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Prayer / John 15:7-8

Last week we began asking one of the most important questions a believer can ask: How can I pray effectively? We discovered that effective prayer is far more than simply presenting God with a list of requests. Prayer begins long before we ever utter the words, "Lord, give me..." It begins with the condition of our hearts. We learned that God delights to answer the prayers of those who humbly submit themselves to His will rather than insisting upon their own. We saw that genuine faith is not confidence that God will always do what we desire, but confidence that He will always do what is best. We discovered that cherished, unconfessed sin hinders our fellowship with God and that effective prayer requires honest confession and repentance. Finally, we concluded that the highest purpose of prayer is not merely to receive God's gifts but to glorify the God who gives them. In other words, prayer is never about persuading God to accomplish our plans; it is about allowing Him to transform our hearts until our desires increasingly reflect His own.

Yet this raises another important question. Suppose our hearts have been prepared. Suppose we sincerely desire God's will, trust His promises, confess our sins, and seek His glory above our own. How, then, should we actually pray? Does Scripture simply leave us to figure it out on our own? Thankfully, it does not. The Bible not only teaches us the kind of heart that pleases God but also gives practical instruction concerning the manner in which His children are to approach Him in prayer.

This morning we will examine four additional characteristics of effective prayer. We will learn what it means to pray in the name of Jesus, why praise and thanksgiving should accompany every prayer, how right relationships and a

forgiving spirit affect our fellowship with God, and finally, how the Holy Spirit and the Word of God work together to shape our prayers according to the Father's will. These are not four new formulas designed to persuade God to answer us. Rather, they are the natural expressions of a heart that has already been transformed by the truths we studied last week. Together they complete the biblical picture of effective prayer and show us how believers can confidently approach the throne of grace, knowing that God delights to hear and answer the prayers of His children according to His perfect wisdom and love.

Praying in the Name of Jesus

To come before the living and holy God is one of the greatest privileges ever granted to mankind. Scripture declares that "God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all" ([1 John 1:5](#)). He is perfectly holy, infinitely righteous, and utterly free from every trace of evil. By contrast, Isaiah reminds us that even our "righteous acts are like filthy rags" before Him ([Isaiah 64:6](#)). When we honestly examine our own hearts, we quickly discover how far we fall short of His perfect holiness. Left to ourselves, we are often lovers of self rather than lovers of God—proud, ungrateful, unforgiving, and consumed by the pleasures of this world ([2 Timothy 3:1–5](#)). Such sinners have no claim upon the presence of the Creator and Sustainer of all things, the One through whom all things were made and in whom all things hold together ([Colossians 1:16–17](#)). It is almost beyond comprehension that creatures formed from the dust of the earth should be invited to "enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise" ([Psalm 100:4](#)). Yet this privilege rests not upon our own righteousness but entirely upon the grace of God revealed through Jesus Christ. Because we are sinful and God is perfectly holy, we possess no independent right to enter His presence. We require a Mediator—One who can bring guilty sinners before a righteous God [1].

God Himself has graciously provided that Mediator in His Son, Jesus Christ. Under the Old Covenant, the priests continually offered animal sacrifices to

make atonement for the sins of the people ([Leviticus 4:20, 26, 31](#)). Those sacrifices pointed forward to Christ, but they could never fully cleanse the conscience of the worshiper and therefore had to be offered again and again ([Hebrews 9:9-10](#)). In glorious contrast, Jesus Christ, the spotless Lamb of God, offered Himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin. Having accomplished redemption through His death and resurrection, He ascended to the Father's right hand, where He now appears in God's presence on behalf of His people. Every prayer we offer in His name rests entirely upon the finished work of Calvary and the certainty that His once-for-all sacrifice has secured every spiritual blessing for those who belong to Him ([Ephesians 1:3](#)) [2]. As Paul triumphantly declares, "Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us" ([Romans 8:33-34](#)). Likewise, Hebrews assures us that "He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them" ([Hebrews 7:25](#)). Indeed, "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" ([1 Peter 3:18](#)).

There are at least two reasons why believers need Jesus Christ as their Advocate before the Father. The first concerns our enemy. Although Christ continually intercedes for His people, Satan continually seeks to discourage God's children from approaching God. As "the accuser of our brothers and sisters" ([Revelation 12:10](#)), he delights in reminding believers of their past failures, convincing them they are too sinful, too inconsistent, and too unworthy to come before a holy God. He whispers that God could never receive people who have failed so often, tempting them to remain distant from the very throne of grace where mercy is found. Yet this is precisely why Christ's intercession is such wonderful news. Every accusation Satan levels against the believer has already been answered by the finished work of Jesus Christ. Our Advocate does not deny our guilt; He presents His once-for-all sacrifice, declaring that the debt of our sin has been fully paid [3]. Therefore, we approach God not because we are worthy, but because Christ is worthy.

The second reason we need Christ as our Advocate is even more fundamental. Even more foundational than Satan's accusations is God's perfect holiness. Scripture declares that "God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all" ([1 John 1:5](#)). A perfectly holy God cannot simply overlook sin or set aside His justice. His righteousness demands that sin be fully atoned for before guilty sinners can enter His presence [4]. Fallen humanity cannot restore itself to God's favor because it can offer no atonement for sin, nor can God exercise mercy in ways that contradict His justice, holiness, and truth [5]. Only One could satisfy both the holiness of God and the justice of God while extending mercy to guilty sinners. That One is Jesus Christ. As we have already seen, the repeated sacrifices of the Old Covenant could never fully cleanse the conscience of the worshiper ([Hebrews 9:9-10](#)); they pointed forward to the perfect sacrifice that was still to come. Jesus Christ alone, the spotless Lamb of God, offered Himself once for all ([Hebrews 10:10](#)), fully satisfying the justice of God. Having accomplished redemption through His death and resurrection, He now appears in the presence of the Father on our behalf ([Hebrews 9:24](#)), forever living to intercede for those who come to God through Him ([Hebrews 7:25](#)).

Therefore, praying "in Jesus' name" is far more than a familiar phrase attached to the end of our prayers. It is the humble confession that we possess no merit by which to approach God. Every request we bring rests entirely upon the person of Christ, His perfect righteousness, His once-for-all atoning sacrifice, and His continual intercession on our behalf. We come boldly before the throne of grace not because we deserve an audience with the King, but because the Son has opened the way, and the Father delights to receive all who come to Him through Jesus Christ. Perhaps some of you have not prayed for weeks because you feel unworthy. You remember your failures. You remember your sins. Satan has convinced you that God no longer wants to hear from you. My friend, if you belong to Christ, your acceptance before God has never depended upon your performance. It rests entirely upon Jesus Christ. Don't stay away from God because you have failed. Run to Him because Christ has already paid your debt

Praise and Thanksgiving

Matthew 6:9 NIV

“This, then, is how you should pray:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,”

Because Jesus Christ has opened the way into God's presence, believers are invited to "approach God's throne of grace with confidence" ([Hebrews 4:16](#)). Yet confidence should never be confused with casualness. The very privilege of drawing near to God ought to fill our hearts with reverence, awe, and humble gratitude. We come boldly, not because we are worthy, but because Christ has made us welcome. Standing before the Creator of heaven and earth, we remember that apart from His grace our own righteousness is nothing more than filthy rags. The first words of the Lord's Prayer therefore remind us that before we present our requests, our hearts should first be occupied with God Himself.

Jesus begins prayer by teaching us to pray, "Hallowed be Your name." In Scripture, God's name represents His very nature and character—His infinite wisdom, sovereign power, perfect holiness, unfailing love, justice, mercy, and faithfulness [6]. To hallow His name is to recognize Him as infinitely worthy of our worship, adoration, and praise. It begins with grateful hearts that rejoice not only in the wonders of creation but even more in the greatness of His redeeming grace, where His wisdom, love, justice, power, and faithfulness shine most brilliantly [7]. Yet hallowing God's name is more than words spoken in prayer. It is a life lived in continual reverence, consciously acknowledging His presence in every thought, every word, and every action [8]. God's name is most truly honored when His people gladly submit themselves to His will, for to profess

Him as Lord while living in deliberate disobedience is to dishonor the very name we claim to revere [9].

