

Steps to Successful Prayer, Part 2

Scripture: 1 John 5:14

Code: B120504

Part 2: Stifle Ungodly Presumptions

The worldly excess and spiritual shallowness of prosperity preachers and charismatic faith healers are easy to spot. It's a man-made, man-centered theology powered by extreme greed—one that encourages followers to make outrageous demands for prosperity and personal gain, reducing Almighty God to little more than a vending machine.

Watching on television, it looks spiritually foreign and wicked, because it is.

But are we as quick to spot the same trends cropping up in our own prayer lives? Do we even notice when our prayers become more and more like shopping lists that show little care or concern for God's glory or His will? Or are we forgetting the model of prayer Christ gave His disciples and instead reflecting this era of self-focused, subjective, felt-needs-oriented religion?

Today multitudes think of prayer as nothing more than a way to get whatever they want from God. Prayer is reduced to a superstitious means of gain—and some will tell you that God is obligated to deliver the goods. Religious television is full of charlatans who insist that God *must* grant whatever you ask for if you can muster enough “faith” and refuse to entertain any “doubt.” *Faith* in their lexicon is a kind of blind credulity, usually bolstered by some kind of “positive confession.” *Doubt*, as they might describe it, is any qualm—even if it's rational and biblical—about whether the thing you desire is in accord with the will of God. Those, of course, are not biblical definitions of faith and doubt. Nor can anyone's prayer legitimately be called a “prayer offered in faith” (James 5:15) if it is contrary to the will of God.

Charismatics are not the only ones who see prayer as nothing more than a kind of utilitarian wish list. Plenty of mainstream evangelicals and old-style fundamentalists seem confused about the purpose of prayer, too. John R. Rice, an influential fundamentalist pastor, wrote a best-selling book in 1942 titled *Prayer—Asking and Receiving*. He wrote, “Prayer is not praise, adoration, meditation, humiliation nor confession, but *asking*. . . . Praise is not prayer, and prayer is not praise. Prayer is *asking*. . . . Adoration is not prayer, and prayer is not adoration. Prayer is always asking. It is not anything else but asking.”^[1]

There are several problems with that perspective. First, Jesus' model prayer is more than merely “asking.” It does include that; there are petitions for daily bread (the barest of material needs) and forgiveness (the most urgent of spiritual needs). But the model prayer Jesus gave His disciples also includes at least four of the five elements Dr. Rice wanted to eliminate from his definition of prayer: praise, adoration, humiliation, and confession.

Remove praise and penitence from the Lord's Prayer and you have gutted it. Insist that proper prayer “is not anything else but asking” and you overthrow one of the central lessons we learn from Jesus'

example: that prayer is first and foremost an act of *worship*. Even worse, such teaching sets up a kind of role reversal between the one praying and the God to whom he prays.

The Bible teaches that God is sovereign and we are His slaves. Name-it-and-claim-it theology teaches that man is sovereign and God is his servant. The person praying thinks he is in the demand-and-command position, with God in the role of the servant who is obligated to cough up whatever we ask for. As I've pointed out [elsewhere](#), that has more in common with pagan cargo cults than with biblical Christianity.

Prayer is much more than merely asking and receiving. It is indeed a great privilege to come boldly before the throne of grace and to let our requests be made known to God (Hebrews 4:16; Philippians 4:6). Scripture repeatedly promises that if we ask for anything in faith, God *will* answer—meaning if we ask in accord with God's will as prompted by His Spirit, He will always graciously and generously respond (Matthew 7:7-11; 17:20; 21:22; Mark 11:24; James 1:6; 1 John 3:22). He often grants our requests “exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20, KJV).

But the nature of a truly *faithful* prayer is clearly spelled out in 1 John 5:14: “This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything *according to His will*, He hears us” (emphasis added). In other words, the promise of answered prayer is not an unqualified blank check. The promise is made only to faithful, obedient, sober-minded, biblically informed Christians whose prayers are in harmony with the will of God. It's not a guarantee of cargo to every gullible or superstitious religious enthusiast who uses Jesus' name as if it were an abracadabra. Jesus said, “*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, emphasis added).

That's because far from being merely a wish list, godly prayer is fundamentally an act of *worship*. It is an expression of our praise, our unworthiness, our desire to see God's will fulfilled, and our utter dependence on Him for all our needs. Thus every aspect of prayer is an act of worship. That includes the petitions we make, because when we properly make our requests known to God—without anxiety, through prayer and supplication, and with thanksgiving (Philippians 4:6)—we are acknowledging His sovereignty, confessing our own total reliance on His grace and power, and looking to Him as Lord and Provider and Ruler of the universe—not as some kind of celestial Santa. Proper prayer is pure worship, even when we are making requests.

The Godward focus of Jesus' model prayer is impossible to miss. The prayer starts with praise of God's name. It expresses a willingness for His Kingdom to come and His will to be done. Pure worship thus precedes and sets the context for supplication. Those opening lines establish the focal point of the prayer: *the glory of God and His kingdom*. In other words, the supplicant is concerned first of all not for his personal wish list but for the honor of God and the extension of His kingdom. Everything else fits into that context, so that the whole agenda of the prayer is determined by the kingdom and glory of God. That is perhaps the most important perspective to keep in mind in all our praying.

Jesus said, “Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13). The purpose of all legitimate prayer is not to fulfill the felt needs or material desires of the one praying, but to acknowledge the sovereignty of God and to magnify His glory. Prayer is not about getting what I want, but about the fulfillment of God's will. The proper objective of prayer is not to enlarge my borders, build my empire, or expand my wallet but to further the kingdom

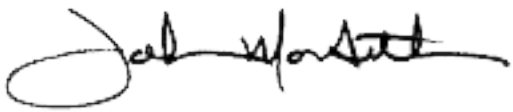
of God. The point is not to elevate my name but to hallow God's name. Everything in prayer revolves around who God is, what God wants, and how God is to be glorified. That is the sum and substance of proper praying.

Any prayers that are self-consuming, self-indulgent, self-aggrandizing; any prayers that seek whatever I want no matter what God wants; any prayers that suggest God *must* deliver because I have demanded it—those are prayers that take His name in vain. Such praying is an egregious sin against the nature of God, against the will of God, and against the Word of God.

“Name it, claim it” prayers; the notion that God wants you always healthy, wealthy, prosperous, and successful; and lists of selfish requests are all quite at odds with the spirit of Jesus' model prayer. Such requests are expressly excluded from the many promises that God will hear and answer our prayers (James 4:3). The faulty belief that underlies all such praying is no small error. It is rooted in a serious misunderstanding of the nature of God.

Because prayer is an act of worship, to offer a prayer based on such a heinous perversion of God's character is tantamount to worshiping a false god. To put it bluntly, when someone presents God with a wish list rooted in greed, materialism, or other expressions of pure self-interest, then demands that God deliver the goods as if He were a genie, that is no prayer at all. It is an act of blasphemy. It is as abominable as the crassest form of pagan worship.

Instead, we must come to the Lord humbly as worshipers, seeking His will and not our own. Successful prayer isn't about getting what you want from God—it's about cementing His glory and honor into their proper, primary place, and submitting your desires and affections to Him. That starts with praise, but it doesn't end there. Over the next several days, we'll look closer at the model of the Lord's Prayer, drawing out some basic, practical steps you can take to have a disciplined, biblical prayer life.



[i] John R. Rice, *Prayer—Asking and Receiving* (Muphreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, 1942), 29

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2024 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).