

Community Church of Issaquah
January 29, 2023

Exactly How Are We Supposed to Pray?

Rev. Vincent Lachina

When I pastored a church in Kansas before moving to the Northwest, I had a very interesting congregational member. His name was Billy Ray and he lived on a farm just outside the city. Every Wednesday when we had our Prayer Meeting, I would ask if someone would like to offer a prayer for us. Immediately Billy Ray would jump to his feet and begin a long and very complicated prayer while the rest of us rolled our eyes and tried to look like we were in a worshipful mood. When I finally approached Billy Ray to ask if he would let other members have a chance to pray, his response was, “But Pastor Vincent, I’m the goodest.” (But definitely not the smartest.) The next Wednesday when I asked for someone to pray, there was total silence and all heads turned to look at Billy Ray.

Prayer has always been something that has been very rewarding for me. When I left the Catholic Church and became a Baptist at the age of 14, I wasn’t accustomed to people praying anything but what was written in a book. I recall a conversation I had with the pastor of the Baptist church where I first became a member. I asked him, “Dr. Price, how do people here learn to pray without reading it?” He replied, “We learn to have a conversation with God, just like talking on the telephone.” He explained, “You know when you call someone, you always say, ‘ Hello, Dr. Price, this is Vincent,’ and then you tell them what you want to say.” That’s exactly what prayer is.

Keep in mind that was in the late 50's and early 60's before smart phones came along to identify every caller each time the phone rings. Now we don't have to tell someone who is calling. They know even before they say "Hello" to us. In the past, there wasn't voicemail, so you knew that if a phone rang 5 or 6 times, no one was home and would not answer. All of this gives a whole new meaning to Dr. Price's definition of prayer. Yet there are similarities between then and now, and I think it worthwhile for us to pause today and think about this concept of prayer and how we are supposed to use it.

Basically, prayer is simply talking to God. There are many different kinds of prayer: public prayers like in church, private prayers like at home, memorized prayers, spontaneous prayers, silent prayers, written prayers, sung prayers, and so many more. All of them have the same concept at heart, a communal bonding between God and you. Strangely, the word prayer is from the Latin word 'precari' which means "to beg." That isn't what you and I actually think of prayer, I believe. Is it?

In today's Scripture passage, we encounter Jesus teaching his disciples how to pray, and his example prayer is one that has endured since he spoke it. In truth, it gives us the principles of how we are to pray, and I would like to share my take on that.

First, we acknowledge that we are engaging in a conversation with God. Jesus begins this prayer with a most interesting phrase, 'Our Father.' Here is the son of God addressing His Heavenly Father with a plural pronoun – our. This is significant because the message of Christ was always that we are all one family of the Creator. Beginning a conversation by recognizing that wonderful truth acknowledges our own belief in this God who dwells in heaven but whom all humankind can

know and follow when they choose. “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be they name,” was the beginning of Jesus’s prayer. Most of us don’t begin our prayers that way, though. We perhaps use the name God, or Lord, or Father or Creator or similar. But whatever name you use to begin your prayers, you acknowledge that you will be talking to your God.

Second, we recognize that it is God in whom we place our trust to do what He wills. When Jesus said, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” it’s the reality that God is in control and God is the one with the power to do whatever He decides. This is at times the most difficult part of prayer for many. For one to say that we must wait for God to decide what will be done and wonder if God’s will would be to grant us whatever we ask is very hard. Sometimes we ask ourselves, “What if God says no? Then what?” Yet we must trust that the God who loves us will make sure that his will is done.

Third, we must determine what kind of prayer we will offer. Let me share four that come to my mind, though I am sure there are more.

- Thanksgiving. I was told once that the best prayer ever was simply to say, “Thank you, Lord.” Many of our prayers are simply prayers of giving thanks to God for what He has done for us. When we stop to consider how blessed we are in so many ways, prayers of thanksgiving seem to be the first prayer we should offer up. Once as I got into an elevator where an older woman was already there, I smiled and asked her, “How are you today?” Her reply made me chuckle. She said, “Honey, every day above ground is a good day.” I think of that often as I pause to consider the simple blessings I have been given, and I am sure you often do

the same. When we offer prayers of thanksgiving for these blessings, we are much more aware of God's grace and love.

