

Lord Teach Us To Pray

The Form of Prayer

Lesson 11

INTRODUCTION:

- I Over the past several weeks we have been taking a close look at the subject of prayer.
 - A. In particular, we have:
 1. Examined our own attitude toward prayer and found that we need to "*pray without ceasing*" (**1 Thessalonians 5:17**) – our prayers must be persistent, and continual.
 2. Looked at the Lord's own prayer to His Father in heaven (**John 17**) and discovered that our Lord prayed frequently – not only for His own needs, but also for His disciples, and all who would become His disciples through the teaching of the apostles.
 3. Examined in detail the model prayer Jesus taught His disciples (**Matthew 6:9-15**), and learned that our prayers are directed to our Father in heaven whose name is to be revered and hallowed.
 - a. We learned to pray for the Lord's kingdom (the rule of God in the hearts of men and women) to be spread throughout the world through their obedience to the gospel.

- b. We also learned to pray for God's will to be done in our lives as completely and perfectly as it is done in heaven.
 - c. While we may pray for our own physical needs, we also need to pray for the forgiveness of our sins as we forgive the sins of others.
 - d. And we learned to pray that God would not allow trials to come upon us that we fear may be more than we can handle, but rather to deliver us from all influences of the evil one.
 - e. And the reason we pray in this manner is simply because we recognize God's right to rule in our lives, and because we attribute to Him all power and glory forever.
4. Examined the need to avoid hypocritical kinds of prayers that are meant to draw attention to ourselves, but at the same time we learned to always seek those private, intimate moments where we can be alone with God. **(Matthew 6:5-8)**
- B. We've gone through 10 lessons on prayer in an effort to learn about the MOST important aspects of prayer. We learned:
1. Our prayers must be the expressions of our heart, not an exercise of our lips – not some DUTY that we feel must be performed.
 2. Our prayers must be respectful and reverent.

3. Our prayers must NEVER be solely for our own needs – selfish and self-centered kinds of prayers – but must also be petitions to God seeking the welfare others.
- C. But perhaps you've noticed that in all these lessons on prayer we've never attempted to answer the questions that are most frequently asked; specifically:
1. What do we need to know about the FORM and FUNCTION of prayer? In other words:
 - a. What are all the proper WAYS to pray?
 - b. What are all the things for which we CAN pray, and what are those things for which we SHOULD NOT pray?
 2. Perhaps you're wondering WHY we haven't dealt with these aspects of prayer before now.
 3. The answer is simple: The FORM and FUNCTION of prayer is of LITTLE CONCERN to God.
 - a. The Lord is MORE concerned about ATTITUDE OF OUR HEART than He is with the physical POSITIONS we assume while praying. WHY?
 - b. If our heart reflects the right attitude toward the holiness and majesty of God, toward His church, and toward His will, then

we should never have problems with praying for wrong things.

- D. However, since these questions may still be of concern to some here, let's spend some time looking at the various forms of prayer, and see that the Scriptures have to teach us about the function of these prayers.
1. What we will find here are some things that may challenge your thinking about prayer – and it should.
 2. If our prayers have become rather formal and ritualistic – which they have, to some extent – then we NEED to be challenged.
 - a. We need to break free from the tendency to make our prayers fit some specific form and function based on the occasion, and learn what it REALLY means to be *"praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit..."*
(Ephesians 6:18)
 - b. We need to make our prayers REAL and MEANINGFUL – they need to pour forth from our HEARTS, and not be mere carbon copies of the same prayers we've heard all our lives.
 3. Therefore, in this lesson in our series "Lord Teach Us To Pray," I want us to consider several things about what we might simply call the "FORM" of prayer, such as:

- a. The circumstances under which we can pray.
 - b. The places and times where we may pray.
 - c. And finally, our posture during prayer.
4. Then in our last lesson, we're going to talk about those things for which we should all be praying.
 - a. Hopefully, once we know HOW to pray, we can turn our attention toward USING prayer in a proper and powerful way.
 5. So, for now, let's take a look at the FORM of prayer.

