

# Living Church: How To Pray

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[ 0 : 00 ] 6, starting at verse 5, it's on page 970, Matthew's Gospel, chapter 6.

So Matthew 6, chapter 6, and reading from verse 5, and this is Jesus speaking. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your father who is unseen. Then your father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like the pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your father will not forgive your sins. Well, prayer, it seems, is one of the hardest parts of our gathering together. We not only find it difficult to pray in private, it seems that we find it more difficult to pray in public. In fact, I would say it's the thing that we most struggle with as a church when it comes to prayer. Because if we're asked to sing, well, we'll all sing together. That's not a problem. If we're asked to read, we'll all read together. But if we're asked to pray, we're pretty much silent together.

[ 2 : 37 ] Like me, we probably sit hoping that somebody else will pray, because I certainly can't. We just want somebody to say something to break that awkward, embarrassing silence. Now, I don't think we're unique in this, and it seems to be a struggle in lots of churches. We just find praying together very difficult. Every one of us finds it hard to pray. So when it does come to our open times of prayer, like the prayer time, or maybe it's communion, or in our home groups, or when we're with other people, we struggle to pray because maybe we just don't know what we should be praying for.

Maybe we're afraid of saying the wrong things and getting our words round the wrong way. Maybe we're wondering what others will think of what I'm saying. Perhaps we even feel too much of a failure to pray. I can't talk to God. Look at the way my life was.

And I think these are all normal things that we all struggle with when it comes to public prayer and also private prayer. But you say, why are you going on about public prayer?

Did Jesus not tell us that we were to pray in private? Look at verse 6. He says, when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen, then your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. Well, there's a fair point, isn't it? Seems like we're to pray in private. But I don't think it's actually ruling out public praying. In fact, Jesus has been addressing those who are in the synagogue in verse 5. He's talking to those who pray in church in a public way, and the problem is they're not praying in a right way. So verse 5. He says, when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues or on the street corners to be seen by people.

It seems that Jesus, in verse 6, is directing us to pray in private so that we can learn how to pray in public. That's why this prayer begins, verse 9, with our Father, not my Father. It's something we do together. And that's why the prayer continues, verse 11. Give us, not give me. So quite clearly, Jesus intends that his gathered people are to pray together. And we learn to pray in private so that we can begin to pray in public. Our public praying is simply an overflow of our private praying.

[ 5 : 40 ] So the problem is not really prayer, because it's a wonderful gift from God. The problem is our approach, or perhaps our attitude, to what prayer is all about. Now this is not a beat-me-up-and-make-me-feel-bad talk, because nobody ever benefits from feeling, being beaten up and going out thinking, oh, I've got to pray better, and I'm such a bad prayer, and I've just got to

do better, and well, we just feel worse. And that does anybody no good at all. We need encouragement to pray. So what does Jesus teach us about praying together? Well, the first thing is this, that prayer is a relationship. Before we even open our mouths, we've got to come back to basics and understand that prayer is a relationship. Look at verse 9. He says, this then is how you should pray, our Father in heaven. Prayer is like a child to father conversation. Not a father who is a bully or who's unkind, who might leave us or reject us, as some of our own parents, as we may have experienced that in our own lives. But here we're talking of a father who treasures us, who accepts us, who values us, and who cares for us. A father, look at verse 6, when he says, when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your father who is unseen. Then your father who sees. In other words, he sees you. He sees your life. He knows all about you. Verse 8, do not be like them, for your father knows what you need before you even ask him.

And verse 14, for if you forgive people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father also forgives you.

Jesus wants us to see that this relationship that he enjoys with his Father is also our Father. Do you remember how we started our gathering this morning? We read these words from Ephesians, once we were separate from Christ, without hope and without God, but now in Christ Jesus, you who are once far away, have now been brought near. Through the death of Christ, through Christ, we both have access to the Father. The writer there is picking up an image of what happened when Jesus died.

