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# Jesus' Pattern for Every Prayer—Part 1: Teach Us to Pray (Luke 11:1–2a)

# 1

**It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples.” And He said to them, “When you pray, say:” (11:1–2a)**

On the importance of prayer in the Christian life, the notable Puritan pastor Thomas Brooks wrote,

The power of religion and godliness lives, thrives, or dies, as closet [private] prayer lives, thrives, or dies. Godliness never rises to a higher pitch than when men keep closest to their closets.

Private prayer is that privy [secret] key of heaven that unlocks all the treasures of glory to the soul. The best riches and the sweetest mercies God usually gives to his people when they are in their closets upon their knees ... the graces of the saints are enlivened, and cherished, and strengthened by the sweet secret influences which their souls fall under when they are in their closet-communion with God. (*The Secret Key to Heaven* [Reprint; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006], xiv, 44)

Prayer is more than merely an occasional duty; it is a way of life. The New Testament commands believers to “keep watching and praying” (Matt. 26:41); “that at all times they ought to pray” (Luke 18:1); to be “devoted to prayer” (Rom. 12:12); to “pray at all times” (Eph. 6:18); to “devote [themselves] to prayer” (Col. 4:2); to “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let [their] requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6); and to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17).

Old Testament saints believed that God heard their prayers. In Psalm 65:2 David addressed God as “You who hear prayer,” while Solomon wrote that God “hears the prayer of the righteous” (Prov. 15:29). Not only does He hear the prayers of His people, He also delights in hearing them (Prov. 15:8). But those prayers must be from a pure heart (Job 16:17; Ps. 17:1; Prov. 28:9), because God will not hear the prayers of those who harbor sin in their heart (Ps. 66:18; Isa. 1:15), and must also reflect trust in Him (1 Chron. 5:20).

The Old Testament records, for example, the prayers of Abraham for Abimelech (Gen. 20:7, 17), Isaac for Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), Moses for Israel after the people rebelled against God in the wilderness (Num. 14:13–19), Hannah for a son (1 Sam. 1:10–12), David in response to the promise of the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:18–29), Solomon at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:22–53), Elijah for the resurrection of a widow’s son (1 Kings 17:21), Elisha for the resurrection of a Shunnamite woman’s son (2 Kings 4:33), Hezekiah in response to an Assyrian invasion (2 Kings 19:15–19), and for healing (2 Kings 20:2–3), David and Manasseh for personal forgiveness (Ps. 51; 2 Chron. 33:11–13), Jonah for personal deliverance (Jon. 2:1–9), and Ezra (Ezra 9:5–15), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4–11), and Daniel (Dan. 9:1–19) for forgiveness and deliverance for the nation of Israel.

The New Testament records the prayers of Anna (Luke 2:37), the apostles (Acts 1:14; 6:6 [cf. 6:4]), the early church (Acts 1:24; 2:42; 4:23–31; 12:5, 12; 13:3), Peter and John (Acts 8:14–15), Peter (Acts 9:40; 11:5), Paul (Acts 9:11; 16:25 [with Silas]; 20:36; 21:5; 28:8; Rom. 1:10; 10:1; 2 Cor. 13:7, 9; Eph. 1:16–23; 3:14–21; Phil. 1:4, 9–11; Col. 1:3, 9–12; 1 Thess. 1:2; 3:10; 2 Thess. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:3; Philem. 4), and John (3 John 2).

But the supreme example of prayer in all of Scripture is drawn from the Lord Jesus Christ. Prayer permeated our Lord’s earthly ministry from beginning to end. He prayed at His baptism (Luke 3:21), during His

first preaching tour (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16), before choosing the Twelve (Luke 6:12–13), before feeding the five thousand (Matt. 14:19), after feeding the five thousand (Matt. 14:23), before feeding the four thousand (Matt. 15:36), before Peter's confession of Him as the Christ (Luke 9:18), at the transfiguration (Luke 9:28–29), for some children who had been brought to Him (Matt. 19:13), after the return of the seventy (Luke 10:21), before raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:41–42), as He faced the reality of the cross (John 12:28), at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:26–27), for Peter (Luke 22:31–32), in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–44), from the cross (Matt. 27:46; Luke 23:34, 46), with the disciples He encountered on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:30), at the ascension (Luke 24:50–51) and, supremely, in His high priestly prayer in John 17. It comes as no surprise, then, that this passage finds **Jesus . . . praying in a certain unnamed place** somewhere in Judea.

