



He Hears (Part 1) – How to Pray

Matt Chandler – May 15, 2016

How are we? Doing well? If you have your Bibles, go ahead and grab those. Matthew, chapter 6, is where we're going to camp out. If you don't have a Bible with you, there should be a hardback black one somewhere around you, as always. I want you to see that I'm not making anything up here, that we're really reading the Bible together and applying it to our lives.

We're going to begin today a short series on prayer. This weekend and next weekend we're just going to talk about prayer, and more than, that we're going to pray. When you're prepping to teach or preach on prayer, I think some things have to be in view. Here's what I mean by that. I think, by and large, my experience is there's nothing I'm going to be able to say about prayer that the people of God in particular, Christians in particular, don't already know.

I'm not going to be able to say, "Christians, you should pray to God because he can hear you" and have anybody go, "What? What? I've been a Christian for 20 years. No one ever told me that." We already know we should, and yet... Again, my experience has been for the last 20 years that most Christians operate in this low-level guilt that they either don't pray or don't pray much.

That then puts me in a spot that the last thing that would be helpful for you, if you're a Christian who has a less than vibrant prayer life, is for me to make you feel guilty and make you feel shame over that, because guilt and shame never draw us toward the Lord but always push us away from the Lord. Shame and guilt are not good motivators to really line us up with what God has for us.

Ultimately, here's what I want to do. I'm not going to preach 45 minutes on prayer and give you a cute acronym of, "Here's how you pray," because we know those things, if we have a church background, and if we're honest, it hasn't helped much. You haven't gotten up early in the morning and gone, "Okay, what was that acronym? Okay, *A*, *adoration*. Okay, we adore you. Okay, *C*, *confession*. Father, just forgive us..."

I think you learn to pray by praying. Just some old school like that. You learn to pray by praying. So I'm going to keep my sermon, despite your doubts, at around 20 minutes, and then from there we're going to spend the next 25 minutes praying together. That's the big plan.

Now there are some things we need to establish right out of the gate. First, in the immense noise of the universe... And the universe is noisy. Not just your house, which I can totally believe is probably noisy also, but if you think about the sheer volume of the universe, the roar of the stars, just all that's going on in the universe and how violently loud it is, that God would hear us is a stunning truth.

This is what David is getting after when in his ignorance he is saying, "When I look at the stars, when I look up at the expanse of the stars..." He doesn't know anything that we know about those stars. They're just lights in the sky. But we know the vastness of the universe. David looks up and says, "When I look at the stars, when I consider the handiwork of your hands, what is man that you are mindful of him? That in the midst of all this noise you hear us, know us, want to hear from us."

It was a stunning reality to King David. God does hear us. He hears what we utter. He hears what we think. He hears us. That's a hard truth for people to really believe. As Christians, we know it's right, so we say it, but to believe it in our guts is a whole other issue.

The second thing that's true that's hard for us is that God *wants* to hear from us. He *wants* to. Most of us...not all of us, but most of us...grew up with daddies that if you just did what they said and left them alone, things went well. If you just do what they say and leave them alone, things are cool. Unfortunately, we've kind of carried that over to our relationship with God, but God is different than most of our earthly fathers in that he's like, "Hey, come hang out. Come tell me about that."

In fact, God asks, "Hey, ask me that again," but he's not threatening when he says that. Your earthly father when he says, "Ask me that again," that's not literally an invitation to ask him again. That's a full-on threat. But when God says, "Ask me again," it's because God delights in hearing his children. We'll talk more about this next week at length. We have turned prayer into some sort of technical lock we have to figure out how to open, and we don't think relationally.

We have a Father who longs to hear from us. We have a Father who loves to hear our voice. We have a Father who wants us to come to him. In fact, the Bible is just jammed full of this truth. I'm going to read several verses to us before we get to Matthew 6. I'm going to read eight verses. I could

scrap all eight and add 20 more, and I could scrap those 20 and add 20 more. I could scrap those 20 and add 20 more. I could just keep doing it, because every book of the Bible is filled with God saying, "Come hang out. Cry out to me. Speak to me. Come to me."

Let me just read a couple of these. Psalm 34:17 says, "**When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.**" Christian, let me talk with you, because if you're going, "Well, okay, that's one of the reasons I don't pray. I don't feel righteous. I'm not righteous, and this says that when the *righteous* cry for help God hears. I don't think God hears me, because I'm not righteous."

Well, Christian, let me remind you of the gospel. It is *never* your righteousness. It is *never* your righteousness. It is *never* your righteousness that gives you good standing with God. It is Christ's righteousness imputed to you. The reason God hears you, Christian, is because of the righteousness of Christ in you, not because of your own.

