

How to Pray

Matthew 6:9-13

As cultural and historical studies remind us, prayer is a natural human impulse. In every society we know about—even among people who claim to be non-religious—prayer is an instinctive response in crisis.

So Jesus, in his teaching on prayer, is not concerned simply to get his followers to pray. He rightly assumes that all people do so. Rather, he is concerned that they pray *in the right way*. Having given two *wrong* patterns of prayer (the prayer of the hypocrite and the prayer of the babbler) Jesus says, “Pray then like this” (Matthew 6:9). What follows is one of the most well-known and often-quoted sections of Scripture: the Lord’s Prayer.

The danger we face in studying the Lord’s Prayer is the danger of *over-familiarity*. The words and phrases roll off our tongues too easily, numbing us to the truly radical nature of this prayer.

However, by surveying the architecture of this prayer in contrast with the “architecture” of our hearts, we will see that in order to truly pray the Lord’s Prayer, a person must have a complete heart renovation.

The Architecture of the Lord’s Prayer¹

Viewed as a whole, the Lord’s Prayer reveals a three-fold structure:

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| 1. Approach | Our Father in heaven, |
| 2. God’s Priorities
<small>(Note the repeated pronoun <i>your</i>.)</small> | hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven. |
| 3. Our Needs
<small>(Note the pronouns <i>our</i>, <i>we</i>, and <i>us</i>.)</small> | Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. |

We can zoom in even further to observe the structure *within* these sections.

Approach	Our	So <i>personal</i> that a relationship may exist in which we can call the God of heaven <i>our</i> Father.
	Father	So <i>good</i> that he desires to meet our needs
	in heaven,	So <i>great</i> that he alone can define what we really need, as well as meet those needs
God’s Priorities	hallowed be your name.	God’s central, foundational priority
	Your kingdom come,	How this priority is achieved: by God reigning as king
	your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven	How God reigns as king: as people surrender their wills to his—just like everything does in heaven

¹Jesus must have taught on prayer on multiple occasions, for we have a similar teaching recorded in a different context in Luke 11. In Luke’s context, Jesus was answering his disciples request, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1).

Our Needs

Give us this day our daily bread,

What we need to do God's will

and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.

What we need when we failed to do God's will in the past

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

What we need to do God's will in the future

How to Pray

In view of this three-fold structure, we may answer the question, "How does one pray?" in the following way: (1) Approach God as your Father in heaven. (2) Put his priorities first. (3) Present your needs.

Renovation Needed

But notice how this requires a complete renovation of our hearts.

1. **Approach.** To truly approach God as Father requires *regeneration*, for unless God really is our Father, we cannot address him as Father. And unless we, as God's children, pause to remind ourselves that God is "our Father in heaven," we will lack the confidence that God is either good or great enough to answer our prayers.
2. **Put his priorities first.** To truly pray that his priorities be accomplished requires a *reordering* of our priorities, for unless we truly *desire* what he does, our prayers will be a sham.
3. **Present your needs.** To pray for daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from evil requires a *redefinition* of our needs, for unless we truly embrace God's priorities, we will always misunderstand what we truly need, and thus ask for *more* than we need and *less* than what God wants to accomplish.

Questions for Discussion and Application

1. What clues do we have in the Bible (consider the near context, as well as other passages throughout the Bible) that Jesus did *not* expect his followers to always use the precise wording of this prayer?
2. How does pausing to remember that God is our "Father in heaven" change our entire approach to prayer?
3. Give examples of things that you have *thought* you needed, but in time discovered you did not truly need.
4. Note that the Lord's Prayer puts God's priorities *before* our needs. Why is this order so important?
5. What are some practical ways we can learn to put God's priorities first?