



5 Forms of Prayer

Every moment of every day there are as many reasons to pray as there are people on the planet.

What are some of your reasons for prayer?

How often do these reasons stimulate you to prayer?

The answer to these questions will provide you with an insight to the quality of your relationship with God.

Perhaps as important as why we pray is how we pray, for while there are billions of reasons for prayer there are only five patterns of prayer.

Prayers of Penitence



Perhaps the most important form of prayer is the one we're most likely to avoid. With the importance our world places on self-esteem, it's difficult to spend our time with God confessing sin. Even so, one of the most beloved of God spent his mornings sacrificing for himself and his family, so that no offense would hinder their relationship with the Almighty. We read in Job chapter one:

When the days of their feasting were finished, Job would send for [his family] and sanctify them; he would get up early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job thought, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts," This was Job's customary practice.

Only one with a proper understanding of sin can offer a truly penitent prayer, and only one who is properly broken over his transgression can offer up a confession worthy of forgiveness. Perhaps the finest example of this form of prayer is found in Psalm 51. Probably none of us have sinned as greatly as King David did with Bathsheba. Not only did he not turn from his lust, he entertained it. After entertaining his passions he had her brought to him, then committed an act of adultery. This led to an unwanted pregnancy and, in an attempt to cover-up his ignoble activities, he had an innocent man -- Bathsheba's husband -- murdered. He would have continued to go dark-side had God not sent his prophet, Nathan, to confront the King.

So broken was David over his sin that he penned a psalm of such contrition that it has endured for thousands of years. Take the time soon to read Psalm 51.

Today we do not offer burnt sacrifices to atone for sin. We live in an age where Jesus has opened the throne room of God to our prayers, and it is the prayer of penitence that not only aligns our heart with God's, but also invokes the forgiveness of God made possible by the last blood sacrifice made upon a cross.

Pledge



It's been said that "we are only human." In our world it reminds us of our limits, our inabilities, our sinfulness. Before the fall, however, the phrase "only human" would never have been uttered. Humanity was the "very good" of all creation, we were beings with expansive rather than limited capacity. But we are only human today, sinners one and all. We are desperate and needy and this is where the pledge prayer comes into play.

Often, especially after confession when our burden has been lifted, we come to God because we want something from him. It may be something for ourselves or someone we love, and it is always something of great importance. Instead of asking for grace, we try to bargain with God. We promise to give up our greatest sins (usually one of the ones we just confessed) if God will only grant us our request.

Bargaining with God is rarely a good idea. For starters, we aren't good at keeping our promises. God knows this; and more

importantly we know it too. So we are deliberately making promises to God that we know we will break regardless of our sincerity, and that is never a good plan.

Bargaining can be performed in a way that honors both parties. The best example of such an occasion is found in Genesis 18. In the account three strangers are visiting Abraham. Some believe this to be the Trinity, others a pre-incarnate Jesus with a couple of angels. Regardless of his identity, they inform Abraham they are on their way to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham has family there, and pleads for the cities' salvation.

Abraham approached and said, "Will you sweep away the godly along with the wicked? What if there are fifty godly people in the city? Will you really wipe it out and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty godly people who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing -- to kill the godly with the wicked, treating the godly and the wicked alike! Far be it from you! Will not the judge of the whole earth do what is right?"

So the Lord replied, "If I find in the city of Sodom fifty godly people, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

Abraham then challenges the Lord again, this time asking to save the cities for the sake of 45 godly people, then 30, then 20, and finally 10. The Lord agrees to spare both cities if only 10 godly people can be found. We all know how the story ends, only Lot and his family are saved.

Why was God so willing to entertain Abraham's intervention? For starters, Abraham bargained from a position of humility. Second, he bargained not with any promises of obedience but rather by appealing to God's character. Though Jesus opened the very throne room of God to us so that we may enter in with all our confessions and requests, we must never forget the honor God deserves or the humility in which we ought to approach.

Petition



In the 17th chapter of John's gospel we find Jesus praying in the garden shortly before his arrest, trial and crucifixion. This is the last time he will be with his disciples, and he takes the opportunity to petition the Father on their behalf. Take a moment to read through the passage, and notice how specific he is.

