

## How Can I Pray?

One of Jesus' disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." (Luke 11:1). They wanted to pray, but knew that they didn't know how. Jesus was so obviously so close to God that surely he could teach them. And Jesus replied to this request by teaching them what has always been called the Lord's Prayer.

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.**

Jesus' first response was not to describe elaborate methods, or to outline a whole theology of prayer, but simply to give his followers one short prayer to say. Many saints have written whole volumes about this prayer, showing how it contains everything the Christian needs to know and to do in order to pray to God. In this very short introduction to Christian prayer, we will keep referring to Jesus' words as the pattern of all prayer.

### What is prayer?

*Prayer is the Christian's relationship with the heavenly Father.*

We can pray, or even desire to pray, only because God himself is calling us into relationship with him. The term "prayer" includes both the corporate worship Christians do in church services and the private prayer, Bible study, and meditation they do at home. Here we will consider only "private" prayer.

**Our Father.** These two little words lay out the whole groundwork for Christian prayer. It is a friendship between persons, a child-parent

relationship, and a dialogue. God is the "senior partner" in this relationship. He is in charge, both in calling us to pray at all, and in teaching us how to do so. The "our" is important too. Even when I close the door and pray privately, I am never alone, but am praying as one member of the great family of God. Remembering these two simple principles can help us to avoid some serious pitfalls, and can help us to deal with the mysteries and problems we will encounter in the life of Christian prayer.

### What does prayer include?

Many people have gotten the idea as children that "praying" simply means "asking God for what you want." If we remember that prayer is first of all *a relationship*, we will understand that a great deal more is involved. One traditional teaching lists five parts, or dimensions, which should always be a part of our private prayers. These are all included in the Lord's Prayer, but it may be clearer to list them this way. They are **adoration, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, and petition.**

**Adoration:** worshiping God because he is God. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." This is the hardest and highest part of prayer and the last one we can even begin to learn well, but it is listed first because it is the most important. Adoration comes first in my prayers even before I really learn what it means.

**Thanksgiving:** thanking God for all his goodness, to us and to others. If we remember that we owe everything we are and have to our Father, we will find it easy to remember to thank him. The more we pray, the more we will find to thank him for.

**Confession or contrition:** we are sinners, and when we come before God we always need to say that we are sorry for the ways we have offended and disappointed him. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." In private prayer we need to be very

specific when we know we have done something wrong, and tell God we are sorry.

**Intercession:** prayer for others. This is implied in the "our": we always pray as part of a family, and are taught to love our neighbors as ourselves. Therefore we will want to ask God's blessing on those near us, on those we know are in need, and (because Jesus told us to pray for our enemies) especially on anyone with whom we are having problems. Every Christian prays for others as part of loving them; for some, intercession is a very central part of their calling and their work for God.

**Petition:** the prayer of "asking God" is here, but it comes last. "Give us this day our daily bread." "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." We may, can, and should ask God for what we need. Notice that it is give *us*, though sometimes I may need to pray "Please give *me*." We pray *first* "Thy will be done," and *then* "give us." Then we will understand better when it is right to pray for healing, or whether it is right to pray for something like a new job.

### But . . . but . . . but . . .

Almost everyone learning to pray will meet the same questions. A brief, general answer may not help very much, but at least it may point the beginner in a useful direction, and assure him or her that other people have asked the same things.

**"It seems so unreal to try to talk to God."** This is one of the reasons why the best place to begin to learn to pray is by taking part in public worship. There you can be caught up in the worshiping community. When you come home to try to pray by yourself, be quiet, remember how you worshiped in church, and then just *do it* -- address God as your Father. If you want to love God, and want to believe that he loves you, then just ask him to teach you how to find him.

Another approach is to read some part of the Bible slowly and thoughtfully, to let God speak to you first, and then begin to respond to him when you are ready. This can lead into Christian meditation or deep reflection on God's word. Perhaps those who have grown up with the Internet will have less trouble carrying on a conversation with someone they can neither see nor hear, and who is "out there somewhere."

