

# OpenTheo

## Growing In The Prayer Life - Part 2

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### **The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier**

John Stott uses the 'Lord's prayer' as a template for our prayer life showing that we can only bring our prayers to God as our Father when we have become His children through faith in Christ.

### **Transcript**

[Music] Far more important than being given do's and don'ts about prayer. In practical terms, the most important of all prayer lessons is to remember and to cultivate this sense that we are children of our Heavenly Father.

[Music] Welcome to The Bible for Today with John Stot.

There's perhaps been no one who has raised the standard of biblical teaching in the 20th century as John Stott. An extremely humble man known affectionately to many as Uncle John, he was a pastor to pastors and a servant of the Global Church. From his home church of all souls Langen Place in Central London, he preached over 600 sermons.

And during this his centenary we're bringing you some of his very best teaching from nearly 60 years of ministry.

[Music] In last week's message, John Stot spoke on the subject of prayer. He showed us that we have the right to call God our Father because as Christians we are His children.

This week John Stot concludes by sharing how we should and how we shouldn't pray. You'll find it helpful to have your Bible open to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 6. The purpose of prayer is not to inform God as if we were ignorant, so that the more we say, the more likely he is to understand what our needs are. The purpose of prayer is not to give God an ear full of our vain repetitions.

He already knows what we need before we begin to pray. So our praying is neither to be hypocritical like the Pharisees nor mechanical like the pagans. But thirdly do be like children coming to their heavenly Father.

Verse 9, when you pray, pray like this, heavenly Father. Dear friends, absolutely foundational to Christian praying is the relationship to God as our heavenly Father. True prayer is impossible.

I do not exaggerate one moment or one little bit. True prayer is impossible unless and until God has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ and God has adopted us into His family and made us His children. And then when He's our Father and we're His children, then and only then can we begin to pray.

He gives us the great privilege of calling Him what Jesus called Him, Father. He gives us the great privilege of taking upon our lips the very pet name that Jesus continually gave to God. In fact, Jesus addressed God as Father on every occasion that He prayed except one, which is My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me.

Otherwise it was Father, Abba, Father, always. And Jesus allows us to use ourselves, His own pet name for God. Now you know, don't you, that Muslims have 99 different names for God? They have a resurrection to some of them, some sects in Islam.

And in their resurrection they have resurrection containing 33, 66 or 99 beads, which they use for reciting the 99 titles of God. Creator, provider, protector, sustainer, and so 99 of them, but not one of the 99 is Father. Some Arabs, Muslim Arabs, with a delightful witticism say that God actually has 100 names, but we only know 99 of them.

And the only creature who knows the hundredth is the camel, which is why the camel's expression is always one of the ineffable superiority. But actually it isn't the camel who knows the hundredth name of God, it's the Christian. Jesus told us to call God Father, and that is the very essence of prayer.

Now having spoken of Muslims, let me speak of Jews. It's very interesting again that the Jews would never have dreamed and never dreamed today of using this affectionate, intimate, and pet name of God. Now if you will know, I think this quotation from the late Professor Joachim Yermias, a well-known German theologian, who died a few years ago, and he spoke the central message of the New Testament.

He says, "To date, nobody has produced one single instance in Palestinian Judaism where God is addressed as my father by an individual person." But Jesus did just this. More remarkable, Gasson Professor Yermias is the fact that he used the diminutive Abba, which almost is equivalent to daddy. "Nowhere in the literature of the press, avenge in Judaism," says Professor Yermias, "an immense treasure all too little explored.

Nowhere is this invocation of God as Abba to be found." Jesus, on the other hand, always used it when he prayed. Once more, Professor Yermias, to a Jewish mind, it would have been irreverent and therefore unthinkable to call God by this familiar word. It was

something new, something unique, unheard of, that Jesus dared to take this step and to speak with God as a child speaks with his father simply, intimately, securely.

When we hear this word, Abba, "Father," says Yermias. We are hearing the ipsism of Vox, the very voice of Jesus. And while I am giving you quotations, I spoke in the Muslims and the Jews.

Let me give you a quotation about Christians. What is a Christian asks Dr. J. I. Packer in his great book called "Knowing God?" And he goes on, "The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer to the question, what is the Christian that I know is that a Christian is one who has God for his or her father." If you want to judge, he goes on, "How well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he or she makes of the thought of being God's child and having God as his father." If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he doesn't understand Christianity very well at all. For everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new and better than the old, everything that is distinctly Christian, as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the fatherhood of God.

