

WHAT CHRISTIANS SHOULD KNOW VOLUME II (#WCSK2) PART IV: PRAYER

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The series What Christians Should Know Volume II (#WCSK2) boosts your understanding and shows you how to apply Biblical principles to everyday life. All Scriptures will be taken from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) unless otherwise noted. Biblical references are examples and are in no way intended to be exhaustive. Many of the ideas here will build upon the series [What Christians Should Know Volume I](#) (#WCSK), which provides education on core beliefs and doctrines in the Christian faith. All of the lessons are best used as a general guide as you engage in your own Bible study.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalms 119:105)

How this principle applies to your everyday life: Prayer is not about getting; it’s about *becoming*. That is, prayer is not a transactional process exclusively designed to grant your requests. Prayer is a *transformational* process that primarily glorifies God, exclusively transforms you, and in turn brings you closer to THE LORD. In the end, if it is your time to get, you should know how to ask properly.

THE LORD’S Prayer

Pray, then, in this way: “Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen” (Matthew 6:9-13).

Introduction: What is Prayer?

Wayne Grudem defines prayer as “personal communication with God.”¹ Prayer is the outward expression of the inward faith that we have in God. Our [faith](#) means we believe God and trust in Him. Although our salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, that faith is never unaccompanied—hence, faith is the fuel that animates prayer.² Because we depend on THE LORD, we pray to Him and communicate with Him. The act of prayer in and of itself points to the reality that we are speaking to Someone greater than us in every way possible. God does not shun our prayers as an indifferent despot; He invites them and delights in them as a Father who desires to provide for His children. Jesus says:

So I say to you, *ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened.* Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?* (emphasis added; Luke 11:9-13)

Prayer brings us into deeper fellowship with THE LORD. Human beings are the workmanship of God (Ephesians 2:10), and we were created for God’s glory (Isaiah 43:7). Prayer is a means to glorify God and thus to fulfill our purpose in Christ. Prayer is the expression by a sensible, subordinate creation of its dependence on a holy, omnipotent, merciful, giving, and eternal Creator.

In prayer, we bow down before THE LORD and bring ourselves under His watchful eye. Although He already knows what you’re thinking, what you’re going to say, and what you need, He still grants you the privilege to enter into His court and address the King. In fact, God welcomes the repentant with open arms. Miraculously, the only thing you need to enter into in His holy presence is a sincere, faithful heart and to begin by saying “Our Father.”

Prayer is multi-directional and multi-dimensional. That is, we are speaking to God, but He then speaks back to us in a figurative sense. (And, in some unique cases, He literally answers back in word or deed.)³ Also, prayer is not simply just asking God for something but has several distinct components. The effects of prayer touch every aspect of our Christian lives.

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 376.

² Matthew 21:22, c.f. Mark 11:24; James 1:6-8, 5:14-15.

³ For example, see I Kings 18:36-39.

Prayer is not something God gave us for His benefit. It is for *our* benefit, an invitation of grace so that we may enter into His presence. The central goal of a Christian's life is to become more like Christ, who obeyed God perfectly. Prayer fuels our obedience and in and of itself is an act that compels the ones praying to humble themselves before God. Prayer is what energizes our spiritual lives. Just as the Holy Spirit is the One who opens our hearts to receive God's Word, the Spirit also compels us to open our mouths to adore, confess, give thanks, and petition the Father.⁴

God used His words to shape and fashion the universe (Genesis 1), and thus it is clear that His words are divine currency that purchase the raw material of our reality. In turn, our natural words materialize our spiritual desires as they arrive at God's ear. It is clear that prayer is not something that everyone does, because due to the fallen nature of humanity, there is a tendency to reject God and therefore no desire to engage in prayer. However, within each member of God's [regenerated](#) elect, there is a new, inherent desire to commune with THE LORD.

Prayer is something that is well-known among believers but is also something that is well-neglected. In my humble opinion, if there ever was a secret to sanctification or to becoming more holy, it would be prayer. All the former saints who were titans of the Christian faith were irrevocably titans of prayer. Prayer is so important that it is one of the few things that human beings can do just as God does.⁵ In the context of the [Trinity](#), the Holy Spirit compels our hearts to pray and reveals to us what to say,⁶ and there is a conduit between us and the Father—Jesus, who makes intercession for us.⁷ Our prayers are made effective *because of Jesus*, the Great High Priest⁸ and mediator⁹ between humankind and God.

Because we are all sinful, and because we all pray for *our* sakes, when we approach the King of Kings through prayer, it becomes quite clear that we cannot and must not approach and speak to the King in any old way. The way one speaks and acts must honor the presence of the One who stands before you. If you speak and talk to God like He is your co-worker or your fishing buddy, then you have already decided that you and He are on the same level. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

⁴ Romans 8:26-27.

⁵ Some examples of Jesus praying: Matthew 11:25-26, 14:22, 15:36, 19:13-15; Mark 1:35-36, 7:31-37; Luke 5:15, 6:12-13, 9:18, 9:28-29, 10:21, 11:1; John 6:11, 11:41-42, 12:27-28, 17:1-16.

⁶ And thus praying "in the Spirit." See Ephesians 6:18 and Jude 20; c.f. Ephesians 2:18; Revelation 1:10.

⁷ Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25.

⁸ Hebrews 4:14-15, 7:26-27, 10:19, 22.

⁹ I Timothy 2:5.

Why Should We Pray?

