

**Understanding Prayer**  
**Matthew 6:5-13**  
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The Gospel of Matthew opens with a series of proofs that Jesus is the Christ, the King of the Jews. This led to the calling of His disciples and His instruction to them through the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7. These chapters are the first of five long discourses by Jesus that Matthew recorded in his Gospel.

Matthew 5:20 (*“For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven”*) provided the basis for Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:21-48 taught six examples of flawed teaching by the scribes and Pharisees, including six corrective teachings regarding righteous conduct by Jesus. In Matthew 6:1-18, we will find three examples of giving, prayer and fasting that demonstrate the flawed motivation of self-service by the hypocrites and instruction of how to avoid their sinful practices.

**How not to pray (6:5-8)**

Matthew 6:5-8 describes two basic practices that must be avoided in prayer. The first evil practice is seen in Matthew 6:5-6 and describes the location of prayer and mirrors Matthew 6:2-4 with the motivation to practice piety in order to be seen by men. The second evil practice is seen in Matthew 6:7-8 and describes the verbiage of prayer.

This teaching on prayer builds off of the basic tenet of Matthew 6:1 of the sinful motivation of the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees. Jesus warned His hearers generally about showing off their righteousness before men in the practice of giving (6:2-3), prayer (6:5-14) and fasting (6:16-18). In each of these three areas, the statement of 6:1, *“otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven”* is amplified by the repeated words, *“Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full”* (6:2, 5 and 16). The concept of reward will be further developed in Matthew 6:19-21.

The issue here is in regard to motivation. The warning of Jesus was for those whose goal was to be noticed by men. So there is a difference between people seeing our righteousness and wanting people to see our righteousness. We must be careful to practice righteousness in response to the Lord alone, not for the attention of others. If we serve the Lord for the right reasons, love of God and the resulting love of others, we will not seek to serve in order to be noticed by men.

The practice of prayer that should not be done is public prayer for the sake of being seen praying by others. This does not mean that public prayer is wrong or even discouraged. Below are reasons that public prayer is not the problem but rather the motivation of praying in public in order to be seen by others is the problem:

1. The Lord's example of how to pray (Matthew 6:9-13) begins with addressing God as "our Father" which presumes the words are representative of others beyond one individual praying.
2. The apostles are seen praying in public (Acts 8:14-15; 16:25; 20:36).
3. Ephesians 5:20 and 1 Corinthians 14 describe public prayer for the church.
4. Jesus prayed publicly in John 11:41-42 prior to the raising of Lazarus and for the purpose of those listening to Him pray. Other examples include Matthew 11:25, Mark 6:41, and Luke 11:1.

Therefore, we must refrain from praying in order to be seen by men. Prayer that is motivated by being viewed as pious by others has no reward. Implicit in Jesus' words, "*truly I say to you, they have their reward in full,*" is the sense that our sincere prayers will be rewarded.

The contrast to self-aggrandizing public prayer is humble private prayer. The "inner room" is not a particular location but a place not in view of others such as the street corners or the synagogues. Our Father sees all, including what is hidden, and will reward us (Matthew 6:6).

The second practice that should be avoided are the prayers that are long ("many words") and contain meaningless repetition. Obviously the hearers of Jesus, like people today, assumed that longer prayers were intrinsically better than shorter prayers. There seems to be a value placed on concise prayer, which we can see in the prayers of Jesus in the New Testament.

It is particularly noteworthy that the way Jesus instructed prayer to be in Matthew 6:9-13 has become a prayer recited by millions every day. The most intensive use of recited prayers can be seen in the rosary where the Lord's prayer is repeated six times. As repetitive as this seems, it pales in comparison to the 53 "Hail Mary" prayers that are contained in the rosary. This practice turns prayer into the epitome of meaningless repetition.

Evangelicals can practice repetitive prayers in similar ways. Examples include prayer before meals, using the same words when we pray, using scripted prayers from books and church services that include scripted prayers. Just as there is an overvalue place on the duration of our prayers, there is likewise an overvalue placed on the wording of our prayers. While we do not know how to pray as we should, the biblical solution is not scripted prayers but the intercession by the Holy Spirit.

*“In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words”* (Romans 8:23).

