

CHAPTER 5

“HOW TO—AND NOT TO—PRAY” • CAUTIONS ALONG THE WAY

FROM: JERRY

TO: GOD

SUBJECT: ARE THERE RIGHT AND WRONG WAYS TO TALK TO YOU?

“Thanks, God! Those model prayers really helped! But all those people lived a long time ago, and a lot of the prayers I hear in church or on TV are different from the way I pray. Are there right and wrong ways to talk to you?”

FROM: GOD

TO: JERRY

CC: THE CHURCH

SUBJECT: ARE THERE SOME SPECIAL RIGHT AND WRONG WAYS TO TALK TO YOU?

“Jerry—there’s not really a right or wrong way, but there are some things to keep in mind so you aren’t wasting your time or mine! Be sure to remember that prayer from your heart is the most pleasing prayer. I care little for grandly constructed prayers crafted with fancy speech. Keep it simple, be specific, and tell me what’s on your heart.”

Principle: While there is no set formula for prayer, there are some ways people pray which are either inappropriate and/or misunderstood. Be sure you take advantage of every acceptable way to talk to God without wasting either His time—OR yours.

ILLUSTRATION

In prayer, the posture of the *heart* is more important than the posture of your body. It is your *attitude* before your Father that takes precedent over where or how you pray. The story is told of a young woman, many years ago, who requested prayer for her gravely-ill mother. Though few who were asked to pray had ever met this young girl, they were told she was a solid Christian, and that her favorite spiritual activity was to take prayer requests for others, and pray her heart out before God. It was said that she appeared to have a ‘special connection’ with God, and that He seemed to have an ear for her requests. Now, it was her time to request prayer from others. God answered those prayer requests. Her mother survived the illness, and lived many more years.

Many of those who had answered the girl’s request for prayer desired to meet this wonderful girl they had heard so much about, and who possessed this ‘remarkable’ access to God’s throne. To the inquirers’ great surprise, the girl was discovered to be a resident of a healthcare facility where she lived in a wheelchair—and was both a quadriplegic and mute. The girl could neither walk nor speak, yet ably accessed her Father in prayer. Although she could never kneel, nor verbally plead her requests, it did not matter to God. It was the attitude of her *heart*—not the impressiveness of her *vocabulary*—which touched the Master.

PRAYER QUOTE

“Prayer is not a matter of getting what we want the most. Prayer is a matter of giving ourselves to God and learning His laws, so that He can do through us what He wants.”

—Agnes Sanford

“Prayer which starts on its knees but never walks on its feet is ritualism; to merely act alone—without consulting God—is paganism. Seek service on your face, and hand it out in kindness.”

—Unknown

THE SIMPLICITY OF PRAYER

Have you ever heard someone pray a great ‘swelling’ prayer in King James English (cp. Matthew 6:5-7)? Did you think God must have heard them because of this? God may have heard them, but not because of the ‘greatness’ of the prayer. God wants you to come to Him in *simplicity* and *honesty*. He does not require a certain length to your prayers (although, see Matthew 26:40). English poet Philip James Bailey has well-said: “Prayer is the spirit speaking truth—to Truth”. God promises not to rebuke you (cp. James 1:5). For example, Jonah was upset with God, and told Him so (Jonah 4:1-11). God still listened to the prophet. Consider King Asa’s prayer (II Chronicles 14:11-15). It was *simple*, *direct*, *to the point*, *in faith*, and *answered!* When you pray, simple and honest is more important than long and ‘flowery’. It’s the depth of your prayer that matters to God—not the length.

THE SPECIFICITY OF PRAYER

“God, bless the world and all the people in it.” Some prayers are so vague that the one praying might never know if their requests were answered! God knows your needs even before you ask (Isaiah 65:24; cp. Daniel 9:20-23). You do not need to impress Him with ‘blanket’ requests—hoping that at least some things in them will be answered. When I was younger, I used to pray ‘blanket prayers’ because I did not want either myself or God to be disappointed if He couldn’t answer my specific requests! I just didn’t understand enough about God. If something is big enough to concern me, it is important enough to concern God. But *blanket* prayers don’t allow for *specific* praise! James says our prayers are to be *effectual*; that means *specific* (James 5:16). Never think anything is too big or too small for God to answer. After all, what could be ‘big’ to God? Be as specific in your prayers as Jesus was (Matthew 6:11; cp. James 4:2), and glorify God—whatever His answer! When you are specific in your prayers, you can glorify Him for *specific* answers to *specific* requests.

