

it: "Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend (p.93)." He IS King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and all of that. But He's also a friend, someone we can trust and who knows our hearts better than we do. Don't worry about what you'll say, or how it'll sound; just open your heart to your God, the One who is on the Throne, your best friend, and lay it out before Him. Remind yourself that He is God, you are not, and that He's going to do things out for good according to what He knows is best.

There's a handy acronym that can help you do this when you pray: A.C.T.S.

Organize your prayers like this:

A: Adoration. Appreciate God for who He is.

C: Confession. He is God, and we are not. Admit your failings, and seek forgiveness and ask for the Holy Spirit to help you get it right next time.

T: Thanksgiving. Give thanks for what He has done.

S: Supplications. Big fancy word that essentially means prayer requests.

Structuring your prayers like this starts first and foremost right where it should: with God. And it moves from who He is and who we are into acknowledging what that means in a practical sense with what He does (and maybe what we could do to help be an answer to that prayer too).

So what DID I tell my friend who said that prayer didn't work? Because I know how awesome God is, I wanted to give Him the benefit on the doubt, and He showed me a perfect opportunity: my friend had just swept up a penny into her dustpan. I reached down into that dustpan, pulled out the penny, wiped off a bit of mashed potatoes, and put it in her hand. I said, "What if God IS trying to give you your million dollars, 1 penny at a time? Will you take the time to pick them up?" She froze, looked at that penny for a moment, and then stuck it in her pocket. A few weeks later, she and I were working to close the restaurant together again. While we're putting away condiments on the salad bar, she says, "You know what? Ever since that talk we had, I've stopped to pick up every penny I've seen. And I've started praying again."

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as _____ will, but as _____ will (Matthew 26:39)." Make your prayer time an opportunity to remind yourself that He is God, and you are not. What He does, or does not do, is a part of His perfect will for His children. Ask Him to help you understand why He says "no" or "not yet", and ask Him to give you the strength to bend over and pick up whatever He gives you, especially if He decides to do so "one penny at a time".

Prayer ("One Penny at a Time")

Your Practical Guide to a More Meaningful Prayer Life
by Pr. Michael Taylor

I used to work in a restaurant as a waiter. It was a great experience with many fun memories. The best part (besides having access to yummy food) was definitely working with my co-workers. When the rush was on, and the restaurant was packed, it was those friends who banded together to make sure that everything went well. At the end of a long shift, the few of us who were scheduled to close were working together to clean. One of my coworkers, Jackie (not their real name), asked me a question that I'll never forget. She said, "Hey Mike, I notice that you pray before meals. Why?" There are many reasons why I pray, but the answer I gave was, "Because I want to pause to acknowledge God's goodness. I want to say thanks for all that He gives me."

She paused and looked at me. "I don't know how you could think that. I used to pray when I was a little girl. I'd ask God every night for a million dollars, but here I am. I'm a single mom working for tips day-to-day to pay the bills. Prayer doesn't work."

This might be controversial, but part of me agrees. We teach our kids that there is a proper posture ("fold hands, close eyes, bow heads, etc."). We show our churches that there are proper things to say during congregational prayers & our chances to talk about "prayer requests". But what we are accidentally teaching some people is that there is a specific formula for how to pray. If you follow the formula - right posture, right words - then your prayers will be heard and answered. Instead of teaching people how to connect with God, we might be teaching them how to treat God like a vending machine. We push the button, make our request, and wait patiently for our root beer to appear. And just like with vending machines that don't give us our root beer in a timely manner or that make us do too much work get the dollar bill accepted in the first place, we're tempted to cash out and move down the line to find another source of whatever it is that we're craving.

We're not alone in treating God like a vending machine. Bible characters struggle with the prayer process throughout Scripture. Abraham wanted kids, and his story is full of his various failed attempts to make God's promises happen in his timing as opposed to waiting for God's timing. He repeatedly

cashed out on God and went somewhere else in order to get what he wanted. Several books later, Saul did too. In 1 Samuel 13, we find King Saul hoping that God would help him against the Philistines. Rather than waiting on a man of God to do the sacrifice, he took matters into his own hands. He cashed out on God and looked elsewhere for what he wanted. Not just one time either; Saul repeatedly treated God like a vending machine before cashing out and looking elsewhere. By the end of his sad story, we find him looking for help from the Witch of En Dor (1 Samuel 28) and begging her to seek advice from the deceased prophet Samuel. Saul didn't understand the same thing that countless people (including my co-worker) don't understand.

