

# prayer: the privilege of approaching God

**Matt Lillicrap** asks 'Why don't we pray?'





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**W**hen you pick up an article or book, or hear a talk addressing prayer, what's your usual reaction? Many of us soon feel guilty. Guilty that we don't pray as much as we should or as widely as we should. Guilty that we simply don't pray.

As we speak to ourselves, our immediate reaction may sound like good resolve. Repeat after me: *'You've got to pray more.'* Then, as the book or sermon progresses, the cry gets louder and louder, until it's all we're hearing: *'You've got to pray more. You've got to pray more. You've got to pray more.'*

This is certainly my experience. But as I look back over my prayer life I recognise an uncomfortable pattern. My prayerlessness is punctuated by short episodes of increased activity before the inexorable slide back into old habits which seemed so dissatisfying a few days earlier.

Why does this happen? It isn't that my guilt lacks foundation. I feel rightly dissatisfied about my prayer life, rightly guilty before the God who commands prayer. But guilt alone is ineffective. When we feel guilty we don't often want to get to the heart of the matter. Instead, we search for some new technique until that guilty feeling goes away, a journal or a new form of prayer diary for example. We want a quick fix instead of looking at ourselves and asking the next question: *'Why don't I pray?'*

But that is precisely the question we must ask. What's the problem here? Where is my view of prayer going wrong? What is it about my view of God, or of myself as I pray that needs adjusting?

It is even evident in the way we view that supreme lesson in prayer, the Lord's Prayer.

Jesus teaches us how to pray, and what do we do with it? We turn it into an incantation, words to be uttered thoughtlessly, as if they were a magic spell. But that is not Jesus' intention at all. The precise words are not the issue. Jesus introduces this very prayer model by decrying the 'babbling' of pagans who 'think they will be heard because of their many words' (Matthew 6:7). Instead, what Jesus gives us here is exactly what we need. This is not a quick fix to help us suppress guilt, but a pattern of prayer that gives us such wide scope it recalibrates our entire vision of who God is and who we are.

The aim of this reflection is to get us asking ourselves 'why don't I pray?' Which means the old application 'you've got to pray more' is barred! If you're hearing that at this point, stop reading – it will do you little good. But if you want to ask the next question, to contemplate who the God you pray to is, and who you are as you kneel before him, then read on!

## 1. the Lord's Prayer: resetting our vision of God

Read Matthew 6:9–13 slowly. As you do, notice the structure of this prayer. There are two quite distinct parts. First the focus is entirely on God: 'Hallowed be *your* name...*your* kingdom come... *your* will be done' (Matthew 6:9–10, emphasis added). Then we are taught to pray for ourselves in light of who God is: 'Give us today *our* daily bread, and forgive us *our* debts...lead us not into temptation but deliver *us* from the evil one' (Matthew 6:11–13, emphasis added). These two parts give us a vision of who we pray to, and who we are before him. Wonderfully, these visions run far deeper than any guilt-derived motivation to drive us to our knees in prayer.



## the king whose name is to be hallowed

*This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Matthew 6:9-10)*

Instinctively we want to start with the title 'Father'. We need to hear this, but we can miss the overwhelming thrust of these opening lines if we do. This God, to whom we pray is the one whose name is to be *hallowed*, whose kingdom is to come, whose *will* is to be done. There is no getting away from it; he is the God who is king, the God who is firmly in charge.

'Hallowed' is an unfamiliar word. What does it mean? Imagine yourself on an access all areas tour of Lord's cricket ground. You see the changing rooms, the showers, the umpires' offices. You wander into the players' dining room. Then, you walk through the famous 'long room', following the footsteps of countless great cricketers down the pavilion steps and out onto the field. Imagining thousands of spectators clapping you to the middle you approach the 22 yards of grass that make up the centre of the pitch, when your daydream is interrupted by the tour guide: 'I'm sorry, I can't allow you to step on there, that's *hallowed* turf.'

Which is to say, it's special. It's set apart. It isn't accessible in the same way as the rest of the tour has been. You can't let just anyone wonder onto the pitch at Lord's. It must be treated with special respect.

And when we pray 'hallowed be your name', we mean God is set apart, to be treated with special respect. He is 'other', he is *holy*. This is firmly emphasised throughout the Bible. Whether we're reading of the Israelites being burned up by 'the consuming fire' (Deuteronomy 4:24),

Ezekiel's vision of 'the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God' (Ezekiel 1:28), or John's vision of God's throne surrounded by terrifying thunder and lightning, celestial beings, and a great unbridgeable sea (Revelation 4). The message is clear: our God is holy. He is to be feared. And for us in our sin, he is inaccessible. His throne room is *hallowed turf*. Which is why we are taught to pray that his name be hallowed – that he be treated with the respect and fear he deserves.