THE STRENGTH AND UNITY OF PRAYER

While one type of prayer may not be more important than another to God, the prayer of *unity*—believers praying with other believers—is certainly a powerful type of prayer. Exactly *why* this is so is not clear, but Jesus emphasized the practice in Matthew 18:19-20. For a certainty, praying in unity when you are gathered *with* other believers inspires the prayer life of all present. Pray, and *agree* in prayer, with fellow Christians. ‘Agree’ in this passage refers to a ‘symphony’, which gives us a better picture of what God is saying. Believers uniting in prayer are called ‘prayer chains’, ‘prayer warriors’, or ‘prayer groups’. It could just be that there is a ‘multiplication factor’ in the added prayer of a partner (cp. Deuteronomy 32:30), or in the collective prayers of a nation (II Chronicles 7:14). Perhaps you do not like to pray aloud with others. Try praying aloud with someone over the phone, or perhaps starting a prayer group on *Zoom*.

And while we’re discussing powerful prayers, although it cannot be proved by Scripture, it is my personal opinion that the prayers of a child are especially touching to God’s heart (cp. Matthew 18:10). Perhaps it is because these little ones have more recently been in His presence. Finally, I firmly believe that God honors the faith in prayers which are offered even *more* fervently as His answer appears increasingly *certain*. To offer such eliminates presumption and stimulates praise! (See Chapter 10.)

PRAYER IS NOT JUST AN EMERGENCY EXIT

Corrie ten Boom, survivor of the Holocaust, once said “Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?” We’ve all seen the characters on TV, and in movies, who never confront the gates of Heaven until something bad happens. And then, they approach God asking the ‘great favor’, as if He were a genie waiting with His magic bottle of favors. But prayer should be your first thought—not your last resort (cp. Psalm 107:27-28)—or an excuse for laziness. To see the God of the universe in this fashion in an insult of the highest proportion. While God delights in meeting our needs, He is not to be kept in some ‘closet’ until needed. He is your heavenly Father upon whom you depend for your every breath (cp. Acts 17:28). See Him as such. Talk to Him as such.

PRAYER IS NOT A FORMULA

Prayer is not a mantra to be recited to God. Personally, I don't think much of praying others' written prayers either. They are little more than liturgical 'formula', and there is no set 'formula' which God requires. Mechanical prayers mean nothing to God. "God is great, God is good..." is a fine model for children, but not for you. Having said that, as long as your prayer is *sincere*, directed toward *God's* glory (Daniel 9:1-19), grounded in *faith*, and wrapped in *trust*—God will hear you (cp. Chapter 12). In teaching young people what to pray for, I suggest a simple but effective memory tool. I have them spread out and look at the five fingers of one hand. The *pointing* finger reminds them to pray for those who point the way, such as teachers, youth ministers, etc. The *tallest* finger reminds them to pray for those in high positions in the world, such as presidents and other leaders (1 Timothy 2:1-3; 1 Peter 2:17). The *weakest* finger reminds them to pray for those who are ill, or those—such as little children and pets—who are *unable* to pray. The *little* finger is the most distant, and reminds them to pray for those who are traveling, far away, or are on the missionary fields. The *thumb* is for those closest to them, such as family and friends. All five fingers form a fist. This reminds them to pray for those who are enemies—to them, to their family, or to their country (cp. Matthew 5:44). I then open the fist, and the hand becomes an *offering* hand, reminding them to always try to find a way to be the answer to their prayers. However you pray, know that prayer is *personal*, and the purpose is that *God* be glorified.

PRAYER IS NOT EMPTY REPETITION

Prayer to your Father is not a monologue. Prayer is a conversation. Have you ever heard prayers where the same requests were made over and over and over—as if God might have missed them at the first mention? Jesus chastised the Pharisees for such (Matthew 6:7). Someone has said: "Painted prayers are lifeless, and frozen prayers never rise". Take care that your mind doesn't drift as you pray, and that your prayer doesn't become a broken record (Job 35:13). Every prayer should be fresh, from a trusting heart, and never forced or routine. God surely frowns upon those who have more to say in public prayers than in private ones.

PRAYER IS NOT IN UNKNOWN TONGUES

For many years I was taught that I needed to learn a 'prayer language', based on 1 Corinthians 14:14-16. Eventually, I thought I received this 'gift'—and was able to pray in an 'unknown tongue'—yet having no idea what I was saying. I began to wonder, though: if God heard this language in a more special way than He heard my 'regular' prayers, how would ever He hear the prayers of deaf-mutes at all? God understands *all* languages (cp. Acts 2:8). Better still, it's your *heart*—not your *lips*—that He listens to. That's why we can sometimes pray silently (cp. 1 Samuel 1:13), or still pray when we simply don't know what to say (Romans 8:26). The 'language' of your heart is the *real* prayer language.

