

Leader Guide for Study 6: Pray

Introduction:

Have you ever reconnected with an old friend and picked up right where you left off in conversation? Do you have a friend who can finish your sentence before you stop speaking or who can predict your actions before you do them? Our relationship with God is like these relationships. God knows what we need before we ask for it, but He implores us to ask for it. Why? Because just like our best friend, God desires for us to be in relationship with Him. Prayer is how we communicate with God and listen to Him. It is how we engage daily in our faith, giving thanks, and making supplications.

Prayer is a key element of worship and our relationship with God. The whole church body often will recite a prayer or be led in prayer by a pastor or speaker. Prayers that are sometimes used in worship include the Lord's Prayer, the Doxology, the confession of sin, the Prayer of Humble Access, and the Prayers of the People.

Prayers are often used throughout the service, but usually after opening worship songs. For example, the Lord's Prayer can sometimes be recited as a worship song prior to the reading of scripture or the sermon. It sometimes also occurs during the Great Thanksgiving shortly before receiving communion. The Lord's Prayer has been recited for generations in Christian worship services. Therefore, much of this study focuses on this prayer and how we can use it to worship Him at any time and in any place.

Part 1: What Does it Mean?

What is prayer and what does it mean? Christians know that we should practice prayer regularly, but do we understand why or what makes an effective prayer? Prayer is so important that 10 questions in the Westminster Shorter Catechism refer to it. A definition of prayer is provided in question 98.

Quest. 98. What is prayer?

Ans. 98. Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.

According to this definition, there are three key elements to prayer:

- 1) Offering up our desires to God for things agreeable to his will in the name of Christ
- 2) Confession of sins
- 3) Thankful acknowledgement of his mercies

Implicit in this definition is that God listens to our prayer. God desires a relationship with his people and prayer enables us to engage in that relationship. Prayer, just like any other conversation is a two-way relationship. It is not only about us talking to God, but also listening and discerning his will for us.

Read Matthew 7:7-12

⁷“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ⁹Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! ¹²“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Matthew 7 includes at least three very important and often misunderstood points regarding prayer. 1) God is there and wants a relationship with us, seek and you will find him, 2) God can provide what is good and what is necessary, 3) God knows what we need before we ask. Knowing God takes faith, focus, and a commitment. Some people are discouraged when they start praying to God and God does not provide what they ask for. But God desires for us not to be discouraged; rather he wants us to persist in our pursuit through our prayers and also to open our hearts to his will. Through that persistence, we might realize that we were asking for stones or serpents, when God desires to provide us bread and fish. Over time we learn to know God as a loving Father and we discern to ask for what is good for us.

Nehemiah 1 offers a great model of an effective prayer.

Read Nehemiah 1:1-11

1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah.

Now it happened in the month of Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, ² that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. ³ And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.”

⁴ As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. ⁵ And I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. ⁷ We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. ⁸ Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, ⁹ but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ ¹⁰ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. ¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

Now I was cupbearer to the king.

Here Nehemiah offers a deep heartfelt prayer to God. Nehemiah seeks to clarify:

1. the problems facing the Jews in Jerusalem who recently returned from exile to find the gates and walls around the city destroyed
2. God's great power to intervene and assist the Jews
3. What Nehemiah could do to carry out God's will in this situation

Offering deep heartfelt prayers to difficult situations can help us to discern God's will and clarify the actions we should take to address the situation. It also often releases the burden of the situation, enabling us to approach it with perspective, clarity, and focus.

Discussion:

1. What are some of the important elements in Nehemiah's prayer that would be useful in our daily prayers?

Suggested answers:

Here are some key elements to discuss: 1) Praise, 2) thanksgiving, 3) repentance, 4) supplications and specific requests, 5) commitment to God and His will.

Acts 4:24-30 offers some other considerations to consider. Here the early Christians presented their problem to God in prayer and rather than asking Him to remove it for them, they asked Him for help in dealing with it. Often, God might not remove our problems, but he might instead give us the strength and courage we need to deal with the problem.

Read James 4:2-3

²You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.
³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

2. Based on this passage from James, what are some of the most common problems in our prayers?

Answer:

James indicates that sometimes we might not ask, we might ask for the wrong things, or we might ask for the wrong reasons. Sometimes we might come to God with a desired solution already in mind and we just want God's approval for that solution. When we do this, we are playing God. It is more effective and powerful to come to God in prayer with an open heart to allow God to shape you to correspond to his will for you and the situation.

Part 2: Why Do We Practice It?

We pray because God is listening and desires a relationship with us (see Psalm 4). We honor God by engaging with him, communicating with him, and listening

to his will and call for our lives through prayer. Prayer is a key that unlocks faith in our lives. Prayer demonstrates our reliance on God as we humbly invite him to fill us with faith and His power. There is no substitute for prayer, especially in circumstances that seem impossible (see Mark 9:29). There is no better way to honor God through our prayer than to use the words God gave us to pray.

Read Matthew 6: 5-15

⁵“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹ Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.^[a]

¹⁰ Your kingdom come,
your will be done,^[b]
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread,^[c]

¹² and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.^[d]

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Jesus told his followers to pray using the Lord's Prayer. For centuries the Christian church honors Jesus' desire by reciting the Lord's Prayer as a key component of worship. But what does it mean and why do we recite it?