Luke's account of this model prayer is an abbreviated version of the one recorded by Matthew (6:9–13), though the two prayers were given on different occasions. The one in Matthew's gospel was in Galilee; the one recorded by Luke occurred several months later in Judea. Undoubtedly both prayers reflect teaching repeated frequently by Jesus to His followers throughout His earthly ministry. For the sake of completeness, the elements noted by Matthew but omitted by Luke will be included in the exposition of this prayer in the chapters that follow.

This prayer is Jesus' vehicle for teaching the disciples (and all believers) the essential structure and required features of prayer. The elements in His prayer emphasize the overarching reason for prayer, as will be seen. This overview may be divided into two sections: the disciples' request that Jesus teach them to pray, and the Lord's response.

#### THE DISCIPLES' REQUEST

**after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples.”** (11:1b)

While Jesus frequently sought solitude when He prayed (cf. 5:16; Matt. 14:23; Mark 1:35), on this occasion some of His disciples were

present. When the Lord had **finished** praying **one of His disciples**, no doubt speaking for the rest, **said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray.”** Given both the Old Testament’s emphasis on prayer and their familiarity with it, this request seems somewhat surprising. But it reflects the sad reality that at that time in their history, tradition and ceremony had replaced the knowledge of Scripture so that true prayer had largely been lost to the Jewish people. The disciples’ request for instruction in prayer also reveals that what they had come to be familiar with regarding prayer was not what God wanted. The prayer they heard Jesus pray was radically different from the traditional, customary prayers they were used to in their synagogues from the scribes, Pharisees, and rabbis.

Jesus noted that contrast in Matthew 6, where He indicted the phony, hypocritical religion of the scribes and Pharisees. “When you pray,” He warned His hearers, “you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full” (v.5). Those prayers were focused on putting on a show of piety for the people who were watching, not on honoring and glorifying God. Instead of showy, ostentatious, public prayers, Jesus instructed His followers, “When you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you” (v.6). Many Jewish prayers were marked by the ritualistic, meaningless, empty, vain repetition that characterized pagan prayers. But Jesus declared, “When you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words” (v.7).

That **John** the Baptist had **also taught his disciples** to pray (cf. Luke 5:33) also prompted the Lord’s disciples to ask Him to teach them. They were acquainted with John’s disciples (cf. 7:18–24), and wanted the same kind of instruction from Jesus that John had given his followers. It is reasonable to assume that since John was not a part of the religious establishment, he had maintained a pure, uncorrupted approach to prayer in keeping with that of Old Testament saints.

THE LORD'S RESPONSE

**And He said to them, "When you pray, say:" (2b)**

The disciples had not requested that Jesus teach them a prayer to recite, but how to pray. He responded by giving them a prayer that, while it is recited and even sung, is not intended for merely that. Having warned against meaningless repetition in prayer (Matt. 6:7), Jesus would hardly have given His followers a prayer to recite mechanically. Nor is there any record in the New Testament of anyone subsequently reciting this prayer. Far from being merely another ritual prayer, it is a skeleton or framework for all prayer. As such, it is of great practical value, as the Puritan pastor and theologian Thomas Watson noted:

There is a double benefit arising from framing our petitions suitably to this prayer. 1. Hereby error in prayer is prevented. It is not easy to write wrong after this copy; we cannot easily err when we have our pattern before us. 2. Hereby mercies requested are obtained; for the apostle assures us that God will hear us when we pray "according to his will." 1 John v. 14. And sure we pray according to his will when we pray according to the pattern he has set us. (*Body of Divinity* [Reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 400–401)