**"I get so distracted."** This one doesn't go away! One element in this problem is that everyone needs to learn basic techniques of concentration, single-mindedness, and discipline. There are many ways to do this, some "religious" and others not, and many of them can help. Another is that some measure of flightiness is part of our human condition.

However, there is one specific "answer" that helps many people. When some particular thing is bothering you and interfering with your prayer, you ought to make *that thing* the subject of your prayer and offer it to God. The "distraction" may well be God himself telling you to pay attention to this problem.

**"Will God answer my prayer?"** Aha! This is the big one, and every child who has ever prayed for a new bicycle has asked it. Here we meet all the mysteries of God's will and human freedom, the problem of evil, the problem of time, the problem of God's patience with human weakness.

We have already seen that prayer is primarily *relationship* rather than *petition*. In that sense, prayer is always "answered" in some way. He has promised to hear our prayers, and we know that he is greater and wiser than we are. If his answer is "No," we can still trust him.

But the problem of unanswered or refused, petitionary prayer is real. Jesus tells us that God answers prayer. Jesus himself prayed in Gethsemane that he might be spared the Cross, and he did *not* get what he prayed for. Yet he did rise

from the dead. Many a saint has prayed to be spared suffering, or prayed for the healing of someone else, and has apparently received the answer “No,” and yet has gone on trusting God.

Many a saint, and many an ordinary Christian, can also tell you about remarkable answers to prayer. “We all prayed for Tom when he went to the hospital, and the surgeon couldn’t even *find* the tumor.” “We prayed when Ann lost her job, and two days later she got a job offer from a total stranger.”

One way or another, the only way to live through this question is to go on praying and to try to learn to trust. In the end, “all things work together for good for those who love God.” Someday we will understand how all these pains, bewilderments, and apparently unanswered prayers are part of his love for his children, and we will thank God. Meanwhile, it isn’t easy.

“Learning to pray” is just another name for “learning to be a Christian,” and it runs into all the same difficulties. Even beginners in prayer come up against practical problems, puzzling experiences, and great Christian mysteries much sooner than they might expect. We will not solve these difficulties all at once. Many excellent books have been written to help those who are learning to pray (and that is all of us).

Even better, the art of “spiritual direction” exists to help us. It is the job of a priest, or often of a lay person with special gifts or experience, to help others by wise and friendly one-on-one guidance. A sensible person will look for a compatible “soul friend” and ask for this sort of help when he or she needs it. (This is not the same thing as sacramental confession. Your confessor and your spiritual director may or may not be the same person.)

### Some practical tips.

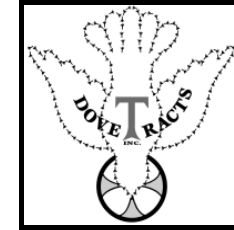
If you want to learn to pray, you will have to stick to it, just as you have to stick to learning Spanish or learning to drive. Make yourself a rule that you will pray every day for so much time -- maybe a quarter of an hour to start with. Set aside a place and a time -- preferably *not* just as you are crawling into bed. It may help to mark this place in some way, with a crucifix, an icon, or a picture, and to keep your Bible there. If necessary, tell the family you want to be alone, and turn on the answering machine; turn off the radio.

Either kneel, or sit in a comfortable but attentive position. (If you have done yoga or similar disciplines, you may want to use some of what you have learned there.) Start your prayer time with some small fixed ritual -- perhaps the sign of the Cross and the Lord’s Prayer. Ask our loving God to help you to come to know him. Then *pray*. God will guide you. You may want to use the “five points” listed above, or pray slowly through the Lord’s Prayer, or use familiar prayers from a book, or read slowly through a Bible passage, or just talk with God about what is on your heart. There is no one “right” way to pray. Try to quiet your mind to make room for him to answer.

At the end of your time, thank God for the opportunity to pray and ask him to be with you. Closing and “reentry” may be the most important and most difficult step in your prayer. Then go on with the rest of your life until it is time to return to prayer.

Some day, please God, we will learn to live so closely with our God that all of our life will be prayer, and we will move easily between time on our knees, time at work, and time with our friends, bringing all of these into our prayer. Meanwhile the discipline of daily prayer can help each of us to grow in loving friendship with the God who made and calls and loves us.

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