Added to this, he is the *king*, whose will is to be done. In our culture we have long forgotten what it is to live in fear of an absolute ruler. Given human sinfulness, it is a great blessing that we no longer suffer such rulers, although many in the world still do. But has this affected our vision of God's rule? Do we see him more like our current monarch – a figurehead for us to rally around when we want to do pomp and circumstance, but lacking absolute authority? Why *would* we pray to a god like that, who has little real authority and power?

If this is our view of God we need to think again, because Jesus is giving us a different vision entirely. As we approach God in prayer, we are coming before the holy, unapproachable, sovereign king who is all powerful and rules absolutely.<sup>1</sup>

We mustn't miss what a privilege this is! The God we pray to is *the* king. He has absolute power and authority and his will is perfect. In short, he is a God worth praying to!

So why *don't* you pray? Have you made God too small? Have you made him a figurehead ruler? Worse, has he become a cosmic vending machine existing to give you what you want? Jesus wants us to see the unapproachable, holy God, that we would approach him on our knees with reverence and humility. We do not merely 'wander' into his presence.

## the God we call Father

*This, then, is how you should pray:*

*'Our Father in heaven...' (Matthew 6:9)*

And yet... It is in this context that the opening words of this prayer become simply astounding. There is a wonderful story about Abraham Lincoln during the American Civil War. For his son's birthday he had given him a goat, which he subsequently harnessed to a kitchen chair as a makeshift chariot and rode through the White House. On the day of a war cabinet meeting the president had been delayed over an hour, leaving his generals waiting. At last he was available and the meeting began. To the generals' dismay, within a few minutes the door burst open and in rode Lincoln Junior, on his goat. What was his father's reaction? Chide his son and dismiss him? Not at all. Rather, the president jumped to his feet, whooping with delight and chased his son out of the room. He wasn't seen again for a further hour.

*That is the access of a son to his father. No waiting around until he might just be free to see you. Just ride on in there with your goat!*

And Jesus wants us to see that this is the access we have to God. Even the unapproachable, holy God. What was it that drove Lincoln to welcome his son's interruption? He *loved* him. He *delighted* in him. Which is where this understanding of God really makes a difference. Yes, we are sinful, yes, we deserve separation and judgment at the hands of the sovereign king, but because of all that Jesus accomplished on the cross, dying in our place so that we could take his, we can enter the throne room with confidence (Hebrews 10:19). The rights Jesus has as *the* Son are ours as we trust in him. We are adopted as God's children (Galatians 4:1-7). We are to call him 'Father' because we truly are his children.

Can there be a greater motivation to prayer than this? We will never come to God and find him too busy or too preoccupied. He never thinks our concerns are insignificant. Yet we readily think our anxieties, about work or finances or families or whatever, are too trivial compared to running a universe. Why would he care about me? The answer is because, trusting in Jesus, you are God's *child*. He *delights* in you.

So, why *don't* you pray? Is your view of God too distant? Has he become a far-off deity dealing with the important matters of running the universe? You might even be happy with the arms-length, distant God. But the God who comes alongside, who welcomes you as child? That can get uncomfortable because it's then that you might have to start involving your emotions in prayer.

In the first half of this prayer, then, Jesus is 'resetting' our vision of God. What a privilege prayer is! The character of our God surely has to be a key motivation for prayer. *Why do we pray? Because God, the king whose name is to be hallowed, is the God we call Father!*

## 2. the Lord's Prayer: resetting our vision of ourselves

The second half of this prayer causes us to drop our eyes from the majesty of God to ourselves in his light. Who are we to approach this God?

## dependent creatures before our creator

*Give us today our daily bread (Matthew 6:11)*

In other words, 'give us what we need for today'. Immediately there are two barriers to us hearing these words properly.

First, do we really understand what they mean? When did you last think about what you

*need* each day? Not what you *have*. Not what you bought last week and might cook tomorrow. Genuinely what you need for just one day. The problem is that we are pretty well stocked most of the time. Even in post-financial crisis 2014, compared to the vast majority of the world we are very rich. Which means we quickly forget just how dependent on God's provision each day.

And, secondly, that extends into the future. Where are you in life right now? How did you get there? You worked hard. You did well at school, passed the exams, worked hard out of school – all those extracurricular activities that made your UCAS form practically sing to the admissions office. Right now you have a house to live in and food to eat – maybe even a menu planned for the next week. This means that after forgetting how dependent we are now, we fool ourselves into thinking we're *independent* for the future as well. But all of it is from God.

You may work hard. Who gives you the discipline? Who gives you the intellect? Who gives you the time you spend working? Who keeps the world turning and your heart pumping, who holds it all in his hands so completely that one word from him and the whole thing would end?