PRAYER IS NOT MEASURED BY LENGTH

It is more important how *often* you pray than how *long* your prayers are. The *shortest* prayer in the Bible saved a drowning man! Peter's prayer was only three words (Matthew 14:30; cp. Matthew 8:25; 9:27), and Jesus answered (cp. Luke 18:13)! The second shortest—and *last* prayer in Scripture—is only about five words (Revelation 22:20). Tell God what's on your heart, and move on. He's more concerned with your needs than you might think. (See *Introduction*.)

PRAYER DOES NOT LOOK FOR A SIGN

The story is told of a man who was debating on whether he should attend a local church. He drove into the parking lot and reasoned with himself that if God wanted him to attend, He would provide a parking spot near the door. Later someone asked the man if God complied with his request. "Oh yes," he said. "On my thirteenth trip around the parking lot". Sometimes we really want 'proof' that God has heard us, and will answer our prayers. It's just human nature. In the Old Testament, Gideon wanted such proof, and put out a fleece of wool, asking God to show—through the dew upon

the fleece—that He would answer Gideon’s prayer. God answered. Based on this example, I remember being told that I should ‘put out my fleece’ when I prayed, and *test* God to show me a sign that He was going to answer. Because Gideon put out a fleece however, is not a reason to do the same, and we are not to do this today (II Corinthians 5:7) any more than since Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, I need to be. How much better to *trust* God through faith than to require a sign (cp. John 20:29)? All too often, faith looking for a sign is nothing more than doubt looking for proof. Remember, all Scripture is *for* us, not all Scripture *is* to us (see Chapter 3).

PRAYER IS NOT PUTTING GOD TO THE TEST

Despite some teaching to the contrary, we should *never* attempt to control God, as we would a puppet, through ritual and self-will. We do not tell the holy, righteous, God of the universe and eternity *what* He must do, and how He *must* answer our prayers. Having authority to talk to the King does not mean we have the authority to command Him to answer. Neither is God *obligated* to give us what we ‘claim’ in faith. We must never put God in a box. The Hebrews ‘tested’ God (Hebrews 3:9) this way when they came out of Egypt. God had made it clear to them that they were His chosen people, and that He would care for them. However, they wearied of His ways. They tired of His manna, and complained when He did not furnish water as easily as they anticipated (cp. Exodus 15:22; 16:1-4). And so they complained. ‘Murmuring’ (or ‘grumbling’) is what they did. They *tested* God by holding Him to His promises and faithfulness, while complaining because *their* desires—*their* timing—did not align with God’s plan. This made God very, very angry. Satan tested Christ to *presume* upon His Father in the wilderness, and Jesus warned him that such was *never* to be done (Mt. 4:5-7). To *demand* for ourselves something we think should be ours, to *murmur* because God says ‘no’ to our requests, to *complain* because God seems to not be doing things *our* way, is to put ourselves—and our will—ahead of God’s ultimate plan. *That* is presumption (Chapter 10). *That* is asking ‘amiss’ (James 4:2-3).

PRAYER: BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU ASK FOR

So, are there things we really should *not* ask for? Apparently, yes. King Hezekiah became ill, and it was time for him to die. He begged God to lengthen his life (Isaiah 38:1-5). God did, and Hezekiah had a son, Manasseh. Manasseh grew up to become one of the worst kings in Israel’s history (II Kings 23:26). In like manner, the Hebrews who escaped Egypt at the exodus tired of God’s manna as food, and begged for meat. God answered their request, but it ‘brought leanness to their souls’ (Psalm 106:15). Sometimes we pray *unwisely* and God gives us the desires of our heart. Later, we learn submission to God the hard way. Be careful what you ask God for. It is better to ask for what you know *is* His will (John 7:17; James 4:15) than to beg for what you’re *not sure* is. Study His Word, and trust His will. He knows what’s best for you. If it’s to God’s glory, you can be sure it’s fine.

My Blog!

Prayer is a simple, but powerful thing! God doesn’t want showy or repetitious prayers. He doesn’t mind if we pray about the same things daily, but we need to remember to focus on what we’re praying for, not just pray using empty repetition, a formula, or flowery phrases. We should talk to God with our minds and hearts, not with fancy or formulaic speech. And we should evaluate and consider what it is we’re asking for, and why we need it.

Heavenly Homework!

4me2cnsdr.now—

- Do you try not to let God know when you’re upset?
- Why might the prayers of a child be so tender to the heart of God?

- What's the difference between a *childlike* prayer and a *childish* prayer?
 - What are some childish, or 'formula,' prayers you need to correct today?
 - Do you find yourself repeating the same 'formula' in your prayers? How can you change this?
 - Why do you think some people only call on God when they need something?
 - How do you go about remembering what you want to pray for?
 - How can you know what you should—and possibly *shouldn't*—ask God for?
 - What, in faith, are you *totally* trusting God for at this point in your life?
 - Are there some things you have been trying to talk God into?
 - Why do so many people seek miracles and signs from God?
 - What does it mean to 'put God to a test'?
 - Why does a prayer's length mean little to God?
- To do—*
- ✓ When you pray, try telling God how you *really* feel.
 - ✓ Try praying without saying a word—let your heart speak to God.

