

OpenTheo

Jesus On Prayer (Part 1)



The Life and Teachings of Christ - Steve Gregg

In this teaching, Steve Gregg examines Matthew 6 which includes the Lord's Prayer. He notes that Jesus assumes his disciples will pray and advises them to pray vertically, not horizontally like the heathen. Gregg cautions against vain repetitions and asks for the sake of self-interest, pointing out that God's will and the good of the whole family should be considered in prayer. He urges listeners to acknowledge their dependency on God and refrain from treating prayer as a magic formula or a way to wear God down.

Transcript

Let's look together at Matthew 6. Last time we talked about the general message of verses 1-18 where Jesus talked about giving alms, he talked about prayer, and he talked about fasting. For the most part, he had almost exactly the same thing to say about each of those three items, namely that the hypocrites, the Pharisees, did those three things in a way that Jesus does not recommend to be done. They are seeking a reward of human approval merely, and they should be seeking God's approval and the honor that comes from God.

Therefore, he recommends that when you do those things, that you do them in a way that's not ostentatious, even secretive, if that's what it takes to make sure your motives are pure and you're doing so. In the midst of that, right in the middle of it, he digresses a little bit to talk further about prayer. Now, of the three practices that he uses to illustrate his general point of not being religious in order to get the approval of men, but rather when you do religious things, make sure you do it to be seen of God and rewarded of God.

When he gives those examples, the middle example is prayer, and there is an extended treatment of the subject of prayer in the midst of it. It actually breaks up the symmetry of the passage, strangely. Therefore, it's not certain, of course, whether Jesus taught this portion on prayer at the same time as the other, or whether Matthew, following his regular procedure of arranging things topically, decided that since Jesus said something about prayer in this case, that he'd add some more things Jesus had said on other occasions about prayer.

The principal feature of the added section here, or the extra section, as it would appear, is the so-called Lord's Prayer, which is found elsewhere in another context in Luke. In Luke chapter 11, just to draw this to your attention, Luke 11.1 says, And it came to pass, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, that one of his disciples said to him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples. So, he said to them, when you pray, say, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us day by day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. And then Jesus goes on to give a parable about prayer and about the need for persistence in prayer.

Now, when Jesus gives it to them on this occasion in Luke 11, it is when they ask him if he would teach them how to pray. If he had already taught them this prayer, it would seem strange that they would ask at this time to be taught how to pray, and he would give them the exact same prayer that he taught them on a previous occasion. Strange, but not inconceivable.

I mean, it is possible that Jesus taught them the same prayer on separate occasions, twice. But Luke has, of course, placed his version of the Sermon on the Mount considerably earlier than this, in Luke chapter 6, and did not include the Lord's Prayer in that. On the other hand, however, Luke did not include in his version of the Sermon on the Mount any of this teaching about alms or prayer or fasting, and therefore, whether it was an original part, the Lord's Prayer was an original part of Jesus' teaching on those subjects or not, can't be determined with certainty comparing it with Luke.

I will say this, though, that it seems to me not an unfair assumption, a probability, that Jesus taught his disciples this prayer on an occasion other than the Sermon on the Mount, and that Matthew, following his regular procedure of gathering things into a topical arrangement, has brought that information into the teaching on prayer that was already included by him. Though I wouldn't want to be too dogmatic about this, because it could be the opposite. It could be that Jesus taught it twice.

In any case, the first thing we want to concern ourselves with is not so much the Lord's Prayer, but what Jesus says prior to it. It's verses 7 through 15 of Matthew 6. Matthew 6, verses 7 through 15 are the verses that are seemingly out of place. And, you know, they're not out of place if Jesus put them there.

They're exactly where they belong. But in terms of judging from the teaching paradigms and the illustrations he gives before and after this one on prayer, it would seem that his parallel teaching on prayer, that is, parallel to his teaching on alms and fasting, occupies verses 5 and 6 and goes no further. Verse 6, of course, ends with the statement that your father, who sees in secret, will reward you openly.

Well, that's how he ends his discussion of alms, in verse 4, and of fasting, in verse 18. So it would appear that verse 6 brings to a full cycle his teaching on prayer insofar as he wished it to parallel his teaching on fasting and on almsgiving. But verse 7 through 15 are continuous teaching on prayer that have no parallel in his teachings on alms and fasting.

