

FROM THE MINISTRY OF



THRU^{the}BIBLE

**LESSONS ON
HOW TO PRAY**

DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

LESSONS ON HOW TO PRAY

One of the primary ways we connect with God is through prayer. We see many examples in the Bible of great men and women praying.

Moses interceded for the children of Israel on Mount Sinai.

David recorded his prayers in the Psalms.

Elijah stood alone before an altar drenched with water at Mount Carmel and called on God.

Daniel opened his window toward Jerusalem and prayed every day even though he lived in a hostile land under a hostile power.

Mary, Jesus' mother, perhaps even sang a prayer after Gabriel told her the news of God's favor on her and that she was to be the mother of the Messiah.

The Lord Jesus Himself was the Man of prayer, so much so that one of His disciples asked Him, "Lord, teach us to pray..." (Luke 11:1).

The apostle Paul was also a great man of prayer, though in light of his other gifts we seldom think of him as such. Yet I believe he excelled in prayer even above all other things.

God invites us to be men and women of prayer, too. He welcomes us to come before Him boldly and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Years ago, I knew a preacher in Dallas who had a thriving church—largely because of his ministry of prayer. He wrote his prayer list on a roll of paper from an adding machine. When he unrolled it, it went through the living room, into the dining room, and on into the kitchen. When he prayed down that list, he knew how to lead his church. He'd call his officers of the church and direct them where to serve. The officers of the church would always say, "We know he's praying because he has us all working." The pastor had a great ministry because he had a great prayer life.

Hudson Taylor, missionary to China, was known as a man of prayer. He was a busy man, but always considered prayer itself as the most necessary and important part of his work.

Most of us would consider ourselves busy, perhaps too busy to pray. What does your prayer list look like? How effective are your prayers?

Paul the apostle is, in my opinion, the man God has given to the believer as the great example of prayer to follow. Ephesians records two of his prayers that help us understand the effective prayer's characteristics and content. Characteristics are outward and content is inward, and they will both help us become better at praying.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PRAYER

EFFECTIVE PRAYERS ARE MOTIVATED BY GOOD NEWS

What caused Paul to go to prayer? What's his motive? He tells us:

Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. –Ephesians 1:15

What sent Paul to prayer? Not bad news, but *good* news. Usually bad news—trouble, sickness, distress, or crisis—sends us to our knees.

Years ago, a ship at sea was going down in a storm, and the captain announced over the loudspeaker, “To prayers! To prayers! To prayers!” An elegant, refined woman asked him, “Captain, has it come to this?” In other words, “Is it so desperate now that we are going to have to use prayer as a life preserver?” They hadn't been praying on the days when there was no storm, but when the storm struck and the ship was going down it was time to start praying. Isn't that the sort of thing that causes many of us to pray today? It's the crisis rather than the time of rejoicing. It's bad news rather than good news that prompts us to prayer.

Shouldn't we pray at those times? By all means! But that's not the only time we should pray. Good news should also move us to pray. Paul is saying, in essence, "*When I heard about your faith—faith in God, faith in Christ—and then I heard of your love to the brethren, it moved me to prayer.*" Good news prompted him to pray.

EFFECTIVE PRAYERS ARE FOR OTHERS

Paul's prayers were also *intercessory*. When I was teaching in the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (now Biola University), I would ask the students during their studies of Paul's epistles to make a list of all his prayers. They were to put down every time Paul said he was praying for someone. Lo and behold, student after student would come to me and say, "I had no idea Paul had such a prayer list. I didn't know he prayed for so many people!" Paul was a great man of prayer.

[!] *do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers.* –Ephesians 1:16

That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory....
–Ephesians 3:16

Paul wasn't praying for himself here. He prayed for himself other times, like in 2 Corinthians 12 when he asked the Lord to remove the "thorn in the flesh." We know he prayed for this personal matter multiple times. But the recorded prayers of the apostle Paul are all intercessory; he was praying for others.

You can do this, too. Many say, "I'm not able to teach, I'm not able to preach, I'm not called as a missionary, I can't sing in the choir, and I can't do even personal work." But my friend, you can pray. Actually, prayer is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. One of the greatest ministries you can have today is to follow Paul's example and engage in a ministry of praying for others.

EFFECTIVE PRAYERS ARE BRIEF


Did you notice that both of Paul's prayers in Ephesians are brief? In fact, all the prayers of Scripture are quite brief.

- The Lord Jesus said in Matthew 6:7, "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words."
- One of Moses' greatest prayers for Israel is recorded in only four verses (Deuteronomy 9:26-29).
- Elijah, on top of Mount Carmel as he stood alone for God against the prophets of Baal, prayed a great prayer that is only two verses long (1 Kings 18:36, 37).
- Nehemiah's great prayer is recorded in only seven verses (Nehemiah 1:5-11).
- The prayer of our Lord in John 17 takes only three minutes to read in the Greek.

Martin Luther argued that the fewer the words, the better the prayer. Some people seem to think a long prayer means we're better heard or extra pious or super religious, but a long prayer doesn't mean we're being heard. We may be just repeating ourselves.

We need to recognize that we're taking God's time when we pray. He's willing to listen, but let's use it wisely. We're careful about composing a letter we send to some important person. And if we have an interview with someone important, we turn over in our minds what we're going to say so we can get right to the point. Why don't we do that in our prayer life? We can study our own prayers. We can make our prayers more effective by getting right to the point.

Once a lady gave good advice to a visiting preacher who prayed long at their prayer meeting. Everyone knelt as he stood up to pray. He wandered, as sometimes preachers do, until finally this lady pulled his coattail, and said, "Call Him Father, and ask Him for something!" My friend, we need to call Him Father and ask Him for something. Our prayers should be right to the point.



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EFFECTIVE PRAYERS ARE SUBMISSIVE

How do you pray? On your feet? On your knees? Paul says,

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. –Ephesians 3:14

“I bow my knees.” We need this humility today. I wish we could return to the old-fashioned way of kneeling during prayer.

During my first year as a pastor, I held a meeting in Tennessee. The little country church was packed out. I said, “Let’s pray,” and shut my eyes. Then I heard a tremendous shuffling, but I didn’t dare open my eyes and appear irreverent. When I said, “amen,” I opened them, but didn’t see a soul! I thought, *What happened? Had they all left while I prayed?* But then they began to come up between the pews just like the corn comes up—a few here, a few there—and in a minute they were all back in their pews again. They had been kneeling on the hard wooden floor.

Kneeling is a good position, especially when you pray privately. Get down on your knees—in fact, get down on your face before God. You see, we are in rebellion against God. We’re “stiff-necked ...” (Acts 7:51). All too often the same term could be used for us.

Two words are used for “worship” in the New Testament. One means to bow the head, the other is to bend the knee. You can either bow the knee or you can bend the head. But too often we are stiff-necked; we want to look up in God’s face. But God says, “*Get down before Me.*” We go down on our faces and get our bodies into a lesser position before Him to recognize that He is sovereign and that we need to obey Him. We need to learn that we don’t treat God as an equal but as the Lord of heaven.

THE CONTENT OF PRAYERS

What did Paul pray about? His subjects were always about what's going on inwardly.

PRAY WITH THANKSGIVING

A note of *thanksgiving* runs through all of Paul's prayers. Thanksgiving should characterize all our prayers. Notice again how Paul wrote to the Ephesian believers:

[I] do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers. –Ephesians 1:16

You will find thanksgiving in his instructions to the Philippian believers, also:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. –Philippians 4:6

“With thanksgiving” is a very strange expression in this context. Paul says that when you bring your requests to God you also are to come with thanksgiving.

What does that mean and how can I do it? Some suggest that means you thank God *after* you get your answer. Others have said you should thank Him for past favors when you make requests for future favors. But Paul didn't say that. Paul says you are to thank Him for the very request you have just made. At the very moment you make your request, you are to thank Him—right then and there—for the answer.