This prayer reflects the elements of prayer found in the Old Testament. There was a sense in which God was unapproachable, symbolized by the veil separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple, and the prohibition against touching Mt. Sinai when God appeared (Ex. 19:12). Yet while the people could not enter directly into God's presence, they were invited to approach Him in prayer. "In my distress" David said, "I called upon the Lord, and cried to my God for help; He heard my voice out of His temple, and my cry for help before Him came into His ears" (Ps. 18:6). In Psalm 145:18 he added, "The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth." In Psalm 50:15 God invited His people to "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me," and in 91:15 He promised, "He will call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him."

Prayers in the Old Testament were characterized by several elements. First, they were marked by adoration, love, and praise, as the passion of the heart flowed out from the lips (Pss. 7:17; 22:23, 26; 34:1).

Second, they reflected an attitude of gratefulness and thanksgiving for God's blessings and provision (Pss. 9:1; 30:4; 33:2; 50:14, 23; Isa. 12:1; Dan. 2:23; Jon. 2:9), Third, they recognized God's holiness (Ps. 22:3), acknowledging His transcendent glory. Fourth, they manifested a heartfelt desire to obey God (Ps. 119:5, 8, 17, 34, 88, 134), which resulted in confession of sin (Ps. 51) when there was disobedience. Fifth, instead of focusing exclusively on the needs of individuals, Old Testament prayers also expressed the needs of the nation as a whole (Ex. 33:13, 16; Deut. 26:15). Sixth, prayer in the Old Testament also involved perseverance, such as that exemplified by Moses, who interceded on behalf of the people for forty days after the incident of the golden calf (Deut. 9:18, 25). Finally, prayers were offered in humility (2 Chron. 7:14; Ezra 8:21; Ps. 10:17). Those same elements are in view in Jesus' prayer, as He reestablished the divine pattern that had largely been lost in Israel.

This rich, multifaceted template may be approached in several ways. It unfolds the various relationships between the believer and God: Father and child ("Our Father"), Holy One and worshiper ("hallowed be Your name"), Ruler and subject ("Your kingdom come"), Master and servant ("Your will be done"), Savior and sinner ("forgive us our debts"), and Guide and pilgrim ("do not lead us into temptation"). It also defines the proper attitudes for prayer: unselfishness ("our"), intimacy ("Father"), reverence ("hallowed be Your name"), loyalty ("Your kingdom come"), submissiveness ("Your will be done"), dependence ("give us this day our daily bread"), penitence ("forgive us our debts"), humility ("do not lead us into temptation"), and confident, triumphant joy ("Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever").

Focusing on God's glory, Jesus ignored non-essential elements such as the posture of prayer. Scripture records people praying in every conceivable position: standing (Gen. 24:12–14; 1 Sam. 1:26), sitting (Judg. 21:2–3; 2 Sam. 7:18; 1 Kings 19:4), kneeling (1 Kings 8:54; Ezra 9:5; Dan. 6:10), bowing (Ex. 34:8–9), lying face down (Ezek. 9:8; Matt. 26:39), with uplifted hands (Ps. 28:2; 1 Tim. 2:8), looking up (John 11:41; 17:1), and looking down (Luke 18:13).

Nor is there any particular location that prayers must be offered, though Jesus did suggest a private place (Matt. 6:6) rather than a pretentious public display. Still, the men of Judah prayed in the midst of battle



(2 Chron. 13:14); Elijah prayed in a cave (1 Kings 19:9–10); Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–44), in the wilderness (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16), on a mountain, (Luke 6:12), and on the cross (Luke 23:33–34); the early church prayed in a house (Acts 1:14, 24; 12:12); Peter prayed on a housetop (Acts 10:9); Paul and Silas prayed in jail (Acts 16:25); Paul prayed on a beach (Acts 21:5) and in the temple (Acts 22:17); Hezekiah prayed in bed (Isa. 38:2); and Jonah prayed in the stomach of a fish (Jon. 2:1–9).