Jesus prays for their protection, their unity, their joy and sanctity. If we were studying this prayer we would want to break down each of these requests, perform a word study and discover the fullness of what Jesus intended for his followers, and it would make a fine sermon. Our goal, however, is of a different nature. Our goal is to discover *how* to petition God, and in this we find our first lesson: be specific.

Seeing the road ahead, Jesus knew what his disciples would face. He prayed *specifically* for those things that would make them successful in their calling. He left nothing of importance out, trusting that if his request were granted, the rest would accompany it.

Our prayers for others should be as well constructed. When we pray for healing, for employment, for financial assistance, for our marriage or families, we too should be specific in our requests – not as to the *how* but as to the *end result*. Is it important for the cancer victim to be healed by God or by modern medicine? What does it matter so long as the person is healed? We should be open to God's decision about how best to answer our petition, and be open to all acceptable solutions.

This is not to say that we cannot include other requests as a part of our petition,

only that we ought to remain open to God's answer. This allows the possibility of God's will to override our own. We may pray for our spouse's promotion at work as a possible solution to helping the family financially, but in reality what we want is financial help, not the promotion. The answer God provides may be a position at another company. We ought to accept the answer God provides even if it isn't what we specifically asked for.

I understand this is in opposition to modern teachings of "name it and claim it." I intended it to be. "Naming and claiming" anything perverts the petition by placing our will over and above God's. Instead of praying for a specific solution, pray in all humility for the root problem instead.

Second, we should note that there is no reluctance to bring these requests to the Father. While we are to always approach the Father in humility, asking for his will (and not ours) to be done, we are to do so without reluctance. Certainly we want to pray in line with God's desires, God himself wants to know our desires as well. There in the Garden Jesus asked that the cup of crucifixion be taken from him – in other words he wanted a different method to the solution of man's salvation – but was humble enough to submit to God's choice. When making this request, he did so with specificity and passion. God wants us to unburden ourselves to him; he wants us to be honest in our requests both mentally and emotionally for this creates a point of connection.

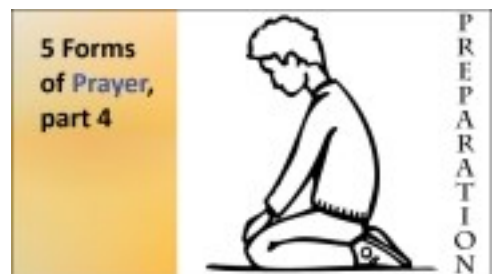
Finally, we should make our requests frequently. I know some believers think that a single request to God is sufficient, after all God hears every one of our prayers. Does God need reminding? Certainly not. Does God not understand the importance of our petitions? Of course he does. Yet again the prayer of petition is to unburden ourselves and uncover our desires to him, and for him. In this regard there cannot be too much prayer, only too little.

Jesus tells a parable about a widow seeking justice. We do not know what wrong was committed against her, only that she considered it important. How do we know it was important to her? Because she re-

peatedly sought justice from a local magistrate. In Luke 18:1-8 we see that a godless judge eventually grants the widows request so that she would stop coming to him to plead her case. Jesus asks, "Won't God give justice to his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?" Likewise, the children of Abraham were only released from Egyptian slavery after their repeated cries had reached God's ears. If it is important to us, we will make every effort, and many attempts, to connect with God and pour our heart out to him.

This is the nature of petitions then: to humbly, specifically, passionately and frequently submit our requests to God, and submitting to however and whenever he wishes to answer them.

Preparation



A life marked by prayer would be incomplete without the prayer of preparation. After confession and the forms of prayer for immediate concerns, this form focuses on the future. Throughout *First and Second Samuel* we see David asking the Lord if he will be victorious before undertaking a battle or chase. Near the end of the gospels Jesus prays before heading to Calvary. But our first observation of this kind of prayer is found in Genesis 32.