But what if He doesn't answer? Paul says He always *will* answer. There's no such thing as "unanswered prayer." What an insult that is to God. It's as if you're saying: "I took a request to God, and He didn't hear me," "He wouldn't listen to me," or "He refused to answer it."

May I say to you, if you are a child of God and you brought a request to Him, He has heard and answered your prayer. You do *not* have unanswered prayers. You did get the answer, but maybe you didn't like it, so you call it an unanswered prayer. Would you accept *no* as an answer from God? Sometimes *no* is His best answer.

When I was growing up, I never took a request to my dad that he didn't answer. He *always* answered. I remember one time I asked him for a bicycle, and he said *yes*. But when I asked for a shotgun, he said *no*. That was the best answer. Likewise, God always answers with the best possible answer, and we are to make our requests with thanksgiving.

Oh, my friend, Paul always had a note of thanksgiving in his prayers. Part of that thanksgiving came out of his knowledge that God would always hear and answer. When he came to God he would say, "*Here is the request,*" and he would lay it out before Him. Then he'd say, "*Lord, thank You for hearing and answering my prayer.*" He always got an answer. If you are God's child, then you will always get an answer, too.

PRAY TO THE FATHER

Paul always prayed *to God the Father*. It is very important to pray correctly. Let me illustrate: I once went to a bank to ask about an important matter. I got a serious runaround. They passed me from one office to another. Finally I said, "I want to talk to the person who *knows*. Don't send me to somebody else. Send me to the one who can make the decision." Then I called for a friend of mine who worked there. He came down from his office and settled the whole matter in about three seconds. It is good to go to the right person. So, what about our prayer life?

Paul prays directly to God the Father. Listen to him:

That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you.... –Ephesians 1:17

Then over in Ephesians 3:14 he says:

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul is being very scriptural, because the Lord Jesus said to His apostles:

And in that day you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full. –John 16:23, 24

To paraphrase what the Lord Jesus Christ said, "*Here is a new way of praying. You have never prayed this way before. Don't pray to Me directly. Pray to God the Father in My name.*"

When we pray to the Son, we lose the benefit of His intercession. He is our great Intercessor. When we pray to God the Father, the Lord Jesus is at God's right hand, and He "lives to make intercession" for us (Hebrews 7:25). He says, "*That is one of mine down there who is praying. I laid down My life for that one. Father, I want You to hear and answer this prayer.*" We lose the benefit of our Intercessor when we attempt to go directly to the Lord Jesus with our requests.

Now that is quite a technicality. Will Jesus hear if we prayed to Him? Of course He would hear. But when I pray, I want the benefit of everything God has to offer. And, my friend, don't we want to be scriptural? He said, "Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full." Jesus emphasizes that we should "Ask the Father in My name."

PRAY FOR SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING

In his prayers, Paul asks for *spiritual understanding*. He prayed for material things and he prayed for the sick. He also prayed that friends might have a good journey. But Paul doesn't pray for physical advantages or material possessions.


We are often overfilled with secularism today. We even sadly measure spiritual enterprises by the standards of material success. Right now, some of the finest ministries are suffering financially. Yet too often we equate God's blessing of a ministry or a church by how much money is pouring in. I can name a whole lot of religious rackets that are bringing in the money, my friend. Prosperity is not the measure of success, not before God.

Spiritual understanding is what Paul prays for, and certainly this is what we need.

That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. —Ephesians 3:17-19

You will find the same thought back in chapter 1:

That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints. —Ephesians 1:17, 18

A person wearing a dark hat and a dark t-shirt is sitting on a large, light-colored rock, looking out over a vast, dense forest. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow over the scene. The sky is filled with soft, wispy clouds. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

*God always
answers with the
best possible
answer.*

- DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

Paul is praying here for that which is spiritual, that they might have illumination and understanding and to know the love of Christ. How many times do we pray for that? Frankly, that is what I'd like to have. "Don't you want to pray for health?" Yes. "Don't you want to pray that all obligations be met?" Yes. But after we've done that, what about spiritual understanding? Paul says it passes knowledge. This means your IQ won't help you here. It is something that only the Spirit of God can give you. For—

“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.

