

Praying Properly

The noise level in the crowded room steadily rose higher and higher, despite the school superintendent incessantly banging his gavel to commence the meeting.

Kenyatta Brown and his wife sat in the audience with all the other parents who had come to the emergency school board meeting. They had been called together because of last week's incident. The Browns' 16-year-old son, Jarel, had told them about the fight when he came home.

Various versions of the story had been circulating ever since. According to Jarel, a white student had called a Black student a racial slur, resulting in the Black student fighting the white student. Lines had been drawn, walls had been erected, and sides had been taken. The Browns, however, had been praying for God's wisdom, peace, and love in the situation.

Finally, the room quieted. Kenyatta stood and addressed the board: "I am Kenyatta Brown, a parent in this community, and I respectfully request that we begin with prayer."

"We can't pray in a public meeting," someone shouted from the back of the room.

The superintendent banged his gavel when the room filled with chatter and murmurs. Once order had been re-established, the superintendent responded, saying, "Thank you, Mr. Brown. I'm asking everyone who wishes to pause for a moment of silence."

As Kenyatta sat down, he was touched on his shoulder and turned around to see four white faces smiling at him. "Thank you, brother," said the man in the middle.

- 1.** *Does prayer ever feel like work to you? Why do you think that is?*
- 2.** *When have you experienced a glimpse of "heaven on earth"?*
- 3.** *How can prayer help fill the divine ache within us and allow us to experience His presence and kingdom?*

LESSON FOCUS: Pray that God's kingdom would come among us.

Praying Sincerely

Matthew 6:5–6 KJV

5 And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

6 But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

Matthew 6:5–6 NIV

⁵“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But 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 tells the crowd to pray with sincerity. He told His listeners to beware of praying like the hypocrites who stand in public places and pray for all to hear. They are seeking glory and praise for themselves, rather than for God. As a result, the praise of others is all the reward they will get. The Lord will not answer their prayers.

On the other hand, God hears and answers the sincere prayers of those who seek His glory. His people are to pray privately, behind closed doors. When His people pray in private, God will reward them with the opportunity to give glory and praise to God for what He has done.

Jesus' admonition does not mean there is something wrong with corporate prayer, when believers come together and pray with one another. There are plenty of examples in Scripture of people praying together (see Acts 2:42; 12:12; James 5:14–16). His point is that prayer is about seeking communication and intimacy with God, not bolstering a public image. Of course, cultural expectations have changed, and most people aren't expecting public praise for praying on street corners. But a modern

equivalent could be leading a congregation or small group in an overly lengthy or elaborate prayer designed to show how “spiritually mature” one is. God wants us to use our prayers to communicate with Him, not to make ourselves look good.

4. *What example does Jesus give of hypocritical praying?*
5. *How does God respond to self-glorifying prayers?*
6. *On the other hand, how are sincere prayers answered?*

Praying Purposefully

Matthew 6:7–8 KJV

7 But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.

8 Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

Matthew 6:7–8 NIV

⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Whereas some people are interested in receiving praise while they pray, others think that if they repeat a prayer over and over, God will surely listen. This is often how religious mystics at that time prayed to false gods. They thought that if they went on long enough, their prayers would be heard and answered.

Such prayers were doomed to fail, in part because their objects—idols—were inanimate objects which have no capacity to answer prayers. These idols cannot communicate.

Christians, on the other hand, can pray purposefully to their Father, for the “eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry” (Ps. 34:15). He is always with us and ready to hear the prayers of His people. He already knows our needs before we pray. Although God knows our every need, believers still turn

to Him in prayer for those needs. Doing so helps them acknowledge that He provides, and it allows them to respond with gratefulness. When believers turn to God for their needs, they remind themselves of their dependency on Him.

Vain repetition is not the same as persistence in prayer. The Bible encourages believers to be persistent. In fact, “Jesus told his disciples . . . they should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1). In His parable, a widow continually goes before a judge to receive justice. Due to her persistence, the judge gave in and granted her justice. Though the answer to believers’ prayers may seem delayed at times, they should never give up. They should instead trust that God hears and will always do what is best for His children.

