

# Prayer

Matthew 6:5-15

9 January 2022 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

**Big Idea:** Prayer is the privilege of speaking to God, asking him to fulfil his promises.

**Big Question:** What is Christian prayer?

## Introduction

Bill and Jim are trying to find a series of abandoned railway tunnels that they've read about online.

The directions are a little bit vague, but they finally think that they've found the place in the middle of nowhere.

However, there's a sign on the gate which says, "No trespassing."

Jim looks at Bill, they both shrug their shoulders and decide to go through.

They start following a clear path which leads them around obstacles and further and further up the hill.

As they come around the corner, they find themselves face-to-face with a bull.

A big, angry bull with the biggest, sharpest horns you've ever seen.

It doesn't take them more than a moment to decide that they'd better turn around and bolt down the hill with the bull in hot pursuit.

As they run down the hill, the angry bull is gaining on them.

Bill shouts out to Jim that he'd better pray that they can make it back to the gate in time.

Jim replies that he doesn't know any prayers.

"I only know one prayer," says Bill.

Recognising that the pointy end of the bull is getting closer with each step, Jim gasps out that his friend better start praying then.

So, Bill calls out at the top of his lungs the only prayer he knows, "For what we are about to receive, Lord make us truly thankful."

Prayer is no joke though.

Some of us, like Jim and Bill, treated prayer as a means of last resort, our backup plan.

It's amazing how many people call out to the God they don't believe in when the chips are down.

Is that God's plan for prayer – as nothing more than a lifeline for when things go wrong?

The answer to that is a firm no!

Prayer is a vital part of a Christian's spiritual life.

## Outline

Over this summer, we're doing a short series on the five Ps of the Christian life.

At the end of the month we'll get back to our usual practice of exposing a passage, working our way through a book of the Bible.

So you might like to start reading through the book of James now to get familiar with it.

But there's also a place for thinking systematically about what the Bible says on a topic, so we're starting the year looking at some fundamental aspects of the Christian life.

They are:

- Persecution
- Proclamation
- Prayer
- People
- Praise

Last week we looked at proclamation – how God has given us the privilege of speaking to others about his plans and purposes centred on Christ.

This week, we'll be looking at prayer.

Prayer can seem like a very vague religious thing to do.

We're used to hearing politicians talk about sending their "thoughts and prayers" during times of crisis and we might wonder what that actually means?

Is Christian prayer nothing more than well-wishes and positive self-talk?

It's much more vital, thoughtful and deliberate than that.

Prayer is one of the most awesome privileges we have as Christians and yet it can be one of the hardest things for us to actually do.

The coldness of our hearts towards God and others often shows up in a lack of desire to pray.

Prayer is a spiritual battle where we fight against both the weakness of our own flesh and the arrows of the devil.

Yet if Jesus is our ultimate example of what it looks like to pray well, then we would be praying often.

Even the Son of God would go off – sometimes by himself and sometimes with others – to pray.

As I was preparing for this morning's message during the week, the first thing that I felt was conviction.

I think that it's a conviction many of us feel when we talk about prayer – a conviction about the weakness and inadequacy of my own prayer life that's driven me to my knees and cling to God in desperation.

But also a renewed conviction about the power and effectiveness of prayer.

If you feel the weight of both those things this morning, then I'd call that a win.

There's much more to be said about prayer than I can say in one short talk.

It's clear that prayer isn't a minor theme in the Bible – it's an undercurrent throughout the Scriptures.

Without needing to use preacher's exaggeration, it really is a topic that could fill a month of Sundays.

We see the important place of prayer in Paul telling Timothy of his desire that:

**1 Timothy 2:8** NIV11 <sup>8</sup> Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing.

To hopefully help this from being just a grab-bag of random thoughts, morning's talk is going to be built around three questions.

Those questions are:

- What is prayer?
- Who do we pray to?
- What can you pray for?

The big idea we're going to see is that **prayer is the privilege of speaking to God, asking him to fulfil his promises.**

## What is prayer?

Firstly, then, "What is prayer?"