The Gospels record this for us, that at the moment when Jesus died, the curtain in the temple, so you can imagine a big, big space like this, with a big, big curtain going across from one side to the other, as thick as my hand. This was a great big barrier that divided between people and God, was ripped apart from top to bottom, so that people could now enter into a living relationship. And if our trust and our faith is in Jesus, we also have access to the Father. Prayer isn't a duty, it's not a performance, it's a child relationship, a conversation with God our Father. But he is not just a Father in the sense of our earthly fathers. He is, look again at verse 9, our Father in heaven. Heaven means he holds a certain position. So as Jesus taught this prayer, people were used to addressing God as sovereign Lord and King of kings, something very grand and majestic. They understood God as some supreme ruler with absolute power and authority, but yet he was distant and impersonal. You couldn't really know him. But Jesus turns all that around and he says, our Father in heaven. Not that God has somehow become less than supreme or somehow he's left some of his power behind. No, he's so much more than that. He is our great king. He is sovereign, but he's our Father King. You may be familiar with this picture up on the screen. Two people, John F. Kennedy sitting at his desk and John Jr. playing underneath.

[10:33] Now putting politics aside, if we were just to look at JFK, we see a past president of America at his desk in the Oval Office in the White House. One of the most powerful men of his time in the whole world.

At his command, at his word, armies would be deployed. Rules would be put in place. A position of great power and influence. Now look at the child. There he is playing hide and seek, discovering the secret door, which became famous in the Da Vinci Code, if you remember. He's just a kid playing around, enjoying himself. To him, this is his home. It's not the control room of power.

Now put the two images together. Here we have a president with great authority, but he's also a father.

Here we have a child at home who's playing, but he's also in the Oval Office in the White House. A child in a relationship with a father. How much more is our relationship with our father king? The king who doesn't dwell in an Oval Office. The king of the universe, who rules the world with all its peoples. The king who speaks and creation comes into existence. Who speaks and things happen. This is our God. A God, a king who deserves our respect and demands our obedience, not just of a few people, but the entire population of the world. A king who gave up his life, not just for a few years, but sacrificed his life on the cross for us so that we can know him as father. So that we can enjoy an intimate and personal relationship with God. You see, our prayer life is a reflection of our relationship with our father. And at times, perhaps, that relationship can seem quite dysfunctional, almost like our own human relationships. Somehow strained and distant. And although they're our father, we kind of don't know what to say to them. And when we're in the same room, it's just kind of like silence. And it's all very distant. But to see afresh that we are encouraged to come and talk to our father in heaven. So prayer is a relationship to our father king. But how do

we pray? What way do we come to our father? Well, prayer is not about performance. It's all about grace. It's living out the grace of that relationship. And I think there are two ways pointed out here that we can come to our father. The first one is that we should come messy. Doesn't mean to say that we come in messy old clothes. You can if you want. But it's more about our messy lives inside. Look at verse 5. When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the church and on the street corners to be seen by people. You know, a hypocrite literally means actor. In those days, in the Greek theatre, people would wear a mask, just a simple little mask on their face as part of their performance. It helped them to take on the identity of the character they were playing. They were simply called hypocrites. The Hollywood actors of the time, but without the big wage packets. Now Jesus is saying we need to be careful that we don't, that when we pray, we don't become actors. That we don't put on a performance or give the appearance that we are someone other than we really are. The hypocrites in the synagogue are the people in church who put on a mask by their words to hide their true self. They say things that give an appearance that they are someone other than what they actually are. And let's be honest. We can all be hypocrites in that way. And what comes of those kind of prayers? Well, look at the rest of verse 5. I tell you the truth.

[15:38] They have received their reward in full. The only answer we get from that kind of praying is the recognition of others. We go home with the reward that we've actually tricked everybody into thinking that we're someone than we really are. We've just tricked people. That's our only reward, our only answer.

Now when we pray in public, we're not praying so that others begin to think of us in a certain way. And we're not praying so that God thinks of us in a certain way. We're not out to try and get an Oscar through our prayers. In fact, we're to pray like the gospel. You know what the gospel demands?

