

522 How Can I Improve My Prayer Life

Phil Sanders

God's Answers to Life's Questions

Over 90 percent of Americans say that they pray occasionally. Even people who do not believe there is a God admit they sometimes pray. Prayer is a marvelous way to get close to God and to pour out our hearts in thanksgiving. Prayer is when we ask God for help and for blessings to meet our needs. Sadly, some people pray so rarely that they miss out on the blessing they can find from a close relationship with God. Like the disciples, we sometimes need to ask the Lord to teach us to pray. James said, the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much (James 5:16).

Prayer is a good habit, but praying by habit only is a very poor habit. Such prayer misses the point; it is a waste of time and a delusion. It shows a spiritually dwarfed life and a lack of faith. Prayerless praying gets no results; it does not reach God. Real prayer, heartfelt and fervent, blesses both God and man. Solomon said in Prov. 15:8, "the prayer of the upright is His delight." It is a great blessing to come away from prayer having shared my heart, my burdens, my fears, my concerns with my Father and knowing He cares to listen and can do something about them.

There are a number of values to prayer. I want to talk about four of them. First, **prayer brings intimacy with God.** The value of prayer does not lie in the number of prayers or the length of prayers, but it finds its value in that we are privileged as children of God to talk to, make requests of, and to shower our love toward our heavenly Father. We need the strength of just being with God, by retreating into prayer. This activity fine tunes our lives, adjusts our attitudes, helps us function properly. God is leaning forward not just to listen but to have fellowship with you.

Sometimes God has to chase us down. In Rev. 3:20, Jesus said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me." Jesus wants that closeness of two friends eating together, enjoying each other's company. Jesus taught us to pray "Our Father." God is a loving and compassionate Father who is to be respected but loved. He asks us to come to Him with our hurts and troubles because He cares. We never need to be afraid in prayer, because our loving Father wants to hear our every concern.

Second, **prayer helps us find Divine solutions to human problems.** Prayer can do anything God can do. I believe in prayer because God suggested it to us to begin with. Jesus said in Matt. 7:7-11, "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will he give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, will he not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" The object of asking is to receive. The aim of seeking is to find. The goal of knocking is to have the door opened. God invites us to ask, seek and knock. Prayer reminds me of my dependency on God—and I need reminding that I need God. Believing in God means that my prayers matter! That God will act if and when I ask Him and will act in ways He would not have acted if I had not asked Him. Divine solutions are always the best solutions, the wisest solutions, and the right solutions for everyone. God is wiser than we are; He sees things we cannot see and knows what we do not know. He will do what is best for us.

Third, **prayer releases the power of God.** Paul said in Ephesians 3:20-21, "Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen." God can do more

than we can imagine—exceedingly, abundantly more! God can do more than we can ask—exceedingly, abundantly more! In 2 Kings 19 King Hezekiah saw Sennacherib, the Syrian surrounding Jerusalem with 185,000 soldiers. They taunted Hezekiah and mocked the God of Israel. Hezekiah humbly prayed to God for deliverance. In 2 Kings 19:35, we read God's answer. "Then it happened that night that the angel of the LORD went out, and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men rose early in the morning, behold, all of them were dead." Does prayer work? Of course, it does! Moses prayed, and God parted the waters of the Red Sea to let the children of Israel pass. Joshua prayed and the sun stood still. Hannah prayed, and God gave her Samuel. Blind Samson asked for strength and pulled down the house of Dagon, killing 3,000 Philistines. Solomon prayed for wisdom; and God made Him the wisest of all mortals. Elijah prayed that it might not rain, and it did not for three years and six months. He prayed for fire to come down from heaven and consume a sacrifice. He prayed for rain, and it did that day! Hezekiah prayed, and God gave him 15 more years of life. Daniel prayed and God rescued him from the lion's den. Jesus prayed, and God raised Lazarus. Peter prayed, and God raised Dorcas. The disciples prayed for Peter in prison, and Peter showed up at the door. Prayer can do more than we ever thought or imagined. Don't ever discount prayer.

Fourth, **prayer changes me.** By spending time with God, I find myself stronger and better than I ever was before. Prayer reminds me I am God's child and God is my Father. It reminds me of my dependence upon God and how He has blessed me. It reminds me of my duty toward God and what I owe Him. It releases me from my burdens as I cast them upon Him. It releases me from guilt so that I can confess my sins to God and forgive others. It reassures me for the day and future that God is with me. It reminds me that one day I will be with God forever. Coming into God's presence to have a talk with Him is a great blessing in our lives.

Let me encourage you to make the most of your private prayers. They can make a difference in your life! Let me suggest **Three steps to take before you pray:**

First, decide what you really want from God. Get clearly in mind exactly what you plan to ask in prayer. Second, Determine whether or not what you are asking for is right. James said, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend *it* on your pleasures (James 4:3). Ask yourself am I being selfish? Ask is it fair to everyone else concerned? Ask is it best for me? Ask is it in harmony with the will of God? John said in 1 John 5:14,15, "And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us *in* whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him." Third, write it down to clarify in your mind what you are asking.