Prayer is a clearly religious thing to do, but it looks very different in different religions.

Prayer is one of the five pillars of Islam and involves careful preparation and saying certain phrases while facing the right direction.

Muslims pray five times per day, with a special gathering for men every Friday and there are set times when they can't pray too.

Tibetan Buddhists use prayer wheels with mantras written on them.

They believe that spinning the wheel has much the same effect as saying the words themselves.

Christian prayer is simply speaking to God.

When we pray, we're talking to God.

The New City Catechism describes prayer like this in Question 38:

Q: What is prayer?

A: Prayer is pouring out our hearts to God in praise, petition, confession of sin, and thanksgiving.

Prayer is an important recognition that God is God and we are not.

We're dependent on God now and always will be.

As one person said, "Learned desperation is at the heart of a praying life."<sup>1</sup>

When life's easy and we aren't feeling like we or our idols are under attack, that's when we're least likely to pray because that's when we feel like we're in control.

Prayer is an expression of that I'm in control of nothing, but that I can talk to the one who's in control of everything.

Therefore, Christian prayer is less about changing God's mind and more about aligning our minds to the promises that God has already made.

As one pastor has said,

*"To fail to pray, then, is not to merely break some religious rule—it is a failure to treat God as God."<sup>2</sup>*

In some religions, prayer is a means of bending a god's will.

Saying the right combination of words over and over might be enough to achieve the outcome you desire.

We don't see any examples in the Bible of prayer being chanting the same words over and over again.

Christian prayer isn't just an incantation – say the right words in the right language so that the genie will do your bidding.

In fact, Jesus warned his disciples NOT to pray like that.

**Matthew 6:7–8** NIV11 <sup>7</sup> And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

There's are lots of ways that we can speak to God, but Christian prayers communicate meaningful thoughts to God.

We don't have to follow any particular words or format though; we can have our prayers be free range.

It's good to be constantly talking to God and that can be a good indicator of godliness, a "personal attitude toward God that results in actions that are pleasing to God."<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, that doesn't mean that the discipline of an index system or an app like Prayer Mate can't help us to focus.

When we lead prayer in the church, we want it to be clear, helpful and not just full of meaningless Christian-sounding waffle, so I think there's value in thoughtfully scripting those prayers to lead people well.

All of our prayers don't even have to be spoken out loud though

God can't hear any better when we speak to him out loud than when we form the words in our heads.

You don't even need to be the one who's coming up with the words.

Our prayers are no less effective when we participate by echoing someone else's words in our own heart and mind, just like we do during Sunday or family worship, when we're led in prayer.

If anything though, I've been challenged that the church has lost the benefit of praying out aloud.

Actually, it can feel a bit weird to be talking out loud to someone who's not standing there in front of us and so we might feel more comfortable praying silently.

I haven't chased the evidence down for myself, but I'm told that that people typically didn't pray silently until after the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps one of the reasons that Jesus says to "go into your room, close the door and pray" in Matthew 6:6 isn't just so that you don't get distracted, but it could also be so that you can't be heard which makes more sense of what Jesus says about God seeing what happens in secret.

In fact, David Powlison suggests that praying out loud might help you from getting distracted.

*"We should more properly have a "noisy time." By talking out loud we live the reality that we are talking with another person, not simply talking to ourselves inside our own heads."<sup>5</sup>*

I gave it a crack this week to test it out and I think he might be right.

Who else finds that their mind tends to wander when you pray?

I find one of the biggest challenges is stopping other thoughts and tasks – often good ones – from getting in the way of prayer.

You're praying when all of a sudden you remember that you need to send a text message or that you need to add something to your to-do list.

Perhaps one of the things that would help those of us who experience this to pray well is to make time and space at a DIFFERENT time to be mindfully present and consciously think through these things rather than use prayer as a pseudo-planning time.

