

When I PRAY What Should I SAY?

by Dr. Mark S. Adams

In Mark Thibodeaux's book *The Armchair Mystic*, he points to the way that people learn to talk as a helpful way for us to understand the various ways we can talk to God when we pray. Imagine a very young child learning to speak. Children begin talking by **echoing** familiar words and phrases, and tending to say the same thing much of the time. As children begin to learn more words and understand more about the world, they may begin verbally **gushing** to anyone and everyone about everything they know. Very little is off limits with little ones!

As a child becomes a young adult, they are capable of more abstract thought, and may begin to seek knowledge more deliberately. So there is both speaking but also the possibility of **listening**. Another way to think about prayer, Thibodeaux suggests, is to think of an old couple who has been married for many decades and has shared everything for many years. They can finish each other's sentences. They know each other's stories, having told and retold them many times. Yet just the same, they still love to simply **be together**.

So what do these things have to do with how we think about prayer? Prayer is a form of communicating and deepening a relationship with God. Many of the same things that create strong interpersonal relationships can also help form a strong prayer life.

Familiar Phrases

As you pray, sometimes the words don't come easily. Whether this is because you are new to prayer, or because your life has gotten you to a place where you just don't know what to say, this is where we can benefit from using prayers that others have prayed.

Sometimes as we try to quiet our hearts into a more prayerful state, we may have a certain prayer—even a very brief one—that helps us talk to God. Some helpful one-sentence prayers might include:

Lord Jesus, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Lord, I believe, but please help my unbelief.

In what we sometimes call The Lord's Prayer, Jesus provides a model prayer that we can read, memorize, and repeat with great personal benefit. As you read through the lines of this prayer, you might notice how each part of the prayer assumes some sort of action and a humble spirit on our part. The prayer involves asking (1) that God's will is accomplished in our life (2) that we practice contentment with what we receive (3) that we show the same mercy to others we wish to receive ourselves. There are many rich insights to be gained from praying and reflecting on the meaning of this prayer:

Our Father who is in Heaven,
may your name be honored as Holy.
May your kingdom come, and 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 forgive our debtors.
Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.
For yours is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever!
Amen.

Some people find it helpful to notice the different movements within this prayer, and even though they pray in their own words, they try to remember to do several things, such as to honor God as our Lord, to pray for God's kingdom, to be thankful for our blessings, and to pray for those who are sick or suffering.

When I was a child, one of my Bible class teachers, a faithful woman named Carol Purkey, taught us to pray in three simple parts about anything that we were worried about:

1. "I believe that you are God."
2. "Here is what I'm worried about: _____"
3. "Thank you."

There is no harm at all in using prayers that others have prayed to help us learn to form our own thoughts in prayer.

Stream of Consciousness

There is value in repeating well-worded prayers, but there is also great value in simply approaching God, and then talking about anything and everything that comes to mind. Think of a parent with whom you are close, or one of your most trusted friends, and remember the times when you have stayed up late at night, sharing about all sorts of things that you might not have talked to anyone else about.

God doesn't get tired, and God doesn't think time spent with you is boring or bothersome. It's the thing he wants most. Quite literally, Jesus proved he would much rather die than live without you! (John 3:16)

In our lives, the voice of God is calling on us to find our security in him. God invites us to know that we are loved, that we are valuable, and that we matter. Satan is hard at work, providing loud competing voices that remind us we are unworthy and flawed on the one hand, or that we are too busy and too important on the other hand. It may be worth letting these two competing voices guide your mind as you talk to God about your life.

1. God, here are the things right now that are weighing my soul down.
2. God, here are the things that are helping me to find your peace and wholeness.

You can talk to God about anything and everything, because Jesus came and lived as a human being. Jesus totally understands what it feels like to be betrayed, hated, mistreated, abused, and even murdered. God understands what it's like to be a parent. God even went through the experience of watching his child be murdered in front of him. There is nothing you can bring to God that God cannot handle or does not understand.

Happily, God also relates to the joyful parts of our life. He knows the happiness of watching children learn to walk and talk. He loves the celebration of good things and blessings, because he's the one who keeps providing them! Good or bad, tell it all to God.

Listening to God

An important part of prayer are the efforts we make to understand God's will. Prayer helps us think about what God loves and to try and develop love in our hearts for the very same things.

A helpful way to pray is to bring a passage of Scripture with you as you pray. Limit yourself to a small enough section that you can really focus on it; just a few verses or perhaps a single chapter. These are God's words to help us learn to be holy as God is holy. (2 Timothy 3:16-17) Read through the very same verses at least 5 to 10 times, and as you seek to understand them, ask yourself the question:

If I am going to take seriously
that these are the words of God,
what would it mean that I have to do
differently in my life?

This is a helpful way to study Scripture, making prayerful efforts to apply what it is you are learning from what you read.

Similarly, the **Psalms** are a wonderful tool to help us deepen our prayer life. The Psalms are well-worded prayers from the life of Israel, collected over the centuries. When you aren't sure what to pray, it can be helpful to read through a few Psalms. As you read through them, put yourself in the shoes of the one speaking the words. What might a person have been going through to pray something like this?

- Have you ever struggled with feeling jealous toward ungodly people? See if Psalm 73 provides you with helpful words to pray.
- Do you feel vulnerable and betrayed? See if Psalm 22 provides you with help. In fact, Psalm 22 are the very words Jesus prayed while he was on the cross!
- Do you feel angry and vengeful? Psalm 137 contains such a strongly worded prayer to God, you might find yourself saying, "Well, God, I'm *mad*, but I'm not *that* mad."

The Psalms remind us of the incredible honesty we can have with God as we pray, and that God's response to such prayers is to love us and help us, not to reject us. Use

passages of Scripture to study as you pray. In this way, you can both **speak** and **listen**. Make time to talk to God, but also allow time for God to speak to you.

Time With God

When you pray, it's wonderful to use well-worded prayers that have been spoken before. It's great to talk to God openly about anything and everything. But it's also fine to say nothing, and to simply spend a few minutes enjoying God's presence.

God is always near. He's always with us. No matter where you go, God goes before you and waits for you. He follows behind you. He guards you on the left and on the right. He lives within every Christian through his Holy Spirit.

A helpful way to use this quiet form of prayer is to begin by controlling your breathing. Relax your body, and begin taking deep breaths. As you breathe in, remember that in this moment, God is providing you with life and health. God gives you love and acceptance. As you exhale, try to let go of your stress and your worries. Focus your mind on God, who is with you. As you do this, you might want to set a timer so that you can try to totally absorb yourself in this moment with God without worrying about anything else.

Sometimes it helps to use a simple word for God such as "Father," "Lord," or "Savior," to help us return to focussing on God when our minds get distracted or wander. God is always near, and the key to our spiritual growth is learning to be **aware of God's presence**.

No Wrong Way To Pray

There's really no wrong way to pray. Whether you're happy, sad, angry, excited, or anything in between, God wants to hear about it. Whether you are being kind and forgiving, or angry and bitter, God would rather you pray to him about everything, because the more time you spend with God, the more opportunity he has to shape your heart so that it becomes more like his own.

Whether you've got a question about prayer, or about anything else, we would be glad to talk with you. Please contact one of our our ministers:

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