BODY:

- I. In **Ephesians 6:18**, Paul says we are to pray "*with all prayer and supplication...*"
 - A. With THESE words, Paul gives us a hint about the form and function of prayers.
 1. The Greek word translated "prayer" (*proseuche* - pro-SOO-kay), which incidentally is the same word Paul uses in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 where he told us to "*pray without ceasing,*" is the most common word for prayer in the New Testament.
 - a. It's a word that refers to GENERAL REQUESTS.

2. The word translated "supplication," or "petition," depending your translation (*deesis* – DEH'-eye-sis), is a word that refers to SPECIFIC PRAYERS, or SPECIFIC PETITIONS.
 3. So, Paul's use of BOTH words in **Ephesians 6:18** suggests that we need to become involved in ALL kinds of prayer – prayers and supplications – any and every kind of prayer that is appropriate for the moment.
 - a. Prayers that are GENERAL REQUESTS, and prayers that are SPECIFIC REQUESTS.
 - b. In other words, on some occasions your prayers may include a BROAD RANGE of petitions, while on other occasions your prayers may be focused on a VERY SPECIFIC need.
- II. Just as there can be a variety in the KINDS of prayers we pray – general requests and specific requests – there are also a wide variety of CIRCUMSTANCES under which we may pray.
- A. Unfortunately, some today have relegated prayer to a formal act of worship that should always be done in moments of calm and especially with proper decorum – prayers that are unemotional and which conform with accepted manners and custom, ESPECIALLY if prayed in a public setting.

1. No wonder our prayers have become stiff and formalized.
2. While some today believe prayer should always be very formal, the Bible shows that people prayed in many DIFFERENT circumstances – MOST of which WERE emotional and LACKED what we would call conforming with accepted manners and custom. For example:
 - a. Job prayed while sitting in ashes, scraping his oozing sores with a piece of broken pottery. **(Job 2:8)**
 - b. When the Israelites suffered a shattering defeat at Ai, Joshua and the elders of Israel prayed after they tore their robes, fell face down on the earth, and threw dust on their heads. **(Joshua 7:6-9)**
 - c. Hanna, the mother of the prophet Samuel, prayed while making a vow to God. **(1 Samuel 1:11)**
 - d. David said he came before the Lord crying tears and groaning, while the Scriptures tell us Jesus prayed with vehement cries and tears. **(Psalm 6:4-6; Hebrews 5:7)**
 - e. David also prayed while agonizing with a sorrowful heart because he felt God had deserted him. **(Psalm 13:1-2)**
 - f. Ezra prayed while being too ashamed to even lift his face to God. **(Ezra 9:4-15)**

- g. And Paul and Silas prayed while in prison with their feet in stocks and while singing songs. **(Acts 16:25)**
- 3. MANY of these prayers are what we might call spur-of-the-moment prayers – prayers that were an IMMEDIATE and SPONTANEOUS outpouring of the heart. And ALL of these circumstances were LITERALLY PACKED with RAW emotions.
- 4. A good example are the prayers of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane.
 - a. Luke’s account tells us that *“He knelt down and prayed” (Luke 22:41)*, and a little later, *“being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” (Luke 22:44)*
 - b. Mark’s account provides us with a scene depicting deep emotions, when He told His disciples, *“My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch.’ He went a little farther, and fell on the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him.” (Mark 14:34-35)*
 - c. But Matthew’s account not only tells us that he was *“sorrowful and deeply distressed” (Matthew 26:37)*, but goes

on to say, *“He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed...”* **(Matthew 26:39)**

(1). The word “fell” (epipten - a-PIP-teen) describes the raw emotions of one who is overcome with terror, astonishment or grief, as well as describing someone who prostrates themselves while rendering homage or worship to God.

d. Jesus fell to the ground in the garden of Gethsemane because He did both.

(1). He was overcome with the sheer terror of what it would mean for the pure and Holy Son of God to bear all the ugliness and shame of the sins of the world on the cross.

(2). And He was clearly prostrating Himself before God to worship and pay homage to HIS Father in heaven.

B. Prayers in Biblical times were offered to God under a wide range of circumstances – from grief to joy, from disappointment and disillusionment to hope and trust.

