

Prayer

When You Don't Know What to Say...

THE BIBLE instructs Christians to be “faithful in prayer” (Romans 12:12, NIV throughout), but what if we aren’t good at it? How do we learn to have a closer, more intimate relationship with our God?

Because this is what prayer is all about — a meaningful, personal relationship with our Father in heaven. Of all our many relationships, this one we need the most.

We all need someone who really knows us and cares about us. Someone to whom we can pour out our worries, insecurities and frustrations. Someone to whom we can confess our sins and inadequacies.

We need a friend to guide us, who will accept us, reassure us and believe in us. Even when—especially when—we are misunderstood, or found out, or when our best effort isn’t good enough.

Jesus taught his disciples to have this personal and intimate relationship with God. He showed us how we can have it, too.

Don't pray like that!

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day had a distorted example of what prayer should be like. They took it seriously, but in doing so made it into a spiritual obstacle course.

Jesus changed that. He came to reconcile the human race to God. He removed all the obstacles that get



between us and the friendly, loving, productive relationship God wants us to have with him.

What should we do? “When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites,” Jesus said. “They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men” (Matthew 6:5).

“When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you,” Jesus said (verse 6). Here is the first key. Prayer should be primarily personal and private. That doesn’t mean prayer can’t be done in a group.

But group prayer is a supplement to, not a substitute for, personal prayer in a private place. Prayer doesn’t

have to be done in a special room. Anywhere you can be alone for a few minutes is a good place to pray.

What to say

Most of us can find somewhere to pray, if we really want to. Frankly, the biggest difficulty many of us have is not where, it's what — what do I say? How do I fill up the time? And how much time do I have to fill up?

Jesus anticipated such questions. “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them” (verses 7-8). This is —precisely why he emphasized sincerity rather than form and ritual. You come to God, not just as another routine client with a carefully orchestrated ritual. Otherwise, you might as well fill in a form!

God wants us, as his sons and daughters, to go to him as a Father and discuss what is most important to us. He promises he will listen. And he will answer, even if sometimes the answer is no or wait. No or wait doesn't mean you are out of favor or that God is punishing you. He may be helping you learn a lesson.

Be yourself. Talk naturally. Share your hopes and dreams. Discuss what is important to you.

Junk mail

Every day, you probably get a pile of mail. Much of it is slick advertising fliers addressed to you or occupant. The sender doesn't really care who gets it. Most of the mail goes straight into the trash.

But when, amid this flood of junk mail, catalogs, magazines and official-looking envelopes demanding to be opened right now because you “already may have won,” you see a humble, ordinary envelope, hand addressed, with a personal return address, you probably read that first.

Perhaps that is how God feels about a prayer. He gets plenty of impersonal junk mail. So hand address your

prayer. Simply use your own words just like you would talk to a friend.

Power and eloquence do not necessarily make a prayer more effective. One of the most effective prayers recorded in the Bible came from a distraught father who admitted, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

Pray about anything and everything. Remember “your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:8). God won't be surprised when you discuss with him your human needs and frailties. He knows what we need— love, hope, health, encouragement, insight and the physical means to keep body and soul together.

Jesus explained that God is more ready to give us good things than we are to provide our children their needs and wants. Like us with our children, God does not want an impersonal relationship, but one built on love.

Jesus taught us to pray in a way that would build a lasting personal relationship with God. He showed us prayer is not difficult, complicated or something only good (or very bad) people need to do.

For many of us, prayer is like mowing the lawn. We know we should, and we feel better when we do. But we don't really look forward to it, and find excuses to put it off as long as possible.

Praying his way soon becomes warm, friendly and personal. You'll look forward to spending time with God who cares, who understands you, and who wants to hear from you.

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