

How Do I Pray?

Luke 11:1-13

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Prayer is the soul's sincere desire
Uttered or unexpressed
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast

In the hymn *Prayer is the Soul's Sincere Desire*, James Montgomery gives some beautiful descriptions of what prayer is.

Prayer is the Christian's vital breath
The Christian's native air
His watchword at the gates of death
He enters heaven with prayer

Prayer is the contrite sinner's voice
Returning from his ways
While angels in their songs rejoice
And say "*behold he prays*"

O Thou by whom we come to God
The Life the Truth the Way
The path of prayer Thyself hast trod
Lord teach us how to pray

The Companion to (our Presbyterian) *Book of Common Worship* says, "Within each one of us, a human impulse to pray seems to reside. As (John) Calvin said, 'Genuine and earnest prayer proceeds first from a sense of our need and, next, from faith in the promises of God.'

For the Christian, then, prayer is a means of grace as well as a result of it. Prayer is not merely an expression of established faith; it is also the food that nourishes faith, giving it strength and energy. By the moving of the Holy Spirit, prayer brings us to new life in the fullness of Jesus Christ. ."¹

In other words, it is in our God-created, human nature to *want* and *need* to pray. And while we may pray because we are thankful for the grace God has given us, we also find that prayer is a means ... a channel ... of receiving and experiencing God's grace.

We know from the Gospels that Christ prayed. We read his Priestly Prayer in John 17, where Jesus prayed for his disciples and all who would believe in, and follow him. We read of Jesus praying a prayer of grief and despair in the garden of Gethsemane in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

And Jesus gave us a good model for prayer as he taught what we know as the Lord's Prayer. "When you pray say this," Jesus said,

"Father, hallowed be Your name" The word hallowed means holy ... Father, you are the Holy one. You are to be revered, honored because of this hallowedness. We worship and adore you because of who You are.

Yet there is something so personal and intimate in this phrase. While we are lifting high the honor and praise of Almighty, Holy God, we are also privileged to say *Father* ... or in Arabic ... *Abba*, which is like saying "Daddy" in English. Claire Cloninger, in her book *Dear Abba*, writes:

Jesus spent His whole ministry trying to get his followers to know the God he called "Abba." His little roadside "theology courses" painted God not as some far-off, inaccessible deity, but as a Shepherd who searched tirelessly for a lost sheep, as a loving Dad who waited with forgiveness on his lips to welcome home a wayward child. These stories are simple but powerful lessons that call us into the waiting arms of a great mercy.

In fact, the whole redemptive mission of Jesus might be viewed as making a way for us to come into his Abba's presence with childlike confidence. He was, in a sense, placing the small hand of humanity in the great, kind hand of its Creator and saying, "Child, come, and know your Father."iii

We pray because we need to be close to the Father.

It took me a long time to understand just how important one particular little sentence in the Lord's Prayer is: *"Thy will be done"*

Phillip Keller wrote: "God's will carries within it all that has been set in motion for our welfare and benefit."iii

Can you really imagine that anything we should desire or think we need that would be outside of God's will would be better than God's perfect will for us? When we think about it, if we did not ask for anything except for God's will to be done in every situation, we would be asking for the best possible answer.

Yet, at the same time, we believe that God wants us to pour out our concerns, our fears, our needs to him in prayer. Jesus said, 'Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, you ... who are sinners ... know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father ... who is all wise ... give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

Ah ... there is a clue as to something important for us to ask for. That we might know the presence of the Holy Spirit more and more in order to know God's will for us more and more.

Haven't you found that just going to God with something that is causing you great worry or heartache ... just talking to Him and asking Him to work it out ... somehow, even though you can't see the solution yet ... you feel better, stronger, more hopeful. I believe that the Holy Spirit is a powerful agent that is at work as we pray, causing us to have that assurance that God is listening and that God really cares and is taking care of us.

Of course there are those times when we pray and feel that our prayers are floating up into thin air ... heard by no one. We wonder why God allows us to feel so alone at times. But perhaps, those are the times when I have not been as disciplined and faithful in setting aside that quiet time for prayer and meditation. I think the meditation part of prayer is very important ... having a prayer book that guides us in Scripture readings, with perhaps a reflection about the passage.

One of the tools I use is a little book that is from our denomination called Daily Prayer. It has Psalms and prayers for each day of the week ... prayers for morning, midday, evening and bedtime. It has prayers for special occasions and it also has suggestions for who to pray for and what to pray for if you are feeling like you're in a rut ... always saying the same thing, which is something most all of us can easily do.

I also like the book called The Divine Hours, by Phyllis Tickle. It too has prayers for different times through out the day, and into the night.

I think meditation is important for another reason. I believe it is the meditation part of prayer time that opens us up to hear God speak. Now, I'm not going to try and tell you that I've heard the great voice of God ... at least not audibly as you and I speak. But I do often believe that I hear that still small voice of God as I sit in silence listening or reading a Psalm, or journaling. Ideas and thoughts that come to mind can be ways that God speaks to us and leads us.

Sometimes, we pray and pray and think God will never answer. But perhaps the time isn't right yet. I actually prayed for a year that if it was God's will for me to leave the church I had been serving in Kansas and to move to another call, He would show me when the time was right and where to go. I believe this is where God wanted me to serve and you weren't quite ready for me yet. But when the time was right, it all opened up.

On the other hand ... sometimes we may need to rethink our prayer. Are we praying "Thy Will Be Done?" Or are we determined to keep praying "**My** will be done?" Sometimes God's answer is no. And if we really think of God as intimately as a Father, as *Abba*, we will be thankful that God does answer no to His children when they want things that may not be best, even though that is hard to see at the time.

Often prayers are described as having four parts. Our prayers in public worship with the Christian community as well as our individual, private prayers gather round these four elements.

First is Adoration, where we praise God for who God is and focus our attention on the greatness of the triune God. God is the only one who is worthy and deserving of our adoration. The psalmist said “For you make me glad by your deeds, O Lord. I sing for joy at the works of your hands.” (Psalm 92)

Second is Confession. The psalmist said, “you do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken and contrite heart.”

In Prayers of Confession we admit our sinfulness and specify those things we have done, or have failed to do, that have caused us not to live up to the image of God and God’s will within us.

Third is Thanksgiving. Here we thank God for all our blessings, for all God’s acts, and for all God has done.

Finally, there is Supplication, in which (Phil. 4:6) we let our “requests be made known to God” as we pray for the world, for others, and for ourselves.

Taken together, the first letters of these four parts spell ACTS.

“Prayer is the Christian’s vital breath, The Christian’s native air.”

It is one of our great sources of strength and renewal. It is a means of knowing God’s grace and love and mercy.

Our Father ... Abba ... wants his children to talk to him ... no matter how you do it.

Jesus said, “ Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”

There is a place of quiet rest ... near to the heart of God. Go there often.

ⁱ Companion to the Book of Common Worship. Pp 173, 174

ⁱⁱ Cloninger, Claire. *Dear Abba*. Nashville, TN. Word Publishing 1997, quoted from the book *In This Quiet Place: Discovering the Pleasure of Prayer*, Zondervan Publishing. 1999

ⁱⁱⁱ Keller, Phillip. *A Layman Looks at the Lord’s Prayer*. Chicago. Moody Press. 1976