

Prayer Proverbs from Jesus

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One of the things that we often don't appreciate about the teaching of Jesus is just how orally oriented it was. After all, everything we know about the ministry of our Lord comes from the word. If we want to know what He said on a particular occasion, the only way for us to do that is to open the book and read what the Holy Spirit has recorded.

However, that is certainly not the way that Jesus' original audience received His message. The written gospels didn't make their appearance for about 30 years after His death and resurrection. In that 30-year time span, the only way that His disciples had access to His teaching was through their own memories. The apostles, of course, had divine help that brought to their remembrance all that He had said. Other early Christians had the spiritual gift of knowledge, and as best as I can figure out, that spiritual gift gave them the ability to remember perfectly what they had heard. However, most Christians didn't fall into either one of those categories. Christ was only preserved in their own human memories.

Jesus, of course, was no fool. He knew that His disciples would be in that situation after His departure, and He planned for it. That's why when we look at the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we see that Jesus taught in ways that were memorable. For example, His parables were intended as a memory device. Human beings are naturally good at remembering stories, and just about all of us could do a pretty good job of repeating the parable of the soils or the parable of the prodigal son, even if we normally struggle with memorizing Scripture.

Likewise, Jesus also taught a lot in proverbs, short, punchy sound bites that His audience could easily remember, in topics ranging from personal righteousness to our particular focus, prayer. Even today, these proverbs stick in our minds, so we can easily incorporate them into the way we pray. Let's look, then, at some prayer proverbs from Jesus.

Structural Proverbs.

If we take all of these proverbs and list them out, we see that about half of them are structural proverbs. They have to do with the way we should pray, no matter what the content of our prayers is. For example, Jesus tells us that before we even start to address the Father, we should **FORGIVE FIRST**. He makes this point in Mark 11:25. Here, Jesus highlights one of the weird disconnects that often appear in our spiritual lives. We're Christians in the first place because we knew we needed God to forgive us. Most of us probably ask His forgiveness every time we pray. And yet, we think nothing of approaching the Father in this way when we're still nurturing anger in our hearts toward someone else.

This tells us, then, that it's good spiritual hygiene to spend a few moments examining ourselves before we begin to pray. We need to reflect back on what's happened in our lives recently and how we feel about it. Are we mad because our spouse didn't wash dishes after dinner like he was supposed to? Are we still steaming about the way that our boss treated us at work? Did our friend hurt our feelings with an unkind e-mail? If we want our prayers to be effective, we have to learn to forgive and let those feelings go before we begin to pray. That's the only way that God will hear us.

Second, we must **PRAY IN FAITH**. Jesus highlights this issue in Mark 11:23-24. As many of us have discovered earlier, this can be a challenging passage to wrestle with. We know from experience that sometimes we pray for things and don't get them. For that matter, we know that Paul and even Jesus Himself prayed for things that they did not receive. What's going on here? Did Paul lack faith when He prayed? Did Jesus?

In reality, the point here isn't about us getting whatever we want, which is actually a good thing. I would be afraid to pray if I automatically got whatever I asked for. In the past, I've asked for some extremely foolish things, and God was most gracious when He didn't give them to me. Instead, the point here is about having faith in the power of God. That's why it's important to read v. 24 here in conjunction with v. 23. Jesus isn't saying that we should go around randomly uprooting mountains simply to prove that we can. Instead, He's telling us that when our faith is aligned with God's will, there is nothing that our prayers cannot accomplish. Let's remember that no prayer is too big for God.

Third, Jesus counsels us to **AVOID VAIN REPETITION**. This appears in Matthew 6:7-8. Amazingly enough, despite this clear statement, there are supposedly Christian denominations whose whole conception of prayer is based on vain repetition. These churches teach their members to pray the same prayer over and over again, dozens and dozens of times, even if that prayer doesn't have the slightest connection to where they are spiritually or what they want. It's as though they believe that there's some kind of merit in the brute act of prayer itself, without thought for its content.

Of course, even as we recognize the problem with that prayer practice, we must take care to make sure that vain repetition doesn't creep into our prayer lives. Notice first of all that there's a difference between repetition and vain repetition. Just because I constantly pray for the same thing doesn't mean that my prayer is vain. That repetition becomes vain when we stop thinking about what we're praying for, when we're just going through the motions of prayer instead of trying to make a genuine connection with God. We prevent this by focusing on our prayers, by talking to God about the things that are really on our hearts instead of just going through an old familiar pattern.