We pray to glorify God, and when a person glorifies God, they reap benefits. So while prayer is a strict requirement of the Christian faith, it is not something that is without profit to us. We pray because I Thessalonians 5:17 says, “Pray without ceasing.” We pray because in order to be molded and shaped and receive from God, we have to prepare our vessel. Prayer facilitates this preparation.

We pray because it can change *the ways* in which God operates in the world. In other words, prayer changes people and circumstances.

In Exodus 32:14, for example, God steers his course of action away from harm after a prayer by Moses (verses 11-13). Additionally, God Himself expressed the power of prayer to change the way He acts in II Chronicles 7:14 when he said, “and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and *pray and seek My face* and turn from their wicked ways, *then I will hear from heaven*, will forgive their sin and will *heal their land*” (emphasis added).

James 5:16 says that “the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” This verse is this the most succinct answer to the question “Why should I pray?” In fact, the prayers of the righteous are one of the means God utilizes to bring events to pass in our natural realm. Furthermore, prayer produces real-life dividends. Biblically speaking, these dividends have no pre-defined limit, so if something is the will of God and someone asks earnestly and according to His will, the effects of prayer know no bounds. Several passages describe the awesome power of prayer.¹⁰ Here are some examples:

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7).

“And Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it will happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive’” (Matthew 21:21-22).

“Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you” (Mark 11:24).

“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).

Notice, though, that the James 5:16 verse mentions *effective* prayer of a *righteous* person. I will explain what effective prayer is shortly, but prayer ceases to be effective when

¹⁰ Genesis 32; Judges 15, 16; II Kings 19; Jeremiah 29:11-15; Matthew 21:22; Mark 9:29; John 14:13-14; Acts 9:40; James 1:5; I John 5:14-15.

performed by an unrighteous person. Hence, “We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him” (John 9:31).

When Should We Pray? How Long? How Often? To Whom? In the name of Jesus or not?

There are no explicit Biblical answers to most of these questions. Isaiah 50:4 speaks of God giving the prophet a “tongue of disciples” in the morning, but there is no Biblical *prescription* for *when* or *how often* to pray. There are *descriptions* in Psalms 55:17 and Daniel 6:10 of praying three times day. Furthermore, Jesus is described throughout Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as praying during all hours of the day (and night). Ephesians 6:18 tells us to pray at *all* times. Paul gives the church at Colossae the global instruction to “devote yourselves to prayer” (Colossians 4:2), and in some instances, prayer can occur over long periods of time for a specific petition.¹¹

The great German Reformist theologian Martin Luther is said to have prayed for one hour on good days. On bad days he prayed for at least two. Some of my seminary professors allocate two to three hours daily to prayer and devotion. Again, there is no strict time limit or minimum given in the Bible.

Of course, there will be times in our lives when we need to be closer to God, and our prayer time will increase. Trials, adversity, and big decisions warrant more prayer time. For example, in Luke 6:12, Jesus prayed for the “whole night” prior to choosing His apostles. These individuals would become the core group of twelve men (minus one) who would go out into the world and spread the gospel. This was clearly a monumental decision that required divine guidance, and Jesus, by necessity, drew closer to God to obtain that guidance.

Generally speaking in the New Testament, prayers are addressed *to* the Father *through* Jesus,¹² but there are some instances where people pray directly to Jesus.¹³ It must be noted that for obvious reasons, Jesus never prays to Himself. He only prays to the Father.¹⁴

In specific occasions¹⁵ in the New Testament, Jesus mentions to His disciples to pray in His name. Prayer for Jesus, our Great High Priest, is categorized as a function of His priestly office. Jesus still prays and intercedes for humanity in heaven, and thus when we pray “in the name of Jesus,” we aren’t invoking magic but are entreating the One who

¹¹ See Luke 18:1-8.

¹² For example, see Matthew 6:9; John 16:23; Ephesians 5:20.

¹³ Acts 7:59; Revelation 22:20.

¹⁴ For example, Matthew 11:25-26.

¹⁵ John 14:13-14, 15:16; c.f. Ephesians 5:20.

mediates for us. For example, in John 16:23-24, Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you. Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full.”

Many of the prayers in the New Testament *do not* mention “in the name of Jesus” *including* THE LORD’S Prayer!¹⁶ Yet, in the name of Jesus, Peter heals a crippled man,¹⁷ and Paul rebukes an unclean spirit¹⁸ and pronounces judgment.¹⁹ Back in ancient times, people didn’t have business cards or personal homepages where you could learn all about them. So, a name was really all a person had to hang their character and reputation on.²⁰ Saying or doing something in someone else’s name meant that you were acting on their prior approval. Thus, praying in the name of Jesus means you are praying based on the authorization, character, and reputation of Christ.²¹ And, because we are praying based on the Person of Christ, saying “in the name of Jesus” is never magic nor will it guarantee results—it does, however, force the person praying to realize that what they are praying about *has to be consistent with Jesus’s character* if the phrase is to have any meaning. So, no, you can’t pray for a Bentley “in the name of Jesus.” As with everything else we’ve learned thus far, God is always more concerned with your internal heart condition than any outward works, acts, or formulas. Consequently, a sincere prayer without “in the name of Jesus” from someone faithfully seeking God is not void.

How to Pray: A.C.T.S. and THE LORD’S Prayer

Wayne Grudem writes that effective praying is characterized by being in accordance to God’s will, faith, obedience, confession, forgiveness, humility, continuing over time, sincerity, patience, being in private but also done with others, and often being connected with fasting.^{22, 23} All of these characteristics will be clarified in what follows.

