

Steps to Successful Prayer, Part 1

Scripture: Matthew 6:9–13

Code: B120502

Part 1: Start with Praise

“Pray then in this way: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.’”
(Matthew 6:9-13)

Study the exemplary prayers in Scripture and you cannot help noticing that all of them are brief and simple. Prayer that is heartfelt, urgent, and unfeigned *must* be of that style. Verbiage and windbaggy are badges of insincerity, especially in prayer. The prayer of the publican in Luke 18:13 is as short and to the point as possible: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Then there’s the prayer of the thief on the cross: “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” (Luke 23:42). Those prayers are cut from the same cloth as Peter’s cry for help when he was walking on water—sometimes cited as the shortest prayer in the Bible: “Lord, save me” (Matthew 14:30).

Scripture records very few long prayers. Much of Psalm 119 is addressed to God in the language of prayer, and of course, that is the Bible’s longest chapter. Other than that, Nehemiah 9:5-38 contains the longest prayer in all of Scripture, and it can be read aloud with expression in less than seven minutes. John 17 is the New Testament’s longest prayer. It’s also the longest of Jesus’ recorded prayers, just twenty-six verses long.

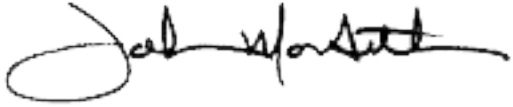
We know, of course, that Jesus prayed much longer prayers than that, because Scripture records several instances where He prayed in solitude for extended periods of time (Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46). When it suited Him, He would even spend the entire night in prayer (Luke 6:12). It was His habit thus to pray, both privately and with His disciples (John 18:2). And the pattern was clear: His long prayers were the ones He prayed in private. His public prayers were perfect examples of crisp, forthright, plain speaking.

Listening to Jesus pray and observing His constant dependence on private prayer gave the disciples an appetite for prayer. So they asked Him, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). He responded by repeating the very same model prayer He gave in the Sermon on the Mount. We call it the Lord’s Prayer. We ought rather to think of it as the Disciples’ Prayer, because its centerpiece is a petition for divine forgiveness, something Jesus would never need to pray for. Like all great praying, it is both succinct and unpretentious. There is not a wasted word, not a hint of vain repetition, and not a single note of ostentation or ceremony in the whole prayer:

And He said to them, “When you pray, say: ‘Father, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation’” (Luke 11:2-4).

That prayer was a pattern for the disciples to follow, not a mantra to be recited without engaging the mind or passions. The various elements of Jesus' prayer are all reminders of what our praying ought to include: praise, petition, penitence, and a plea for grace in our sanctification. Those are not only the key elements of prayer, they are also some of the principal features of authentic worship.

And that's where we'll start in our next post.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Montague". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

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