Instead, making prayer a priority like Martin Luther wrote:

*“Guard yourself carefully against those false, deluding ideas which tell you, “Wait a little while. I will pray in an hour; first I must attend to this or that.” Such thoughts get you away from prayer into other affairs which so hold your attention and involve you that nothing comes of prayer for that day.”*

What is prayer?

Prayer is speaking to God.

## Who do we pray to?

This second question is really important because who you pray to really matters.

Prayer is relational; allowing us to connect with God so our relationship will be aligned with him.

Christian prayer isn't just an expression of vain and meaningless hopes shot up into the air to anyone who might happen to be out there.

That's basically what Bill's prayer was in my opening illustration.

And our prayers aren't directed towards a place, but a particular being, namely the living, Creator God.

When we're praying to the God of the Bible, who is it that we're praying to?

We need to remember his character because that's going to shape the way we pray.

We're not talking to someone who's weak and unable or even to a unpredictable maniac, but to the all-powerful God who can do anything that conforms to his character.

We're praying to the God who made the world and rules over it, the Master in heaven.

We pray to the God who is mighty and perhaps most importantly, holy.

We also pray to the God who is good and wants good things for us.

We pray to the God who we can call Father.

It's striking how many times Jesus refers to God as father when he's talking about prayer in Matthew 6.

Twice in verse six, again in verse eight and he starts his model prayer using the title in verse nine.

And don't think God's just Jesus' father because Jesus refers to him as YOUR father the first three times and then almost unbelievably as OUR father on the last one.

When God saves us from our sin, he doesn't just forgive us but he also adopts us into his family.

He turns around rebellious human beings and welcomes us as his children.

Not just as a foster father for a short period of time, but we're made a ridgy didge part of the family.

And so when we pray, we pray to the God who is our father.

Our Father is a God who isn't our equal, but far exceeds us in goodness, kindness, generosity and faithfulness.

In Matthew 7, Jesus describes what it's like to be able to ask things of God as a father.

As a father, he cares for his kids and wants to give us good things.

God isn't going to deny our needs and he's not going to give us bad stuff to be mean.

**Matthew 7:9–11** NIV11 <sup>9</sup> “Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup> Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? <sup>11</sup> If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

God invites us to pray to him since it brings him glory and helps us too.

As a father, God wants to give us what we ask for.

And he doesn't get upset when we ask for the wrong things either.

Good parents want to be able to say 'yes' to their children and generally only say 'no' when there's a good reason.

Perhaps you've experienced that as a parent or you've experienced it as a child.

If that really is true, you might be wondering why God would sometimes say “no” then.

We don't always know the specific reasons why God doesn't answer our prayers.

While we can guess, we mightn't always be right.

What we can be sure of is that God delights to give us good stuff.

God says 'no' for the same reason a good parent does.

The only reason a good parent says 'no' is because they know something better.

God won't say 'no' unless he knows that what we need is something better.

Tim Keller says,

*“God will only give you what you would have asked for if you knew everything he knows.”*

Some of us might struggle to pray because we don't feel like we're good enough for God to listen to us.

If that's how you feel, you're half right.

Based on your own merit, your own righteousness, your own goodness, you're not good enough to pray to God, but then neither am I or anyone else who's been alive.

It's wise to recognise that you and God aren't good.

Speaking to God in prayer is a good time to apologise for our sin and rebellion from God.

How can holy people ever pray to a holy God?

Through our Lord, Jesus Christ.

It's because he's died for us and made us right with God that we can approach God with confidence in prayer.

That Jesus is the one interceding for you is the reason that the writer to the Hebrews says:

**Hebrews 4:16** NIV11 <sup>16</sup> Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Remember who you're praying to!

Pray and pray even when you don't feel like it because you need it.

You're praying to the God who is both good and able.

## **What can you pray for?**

I think this question really captures what most of us actually believe about prayer.

It's a really big question.

The big summary answer that I would give is that we pray for everyone, everywhere about everything!

God gives us a lot of latitude when we pray.

When we think about the things that we COULD pray for, the list is going to be really, really long.

Don't worry, I'm not going to talk about everything you could pray for.