Generally speaking, there is a simple way to memorize how to pray: *ACTS*. It stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. So, the first part of a prayer (*adoration*) involves fervent²⁴ expression of deep love, respect, and worship of God. Hebrews 13:15 says, “Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (ESV). Psalms 150:6 says, “Let

¹⁶ Matthew 6:9-13 (THE LORD’S Prayer where Jesus told His disciples how to pray); Acts 1:24-25; Revelation 6:10, 22:20.

¹⁷ Acts 3:6.

¹⁸ Acts 16:18.

¹⁹ I Corinthians 5:4.

²⁰ Proverbs 22:1; Ecclesiastes 7:1.

²¹ Matthew 26:39; I John 5:14-15.

²² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 382-391.

²³ For examples of prayer and fasting, see Nehemiah 1:4; Esther 4:3; Daniel 9:3; Joel 2:12-13; Luke 2:37 and Acts 13:2.

²⁴ Luke 22:44.

everything that has breath praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! (ESV).” Praise denotes superiority for God and humility for us. The prayer of adoration, then, reflects this dynamic and is *never* conversational. If you’re curious what exactly to say to express adoration, by and large the Book of Psalms contains many different types of prayers that are filled with adoration. Getting stuck on adoration usually means you either don’t know what to say or you don’t know *Who* you’re admiring. Answers to both questions are found all throughout the Bible. For example, Psalms 19 reads as follows:

The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge ... The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. (Verses 1-2, 7-10)

Second, *confession* is quite straightforward: In the presence of a holy and just God, we recognize His magnificence and our iniquities, and thus we confess our sins so that God may forgive us. Your answer to the question of how often you sin also answers the question of how often you should confess (at least daily). Christians know that God is merciful, but they fail to realize that forgiveness is *preceded* by confession. I John 1:9 says, “*If we confess our sins*, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (emphasis added). King David, a well-known sinner and psalmist, wrote all of Psalms 51, which is essentially a confessional prayer. His confession was predicated on God’s undeserving grace, so David didn’t say, “Hey God, I confess, I repent, now pardon me,” but he instead pleaded for God to restore him by the mercy of His grace alone. [Atonement](#), or reparation for sin, is never a matter of human effort.

Third, *thanksgiving* recognizes all that God has done for us and proclaims that everything that we have is a gift of grace from THE LORD. Take note that thanksgiving is a visible act, an outward expression of inward gratitude. Hence, a lack of gratitude tends not to yield thanksgiving, and ingratitude usually goes to bed with disrespect (c.f. Romans 1:21). This is basically the world’s position when it comes to God. I Thessalonians 5:18 says, “In everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:6 says, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Psalms 103:2 says, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits.”

Fourth, our *supplications* are where we petition God to do something for others and ourselves. There is no Biblical restriction on what you can ask God for so long as it falls in line with His expressed will. John 15:7 says, “Ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” Mark 11:24 says, “Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you.” I Timothy

2:1-4 says, “First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, *petitions* and thanksgivings, *be made on behalf of all men*, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (emphasis added). Of course, asking God doesn’t guarantee you will receive something, and not receiving often happens because we are not specific in our requests, or our motives are impure: we are rebelling against God, we are impatient, or we are asking for something we already have or for something that we honestly do not need. The last point emphasizes the fact that God will never give you something that you will misuse or that will destroy you.

ACTS equips you with a very general formula of what to say. Notice that one begins by praising God and ends with asking for something. Some folks just skip the *ACT* and go straight to the *S*, failing to realize what prayer really is and forgetting to whom they are speaking. Sometimes I can’t get my wife to do a favor without saying something nice or complimentary first, and God is a much stricter audience than Mrs. Sadaphal.

ACTS is derived from the Scriptures, not something made explicit by God. However, cognizant of the paramount importance of prayer, Jesus gave us a specific blueprint—THE LORD’S Prayer—on exactly *how* to pray. THE LORD’S Prayer is located in Matthew 6:9-13, and Luke 11:2-4 gives a more concise version. Jesus explains the Prayer in detail in response to a request by the disciples: “Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). Before Jesus answers this question in Matthew 6, He first makes mention of what not to say. In Matthew 6:5-8, Christ says:

When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

In other words, Jesus qualifies prayer by first stating what it is not supposed to look like. When we pray to God, there is a particular character of our communication that separates it and distinguishes it from our communication with others. Anyone anywhere in the world can “pray” at any time, but as it pertains to the God of the Bible, “praying” doesn’t necessarily mean you’re engaging in *godly* prayer. Hence, un-godly prayer is characterized by *who* does it (the hypocrites), *where* they do it (only in public), *why* they do it (for selfish reasons) and *how* they do it (according to worldly patterns).

The word “hypocrite” is derived from *hypokrite* in Greek, which means an actor under an assumed character or a stage-player. *Hypokrites* have no sincere internal motivation to draw closer to God but put on a mask to put on a show “so that they may be seen by

men” and draw attention to themselves. Thus hypocritical prayer is done in public *for the purpose of spectacle*. Jesus subsequently follows up His disapproval of public prayer with His approval of private prayer: “When you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret.” Of course, this does not condemn believers coming together as a unified body in earnest, sincere prayer *for the purposes of God*, as Paul writes in I Timothy 2:8: “I want the men *in every place to pray*, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension” (emphasis added).