So you can breathe out, because it's not your goodness that week that gives you good standing to boldly approach the throne of grace with confidence. It's the righteousness of Christ. This is what it means to be Christian: to understand that it's not my righteousness. This isn't on me. It was on Christ, and he fulfilled all that the law required for me and for you as Christians. It's the righteousness of Christ that God sees. So he hears our prayers, and he responds.

Psalm 18:6: "**In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears.**" Jeremiah 29:12: "**Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.**" Now before you take Jeremiah 29 and run and put it on a coffee cup, or something like that, let me speak to what's going on in this text.

The people of God had grown hard-hearted and proud. They had begun to live as functional atheists, so God in his mercy sent the people into exile and into slavery. What Jeremiah is prophesying about in chapter 29, verse 12, is that they will eventually, by the weight of this, be broken and humbled, and when they're humbled, *then* they'll pray, and when they pray, he will hear them and he will respond. It's a heavier verse than you might think just reading it.

Jeremiah 33:3: "**Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.**" James 4:2: "**You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.**" Matthew

11:28, I think in all of religion the craziest sentence a god ever uttered: **"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."**

The God of the universe makes this invitation: "Come to me." Who? "Are you weary? Are you heavy laden? You, come to me." When you're making a list for a party, let me tell you who you don't tend to put up high on the list. That friend of yours who's always so depressed, who's going to just mope around the party that whole night and every time you celebrate something is going to be quick to counter with the bad part of that.

"I have ice cream cake."

"I'm lactose intolerant."

"We're going on vacation to Brazil."

"Zika virus."

You're just like, "Put them at the end, and if we have space we'll include them." You don't tend to invite the socially awkward guy who's going to offend everybody and not even know he's offending everyone. Yet the invitation goes out like this. "Are you weary? Are you heavy laden? Are you anxious? Are you depressed? Are you empty? Are you in despair? Come to me."

This is a stunning invitation, that the most awkward and broken of us are welcome. No other religion makes this kind of invitation. Every other one says, "Fix yourself and come. Do these things and you'll be welcome." It's only in Christ that Christ says, "As you are, as dysfunctional as you are, as broken and idiotic as you are, come to me, and I will give you rest." This is a stunning sentence.

Philippians 4:6-7: **"...do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."** Then the last text for our purposes today, Hebrews 4:16: **"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."**

So let us not just pray, but let us approach God with confidence. There's this confidence we have, that I am welcome, I am wanted, and I am heard. Let us approach God with confidence. I love that sentence. Here's a disarming fact about the Scriptures. The disciples who are hanging out with Jesus and doing life with Jesus finally, in Matthew 6, go, "Hey, teach us to pray."

If you feel like, "Man, I should be praying more; I just don't know what to do," be at ease, because the disciples said, "Hey, teach us to pray," and Jesus' response was not like, "Are you guys kidding me right now? How long have we been together, and you're just now asking this question?" That's not what he does. They ask what might be perceived as a stupid question, and yet Jesus gently answers the question.

So what I want to do is walk through the Lord's Prayer, point out a couple of things about it, and then I'll transition us into praying with one another. In Matthew, chapter 6, starting in verse 9, Jesus says, **"Pray then like this: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.'"** If you have a church background at all, what you just said in your mind was, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name."

That's probably how you memorized it when you were a kid. You memorized the King James Version. I'll just lay before you this fun fact. You don't need to speak King James to have a conversation with God. God is no respecter of eloquent speech. Are you tracking with me? He's not deceived by eloquent speech. You can pray out loud in this flowery language and impress others, but God sees the heart. Your eloquent language goes nowhere but the ceiling, but God hears the heart.

"Our Father 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 lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." I want to try to make this as simple as possible, and then we'll practice it, because the way you learn to pray is to pray.

If we took this text, what I would want to show you is that prayer kind of flows back and forth between two poles. It's the pole of *praise* and the pole of *petition*. Prayer is about praising God and asking of God, and then as prayer bounces between those two poles, oftentimes that will lead us into confession. What you need to know is that all prayer is praising God or asking of God.

When we're talking about praise, we're just talking about saying out loud the goodness that God has accomplished in us, around us, through us, with us, and all that God has graciously done. When this prayer starts out, "Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed..." (which means, "big, mighty, beautiful) "...is your name." Then it flies over to petition. "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." That's not praise; that's petition.

Then if we walk through this, you would see it keeps bouncing back and forth until it lands on, "Forgive us our debts." You get really aware of your sin when you see God for who he is, because seeing God for who *he* is shows you most clearly who *you* are. As long as you're able to compare yourself with the morons around you, you will always feel highly about yourself.

It should not be difficult for you to find people to compare your life to that make you feel good about your life. You might have to get off Instagram for a while and look at the real world, but that shouldn't be difficult for you. When you're looking at God, your lack of holiness, you become far more aware of how needy you are. That's why confession is birthed out of praise and petition. This is all prayer. This is a conversation with God where there's praise and petition that leads oftentimes organically to confession.

