



“Perfect Prayers”

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Jesus is looking for a few good men. Twelve, to be exact. Just a handful to turn the world upside down. Two thousand years later the world still stands amazed and aghast at the men he chooses.

Matthew who collects taxes for the Roman army of occupation.

Judas, a petty thief and money-grubber, who will later betray him for 30 pieces of silver.

Simon the Zealot, a wild-eyed fanatic on the lunatic fringe, who has wasted his life in the pursuit of lost causes and failed politics.

Thomas, an unreliable skeptic and cynic.

Philip, a “bean counter” who is paralyzed by doubt and anxiety.

Nathanael, the impractical dreamer.

James and John nicknamed “The Sons of Thunder” because they are hot-tempered barroom brawlers always ready for a fist fight.

The rest are even more suspect, if that’s possible. But we would all agree that the worst of the lot is Peter. Actually, his given name is Simon. His hands are calloused and he smells of fish. Those who know him will tell you that he’s lived a rough life. His ways are uncouth and his vocabulary is lurid. When provoked, he’s always ready for a fight. But when the going gets tough, he turns tail and runs. He’s well past forty and set in his ways. You know what they say: “You can’t teach old dogs new tricks.” And Simon is a notoriously slow learner.

No one in their right mind would choose these undependable Galilean peasants. No one, that is, except Jesus. He calls out to Simon and his ragtag crew in Matthew 4:16, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” He sparks a dream in the tired heart of that old fisherman. A dream that will transform unstable Simon into *Peter*—the “Rock” who will change history.

A dream is a powerful thing. Do you have a dream that gives your life *eternal* significance? There are dreams so grand that they will never allow you to go back to the lesser things that occupy ordinary people. Simon desperately needs such a dream. And so do every one of us. Jesus comes to us today with the same dream that transformed Simon and the others 2,000 years ago:

“Follow me and I will make you fishers of men. Give me your lives and I will transform them radically. You will light up the world with goodness. As holy warriors, you will shatter the dark powers of this evil world. If you will dare abandon yourselves to my vision for you, I will give you a harvest of souls that beggars the imagination.”

Mao Zedong inspired his defeated and dispirited Chinese Communist troops to begin their famous “Long March” to victory with these words: “The journey of a

thousand miles begins with a single step.” So Jesus takes his new disciples on the first steps of a “Long March” that will take them from defeated lives to triumphant warriors. He leads them to a hill by the Sea of Galilee where he shares *kingdom* truths that will revolutionize their lives. We call this *The Sermon on the Mount*. The subject that he devotes more time to than any other is prayer.

If these new disciples are going to be transformed, it will be through prayer. Jesus devoted himself to prayer. Yet, it was the thing his disciples neglected most. Every survey reveals that the thing Christians feel most guilty about is their lack of prayer. Pollster George Barna’s research shows that Evangelicals spend less than five minutes a day in prayer. Mark Twain wrote that our first prayer ought to be, “Lord, forgive us our prayers.” If we are going to be ready for battle, our first step on “the journey of a thousand miles” must be learning how to pray effective prayers. In Matthew 6:5-15, Jesus gives this vital principle:

Our Lord’s power is unleashed when his power is unpacked.

In the middle of his teaching on prayer is *The Lord’s Prayer* (or *Jesus’ prayer*). Our Lord introduces his prayer with these words in verse nine: “This, then, is how you should pray.” This prayer only takes about 25 seconds. To sing it takes about a minute-and-a-half. Is this all there is to prayer? No, Jesus is giving us a pattern (or an outline) on how we are to pray. This is what we learn:

1. “Forgive our Prayers”: How Not to Pray

Jesus begins his teaching on prayer with these words in verse five: “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites...” The original word is *hypokrites*, which is Greek for actors. In the ancient Greek theater, players on the stage quickly changed roles by changing masks. A hypocrite is someone who wears a mask, plays a part, and is a poser. Jesus is saying that one of the surest ways to spot religious pretenders is to look at their prayer life. It is a sure-fire indicator of true or *false* spirituality. Jesus speaks of two kinds of defective prayers:

1) The *hypocrite’s* prayer: performing for others

Jesus describes this person in verse five:

“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 men. I tell you the truth; they have received their reward in full.”

