

LESSON THREE

POWER IN PRAYER

*“But you, when you pray, go into your room,
and when you have shut your door, pray to your
Father who is in the secret place; and your Father
who sees in secret will reward you openly.”*

MATTHEW 6:6 NKJV



REFLECTION

A major news magazine once reported that roughly four out of five adults say they pray at least once a week. The survey also revealed that eighty-five percent of those who pray claim they do *not* regularly receive answers to their prayers. How do you explain this contrast?

SITUATION

Matthew, having introduced Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah-King sent by God, relates how Jesus began his ministry by calling his first disciples and healing many people. Great multitudes began to follow him, so Jesus went up on a mountain to teach them. In this famous "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus set forth the standards of living in God's kingdom. The ability to pray effectively is among the God-honoring practices expected of those who follow Christ.

OBSERVATION

Read Matthew 6:5-15 from the New International Version or the New King James Version.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

⁵ "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you

pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ "This, then, is how you should pray:

"Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

¹⁰ your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from the evil one.'

¹⁴ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

NEW KING JAMES VERSION

⁵ "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ⁶ But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. ⁷ And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

⁸ "Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. ⁹ In this manner, therefore, pray:

Our Father in heaven,
 Hallowed be Your name.
¹⁰ Your kingdom come.
 Your will be done
 On earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,
 As we forgive our debtors.
¹³ 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.

¹⁴ "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

EXPLORATION

1. How did Jesus describe the prayer habits of the religious "hypocrites"?

2. Why do you think Jesus instructed his followers to "close the door" when they pray? What does this tell us our attitude should be when we come before God?

3. What did Jesus say about repetitive or "wordy" prayers?

4. Why did Jesus instruct his followers to address God as Father and not with some other title or form of address?

5. What kind of things did Jesus command us to express before asking God to provide for our needs and desires?

6. How is a forgiving spirit connected to effective praying?

INSPIRATION

We might as well admit it. Prayer is odd, peculiar. Speaking into space. Lifting words into the sky. We can't even get the cable company to answer us, yet God will? The doctor is too busy, but God isn't? We have our doubts about prayer.

And we have our checkered history with prayer: unmet expectations, unanswered requests. We can barely genuflect for the scar tissue on our knees. God, to some, is the ultimate heartbreaker. Why keep tossing the coins of our longings into a silent pool? He jilted me once . . . but not twice.

Oh, the peculiar puzzle of prayer.

We aren't the first to struggle. The sign-up sheet for Prayer 101 contains some familiar names: the apostles John, James, Andrew, and Peter. When one of Jesus' disciples requested, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1), none of the others objected. No one walked away saying, "Hey, I have prayer figured out." The first followers of Jesus needed prayer guidance.

In fact, the only tutorial they ever requested was on prayer. They could have asked for instructions on many topics: bread multiplying, speech making, storm stilling. Jesus raised people from the dead. But a "How to Vacate the Cemetery" seminar? His followers never called for one. But they did want him to do this: "Lord, teach us to pray."

Might their interest have had something to do with the jaw-dropping, eye-popping promises Jesus attached to prayer? "Ask and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7). "If you believe, you will get anything you ask for in prayer" (Matthew 21:22 NCV). Jesus never attached such power to other endeavors. "Plan and it will be given to you." "You will get anything you work for." Those words are not in the Bible. But these are—"If you remain in me and follow my teachings, you can ask anything you want, and it will be given to you" (John 15:7 NCV). . . .

Do you think the disciples made the prayer-power connection? "Lord, teach us to pray *like that*. Teach us to find strength in prayer. To banish fear in prayer. To defy storms in prayer. To come off the mountain of prayer with the authority of a prince."

What about you? The disciples faced angry waves and a watery grave. You face angry clients, a turbulent economy, raging seas of stress and sorrow. "Lord," we still request, "teach us to pray." (From *Before Amen* by Max Lucado.)

REACTION

7. What are your feelings toward prayer? What would you say are some of your greatest impediments to having a more consistent prayer life?

8. Jesus observed that much of prayer is inauthentic and only for show. How much "bogus" praying goes on in churches? In your life?

9. Look again at the specific sequence of prayer Jesus advocated in Matthew 6:5-15. What is significant about this more God-centered way of praying?

10. Passages such as Mark 1:35 and Luke 6:12 give us a window into Christ's personal discipline of prayer. What are the implications for you based on Christ's example?

FOR FURTHER READING

To complete the book of Matthew during this twelve-part study, read Matthew 5:1-7:29. For more Bible passages on prayer, read Nehemiah 1:4-11; John 17:1-26; Ephesians 6:18; and Philippians 4:6-7.