He says in verse 7, but when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore, do not be like them, for your father knows the things that you have need of before you ask him. In this manner, therefore, pray, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. Alright, now, Jesus teaches several things about prayer. Yeah, I know that came out sounding funny.

He says the same thing about prayer he says about the other subjects, namely, when you do it, don't do it as the hypocrites do. He doesn't say how often you should pray. He doesn't even command you to pray.

He assumes you will. He assumes that his disciples will talk to him. He assumes that Christians are going to be praying people.

Actually, all religions pray. All religious people are into either prayer or at least chanting or something akin to prayer. Buddhism probably doesn't have actual prayer.

I couldn't say for sure because I'm no expert on it, but Buddhism doesn't technically speaking have a belief in God. It is believed that Buddha was an atheist. So there may be no actual prayer in Buddhism, but there are verbal utterances, meditations, chants and so forth that in their own way probably take the place of prayer in that religious system.

But one of the principal features of religions is prayer. Because religion, by definition, usually involves the acknowledgement of a deity or a higher power. And the very act of practicing religion suggests that you not only believe there is a higher power, but there's some means of pleasing or displeasing, of having a relationship either positively or negatively with that power.

And that relationship is defined at least partially in terms of communication and prayer. So the Jews pray, the Muslims pray, cultists pray, pagans pray, the Roman idolaters pray,

the Greek idolaters pray, and it is assumed Christians too will pray. But when they pray, they should not do it the way that the pagans do.

Now, here's where he departs from what he said about the other two subjects in this section. He says about all religious practices that when you do it, you shouldn't do it like the hypocrites do, that is the Pharisees. But now he says of prayer, when you pray, you also should not do it the way the heathen do.

There's two wrong ways of praying that Jesus wants to correct here. There may be more, but there's two that he addresses in this place. One is to make the mistake that the Pharisees make.

And that is to pray in such a way as to not really be talking to God, but talking for the ears of men. I might just go on this a moment. It is very much the case that when we pray, there is the temptation to be mindful of who may be listening.

There may be a tendency to add more emotion than one naturally would, or less emotion than one naturally would, depending on how many people are within your shot and how they are likely to judge your prayers, or you, or think of you, by the presence or absence of emotion in your prayer. There is even in some cases a tendency for people to pray in King James English, which obviously doesn't have any particular value in getting through to God more than ordinary English or any other language for that matter. There is also, of course, certain prayer vocabulary that when you learn to pray, you learn this vocabulary.

And you talk in prayer differently than you would talk to ordinary people. For instance, the frequency of the word just in prayer is far greater than that in any other common speech. I don't come up to Matt and say, oh Matt, I just would like to ask you to just set up this PA system so that I can just turn it on and just speak.

And if you just do that, could I just ask you to do that and just this and just that? And yet, if you pay attention to how people pray, including yourself, in all likelihood, you use the word just a great deal when you pray. This is not because it has a function in your prayers, it actually doesn't. The word doesn't have any use unless it is to convey the idea of modesty.

I'm not asking for much, just this. God, we just want to see you. Well, that's got me.

That means we have no other desire than that. But God, we just want to see your glory. God, we just ask you this and we just ask you that and we just ask you that.

It seems to be kind of hypocritical to say, I'm just going to ask you this. And I turn around and just ask him something else and just ask him something else too and just ask him something else. Then I shouldn't have said just the first time because it wasn't just that that I wanted to pray about, it was several other things too.

So why do I say just? Well, I just do. That's just how we talk to God. Now, I'm not saying we should.

In fact, that's the very thing I'm suggesting is that we probably shouldn't. But God is no doubt very forgiving in this matter. There is much phoniness in the way we talk to God as opposed to the way we talk to other people.

Now, some of that no doubt is occasioned by the fact that we show greater reverence to God and rightly so than we show to others. Some people just don't feel right speaking to God and saying you, thou, seems much more reverential. Although they don't speak to others that way, it just seems too familiar to say you to God for some people.