Ungodly prayer is also discussed in the Old Testament. David clarified that someone with iniquity in their heart would not be heard by God (Psalm 66:18), and that prayers from the wicked are not only unheard²⁵ by God but are counted as sinful.²⁶ Disruption in interpersonal relationships²⁷ and unforgiven sin²⁸ hinder prayer.

Finally, the *how* of hypocritical prayer follows a formula of endless repetition without meaning and is therefore excessively lengthy. Endless repetition is not required for a God who “knows what you need before [you] ask Him.”²⁹ In fact, repetition runs the risk of being nothing more than repetition, and the content of what the person is saying is therefore stripped of any significance. This does not abrogate repeatedly coming to God over time with an earnest petition, for “will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him *day and night*?” (Luke 18:7, emphasis added). Paul, for example, asked God three times to remove the figurative thorn in his side.³⁰

With endless repetition, what is meant to be engaging instead becomes reflexive and divorces itself from the mind, the heart, and the spirit. This even applies to THE LORD’S Prayer itself—while there is certainly nothing inherently wrong about reciting the Prayer, merely repeating it without a firm understanding of what it means strips the Prayer of its meaning. Again, the key take-home point is that prayer is an external act that is driven by an internal heart condition. A heart that is focused away from God or someone who is simply “acting” will produce prayer that is hypocritical and shunned. A sincere heart condition will produce sincere prayer, and Jesus outlines what this looks like in Matthew 6: 9-13.

Pray, then, in this way: ‘Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. ‘And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.’

²⁵ Proverbs 15:29.

²⁶ Psalm 109:7, Proverbs 28:9.

²⁷ I Peter 3:7.

²⁸ Isaiah 59:1-2.

²⁹ See also Psalm 139:1-4.

³⁰ II Corinthians 12:8; c.f. Mark 14:39.

Note that Jesus did not say “Pray *this*,” as in pray these exact words. Rather, He said, “Pray *in this way*,” as in “this is the blueprint but not the actual house.”

Our Father who is in heaven (Adoration). As R.C. Sproul notes, those writers and authors in the Jewish tradition never called God “Father” in their written prayers until the tenth century A.D.³¹ In contrast, Jesus almost always referred to God as “Father” when He prayed. Hence, in THE LORD’S Prayer, Jesus invites us all to address God as “Father,” which points to a familial, close, intimate relationship. Technically speaking, Jesus is the only begotten Son of the Father, and thus Jesus is the only One who can properly call God “Father” (Mark 14:36). Yet, as Paul writes in Galatians 4:6, the Holy Spirit works in us to turn us toward God and say “Abba! Father!”—a term of endearment.³² We are not talking to an impersonal “It” detached from our reality but to a loving Parent who has chosen adopted³³ sons and daughters into His family. Resultantly, the adopted call God *Our Father* to represent the head of the corporate family. Interestingly, these two words draw our attention to God and to our neighbor, because God is never “mine”—He’s *ours*. There are countless elect others who call Him Father as well, and they are *our* brothers and sisters as a function of adoption. Hence, the first two words of THE LORD’S Prayer orient the reader to the two greatest commandments: to love God and to love one’s neighbor.³⁴

Notice that we are encouraged to call the Patriarch “Father”—not Mr., Sir, or Commander, but Father. This conjures up the idea of a strong, nurturing relationship that all humans can relate to and purposely does not invent a new type of name for God that is foreign to human understanding. It must also be said that there are many natural fathers who abuse their position, but again, *Our Father* is not the exact same as an earthly father because *Our Father* is a Dad *Who is in heaven*. This is what separates the One Divine Father from earthly fathers and their inherent human flaws.

Furthermore, we were not adopted out of divine necessity but out of the grace of God. And of course, it goes without saying that all those who call God “Father” do not necessarily have a genuine relationship with Him, as Jesus so informs the persecutory Jews in John 8:39-47.

So within the first two words of THE LORD’S Prayer, our hearts and minds are directed in proper orientation to the One who chose us, and even after that choosing, He has invited us into His presence to call Him “Father.” All of this illuminates the understanding that despite the fact that God is “Our Father” and in this there is nearness, He “is in Heaven,”

³¹ R.C. Sproul, *The Prayer of the Lord* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2009), 18.

³² Abba is an Aramaic word that is analogous to saying “Daddy” or “Papa.”

³³ Adoption is the doctrine that says God makes us members of his family. It is an act initiated by God is not a function of birth. Our adoption is mediated through Christ. See John 1:12; Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 3:23-26, 4:4-7, 28; I John 3:1-2 Those who do not believe in Jesus Christ are not adopted and are “children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3) and “sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2).

³⁴ Matthew 22:36-40.

and there is simultaneous away-ness (no, that isn't a word, but you get the point). Even though He has an otherworldliness about Him, we can still come into His presence at any time through our prayers and be near to Him.

Hallowed be Your Name (Adoration). According to *Strong's Concordance*, the word hallowed is translated from the Greek word *hagiazō*, meaning, "to make holy, purify, acknowledge, to separate from profane things and dedicate to God."³⁵ Basically, God doesn't need you to tell Him that His name is holy, but by Jesus telling His disciples to pray in this manner, He instructs us to make an appeal that God's name will be treated with esteem, regarded as sacred, and treated with veneration. We know from the Third Commandment³⁶ that God takes His name very seriously, and thus so should we. Therefore, the first formal line of THE LORD'S Prayer after the opening is a proclamation for His name to be honored, which sets the tone for what is to follow.