1. Over and over again we see that MANY prayers were offered IMPROMPTU and SPONTANEOUS.

- a. MANY were unplanned, and spur-of-the-moment because of some need that arose suddenly and unexpectedly.
 2. We need to get away from the idea that prayers must be planned – praying only in the morning or evening, or over a meal, or at set times in our worship services.
 - a. We need to be able to stop and pray under ANY circumstances and at ANY time when the presence of God, or help FROM God, or blessings of God are needed.
- III. Just as prayers were offered under a variety of emotion-packed, spontaneous circumstances, the PLACE where prayers were offered is just as diverse.
- A. Sadly, the prayer life of many is virtually non-existent. Many pray ONLY when they come to worship services, and then, only when someone else is leading in prayer.
 1. And yet, the Bible records people praying in all sorts of places:
 - a. Solomon prayed in the temple he had just completed building and was dedicating to the Lord. **(1 Kings 8:22-53)**
 - b. King David prayed while in bed. **(1 Kings 1:47-48)**
 - c. Jonah prayed while in the stomach of a great fish. **(Jonah 2:1-10)**

- d. Elijah prayed while in a cave. **(1 Kings 19:9-10)**
 - e. The men of Judah prayed in the heat of battle, especially when things weren't going too well – they were completely surrounded by their enemy. **(2 Chronicles 13:14–15)**
 - f. Jesus prayed often in the wilderness. **(Luke 5:16)**
 - g. Jesus also prayed all night on a mountain. **(Luke 6:12)**
 - h. Of course, Jesus prayed in a garden. **(Matthew 26:36-44)**
 - i. Peter and others prayed in a home. **(Acts 9:39-40)**
 - j. Peter also prayed on a housetop. **(Acts 10:9)**
 - k. Devout women in Philippi prayed beside a river. **(Acts 16:13)**
 - l. Paul and Silas prayed in prison. **(Acts 16:23-26)**
 - m. The apostle Paul and those accompanying him prayed by the seashore – on a beach. **(Acts 21:5-6)**
 - n. And the most notable place of all – Jesus prayed on a cross. **(Luke 23:33-34, 46)**
2. In **Psalm 34**, David said, *"I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth."* **(Psalm 34:1)**
- a. David knew the importance of making EVERY place a place of prayer – whether tending sheep in green pastures as a youth, or while in the wilderness fleeing from his enemy, or in

his palace when facing great loss, or at the end of his life while on his bed.

- b. We ALSO need to "bless the LORD at all times," and let OUR mouth CONTINUALLY praise Him!

B. As we mentioned earlier, some feel there are certain TIMES of the day when it is more appropriate to pray. But the Bible gives examples of prayers being offered at every hour of the day or night.

1. Probably one of the most common times to pray is in the morning, and there are many passages that speak of morning prayers:

- a. For example, David said, *"Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my meditation. Give heed to the voice of my cry, my King and my God, for to You I will pray. My voice You shall hear in the morning, O LORD; In the morning I will direct it to You, and I will look up."* **(Psalm 5:1-3)**

- b. But David also said, "Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, and He shall hear my voice." **(Psalm 55:17)**

2. So, a quick survey of the Bible shows that people prayed at all times during the day:

- a. The psalmist David urged his readers to pray at bedtime. **(Psalm 4:4)**

- b. David also prayed all day long. **(Psalm 86:3)**
 - c. Daniel prayed three times a day. **(Daniel 6:10)**
 - d. Elijah prayed in the evening. **(1 Kings 18:36)**
 - e. Anna the prophetess prayed night and day, and Jesus said God will answer the prayers of those who pray day and night. **(Luke 2:37; 18:7)**
 - f. John's disciples fasted and prayed often – at no particular time of the day. **(Luke 5:33)**
 - g. When feeding the multitudes, Jesus prayed before the meal. **(Matthew 14:19)**
 - h. Peter and John prayed in the middle of the afternoon, at the ninth hour – 3 pm. **(Acts 3:1)**
 - i. Paul and Silas prayed at midnight. **(Acts 16:25)**
- C. And so, the PLACE and the TIME we pray are not important at all.
- 1. What is MOST important to the Lord is that *"men always ought to pray and not lose heart."* **(Luke 18:1)**
 - 2. That's why the apostle Paul urged the saints in Thessalonica to "pray without ceasing." **(1 Thessalonians 5:17)**
 - 3. Don't be concerned about the TIME or the PLACE – just PRAY!

IV. Surprisingly, one aspect of prayer that is MOST OFTEN discussed is the PHYSICAL posture we should assume when praying to God.