There really are people who say so. I don't have that problem, but I know there are some who do. Likewise, maybe people feel almost apologetic about coming before God, apologetic about praying as if God's a little inconvenienced by us praying.

And so we want to express how little it is we have to ask him. We just want to ask you this and we just want that and we just want this. And we don't have the same perhaps tendency to cower before men.

But if we were making similar requests to a king or to some important man, we might tend to add those expressions of modesty too. Yeah, well, could you just do this for us and just that and just so forth. But the fact of the matter is, even though those might be ways of communicating to God that spring out of a sense of reverence, yet they don't really, they're not necessary parts of prayer, they're just traditional ways of praying.

And when we pray that way, we're not doing that because God requires it or even probably because we think God requires it, but because maybe people will hear us and they'll think we're not being reverent enough or we're just being a little too brassy with God and we're not being modest enough in our way of approach. We learn to pray the forms of the prayer group that we participate in, of our denomination or whatever. In some denominations, you have to genuflect or bow in a certain manner.

And you do those things mechanically sometimes, not because it's real or because you have any sense that that's really something that matters to God, but that's just the protocol. You do that to please men. That's the mistake of the Pharisees, to fall into praying with, ostensibly praying to God, but with the attention focused on the other party's presence.

I remember hearing a story about, well, I would give the name, Leonard Ravenhill was one of the participants here. I won't tell you the name of the other party, but Leonard Ravenhill is not a Pentecostal. He is, I don't know if he's become a charismatic now, but when this story applied to him, he had not yet, and he may not yet still have spoken in tongues.

He was not a tongues speaker. And he was in prayer in the home of a friend who was a Pentecostal preacher, whose name is also a household word. I won't give him because this reflects negatively on his wife.

But Leonard Ravenhill was in the home of a Pentecostal guy who's very famous and well known. And they were praying together, I guess, in the living room. And this Pentecostal's wife, also Pentecostal, came in and decided to join them in prayer.

And the first opportunity she had, she began to pray, Oh Lord, we pray for Brother Ravenhill that you'll just baptize him in your Holy Spirit and God. We just pray that he'll open up his heart and to receive the gift of tongues. And God, how we really desire that you'll take away any fear from this brother and help him to be open to this and so forth.

And most of her comments in prayer were more in the form of exhortations to Leonard Ravenhill than they were things that were God's to do. And Leonard Ravenhill interrupted the prayer and he said, Sister, when we pray, we want to pray this way, not that way. And I can only imagine how she felt about that.

And that's why I haven't given the name. Because it was probably one of those embarrassing things like Sarah endured when it's on record about her that she laughed and got rebuked by God. But it is often the case that when we pray, we pray horizontally instead of vertically.

Because we're praying for the ears of men. That is the mistake of the Pharisees, of the hypocrites. They wanted to pray in such a way as to impress men.

Now, the heathen pray other than that and they make their own mistakes. For one thing, the heathen don't have any actual relationship with their gods. Their gods are not alive.

Their gods are idols. The heathen were worshipers of idols. And the idols no doubt represented to them invisible beings who lived up on Mount Olympus or whatever.

But they were certainly not accessible to man. And the way that you would try to get their attention would be through chanting or through lengthy oratory addressed to the gods to impress them with how committed you were to this prayer project or whatever that thing you were asking for. And Jesus made it very clear that one of the principal features of the heathen's prayers is that they think that it requires a lot of talking, a lot of repetition of the same point.

Now, Jesus said, don't be like the heathen in terms of the use of vain repetitions. Now, I want to say something about vain repetitions if I could. Because a lot of Christians have, I think, misunderstood what Jesus is saying on this.

Some people think it's wrong to repeat the same prayer twice. That it's a vain thing to do. I have heard it taught, and it's possible that some of you have too, because it's not

that uncommon for some people to say this, that you should only pray for a thing once.

After that, you should only thank God for the answer to the prayer, even though it may not have yet been answered. Yet it's an act of faith on your part, once you've asked God for a thing, to just begin to thank him for it, rather than ask him again. And the idea here is that if you ask him a second time for the thing you've already asked him for, it proves that you don't believe, that you don't have faith.

