

Personal Spiritual Growth Lesson 4B

Prayer

As we continue with Personal Spiritual Growth we are in Lesson 4b. This lesson focuses on the second vertical spoke that helps to strengthen our relationship with God. Lesson 4A focused on the Word of God and this lesson will focus on prayer.

Concerning the Word of God, you will remember that we can interact with the Bible in various ways. We can hear, read, study, memorize and meditate on the Word of God. Engaging with God through the Bible we engage is a process of maturing in our faith and results in a deep, abiding relationship with Jesus leading to a spiritual life that will be fruitful, prosperous and effective.

In addition to the Word of God, we have been given the spiritual discipline of grace called prayer that is a powerful blessing. This lesson begins on page 29.

When we teach in a group setting, I usually start this lesson by asking a few questions to assess where the group might be related to the topic of prayer.

Why do we pray?

Take a moment to write down a few answers to that question.

A very common response to this question is that we pray to develop a relationship with God. I agree with this response, but I am not convinced that this is the primary motivation for our prayers. It should be, but others things can take a greater priority.

Here are some other typical responses:

- We pray because God's commanded it.
- We pray because God is all powerful. Prayer is not powerful by itself. God is powerful. Prayer is the means to access the power of God.
- Prayer is part of discipleship.
- Prayer grows our intimacy with the Lord.
- Prayer also grows our intimacy with others.
- God is the one who knows all things. He's the one who's ever-present. We pray because God has chosen to work in this world through the prayers of his people.

The next question: What is prayer? Finish this statement. Prayer is _____.

- Prayer is communicating with God.
- Prayer is praise.
- Prayer is worship.
- Prayer is thanksgiving.
- Prayer is confessing our sin.
- Prayer is repenting.
- Prayer is being silent, just listening to God.
- Prayer is bringing requests before God for ourselves and for others.
- Prayer includes many things.

- At the end of the group discussion, I will share that prayer is balanced. There are many facets of prayer yet often we just think that pray is just asking God for things. There is so much more to prayer.

Next, I will ask, what helps you or hinders you in praying?

When we come to the end of this lesson, the answers to that question will become more evident.

It is helpful to have a model for praying that is based on what God tells us in His Word. It is helpful to pray out of the Bible, especially when we are not sure how to pray.

The Bible tells us that certain things can hinder our prayers.

- Unconfessed sin in our life.
- Praying without faith.
- Praying with wrong motives.

These are just a few examples of heart attitudes that may hinder the effectiveness of our prayers.

You'll notice on page 29 that the picture for this lesson is a bit different from the other lessons. You see a conductor. A maestro of an orchestra. Someone who's leading an orchestra. Then there's a four-step process with arrows pointing upward, downward, inward, and outward.

As we mentioned to start this lesson, prayer is a means to grow in our relationship with God. God has given us a model for praying. Much like a conductor leads his orchestra or a choir of singers, God provides us with a process to guide our praying. There is a rhythm to prayer. There is a beat that a conductor sets so that the singers and instruments work together to make beautiful music.

In this picture, there are four strokes of the conductor's baton. He starts with an upward stroke, followed by a downstroke, then a stroke to the left, and a stroke to the right, and back to the top. The conductor is setting the 4-count beat of one and two and three and four and one and two and three and four. This is what the picture is attempting to represent.

You may be asking, how does this picture relate to prayer?

In a moment, we will read Matthew 6 where Jesus is teaching on prayer. As we discuss this passage, we will discover that there is a rhythm to prayer. This picture is aligned with the model that Jesus offers for prayer.

Turn with me to Matthew 6:5 – 13. Let's read the passage and make some observations about that passage related to prayer.

“When you pray you must not be like the hypocrites, or the Pharisees, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogue and at the street corners that they may be seen by others. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward.

But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles or the pagans do, for they think that they will be heard by their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

You then, pray like this,

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, 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 also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.”

What is the context of this passage?

This is part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is teaching about life in the Kingdom of God. A large crowd of people has gathered to listen to Jesus. As he is teaching, you might imagine different groups of people in the crowd. Obviously, there were men, women and maybe children. There may also have been different classes of people. In this teaching, Jesus references three distinct groups or classes of people.

Let's see if we can identify the three groups that Jesus is addressing in this passage related to prayer. There are a few pictures in your handout to help with this.

He's teaching a large group, and to first group of people he says, don't be like the hypocrites or the Pharisees. They like to pray for a show. They like to pray to be seen by people. And there's a picture of a Pharisee out on the street corner. Jesus implies that they are praying with the wrong motive.

They're not praying to hear from God or to bring glory to God. They are praying to be seen by people. They're praying to bring glory to themselves. Jesus is saying that is not the way to pray. Don't pray like them.

He continues, and he says, and don not pray like the Gentiles or the pagans. And there is a picture of Elijah and the prophets of Baal on the top of Mount Carmel, where the prophets were having a competition to see whose God would burn up the sacrifice. These prophets of Baal were praying all day long. They were cutting themselves. They were chanting. They were going on and on.

Eventually Elijah prays to his God. He asks for water to be poured on the altar three times until it is filled with water. And then God brought fire down from heaven and proved that he was the true God. Jesus is saying, don't pray like the Gentiles or the pagans. They think that by saying just the right words, or praying long enough, or praying loud enough, or thinking that prayer is a formula, we can in some way twist God's arm. Jesus is saying, don't pray like them. They're praying with the wrong methods.

The Pharisees had the wrong motives, the wrong heart motive. They were praying not to glorify God, but to glorify themselves and be seen by people. The Gentiles or pagans, they

were praying with the wrong methods, many words, formulas, loudness, length of prayers, thinking that they could influence or manipulate God.

Jesus is saying, don't pray like them either.

And then, Jesus turns to the third group and says, “you”, meaning those who were looking to draw near to him, to be a part of the kingdom that was coming. You, my followers, pray in this way. And Jesus goes on to share what we know as the Lord's Prayer.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done ...”

This prayer is not necessarily meant as a prayer to be repeated word for word. There is nothing wrong with praying this prayer. But if we think that there is power in just repeating these words, how is our praying any different from that of the Gentiles or pagans? Prayer is not about saying just the right words or thinking there is a secret formula to ensure that our prayers are answered.

It seems that Jesus is providing a model for prayer. There are various aspects in this prayer that provide a balanced approach toward prayer.

In this teaching, Jesus also makes reference to praying in secret. When we pray, do we always have to go into our room? Is it okay to pray with others? Jesus said, don't be like the hypocrites, but go into your room. What did this mean?

Jesus, prayer alone at times with his Father. But he also prayed openly with his disciples. He prayed in community with others.

If I asked you which leg is more important to you? Your right leg or your left leg? You would say that both are equally important.

If you were flying in an airplane, which wing of the airplane is more important? The right wing or the left wing? You would answer that both wings are needed to fly.

The same applies to prayer. Which is more important? Private prayer or corporate prayer? For definition purposes, corporate just means praying with more than yourself. It could be one other person, ten people or with hundreds of people.

The Word of God is very clear that there is great value in private prayer and there is value in praying with others.

And the scriptures are filled with examples of both. When Jesus said, go into your room, I don't think he had the intention of just going into a closet, a prayer closet by yourself. There may be a time for that. I think he was teaching more about our heart attitude related to prayer.

It's not so much the location of our praying, but rather the attitude of our heart. Whether praying alone or with others, our focus should be on drawing near to God and bringing requests before him, worshiping him, thanking him, confessing sin to him. Abiding in Christ is all about a deep, intimate relationship with Jesus. This was the focus of lessons 1, 2 and 3.

Prayer is also primarily focused on building our relationship with God. Prayer is a spiritual discipline of grace, a gift from God, to walk in close fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

When Jesus said, pray like this, it was not just a suggestion or one of many options. It was a command for our good and his glory as we pray. And we're not permitted to freelance with our own approaches. We don't override this model because we think we have a better formula or a clever approach that makes improvements upon what Jesus was teaching. The prayer pattern described on these pages, and the rest of this lesson, is based on a very basic premise.

The model prayer that Jesus gave us, the first half of Jesus' model prayer is focused on God. It is upward focused.

And the second half of the prayer is focused on us, on man, a downward focus.

We could summarize this model prayer in two parts, saying that **God is worthy and we are needy. God is worthy and we are needy.** As we begin to pray, it is helpful to begin our praying focused upward on God in worship and adoration.

This is time well spent praising him, thanking him, reminding him of his character, of his attributes, his names. That's the focus of the phrase "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." This is a good place to start that aligns our heart with the character and will of God.

This prayer model is balanced. It follows a rhythm like a conductor of an orchestra. The rhythm is upward, downward, inward, outward. Matthew chapter 6:9 - 13 follows this balanced flow.

Turn with me to page 30. There is a phrase that says, "This then is how you should pray". Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

That's the first half of the prayer. God is worthy.

And then the prayer continues.

Give us today our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we all have also forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.

This is the second half of the prayer. We are needy.

Before we discuss the various elements of this prayer model, we see that Jesus is saying, "don't pray that way but pray this way".

Here's a biblical model for prayer. We stated at the beginning of this lesson that above all, prayer is about building a relationship with God.

Prayer isn't so much about what we can get from God. Prayer is drawing near to God. It is developing our relationship with him.

It is “seeking God’s face”. It's seeking God’s face, not just his hand.

We see an example of this in Psalm 27:4.

David said, there's one thing that I ask, one thing I desire. That is to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and seek him in his temple. At that time, Dave was running from his son Absalom. He was away from Jerusalem and the tabernacle which represented the manifest presence of God on earth. David’s one desire was to meet with God.

Then in verse 8, God invites David (and us), to seek his face. David replies, your face, Lord, I will seek.

On page 30, there is a picture of a hand holding some money.

This is an illustration of this principle that we must seek God's face, not just his hand. Imagine I was having a conversation with you, and I was holding out 20,000 CFA. I am looking at you, and saying, that I love you, I have thought about you, and I desire to bless you with this gift.

And the whole time that I am speaking to you, instead of you looking at me, you're looking at my hand. You are looking at the money that's in my hand.

This is perfect picture of how we often approach God. We look at his hand only. We are seeking his hand. We are most interested in what we can get from God, instead of first seeking his face and, and drawing near to him and, and developing a closer relationship with him.

If we seek God's face, we get so much more, we get him, plus everything else that comes with it. If we seek his hand only, we may miss our relationship with him. Let me be clear. There is nothing wrong with asking God for things, we are his children. But if prayer is only about seeking God’s hand, we're missing the primary blessing of prayer.

Prayer is first and foremost about seeking God’s face, seeking the relationship, deepening the relationship with God. This is a key principle.

Here are a few other prayer principles that we can take away from this teaching.

We should pray with our heart fixed on God's glory, not just our personal satisfaction.

This is the emphasis of God’s kingdom come and his will be done, and hallowed be his name.

We should look to pray out of the treasury of God's word, not just from our own list of ideas.

Often people will say, I don't know what to pray about. Well, just open your Bible. The Psalms are a wonderful place to begin to pray. There are many written prayers throughout

the Scriptures. Pray what is in God's Word. If we are praying God's Word, we can know that we are praying according to God's will.

We can pray according to the Spirit's instruction, not only our human reason.

Allow the Holy Spirit to guide our praying, to not just have our own mindset, our own agenda. There is a blessing in praying with others. When we pray in a group we should not just be waiting for someone to stop praying so that we pray what we want to pray. Praying in one accord means that we should be listening to how others are praying. We should allow the Spirit of God to lead us in prayers that that build upon each other. The Holy Spirit of God desires to shape our prayers and align them with God's will.

We can pray with our hearts completely surrendered to God's will, not our own hurried agenda.

Pray in anticipation of living triumphantly in the war zone not in satisfaction with our comfort zone.

This is not our home. We are in enemy territory representing the King of kings. This is a battlefield. God has left us here for a purpose, to make disciples. We can live victoriously here as we wait for heaven. We recognize that we are in a war zone, we're in a battle zone.

And finally, pray that God would change you and me, not just change things around us.

This is the ultimate focus of prayer. God would change our hearts, align our hearts more with his purposes.

On the next few pages, I have provided a summary of the Lord's Prayer and how these four aspects of prayer can be incorporated into our regular times of prayer.

We start upward with God and then downward in reverence, leading to requests and then leading to readiness and ending with an upward sense of worship for God. Each of these is described beginning on page 31.

You can read through this in the handout so I will just highlight a few points.

As we begin to pray, we think about the first aspect, our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. This is an upward focus on God. It is not asking for anything. It is praising God for who he is and thanking him for all that he has done. This is described on page 31.

When we spend time praising God, worshiping him, thanking him, not asking for anything, this reminds us that we are different from God. He is holy. He is worthy. We need His help.

This brings us into this downward stroke, a place of surrender and submission, of aligning our will to his will, our hearts with his heart. The model prayer guides us with "your kingdom come your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

This is a wonderful place to remember who God is, to acknowledge and surrender to God's will. We are listening for the Spirit of God to convict us and guide us.

This is a time of confession, of surrender.

So we start upward with God, “our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name” and then move downward, “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”.

This will naturally begin to align our heart with God's heart, focused on his will and his kingdom. Then as we begin to bring our requests before God, our requests may be more aligned with his will and his kingdom.

This model prayer continues with, “give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”. These are requests made for ourselves and for others.

We do not stay in our “prayer closet”, but we must engage in the world and do the work that God has prepared for us. This next aspect of the model prayer is meant to prepare us for the spiritual battle, to be ready to engage with the world. Jesus prays, “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”

Based on God’s Word, we know God does not tempt us to evil. God can test us in order to refine and mature us. This part of the prayer is saying, God, you know where we are weak. Strengthen us in the trials and testing. Shield us from those things that may tempt us. Help us to do well under the tests and trials. Guarding against looking at the things we shouldn't be looking at, or going to the places we should not go. Strengthen us so that we honor you moment by moment. This is a time in prayer to remember God’s promises. He is not going to leave us or forsake us. God has promised to deliver us. The evil one cannot harm us. We are his children and in Jesus we overcome. God is preparing us to have an impact in the world around us.

The prayer model ends as it begins. In some translations, the Lord's Prayer ends with, “for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

We end where we started, upward in reverence of God.

This prayer model is focused on God and His character. It allows for praise and thanksgiving. There are times of surrender, confession and repentance. We are encouraged to bring our needs before our heavenly Father, that are aligned with his kingdom and his will. There is a reminder to ask for strength in the midst of the battle, claiming God’s promises, ending with reverence and glory to God.

Before moving on, I must make a clarifying point. We have spent the last 30 minutes discussing prayer and the model for prayer that Jesus offers us in Matthew 6. I do believe that Jesus is not giving us a prayer to be memorized and repeated mechanically. I believe that Jesus is calling us not to pray like the world but instead to pray with our hearts focused on our deep, intimate relationship with God.

With that said, we must be careful not to make this prayer model a magic formula for praying. As God’s children, we are invited to cry out to him at any place and at any time. Each time we pray we are not required to follow every aspect of this model prayer. There are times, when in great need, we may simply cry out to God in this way. Lord, save me! Lord, help me! Lord, rescue me!

Or like Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, after God answered her prayer for a son, she lifts her voice to God and never asks God for anything. Her prayer contains only praise and thanksgiving. Her prayer reminded God of who He is.

Or maybe we are so overcome by our sin that we cry out like the tax collector asking for forgiveness and mercy because we are not worthy in the sight of holy God.

Keep in mind that prayer, above all else, is a relationship. It may be the greatest demonstration of our faith and dependence on God. Jesus is instructing us how to communicate with God in a balanced way that glorifies and God and transforms us into the likeness of Christ.