–1 Corinthians 2:9, 10

The Spirit is the One who leads us and guides us into all truth. We need to have a fresh anointing of the Spirit of God to understand divine truth.

We do so little pray for spiritual understanding. I'm amazed at the heresy that is creeping into the church today. It's because we haven't been praying for that which passes knowledge. We need to be praying for a spiritual understanding of the Word of God, my friend. Never have we needed that as we need it in this hour. I see so many going off on a tangent, veering from the truth. We need to pray for each other that the “eyes of our understanding” be opened and that we may understand divine truth.

Now it may seem to you that I'm way out in left field when I say that. Perhaps you are saying, “I've been praying for a new car—is that all right to pray about?” Sure. But when you pray for that, also ask for a little understanding about how to drive it, as well as a little spiritual knowledge to understand divine truths.

PRAY FOR SPIRITUAL POWER

That's not all. Paul requests *spiritual power* that's not measured by horses or kilowatts or what's under the hood of a car. Will you listen to him:

And what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power.

–Ephesians 1:19

He says in essence, “*I’m praying that you not only have an understanding but that you have a power, a dynamic, in your life.*” What is that power? Well, the norm back in the Old Testament was the power of Jehovah “which brought you out of Egypt”; that was always the measuring rod of power. God would say to Israel, “*I will do this for you, and I am Jehovah who brought you out of the land of Egypt.*” That was power. He did it by miracle-working power. That was the norm then, but that is not the norm today for believers.

The norm today is this:

Which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places.

–Ephesians 1:20

That is resurrection power. Paul could say, “That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection...” (Philippians 3:10). What do we know today about resurrection power? What do we know of having that power which worked in Jesus, brought Him up from the dead, and put Him at God’s right hand? Think with me for a moment. As long as we are in these earthly bodies, we’ll never get rid of this old nature. But this old nature needs to be put in the place of death in order that we might live by the power of the Holy Spirit working through our new nature. Do we know anything about that power today? Have you felt that power surging through you?

I once knew a man who was kind enough to take me out to his country club to play golf. He drove a beautiful, big luxury car. He said, "You know, McGee, I have to watch the speedometer all the time because of the tremendous power of this car. The other day I was going a hundred miles an hour before I knew it—but the police officer knew it! I just put my foot down on the accelerator, and oh, what power!" I said, "I wish that kind of power was in my life." Wouldn't you like to start living by that kind of power? Oh, not the kind of power that's under a hood, but the power that raised Jesus from the dead! And that's not all of it. Since that same power also "seated Jesus at His right hand in the heavenly places."

Where is the power? Paul says in effect, *"I pray that the power, which brought Jesus back from the dead and then took Him off this earth in a glorified body to God's right hand, might work in you."* We need to pray for that. Honestly, do we know much about that kind of power? Do our prayers really lay hold of God?


Suppose you go out to the airport, get into the plane, race the motor, roll down the runway, and then you come back and put it in the hangar. We can say we've been to the airport and that we made it to the end of the runway, but we never took off. How many times do we really take off in prayer? How many times do we really pray? How many times do we lay hold of God? I wonder if God says, "Your prayer meetings are like taking a plane down the runway, but you never take off. Many of you never do. You just race your motors and go back to the hangar, and you wonder why you feel no strength and why you have little interest in prayer."

Oh, may God teach us to pray. When we learn these basics, we travel the same road that the men and women of the Bible walked as they traveled toward their eternal homes, walking and talking with God the whole way. What a beautiful way to go through life. I commend you to the practice of prayer every day. God is listening to you, child of God.

A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, smiling and talking to each other outdoors. They are gesturing with their hands as if in conversation. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in a park-like setting.

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A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone. The phone screen displays a webpage with several articles, each with a 'Download' button. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

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