A. Even though the POSTURE of prayer is sometimes hotly debated, I believe it's one of the EASIEST aspects of prayer to understand.

1. If we are to "*pray without ceasing*" – meaning that we're prepared to pray on any given occasion – THAT FACT ALONE necessitates being in a VARIETY of positions or postures while praying.

B. Therefore, posture is NOT important.

1. Let me ask: was our Lord kneeling or standing when he offered the prayer recorded in John chapter 17? We don't know.

a. All we do know is that He "**lifted up His eyes to heaven.**"
(John 17:1; also see John 11:41)

2. Most people bow their heads and close their eyes when they pray, but Jesus lifted His head and focused His eyes on heaven.

3. Many people fold their hands when they pray, but I don't find this practice anywhere in Scripture.

4. In fact, the Jews were accustomed to lifting up their hands, open to God, expecting to receive something!

a. "**Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands toward heaven.**" (1 Kings 8:22)

- b. When Ezra had finished his prayer of blessing to God, "*all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen!' **while lifting up their hands**. And **they bowed their heads** and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground." (Nehemiah 8:6)*
- c. David prayed that God would answer his supplication, when, as he said, "**I lift up my hands** toward Your holy sanctuary." (Psalm 28:2)
- d. This is the PRECISE reason why Paul said, "*I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, **lifting up holy hands**, without wrath and doubting." (1 Timothy 2:8)*
- (1). Some argue that Paul is only using the phrase "*lifting up holy hands*" in a metaphorical sense – not that they were to actually, literally lift up their hands.
 - (2). But I beg to differ. The metaphor Paul used in this verse was "*holy hands*"
 - (3). In other words, when you lift up your hands in prayer (which was a customary way of praying), make sure you're lifting up HOLY hands – hands that are empty of hatred and bitterness and filled with faith.

C. The Bible records many different postures for prayer, and – I know this is probably going to make some of you uncomfortable when I say this – but ALL of these postures are acceptable to God.

1. Sometimes people prayed while bowing on their knees, including:

- a. Abraham. (**Genesis 24:52**)
- b. Jehoshaphat and all the people of Judah. (**2 Chronicles 20:18**)
- c. Daniel. (**Daniel 6:10**)
- d. The apostle Paul. (**Ephesians 3:14**)
- e. Jesus, when praying in Gethsemane, began by bowing His knees, then fell on His face and continued to pray. (**Luke 22:41; Matthew 26:39**)

2. In the Bible, we find people using a wide range of OTHER postures while praying:

- a. Abraham also prayed while standing. (**Genesis 18:22-25; 24:12-14**)
- b. King David prayed while sitting on his throne, talking to God about the promised kingdom. (**2 Samuel 7:18**)
- c. Ezra prayed while bowing. (**Ezra 10:1**)

- d. The tax collector in the parable of Jesus prayed while looking down and pounding on his chest in deep grief and sorrow.

(Luke 18:13)

- e. As we mentioned earlier, Jesus prayed while upward toward heaven. **(John 17:1)**

- f. And don't forget all those who prayed while lifting their hands – some while looking up toward heaven, and others while bowing their heads. **(Psalm 28:2; 1 Kings 8:22; Daniel**

4:34; Nehemiah 8:6; 1 Timothy 2:8)

D. So, when it comes to our physical posture while praying, the GOOD NEWS is that there IS NO set standard for posture.

1. We need to be prepared to pray at all times, wherever we may be, and in whatever posture we may find ourselves assuming at the time.
2. Neither is there any posture that is wrong or prohibited.
 - a. Prayer needs to be a natural expression of our heart to God.
 - b. And if someone feels the need to kneel, to raise their hands, to look upward to heaven, to bow, or to pound on our chest (as in **Luke 18:3**), then you and I don't need to be criticizing or judging them for doing what they feel is appropriate for them at the moment.

- c. It may not be a posture WE'RE comfortable with, and if that's the case, then don't use that posture when you pray.

Choose your own.

- 3. Brethren offer all kinds of reasons why we SHOULDN'T assume certain postures when we pray.

- a. Some say, "Those were the customary ways of praying in Biblical times – you said so yourself – and customs have changed and we just don't pray that way anymore."