It demands that we take off our masks. That we take off that exterior that we put on. That we put aside our performance and we come before God with all our sin and all our failures so that his grace can begin to work deep within our lives. And it's simply no different when it comes to prayer.

We come to the Father in the same way. Messy. We don't hide our failures. We let him know that we see and we know what we're really like. We come with all our mess and all the brokenness and all the hurts and all the things that we are. Now that doesn't mean, in case you're getting scared, that we have to publicly stand up and go through all the naughty little things we've done through the week and let everybody know, I don't think it means that we have to do that. But it does mean that we come with the right heart attitude. Just as the gospel never says to us, get your life sorted first and then come to Jesus. The gospel always says, come as you are and he will sort you out. So in the same way the Father says, never says, get your life sorted and then talk to me. He says, no, come as you are. Come messy. When you pray, let him see you as you really are.

[17:52] So, come messy. Second, we are to come helpless. Verse 7. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Now how many of us think that the longer we pray, the better the prayer?

I mean, if you prayed for 30 seconds, but then if you prayed for 10 minutes, do you think God would kind of give you a little bit more? Would he be hearing you more and he'd take you more seriously? Well, there's nothing spiritual about the amount of words or the length of time. That says Jesus is all performance, all that babbling. It's just a show. Jesus' model of prayer here is only 52 words. Don't go counting them. Do that at home. Take my word for it.

But who's counting anyway? It could only be five words. It doesn't really matter. Again, the attitude is what counts. We are to come not with many, many words.

We are to come with an attitude and a heart of helplessness. Look at verse 8. He says, Do not be like them, those babblers. For your father knows what you need before you ask him.

[19:20] It's not about informing God as if he didn't know. He already sees us and he knows about our life. It's about showing God how helpless we are and that we're recognizing, we're saying to him, I cannot do life on my own.

I just can't do life without you. For all the pressures and all the things that I'm going to face this week, I cannot do it on my own. Thomas Merton was a monk.

People who went away and liked to be silent. And in his silence, he thought about prayer and this is what he said. Prayer is an expression of who we are.

We are a living incompleteness. We are a gap, an emptiness that needs fulfillment. I like that. We're a living incompleteness.

You see, when we come to our father, we are not trying to get his attention by shouting at him with lots of old babble. We are coming empty, incomplete, recognizing that we cannot manage, longing to receive what we need for life.

[ 20 : 37 ] So when we pray, come helpless. Come knowing that we can't do life on our own. Now I think these two things, there's something wonderfully liberating about coming messy and helpless.

It means we begin to talk to our father as we should. Nobody's scoring our prayers. It's not like come dine with me, where everybody holds up a score out of one to ten.

We're not trying to get the best prayer award. Nobody's taking notes. We have come to talk to our father in heaven, who welcomes us, who's present with us.

He welcomes us to come as we are. So what do we pray? We've got an understanding of the attitude and the approach.

We come messy and helpless. But what do we say? Well, this is where we have this very well-known prayer of Jesus. Although it's not so much a prayer of Jesus, it's something, a model, a framework for his disciples, for people like us.

[ 21 : 53 ] And it's simply divided into two parts. We're not going to go into it in too much detail, but just unpack it to help us see how this could form a framework, a model for how to pray.

The first three requests all relate to God and to his priorities. Look at verse 9 again.

He says, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Very simple, isn't it?

Hallowed be your name. It's not a request to make God holy because he already is holy. It's a request that people would treat God as number one, as the first, as the best, as the greatest.

We want people in our community, in our nation, in our land, in our world, to recognise that God is above all with supreme authority and absolute power.

[ 22 : 59 ] So we pray that God would take centre stage in everything. Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.

It's a desire to see the growth and the extension of God's kingdom. It's not political. It's not geographical. It's a personal kingdom.

It's about his rule over individual lives. And so when we pray your kingdom come, we are praying that friends and family, that we know that they would see and understand the good news of God's kingdom and that they would submit to him and turn to him.