That you asked, but you didn't believe that he'd do it, so you have to ask him again, hoping he'll do it. And so some have argued, and as I say, it's not uncommon to hear this teaching, I've heard it in many places many times, that you shouldn't pray for the same thing twice. And that if you do, then it's a vain thing, that's vain repetitions, and it shows that you don't have any faith.

You should only pray once for a thing, and then thank God for it forever after that. Now, I want to say, I don't have any real objection to the idea of beginning to thank God for a thing before he's answered the prayer. By faith, to thank him for his expected answer is not something I have anything against.

But if someone is saying that to ask twice for the same thing is wrong, that would seem to go against what Jesus taught in other places. For example, Jesus prayed the same prayer three times in rapid succession in the Garden of Gethsemane. Did he not? He prayed three times, he went and he fell down and he said, Father, if it's your will, let this cup pass from me.

However, not my will, but yours be done. Then he went and checked on the disciples and went back and prayed the same prayer. In fact, some of the gospels in the recording, if they say, they don't even repeat the prayer, they say, he just spoke the same words.

He prayed along the same lines, prayed the same thing. And if Jesus could pray the same thing three times and not be in the wrong, and certainly Jesus was not in the wrong, then I don't know how anyone can say that we shouldn't ask more than once for a thing. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12 that he had prayed three times for one particular thing before he got an answer from God.

It's possible in that case, but Paul had a thorn in the flesh, whatever it was, we do not know, but it was an irritation to him, it was a problem to him, and he asked God to remove it three times, and God didn't. But when God didn't respond to the first prayer, that didn't keep Paul from praying a second time. And when God didn't answer the prayer the second time, it didn't prevent Paul from praying a third time for the same thing.

And the only thing that stopped Paul from praying for it was that after the third time he prayed for it, God says, no, my grace is sufficient for you, I want you to embrace this

thing, it will make my strength more perfect than you when you're weak. And so Paul says, okay, I stopped praying about it. But he didn't stop praying for it because it was inappropriate to pray more than once for a thing.

It seems to me the biblical revelation would be that you keep praying for a thing until you either receive it, or have the assurance from God that you're going to receive it. And the fact that you've asked once does not carry with it necessarily, it does not carry with it the assurance that you're going to receive the thing you asked for. Despite the name and claimant type people who say, well, you just have to ask and then it's yours.

That's not always the case. Some things you ask for, even believing, are things that God doesn't want to give you, as Paul's thorn in the flesh being removed was a case of that. Or Jesus having the cup passed from him.

Both represent cases where a man of God, or Jesus himself in one case, sought relief from a particular circumstance, asked for a particular course of events to follow, and did not get granted what he asked. And both of them no doubt would have kept praying along those lines until they had received assurance that they now knew the will of God on the matter. The third time Jesus prayed, Judas and the others were on their way there.

He could see them. He woke up the disciples and said, here they come who are going to betray me. So it was no time to pray a fourth time on the matter.

The will of God was evident. Likewise with Paul. He prayed three times and God says, no, my grace is sufficient for you.

Be content. And that was good enough. He didn't pray a fourth time about it, but he no doubt would have prayed more than once about it.

So what I'm saying is the concept of prevailing in prayer and continuing to pray for the same thing until you either have the thing you're praying for or have assurances from God that he's going to give it to you and you need to ask no further about it. Because he's not going to give it to you. Those would all be different ways of resolving prayer burden is that you either know you've got it or you do have it or you know you're not going to get it.

In any case, that's when you give up praying for a thing. But you don't give up before that. Jesus told two parables to indicate that idea.

Actually, one of them, it's not so certain that this is his meaning, but let me give it to you anyway. It's usually understood to be. In Luke 11, in the model prayer that we just read there, it is followed by a parable about prayer.

Luke 11.5 says, And he said to them, which of you shall have a friend and go to him at

midnight and say to him, friend, lend me three loaves. For a friend of mine has come to me on his journey and I have nothing to set before him. And he will answer from within and say, do not trouble me.

See, the door is now shut. My children are with me in bed. I cannot rise and give to you.

I say to you, though he will not rise and give him because of his friend, because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence, he will rise and give him as many as he needs. Now, persistence is a word that can be translated otherwise and some of the other translations would remove the whole idea of persistence in prayer from the parable. Traditionally, though, this rendering is pretty much how it's been understood.