After stealing his brother Esau's blessing Jacob fled to his uncle's home, where he worked for many years and married Laban's two daughters, Leigh and Rachel. When he received word that his brother was coming to visit, he assumed the worst and began making preparations. He divided his livestock into two separate groups, thinking that if one was taken the other might escape. He then went to the Lord in prayer.

“O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O Lord, you said to me, ‘Return to your land and to your relatives and I will make you prosper.’ I am not worthy of all the faithful love you have shown your servant. With only my walking stick I crossed the Jordan, but now I have become two camps. Rescue me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, as well as the mothers with their children. But you said, ‘I will certainly make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand on the seashore, too numerous to count.’”

A common theme of biblical prayers is humility. While preparing for his brothers visit/invasion Jacob makes every preparation, never forgetting to spend some time on his knees. At a Bible study or church service everyone expects opening and closing prayers. In the day-to-day living, however, most of our expectations are small if existent at all. How many of God’s people, including pastors, spend time each night or morning preparing for the day ahead in prayer? We may not be facing a great challenge like Jacob, but as Jesus reminds us, each day “has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6.34). How many of those troubles might be avoided, or better responded to, if we’d only spent more time connecting with our Lord?



Praise

If the prayer of penitence is most important for our soul, then the prayer of praise is most important for our heart. If the prayer of penitence is hardest on the ego, then the prayer of praise restores one’s self-worth. For praise-prayers are the expression of gratitude and thanksgiving for God having answered our prayers of forgiveness, intercession and preparation.

It is fitting that as we looked to David for a great example of a penitent prayer that we come back to one of his greatest triumphs – a psalm of praise.

*“I love you, Lord, my source of strength!
The Lord is my high ridge, my stronghold,
my deliverer.*

*My God is my rocky summit where I take
shelter, my shield, the horn that saves me,
and my refuge.*

*I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise,
and I was delivered from my enemies. The
waves of death engulfed me, the currents of
chaos overwhelmed me. The ropes of Sheol
tightened around me, the snares of death
trapped me.*

*In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried
out to my God. From his heavenly temple
he heard my voice; he listened to my cry
for help.*

Unlike all other forms of prayer, praise makes no requests of God. It acknowledges all of God’s greatness, his attributes, his loving care, guidance and provision. It reveres his power, extols his virtue and likens his qualities to the very best of creation.

The contrast of praise with penitence continues as a praise-prayer replaces the humility of confession with the joys of God’s love. We understand how much God loves us, and how important that love is, when we focus our attention on the one we serve. But the two forms also have much in common. One points to God’s willingness to forgive, while the later points to his power to save.

By keeping these types of prayer in mind we are on the road to a more satisfying prayer life and, more importantly, able to build more connections between ourselves and the lover of our souls.

Conclusion

Whenever I travel to guest speak I spend time in the prayer of preparation, asking the Lord to prepare me as a messenger of His Word. At the beginning of each session I always open in a word of prayer and similarly close each session in prayer. It isn’t anything that most pastors and Christian speakers wouldn’t do, and it is entirely expected.

What is difficult to remember, and to make a habit of, is praying throughout the day. Author Cowley Fathers keeps a schedule most of us can relate to.

Cowley Fathers had just been holding Retreats for Clergy of the English Church. In the course of a discussion with author Andrew Murray he used the expression – “the distraction of business,” and it came out that he found it one of the great difficulties he and others had to deal with. Of himself, he said that by the vows of his Order he was bound to give himself especially to prayer. But he found it exceedingly difficult. Every day he had to be at four different points of the town he lived in; his predecessor had left him the charge of a number of committees where he was expected to do all the work; it was as if everything conspired to keep him from prayer.

The challenges of living affect us all, but they are never meant to be an excuse for not spending time in prayer. Hopefully this series has inspired you to pray with more purpose and with more frequency. I’ll close with these words from John Murray’s book, *The Ministry of Intercession*:

Let all lovers of souls, and all workers in the service of the gospel, take courage. Time spent in prayer will yield more than that given to work. Prayer alone gives work its worth and its success. Prayer opens the way for God Himself to do His work in us and through us. Let your chief work, as God’s messengers, be intercession: in it we secure the presence and power of God to go with us.