Hopefully, this will give us some ideas about what we can pray for.

For many of us, they're probably not new ideas, but they're some things that we need to be reminded of.

So, let's address the big one first – are there any limits?

No, there aren't any limits on what you can pray for, but don't expect that God will give you everything you might ask for.

Janis Joplin asked the Lord to buy her a Mercedes-Benz and a colour TV.

I not sure if he delivered.

If you take Jesus' words in Matthew 21:22 – “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer” – as a guarantee that you'll get whatever you ask for, then you misunderstand prayer.

When God tells us that he'll give us whatever we pray for, it's not just as good as a blank cheque to fulfil our greatest personal desires and whims.

The good thing is that God doesn't get upset when we ask for the same thing over and over.

I'll admit to getting a little cranky when I'm asked for the 500<sup>th</sup> time if we can go to the park yet.

If you trace the topic of prayer through from the beginning of the Bible to the end, you'll find that prayer is asking God to fulfil his promises in the name of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

When we look at Jesus' model prayer, that's what we see too.

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today 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 the evil one.

They're all requests for God to deliver on the promises that he's made.

Often our prayers are far too limited in their scope.

What we should pray for should be controlled by the gospel.

The focus of our prayers will be God's work in us and God's work in the lives of others.

There are five things in the New Testament that God will definitely answer: a prayer for forgiveness, to know God better, for wisdom, for strength to love and live for God, and for the spread of the gospel.<sup>7</sup>

Prayer is also a great opportunity to give thanks to God for what he's done in delivering on these promises.

When it comes to asking, there's what we might call maintenance prayer and frontline prayers.

Both are equally as important.

When we look at the prayers in the Bible, we see that many of them are extraordinarily ordinary or what we might call maintenance prayer.

Instead of just praying that our kids might be safe and they'd get good grades or even have great friends, we can pray for their character.

That they would come to know Jesus and that they would grow in their love and knowledge of Jesus.

Pray like Paul did in Philippians 1, asking that they would abound in love more and more.

When we pray as a home group or a family, it sometimes feels like we don't really have anything to pray for.

The awkward silence can be a little frustrating because it's not as though praying is unexpected.

There are literally millions of things we could pray for, but we struggle to think of stuff.

I reckon there's probably lots of reasons for that, but one of them is that we feel like we've got to pray for something spectacular and unusual.

Pray for the extraordinarily regular.

Pray for your family – both your immediate family and your extended family.

And pray regularly for this ordinary godliness in your church family too.

You only need to look at the person sitting in your seat or the bloke behind the pulpit to know that we need to be praying regularly for holiness, unity, boldness, protection and growth.

Pray for the workers to share the good news about Jesus.

That means asking that God would raise up gospel workers for both here and for overseas.

Then faithfully praying when they're gone.

In our family, we have a different family we pray for each night of the week.

It also means praying for each and every one of us, that we might be sensitively bold in talking about Jesus.

**Luke 10:2** NIV11 <sup>2</sup> He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.

Then there are more frontline prayers.

The kind of urgent, time-specific prayers.

Christians pray for those who are sick and struggling.

Every now and again, you come across someone who says that a study has proved that prayer does or doesn't work.

I had a poke around – admittedly on the internet – and it seems to be a mixed bag when it comes to double-blind studies about whether prayer produces better health outcomes.

Which, as a Christian, doesn't surprise me one bit.

We pray for the sick knowing that God may or may not heal someone using supernatural means (there's plenty of that in Scripture) or ordinary means like the healing processes of the body as well as the intervention of skilled people.

When Christians pray for those who're sick, we're praying for much more than just better health outcomes.

We pray for what they might learn through the trial they're going through – they would grow in their trust of Jesus.

That the person who's sick might be humbled and might deal with their sin because Scripture makes clear that physical and spiritual illness can sometimes be related.

If you want to get good at praying, listen to others and learn from them.

You can learn to pray from reading the prayers of spiritual giants like Luther, Calvin or books like *The Valley of Vision* or the Duguids' *Prone to Wander*.