One may ask what the big deal is if God's *name* isn't respected.³⁷ Well, disregard for God's name leads to familiarity and ordinariness, irrevocably leading to lack of respect and disregard for God Himself. Consider that in modern society, people casually say, "Oh my —" reflexively or use His name before d@mn as a cuss word. You may still be asking what the big deal is, *and that's exactly the point*. Treating the name of God like every other name means one is not separating it from profane things or making it holy—it desecrates it. "Hallowed be Your Name" is an appeal for respect because victory for God's purposes on Earth cannot happen in a realm where no one has any respect for Him. Being adopted by God carries with it the responsibility and accountability of honoring Him.

In the Old Testament, God codified reverence for His name in the Ten Commandments, and now in the New Testament, Jesus codifies the sacredness of God's name in the start of THE LORD'S Prayer. This sets the tone, preps our attitudes, and immediately destroys any frolicsome ideas we may have in regards to the way we address THE LORD.

Your kingdom come (Adoration). So after we recognize the holiness of God's name, Jesus then tells us to pray for the coming of the kingdom of God. God already rules in the kingdom of heaven, but Jesus was telling His disciples to spread the reign of God in the natural earthly realm so that it would mimic the perfect heavenly reign of God. This is what John the Baptizer was alluding to when he said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). Of course, human beings always want a king with a kingdom, but they have always rejected God as the King of Kings and often settled for less-than-adequate substitutes.³⁸ In the case of King Saul, for example, the Israelites chose a king of their own desires (I Samuel 8:4-5), even though they were told that he would rob them

³⁵ James Strong, *The New Strong's Concordance* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), Greek, 3.

³⁶ "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain" (Exodus 20:7).

³⁷ One answer to this question is death. See Leviticus 10:1-3.

³⁸ c.f. Psalm 2:2-4.

blind (I Samuel 8:11-18). When Jesus came around, not only did the Jews reject Him, but the Romans crucified Him. These groups weren't saying "Your kingdom come" but "Get your stinking kingdom out of here!" Clearly we have much work to do in modern society. For example, I wrote in the introduction to [What Christians Should Know](#) that about one in five American adults is either an atheist or agnostic. This fact highlights the acute need in our prayers for petitions such as "Your kingdom come."

God isn't running out of room in heaven and needing more space. Rather, the petition that "Your kingdom come" is an appeal for God to pierce the hearts of those on earth to be ruled by the Messiah. It is a petition for people in this world to be moved by the Holy Spirit to have regenerated hearts, turn to Jesus, and bow before the true King. Jesus described what the kingdom of God would be like by describing the type of characters that would serve in it in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7). God's kingdom is otherworldly, and this is why Jesus told Pilate in John 18:36, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." Similarly, God's chosen are *in* this world, but our citizenship is not *of* this world (Philippians 3:20).

It is important to note that the kingdom of Jesus is not something that we're all waiting for *technically speaking*. That is, He's already the King with *all* authority "in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18). God's kingdom is *unseen*, and when we pray that "Your kingdom come," this is a request that in every aspect of our individual lives and in the communal life of the church, we bring the invisible kingdom *into the visible realm*—this applies to every aspect of our lives, including family, relationships, evangelism, community service, devotional life, schools, jobs, finances, behavior patterns, and methods of thinking.

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Adoration). God's will is that we obey His Word and keep His commandments. Hence, when we say these words, it is of tremendous value to know God's Word, the Bible. Knowledge of the Bible drives our prayers,³⁹ so that God's Word, and thus knowledge of His will, abides in us. Our expressed words thus match His Word dwelling in us. Resultantly, Jesus, the Word made flesh, says, "if you abide in Me, *and My words abide in you*, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (emphasis added; John 15:7).

No person knows all of God's will, yet that doesn't stop everybody from investigating. So if we pray for God's will to be done, but we don't know what God's will is, aren't we shooting arrows in the dark? Not necessarily, because there is not one single flavor of God's will. Allow me to explain. The Greek word for "will" used in the THE LORD'S Prayer is *thelēma*, which means what God wishes, has commanded, or has determined shall be done. The other word for "will" in the New Testament is *boulema*,⁴⁰ meaning plan or intention. This word suggests predetermination and thus rigidity. Although these

³⁹ See Acts 4:25-26.

⁴⁰ As translated "plan" in Acts 2:23.

are two different words with a slight difference in meaning, over time the two became interchangeable synonyms.

Accordingly, from the contextual usage of “will” in the New Testament, Bible scholars formulated three different types of God’s will: (1) *God’s efficacious will*. Here, God determines it shall happen, and it happens. Nothing can stop His efficacious will because He is [sovereign](#). As an example, Jesus told a sick and crippled man in John 5:8 to “pick up [his] pallet and walk.” Immediately the man was healed, got up, and walked. There is nothing that man could have done to deter Jesus’s will and resultant command. Human beings are passive recipients when it comes to God’s efficacious will. (2) *God’s preceptive will*. Here God would like for things to happen, but you can reject that will. The preceptive will pertains to God’s explicit rules and commandments. For example, Exodus 20:17 essentially says, “Do not covet your neighbor’s things,” so it is very clear that God wills everyone not to yearn after someone else’s possessions. Yet, people covet every second of every day. So, asking “Your will be done” is an appeal for people to adhere to God’s preceptive will. Human beings are active and responsible when it comes to God’s preceptive will. (3) *God’s will as it pertains to His disposition or His general character*. Here, the will of God has to do with what is agreeable or disagreeable to Him. For example, it is agreeable to God that people live obedient, faithful, and productive lives. It is disagreeable to Him for people to live slanderous and indolent lives.

