

For Whom Should We Pray?

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Private prayer is by definition a personal activity. It is the soul speaking with God. It is coming into a spiritual communication, through the mediation of the Holy Spirit, with our heavenly Father. A believer approaches God upon the ground of Christ's cleansing blood and justifying righteousness. No other acceptance is possible. No other qualification is necessary. Holiness must meet holiness (1 Corinthians 2:14).

When we come to God in private prayer there need be no constraints, procedures or predefined pattern for our approach. We do not have to pray in a special place, kneel, stand or sit down, to be heard. There are no special words that must be used or formulas to follow. Vain repetition is not prayer, we do not need beads.

Rather, we speak as children to a loving parent. Our limitations are understood, our frailties conceded, our struggles with sin, lack of faith and hardness of heart are all allowed for (Romans 8:26). In Christ we are always fit to speak with God, in ourselves we are always in need of His accommodations. Never stop praying because you are unfit to come before God. Never imagine you are heard, except for Christ's sake.

Purposeful prayer

Yet, there are themes in prayer that will always bubble to the surface when a child of God prays. Giving thanks is always appropriate when we speak to the Lord; thanks for salvation, thanks for life, thanks for the multitude of blessings we enjoy daily. Praise, too, is appropriate. Worshipping God is a believer's privilege and joy. God alone is to be worshipped and we are enjoined by the Lord Jesus Christ to remember to acknowledge, or 'hallow', God's name above every other name.

Prayer also reminds us of the sovereignty of God. We pray to God because we believe He is able to hear our requests and accomplish what we ask. Whether or not He answers our prayers in the way we expect is another matter, yet we believe He is able and that is why we ask. Our Saviour prayed often and specifically and we pray, too. May God give us the desire to pray more.

Prayer has a purpose and it is worth reminding ourselves that essentially prayer is for the benefit of individual believers and the church. Prayer is not for the benefit of God. God is not enhanced, improved or enlarged when the church prays, but believers are. God's will is not swayed, nor His

purpose altered when the church prays. Our will may well be. God is not comforted, consoled or encouraged by our prayers, yet believers find strength in coming before God in prayer. This is because prayer is a two way process. Believers speak to God and, when they pray, God speaks to them; illuminating His will, applying His word and instructing their walk.

Yet there are questions about prayer which believers genuinely ask, not wishing to be found praying amiss. Some wonder if God's sovereignty in grace and providence gets in the way of us praying for the salvation of others. Is it presumptuous to pray for other people, sometimes against their will, or even selfish to ask others to pray for me? It is true that prayer can be misused and certainly there are things we should not ask God for, things that are contrary to His revealed will, things unsuited for request in Christ's blessed name (John 16:23).

Praying for the unsaved

But praying for the unsaved is not one of them. It is our Father's will that we take our burdens to Him, and that includes our concerns for the unsaved. Those who know the Lord are genuinely concerned for the spiritual wellbeing of their loved ones. The prospect of our spouse or children, who do not trust Christ, dying in their sins is hard to countenance. Their wandering in the world is a source of great sadness and we long to see them brought into the family of God. How blessed we are then to carry our loved ones in prayer to the only One who can save them. How wonderful to be a Jairus in prayer, fetching the Lord to a dead child's side!

Likewise, in the assembly of the Lord's people it is appropriate for us to bring the needs of the unsaved before the Lord in prayer. Perhaps there are those who hear the gospel but are hardened to it, or who need to hear it and will not. The Lord lays a burden upon his people not only to preach the gospel but to pray for its free access into the hearts of men (2 Thessalonians 3:1). That obligation should be genuinely discharged.

However, prayer is not to be made inappropriately, for example, for those who cannot benefit from it. Those already dead and in hell cannot be helped. Those in heaven, need no help. Nor should we pray for things that God has declared will not happen, such as the salvation of everyone (John 17:9), or for the destruction of our enemies, for vengeance is mine saith the Lord. We are not commanded to pray for the reprobate who has committed the sin unto death (1 John 5:16). Yet even here it is not easy to say when that sin, the wilful denial of the truth of the Gospel, has been irredeemably committed.

Praying for the Lord's people

We are also encouraged to pray particularly for the Lord's people, the household of faith. We pray not only for their spiritual needs but also for their temporal needs, for health issues, even for material wellbeing and

suitable employment. There are evils in this world that the Lord's people are protected from, in the main, and evils that they are often particularly prone to. The Lord has taught us to pray, "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil".

We are encouraged also to pray for those who minister to us, who carry the gospel out as missionaries, who undertake leadership roles amongst the churches. We can pray for husbands and wives, children and parents, those who suffer for the cause of Christ and struggle under hard providences. But let us not use prayer as a substitute for help, or words in place of action. Christian love means more than remembering the needs of others in prayer, it also means meeting those needs.

Praying for the government and those in authority

We are taught to pray for specific individuals who fulfil roles in society for the maintenance of peace and preservation of law and order. For Christians to "lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" requires the rule of law and the suppression of the evildoer. God has established such rule by providing kings, governors and magistrates – those who wield the sword – and Christians are to value and support them. This we do by fulfilling our duties as citizens and by maintaining through taxes and by voting the offices and officers of social cohesion. We also do it by praying for them.

We may recoil from the moral conduct of a king or queen, and disagree with the policies of a particular politician, but because of the position they hold we are called to pray for them, that they might rule well, be wise in their decisions, honest in their dealings and impartial in their rulings. These are qualities that every citizen desires and Christians are encouraged to take such matters before the Lord in prayer.

Magistrates, whether they acknowledge them or not, have responsibilities under God, and before men. They will be held accountable to God for their actions. For our part, we are to honour and serve those who rule, praying that they rule well. Civil disobedience is no part of a Christian's armour. We are to obey their word, demurring only where our consciences require it in matters of faith and conduct, and prepared to submit ourselves passively to punishment, as the saints of old have done (James 5:4).

James tells us, "The effectual prayer of a righteous man availeth much." Dr Gill comments on this verse, "true prayer is not what is written in a book, but what is wrought in the heart, by the Spirit of God; who is the enditer of prayer, who impresses the minds of his people with a sense of their wants, and fills their mouths with arguments, and puts strength into them to plead with God, and makes intercession for them according to the will of God; and such prayer is always heard, and regarded by him: this has great power with God; whatever is asked, believing, is received; God can deny nothing prayed for in this manner".

May we learn to pray effectually.

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