Next, here are **three steps to take while you pray.** First, focus on God, give Him your complete attention. Find quiet place that is free from any distractions. If you are going to spend time with God, get alone with God in a private place. Second, Talk *with* God not to or at God. When you pray, you are praying to your heavenly Father, who loves you. We need to pray with Samuel's heart, "Speak: for thy servant heareth." (1 Sam. 3:10). Often we pray "Listen, Lord, for Thy servant speaketh." Jesus prayed "not my will, but thine be done." Let's pray for strength and willingness to accept the will of God for our lives. Third, share with God what you yourself will do to answer your prayer. Jesus prayed "Thy will be done," and then endured the cross. If you are asking God to forgive you, tell him what you are doing to repent. If you are asking for forgiveness, then be forgiving

of others. Jesus worked many miracles by giving the person to be blessed something to do. God answers prayer, not just for you, but often *with* you. As we pray, let us keep humble and submissive to God's will for our lives.

Now, *three steps to take after you pray*: First, thank God for answering your prayer, showing you believe He will answer your requests. Thank God for being willing to bear your burdens as you cast them upon Him (1 Pet. 5:7). Thank God for caring about your requests large or small. Thank God for meeting your needs. Thank God for being near you. Psalm 145:18 "The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon Him in truth." Second, Be willing to accept whatever God's answer may be. Trust Him to do whatever is best for you, remembering the words of Jesus, "not my will but Thine be done." (Lk. 22:42) Third, Let the time you have spent with God make a difference in your life. Prayer time is an intimate, loving time with God. Leave your prayer time to go and express God's love with others. Prayer time is coming into the presence of the Holy One. Go and live a holy life. It is hard to sin when you have just come into the presence of the living, holy God. The best prayer life is the life that practices what it prays. Do not speak in vain to God.

When people come to me with a broken heart or a troubling problem, I ask them, "Have you prayed about it?" Have you taken time to talk to God?

A loving wife wants to reach her husband with the gospel but doesn't think he'll ever change. I ask, "Have you prayed about it?"

A husband has been fighting with his wife. He says, "I don't know what's happening to our marriage. Our love for each other seems to be fading away. There seems to be no hope." I ask, "Have you prayed about it? I have you asked God to help you put your marriage back into place? Have you prayed about being the kind of husband you ought to be?"

Someone says, "The Bible class I attend just doesn't help very much. The teacher doesn't seem to teach about things that affect me. I have trouble studying." I ask, "Have you prayed about it?" Have you worked at understanding how the truth you learned applies to you?

Someone says, "I'm having trouble making a decision about my life and what to do. What should I do?" I ask, "Have you prayed about it?" Have you asked the Lord to open doors?

Someone says, "Life is really hard for me right now. There seem to be so many problems and so little money, so many demands and so little time." I ask, "Have you prayed about it?" Have you thanked God for providing what He has given you? Have you asked for what you need?

Someone says, "There is some sin in my life and I just don't know what to do about it. I seem so weak to temptation." I ask,

"Have you prayed about it?" Then I ask, "Are you asking God for the way of escape He promises?" Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it." Sometimes we need to stop and take stock of what is already doing for us and remember His promises.

Prayer is a sustaining gift God gave us. It is the gift of Himself. It is the gift of His attention. He listens to us and cares. It is the gift of His heart, because He genuinely loves His children. We have three sustaining gifts: the blood of Christ, the Bible, and prayer. Trust God to be faithful.

What have you done for God? Have you given yourself to Him? Do you practice what you pray? Are you willing to accept what He has already told you to do to be saved? Listen to His Word, believe, repent, confess His name, and be baptized (immersed) in water to wash away your sins. Then the Lord will count you His child and add you to His body, the church.

In Luke 18, Jesus told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.'" (Luke 18:9-14).

How we pray and what we pray matters a great deal. Sometimes in our prayers we are as insensitive to God as the Pharisee. The real key to prayer is never forgetting the One to whom you are praying. Pray fervently, pray sincerely, pray humbly, and pray lovingly. Be thankful as you pray, and give God the respect and the praise that is due Him!

Today we're offering a pamphlet free of charge, entitled, "Ten Things God Wants in Your Life." It tells of all the wonderful things God wants for you. With all the blessings of God, it is no wonder that we should draw near to Him always. Where are you in your life? Do you have a close, loving, peaceful relationship with God? Do you have peace of mind and heart inside? God hasn't left you; it may be that you have left God. The greatest need of our time is to know God and to draw close to Him again by listening and obeying His Word. Won't you do that?

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Concord Road Church of Christ
8221 Concord Rd., Brentwood, TN 37027
1-877-226-5747

phil@God-answers.org www.God-answers.org