So, as it pertains to God’s efficacious will, there can never be a discrepancy between what God wills and what is. However, there can be a very large gap between His preceptive will or His disposition and what we do here on earth. Hence, Jesus tells His disciples to qualify “Your will be done” with the phrase “on earth *as it is in heaven*.” The implication is that in heaven, everything that happens fulfills the will of God. On earth, many things do not, hence the petition.

In a general sense, then, believers always know what God’s *revealed will* (included within His preceptive and dispositional wills) is because the Bible is full of commands and instructions on what to do and descriptions of God’s character. Believers can never know God’s *secret will* (included within His efficacious will), because of course, He’s God, and the secret things belong to Him only (Deuteronomy 29:29). This does not preclude that fact that God is willing to reveal more of Himself in prayer. All we have to do is ask: “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5).

This leads to an important point worth considering: If God’s will is what ultimately will be done, then why should anyone bother praying? In other words, God is eternal and sovereign. So, prayer never changes God’s mind. So then, why bother to pray? Because, as R.C. Sproul writes,

Prayer *does* change things, all kinds of things. But the most important thing it changes is us. As we engage in communion with God more deeply and come to know the One with whom we are speaking more intimately, that growing knowledge of God reveals to us all the more brilliantly who

we are and our need to change in conformity to Him. Prayer changes us profoundly.⁴¹

God is the first cause of all things. This doesn't disqualify the fact that secondary causes *are the means by which His first cause materializes*. Even more, His first cause often is directed at us *and not* at what is around us. This highlights one of the most overlooked aspects of prayer: It has more power to change us on the inside than it does to change things on the outside. Prayer is a discourse with God and is *relational*. It naturally follows that its primary activity is to strengthen the bond of that *relationship*. Consequently, Jesus never overpowered people with His will, nor did He, for example, change the external circumstance of the oppressive imperial Roman regime of the time. He invited people to draw close *to Him* for the purpose of the relationship: “*Come to Me*, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and *I* will give you rest” (emphasis added; Matthew 11:28). If rest is to be found in a Person, one can still be at peace regardless of the circumstances.

God's sovereignty also does not nullify our individual freedom—God's sovereignty *defines the contours* of human freedom. There is nothing in my natural life that I could ever do, nor is there any request in my prayer life that I could ever make, that would negate God's sovereignty. Within the contours that His sovereignty has defined, I am free to operate, and within this sphere, prayer changes much. This highlights the point that prayer is done exclusively for our sakes. We are incapable of drawing close to God without prayer, and God's eternal will works through our individual will through prayer to satisfy the demands of His will.

The Bible never says that God created and then left us alone. He is constantly working in and through creation, utilizing active participants. Prayer will not change the Creator, but prayer will change the creation that stands under the control of the Creator.⁴² *Even God (Jesus) prayed to God (the Father) in order to bring events to pass (John 11:38-44)*. If God's sovereignty did, in fact, nullify what we do, then there would be no reason to do anything: pray, fast, read the Bible, worship, or be obedient.

This is exactly why in the lesson on the Tabernacle ([Part I](#) and [Part II](#)), it was emphasized that priestly prayer and intercession are what shifts the believer from standing almost next to God to being directly in His presence. The execution of intercessory prayer for others and making our specific requests known to God is what changes the circumstances of our life. R.C. Sproul thus writes, “The intricate problem of the relationship between the sovereignty of God and human prayers comes not at the point of adoration and confession, but at the point of intercession and supplication.”⁴³

⁴¹ R.C. Sproul, *The Prayer of the Lord*, 14.

⁴² As examples, see Exodus 32:9-14; Joshua 10:12-14; I Kings 18:36-40; II Kings 6:15-19; Luke 22:31-32; Acts 1:12-2:4; James 4:2, 5:13-18.

⁴³ R.C. Sproul, *The Prayer of the Lord*, 115.

Here lies a timeless question: How do I know God's will for my life? The more I study the Bible, the more I believe that an even better question to ask is, "If God does reveal His will to you, are you prepared to accept the answer and its consequences?" Let me give you an example. In Luke 22:39-46, before Jesus is crucified, He prays to the Father and asks God, "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done." So, God asks God to stop something from happening, and what is God's response? *The thing is still going to happen*. Not only that, but despite Jesus's agony (sweating blood, verse 44), after He prays, God sends an angel to strengthen Jesus so that He can eventually endure the thing (the Cross).

Throughout His prayer, Jesus qualified His petition with "Father, *if You are willing...*" Oftentimes, God's answer to our petitions is simply, "Submit to My will."⁴⁴ Other times, God's "silence" often calls us simply to wait on Him,⁴⁵ and in this time of waiting, we may have our desires changed, our insight increased, a new revelation, or a new assurance of what God's will truly is. The pursuit of God's will through prayer may be one of the most submissive, pious searches a believer can execute in his or her walk. It may also be a search saturated in pride and conceit. Determining which scenario applies to you depends on who's will you are really looking for.