7. *How would “babbling” in prayer be an issue in your modern context?*

8. *Why did certain people pray with many words?*

9. *How should God’s people pray?*

Praying for God’s Will

Matthew 6:9–15 KJV

9 After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

10 Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

11 Give us this day our daily bread.

12 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us

Matthew 6:9–15 NIV

⁹ “This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,

from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

14 For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you:

15 But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

but deliver us from the evil one.'

¹⁴ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Jesus begins His prayer by recognizing the Father's holy nature. God rules from heaven, and when believers praise Him, they approach Him with reverence and respect.

After praising God for who He is, Jesus brings requests to Him. The prayer for "daily bread" points toward God's provision. God alone can meet His people's needs. Jesus' prayer shifts from physical needs to spiritual needs. Confession of sins and requests for forgiveness are vital for fellowship with Him. Forgiveness is also vital for fellowship with one another. Unforgiveness is an offense before God. If we do not forgive, we broadcast that we haven't understood the forgiveness shown to us. A forgiving Father expects His children to forgive.

Another important request is to be kept from temptation. Thankfully, God will faithfully lead His people along the path of righteousness, especially when they ask Him to. As Paul puts it, "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13). Praise God that He will always keep His people from straying when they sincerely choose to follow Him!

10. *How should we begin our prayers?*

11. *What are examples of right and good things to ask our heavenly Father?*

12. *Why should we forgive others?*

Praying for God's Kingdom

No matter how much a person knows, without the power of prayer, God's people are prone to wander aimlessly along the path of life. Prayer is for the here-and-now, as well as for the future. Jesus is already king, but the world doesn't recognize Him. The king's instructions are as relevant today as when He spoke to His disciples in the first century, when they faced persecutions and famine, difficulties and disease.

God gives His people prayer to live a victorious life that glorifies Him. When believers pray sincerely and seek God's glory, they pray for God's kingdom to come and transform their circumstances. Jesus' model helps us to ask God to fill the world with His presence.

Thus the Christian's purpose in prayer is to signal the glory of the king from within the world that doesn't yet know Him. Followers of Christ bring Him the honor and reverence due to Him as "the Lord Almighty . . . the King of glory" (Ps. 24:10). Following Jesus' example, believers first praise God with reverence and respect for His holiness. Second, they seek His will and His rule over their lives. Third, believers bring their requests to God and acknowledge that He is their provider. They surrender control of circumstances and depend upon Him. Finally, they ask forgiveness for sin and challenge themselves to be as forgiving as their heavenly Father. God hears such prayers, and He wants people to trust and follow Him on the path of righteousness.

13. *What does it mean to say God's kingdom is both present and future?*

14. *What is our purpose in prayer?*

15. *How is God's glory revealed through His people here on earth?*

16. *Why is it important to pray for God's kingdom to come?*

Kingdom Prayer

Kingdom prayer is sincere, purposeful, grateful, and humble. It focuses on God and His will. Jesus provided a model that guides believers in praying for God's will. Reflect on the outline below to write your own prayer based on Jesus' model.

- ▶ *Recognize the holy nature of God.*
- ▶ *Praise the righteous, heavenly Father, who is also creator and king.*
- ▶ *Seek His will for your life.*
- ▶ *Bring requests for care and provision to Him.*
- ▶ *Confess sins, then ask for and receive His forgiveness.*
- ▶ *Ask God to direct your path in righteousness.*

KEY VERSE

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

—Matthew 6:10 KJV

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

—Matthew 6:10 NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of January 27 through February 2

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross devotionals* on these passages.)

- Mon.** Matthew 11:25–30—Come, All Who Are Weary.
- Tue.** Psalm 4—God, Answer Me When I Call.
- Wed.** Luke 18:1–8—Cry Out for Justice.
- Thu.** James 5:13–20—Pray for One Another.
- Fri.** Psalm 91—God Is My Refuge and Fortress.
- Sat.** Psalm 92—God Will Deliver You.
- Sun.** Matthew 6:5–15—The Prayer that Jesus Taught.