The truth is: the power isn't in prayer. The power is in God. Prayer is just a tool that God gives us to connect with Him. It's not about the process; it's about the relationship. There are plenty of pious-sounding prayers that follow "the right process" which are ignored by God (see what Jesus says in Matthew 6:5-7), and plenty of guttural cries from the deepest, darkest moments in our lives which cause all of Heaven to stop. People like Jonah (Jonah 2) and Samson (Judges 16) come immediately to mind. While the prophet Daniel had a model prayer life, we learn something interesting about the "mechanics" of prayer from him in Daniel 9. The prayer of v. 4-19 is one of the longest in the Bible, and one that gets an immediate response from Heaven. Faster than immediate, in fact; Gabriel arrives while Daniel is still praying (9:20). When he gets there, he tells Daniel that the command to go and answer Daniel's prayer went out as soon as Daniel's lips opened to pray (9:23). In other words, Gabriel was sent to answer the prayer before Daniel had even prayed it. God already knew Daniel's prayer before the words came out, because "knows the things you have need of _____ you ask Him." (Matthew 6:8).

If all of that is true, then why pray? The answer is simple: because prayer is a tool designed by God that we can use to connect with Him. If used properly, it's our chance to become more aware of who He is, what He's doing, and areas where He's going to reveal Himself. The more we pray, the more we should be able to appreciate who He is and what He does. Immediately after declaring that God knows our hearts before we pray, Jesus then explains how to pray properly in v. 9-13. "The Lord's Prayer", as it is commonly known, sounds radically different than the majority of our prayers today. While we often just pause to acknowledge what God has done for us (giving thanks), or take the time to make requests of what He could do for us, what Jesus calls "the model prayer" is much more focused on who God is apart from what He does.

The Lord's Prayer

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|---|-----------------|------------|
| Our Father in heaven, | God's character | God's acts |
| Hallowed be Your name. | God's character | God's acts |
| Your kingdom come. | God's character | God's acts |
| Your will be done | God's character | God's acts |
| On earth as it is in heaven. | God's character | God's acts |
| Give us this day our daily bread. | God's character | God's acts |
| And forgive us our debts, | God's character | God's acts |
| As we forgive our debtors. | God's character | God's acts |
| And do not lead us into temptation, | God's character | God's acts |
| But deliver us from the evil one. | God's character | God's acts |
| For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. | God's character | God's acts |

As I discussed in the guide on praise & worship, there is a danger in neglecting to appreciate the character of God for who He is apart from what He does. Satan is continually trying to attack the character of God in order to pull Him off His throne. This propaganda campaign started in Heaven itself, came to the Earth via the Garden of Eden, and now targets every person who trusts God in their lives. For more on the value of praise, check out that guide.

There is a secondary issue when we focus more on what God does rather than who He is with our prayers (or any of our "heart" habits): the missing of an opportunity to build trust. Philip Yancey, in his book Prayer, reflects on the difference between Western (American) and Eastern (Japanese) restaurants & dining experiences and what it could mean for our prayer time. Americans tend to want restaurants to all be a little like Burger King, where the motto "Have It Your Way" is king. If I don't like pickles, then no pickles. And our prayers are similarly focused: "God, here's what I want and what I don't want. No pickles and heal their cancer." In stark contrast to this direct approach, however, is the trust that Eastern chefs earn and demand from their guests. Guests look at these culinary professionals and trust them so much that they'll often just wait to see what the chef serves them. And he thinks prayers could be similarly focused. "You're the expert, and if you think it's good enough, then I trust you. Your will be done. Amen."

For the sake of balance, however, the praise vs. thanksgiving issue doesn't mean that our prayers should become mindless lists of adjectives or anything like that. We should absolutely pray for God to do things, to be involved in this world. But when we do so, we should keep in mind who we're talking to. I like how Ellen White, in her book on personal spirituality Steps to Christ, puts