- ✓ Try praying *with* others. Remember, you do not need to impress them or God with your prayers. (If you have difficulty praying aloud with someone, try praying with him or her over the phone.)
- ✓ Go to the following link and read some great 'answered prayer' stories: <http://epistle.us/answeredprayer.html>
- ✓ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem (Psalm 122:6).
- ✓ Pray for America (II Chronicles 7:14).

Text message summary:

Prayer is personal communion with God. He hears—and enjoys hearing—our real thoughts and feelings, and is not impressed with wordy prayers, constructed speeches, or mindless rote formulas.

PRAYER JOURNAL

PRAY SIMPLE

Reread the prayers mentioned in the last chapter. What makes these prayers *great*?

How do these prayers differ from *your* prayers? How are they *similar*?

Why do some people think long flowery prayers are important?

Why is it wrong or not wrong to be *angry* with God? How do you *know*?

PRAY SPECIFIC

Why are some people afraid to ask *specific* requests?

“Give us this day our daily bread.” (Matthew 6:1)

Can some prayers be *too* specific? How?

Can anything be too *big* or too *small* to pray about? Why do you say this?

In what ways have you been too general in your prayers, and how will you become more *specific*?

PRAY STRONG

Read Deuteronomy 32:30. Why do you think there is *strength* in praying *together*?

At what times do/could you pray in unity with someone else? Who would they be?

Do you think God requires you to be actually *present* with those you are uniting in prayer with? Why? Why not?

Read Matthew 18:6-14. Why do you think a *child's* prayers might be special to God? Explain.

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Why do some people not like to pray, or pray *aloud*?

Do you think God hears *written* prayers? Explain.

Do you think God hears prayers from a *recording* that we pray along 'with'? Why? Why not?

PRAY SINCERE

How do *you* remember what to pray for?

Who are the 3 people that come to mind right now that you would like to include on your prayer list? Why did you choose these?

What's the difference between a *childlike* prayer and a *childish* one?

Read Hebrews 6:1. Why should adults no longer pray as children?

What is your opinion on praying prayers written by *others*, because they 'reflect your thoughts', and 'say my thoughts better than me'? Are they *genuine* prayers to God? Why? Why not?

PRAY CONCENTRATING

"*Painted prayers are lifeless, and frozen prayers never rise.*"
What does this statement mean?

“And when you pray, pray not with empty repetition as the heathen do.”
(Matthew 6:7)

What could you do to keep your prayers from sounding like a broken record?

Why do you think God seems so *displeased* with formula prayers?

PRAY WITH UNDERSTANDING

What is Paul referring to in I Corinthians 14:14-16?

What were some *problems* the Corinthians were experiencing?

How does a deaf-mute reach God? What can you learn from this?

Is prayer more effective in one language as opposed to another?

Someone has said: “*Your thoughts are merely prayers in formation. Sometimes words can get in the way. Try praying without saying a word.*” What are your thoughts on ‘silent’ Prayer (cp. I Samuel 1:13)? Explain.

Why do some people feel praying in an unknown tongue is important?

PRAY AND MOVE ON

Why is *length* of prayer less important than the *quality* of prayer? Read through the 8 prayers in the previous chapter. What is the average amount of time it takes you? What can you learn from this in *your* prayer life?

PRAY TRUSTING

“Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass.” (Psalm 37:5)

Is it OK to ask God for a sign that He will answer prayer? Why? Why not? Explain.

How could looking for a sign actually harm your prayer life?

PRAY SURRENDERING

“It’s OK to demand that God answer your prayer when you know it’s His will according to the Scripture.” Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement.

How could the ‘name it and claim it’ philosophy actually paint a negative picture of God to the world?

Is it always God’s will to heal? How do you know? Explain.

“God healed them by taking them to heaven.” How would you respond to this response after the death of someone you prayed for?

PRAY CAREFULLY

How do you know when to stop praying for that which hasn’t been answered?

Look at Proverbs 30:5-9. What can you take from these verses that might improve your understanding of God and your prayer life?

What do you think God is trying to *teach* you when He gives you what you ask for even though it might not be His *perfect will*?

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Read Psalm 122:6. Why do you think praying for Jerusalem important? Explain.

When did God ever give you something you *thought* you needed but didn't? Explain.

My Personalized Prayer Journal

The 3 most important things I learned about God, God's Word, or prayer in this chapter are:

“Dear Lord: To glorify you, edify others, and strengthen my prayer life, I am going to take the things I learned in this chapter and put them to use in the following ways this very week: