

Prayer (Matthew 7:7-11)

Big Idea: Come to God because he cares for you. Remind yourself of who he is, tell him what's on your mind, and use Jesus' model prayer.

I have a problem with prayer.

Actually, I have a few of them. My main problem is that I'm not very good at prayer. But that's not even the problem I want to talk about today.

The problem I want to talk about is this: that the Bible makes some extravagant claims about prayer that seem a little over the top. For instance, Jesus said:

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:7-11)

I looked. There are no asterisks there, no fine print. Jesus simply says that when we pray, God will answer and give us good things. Jesus says we should presume that we can come to God and tell him what we want, and keep asking, knowing that our Father will give us what's best according to his gracious will.

And then there's this passage: "casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Here's the baffling thing about this verse.

One: that if we have any anxieties, we can give them to God. I know most of you, and I even like you. But if I had to listen to all of your anxieties, I think I would only make it to person number

five before needing a nap. And then I'm not sure I would come back. But this verse says that we can give our anxieties to God. If it matters to you, it matters to him. The Bible says we can cast our cares on him — a one-time committal of what worries us, given over to him. Even though he's running the entire universe, even though there are almost eight billion alive, he invites you to talk to him about whatever is on your mind — all your worries, all your cares, all your anxieties.

But that's not even the most mind-blowing part. It then gives us the reason: "because he cares for you." "God is not indifferent, nor is he cruel. He has compassion on his children and will sustain them in every distress" (Thomas Schreiner). It is impossible for him to care for you more than he already does.

So here's my problem with prayer: it seems too good to be true. God invites us to come with whatever's on our mind and give it to him. He assures that we can keep coming and asking whatever we want, and that he will give us what's best for us out of an abundance of love for us.

It seems far too good to be true!

How to Pray

We're talking about building a Liberty Grace Rule of Life. We're asking: What communal rhythms, practices, and habits would help us love God and love others?

So far we've looked at two practices:

- To slow down enough to make time for what really matters: especially to sit at Jesus' feet. We've been talking about ideas on how to do this on the Rule of Life website at <https://libertygrace.ca/ruleoflife/> and I really appreciate this.
- Second, to build a habit of meditation on God's Word so that it shapes us more than anything else. We've talked about two ideas so far: spending five minutes a day meditating on a passage from the Bible, and reading Scripture before our phones every day.

This is very much a work in progress, and I appreciate your help in shaping this so that it fits. I don't want this just to be a series. I want it to shape how we live.

But today I want to go a bit further. I want to look at how to include prayer in our Rule of Life. The idea is that we take advantage of this too-good-to-be-true resource that we somehow seem to struggle with, even though it's available to all of us.

This week I want to do something different to help us build a Rule of Life around prayer. We're going to do the same thing in a couple of weeks too when we talk about fasting. Jesus actually gave us specific instructions on how to pray. Today all I want to do is to look at his instructions, and then to talk about how to translate them into a set of practices that we can adopt in our lives together.

So here's what Jesus taught us. He gave us three tips on how to pray.

One: Remind yourself that you're praying to God.

Jesus talks about a common problem in prayer. It's easy to pray to impress other people and forget that we're talking to God. I go through this every time I pray in front of others. I want to sound impressive. I want to sound as good as the other people who pray. Sometimes prayer becomes like performance art, done for the benefit of others rather than out of connection with God.

So Jesus tells us: enter into God's presence and keep the focus on him. One way to do that is to do what Jesus says to do: to pray alone so that it's just you and God. But Jesus made it clear elsewhere that it's okay to pray in front of others. The overall principle is this: make sure that you remember that you're in God's presence, and your focus is on him, not on the people who are with you.

Dr. Reuben A. Torrey, the great Bible teacher and evangelist, used to say correctly that “we should never utter one syllable of prayer, either in public or in private, until we are definitely conscious that we have come into the presence of God and are actually praying to him.”

He says, “I can remember when that thought transformed my prayer life. I was brought up to pray. I was taught to pray so early in life that I have not the slightest recollection of who taught me to pray.... Nevertheless, prayer was largely a mere matter of form. There was little real thought of God, and no real approach to God. And even after I was converted, yes, even after I had entered the ministry, prayer was largely a matter of form.”

