

Taken from: Packer, J. I. (1994). *Growing in Christ* (pp. 155–158). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

This is an optional introduction on prayer that you might want to read and think as a follow up of this week's sermon on Psalm 27

When You Pray

Praying to God is a problem for many today. Some go through the motions with no idea why; some have exchanged prayer for quiet thought or transcendental meditation; most, perhaps, have given prayer up entirely. Why the problem? The answer is clear. People feel a problem about prayer because of the muddle they are in about God. If you are uncertain whether God exists, or whether he is personal, or good, or in control of things, or concerned about ordinary folk like you and me, you are bound to conclude that praying is pretty pointless, not to say trivial, and then you won't do it.

But if you believe, as Christians do, that Jesus is the image of God—in other words, that God is Jesus-like in character—then you will have no such doubts, and you will recognize that for us to speak to the Father and the Son in prayer is as natural as it was for Jesus to talk to his Father in heaven, or for the disciples to talk to their Master during the days of his earthly ministry.

Two-Way Conversation

Conversations with parents or wise friends whom we love and respect, and who are ready to help us by advice and action, feel neither pointless nor tedious, and we gladly give time to them—indeed, schedule time for them—because we value them, and gain from them. This is how we should think of times of communion with God in prayer. When the Methodist saint Billy Bray said, as he often did, “I must talk to Father about that,” it was of praying that he spoke.

Does God, then, really tell us things when we pray? Yes. We shall probably not hear voices, nor feel sudden strong impressions of a message coming through (and we shall be wise to suspect such experiences should they come our way); but as we analyze and verbalize our problems before God's throne, and tell him what we want and why we want it, and think our way through passages and principles of God's written Word bearing on the matter in hand, we shall find many certainties crystallizing in our hearts as to God's view of us and our prayers, and his will for us and others. If you ask, “Why is this or that happening?” no light may come, for “the secret things belong to the Lord our God” (Deuteronomy 29:29); but if you ask, “How am I to serve and glorify God here and now, where I am?” there will always be an answer.

Made to Pray

It is not too much to say that God made us to pray; that prayer is (not the easiest, but) the most *natural* activity in which we ever engage; and that prayer is the measure of us all in God's sight. “What a man is alone on his knees before God,” said the saintly Murray McCheyne, “that he is—and no more.”

Perhaps Jesus' disciples felt this when they made their momentous request (have you ever echoed it?), “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). Jesus must have rejoiced to be asked this. In the manner of a good teacher, however, he controlled his feelings and gave a matter-of-fact answer. “When you pray, say ...” — and for the second time in his public ministry he gave them the form of words which we call the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:2–4; cf. Matthew 6:9–13).

“Say ...” Did Jesus just intend that they should repeat the words, parrot fashion? No; but that they should enter into the sense. “Say,” we might say, means “mean!” This prayer is a pattern for all Christian

praying; Jesus is teaching that prayer will be acceptable when, and only when, the attitudes, thoughts, and desires expressed fit the pattern. That is to say: every prayer of ours should be a praying of the Lord's Prayer in some shape or form.

Learning to Pray

"Experience can't be taught!" The phrase comes from a brochure on youth employment, but it is as deep a truth about prayer as it is about wage-earning skills. Praying, like singing, is something you learn to do, not by reading books (not even this one!), but by actually doing it; and it is so natural and spontaneous an activity that you can become quite proficient in it without ever reading it up. Yet, as voice training helps you to sing better, so others' experience and advice can help us pray to better purpose. The Bible is full of models for prayer: 150 patterns of praise, petition, and devotion are contained in the Psalter, and many more examples of proper praying are recorded too, along with much teaching on the subject.

We should certainly not content ourselves with parroting off other people's prayers, nor would God be content if we did (for what parent could be happy if his child only ever spoke to him in quotations, thus limiting his conversation to the reciting of other people's sentiments?) But as another pianist's interpretation of a piece can help a budding musician to see how he can best play it (not, perhaps, in quite the same way), so we are helped to find our own way in prayer by seeing how others have prayed, and indeed by praying with them. And overarching everything we have the Lord's Prayer as our guide.

As analysis of light requires reference to the seven colors of the spectrum that make it up, so analysis of the Lord's Prayer requires reference to a spectrum of seven distinct activities: *approaching* God in adoration and trust; *acknowledging* his work and his worth, in praise and worship; *admitting* sin, and seeking pardon; *asking* that needs be met, for ourselves and others; *arguing* with God for blessing, as wrestling Jacob did in Genesis 32 (God loves to be argued with); *accepting* from God one's own situation as he has shaped it; and *adhering* to God in faithfulness through thick and thin. These seven activities together constitute biblical prayer, and the Lord's Prayer embodies them all.

So the Lord's Prayer should be put to service to direct and spur on our praying constantly. To pray in terms of it is the sure way to keep our prayers within God's will; to pray through it, expanding the clauses as you go along, is the sure way to prime the pump when prayer dries up and you find yourself stuck. We never get beyond this prayer; not only is it the Lord's first lesson in praying, it is all the other lessons too. Lord, teach us to pray.

Further Bible Study

The naturalness of prayer:

- Psalm 27; 139

Questions for Thought and Discussion

- How does one's view of God affect one's view of prayer?
- Why is prayer "the most natural activity in which we ever engage"?
- In what sense should every prayer be a mirror of the Lord's Prayer?