Notice the first thing that Jesus says about masked religious folk: “...for they love to pray...” Prayer is their passion. Not only that, they pray “...in the synagogues...” Their prayers are impeccably-pious and wonderfully-inspiring to the assembled saints. They also pray “on the street corners,” unafraid to express their faith publicly. These people plaster their cars with religious bumper stickers and bow their heads in restaurants. Outwardly they are sold out to God. But outward show can be deceiving. Pretenders love public places because an

actor is lost without a stage. But most of all, actors live for the applause of others. How do you know if you are a *hypocrite*? Let's do a diagnostic checklist.

Do you pray more in public than in private? Do you find it easier to pray in groups than by yourself? Ordinary Christians can manage to sit quietly with their eyes closed during prayer meetings. They can even manage to pray well-thought-out prayers if put on the spot. But the great saints all spent prodigious amounts of time alone in prayer.

Do you calculate your prayers to impress those listening? I remember reading this line in the *Boston Globe*: "It was the finest prayer ever offered to a Boston congregation." That's the problem: most public prayers are offered to the congregation and not God. Lyndon Johnson once asked Bill Moyers to open the cabinet meeting in prayer. After a few seconds, Mr. Johnson interrupted his prayer: "Speak up, I can't hear you!" Moyers replied, "Mr. President, it may come as a shock to you—but I am praying to God. As much as it may pain you to hear otherwise, you are *not* God."

Do you catch yourself using prayers to share information? Or to correct someone? Sometimes we preachers use our prayer after the sermon to cram in another point or to make an announcement to the congregation. But God is the audience for our prayers, not other people.

Are you afraid to pray publicly because of what others might think about your prayers? Do you worry afterwards about whether they liked your prayer? Again, you are not praying to others, but to God. And God looks at the motives of the heart, not the quality of the words.

We waste our lives performing for others, constantly changing masks to impress them. Prayer is *never* about sending messages to other people. That's why Jesus says to his disciples in verse six, "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." The only thing that ultimately matters is the applause of heaven, not the approval of people.

2) The *pagan's* prayer: manipulating his "god"

Jesus describes this person in verses 7&8:

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

Pagans comes from the Latin word *pagani* which literally means "hillbillies." The *pagani* were rural, uneducated, and superstitious people who held on to their idols long after sophisticated urbanites had discarded the old Greek and Roman mythologies. These "hillbillies" saw their gods as good luck charms, much the same way basketball players make "the sign of the cross" before shooting crucial foul shots, or a gambler kisses his crucifix before he throws the dice.

In his latest book, *The Seven Faith Tribes*, George Barna says that most Christians in America are functional deists. Deism sees God as the One who originally set the universe in motion, but now lets it run according to the laws of nature. The God of the deist seldom (if ever) supernaturally intervenes in the affairs of this world. Many of our Founding Fathers were deists, and most Americans today are too. Barna says that 66% of Christians in America see God as far away and uninvolved in their daily affairs. For all practical purposes, he is irrelevant unless they are suddenly overtaken by a crisis they can't solve. Then prayer becomes a desperate throw of the dice in a cosmic game of craps.

For the *pagani*, prayer is not about establishing a deeper personal relationship with a loving Father, but sticking a coin in a slot machine, pulling the lever, and hoping they hit the jackpot. Jesus says in verse eight, "Your Father knows what you need." First of all, as your Father, he knows and is sympathetic. He wants you to bring your needs to him. But he wants so much more: he is hungry for a father/son/daughter relationship with you.

Notice what else he says about the *pagani* in verse eight: they "keep on babbling...for they think they will be heard because of their many words." If they say it loud enough, often enough, and with enough threats or promises, then maybe God will respond. It's like a television game show: "Let's make a Deal with God." I think of Robert Duvall in the movie, *The Apostle*. He plays a desperate tent evangelist whose world is rapidly imploding. So he kneels beside his bed and repeatedly prays a two-word prayer: "Give me...give me...give me...give me!" That's vintage "hillbilly" prayer. Better to pray, "I'm desperate for you, God. I won't rest until I possess you and you possess all of me." In verse nine Jesus says, "This then, is how you should pray..."

2. The *disciple's* prayer: the way God wants it

There are many professing Christians in this world, but few disciples. In his book, *The Normal Christian Life*, that Chinese saint, Watchman Nee wrote, "Most followers of Jesus are so unordinary that they think anyone who lives an ordinary Christian life is extraordinary." Jesus has not called us to be pew warmers, but overcomers. Watchman Nee calls that "the normal Christian life." He goes on to say, "Extraordinary prayer is the key to extraordinary lives."

