with your hands raised, looking into the

sky will produce a different experience. Likewise, you can vary whether you pray silently in your heart, or speak out loud to God as you talk to him.

## PATTERN

The most challenging aspect of prayer is that it requires **commitment**. In developing a habit of prayer, allow yourself much grace and patience. If you intend to pray every day, but pray for one day and then miss a few, do not be hard on yourself. Don't let your inner perfectionist suggest that if you miss one part of your plan that you ought to quit.

You probably had to crawl before you could walk or run, and a healthy life of prayer is the same way. If you make a commitment to praying more and then pray more at all because of this commitment, that is a victory to be celebrated. When you miss a few days, allow yourself to start again without needing to do any acts of penance for unfulfilled intentions. **Do the best you can, just for today.**

So as you prepare to pray, it is worth considering your **purpose, place, posture, and pattern** for how you will approach the opportunity.

## FOUR WAYS TO PRAY

An early book I encountered on contemplative spirituality is Mark Thibodeaux's book *The Armchair Mystic: How Contemplative Prayer Can Lead You Closer to God*. (There is now an expanded edition. I have only the original version.) The most useful part of this book, to me, is the metaphors Thibodeaux uses for how prayer can be like stages of communication as a child grows.

Consider the ways in which our own communication with people changes over the years.

- A **TODDLER learning to speak** will mostly **talk at people**. Much like parrots, they repeat what they've heard people say. Maybe they can say their alphabet or sing parts of a song they like. But in the beginning, toddlers talk at people.
- A **YOUNG CHILD will begin to talk to people**. Chat with a child and you might end up discussing a wide variety of topics, stream of consciousness, based on whatever they have on their mind. While they are capable of listening and responding, they may get preoccupied with what they are trying to tell you about, whether you know anything about it or not.
- An **ADOLESCENT is able to talk with people**. They will speak some, but they will also be capable of listening. They'll be familiar with the thought patterns and

personalities of their friends, and have much more of a back-and-forth quality in the things they like to discuss. They want both to speak and to listen, to share and to receive.

- An **OLDER COUPLE** may be completely content, simply to *be together*. Not that they don't enjoy talking, listening, interacting, etc. But in a long relationship, you can come to know someone so well that simply to be with them is a joy. Speaking is a fine part of the relationship, but not always necessary. Simply to hold hands and enjoy the scenery will be all they need some of the time. They know who they are in relation to each other, and it brings them joy.

Borrowing from this imagery, here are four ways to think about praying. It is worth varying your approaches from time to time to see in each season what helps you best to connect with God.

## 1) TALKING AT GOD

I think this a better practice than how it might sound in my description. But especially when you are learning to pray, or later on when you are struggling for words, consider saying to God things that have been prepared beforehand. This could be the Lord's Prayer. It could be the reading or repeating of a Psalm. It could be a well-worded prayer you've found in devotional literature. Well-formed words can help keep your mind and heart in a healthy place as you pray.

Consider also short prayers that you can easily bring along with you in each day. Such as:

- "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom"
- "Lord, I believe, but please help my unbelief"
- "Lord Jesus, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner"

## 2) TALKING TO GOD

While there is value in well-worded prayers, God doesn't need us to be articulate in order to please him. There is tremendous value in approaching God and talking about anything and everything that comes to your mind, stream-of-consciousness. God never

### A MORNING PRAYER

I LOVE YOU, FATHER, AND  
THANK YOU FOR THE REST I'VE  
RECEIVED. FULLY AWAKEN MY  
BODY, MIND, AND HEART TO  
YOU THIS NEW DAY. WHERE I AM  
HOPELESS, BRING HOPE. WHERE  
I AM DRY, BRING WATER.  
WHERE I AM DISILLUSIONED,  
BRING CLARITY. FILL ME WITH  
ANTICIPATION FOR THE GOOD  
YOU HAVE FOR ME IN THIS DAY.  
ALMIGHTY AND ETERNAL GOD,  
SO DRAW MY HEART TO YOU,  
SO GUIDE MY MIND, SO FILL MY  
IMAGINATION, SO RULE OVER  
MY BODY AND WILL THAT I MAY  
BE COMPLETELY DEVOTED TO  
YOU, FULL OF PEACE AND LOVE,  
STRONG AND PLIABLE, FOR  
YOUR GLORY AND THE GOOD  
OF ALL, INCLUDING MYSELF.  
I ASK THROUGH CHRIST, AMEN.

gets tired. He's never bothered by you. For you to think of him and make time to talk to him is the thing God wants most!