And Dr. Packer ends the quotation, "Father is the Christian name of God." So, if when we pray, we come to God as our father and see ourselves as his children who have the privilege of access into our furthest presence, what will our prayers be like? That question, Jesus, goes on to answer. In the Lord's Prayer, I'm going to suggest just two things, he is speaking. Aye, if we come like little children to our father, our prayers will be God-centered.

The Lord's Prayer doesn't begin, as you know, with us. It doesn't begin with our needs. It doesn't begin as we nearly always begin our own prayers, which is with a whole string of petitions.

Now, the petitions are actually third in line. The Lord's Prayer begins with the address of Father in Heaven, as we take a little time to think about who it is to whom we're coming in prayer, and remind ourselves that he is Father, our Father, our Heavenly Father, and so on. And our praying begins with this address.

Secondly, it goes on with concern for our Father's glory. May your name be honored, your kingdom established, and your will obeyed. So the major preoccupation of children who come into their Father's presence in prayer is not that we may receive what we need, but that he may receive what he deserves, which is honor to his name, the spread of his kingdom, the doing of his will, and that is our preoccupation.

When we call his children to our Heavenly Father, our prayers will be God-centered, and be our prayers will be comprehensive. We shall not hesitate to bring anything to God in prayer. Dear, as we've been singing, that in prayer we can bring everything to God in

prayer.

Nothing is beneath his notice. Nothing is beneath his dignity. Nothing is beneath his interest.

Jesus sums up this comprehensiveness by referring to our daily bread, which is our material need and includes not only food and drink, but our life and our health and our shelter and our clothing and the things we need for survival. They are not beneath his dignity. We pray for our daily bread what we need to sustain our material life.

Then we pray for the forgiveness of our sins, which is our major spiritual need, that our sins may be forgiven, and that we may enjoy unbroken communion with our Heavenly Father through Christ. Then we pray that we may be delivered from evil or the evil one, which is our moral need. We bring that to him as well, and in the physical and the spiritual and the moral that are expressed in daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from evil.

You see something of the comprehensiveness of our prayers when we come to make our needs known to him. And what we're doing in every area is to acknowledge our total dependence as little children on our Heavenly Father, who himself sustains our life through Christ who died for us, forgives our sins. And by the power of the Holy Spirit within us delivers us from evil, and in every area we express our dependence.

Now I think I have time just to mention this rather surprising thing in a way. And that is when you think about daily bread forgiveness and evil, deliverance to me, if you ever thought of this, we actually receive our daily bread, or millions of people do, who never pray for it. Praying for daily bread is not a condition of receiving it.

For as I know Christians who say grace before meals, and Christians who omit to say grace before meals, both have meals. And daily bread is not given to the one who prays and denied to the one who doesn't. On the other hand, when you come to forgiveness and deliverance from evil, I venture to say that God does not give those things who never pray for them.

We want to be forgiven our sins, we have to cry to God for forgiveness. If we want to be delivered from evil, we have to cry to God for the power of the Holy Spirit to set us free. So isn't that interesting? In these three petitions, one is given whether we pray or not, and the other two are given only if we pray.

And I think that gives us the clue as to why we should pray, which is not to inform God as if he were ignorant. Nor to badger him to come to our rescue as if he were reluctant, but simply to acknowledge our dependence on him. So we pray for daily bread, even though we will be given it if we don't pray, because our prayer is not OTOs or unnecessary.

The reason we pray for daily bread is in order to express our acknowledgement that

without the sustaining grace of God given to all humankind, we would turn to the dust and die. And little children, Christian children of our Heavenly Father love to acknowledge this. Before God, that's why we say grace and give thanks for our food.

Well, let me recapitulate and then perhaps you'd be gracious and give me another minute or two to conclude. Our prayers then, according to Jesus, are not to be hypocritical like the Pharisees, they're not to be mechanical like the pagans. They are to be simple, humble, trustful, real, God-centered, comprehensive, like children coming to their Heavenly Father.

So I myself do honestly believe from the teaching of Jesus that the greatest of all prayer lessons, far more important than being given do's and don'ts about prayer in practical terms. The most important of all prayer lessons is to remember and to cultivate this sense that we are children of our Heavenly Father. Now, three quick lessons in conclusion.

A, to know God as our Father makes our prayers real. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that it is actually impossible to pray hypocritically, and it is impossible to pray mechanically if we remember that we are children coming to our Heavenly Father. Our awareness of God as our Father excludes unworthy prayers.