Again, *The Lord's Prayer* only takes about 25 seconds to pray. Jesus is giving the skeletal outline of prayer. This should be called "The Lord's *Pattern* for Prayer. This prayer can be said in a few seconds or can be prayed for several hours. After Jesus wrestled in the agonizing prayer of Gethsemane, he asked his sleeping disciples in Matthew 26:40, "Could you not keep watch with me for one hour?" As a disciple, I have taken that as a personal challenge to pray the Lord's *Pattern* Prayer for at least an hour every day. Here's how it works for me:

1) It begins with *his* name, not *my* needs

Jesus says in verse nine that we should begin with, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." Sometimes, desperate situations require desperate

prayers. Simon Peter tried to walk across the stormy waters to Jesus. His faith faltered when he took his eyes off Jesus, and he began to sink. He shouted the shortest prayer in the Bible—a single, desperate word: “Help!” It wasn’t pretty, but it *was* effective. Jesus immediately pulled Peter up out of a watery grave. We don’t always have time to pray the Lord’s *Pattern* Prayer.

But remember how Peter got into this mess. He was the only disciple who had the faith to get out of the boat when he saw Jesus walking across storm-tossed waves. He obeyed Jesus’ command to walk across the waves to him. Sometimes faith will put us in dangerous waters. As long as he focused on Jesus, he was okay. When he got distracted by the storm raging about him, he began to sink.

Like Peter, we often focus on the storms instead of our Lord. Suddenly the storms seem bigger than the *Lord* of the storms. Overcome by fear, we sink into a sea of despair, drowning in our own panic. That’s why the first petition of the Lord’s *Pattern* prayer is crucial. It fixates on the bigness of our God rather than the size of our storms. It’s our way of focusing on Jesus rather than the waves.

The Jewish Rabbis tell us that there are more than 7,000 names for God in the Old Testament alone: *Jehovah-Jira*—“The Lord will provide”; *Jehovah-Rophe*—“The Lord who heals”; *Jehovah-Shalom*—“The Lord of peace”; *Jehovah-Rohi*—“The Lord our Shepherd”. The list goes on and on. Reflect on the names of God. Savor them. You can spend endless hours just hallowing (or praising) his name. As you do, the waves will bow down to his incomparable excellence. The storm won’t always abate, but fear will give way to a peace that passes understanding.

2) It’s about *his* will, not *my* way

Jesus goes on to the second petition in verse ten: “...your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven...” When I realize how awesome my God is, I naturally want him to be the master of my universe. I realize that my plans are petty next to his; my ideas fade in the light of *his* infinite wisdom, and my solutions are flawed next to *his* purposes. In the movie *Rudy* an old priest at Notre Dame says, “I’ve learned two things in my years of ministry: there is a God, and I’m not him.” Heaven’s angels, who gaze upon his dazzling glory, understand that they are poor creatures in comparison to their awesome Creator. He speaks a word, and they rush to do his bidding with perfect obedience. Jesus says that we should pray for the creatures on earth to do the same thing.

The word *kingdom* is a combination of two old words: *king* and *dominion* or *domination*. A kingdom is wherever a king dominates. Bob Dylan wrote a song entitled, *You Got to Serve Somebody*. No one is a free agent in this world. Dylan sings, “It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you got to serve somebody.” Whether you are mastered by the lusts of your own flesh, or the need to please others, or the devil’s dictates, or the Lord’s sovereign will, you *will* serve somebody. No one is ever free. Your only choice is whether or not you will be dominated by someone who has your best interests at heart. Once you “hallow *his* name”, you know that that “Someone” is the Father who made you for himself.

You realize that prayer is not *informing* God about the way you want things to go, but *conforming* to his perfect will for your life. Not only do you want that for yourself, you are convinced that it is best for the whole world. You can spend hours interceding for all the people, institutions, and nations who need to come under the domination of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

3) It's a *provision* for my needs, not a pipeline for my wants

Jesus goes on to the third petition in verse eleven: "...give us this day our daily bread..." We usually make this our *first* petition. But Jesus puts it in third place. It's not that our *daily bread* isn't important. Jesus says in verse eight, "Your Father knows what you need." In verse 36 he says that if God cares enough to feed the birds of the air, he will surely meet all our physical and emotional needs.