The humanity of Christ helps us in this kind of praying, because we pray to a God who understands. The joys and blessings of life, he can laugh along with you. The worst pains you experience in this life, he understands. Treat God as a friend and tell him about anything and everything.

### 3) TALKING WITH GOD

An important aspect of time spent in prayer is our effort to learn the will of God. I can speak, but I can also listen. Sometimes this might mean asking God for wisdom you need to receive and then pulling back to listen to whatever tugs on your heart.

A helpful practice is to bring a **passage of Scripture with you** as you pray. First read and dwell on it. Try to see God's heart and mind at work. Then talk to God about what you are hearing and understanding.

Ask your self the question before you pray:

IF I AM GOING TO TAKE SERIOUSLY  
THAT THESE ARE THE WORDS OF GOD,  
WHAT WOULD IT MEAN THAT I HAVE  
TO DO DIFFERENTLY IN MY LIFE?

Discern your internal reactions and try to pray in a way that keeps you open and pliable.

### 4) BEING WITH GOD

Have you ever tried praying in such a way that you relax and let go of the stresses of your life and simply paused for a while to be in God's presence. Have you ever tried **praying without using words?** As you go from place to place, do you remember that God is with you? Do you pull aside to enjoy this truth?

As I've shared these four items, let me say what I am **NOT** trying to imply here: I am **NOT** trying to imply that types of prayer borrowing from the more mature forms of communication are intrinsically more mature forms of prayer. I believe that **all types of prayer can be useful and important to people in all phases of life and spiritual maturity.** Experiment and see what best fits you in this season of your life.

## CHALLENGE: BREATH PRAYERS

I like **Breath Prayers** because they blend the above categories. They involve pre-written words, usually Scripture, and they involve much being still without necessarily trying to say much. The practice is to slow down and breathe. And as you inhale, you utter the first half of a statement, then as you exhale, you utter the second half. Let the repetition bring out deeper meanings to the text, and let it force you to be more introspective as the text continues to show you the heart and mind of God. Here are some you can try.

PSALM 116:7

RETURN, O MY SOUL, TO YOUR REST, — FOR THE LORD HAS DEALT BOUNTIFULLY WITH YOU.

PSALM 33:22

LET YOUR STEADFAST LOVE, O LORD, BE UPON US, — EVEN AS WE HOPE IN YOU.

PSALM 62:5

FOR GOD ALONE, O MY SOUL, WAIT IN SILENCE, — FOR MY HOPE IS FROM HIM.

PSALM 119:49

REMEMBER YOUR WORD TO YOUR SERVANT, — IN WHICH YOU HAVE MADE ME HOPE.

PSALM 51:12

RESTORE TO ME THE JOY OF YOUR SALVATION, — AND UPHOLD ME WITH A WILLING SPIRIT.

PSALM 62:7

ON GOD RESTS MY SALVATION AND MY GLORY; — MY MIGHTY ROCK, MY REFUGE IS GOD.

PSALM 4:8

IN PEACE I WILL BOTH LIE DOWN AND SLEEP; — FOR YOU ALONE, O LORD, MAKE ME DWELL IN SAFETY.

LAMENTATIONS 3:24

THE LORD IS MY PORTION, SAYS MY SOUL, — THEREFORE I WILL HOPE IN HIM.

MARK 10:47

JESUS, SON OF DAVID, — HAVE MERCY ON ME.

MATTHEW 11:28

COME TO ME, ALL WHO LABOR AND ARE HEAVY LADEN, — AND I WILL GIVE YOU REST.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:5

FOR AS WE SHARE ABUNDANTLY IN CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS, — SO THROUGH CHRIST WE SHARE ABUNDANTLY IN COMFORT, TOO.

PSALM 85:8

I WILL HEAR WHAT GOD THE LORD WILL SPEAK; — FOR HE WILL SPEAK PEACE TO HIS PEOPLE.