

How to Pray Even if You're Not Religious – Matthew 6:24

Most people pray, at least sometimes. But most people admit that they don't pray as much as they should pray, and most people admit that they're not really very good at it.

When I have suggested to people that they pray, one of the responses has been, "I'm really not a very religious person." I suppose the interpretation of that comment depends on your definition of religion. Usually when people talk about religion they're talking about keeping some type of religious ritual. We think of a religious person as an insider - - she goes to mass every day or he reads the Bible through at least once a year or a family may give 10% of their income to the church. These are the people who know the jargon. They can easily talk about Lent and Easter and Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. They can use words like liturgy and sanctification, and they actually know what they're talking about when they use those kinds of words.

But what if someone isn't religious and wants to pray? After all, don't irreligious people need to pray and need God as much as those who are religious? If nothing else, they have a lot of catching up to do.

The trouble is that there seems to be no easy way to learn how to pray. It seems dumb to ask how to pray. And, if we try to learn by listening to others pray, we often hear experienced pray-ers who are well practiced, eloquent and have all the words and the theology figured out. That may convince us that we could never pray as well as the person we have heard, and so we are more discouraged than encouraged to pray.

One time I went to a health club and decided I was going to try out a new piece of Cybex exercise equipment. A trainer had showed me how to use it a couple of weeks earlier, but I had been away and this was my first time on my own. I awkwardly sat

down and began doing some exercises in a room with too many other people with very muscular bodies.

After I got off, someone else took over the machine. It was then that I realized I was sitting on the machine backwards. All those muscular types must have had a good laugh (or cry!). I may have been the topic of locker room conversation that morning. I wasn't sure I wanted to ever try again.

It can be the same way with prayer. You try it and do it all wrong and feel more like quitting than trying again.

The Symphony Orchestra once ran an interesting ad in one of the Chicago daily newspapers. The ad was specially targeted at people who had never attended a classical music concert because they didn't know how to do it.

It was a step-by-step description of how to buy a ticket, what to wear, when to arrive, where to park your car, where to hang your coat and how to follow the program. It even gave instructions to make sure that you bring a supply of cough

drops along with you so that you don't distract other listeners.

So let's do the same thing. Let's make a list of how to pray even if you're not religious. But wait a minute. Is this worth doing? Will God even listen to, much less answer, the prayer of someone who is not religious?

The answer is, "Yes, he will!" God has good ears and is a great listener. He hears every prayer that is sent his way. He is not deaf to the petitions of anyone, not even the irreligious or those who are mistakenly religious. However, while God does not make advance commitments to those who are not Christians, he has obligated himself in advance to those have accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. There is no parallel obligation to unbeliev-

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ers. I guess he takes them a prayer at a time.

Now here is some advice on how to pray.

Number One is to start with the faith that you already have. Lots of people seem to have trouble because they don't have much faith. That is a genuine concern because prayer requires faith. However, the shortage of faith should not stop a person from praying anymore than the lack of muscle development should stop a person from exercising.

Start with the faith you already have. It really doesn't take much faith to pray. In Romans 14:1 St. Paul told the first century Christians, "Accept him whose faith is weak." If Christians are supposed to accept people with weak faith, wouldn't it be obvious to assume that God also readily accepts people of weak faith?

In Matthew 17:20 Jesus said that great things can be done by those who "have faith as small as a mustard seed." Since mustard seeds are very small, Jesus' point is that you don't need huge faith to get started with God.

How much faith do you think you have? On a scale of 0 to 10, with zero being no faith at all and 10 being as much faith as any person has ever had, where would you be? One thing is for sure, for prayer to work there has to be at least some faith.

There's a significant New Testament teaching in Hebrews 11:6 that "without faith, it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." In other words, you must at least believe that God exists and that he responds to those who seek him or prayer is pretty much a waste of time. But that makes sense - - - why would anyone bother to pray without first believing in God?

So don't let a shortage of faith stop you from praying. Do you believe in God? That's faith. Start with the faith that you already have.

The second piece of advice on how to pray is not nearly as widely known. There are those who have been Christians for much of their lives who seem to have missed out on this principle completely. It is the advice to seek God more than the answer.

Do you remember the words we just looked at

from Hebrews 11:6? "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." A very common practice is to try to *use* God rather than to *seek* God. We want something and think God can help us get it, so we pray. If God gives it to us, we're glad. If God doesn't give it to us, we're mad. Wrong approach!

A professional fundraiser once told me about the way he approached wealthy donors. He said that he couldn't go and just ask for money for his project because that would be offensive. In many cases, the project that he was interested in might not be a project that the potential donor was interested in. He explained that he needed to be genuinely interested in that donor as a person, build a relationship and fit his request into the donor's priorities. Makes sense!

When I receive telemarketing calls at home from someone I don't know asking me to give money to an organization that I've never heard of, I usually say "no". Rarely have I sensed that the caller had any interest in me as a person, even if that caller used my name.

The same principle applies to God. Our prayers should seek God more than the answer. Talk to God as the person he is. Use prayer to get to know him. Build a relationship. Ask him what he wants.

This is a good news approach. It's a win/win approach. First of all, getting to know God is the best thing that can ever happen to anyone. God is far better than anything we can ask or that he can give. So even if we pray for something and God says "no", we're better off just for seeking and knowing him. And second, God loves to give good gifts to those who seek and love him. Those who seek him frequently hear the divine "yes!" So remember to seek God more than the answer!

A third piece of advice is to pray with heart and mind. Some people pray with lots of emotion but don't think through what they're actually praying for. They pray for stupid things, inappropriate things or even impossible things.

One woman with a broken heart from a broken relationship prayed that her former fiancée's wedding to another woman hadn't happened. But it had

already happened. It was literally past praying for. It was done. Her prayer didn't make sense. She may have been praying with her heart but not with her head.