- Confession. When Jesus said, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," it leads us to a time when we have the need to ask for forgiveness. We all mess up, everyone one of us. That's never a secret. That's why we regret some of our actions especially when we failed to do the right thing. Confession is the act of admitting our guilt or our regrets or our confusion. We offer that prayer of confession to the God who wants to offer peace and comfort and help us make things right so that we can move on. Luke wrote in his gospel, "God have mercy on me, a sinner." And God does show mercy and grace to each of us when we ask.
- Requests. Perhaps the most frequent prayer I ever pray is, "God, help me." There are times when we need something, and we ask for help. Maybe we need something provided for us, or intervention or protection or one of a million other requests that we believe God can provide and give us something that we cannot give ourselves. Of course, sometimes we ask for things with the wrong motive, and that's why James wrote in his book, "When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." God doesn't just grant every wish, but He does take seriously all of our requests. In the Gospel of Luke, he records Jesus's prayer with these words, "Give us each day our daily bread." This is a strong reminder that we should focus on each day's need and not project into the future something that may or may not happen.
- Worship. Prayer is one of the most common ways we choose to worship God. The very word 'worship' means to 'ascribe worth.' In prayer, we give God credit for His good works. Worship reminds us that the reality of our world is that there is only one

God, and we are not him. Our prayers verify our own promise to give worth to God., to live as He has taught us.

With these in mind, how exactly are we supposed to pray? Are there times when you do not know what to pray? Or you don't know what to say, what words to use? That's the starting point for praying.

Acknowledge in your talk to God that you might not know what to say.

God doesn't need fancy words or flowery prayers. God wants you to talk to him and be with him with no pretense. Having acknowledged your presence of God in your life, begin an honest conversation.

Talking to God should come from your heart. Too often we get sidetracked in feeling like we might not know the right thing to say. The truth is there is not a right thing to say. There is only what you want to say. And there is not only one right way to pray. Just begin talking to God.

Start where you are. Are you struggling with something? Tell Him.

Are you feeling enormously blessed? Tell Him. Do you have a specific need? Ask Him. After you tell God where you are, your prayer can also include where you would like to be. Prayer invites God's presence into your life, so just be honest and start where you are. Understand this,

however, God already knows where you are. He wants you to realize it and talk to him about it. Do you want to spend prayer time thanking God for your life's blessings? Then make a prayer of thanksgiving. Do you have something you need to get off your chest? Then offer a prayer of confession. Do you have a need in your life or in someone else's?

Then make your prayer a time of requesting God's intervention. Or perhaps you are just sitting for a moment or two of peace and want to worship God perhaps by repeating a Scripture verse or singing or humming a hymn. Then offer a prayer of worship.

All of this advice is not to say that prayer can only be one variety. That is far from the message. Your prayers can be a mixture of parts, all of which will be the conversation you are having with God. Only you will know what the content of your prayer will be, but God is faithful to hear you and to answer in time. That's the beauty of our calling to pray. And do not ever struggle with trying to find the correct words to say in prayers. Do you know the most common word used in prayers, other than the name of God? Would you believe the word "amen." The Hebrew word amen means 'certainty,' but today is most often defined as 'so be it.'

One word of caution as you pray. A lesson I learned from our founding father Abraham. That lesson is this – we often try to bargain with God, but that does not often work. Abraham was engaged in direct prayer with God over a crisis. God had told Abraham that he was going to destroy five sinful cities in Canaan, including Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham began to bargain with God. What if there were 45 good people, would God spare the cities? God said yes. Well, what if there were 40 good people? God said yes. What about 30? God said yes. Then what about 20? Again, God said yes. And finally, what if there were 10 righteous people? God said yes, he would spare them if Abraham could find 10 good people. I think we know the end of that story. Abraham could not find even 10 righteous people and only one of the five cities was spared, Beta. We know that the only folks to make it out alive were Lot and his family, except for his wife who didn't listen to the instructions about not looking back and was turned to a pillar of salt. I also learned this lesson personally when I asked God to let me win the lottery and promised to be the biggest donor in the world. As you can see, that bargain didn't work either.

Prayer is not a means to change God's mind. But it can be and should be a time to persist in asking God's help. Often, we do that over and over again for some need in our life. Like the woman in Luke's account of the Lord's prayer who persisted in asking her neighbor for help until he gave in, we need to continue our prayers. Jesus's promise that accompanied his prayer is this: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."

So how are we supposed to pray? That is totally your choice. Your conversation with your God.

Let me ask you if you would to stand and pray with me the prayer Jesus taught his disciples and teaches us today.