Furthermore, the practical answer to the question of how you can know God's will becomes evident: *You have to search for it*. For example, in order to write this lesson, I began with a question: What instruction can I give to believers that delivers helpful, practical, and actionable advice on the topic of prayer? So what did I do? I prayed. I read the Bible. I wrote. I read three books on prayer. I prayed. I read some more. I read more Bible verses. I wrote again. So while God never revealed His will to me and said, "Lesson number four shall be on prayer! Thus sayeth THE LORD!" I know from reading the Bible that all believers should be able to relay sound doctrine (Titus 2:1), Scripture is profitable for teaching (II Timothy 3:16), the Word guides us in our everyday lives (Psalms 119:105), and one of the responsibilities of leaders in the church is to teach properly and with integrity (Titus 2:7-8). I am also aware that the second I begin to teach people about the Bible, I subject myself to greater scrutiny and judgment (James 3:1-2), so I cannot bring my B game. I can't even bring my A- game. I have to search, research, search, research, and then write. So why did I go through all that? Because I specifically asked God for guidance and never received an answer, but although I don't know His secret will nor has He revealed anything to me, I know enough about His preceptive will to guide my actions. In fact, if I ever assumed that I could get a hold of the Almighty's secret will, then I've asked a question that doesn't concern me. In our lives, the revealed will is always where we start.

For an even more practical example, let's say you're a young twenty-something thinking about where to go to school or who to marry, and you are constantly praying, "Your will be done." At the end of the day, because God defines the contours of your will, any choice you make cannot override God's sovereignty. If you do make a choice that flirts

⁴⁴ See II Corinthians 12:9-10.

⁴⁵ See Psalm 27:14, 38:15, 130:5-6.

with a limit, God always has a way of re-directing you. So while you may endlessly deliberate on whether to go to the Ivy League school in Philadelphia or the big football school down south, His revealed will is more concerned with how you conduct yourself when you get there. Similarly, when it comes to looking for a mate, people often pray and wait on God to show them who their perfect soul mate is without realizing that His revealed will induces you to pursue much more *self-scrutiny* than *other-scrutiny*.

A Biblical example of God's will in action can be seen in the story of Joseph (Genesis 37-44). If Joseph as a young teenager sought God's will and God actually told Him that he would one day be one of the most powerful men on Earth, the desired revelation would likely fill a teenager's head with too much ego. Conversely, if it was revealed to Joseph that he would be sold into slavery by his brothers, he likely would have ran far, far away and never looked back. Instead, what Joseph did receive was a vague dream (37:5-7) with an expressed promise. So, as time moved forward, although Joseph experienced many trials and tribulations, it was his faith and *the lack* of complete knowledge of God's plan that kept Joseph moving forward. Ultimately, at the end of Joseph's trials, when he was on top in Egypt and able to assist his entire family, he could then look back and make sense of his whole story in light of the ending God had written for him. God's ending always makes sense of the rest of your story, but you often have to get to the ending for His divine will to be the most compelling.

Always, we are to come before God and let Him know what is in our hearts, but we must also realize that He is the One who knows what's best for us. To pray that "Your will be done" means that whatever the answer is, it is His will, not our will, that we will faithfully obey.

Before we move on to the next segment, realize that the beginning of THE LORD'S Prayer is essentially an expression of the First Commandment (Exodus 20:3), that God is God and *He alone* is God. Hence, He is "Our Father who is in heaven," whose name is "hallowed" and whose kingdom do we seek to make visible. Before we do anything else in prayer, we glorify THE LORD.

Give us this day our daily bread (Thanksgiving and Supplication). In asking God for our *daily* bread, we are alerted to the fact that He is the one Who provides for us each and every day. This request is rooted in the Old Testament, where God provided daily bread (manna) to the people of Israel who were wandering in the wilderness (Exodus 16:1-7). Because God gives freely, this is a reason for thanksgiving. And just like it did for the Israelites in the desert, the fact that each new day He willingly provides for us keeps our frame of mind focused on THE LORD as a reliable provider. Essentially, we, as the creations, are asking God to grant us something, and the Scriptures tell us that He is both more than able to give *and willing to give*. The following verses provide examples.

"For every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills" (Psalm 50:10).

"Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (James 1:17).

“Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!” (Matthew 7:9-11).

Moreover, in relation to God, asking for something as minute as daily bread reveals that God is wholly invested in the minutiae of our everyday lives and that He wants us to depend on Him for provision. God will provide for His own: “I have been young and now I am old, Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken *or his descendants begging bread*” (emphasis added; Psalms 37:25). We can’t petition God in prayer once a month or once a year and expect that He will provide if we haven’t acknowledged our innate necessity and reliance on Him. Although not explicit, the implication is that we are to pray every day.

Finally, if we are to pray for daily bread, then Jesus is telling us not to pray for an overabundance of bread, nor are we to be anxious about either getting more or not having enough. Jesus says in Matthew 6:25-26, “Do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?” We can draw life insights from the Israelites who were instructed in Exodus 16 not to take more than a day’s supply of manna from heaven.

It is within God’s will, as expressed by Jesus in THE LORD’S Prayer, that He desires to provide *daily needs, not excessive ones*. So while God wants us to ask, He is not inviting us to ask for abundance, only daily bread. And, if He entreats us to be as specific as asking for a daily need, God can only answer specifically if we make a specific request. As R.C. Sproul writes, “We have a tendency to pray in general. When we pray in general, the only way we will see the hand of God’s providence is in general.”⁴⁶

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (Confession and Supplication). The word for debts in Greek (*opheilēma*) doesn’t refer to a monetary debt but to sins, and thus something that is legally owed to a God who finds sins offensive. The debt of sin is a moral one. In fact, the New Testament often refers to sins as a debt owed to God as we incur an obligation to Him. Jesus has already [paid](#) the eternal price for all [sins](#), but we make an appeal to God to forgive our sins as we inevitably commit sin and become indebted to THE LORD. What truly is unsettling about asking God to “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” is that our personal forgiveness becomes contingent upon our forgiveness of others. This places an acute emphasis not only on the vertical relationship to God but also on the horizontal relationship to our neighbors.