- (1). Customs haven't change. People still pray these ways today.

- (2). YOUR custom may be to pray while standing and bowing, or sitting with your head bowed, but that's not the custom of others.

- b. Others say, "People who pray in UN-conventional ways, like kneeling and lifting up their hands, are just doing that to be seen by men. They want to draw attention to themselves. "

- (1). How do you know that? How do you know they're trying to draw attention to themselves when all they're doing is praying? Why not let God make that judgment?

- (2). And, perhaps you can tell me who determined what is conventional and what is UN-conventional when it comes to the posture of prayer.
 - (3). Besides, isn't that what the Pharisees did – condemning someone simply because they didn't keep THEIR traditions? They openly condemned Jesus and His disciples for breaking all the traditions and conventions that had NO PART of the commandments of God.
- c. Still others say, "We're supposed to do everything decently and in order, and having a bunch of people kneeling, while others are lifting up their hands, and still others are standing or sitting while they pray is not doing things decently and in order. Besides, it offends my conscience to see people praying like that during worship services."
- (1). Personally, I believe this argument takes **1 Corinthians 14:40; Romans 14; and 1 Corinthians chapters 8 and 10 COMPLETELY** out of context.
 - (2). Why is it that every time someone has an objection to something other brethren are doing, their only defense is to claim the practice is not decently and in order, OR that it violates their conscience?

- (3). If we're always catering to the FEW who raise objections to anything THEY feel is unconventional, isn't that sanctioning MINORITY rule?
 - (4). Furthermore, can you tell me what's IN-decent and DIS-orderly about praying while standing with your hands raised, or kneeling – even during the assembly?
4. Brethren, let's be real honest with ourselves. The reason many of us feel uncomfortable with so-called UN-conventional postures in prayer is because we're afraid we're going to start looking like folks in the denominational world.
 - a. We're worried that someone will think we're charismatic or Pentecostal.
 - b. And so, we'd RATHER look like those denominations that MANDATE stiff, formalized, prescribed, and downright cold worship.
5. Please don't misunderstand what I'm saying here. I'm not suggesting we need to start praying with our hands raised or while kneeling. You won't see me praying that way because I'm personally not comfortable praying with my hands raised. I've tried it and didn't like it.

6. What I AM saying is that the most important thing to the Lord is the posture of our HEART!
 - a. While the outward posture can be evidence of the INWARD spiritual attitude, it's not always so.
 - b. The hypocrite can pray standing with his hands raised to heaven just as easily as the TRUE worshipper.
 - c. In fact, it's been said that it's much easier to bow the knees than to bow the heart in submission to God.
7. So, DON'T try to judge the spiritual condition of a person's heart merely by the physical posture they assume while praying.
8. By the same token, you and I need to be VERY careful and do a lot of SERIOUS, PRAYERFUL THINKING before we go up to a brother or sister and say, "I'm sorry, but we don't pray that way here. It's not permitted."
9. Brethren, let's never forget that it's as much a sin to PERMIT what God does NOT allow, as it is to NOT allow what God PERMITS. Or, to say it another way, it's as much a sin to LOOSE where God has BOUND, as it is to BIND where God has NOT bound.

CONCLUSION:

- I. So, what have we learned from all this?

- A. Hopefully we've learned some valuable lessons here. Hopefully:
1. We've learned that our prayers can be general in nature, and on other occasions they can focus on very specific needs.
 2. We've also learned that prayer is fitting at any time, in any place, under any circumstance, in any attire, and in any physical posture or position.
- B. But most importantly, I hope we've learned that prayer **MUST** be a **TOTAL WAY OF LIFE** – an **OPEN** and **CONTINUAL** communion with God.
1. It all begins and ends with the condition of our heart.
 2. A heart that is set on God – that makes God and the Lord Jesus Christ the very center of their life – will have no problems with prayer.
 3. But the heart of those who would rather do **THEIR OWN** will rather than the **WILL OF GOD** will **ALWAYS** have problems with prayer.
- C. Is God pleased with you're prayers?
1. The answer to that question depends largely on whether or not God is pleased with **YOU**.
 2. If you've never obeyed the gospel of Christ, or if as a child of God you've chosen to do your will over His, God is **NOT** pleased.
 3. Therefore, the solution is relatively simple.