Most people have usually understood this parable to be saying that even if someone is reluctant to give you what you want, if you keep pressing in, they'll eventually give in to your persistence. Now, there is a possible other meaning of this parable, which I'll give on another occasion when we come to it. So there's some question, although it's not a very great question in the minds of most, whether that's advocating persistence in prayer, but at one place where there's no question about it is in Luke 18, where persistence in prayer is very clearly what is advocated.

Of course, both of these parables represent further teaching by Jesus about the subject of prayer, and so they belong in our discussion of his teaching on the subject in the Sermon on the Mount. Luke 18, one says, Then he spoke a parable to them that men always ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city, and she came to him, saying, Avenge me of my adversary.

And he would not for a while. But afterward he said within himself, Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. Then the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge said, And shall not the God avenge his own elect who cry out day and night to him, though he bears long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily.

Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he really find faith on the earth? Here we have a very clear picture of God forestalling an answer to a prayer, but he says, Though he bears long with them, he will eventually and speedily answer their prayers. But the parable encourages continuing in prayer for the same thing until God does. Now, some are bugged by the fact that the unjust judge was just that, an unjust judge.

That's not a very worthy symbol for God, is it? I mean, this judge didn't care about this woman. He didn't care about her. He was just bugged.

He was just irritated, and because he was irritated, he finally gave in. And is Jesus saying that God's like that? That he doesn't care about you really? He doesn't fear God or care

about man at all? He only cares about his own peace and quiet? He doesn't want people bugging him? And so if you keep bugging him, he'll give in to you? No. What he's saying is that even if an unjust judge who doesn't care about a person can be prevailed upon by persistence, how much more God, who does care, can you expect him to avenge his elect? I mean, the comparison here is not really one of comparison, but of contrast.

The parable contrasts the character in it with that of God. Just like when Jesus said elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount, if you earthly fathers being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly father, it is implied, who is not evil, give good gifts to those who ask him? The idea being that sometimes God, to make a lesson about God, Jesus can compare or contrast God with someone who's not very nice, not very good, and yet show that even they do some things that are desirable, and how much more God, who doesn't have their defects, can be expected to do those same kinds of desirable things. The point is that Jesus did teach and model that praying for the same thing more than once is okay, in some cases, in fact, recommended, until there's some resolution of an answer to prayer being given.

Then what did Jesus mean by vain repetitions? Don't use vain repetitions like the heathen do. Well, vain repetitions are simply that, they're vain, they're empty. If you repeat yourself emptily, for instance, if your prayer is no good the first time, if it's not a good prayer, repeating it over and over again isn't going to make it a better prayer, it's not going to prevail on God.

For example, if you don't have any faith when you pray, it's empty. If you're not praying according to the will of God, it's empty. And no matter how many times you repeat it, it'll remain empty.

If there's no faith, if it's not according to the will of God, if it's not in the name of Jesus or whatever, if there's some defect in the prayer that empties it of its efficacy, then the repetition of it won't change its emptiness, it won't make it any less empty. That is, if there's something about your prayer that God chooses not to answer, don't think that you're going to make him answer it, though your prayer doesn't improve in its quality, but just by quantity of it, by wearing him down. In other words, it's not exactly like the widow.

The widow did wear down the unjust judge, but God's not going to give you what he doesn't want you to have just to keep from being worn out by you. The heathens may think so because they deal with unjust judges, but God is a just judge and he's different, and as I say, the parable that we read in Luke 18 is a contrast, not a comparison of God to the judge. But what is a vain repetition, or what he's talking about here, is that the heathen, they don't take into consideration what really matters in prayer.

They just think that by frequent repetition, chanting the same thing over and over again, that somehow that magically is going to get their wishes done. It's really not too much

different than the word of faith people themselves. Although they would understand a vain repetition to be praying for the same thing twice, actually what they do is a little more like what the heathen did.

That is, think that by continuing to say something that isn't really true and isn't going to be true necessarily, but by continuing to say it, it's going to make it happen. It's sort of a magic idea. It's an idea of manipulation of the gods, or the manipulation of the powers, or of the laws of the universe, by saying the same things, the right things, enough times, and so forth.