⁴⁶ R.C. Sproul, *The Prayer of the Lord*, 72.

Matthew 6:14-15 says, “For *if* you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (emphasis added). Mark 11:25 also emphasizes that before we petition God, we must reconcile with our neighbors: “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.” Jesus says to forgive our neighbors “seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22) times. This part of THE LORD’S Prayer forces us to realize that our relationship with God is not independent of others but *inclusive of others*.

In three separate places (Matthew 22:37-38, Mark 12:30-31, and Luke 10:27) Jesus says *of everything we are told to do in the entire Bible*, the top two commands are to love God and to love your neighbor. If someone does not repent through genuine prayer and confession and has an antagonistic attitude toward his or her neighbor, then they do so to their own detriment: “But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God” (Romans 2:5). In the spirit of reconciliation, it must be mentioned that forgiveness of others does not abrogate justice.

And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil (Supplication). This is the only part of THE LORD’S Prayer where the original Greek delivers the most insight into understanding the Prayer itself. The word for temptation (*peirasmos*) means a trial, adversity, or putting to proof. God tempts no one (James 1:13), but He frequently *tests* His elect, and that exam “will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able” (I Corinthians 10:13). Asking God to “lead us not into temptation” petitions Him to *not* let adversity strike because, obviously, trials are never fun. Yet, God will test those whom He loves (Hebrews 12:6), and the purpose of the trials is to make the believer more complete and purify their righteousness (James 1:2-4).

The word for evil, *ponēros*, uses a particular masculine version of the noun for evil. Hence, although the NASB translates it as “evil,” the more exact translation is “the evil one” or Satan. Hence, the New King James Version says, “But deliver us from the evil one.” So, in this petition, Jesus is telling us that when we pray, we are to ask God not to lead us into difficult trials, but we are also to petition God to be delivered from the cunning attacks of the devil. Jesus knew firsthand what it meant to be lead into temptation and to be subjected to the wiles of Satan (Luke 4:1-13). It is impossible for humans to resist these attacks by themselves, so we pray, seeking divine protection.

For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen (Adoration). THE LORD’S prayer starts with God and ends with God. Here, at the end, the one praying recognizes the Divine Kingship of God, Who is sovereign over the kingdom, Who has unquestioned power, and Who is to be glorified. The one praying concludes that at the end of his or her prayer, it is God’s will that reigns supreme, not the person’s will. To embrace this idea means that you recognize and accept that God is an eternal monarch whose system of government *is a monarchy*. It’s not a democracy, so there is no popular opinion, nor do I get to vote on what I think is right. THE LORD rules, and we follow, and we gladly follow because His eternal power enables us to be citizens of that heavenly

kingdom. Citizenship in that eternal kingdom offers eternal life, something no earthly dynasty can ever provide. Because of this reality, we glorify God.

In the close of THE LORD'S Prayer, we humbly recognize that we exist but for a season, yet it is God Who rules His kingdom with power and glory forever: "For this reason also, God highly exalted [Jesus], and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

Conclusion: What this all means

At the start of this lesson, I mentioned that prayer is not transactional but transformational. In transactional relationships, one party does something as part of an exchange, like an employee working for an hourly wage. When the incentive for the transaction no longer exists, the employee stops working. Hence, this employee is "stuck" in a position we can all relate to: doing a job not for the job itself but for the money. The work is only a means to get a paycheck, so the work has no real value to us. Typically, we are apathetic and need more incentive for more effort. *Here, we do to get and are driven by something on the outside.*

In contrast, a transformational relationship actually transforms the parties involved so that through persuasion and voluntary engagement, they begin to set their eyes on an admirable goal or an idea that transcends what they are doing right now. Here, I do the work or job in pursuit of that goal, so if this requires doing more work or exerting more effort beyond the bounds of my "job description," I do so cheerfully and willingly—because I believe in the principle—like an eager young entrepreneur sacrificing sleep, time, and resources in pursuit of a revolutionary business idea. *Here, we do because we believe and are driven by something on the inside.* The stronger our belief, the more we do.

In transactional prayer, all we want is something from God *but not God Himself*—not His will, not His kingdom, not His power. If God then gives the something to us, the "transaction" is complete, and we no longer have a need for Him. In this scenario, granting a prayer request is actually dangerous because it will distort our perception of THE LORD and therein distort our self-image as image-bearers of Him.

Prayer is the transformational medium in our relationship with God, yet the transformation is one-sided: only we change. We change slowly and steadily to become more like Christ so that our will matches His will, our heart matches His heart, and our mind matches His mind. Hence, as we are transformed, all we will desire and pursue is God Himself. This is a Person that transcends our circumstances. Subsequently, as elect, regenerated, repentant believers, our eyes are set on THE LORD, whom we know we will glorify through prayer, and we exercise our faith in Him by prayer. This transforms us even more, drawing us closer to Him and increasing our desire to pray and fellowship

with Him even more. In the end, the Bible teaches us that “God causes *all* things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (emphasis added; Romans 8:28). Those who love God faithfully and effectively pray to Him, and He uses our prayers to shape us according to His glorious purposes. In the end, when He molds us into something new, our purposes, goals and desires change so that our new prayers will match our new vessel.

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