Nor did Jesus specify any particular time to pray. Scripture records people praying in the early morning before dawn (Mark 1:35), in the morning after sunrise (Pss. 5:3; 88:13), three times a day (Dan. 6:10 [morning, noon, and evening; Ps. 55:17]), at noon (Acts 10:9), in the afternoon (Acts 3:1), in the evening (1 Kings 18:36), during the night (Pss. 4:4; Luke 6:12), at midnight (Acts 16:25), all day long (Ps. 86:3), and day and night (Neh. 1:6; Luke 2:37; 1 Thess. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:5); in short, believers are to pray at all times (Luke 18:1; Eph. 6:18), continually (Acts 1:14), and unceasingly (1 Thess. 5:17).

The Lord also did not mandate one particular attitude for prayer. On the one hand, some approached God with an attitude of sadness, grief, even despair. Daniel prayed wearing sackcloth, a manifestation of sorrow (Dan. 9:3); a repentant tax collector beat his breast, a sign of remorse, while praying (Luke 18:13); Hannah “wept bitterly” as she prayed (1 Sam. 1:9–11), as did David (Ps. 39:12); appalled by Israel’s defeat at Ai following Achan’s sin, Joshua and the elders of Israel put dust on their heads and tore their clothes when they sought the Lord in prayer (Josh. 7:6–7); after the devastating catastrophes that hit him “Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped” (Job 1:20); Moses (Deut. 9:18–19), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4), Anna (Luke 2:37), the leaders of the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1–3), and Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:23) fasted and prayed; Jesus, “in the days of His flesh, . . . offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety” (Heb. 5:7; cf. Luke 22:44); David exhorted the people, “Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us” (Ps. 62:8).

On the other hand, prayer can be offered with an attitude of joy. Paul wrote to the Philippians that he was “always offering prayer with joy

in my every prayer for you all” (Phil. 1:4); 1 Samuel 2:1 records that “Hannah prayed and said, ‘My heart exults in the Lord; my horn is exalted in the Lord, my mouth speaks boldly against my enemies, because I rejoice in Your salvation’”; David declared, “My mouth offers praises with joyful lips” (Ps. 63:5; cf. 71:23; 84:2; 92:4); Psalm 66:1 exhorts, “Shout joyfully to God, all the earth”; in Psalm 95:1–2 the psalmist exhorted, “O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord, let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms” (cf. 98:4–6; 100:1–2).

The petitions in the first half of this model for prayer focus on God’s glory, those in the second half on man’s need. Yet in reality the entire prayer is God-centered, since He glorifies Himself by providing for man’s needs. Prayer arises from the Word of God (cf. Dan. 9:2–3) and has as its ultimate goal the glory of God. It is not an attempt to change the will of God, still less does it attempt to manipulate Him to gain one’s greedy, selfish desires, as the “Health and Wealth” movement falsely teaches. True prayer puts God in His rightful place of sovereign authority and willingly, joyfully subordinates itself to His purposes. As Thomas Brooks noted, “Such prayers never reach the ear of God, nor delight the heart of God, nor shall ever be lodged in the bosom of God, that are not directed to the glory of God” (*Secret Key*, 235). Everything in Christ’s model prayer is in reality a rehearsal of what God has affirmed to be true, concerning both His person and His promises. Prayer seeks God’s glory and aligns itself with the promises He has made in Scripture.

All of the petitions affirm the supremacy of God. “Father” acknowledges Him as the source of all blessing; “hallowed be Your name” as sacred; “Your kingdom come” as sovereign; “Your will be done” as superior; “give us each day our daily bread” as supporter; “forgive us our sins” as savior, and “lead us not into temptation” as shelter.

This opening section of chapter 11 focuses on the importance of prayer. Verses 1–4 contain the Lord’s instruction on prayer, verses 5–8 reveal God’s eagerness to hear prayer, verses 9–10 teach the certainty that God will answer prayer, and verses 11–13 express God’s desire to give the best to those who pray. All of those rich truths will be the subject of the next several chapters of this volume.