Here's the good news. You can't really systematize this. If you started your prayer with petition, if you woke up in the morning and just laid there on your couch and said, "God, help me today," God wouldn't be like, "Okay. Anything to say before I consider that? I mean, you want to talk about me a little bit before we get into me helping you with that? I mean, I get it. I *can* help you with that, but you know what would be nice? It would be nice to hear how awesome I am before you try to get me to... I'm not a genie, so don't be trying to treat me like a genie."

It doesn't work that way. God loves petition. He loves to hear, "I need you. Help me." The psalmist in Psalm 51 says the broken and contrite in spirit he will never despise. I love that verse. The broken and contrite. Isn't it funny? In prayer we think we should be bold and put together, and yet the Bible says, no, it's the broken and contrite that the Lord draws near to, that the Lord hears.

In the same way, if we start with confession, "Please forgive me," the Lord is not going, "You got the order wrong. I'm hanging up for now. Figure out the order. Go back to that acronym thing you learned, and you do it in the right order, and then I'll hear." It doesn't require a specific language, and it doesn't require a specific order. That's not how prayer works.

What we see in this prayer is praise and petition that has led to confession. Even if in what I'm saying you're going, "I get that. I know I should pray, and then when it comes time to pray I feel like all of the words are just gone. I don't know what to say, so it feels trite, so I'm just like, 'Hey, be with me today,' and generic, and I just don't feel like I'm praying like the Lord would want me to pray," I have great news, and then we're going to practice.

One of the real gifts of the Word of God to you as a Christian is not just that it's the primary way in which God speaks to you, but it will also give you the very words of God to pray to God. At that point, you know you're praying the will of God. How awesome is that? When we pray the Word of God back to God, we're praying the very words of God and the very will of God back to God. That in itself should increase our confidence and boldness in prayer.

You can take any text of the Bible and look at it, read it, consider some things, and pray; look at it, read it, consider some things, and confess; or ask help from God as you read it. Here's where we're going to turn. In just a couple of moments I'm going to pray for us, and then we're going to actually practice this by praying through a text of Scripture. Let me say a couple of things before we dive into that.

First, if you're not a Christian here... You just know now this is about to get really awkward for me. Let me just chat with you. I love that you're here. I actually sat in a seat like you for well over a year before I became a Christian. I genuinely wanted to know what this was all about. I just couldn't see, so I was trying to figure it out, so I just kept coming to church. I thought church was so goofy, and then, for whatever reason, I'd leave and I'd be like, "This is so dumb."

"You want to come back next week?"

"Yeah, sure. Will you pick me up?"

I just kept coming back. I didn't know it at the time, but the Lord was wooing me and drawing me. Maybe that's where you find yourself. Here's how I want to encourage you. What you can do as we pray is pray with us, except as *we* pray prayers of praise and petition, *you* pray prayers of God opening your eyes.

We're going to read through a text, and you can just say, "Help my heart believe this. I want to understand this. Would you help me? If any of this is true..." Because maybe you're not convinced.

"If any of this is true, will you help my heart believe? Will you open up the eyes of my spirit to understand these things in deep ways?" So if you're not a Christian, please join us in praying.

Now if you're a nominal believer... That's a category I'm not sure what to do with. Kind of halfhearted. "I'm kind of a Christian, but I'm not fully one. I kind of self-identify as an evangelical because my parents were Christians or because I was born in San Antonio." Here's where I want to press you gently and lovingly. You'll need to navigate the spaces in your heart if all of a sudden you're like, "Man, I don't want to do this. Let's bail out early. Man, I don't know what to do here."

Why would you rather *me* talk *about* him rather than *you* talk *to* him? You really struggle here with boredom, or you're like, "You're just so much more engaging than God." I think you have to do something with your heart. There's a low-grade idolatry there or a type of immaturity that you should long to grow out of.

The last thing would be, husbands, daddies, this is a great opportunity for you to lead in a real cool way. Just put your arm around your wife and gather the kids and just say, "We're going to pray together," and you guys can pray together. If you're by yourself, feel free to just pray by yourself. If you came with a group of friends, feel free to pray like that. If you're by yourself and don't want to pray alone, I can just tell you, lean into the awkward. We love it here. We're a peculiar people.

You can just join a group and be like, "I'm praying with you guys today." They're like, "Oh, okay," and then they'll love it, and you guys will become best friends forever and go on into the kingdom of God together. I want you to be comfortable where you are, but here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to pray for us, and then we're going to practice these things. Let me prophesy. You're going to pray for around 20 to 25 minutes, and it's going to be awesome. Let's pray.

Father, thank you for my brothers and sisters, the opportunities to just pray your words back to you in great confidence that we're praying your will, that you know our hearts, and that you hear us. You are gracious and good. We thank you and praise you. It's for your beautiful name I pray, amen.