Now, what Jesus wants us to understand about prayer is that it's not a manipulative device. It's not something where we get God, whoever he may be, or the gods or the powers out there, to do what we want. That's what the heathen think of it as, you see.

Now, what prayer is to the Christian is a relationship with God, with the real God. And it is a relationship principally of submission to God, not of giving God orders. We have to understand that the purpose of prayer is not that God gives you a magic wand to help you get your own way, or that God gives you a blank check so that you can write it out and do any selfish thing you want with it.

And if you are selfish in your prayer, I mean, James says you have not because you ask not, and you ask and receive not because you ask with wrong motives. You ask amiss that you may consume it on your lusts, over in James chapter 4. If you ask with wrong motives, God will not be pleased to answer your prayer. And no matter how often you repeat that selfish prayer, it's not going to incline God more to give it, because prayer isn't for you to get your selfish way done.

You wonder about the verse number, it's verses 2 and 3, James 4, 2 and 3, especially verse 3. You ask and do not receive because you ask amiss that you may spend it on your pleasures. Or King James says consume it on your lusts. The idea is that prayer is a relationship like that between a father and a son.

And while sons may indeed ask their fathers for favors, it is understood that the father is the head of the house, not the child. And while it may please the father to give the son favors and special treats, nonetheless, what is the will of the father is what must prevail in the relationship. The father cannot allow himself to be manipulated by the son's pestering or begging.

But rather, the son needs to be concerned about the father's will, because the father, first of all, has the concerns not only of that son at heart, but of the whole family. And that which may be desirable from the point of view of that one child may not be desirable from the point of view of the benefit of the whole family. And while the child is self-centered enough not to realize what's good for the whole family, or even often not even to care, but rather just to care about his own needs, the father has the concerns of

the entire family on his heart, because he loves all his children equally.

There are bigger issues involved than just the immediate gratification of somebody's petulance. And the father is wiser, for one thing. The father knows more about what will be the consequences of a decision than the child does.

Therefore, although children can confidently ask their fathers for things, knowing that if it pleases their father to give it, that's exactly what he'll do, because fathers love to give good gifts to their children. Even evil fathers do. How much more does your heavenly father love to do that kind of thing? But, knowing still that he is the father, and you're the child, and as the father, he may overrule your wish if he sees that the granting of it is not for the good of the kingdom of God in general, the family of God as a whole, or because he sees some consequence that would accrue if he granted it that you can't see, an undesirable one.

And therefore, when you pray, you submit to God's wisdom and his wishes, because he's got higher purposes in mind, in all likelihood, than you are inclined to, when you just know you're desperate, you selfishly desire something, or you're in a crisis, and you can't see anything but the immediate problem. When you pray to God, he sees more than the immediate problem. He sees all the possible ramifications.

He knows what's going to happen as a result. He knows what an answer to that prayer would mean in terms of later repercussions. He knows what it would mean in terms of the well-being of others.

And he says, no. And just begging and whining isn't going to help. And that's what the heathen do.

They don't pray according to the will of God, but they just think that if they whine and beg enough, they'll get it anyway. He says, that's not what I want you to think about. For actually, if you pray like this, and then he gives an example, he says this is proper praying.

But the prayer he gives is one of the shortest in the Bible. You'll find many prayers in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, and even some in the New. This is the beginning of many of his epistles.

Some of them are a little shorter than this, but this is among the shortest of the prayers in the Bible, which is a way of his illustrating that it doesn't take many words to be heard by God. It's the quality of the relationship. It's the quality of the motivations and the priorities, and what is your concern in prayer and what is the nature of your relationship with God.

All those things factor in far more significantly in prayer than how many words you speak or how long your prayer is. In fact, if you go to a prayer session, it's really a false

standard to judge your prayer life by other people who pray for two hours or six hours a day. It's not the length of your prayers that makes a difference.

It's the quality of them. It's the quality of the relationship. And so Jesus gives a very brief prayer, and he says when you pray, you should pray like this.

