

“Real Prayer”

*Matthew 6:5–13; Luke 3:21–22; Matthew 14:22–23;
Luke 6:12; Mark 1:35*

Prayer is the right place to begin building better habits



In this series, we are talking about building habits, good habits, good moral habits, that change us from the outside in, that reorient our hearts so that we love what God loves and love them in God’s way. For our hearts are like a compass that has been knocked about so much it’s no longer accurate – follow it and you’ll end up in the wrong place. It might look like the right place, even feel like the right place, but you’d soon be disappointed. Too many people think they know what the “good life” is and how to get there, but, too late, they realize that they were never headed in the right direction after all.

You can’t think your way to such habits or feel your way to them. Good moral habits, aka virtues, are built from doing, from practicing these habits until they become . . . well, habitual. These practices must rest on a base of sound learning, but without disciplined practice, our habits won’t change.

Jesus practiced what he preached. He was a bundle of good moral habits; one particularly well-depicted in the Gospels is the habit of prayer. Above, you’ll find some of the occasions when Jesus prayed, often withdrawing from others to be alone with the Father in prayer. His time in prayer was rarely for others to see; it was for him and his Father. He taught us all that our prayers are never to be for show, never long nor verbose, but simple and genuine. Our prayers are to reflect our faith—our trust in God.

Prayers built upon trust

In the Bible, trust is a good synonym for faith. When we say that we have faith in Jesus Christ, we mean that we trust Jesus – completely and utterly. Now, all of us are experienced at building trusting relationships with others, or at least trying to. We know that building trust is not easy. It takes time. We risk trusting a person in small matters so that we might come to trust them in large matters. We know that trust is fragile. Trust takes a long time to build but it can disintegrate in a moment of betrayal. We know that trust must be cherished and protected. And . . . we know that hypocrisy and empty talk are not the way to build trust (back to Jesus on prayer in Matthew 6 above).

Prayer is conversation with God; conversation that is to be grounded upon trust. Indeed, prayer builds trust, making it a habit. So, just as we strive to be sincere and forthright with those we trust, there can be no hypocrisy or deceit in our prayers to God. The psalmists are sometimes incredibly angry with God and they don’t hesitate to voice their anger. Of course they don’t hesitate; they trust God.

It is in the context of this deep, abiding trust in God that Jesus’ teaches his disciples the Lord’s Prayer. He points them toward God’s kingdom and teaches them to rely completely upon God, even for the bread they eat. The disciples are to trust in God’s forgiveness, even as they forgive others. Condemned by the Nazis, a modern-day disciple, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, would pray, “I put my trust in your grace and commit my life wholly in your hands.”

Whether we are praising God or thanking him. Whether we are confessing or asking. Whether we come to God with a peaceful heart or an angry one. In all this, we trust that God loves us and hears us and answers us. The basic ingredients of prayer are the ingredients that build trust between two persons: honesty, sincerity, caring, thanking, appreciating, loving, serving . . . add to this list yourself. And in the end, pray with a trusting heart.

It is with such a heart that we are to pray the Lord’s Prayer, even as we pray it together and often aloud. It is the prayer Jesus taught his disciples.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a German Lutheran pastor who publicly opposed the Nazis from 1933 until his execution. In 1943 he was implicated in a plot to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer was jailed by the Nazis and later hung.

‘condemned to death’

O Lord God,
Great is the misery that has come upon me.
My cares overwhelm me: I am at a loss.
O God, comfort and help me.
Give me strength to bear what you send,
And do not let fear rule over me.
As a loving Father, take care of my loved ones,
My wife and children.

O merciful God,
Forgive all the sins I have committed
Against you and against my fellow men.
I put my trust in your grace,
And commit my life wholly into your hands.
Do with me as is best for you,
For that will be best for me too.
Whether I live or die, I am with you,
And you are with me.
Lord, I wait for your salvation
And for your kingdom.

*The Lord's Prayer*¹

Jesus spoke more often about the Kingdom of God than about anything else. Not surprisingly then, the Lord's Prayer is a kingdom prayer. In his sermon, Jesus trains his disciples for the kingdom; in this prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for its arrival.

Prayer is theology and theology is prayer. What we pray for reveals our deepest beliefs about God and ourselves. One way to approach the Lord's Prayer is to think of it as being in two parts. In the first part, we express our desire for the arrival of God's kingdom so that the will of God will be done, so that God's desires for his creation will be realized. This is not some other-worldly thing – God's will is to be done on earth, as it is in the kingdom of heaven. Think of it as the merger, or marriage, of the two – our world is to be transformed into the full expression of God's love and creative power, a world free from sin and death, misery and tragedy.

In the second part of the Lord's Prayer we turn to our own lives, admitting that it is God, not we, who provides today and every day even the basics of life – like bread. We pray that God will shelter us from the trials and tests that come at us so often in a world still rocked by pain and suffering. We even pray for our rescue, not from some abstract idea of evil, but from the foes of God that threaten all goodness and mercy. All this is to be God's doing. Nonetheless, we recognize our own part in this as well. We confess to God our understanding that God's forgiveness of us is somehow bound up with our own forgiveness of others. We are not to be bystanders sitting out God's

war against evil. We are not to be escapists watching the world sink ever deeper into godlessness. We are to be the light to the world, the ones through whom God accomplishes the very things for which we pray!

Where to begin

Building better habits of prayer begins with daily prayer, not a few offhand comments or requests, but a more disciplined commitment. Why not begin with the daily praying of the Lord's prayer? You could add to that the daily practice of Lectio Divina. You “simply” take a passage of Scripture, Psalm 117 or John 14:27 for example, then read it, meditate on it, read it again, pray over it, read it again and contemplate what you have read. The goal is not intellectual or analytical, but to enter into the passage, to embrace the passage as the Living Word – to pray the passage.

However you decide to begin a disciplined habit of prayer, strive to make it a daily habit, for in that you will find transformation and a reoriented heart.

¹ The Lord's Prayer will greatly repay slow praying and thoughtful reflection. Two excellent and brief books on the Lord's Prayer are *The Lord and his Prayer*, by N.T. Wright and *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life*, by William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas.