

# How to Pray

Psalms 23; 51; 150; Luke 11:1-13

**The Big Idea:** When we pray we open a connection with God.

**Learning Goal:** Learners will understand the role of prayer in the Christian life, different appropriate methods of prayer, and the benefits of spiritual discipline.

**Opening:** Begin by sharing a high and low from this past week. When each person has had a chance to listen and share, open your session together by praying the following prayer together, out loud.

## Opening Prayer

**Powerful and loving God, you are more ready to listen than we are to pray. Search our hearts and our minds, that we may know you and seek your will for our lives. Bless our time of learning. Help us to entrust those we love to your care. Thank you for the gift of prayer, here with our friends, and whenever we come to you, in Jesus' name. Amen**

**Read:** In Luke 11, one of Jesus' disciples requested, "Lord, teach us to pray..." Jesus responded with the words we now call the Lord's Prayer. He continued with this reassurance, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Luke 11:9).

It is true that human beings yearn to pray. We long for a connection with God, whether we can voice who that God is or not. At its most basic, prayer is our response to this yearning. The New Testament witness preserves the words of the Lord's Prayer, which, because it covers so many issues, captures for us the breadth of prayer's concerns.

The church through the centuries has made quite a bit of prayer. It is one of the premier spiritual disciplines, along with fasting and giving alms. The misfortune of this is that many believers have come to understand that prayer requires certain prerequisites, like ordination, or a particular holiness, or a gift with language or memory. Paul reminds us in Romans 8:26-27 that we don't have to worry about praying "as we ought" because the Spirit intercedes for us beyond what we even know.

The gift of the church's long attention is that many strategies for prayer have developed over the centuries, many of which are finding audiences today:

- *Lectio divina*: a slow, contemplative reading of scripture
- Reverential listening
- Meditation
- Centering prayer: repeating one word or a phrase from scripture
- Intercessory prayer: praying for others
- Lament
- Walking a labyrinth
- Praise and/or thanks

If we understand prayer to be our connection with God, it certainly is not restricted to a set of words or postures. For some, the deepest yearnings of the heart may be best carried by music, dance, or sculpture. For some, journaling can be prayer, as can a solitary walk in the woods. The question "How to pray?" can be answered in many, many ways.

Some also struggle with what to pray for or about. We have learned to pray for things such as health, wealth, wisdom, or luck. We may even pray for these things on behalf of others. New to some might be the idea of listening for God, waiting for the "still, small voice" that might lead us to new insight or awareness. Many of the old forms of prayer seek this kind of outcome.

Are any prayers more holy than others? None seem to be. Many Psalms, for example, are laments where the psalmist complains to God about the circumstances besetting him or her. Even demands to show up or answer are a part of lament. Few of us would imagine that our communication with God could include complaint as well as praise.

Luther would be careful to say that the pray-er is not the one who makes prayers effective. It is the receiver of the prayers, God, who discerns without effort what it is we need or long for. We would also confess that God reliably answers prayer, though Luther would say that God answers in God's own way and time. Luther was frustrated by many of the prayers he heard in his day, "not one of them asking for the least thing" (*Book of Concord*, Tappert, Large Catechism, Part Three: The Lord's Prayer, section 25).

Luther's real irritation is revealed in these words: "They only thought, at best, of doing a good work as a payment to God, not willing to receive anything from him, but only to give him something." Here is the danger in prayer. It is not about trying to butter up God, earn points in heaven, or any other such thing. We pray because we need to be connected to God, and because God has invited us to do so.

So, how to pray? Simply begin. If the routine of praying before meals helps to draw attention back to the source of our sustenance, there are many useful prayers already written that will do well. Some offer prayer before sleep, and some offer prayer as the first or early act of a new day. Luther himself wrote an evening and morning prayer that continue to be used in Lutheran liturgies.

Whether it is a matter of routine or a spontaneous appeal, prayer is God's gift to us. Whether it is oral or not, God will hear. And whether we know what we need or whether we simply come before God with an open heart and open mind, God will respond with love and attention.

## My Faith Story

Describe your own experience with prayer. Share circumstances when you felt thankful, in need, energized in a community, or alone and reflective. Is there a particular example of when you asked God for something, and the answer came in an unexpected way? Are there songs, gestures, or times of worship that help you in your relationship with God? Was there a time when you were helped by others who prayed for you? For many, the Psalms are a treasury for daily prayer. Do you have a favorite Psalm you can share with the learners?

## How to Pray...Tips

Pray is intimate communication with God and can be used before a meal, at bedtime, during a worship service or anytime the need or opportunity arises. Silent and spoken prayers are both okay and may be used liberally throughout the day. Prayer is also taking time to listen to what God is saying to us. Spontaneous prayer is often best, but following process may help build the habit.

1) Assess your need for prayer – Take stock of the situation at hand, including your motivations. What are you praying for and why?

2) Select a type of prayer – Prayer of supplication (request for God’s help), contrition (in which sin is confessed and forgiveness requested), intercession (on behalf of others) and others are good and time tested. Books of personal prayer, hymnals, and devotionals often contain helpful, prewritten prayers. Consider also an ad-libbed prayer from the heart.

3) Select a physical prayer posture – Many postures are appropriate:

- The most common type of prayer in the New Testament is from prone position, lying face down on the ground, arms spread.
- Kneeling with your face and palms upturned is good for prayers of supplication
- Bowed head with closed eyes and hands folded is common today and aids concentration

There is no “official” posture for prayer. Choose your posture according to your individual prayer needs.

4) Offer your prayer – Pray with confidence. God listens to all prayer and responds. Breathe deeply, relax and be open as the Spirit leads you.

5) Listen – take time during your prayer simply to listen. Some prayer traditions involve only silent meditation as a means of listening for God’s voice.

Be Aware:

- God hears every prayer
- Prayer can be done either alone or in the company of others (corporately)
- Environment matters. If possible, consider lighting a candle and dimming the lights to set the correct mood and help block out distractions.

Which are particularly helpful? Which are common in church? When would some of these seem inappropriate? How can other things in the environment (silence, dimmed light, candles) also help prayer?

## Points to Ponder

- Find the Psalms in the middle of the Bible. It's the longest book in the Bible, with 150 Psalms in all! They are mostly prayers from a wide range of human experience. Find Psalm 23. Consider why this psalm has provided comfort for more people than perhaps any other psalm.
- Read Psalm 51. Find passages, such as verse 10, that are commonly used for songs in worship. Many think this is a composition by King David after his sin with Bathsheba. What makes this a good prayer for confessing sins? Much of prayer is simply praise.
- How does prayer deepen our relationship with God?
- What new ways to pray have you thought about?
- What one new way of praying would you try this next week?

## Closing Ritual

L: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

C: Amen.

L: Lord, teach us to pray always, with our bodies, minds, and spirits. Reveal your presence to us in silence and in speech, in community and in solitude. When we are unable to pray, give us your Holy Spirit to intercede for us with sighs too deep for words. Gather us into one by that Spirit, as we pray as Jesus taught us. Our Father...

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