### **How to pray (6:9-13)**

In Matthew 6:9-13, Jesus instructs His hearers on how to pray. This section of Scripture is commonly referred to as “The Lord’s Prayer.” It is the Lord’s prayer not in the sense that the Lord prayed this prayer but rather in the sense that it came from Him.

The prayer was never intended to be recited verbatim. It is a model for how we should pray, not a script of words to pray. By reciting this prayer, the mere repetition results in a violation of Jesus’ teaching of how not to pray, specifically with meaningless repetition (Matthew 6:7). Such verbal practice devolves into words that lose their meaning.

This prayer is not long but succinct. This prayer is not repetitious but varied. This prayer is not focused on man but God. It contains the most significant things to pray for.

This model for prayer is divided into six parts. The first three petitions center on God and the final three petitions center on us. We can see the first three parts by the use of the pronoun “Your” and we can see the last three parts by the use of the pronoun “us.”

#### 1. “Hallowed be Your name”

The first petition is that God’s name would be hallowed. This is not intended for us to pray that His name become hallowed for it is indeed hallowed whether it is recognized as such or not. To be hallowed is to be greatly honored and respected. This prayer therefore is for men to acknowledge the reverence of God’s name and to honor Him, not to use His name in vain. To speak about God meaninglessly or carelessly is to dishonor Him. Non-Christians certainly will speak of God in careless ways but unfortunately, many professing believers will use religious jargon in referencing God in similar careless ways. When we speak of God the Father, Christ the Son or the Holy Spirit we must do so with great consideration of Whom we are speaking about.

God is respectfully addressed at the outset of this prayer as “our Father.” This is significant in two ways. First, “our” speaks to group prayer, not individual prayer.

The term “Father” is used fifteen times in the Old Testament for God as the king of Israel. But Jesus introduces this term for individuals in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:16, 45, 48; 6:1, 4, 6, 8, 14, 15, 18, 26, 32; 7:11, 21). This will continue throughout the New Testament dozens of times. Addressing God as our personal Father would not have been practiced by the disciples at this time. This of course is not identifying God as a physical gender but using the imagery of a human father to communicate the nature of God and our relationship to Him.

Secondly, the term “Father” speaks of our special relationship with God. God is omnipresent, in this prayer our Father is located “in heaven” because it relates to the holiness (“*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*”) and sovereignty that requires great honor. By addressing God as our Father in heaven, we prepare ourselves to come before Him with the correct attitude. This address is not so much to deliver a response by God to our petition but to deliver proper acknowledgement of the One to whom we pray.

## 2. “Your kingdom come”

Next is our beseeching God for the coming of His kingdom. The longing for God’s kingdom is a theme in the New Testament. The meaning of the term “maranatha” (1 Corinthians 16:22) is “O Lord Come!” and the final chapter of Revelation repeats the words of Jesus, “I am coming quickly” three times (Revelation 22:7, 12, 20). This request communicates the future nature of the Kingdom of God. This coming kingdom will be a visible, earthly kingdom, established when the Lord returns to earth, in the same way He left, at a time fixed by the Father.

*“So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from*

*you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.”* (Acts 1:6-11).

3. “Your will be done”

This petition that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven will be fulfilled at the coming of Christ in His kingdom. When the kingdom of God comes to earth, God’s will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. This request will be answered for it is not a mere wish that can never be fulfilled by sinful men.

While the ultimate fulfillment of this request awaits the coming kingdom, it clearly orients the prayer toward a desire for God’s will to be done. This is the meaning of praying in the name of Jesus. *“If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.”* (John 14:14). The humble prayer in submission to the will of God is necessary for the final requests in this model prayer (Matthew 6:12-13).

Our longing for God’s will to be done is the essence of true prayer for in it we bow in submission to His will and not our own selfish desires. This is the basis for answered prayer. *“You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures”* (James 4:3).

4. “Give us this day our daily bread”

Certainly bread is used to refer to our entire sustenance. This is a common figure of speech, known as a synecdoche, where a part is used to refer to a whole. Second Thessalonians 3:12 uses the term “bread” in the same fashion. Bread is a staple diet in many cultures and the intent here is for the one praying to beseech the Father for their daily existence.