But the only way to come to God is with reality as our Father sincerity, simplicity, and humble dependence. So to know God as our Father makes our prayers real. Be to know God as our Father helps us when our prayers are turned down or rejected.

In other words, when God says no to our petitions, if you wouldn't mind just glancing on, I think I would be allowed to cheat a little bit and glance on to chapter 7. You will remember in verse 9 that Jesus says, "What man if you if his son or daughter for that matter asks him for bread would give him a stone." Or if he asks a fish would give him a snake. So if you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children how much more will your Heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him. It is a little lesson that any human parent will readily understand no human parent would ever dream of giving their child a stone in place of a loaf or a snake in place of a fish because parents only give good gift.

Good parents give good gifts to their children. But have you ever asked yourself this question? Supposing the child asks for a stone. Supposing a child asks for a snake.

Then what does the parent do? Well, the parent says no to the request. Why? Because parents only give good gifts to their children. And therefore God who is greater than any human parent, if through selfishness or folly we ask him for something that he knows either to be not good in itself or not good for others.

Good for us. That is to say a snake or a stone because he loves us with a father's love he

says no. And thank God that he does.

I remember being very much helped when I read a commentary by Alec Martier on the Epistle of James many years ago and he wrote if it were the case that whatever we ask God was pledged to give. I for one would never pray again. If God were bound to give us everything we give says Alec Martier I for one would never pray again.

Why not? Because I would not have sufficient confidence in my own wisdom to ask God for anything. And I think if you consider it he goes on you will agree it would impose an intolerable burden upon frail human wisdom if by his prayer promises God was pledged to give whatever we ask when we ask it and exactly in the terms we ask how could we bear the burden. So thank God he sometimes says no.

Then see the new God is further quickens our trust in his father lip providence. I know that there are some people and maybe some here tonight who find great difficulty in thinking of God is their father because their own human father was not a very good one. Maybe he drank too much maybe he gambled some of the family income away maybe he was cruel to your mother.

Maybe there were other things about him that you certainly didn't admire you wasn't a good father and you found it difficult with that image of fatherhood in your mind to think about God is your father. Understand the Japanese proverb that says there are four things to be afraid of fire storm earthquake and your father. Some fathers are like that.

So what we need to do if our father is not been a very good one is to try and develop in our imagination a picture of a good father. One who is kind loving caring and completely committed to the welfare of his children. Then you know when you think of God like that it will affect our whole relationship to him and I'm going to finish with a quotation from Hudson Taylor the great missionary in England China from the middle of the last century.

Here's something that his biographer wrote. There was no title at Hudson Taylor more love to use for God than father and there was no attitude he more rejoiced to adopt than that. Then that of a trustful child.

I'm taking my children with me Hudson Taylor wrote shortly before leaving England for China and I noticed that it is not difficult for me to remember that the little ones need breakfast in the morning dinner at midday something to eat before they go to bed at night. Indeed I could not forget it and I find it impossible to suppose that I have only father is less tender or mindful than I. I do not believe he wrote that I have only father will ever forget his children. I'm a very poor father myself but it's not my habit to forget my children.

God is a very very good father. It is not his habit to forget his children. So may God help us in our prayers to come to him as our heavenly father with a trustful humility and

simplicity of a little child.

We'll be quiet a moment and turn to God and think of him as a loving heavenly father and ourselves as his children dependent upon his grace concerned for his glory. We do thank you very much heavenly father that in your great grace that we do not begin to deserve you astute to us in Jesus Christ and that through his death on the cross for our sins you offer us a free forgiveness reconciliation with yourself and adoption into your family. Thank you that many many of us here can look up into your face and call you father.

Granted in days to come our prayers may express more truly the simplicity and trust of a little child. We ask it for the glory of your great and worthy name. Amen.

We have a heavenly father who is completely committed to the welfare of his children. You've been listening to the conclusion of a message by John Stott on why and how we should pray. You may know that John Stott wrote many books during his lifetime and each week we recommend one that might help you with our subject.

Today's is entitled The Disciple and you'll find details on the homepage of our website [premierchristianradio.com/JohnStott](http://premierchristianradio.com/JohnStott). The legacy of John Stott lives on and is growing touching every level of society across the world. Today Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries thanks to the vision of John Stott who donated all his book royalties to support this ministry through Langham partnership. To find out about this and other ministries John Stott founded go to [premier.org.uk/JohnStott](http://premier.org.uk/JohnStott) Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stott.

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