“But the day came,” Torrey writes, “when I realized what real prayer meant, realized that prayer was having an audience with God, actually coming into the presence of God and asking and getting things from him. And the realization of that fact transformed my prayer life. Before that prayer had been a mere duty, and sometimes a very irksome duty, but from that time on prayer has been not merely a duty but a privilege, one of the most highly esteemed privileges of life. Before that the thought that I had was, ‘How much time must I spend in prayer?’ The thought that now possesses me is, ‘How much time may I spend in prayer without neglecting the other privileges and duties of life?’”

When I went to seminary, we opened each class in prayer. One day the professor asked me to open in prayer. I didn’t even pause. I just started praying. Afterward the professor told me off. He said, “Did you take even a second and remind yourself that you were entering into the presence of the God of the universe and communicating with him?” He had a point.

So here’s my idea. What if we took a moment regularly to shift our focus in praying, to remind ourselves who it is that we’re talking to, and make sure that our focus is on him? What if we stopped before praying and reminded ourselves of what we’re actually doing? What if we reminded ourselves that this is God who not only runs everything, but has seen us at our worst and still invites us to come to him — that he sees us now, if you have turned to Jesus in repentance

and faith, as fully clean, as fully forgiven, as his beloved? What if we really believed that God loved us this much and wanted to hear from us, and that Jesus right now is praying for us?

Two: Tell him whatever is on your mind.

I think I need to get prayer right. I think there's a right way to pray: the right combination of words that will unlock God's willingness to listen.

I'm not alone. Jesus talks about people who heap up empty phrases, who think that the quantity of words is what allows them to be heard. It's like they thought that if they said enough to God, maybe they would say something right that would cause God to listen to them.

Jesus said to drop all of that and to simply presume that God cares, and that he knows what you need even before you start to pray. You don't need the right words, because God's already aware of exactly what you need. Focus on God who cares for you, who knows you better than you know yourself.

Martin Luther is a colorful character in church history. He once said, "The Gentile delusion [is] that prayer meant making both God and oneself tired with yelling and murmuring.... But the Christian's prayer is easy [!], and it does not cause hard work.... It presents its need from the heart. Faith quickly gets through telling what it wants.... God has no need of such everlasting twaddle."

Interestingly, Luther goes on to say that "the ancient fathers [i.e. the church fathers] have said correctly that many long prayers are not the way. They recommend short, fervent prayers, where one sighs toward Heaven with a word or two, as is often quite possible in the midst of reading, writing, or doing some other task."

Don't think that there's a correct way to pray. Assume that God cares, and simply come to him with whatever's on your mind.

Remind yourself that you're praying to God. Tell him whatever is on your mind. And then Jesus gives us one more guideline:

Use his model prayer.

This is actually freeing. When we don't know what to pray, Jesus tells us. This is meant to make prayer easier rather than harder.

One guy [writes](#), "Jesus gave an example of the perfect prayer (what we now call the Lord's Prayer), and it too was short (it might take twenty seconds to pray) and simple (even a two-year-old can say and memorize the words), and if prayed sincerely it is a most pleasing prayer."

The thing about this prayer is that it is simple and quick to pray, and yet you could take a lifetime exploring it. My uncle — a man I really respect — has written [an excellent book](#) on this prayer, and every page feels like a feast. It's a reminder to me of how rich a prayer this is.

So this sermon seems like a small introduction to a huge topic. We could say a lot more. But this is a start. You can help shape this by visiting <https://libertygrace.ca/ruleoflife/> and adding your thoughts.

God invites us to come to him because he cares for us. And Jesus teaches us to remember we're praying to God, to tell him whatever's on our minds, and to use his model prayer.

Come to God because he cares for you. Remind yourself of who he is, tell him what's on your mind, and use Jesus' model prayer.

That's how you pray. That's simple, and yet there's enough there to keep us occupied for the rest of our lives. Let's struggle to apply this in our lives together. Are you in?

Lord, teach us to pray. Thank you that you care for us. Thank you that Jesus died for us. Help us to remember who you are. And then teach us to tell you what's on our minds, and to use the simple but profound prayer Jesus gave us.

We all struggle with prayer, but help us to get better. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.