We pray your kingdom come. And we pray your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. It's a longing to see God's rule worked out in our lives and in our church family.

We want God's desires. We want God's priorities. We want God's wants to become ours. When we pray your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, we pray that the pattern of heaven would also become the pattern of our hearts.

[ 24 : 17 ] We pray that what God wants. We pray that what God wants is what we want. Three simple requests that shape and direct what to pray for in relation to God and his priorities.

The second three requests all relate to each other, to one another and to our needs. Verse 11. Let's read there.

Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

Give us today our daily bread. It's not a request for something spiritual. It's very practical. It's about our physical needs for food, for clothing, for shelter, for the basic provisions of day-to-day life.

And it's not only a request, it's an expression of our complete and utter dependence on God. It's so easy to go to the till and put the card in and get money out or go to the cupboards and get food out and think that we've provided it all.

[ 25 : 27 ] No, it's an expression of complete dependence on God. That everything that we have comes from him. And so we ask of him.

We pray, give us our daily bread. We pray for our needs, not our wants. We pray for our necessities, not our luxuries.

We pray for today. Give us today. Not for tomorrow. For today. And we will trust you for what's tomorrow.

Then he says, forgive us our debts or our sins as we have also forgiven our debtors. It's a recognition, a helpful one, that we mess up and we fail all the time and need God's forgiveness, grace and mercy all of the time.

But of course, the experience of forgiveness is tied to our forgiveness of others. Look at verse 14. It's unpacked for us there. He says, For if you forgive people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

[ 26 : 36 ] But if you do not forgive people their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. Now it's not that God won't forgive.

In this context, it's that he can't forgive. You see, if we come to our Father with open hands, expecting to receive grace and mercy for all the things that we've messed up on, but yet then we turn away from God and we clench our fists and we hold back the forgiveness to those who have wronged us.

There's something not quite right. The sign that we genuinely desire God's forgiveness is seen in our genuine desire to forgive others.

And so we pray to be forgiven. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. Again, it's not a request that God would stop leading us into temptation. He doesn't do that. Rather, this is a prayer that he would keep us following in the way of Christ.

[ 27 : 51 ] It's a prayer that Jesus would satisfy us, that he would fill us, and that we wouldn't be people who go looking to someone else or something else for our joy and our contentment.

We pray to be free from the devil's snares and that we would be satisfied ultimately in Christ. That all that he has to offer is sufficient.

So again, three simple requests that shape and direct what to pray for in relation to one another and our needs.

So, prayer is hard, isn't it? It's a struggle. We all find it difficult. But prayer is also a relationship with our Father King who invites us to come messy and helpless to seek his priorities and to receive all of our needs.

We've been invited to pray by our Father. And so we can begin the conversation to pray for our church using the new sheet.

[ 29 : 05 ] inside in the new sheet we put prayers that you can be praying for people and situations. We've been talking to each other over tea and coffee.

We maybe didn't ask them what can I pray for but you probably found out something about their doing or have done and you can remember that and pray that for that person.

We can pray that God's kingdom will grow as we seek to reach out through the Christianity Explored. And when we do come together to meet and celebrate the Lord's Supper communion together we can pray and give thanks to Jesus who's actually made it possible for us to have a relationship with our Father.

So let's enjoy that relationship. Let's not be thinking about who's around us but think of our Father who knows all about us who knows our needs who invites us come messy come helpless seek his priorities and receive all of our needs.

We're going to pray together now. We're not going to sing a song but we're going to put into action what we've been thinking about. We're going to pray together.

[ 30 : 33 ] So I'm going to ask you to turn to your new sheet. If you haven't got one put your hand up there's none left there should be one on the seat or under the seat.

There's people that we can be praying for situations that we can be praying for. Now I'm not going to be chasing anybody if you don't pray audibly it's okay but if you can there are people who can to pray together to support each other as we pray.

Let me just mention one in particular. It's mentioned there the prayer about Chris on Wednesday night. And something holds I We W Queen A Lord We I I What What