Now, he does say in verse 8, Do not be like them, for your Father knows the things that are best for you. Now, before we talk about the model prayer that he gives, we need to look at this fact that Jesus affirms even before he teaches us to pray. Namely, before you say a word in prayer, God already knows what you need.

Many thinking people have, either from reading this verse or just knowing intuitively that God certainly knows what I need without my asking him, have asked the question, well, then why pray? Why doesn't God allow prayer to be part of the human experience? Why, in fact, does not God just say, listen, don't give me any advice. I'll get the job done a lot better without all your suggestions. I know what's best.

I know what you need. You don't have to ask me. I'll take care of it without you asking me.

And by the way, if you make any specific suggestions, I'm going to have to overrule them in that way. Why does God even give us a say in the matter or ask us to even pray when Jesus affirms that God doesn't need for us to pray in order for him to know what our desires, our needs are, then what is the purpose of prayer if he already knows without us asking? Why ask? I actually have known at least one Christian who is very strong on this. He believes it's wrong to pray specifically.

Doesn't that seem strange to you? Maybe not. Maybe you think it's wrong to pray specifically, too. But that seems strange to me that someone would hold that position.

But he thinks it's wrong to pray specifically because you should just say, God, your will be done, period. And he feels that if you go beyond that, you're making suggestions that if they are good suggestions, God already knows them and doesn't need to hear them. If they're bad suggestions, you shouldn't be making them.

So better yet, we should make a prayer, although we do see elsewhere in Scripture a great deal of specific things prayed for and even encouragement to pray for specific things. Even Jesus himself in the upper room told the disciples that whatever they asked for in his name, they could expect it. Not just generically ask that God's will be done.

That would make an extremely short prayer. Even this prayer has some specifics in it. Praying for daily bread, praying for deliverance from temptation.

I mean, God knows we need those things. Why even ask if he already knows? Well, the answer is, I think, twofold. And one is, of course, that communication is part of a

relationship.

If there was no prerogative given to us of praying, there wouldn't be much of any sense in which we'd be in communication with God. And what kind of relationship would that be if we never talked? Furthermore, although God knows what we need and desires to give them, he does appreciate being asked because prayer is a sign of an expression of acknowledged dependency on him. When we ask, we are saying, hey, we need you.

We need help from you. There are many people who never ask for help from anyone. It's a matter of pride on their part.

They know that by asking for help, they're acknowledging that they can't do whatever it is they need done alone. And they'd rather struggle with it and do a poor job than ask somebody to help them because their pride is so much in the thing that they're doing. But to ask for help is a sign of humility and admission of need.

And that is appropriate to our state as creatures, by the way. It is appropriate to our state that we acknowledge our dependency and our need. And if God just handed things over to us, things we need, without our ever asking, it would be sort of an automatic supply line that keeps coming on.

And we'd soon take it so much for granted that there'd be no obvious... it was coming from God at all. We'd just see it as in the nature of things. For instance, many people who aren't believers in God still benefit from God, as Jesus said early in the Sermon on the Mount.

He causes His sun to rise on them. He causes the rain to come on them. Their crops grow.

God supplies much food, but they don't know it's God because it's almost automatic. It happens almost automatically. Now, not always.

Let there be a famine. And then when He sends deliverance, they recognize it is from Him. But if there's no crisis and if there's no calling out on God for specific things, then the blessing of God comes almost automatically, is taken for granted, and many of them forget that God's even a factor in the thing and they just figure that that's just part of the world we live in.

Things come, and I can handle things pretty much myself as much as anyone else can, and God doesn't have to be factored into our thinking. But if God withholds things until we ask, even though He knows they're good for us, it encourages us first of all to talk to Him, secondly to acknowledge our dependency upon Him, and thirdly to recognize the answer as a blessing from Him after we've asked for it. If it rains on a regular basis every year and the crops grow well and you forget to pray, it doesn't seem so obviously to be the blessing of God.

I mean, depending on how good your theology is, you might recognize it to be the blessing of God, but you might not. You could even forget that God's involved in it. But as I said, if there's a drought for some years and you pray and then rain comes, it's hard not to see that it's from God.

And when things are given to us in answer to prayer, it's hard not to give God the credit. It's hard not to see the hand of God in it. And God gets more glory by providing the things we need in response to our asking because we then see that it's He that has provided it.