In the first century agrarian life, people were accustomed to not having many days of food stored up for them. Thus the prayer for our *daily* bread, for food would be acquired on a daily basis and there were eras of famine where food became scarce. The acknowledgement that our food is not ultimately dependent upon our barns to house them but upon the Father’s supply is fundamental to faith and prayer.

Because our basic human needs are provided for in our affluent society, our prayers can be focused on our wants, not our needs. While there is nothing wrong with praying for things we want (Philippians 4:6-7) there ought to be a continual awareness in prayer of the One who provides for our daily needs. This will serve to increase our thankfulness and motivate our obedience. This gratitude to God is the counter to the sinful value of

self-sufficiency that is propagated among modern societies. We should pray for our daily needs and not fret about tomorrow's needs (cf. Matthew 6:34).

#### 5. "Forgive us our debts"

The word for debt (OPHEILEMATA) is only used one other time in the New Testament, in Romans 4:4 where it refers to a financial obligation. In the parallel passage of Luke 11:4, the term "sin" (HARMARTIA) is used so the usage of debt to refer to sin occurs in Matthew 6:12. Both Aramaic and Hebrew use the term debt as sin (cf. Psalm 51:4). This sense that our sin is a moral obligation that we owe to God is a Jewish way of thinking.

This request for forgiveness is an essential component of the Christian faith in that we must recognize our sinfulness in order to pray this prayer. Similar to our request for daily sustenance to exist in the physical realm, this request is fundamental for life in the spiritual realm. *"If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.... If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us."* (1 John 1:8, 10).

The relationship between our forgiveness and our own practice of forgiveness for others is expanded in Matthew 6:14-15. We extend forgiveness to others because we are forgiven by our Father, not in order to acquire forgiveness from our Father. To confuse this is to confuse salvation by grace and salvation by works.

Our next class will cover the subject of forgiveness in depth by looking at Matthew 6:14-15.

#### 6. "Do not lead us into temptation"

This final petition combines a negative request, *"do not lead us into temptation"*, with a positive request, but to *"deliver us from evil."* Yet it requires an analysis because in Matthew 4:1 we saw that *"Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil"* and James 1:13-14 states *"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust."* Does God lead us into temptation?

The understanding of this request turns on the meaning of the word "temptation" (PEIRAMOS) and could mean either temptation or trial depending upon the context. Thus this is not a prayer requesting God to not tempt us since He Himself does not

tempt anyone. Rather this prayer refers to trials that test and refine our character. There is no need to pray that God will not tempt us but we should desire to be delivered from evil.

The fallen world brings temptation and God permits us to experience this temptation as we live in the world. This does not mean He leads us into temptation but He matures us through the trials the world's system brings to us. Our flesh can be enticed by sin (James 1:14) that is in the world, which lies in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19).

The deliverance from evil can also be understood as deliverance from the evil one, the devil. When the Greek word "from" (APO) is used with deliverance, as opposed to "out of" (EK), it usually refers to people rather than things or circumstances. This lends credence to the NIV translation "evil one." Either way, this dual prayer of Matthew 6:12-13 beseeches the Father to protect us from occasions of our testing that could result in our sin.

The ESV omits the phrase *"For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen"* in Matthew 6:13. The NASB brackets this phrase and includes the note "this clause not found in early manuscripts." It is found in the King James Version which did not have the earliest manuscripts available for their translation. This phrase not only interrupts the connection between verses 12-13 and 14-15 but it may have been added for liturgical purposes as a recited prayer. Furthermore, in manuscripts that contain these words there exists substantial variation in the reading that it becomes conclusive that it was not in the original text.

This phrase is essentially a summary 1 Chronicles 29:11-13, *"Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name."*

## **Conclusion**

Jesus instructs His disciples to refrain from pretentious public prayer that uses meaningless repetition. Our prayers should be concise and purposeful for our Father knows what we need before we ask Him.

Jesus provides a model for how we should pray that exalts God's holy character and divine will before addressing our needs. Regarding supplication for ourselves, emphasis is placed on our physical daily needs and spiritual state and holiness. These priorities in prayer should be included in our practice as we communicate with our heavenly Father.