The Lord's Prayer teaches us to draw near to God with holy reverence, as children drawn to a father able and ready to help. In verse 10, we pray that God's kingdom will be advanced; that the kingdom will be hastened; and that we will be able to know, obey, and submit to God's will as angels do in heaven. In verse 11, we pray that God will provide for our daily needs and that we will enjoy his blessing on them. In verse 12, we pray that God, through Jesus Christ, would freely pardon our sins and through his grace, we will forgive others. In verse 13, we pray that God will prevent us from being tempted to sin and will support and deliver us when we fall into temptation.

The Lord's Prayer contains many of the key elements of prayer we discussed in the last section, including 1) praise for God, 2) repentance, 3) specific requests and supplications, and 4) a commitment to God and His will.

Discussion:

1. What do you think are some reasons for why we recite the Lord's Prayer in worship?

Suggested answers:

- 1) Jesus told us to do it. The Lord's Prayer provides a template for how we should practice prayer. Although we often recite it on Sunday's it is not intended to be used only on Sunday. Through this prayer we have confidence that we are requesting nothing absurd or unacceptable to God since we are asking using his own words.
- 2) Using the prayer unites us with historic churches and the universal church which recites the prayer. Instruction for using the prayer goes back to Jesus and the historical churches of the first and second century. It unites the church with the Bible and believers worldwide.
- 3) It's a tool for learning the Christian faith. The Westminster Catechisms include an exposition of the Lord's Prayer because theologians recognized that the prayer is great for teaching doctrine. The prayer provides an avenue for believers to learn about the heavenly Father's power, provision, and protection.

Leaders might choose to step through the Westminster Shorter Catechism as they discuss the Lord's Prayer. Focus on questions 98-107: <https://www.opc.org/sc.html>

Read Psalm 77:1-12

77 I cry aloud to God,

aloud to God, and he will hear me.

² In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;

in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying;

my soul refuses to be comforted.

³ When I remember God, I moan;

when I meditate, my spirit faints. Selah

⁴ You hold my eyelids open;

I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

⁵ I consider the days of old,

the years long ago.

⁶ I said, ^[a] "Let me remember my song in the night;

let me meditate in my heart."

Then my spirit made a diligent search:

⁷ "Will the Lord spurn forever,

and never again be favorable?

⁸ Has his steadfast love forever ceased?

Are his promises at an end for all time?

⁹ Has God forgotten to be gracious?

Has he in anger shut up his compassion?" Selah

¹⁰ Then I said, "I will appeal to this,

to the years of the right hand of the Most High."^[b]

¹¹ I will remember the deeds of the LORD;
yes, I will remember your wonders of old.

¹² I will ponder all your work,

2. Does God hear our prayer when we are distressed? How does the psalmist's prayer change over time as he reaches out to God for relief from his distress?

Suggested answer:

God hears us when we pray during deep distress. The psalmist provides a great example of how God is working in our hearts during our prayer. The psalmist begins the prayer by expressing his discomfort and pain and crying out to God for help. Over the course of the psalm, the prayer changes to a focus on God, remembering God's faithfulness to his people and the good works he has done, and ultimately worshipping God. Similarly, we can have confidence that God will hear our prayer and work in our hearts to assist us in our distress.

Part 3: How Do We Practice It

During worship we are often encouraged to recite the Lord's Prayer in unison or as part of a song together as a community. In Matthew 6:6 we are instructed to go to our room, shut the door and pray to God in secret. In Jonah 2, Jonah prays a prayer of thanksgiving from inside a fish, and God heard his prayer. We can pray anywhere and at any time and God will hear us. There is no sin too great or situation too difficult to separate us from God if we seek him out with genuine faith.

We are warned in Matthew 6:5 that prayer is not for show. It is not intended to be used to demonstrate piety or to claim superiority to others. Instead it must be heartfelt and humble.

The key is to seek out God with humility and a willingness to listen to Him and His will. We need to recognize that although we might want a given situation to

turn out a certain way, God might have other plans for us and we should be open to letting God shape us and the situation.

Read John 17:6-26

⁶“I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. ⁸ For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. ¹¹ And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³ But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. ¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them ¹⁸ in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sake I consecrate myself, ²⁰ that they also may be sanctified ²¹ in truth.

²⁰“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known,

that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

John 17 contains Jesus' longest prayer to God. In it He prays for his disciples, both those with him during his ministry and those that will follow Him in the future, including us. He prayed that God would keep his disciples safe from Satan's power, ensure they are pure and holy, and ensure they are faithful to God's word and teachings.

Discussion:

1. How does Jesus pray to God in John 17? What are some examples of prayer elements you see in His prayer to God?
2. How do you plan to approach God in prayer after completing this study? What can you do to improve your time of prayer with God?

Conclusion:

Just like a best friend finishing our sentences, God knows what we need before we ask for it. Just like our best friend, God welcomes us with open arms and looks forward to our next conversation with Him. Prayer is an essential element to our relationship with God. It is a moment when we give praise, repent, give thanks, make supplications, and commit to God and His will. Just like all conversations, prayer is a two way street. We must approach it with humility and open to listen to God and His will. The Lord's Prayer provides a perfect model for how we should craft our own prayers and supplications to God. There is no sin too great or no suffering too severe that can separate us from God. All we have to do is reach out in humility and be willing to listen to Him. Our prayers can offer hope and clarity. Through our prayers we can let go of our sin, guilt, shame, and burdens, freeing us up to focus on God and his faithfulness thereby offering us hope and clarity. How will you respond to God's call for you to engage with him in prayer?