All of it is from God. We are utterly dependent on him. Yet how often do we forget or ignore that? How often do we act as if we don't need him? How often do we struggle with prayer because we are far too self-reliant? Look at someone struggling with prayerlessness and you'll see someone struggling to understand how much they need God, thinking they're doing fine by themselves.

And yet we must look out for a more subtle symptom evident even when we do pray. We rightly claim that we should pray because when we do, God acts. But how quickly can that





become 'God won't act *unless* I pray' or even 'God *can't* act *until* I pray.' All of a sudden we're left with a God who's more like a frustrated genie – locked up in a lamp until we rub it the right way. All of a sudden we're left with a God who is dependent on us.

So why don't you pray? Is your view of yourself too big? Have you forgotten how dependent on God you really are? Instead, Jesus wants us to see ourselves as dependent creatures on our knees before our almighty, independent, creator. We need him, and the gift of prayer, allows us access to the one who meets our needs.

### sinner before the throne of grace

*And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one (Matthew 6:12-13)*

This final petition is one we're perhaps more familiar with. We don't have to look far to find something reminding us of debt. Whether it's the country's debt, or individual debt being higher than ever before, student debt rising all the time or house prices climbing, taking mortgages with them. Every so often a letter from the bank or the student loan company lands on the doormat as if to say, 'just to let you know, this isn't getting any better.'

But what about spiritual debt? How aware are we of our debt to God? God is the sovereign king; this means we owe him total, unflinching loyalty and service. So every sinful thought and act is essentially a failure to pay, so a catastrophic debt piles up. The Bible speaks about sin in many different ways: law-breaking, missing the mark, rebellion, pollution, idolatry – but here Jesus forces us to see our sins as unpaid debts. Jesus wants us to see ourselves



as debtors to God as we pray. The question is, just how much do we owe? Are we nearly-acceptable creatures with little blemishes we could consolidate and pay off in one easy monthly repayment? No. We are sinful to the core. The debt we owe God is one we can never pay off.

Imagine you received a monthly statement on your spiritual debt. Every month it hits your doormat. 'This really isn't getting any better.' Yet Jesus *commands* us to pray 'forgive us our debts'.

Imagine you called the Student Loans Company saying, 'I was reading this book the other day and it told me I should ask forgiveness for my debts. So how about I say sorry and we call it quits.' How would that go? They would laugh at you! Forgiving debt just isn't what they do.

But Jesus tells us to pray 'forgive us our debts'. Surely if we understood this, we would find ourselves inextricably drawn to prayer. But here we often get our view of ourselves wrong in two different ways. First we make our sin too small. If this is you, then you don't realise how much debt you're in. You take God for granted, waltzing in and out of his presence as if he was just a housemate, not recognising the enormous slight on his character, his holiness that you make by even presuming to approach him as a sinner. You are not a pretty good person with a few blemishes. You are utterly sinful and your debt is one you could never pay. You need to understand you *must* pray 'forgive us our debts' because you desperately need forgiving.

Secondly, though, we can make sin too big. If this is you, then you already know you *need* to pray this. You need to hear that you *can*. If this is you, then you'll have had those moments when you tell yourself you can't pray.

Maybe you've committed that same old sin *again*. Don't listen! Wasn't Jesus' death enough? Didn't he pay off that part of the debt too?

So why don't you pray? Have you made your sin too small, as if it matters little, or too big, as if it's unforgivable? Jesus tells us to pray 'forgive us our sins' because we *must* and we *can*. The price really has been paid, you really are forgiven and you really are a child of the Father who is the king of the universe!

## the privilege of approaching God

So, how is your vision? As you reflect on this incredible prayer, do you have eyes to see the holy unapproachable God whose name is to be hallowed, to whom you pray? Do you have confidence in his promise of adoption by the death of his Son, such that you approach him as Father? And what of yourself as you pray? Do you recognise your complete dependence on him for everything you have and are? Do you understand the immense weight of your sin, and trust the fully paid price of the cross?

I pray that as you reflect on the Lord's Prayer, your heart will be drawn to exercise the wonderful gift of approaching this wonderful God. ■

### REFERENCES

1. This raises one of the mysteries of prayer. If this is true, then surely God's sovereign rule means his will will be done? So why pray at all? There are a number of articles in that question (eg see [bit.ly/1wb2WcM](http://bit.ly/1wb2WcM)), but one answer is that when we pray 'your will be done', we are saying 'teach me to accept your will over mine.' Jesus prayed this before his death: 'Not as I will, but as you will.' As we kneel before the holy, unapproachable, sovereign king, we are laying down that little crown we so want to keep hold of.