Honoring God's name is expressed through both praise and thanksgiving. In a culture that continually exalts self, it is easy to approach God with little more than a list of personal requests. Yet Scripture teaches that before presenting our petitions, we should first fix our hearts upon the greatness of the One to whom we pray. The psalmist writes,

Psalm 100:4 NIV

Enter his gates with thanksgiving

and His courts with praise;

give thanks to Him and praise His name.

These words remind us that we are entering the presence of the King. Not merely a king among many, but the King of kings and Lord of lords, the sovereign Ruler of heaven and earth, the One who declared, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me" ([Matthew 28:18](#)). While Scripture invites us to "present your requests to God" rather than be anxious ([Philippians 4:6-7](#)), it also reminds us to come with humble hearts, recognizing that we do not always know what is best to ask. Our heavenly Father, however, knows our every need and faithfully supplies what is best according to His perfect wisdom and love. Therefore, before we ask for His gifts, we first worship the Giver. We praise Him because He is our Creator, our Sustainer, and our Redeemer, who loved us so greatly that He gave His only Son to atone for our sins.

Throughout Scripture, praise and thanksgiving are the natural language of God's people. We are invited to "come before Him with thanksgiving and extol Him with music and song" ([Psalm 95:2](#)). Through Christ, we continually "offer to God a sacrifice of praise" ([Hebrews 13:15](#)), while the message of Christ dwelling richly within us overflows in "psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing

to God with gratitude in your hearts" ([Colossians 3:16–17](#)). Yet praise and thanksgiving are not identical. Praise arises from awe as we behold God's greatness and adore Him simply for who He is. Thanksgiving, on the other hand, responds to His gracious works in our lives, joyfully acknowledging His countless blessings and bearing witness to His faithfulness before the world [10]. Both find their richest expression when they are grounded in the unchanging character of God—His righteousness, holiness, faithfulness, steadfast love, covenant mercy, and above all, His saving work through Jesus Christ [11].

What does my prayer life reveal? If someone secretly listened to your prayers for one week, would they conclude that you delight in God—or merely that you need things from God? Would they hear praise before petitions? Thanksgiving before requests? Worship before wants?"

Right Relationships and Forgiveness

Matthew 6:12 NIV

And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Matthew 6:14–15 NIV

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

Having first fixed our hearts upon God's greatness through praise and thanksgiving, Jesus now turns our attention to our relationships with others. We cannot sincerely ask God for mercy while refusing to show mercy ourselves. Those who have received the grace of God should increasingly reflect that same grace in the way they treat others. Thus, when we approach God's throne of

grace, we come not only seeking His forgiveness but also with hearts that are willing to forgive those who have sinned against us.

This principle runs throughout the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus teaches that sin is not limited to outward actions such as murder but also includes sinful attitudes of the heart, such as anger, bitterness, and contempt toward a brother or sister ([Matthew 5:21-22](#)). The Apostle John explains why this matters:

1 John 4:20 NIV

Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.

From our relationship with God we learn to love not only Him but also those around us. Indeed, Jesus teaches that if we are presenting our gift at the altar and remember that a brother or sister has something against us, we should first leave our gift, go and be reconciled, and only then return to offer our worship ([Matthew 5:23-24](#)). God desires reconciled hearts before religious activity. Such reconciliation often requires humble confession of our own failures, a willingness to seek peace, and a readiness to forgive those who have wronged us.

Peter once asked Jesus, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" ([Matthew 18:21](#)). Jesus replied, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" ([Matthew 18:22](#) NIV). The Lord was not giving His disciples a number to count but teaching that forgiveness is never to be measured or limited. As those who have been forgiven an immeasurable debt by God, we are called to extend that same spirit of forgiveness to others whenever they sin against us.

