

## *How to Pray Prayers that Get God's Attention • Luke 11:1-13*

When you write to a potential employer seeking a job you may be just one of a thousand applicants for the same position. It is important to know how to go about the application process. Certainly you want to send the letter to the right person, spell her name correctly, use the correct address, write the letter in the best form, present your education, skill and experience in an attractive manner and otherwise do everything possible to get the attention of your potential employer. You want to stand out in the crowd of applicants. If you were to start the letter with the words "Dear Dad", those two words would probably either get you the job (if your dad owned the company!) or your letter would be thrown in the trash.

Now move that whole process from seeking a job to praying to God. If billions of people are praying prayers every day to the God of heaven and earth, you certainly want to do yours right. You want to get God's attention.

Jesus' followers wanted to learn to pray in a way that would get God's attention. They had seen Jesus pray; they had heard Jesus pray; they recognized that he was connected to God in a way unlike anyone they had ever seen. He got the kinds of results everyone would like to have. So, we read in Luke 11:1, "*One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.'*"

Even before Jesus answered, a very important point was made: Prayer is learned! It is not intuitive or genetic. It is taught. We must learn to pray if we are going to get it right.

Of course, this means that it is possible to do it wrong. And lots of people do. Millions of people every day pray to gods that aren't gods at all. They are idols made out of wood or stone or something else. Other people pray in ways that alienate God rather than connect with God. They ask for things God would never give or do and

otherwise pray incorrectly. Not that prayer is tricky or difficult to learn, but it must be learned. Prayer is like walking, speaking, reading or writing. They all must be learned.

Jesus' followers learned to pray by listening to him and then trying it themselves. And it is the same for us. The way to learn is to learn from Jesus and then practice prayer. Listen to other people pray. Pray every day. Pray in good times and bad times. Pray in private and pray in public. Pray silently. Pray out loud. Listen and practice. Listen and practice. Listen and practice. That's the way to learn to pray.

Jesus offered a sample prayer to help his followers get started. It was just that, a sample, not a standard. We call it the Lord's Prayer, al-

though that's probably not a very good name for it because Jesus didn't actually pray this prayer himself. In fact, it was a prayer Jesus couldn't pray because Jesus was not a sinner and the prayer asks for forgiveness. It really was the Disciples' Prayer—a model to teach them how to pray. It was never intended to be memorized and prayed by rote. That's obvious because there are different versions of the prayer in Jesus' different biographies. So, think of this sample prayer as a template or form for us to fill in the blanks, an example for us to follow with our own words.

If you want to learn how to write a resume for a job application you may go to a bookstore and buy a book with sample resumes. The book will show you a layout with a name at the top, an address and sections on education, work experience, career objectives and references. The book will use sample names and addresses, schools, companies and other illustrations. But, you need to use your own name, list your own schools and put down your own work experience. It is not intended for you to simply copy the resume out of the book and mail it in. Use the basic form but

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personalize it to fit you. That's the way it is with the Lord's Prayer. Don't just copy it out of the Bible. Use the sample, but fill it in with your own information.

Jesus began his sample prayer with the words, "*Father, hallowed by your name, your kingdom come.*" Jesus was teaching his followers the first and most important lesson of effective praying: Start with God!

Some people start with themselves. I am not even sure their words qualify to be called prayers. Actually, it is more like they are talking to themselves. The prayer that gets God's attention is the prayer that begins with God.

If you want to call someone on the phone, whose number do you dial? You dial the number of the person you want to talk to. If you dial your number you are calling yourself. That is a waste of time and won't do any good. You must start with the other person. This principle is 10,000 times more important in prayers. Prayer must begin with God, not us.

Starting with God is more than a formality. It is possible to get the words right and the prayer wrong. A person could pray, "Father in heaven, it's me again and I want your help now." Technically, the prayer begins with God, but in reality it centers on self.

To start with God is to begin with his name. Jesus taught us to call him *Father*. Some people portray God as distant and difficult. Jesus is telling us to talk to God as our father, our friend, someone who wants to listen and wants to answer the requests we make to him. But the name is more than just a name. It represents who God is. Calling him *Father* acknowledges him as the source of life, God of the universe, powerful, righteous and good. God's name is hallowed (holy) because God is holy. God is one of a kind. He is special. He is perfect. He is the boss.

When we start with God, praying to him by name, we are saying up front that we are on his terms and not our terms. We agree that his kingdom in heaven is perfect and that the best thing possible is for his kingdom in heaven to come to earth. We are telling him that we want his will to

be done on earth in our lives just as his will is done in heaven.

Starting with God is an act of submission. We are agreeing in advance to submit to God's will and God's way—his terms, not our terms. We are agreeing that his is good and right even when his will is different from our will.

Jesus taught us that the way to pray prayers that get God's attention is to always start with God: "*Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.*"

Jesus' next lesson is to ask. Jesus taught them to pray like this: "*Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.*" Jesus invited Christians to ask God for everything we need—for the present, for the past and for the future.