And don't forget to learn from the master of prayer, Jesus himself, who gave his disciples a model prayer in Matthew 6.

His prayer comes with a warning, I think, in the verses before that we're not to just meaninglessly recite it off though.

You can even learn from other people how to use that model prayer well. So meta.

Luther's got a great book called *A Simple Way to Pray* that he wrote for his barber, of all people.

He shows you how he prayed through the Lord's Prayer as well as through the Ten Commandments.

In my experience, people seems to fall roughly into two categories.

Let's call them the Bible People and the Prayer People.

Bible People tend to spend most of their time on reading the Bible.

And you guessed it, Prayer People tend to spend most of their devotional time praying.

Both are good and we need both.

In fact, Bible People must be Prayer People because the Bible is full of people who spend time praying, including Jesus himself.

And Prayer People need to be Bible People too because our prayers are informed by Scripture.

The Lord speaks to us in His Word, and we respond by speaking to Him our thanks and making known our requests.

Martin Luther talks about meditating on the Word for prayer and the best prayers are those that naturally echo the thoughts and patterns of Scripture.

What can you pray for?

Anything, but let your prayers be informed by Scripture so that we might ask God to deliver on his promises.

## Conclusion

Every time I preach on prayer, I feel deeply my own inadequacy in this area.

It feels like a slow dawning of realisation that it's an area that I want to grow in.

John Stott said it was the greatest struggle in his Christian life and when interviewed about what he could've done better in his pastoral ministry, Tim Keller once replied, "I didn't pray enough. There's no doubt about that."

I hope and expect that many of you do it better than I do.

One final thought as we close, though, is that I think that the phrase "Can I pray for you?" are some of the most underused words we have.

And not just because we so often fail to follow through on them, but that's another matter.

Those words are a unique and powerful way into spiritual conversations.

In my experience, I think we as Christians have fallen out of the habit of asking to pray for others.

I'm trying to get into the routine of ending more conversations by suggesting that we pray then and there.

It is a great encouragement to Christians when we pray for them.

And it's a great way of bringing up spiritual things with those who aren't yet Christians.

My mechanic is a Christian and every time I drop-off or pick up a care I have to allow at least half an hour while I'm blessed with hearing how the Lord's been at work in his life.

When they drop off their car, people often share with him a struggle that they're going through.

He often asks if he can put his hand on them – even big, burly, rough guys – and pray for them.

People tend to be surprised, but it's rare for them to say, "No".

Praying for someone doesn't mean that you've shared the powerful gospel that we need for salvation, like we looked at last week, but it does open a door.

It expresses that you think prayer makes a difference because you've got a God you can talk to, a God who cares and loves them, a God who delights for you to bring your requests before him.

We've got an amazing God who invites us to pray.

Make use of the privilege of being a child of the king.

We have the privilege of speaking to the God who's good and able.

So ask him to fulfil his promises.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul E. Miller, *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2009), 114.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Keller

<sup>3</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Practice of Godliness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Justin Taylor, 'Hearing, Praying, and Speaking the Word', The Gospel Coalition, accessed 8 January 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/hearing-praying-and-speaking-word/>.

<sup>5</sup> Justin Taylor, 'Should We Really Call It a "Quiet" Time?', The Gospel Coalition, accessed 8 January 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/should-we-really-call-it-quiet-time>.

<sup>6</sup> John G. Millar, *Calling on the Name of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Prayer*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 38 (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Millar, 239.

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Matthew 6:5-15

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**Big Question:** What is Christian prayer?

## Discussion Questions

1. How is Christian prayer similar and different to prayer in other religions?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of preparing your prayers?
3. List some things that help you stay focused when you pray.
4. How does the character of the God we pray to change the way we pray?
5. Why does God sometimes not answer our prayers?
6. Is there anything that Christians can't pray for?
7. What does it mean to ask that God would fulfil his promises?
8. How do you think asking, "Can I pray for you?" might help both others and yourself?