Living in a world that often operates by the principle of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," Christ's command to forgive can seem almost impossible. Our natural instinct cries out for justice. We wonder, Where is the justice in extending forgiveness without retaliation? Does forgiveness minimize the

seriousness of the offense or ignore the pain inflicted upon the innocent? Even believers wrestle with anger, hurt, and the desire to see wrongs made right. Yet the gospel calls us to something far greater than human revenge. It calls us to extend the same grace and mercy that we ourselves have received from God.

To illustrate this truth, Jesus told the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant ([Matthew 18:23–35](#)). A servant who owed his king an unimaginable debt—far beyond anything he could ever repay—fell before him pleading for mercy. Moved with compassion, the king completely cancelled the debt. Yet that same servant immediately sought out a fellow servant who owed him only a tiny fraction by comparison. Rather than showing the mercy he himself had received, he violently demanded repayment and had the man thrown into prison. When the king learned what had happened, he condemned the unforgiving servant, not because justice was unimportant, but because the servant had failed to extend the very mercy that had transformed his own life. Jesus concludes the parable with these sobering words:

Matthew 18:35 NIV

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Why, then, should we forgive someone who has wounded us so deeply? Because no one has ever sinned against us as greatly as we have sinned against God. Every offense committed against us, however painful, is small when compared with the immeasurable debt that Christ has freely forgiven through His death on the cross. Forgiveness does not deny that wrong has been done, nor does it excuse injustice. Rather, it entrusts justice to God while releasing personal bitterness and extending the same grace we ourselves have received. Those who have truly experienced God's forgiveness cannot remain unchanged; they increasingly become people who forgive from the heart, just as Christ has forgiven them.

Is there someone whose name immediately comes to mind this morning? Someone you have refused to forgive? Someone whose name still stirs anger in your heart? Perhaps the greatest obstacle to your prayer life isn't unanswered questions but an unforgiving spirit.

Praying According to the Spirit and the Word

Effective prayer requires alignment with both God's Spirit and His Word—two complementary realities that work together to shape your prayers according to God's will. When you ask anything according to His will, He hears you, and because He hears you, you can have confidence that He will answer according to His perfect wisdom and purpose ([1 John 5:14–15](#)). This is the foundation of effective prayer: not persuading God to adopt your plans, but bringing your desires into harmony with His. His revealed will is found throughout Scripture, making God's Word the primary guide for knowing how to pray [12]. As Jesus promised, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" ([John 15:7](#)). In contrast, prayers driven by selfish ambition or sinful motives do not receive God's approval ([James 4:3](#)).

The Holy Spirit becomes indispensable because, despite having God's Word, you do not always know what God's specific will is in every circumstance. There are seasons when your understanding is limited, your burdens are overwhelming, and you simply do not know how to pray. In those moments, the Spirit graciously intercedes for you with groanings too deep for words, praying in perfect harmony with the Father's will ([Rom. 8:26–27](#)). Because the Spirit knows the mind of God completely, He teaches and directs you in prayer, enabling you to bring requests before the Father that are increasingly shaped by His purposes rather than your own desires [13]. As you yield yourself to the Spirit's leading, He transforms your prayers so that they reflect God's heart and will [14].

One of the most reliable ways to pray according to God's will is to pray the Scriptures themselves. God's promises reveal His character and His purposes, giving believers confidence as they approach His throne [15]. When King David prayed that God would establish his throne forever, he anchored his request in God's own promise: "And now, O Lord God, the word that You have spoken concerning Your servant and concerning his house, establish it forever, and do as You have spoken." David did not invent a promise; he prayed God's promise back to Him in faith. Likewise, believers can confidently stand upon the promises God has revealed to His people, knowing that His Word never fails. Whether the Spirit leads us through ordinary words or, according to one's theological convictions, through other expressions of prayer, He always directs believers into deeper communion with God and greater conformity to His will. When Spirit-led prayer is joined with Scripture-shaped prayer, the believer approaches God with both the truth of His revealed Word and the guidance of His indwelling Spirit. Together they provide a powerful, God-centered pattern for effective prayer in every circumstance [4].