Some people pray with lots of intellect but don't feel what they are praying. These are the cerebral types who research just how a prayer should be organized and presented. They try to be theologically accurate, but their hearts aren't in it.

I received a mailing from CompuServe that offered an interesting service. It offered telephone access to your computer e-mail. For a small fee you can call an access number from any telephone and have your e-mail messages read to you by "advanced text-to-speech technology sounds." So I tried the sample service. The speech was clear and understandable, but it lacked heart. I tried to imagine the "advanced text-to-speech" machine saying things like "I love you", "You just inherited ten million dollars" or "the IRS will seize your house in the morning."

Some communication just isn't what it needs to be unless it has heart. The emotions have to be there. That's the way it is with prayer to God. God is a person. God feels and thinks. Our prayers to God should be with both heart (the emotions) and mind (the intellect).

Advice Number Four is to include God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit when we pray. Without getting too technical in explaining theology, let me simply say that God is a trinity; that is, one God,

three persons — three persons whom we address and refer to as the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

When our children call home they will sometimes say to Charleen, "Is Dad there? Will you ask him to get on the phone, too?" That's usually an indication that the topic is important and both parents need to hear and answer at the same time. It's based on an understanding of how our family system works.

In somewhat the same way, it is helpful to understand how the Trinity system works in terms of

prayer. Normally, prayers should be addressed to God the Father, prayed in the name of God the Son and prayed in the power of God the Holy Spirit.

Prayers in the Bible are almost always spoken directly to God the Father. Jesus taught us to pray in his name. That's like someone famous saying, "When you phone, just tell him that I told you to call. You can use my name to get access." The name of Jesus is the access to God the Father.

The Holy Spirit is the person of the Trinity who actually lives inside of every Christian. He helps us, teaches us and gives us the spiritual power to live the Christian life and to pray. So, we should continually think about and lean on the Spirit when we pray.

What would a prayer sound like if we were to do it in this biblical way? Well, the prayer might go something like this: "Our Father who art in heaven . . . I'm praying to you today in the name of Jesus and with the power of the Holy Spirit."

It's very common for Christians to end their prayers saying, "In Jesus' name. Amen." The "amen" really doesn't much matter. It's the name of Jesus that really matters! "Amen" is a very old word that sort of marks the end of a prayer. Literally it means "so be it." It's a little bit like saying

"good bye" at the end of a telephone conversation.

But the name of Jesus should never be routine or a mere formality. It is only because of and through Jesus

Christ that we have the right to pray to God. And it is only because of Jesus Christ that we can claim God's promise to hear us and to answer us.

The fifth piece of advice for praying is just super practical. Get started! Get started with the faith that you already have. Seek God. Seek him with heart and mind. Pray to the Father in the name of the Son and the power of the Holy Spirit — but do it!

Get started with your own prayer. Not the recitation of the Lord's Prayer or reading someone else's

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prayer or reciting something your parents taught to you. Put your prayers in your own words.

Still a little unsure? Then write out your prayer and read it to God. It doesn't have to be spontaneous. After all, every prayer in the Bible was written out!

I proposed to Charleen one week before Christmas. She didn't know it was coming. I was in school in Chicago and she was working in New Jersey. I bought a ring. I wrote out the proposal. I memorized every word. She picked me up at the airport and we drove together into Manhattan. We went to Rockefeller Center, stood under the Christmas tree and I spouted out my memorized proposal.

Why did I write it out? Because I didn't have any experience at doing this before. Was it less sincere because I didn't make it up at the moment? Of course not! It was very much a matter of heart and mind, based on faith and seeking the person more than the answer.

And that's what we need to do when we pray to God. We just need to get started, do whatever we need to do to pray. Just do it. Whether you consider yourself to be religious or irreligious, just do it.

And then be patient, understanding that God is not under our time pressure. His clock does not tick with the same volume and urgency as ours.

Like all relationships, the relationship with God is a relationship that grows and develops over time. Just because God doesn't give you what you want at the moment you ask for it doesn't mean that he didn't listen. It doesn't mean that he does not care. And it does not mean that he will not answer. In fact, faith is allowing God to be God. It means that we trust him to do what he knows is best and when he knows is best to do it.

If God gave every prayer an instant answer and a guaranteed "yes!" we probably would never get to know him as a person. We would relate to God like a vending machine where you put in your quarter and push a button and get out what you asked for. Persons aren't like that at all. God isn't like that. As hard as it may be, be patient!

One last piece of advice is to repeat, repeat, repeat. Jesus encouraged frequent prayer. Jesus, the night before he died, prayed essentially the same

prayer three times. So while he never encouraged rote prayers, he did encourage repeated prayers.

Charleen and I became friends with a couple from India who had an arranged marriage. They barely knew each other prior to the wedding ceremony. Their parents set it up for them. They thought it was a much easier, more efficient and rational approach than our prolonged system of American dating and courtship.

Most Americans would disagree with that. We like to get to know the person we are going to marry. We like to have lots of dates and plenty of phone calls and varied experiences because we would say that repetition is the way that love grows. Repetition is the way you build a relationship together.

That's the way it is with prayer. Prayer is a repeat business. The more we pray, the better we pray. The greater the repetition, the greater our relationship with God. God is never turned off by our constant praying. He is never upset by our repetition. He loves to talk to us and hear us talk to him. So while prayer is a very good thing to get started, it's an even better thing to keep repeating.

So, are you religious or not? Don't spend too much time worrying about it either way. Just go ahead and pray. In the Old Testament words of King David in Psalm 17:6: "I call on you, O God, for you will answer me; give ear to me and hear my prayer."

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