But its placement in this perfect prayer makes me understand the purpose of my *daily bread*. It's not to satisfy my needs (or wants), but to make me stronger for higher purposes. The first petition reminds me that my chief aim in life is to glorify and enjoy God. Because I've seen his glory, I want his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. I am passionate about *my* King dominating me and every part of his creation. To advance his kingdom on earth is my second highest aim in life (right after worship). It will require every ounce of strength I possess. So I need food, energy, health, emotional stability, and all the necessary resources to advance his kingdom in my world. The "stuff" that I need is a means to a higher end, not an end in itself. I don't want to have the most toys when I die, but I am passionate about hearing my Father say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Not only does God's glory come first, but the needs of others are paramount. I don't pray, "Give *me* this day *my* daily bread." Rather, it is "Give *us* this day *our* daily bread." God wants me to intercede for you to have the same strength to do his will and advance the glory of his kingdom. The hypocrites pray for status. Pagans pray for stuff. But disciples pray for daily strength to bring salvation to a lost world so that the Savior will receive all the glory.

4) It *receives* grace because it *gives* grace away

It is no accident that the fourth petition in verse 12 says, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." When I pray the Lord's *Pattern* prayer, I am awestruck by an inescapable fact: too often I get my priorities out of sync. Almost always, my first concern is my *daily bread*. That's what I think about most. It wouldn't be so bad if it was only *daily bread* that consumes my desires. But it's an endless supply of cake, candy, pizza, toys, pleasures, entertainment, success, status, prosperity, and a thousand other baubles that are really quite tawdry in the dazzling light of God's kingdom, power, and glory. It suddenly dawns on me that I too have sold out my Savior and Lord for 30 pieces of silver. It is impossible to pray the first three petitions without inevitably coming to the fourth: "Forgive our debts..." Notice it's *our* debts and not *my* debts. Even in my confession of sins, I am not allowed to be *self*-focused as if I alone matter.

Like the repentant prophet in Isaiah 6:5, I cry out, "Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." Do you see the *pattern* in the Lord's Prayer? Like Isaiah, when we begin by focusing on our Almighty God, and then realize that he is a King who demands and deserves our first allegiance, we suddenly realize how we have abandoned him for the dirty things of this world. But we are not alone. The whole world is in our wretched condition. Having been cleansed by his forgiveness, we must cry out with that same prophet in Isaiah 6:8, "Here am I. Send me!" The Lord's prayer is a call to bring that same forgiveness to fellow debtors in our world.

This is a desperate prayer for God to release me from the most vile sin of all: having been forgiven, refusing to give forgiveness to others. So I pray, "Forgive our debts *as we also have forgiven our debtors*." The ultimate end of the Lord's *Pattern Prayer* is that we would be conformed to our God's image; that we would freely give grace to others as he has lavishly given it to us. This is so important, that Jesus follows up the Lord's prayer with a warning in verse eighteen: "But if you do not forgive men their sins, your father will not forgive your sins." A refusal to give grace cuts off the flow of grace. Bitterness and harbored resentments hinder prayers and dissipates the power of kingdom warriors.

5) It is desperate for holiness, not demanding of happiness

The Lord's *Pattern Prayer* moves to a perfect conclusion with the fifth and final petition in verse twelve: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." A hypocrite's prayer seeks its happiness in the applause of others. A pagan's prayer seeks happiness in getting the "stuff" of this world. A disciple of Jesus welcomes happiness, but is even more desirous of holiness. Most postmodern parents say to their children, "Have a good time." When I was a teenager, my old-fashioned father used to say, "Be a good boy." As a good father he understood that godly character counted more than "good times." My heavenly Father knows that holiness has an eternal value that far outweighs temporary happiness. He wants me to refocus my prayers to that end.

The prayer that begins by drawing me closer to the goodness of my heavenly Father ends by pulling me away from the badness of the One who will destroy my life. That which begins by begging for his will to be done in my life rightly ends by imploring him to keep me away from any temptation to disobey his will. Unordinary prayers plead for happiness. Extraordinary prayers beg for holiness. From beginning to end, step-by-step the Lord's *Pattern Prayer* transforms hypocrites and pagans into disciples who overcome the world.

How about it, Simon? The Lord lays a vision before you today. He promises to take the sifting sands of your life and turn you into a rock that will turn the world upside down. Are you ready to pray to that end?