We are to ask for whatever our daily needs may be. You may recall the Old Testament story of God feeding the people of Israel after they escaped slavery in Exodus and then wandered forty years in the Sinai wilderness. God provided manna for them to eat. It was like bread and it came every day. They got all they needed, but it was never for the next day. One day at a time. Jesus invites us to ask God to meet our present needs today. It's not that tomorrow isn't important, but God will take care of tomorrow's needs when they come. God wants us to ask him for help to meet today's needs and to trust him to give us our daily bread or whatever else we need for today.

For the past—ask for forgiveness. God wants to forgive our sins, but we need to ask. We all have sins left over from yesterday and the day before and the week before and maybe even from years before. We are all sinners. Sin is the wrong we have done and the good we have not done. Sins are the things we can't fix ourselves. We need God's forgiveness to be right with him and to clear our consciences of our guilt.

The assumption in Jesus' sample prayer is that our forgiving others and God's forgiving us go hand-in-hand. We forgive others for the ways they have wronged us and ask God to forgive us

for the ways we have wronged him. We are told in I John 1:9, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”* The word used here means to agree with or to say the same thing as. To confess sin is to agree with God about our sins.

When we pray to God it is important that we confess sin and receive forgiveness to clear the communication and relationship lines between us and God. Unconfessed sins clog the lines, distance our relationship and hinder our prayers.

For the future, ask for protection. Tomorrow is full of potential pitfalls—temptations and tests that could take us down. We can ask God for help, strength and protection to avoid sin, resist temptation and pass the tests we will face.

God wants to be there for us in every time dimension. We can and should seek his help for today, yesterday and tomorrow.

Jesus was very clear and direct. He told his followers, *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.”*

In other words, when it came to praying, Jesus said, “Go for it!” Go ahead and ask for what you need. Go ahead and seek what you are after. Go ahead and knock on the door you want opened. You will never get what you need if you don’t ask for it.

Does this mean that we are guaranteed to get whatever we want from God? Of course not! God is a parent. No decent parent would ever grant every request from a child. That would ruin the life of the one we love. God does not promise to reward our stupidity, empower our mistakes or help us do something that is not ultimately good. In some cases God will have to say “no”; other times God will have to say “wait”. In some cases God

can’t tell us his answer right away. But, God is predisposed to say “yes”. God likes us to ask. God likes to say yes.

If you want to pray prayers that get God’s attention, learn how to pray by listening and practicing. Start with God. Ask . . . because God likes to say yes. And don’t give up! In Luke 11:5-8 and 11-13 Jesus tells an interesting story to make his last point about prayer:

*Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, “Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.”*

Then the one inside answers, “Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.” I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

Jesus’ point is simple: Don’t give up!

Let’s try to understand the setting and background of the story. Hospitality was important in the Middle East. You had to feed and lodge a friend if they asked. In this case the friend probably traveled late at night because it was cooler, so he arrived around midnight after everyone had gone to bed. He was hungry and his host wanted to feed him but didn’t have any bread left. So, even though it was very late the host went to his neighbor’s house and knocked on the door in order to borrow three loaves of bread.

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When the neighbor knocked on the door, the man of the house didn’t want to get up because it would awaken the whole family as well as the animals. It would have been a big hassle. He whispered, *“Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I*

*can't get up and give you anything."*

It was bold and intrusive to knock on the door after midnight in the first place. It was persistent and even audacious to knock again but the guy with the guest wouldn't give up. He knocked and asked and knocked and asked. Finally, the man inside was awake—and probably his children, chickens and everything else were awake as well! Reluctantly he got up and gave the neighbor the three loaves of bread to shut him up and get rid of him.

Please don't misunderstand this story. This is not suggesting that God does not want to be bothered and we need to nag him into giving us what we request. Not at all! The point is that God is not like the man in the house. God loves to hear our prayers. He welcomes our requests. God desires to give us good gifts. As Jesus explained: *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."*

So don't quit praying. Don't give up. Don't become discouraged. God is on your side. God loves to hear you pray. And God wants to answer your prayers. God desires to say yes.

To further make his point, Jesus added:

*"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"*

With very few exceptions, human fathers try their best for their children. When a son or daughter asks for something Dad doesn't give something bad or hurtful. Any decent human dad always gives his very best.

If human fathers are that good, God is a million times better. God doesn't give us bad when we ask for good. God doesn't trick us. God doesn't hurt us. God gives us the best of the best. For example, God has given the best gift he has

to give in his Holy Spirit. When a person becomes a Christian, God gives the Holy Spirit to come and live inside that person. That's proof! God is really generous and really good!

Put all Jesus' words together and we have what we need to know to pray. Learn; begin with God; ask; and don't give up!

Prayer is something that is better done than just talked about. So I'm going to invite you to pray. I will lead you through the lessons that Jesus taught. First of all, ask Jesus to teach you what you need to know to pray. Tell him that you want to learn to really pray well.

Now, pray to God telling him how great he is and how much you love him. Take time to just say everything great about God that you can tell him.

Next, ask God for what you need today.

Ask God to forgive your sins. Be specific. Tell him the specific sins you are asking to have forgiven.

Ask God to protect you from future temptations, especially ones that will come this week.

And finally, tell God that you will be praying again soon and often, that you are not going to give up!

*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.*

*Amen.*

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