Conclusion

Over these past two weeks we have discovered that effective prayer is not primarily about learning the right words to say or following a particular formula. It is about becoming the kind of person God delights to hear. Prayer begins with a heart that has been transformed by His grace—a heart that humbly submits to His will, trusts His promises, confesses its sins, seeks His glory above its own, approaches the Father through the merits of Jesus Christ alone, overflows with praise and thanksgiving, extends forgiveness to others, and depends upon both the Holy Spirit and the Word of God for guidance. None of these characteristics earn us the right to be heard. We possess no merit of our own by which to approach the throne of a holy God. Our confidence rests entirely upon Jesus Christ, who through His once-for-all sacrifice has opened the way into the

Father's presence and now lives forever to intercede for His people. Every effective prayer begins and ends with Him.

At the same time, these two sermons remind us that prayer is never about persuading God to accomplish our will. It is about bringing our hearts into harmony with His. As we grow in our knowledge of God's Word, yield ourselves to the leading of His Spirit, and walk in humble obedience, our desires increasingly become His desires. When we ask according to His will, we may pray with confidence, knowing that our heavenly Father hears every prayer and faithfully accomplishes all that He has purposed in His perfect wisdom and love. This also reminds us that while God is able to do all things and still performs mighty works today, He has not promised to remove every burden or heal every sickness in this present life. Sometimes His answer is immediate deliverance. Sometimes He calls us to wait. Sometimes He accomplishes His greatest work by giving sustaining grace rather than removing the trial. In every circumstance, however, His answer is perfect, His wisdom never fails, and His love for His children never changes. Our faith therefore rests not merely in what God can do, but in who God is.

As we leave this place today, may we never lose the incredible privilege that has been given to us. Because of Jesus Christ, sinful men and women are invited to approach the Creator and Sustainer of the universe as beloved children coming before their heavenly Father. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace—not with proud or demanding hearts, but with hearts that delight to know His will, trust His promises, seek His glory, and rest in His unfailing goodness. For the greatest blessing of prayer is not merely that our requests are answered, but that through prayer we draw ever nearer to the God who loved us enough to give His Son, and who delights to fellowship with His redeemed people forever.

Footnotes

- [1] Richard E. Averbek, “Offerings and Sacrifices,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 580.
- [2] Adam Clarke and Samuel Dunn, *Christian Theology* (London; Glasgow; Dublin: Thomas Tegg & Son; R. Griffin & Co.; Tegg, Wise, & Co., 1835), 133.
- [3] Thomas Brooks, *The Complete Works of Thomas Brooks*, ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; G. Herbert, 1867), 396–397.
- [4] Hans K. LaRondelle, *LaRondelle Articles and Lectures* (Bradentown, FL: Barbara LaRondelle, 2015), 2.
- [5] Charles Simeon, *Horae Homileticae: James to Jude* (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1833), 373–374.
- [6] Thomas Watson, *The Select Works of the Rev. Thomas Watson, Comprising His Celebrated Body of Divinity, in a Series of Lectures on the Shorter Catechism, and Various Sermons and Treatises* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1855), 406.
- [7] J. I. Packer, *Praying the Lord’s Prayer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 43–45.
- [8] John MacArthur, *Matthew*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1985–1989), 1:378.
- [9] Ibid.
- [10] Hughes Oliphant Old, *Leading in Prayer: A Workbook for Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 291.
- [11] John Frederick, “Praise and Thanksgiving,” in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. Douglas Mangum et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).
- [12] Got Questions Ministries, *Got Questions? Bible Questions Answered* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2002–2013).

[13] Ian McNaughton, *Opening up 2 Thessalonians*, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2008), 53.

[14] Joyce Meyer, *The Power of Simple Prayer: How to Talk with God about Everything* (New York, NY: FaithWords, 2007).

[15] Ibid.