Likewise, we must take care to **PRAY FOR GOD, NOT MEN**. Our Lord makes this point in Matthew 6:5-6. Although it's hard for us to imagine today, in the Jewish world of 2000 years ago, you could actually gain worldly popularity and prestige by appearing religious. Some of the Pharisees hoped to impress their fellow Jews with their piety by praying these long, pretentious prayers in some public, conspicuous location. Of course, they didn't really mean a word of what they said, so while their countrymen came away impressed, God came away angry.

In response, Jesus teaches us that it's better to pray in secret, where no one but God can hear. Of course, this doesn't mean that it's wrong for us to lead a prayer in the assembly, or to bless our food with our families before we eat. The problem with the hypocrites wasn't that they were praying on the street corner. Their problem was WHY they were praying on the street corner. If we're praying before a thousand other Christians, but our minds are focused totally on God, giving Him the glory and seeking His help, then we are every bit as righteous as if we were uttering the same prayer where no one else could hear. Let's remember that our prayers are about God and not others, regardless of circumstance.

Content Proverbs.

Jesus also spent a great deal of time teaching us not just how we should be praying, but what we should be praying for. First, He teaches us that we should **PRAY FOR WHAT GOD WANTS**. This is obvious from the model prayer presented in Luke 11:2-4. The real emphasis of the prayer here is not on our desires, but on God's promises and God's glory. It begins with a request that His will be done and His dominion be advanced. That's God-focused, not us-focused. Even the things that are us-focused follow the pattern of God's promises. Matthew 6 tells us that God will provide for us if we seek His kingdom first. Luke 6 promises that if we forgive, we will be forgiven. 1 Corinthians 10 guarantees us a way of escape in temptation. When we seek those things, we know that they are in accordance with God's will. We can be certain that we will receive them because God has already promised them.

Once we understand this about the nature of prayer, it presents us with a two-part challenge. If we want to pray for what God wants, first, we have to know what God wants. We have to determine what His plan for mankind is, and we have to know what His promises are to us. Obviously, we can only gain that kind of knowledge through study of the word. Second, we have to put that knowledge into practice by wanting those things and praying for them. God didn't give us prayer as a way for us to go on a spiritual shopping spree. Instead, He intends prayer as a way for us to grow closer to Him. When we learn to desire His will and trust in His promises, that's when His goal is best accomplished.

Second, we should learn to **PRAY IN TEMPTATION**. We see this in the request that Jesus makes of His disciples in Luke 22:39-40. It's worth noting here what this says about Jesus' concerns in the garden. Although He wasn't thrilled about His impending death, to say the least, He was also concerned about what would happen to His disciples. He knew that in the next few hours, all of them would be tempted to forsake Him, and Peter would be tempted to deny Him. Those things were going to be a stern test for their faith, and He wanted them to pray to prepare themselves.

Today, prayer is just as important for us when we are facing temptation. This kind of prayer is important on several different levels. First, when we are tempted, Satan tries to give us spiritual tunnel vision. He wants us to focus on the sin that he's dangling in front of us and how badly we want it. However, when we pray instead, that reminds us of our duty to God and our love for Him. It snaps us out of that deadly tunnel vision. Second, and even more importantly, God promises us that when we pray for His help in such a situation, He will surely grant it. No matter where we are spiritually, it is certain that if we pray more when we encounter temptation, we will end up sinning less.

Third, in the face of a certain kind of temptation, we must remember to **PRAY FOR PERSECUTORS**. Jesus enjoins us to do this in Matthew 5:43-44. This challenges us on several different levels. First, even though God promises in 2 Timothy 3 that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, many Christians have never actually faced persecution. Even though that sounds desirable, it's actually a problem, because the only way for us to avoid persecution is for us to blend in so well with the world that it loves us instead of hating us.

Second, when we do reach the point of persecution, when others do treat us badly because of the way we express our faith, those people don't normally rise to the top of our happy list. If anything, we're naturally inclined to pray that God will blast them so they'll leave us alone. Of course, that's not what Jesus is talking about here. He wants us to love them and to pray for them, to ask that God will forgive them instead of blasting them, to ask that they might find Him.

In fact, this should be our desire for everyone, so that we **PRAY FOR EVANGELISM**. This too is commanded by Jesus in Luke 10:1-2. One of the saddest things I hear from Christians today is when they say or imply that the world today has passed the gospel by, that our efforts to reach the lost are doomed to fail because the people around us are just too evil. Nothing could be further from the truth. Today as always, the fields are white for harvest.

We must recognize, though, that just as was true for the 72 here, when we pray for evangelism, we are calling our own number. We can't lead a prayer in the assembly about the lost and dying world and then go home and sit in our recliner all week and do nothing about it. If we pray like this, what we're actually saying is, "Father, give me someone to teach," and if we ask Him for that, we'd better be prepared for the answer. Let's pray and work to save the lost.