Always be on guard for praying with the wrong motives of the Pharisees and the wrong methods of the pagans.

On page 34 you can try it for yourself. Using Psalm 46, you can follow the prayer prompts to work through each step of the model prayer from reverence, to submission, to requests, to readiness, and then ending in reverence. You can try that on your own.

I provided another tool on page 35. This article, written by Daniel Henderson, summarizes the fruit of worship-based prayer.

- **God is glorified and we are sanctified.** We are set apart, We are of being made holy. We are transformed and we are being transformed.
- **The church is edified.** Discipleship happens. The church is built up and we pray together in this way. The church is built up and strengthened.
- **The world is mystified.** The world is watching in amazement.
- **The enemy is notified.** Satan is powerful and supported by a myriad of demonic forces, but he cannot read our thoughts. The best he can do is observe our behavior, eavesdrop on our conversations and implement a strategy to send his fiery darts against our minds based on his understanding of our vulnerabilities and habits. When we are in the habit of experiencing transformation as we seek God's face, the enemy's efforts to defeat, discourage, distract, and destroy us are met with the reality of our victory that comes through intimacy with Jesus.

To Satan's dismay, he sees us praying, trusting God, and being conformed to the likeness of Christ. Satan is notified that we are engaged in a pursuit of the promises of transformation and an impact for the Savior. Satan knows he is a defeated foe.

Turning to page 36, God's word makes it clear that prayer is not just an idea.

Colossians 4:2 says we are to devote ourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

1 Thessalonians 5:17 says we are to pray continually.

Both of these are commands. This means that too little time, too many responsibilities, too many kids, too much work, too little desire, too little experience, none of this exempts us from the expectation to pray. God expects every follower of Jesus to be devoted to prayer and to pray without ceasing.

You can read a number of references that reinforce this aspect of continuing to pray, on all occasions, with all kinds of requests, continuing to seek God's face through prayer. Prayer is not just a command, **it is a royal invitation.**

Hebrews 4:16 makes that clear.

“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

As we close this lesson, there are things that can hinder our prayers.

- Wrong motives
- Unconfessed sin
- Unforgiving spirit
- Outward show
- Disobedience
- Lack of faith
- Stinginess
- Husbands not being gentle with their wives
- Idolatry
- Not praying in the Spirit
- Not abiding in Christ
- Not praying in Jesus' name, which just means not in his authority, not as he would pray, not according to the Word of God and the will of God

These are some examples of things that can hinder our effectiveness in prayer.

GTN does offer a two-day course on worship-based prayer. This course takes these concepts and allows for additional discussion and practical application.

From this lesson, you can grasp the prayer that Jesus gave us in Matthew 6.

We are reminded to seek God's face more than just his hand. Prayer is about relationship with God.

We are encouraged to pray out of the Scriptures.

Pray led by the Spirit of God with a focus on the glory of God, coupled with the Word of God.

All of this will strengthen our vertical relationship with the Lord.

The one-page summary on Page 37 summarizes the principles in this course with an emphasis on the Navigator's wheel.

Lesson 1 focused on transformation and training.

Lesson 2 focused on abiding in Christ, having a Christ-centered life. Jesus is the hub of the wheel.

Lesson 3 focused on the obedient, Spirit-filled life. The Holy Spirit empowers us to live out the life that God's called us to.

In Lessons, 4a and 4b, we focused on two disciplines of grace that allow us to grow in our relationship with the Lord. One is through the Word of God - hearing, reading, studying, memorizing, meditating on the Word of God. We also strengthen our personal relationship with God through prayer - thanking Him, praising Him, yielding to Him, and then with a heart aligned to His kingdom and His will, we bring our requests to Him and trust Him to provide for us in this spiritual battle.

And we are blessed with the joy of being part of seeing His kingdom come and His will being done as Jesus builds His church. In Lesson 5 we will focus on the horizontal spokes of the wheel as we love others in the church (Fellowship) and those who do not know Jesus yet. (Evangelism/Witnessing)

Talk with you soon in Lesson 5.