

Prayer

What is prayer?

A) Prayer is simply talking to God. The essence of being a Christian is having a relationship with God (John 17:3). God is a person and you communicate with Him in much the same way that you communicate with any other person. As you know, communication is essential for any healthy relationship.

What should I say to God when I pray?

A) Jesus is your primary example of what to do and how to live as a Christian. Here is what Jesus taught about prayer:

(1) “Pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil’” (Matthew 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4, ESV).

(a) Jesus’ prayer serves as a model for our own praying. Note that He said, “Pray then like this.” He did not mean for you to repeat this prayer word-for-word over and over again. He intended this prayer to give you an idea of what to say when you talk to God.

(b) The word “Father” reminds you of the nature of your relationship to God—He is your Father. God graciously adopted you as his child, and He loves you very much. (People sometimes wonder whether they should pray to Jesus or to God the Father. The answer is that you follow Jesus’ example—He prayed to the Father and so should you.)

(c) When you talk to God, you should begin by honoring God’s name. Tell Him how much you love who He is and what He’s done for you. The Psalms are full of ideas on how to express yourself in this way (read Psalm 97, 103, 111).

(d) The kingdom of God is both spiritual (He is Lord of your life) and physical (He will someday rule the earth). You should tell God that you desire His kingdom to come—both in the hearts of others as well as here on earth. Tell God that you want His will to be done in your life just like it is in heaven.

(e) Talk to God about your daily needs. He wants you to recognize your dependency on Him for even the basic necessities of life. He does not want you to worry about these things; He wants you to trust Him to provide.

(f) If there is any attitude or action that God is convicting you about, prayer is the time to confess it and ask His forgiveness. Note that forgiveness from God is conditional upon you being willing to forgive others.

(g) Ask God to help you resist the temptations of the enemy and to deliver you from evil. Doing this will remind you that you cannot make it on your own—you need God's help every day to resist Satan's attacks.

(2) The Bible records an intimate conversation between Jesus and the Father that took place in the Garden of Gethsemane: "And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will'" (Matthew 26:39, ESV).

(a) Jesus talked openly to God about the inner struggle that was going on inside Him. This shows us that we should share even our most private thoughts and feelings with God. Note that Jesus' attitude was one of submission to God's will, even when His own desires were pulling Him in a different direction.

B) Think about it this way—what do you say when you're talking to your family or your friends? You talk about the events of the day, how you're feeling, what you've been thinking about and any irritations or difficulties that you've had. You should talk to God about all these things. He's interested in every aspect of your life!

Prayer seems so one-sided. How does God talk to me?

A) The primary way God talks to you is through the Bible. That's why it's important for you to be reading the Word each day. For example, you may have told God that you are concerned about your job. Listen to His response: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6–7, NIV).

B) God also speaks to you through His Holy Spirit. The Spirit lives inside you and serves as your counselor, helper and guide (1 John 3:24; 4:13; John 14:26). He will often speak to you through impressions and thoughts. For example, if you yell at someone in anger,

you will notice a feeling of conviction. This is the Spirit prompting you to apologize and ask forgiveness. You will also experience impressions to witness to others and thoughts urging you to act and speak in a Christ-like manner. Learn to recognize the Spirit's voice and always respond in obedience!

C) God will talk to you through other Christians. One of the primary ways this happens is through pastors and teachers (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; Hebrews 13:7, 17).

D) God may also speak to you through events and circumstances. It has been said that God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain.¹ The trials and sufferings we endure are often used by God to speak to us about areas of need in our lives.

How long should I pray?

A) There is no time limit on prayer. The Holy Spirit lives inside you and is with you all the time. Thus you can talk to God all day long (1 Thessalonians 5:17). However, even with our family and friends there are specific times when our focus is on talking to them directly. It is the same with God. These times will be short to begin with and will lengthen over time as your relationship with God grows.

Why is it so hard to pray?

A) The Devil hates prayer. You can expect him to do everything he can to stop you from praying. His usual method is to interrupt or distract you. That's why it's important to make sure you are alone and free from distractions (cell-phones, etc.) when you are praying (Matthew 6:6).

B) Much of our communication with others is non-verbal. This makes talking to God difficult since we cannot see Him. Because of this, you may find your mind wandering while you're trying to pray. Here are some suggestions that may be useful to you:

(1) Pray out loud. Praying out loud helps to focus your mind on what you're saying. I personally have found this very helpful.

(2) Change your position. Many people find themselves dozing off if they pray while sitting or kneeling. Sometimes walking or standing can help keep you awake.

(3) Consider writing instead of speaking. Some people have found it easier to write their prayer down on paper rather than speaking. Think of it as e-mailing God. This has the added benefit of functioning as a prayer journal. You can save

each prayer and review them in the future to see how God has been working in your life.

(4) Some people find that following a format like ACTS is helpful: begin with Adoration, then Confession, then Thanksgiving and end with Supplication.

C) For many people, finding time to pray in their busy schedules is the hardest part of praying. The solution is simple but requires sacrifice. Prayer does not just happen—you must plan ahead and purposely take the time to pray. Set aside a certain time each day that you go off alone and pray.

Will God always answer my prayers?

- A) God will always answer your prayers. But His answer may be Yes, No, or Not Yet. The Yes is easy to recognize, but it's often difficult to tell the difference between No and Not Yet. Over time, you will learn the discipline of waiting on God until the time is right for Him to say Yes.
- B) There is one way of praying that is sure to get a No response—James 4:3 says, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures” (NASB). Watch your motives when you pray. God is not a Santa Claus with a bag of goodies reserved for your personal pleasure.

What are some things to avoid when praying?

- A) Praying to be seen. Jesus specifically mentioned this when talking to His disciples about prayer (Matthew 6:1, 5–6). The religious leaders of His day craved the attention and respect of the people. In order to appear as righteous as possible, they would pray in places where the public would be sure to notice them. Jesus rejected this kind of behavior and told His disciples to pray alone where only God could see them. As a new convert, this probably won't be a temptation for you. However, it's good to be aware that this is a potential area the enemy can exploit.
- B) Meaningless repetition. Jesus' prayer was given as a contrast to His comment about the Gentiles (non-Jews): “And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him” (Matthew 6:7–8, NASB). You certainly wouldn't say the same thing over and over to your family or your friends—don't do it to God either! (that includes Jesus' prayer itself).