Then He would get if He just provided it without our asking. It's when we have a felt need and then ask that we pay closer attention when the need is met. As I said, if God just had an open supply line and everything just automatically came into our hands without our ever asking, we'd never have a felt need.

And that's when you begin to take things for granted. But when you have a felt need and your attention is drawn to the need to the point where you actually ask God about it, then when the thing comes, even though it might have come automatically, yet after you prayed for it, you see the hand of God in it more. And God is more inclined to get the glory in the matter.

And I'm sure that that has a lot to do with His reasons for encouraging prayer. But there's another thing, and there are some who dispute this, but it strikes me as very biblical. Some people don't think it's biblical, so you make up your own mind, but I believe there's sort of a legal thing involved in it too because God, when He made man, gave him dominion over the earth.

And that dominion, He didn't say, if you do well, I'll let you keep the dominion. If you do poorly, I'm going to step in and give it to someone else. God didn't say that.

He just said, I'm giving it to you. It's yours. You have it.

Now, Adam did poorly. He abused his dominion. He surrendered it to the enemy, and the world has come under the enemy.

But God didn't just automatically step in and say, now, you blew it, Adam. I'm going to take that away from you and I'm going to do it right myself. God honored His original agreement with Adam that man has dominion.

And this is true even after the fall. Man has dominion. We can see that in a statement that's fairly clear on the matter, it seems to me, in Psalm 115, verse 16.

Psalm 115, verse 16 says, Even the heavens are the Lord's, but the earth He has given to the children of men. Now, the Lord's, the heavens are the Lord's, but the earth He has given to the children of men. Now, there are other places in the Bible that say that the

earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

Psalm 24, for example. Psalm 24, verse 1. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. There is a sense in which the entire universe is the Lord's.

I mean, He's sovereign in the sense that He can smash it any time He wants. He can destroy it and start over if He wants to. But in His governing of things, He has retained the right personally to govern the heavens, but He's given the right to govern the earth to man.

Some might think that is a pretty big mistake on God's part to do. God doesn't make any mistakes. And there's a purpose in everything He's done.

But the point is, that since He has given man the right to govern the earth, in the same sense that God governs the heavens, that's what it says in this psalm. Psalm 115, verse 16. The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord's.

But on the earth He is given to the children of man. In the same sense that God governs the heavens, man, the children of men, govern the earth. And this obviously is after the fall because there weren't any children of men until after the fall.

Adam and Eve didn't have any children until after the fall. So to say that God has given the dominion of the earth to the children of men suggests that even after the fall, this situation prevails. That man, by God's decree, is the possessor and ruler of the earth.

Now, most men are still in rebellion against God. And for God to reclaim the earth, He's not going to get any cooperation from them. But when He converts somebody from that frame of mind over to loyalty to His kingdom, then He has some men on His side and women on His side.

And since they too are humans, since humans, whether they're Christian or non-Christian, have dominion, since they are the rulers of the earth, we, Christians, who are as much as the unbelievers are, are entitled to make decisions about how the earth is governed. We can invite God to come in and do it. Now, He doesn't intrude without an invitation, generally speaking.

Now, this is where many would disagree. I've read some Calvinist authors who have a very strong, of course, opinion of God's sovereignty, a very low opinion of man's free will. They don't believe this is true.

They believe this is too limiting on God. But it seems to me biblical that God doesn't just come in and do everything He wants to do. He waits to be asked.

Or else, why would He tell us to pray, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Now, the assumption is God's will is automatically done in heaven. We don't have to pray for

His will to be done in heaven.

That happens without praying for it. What we pray is that His will will be done on earth as it is already in heaven, which suggests that He doesn't need our invitation to do what He wants to do in heaven, but He awaits our invitation to do on earth what He does in heaven. Because the heaven is the Lord's, but the earth He's given to the sons, the children of men.

Therefore, there's a sense in which, although God does have the sovereignty and the right to demolish the whole thing if that's what He chooses to do, yet to intervene on a day-by-day basis and to force man, force the world to follow a certain course, although God has the power certainly to do that, it is His choice not to do that, but to rather honor the dominion that He has given to man.