

Teach Us to Pray
(Adapted from Tertullian's *On Prayer*)
Short Devotional Lesson on Prayer

I. Purpose of this Lesson

- a. Recently I read Tertullian's short work, *On Prayer*, and found things in there that have been helpful in my own prayer life. I wanted to share these basic things with others who might benefit as well.
 - i. Tertullian was an early Christian writer from Carthage, in North Africa. Scholars believe that *On Prayer* was written around 198 AD.
- b. These are basic, simple things that I believe you can benefit from if you put them into practice.

II. The Lord's Prayer as the Foundation for Our Prayer Life

- a. Growing up in the Roman Catholic church, I was taught several specific prayers which we were expected to commit to memory. There were even books of prayers to recite, for all different occasions.
- b. The most frequent prayers were the 'Our Father' and the 'Hail Mary'. I recall saying the rosary (a repetitive series of prayers one would say following a string of prayer beads to keep track); saying one 'Our Father' followed by ten 'Hail Mary's', and then repeat the cycle again and again, hopefully meditating on various things while reciting those prayers.
 - i. I learned to say those prayers very quickly; and could do so with my mind on other things.
- c. Years later, in a much different church, I experienced perhaps the other extreme, where all prayers were relatively free and spontaneous. Sometimes people would follow a general outline (such as praising God first, confessing sin second, giving thanks for things third and finally petitioning God for things we want Him to grant).
 - i. In those circles I was taught that God wanted sincere, spontaneous prayers from our hearts, not rote prayers. That seemed reasonable to me. The 'Lord's Prayer' was considered a good general outline for prayer; but I don't recall hearing people in those churches ever saying the specific words of that prayer taught by Jesus.
- d. Later, I became familiar with some of the writings of the early Christians. It seemed that many of them took Jesus literally when he said, as recorded in the **Luke 11** version of the Lord's Prayer:
 - i. "Now it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as

John also taught his disciples.' So He said to them, 'When you pray, say: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven....' " (**Luke 11:1-2**, NKJV)

- ii. Taking Jesus literally, it seemed that He wanted his disciples to say those words. Furthermore, that is clearly what many of the early Christians understood Him to mean in that statement.

III. Tertullian on the Significance of the Lords Prayer

- a. Tertullian pointed to this prayer that Jesus taught as the highest and best prayer, the perfect prayer for Christians to pray. He said,
 - i. "In the (Lord's) Prayer is comprised the epitome of the whole Gospel"
 - ii. (Source: Tertullian, *On Prayer*, chapter 1; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 681)
 - 1. Online link to Tertullian's *On Prayer*:
 - a. <https://ccel.org/ccel/tertullian/prayer/anf03>
- b. Tertullian explained the meaning of the prayer clause by clause. If you understand the meaning of each statement in that prayer, this is not an easy prayer to pray (if you think about and sincerely mean what you are saying). In fact, it is extremely challenging!
- c. Here is a summary of his explanation of the meaning of the phrases contained in this prayer:
 - i. "Our Father in heaven..."
 - 1. Here we are obeying Jesus' teaching to call no one on earth 'Father' except God. (**Matthew 23:9**)
 - 2. As it says in John's gospel,
 - a. "But as many as received Him [referring to Jesus], to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.... " (**John 1:12**, NKJV)
 - b. To be called "children of God" is a right and an honor. It carries with it the responsibility to honors God by respecting and obeying Him as our Father.
 - 3. In recognizing the *Father*, we also acknowledge the *Son*.
 - ii. "Hallowed (holy) be thy name..."

1. "...when we say, 'Hallowed be Thy name,' we pray this; that it may be hallowed in us who are in Him, as well in all others for whom the grace of God is still waiting; that we may obey this precept, too, in praying for all, even for our personal enemies."
 - a. (Source: *On Prayer*, chapter 3; ANF 3.682)
 2. We are praying that our lives (living as the light of the world, obeying God, living holy lives and showing the love of God to others) can bring glory and blessings to the name of God.
- iii. "Thy will be done on earth as in heaven..."
1. God's will is for us to walk according to His discipline: including to preach, to work and to endure even to death.
 2. This is the attitude Jesus demonstrated when He asked that the Lord remove the cup of suffering that was before Him:
 - a. (Jesus *prayed*) "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done." (**Luke 22:42**, NKJV)
 - b. Likewise, in praying this prayer we are giving ourselves up to the will of our Father.
- iv. "Thy kingdom come..."
1. Like the prior statement, we are asking that this be done in us.
 2. We want the kingdom to come and to advance with all speed.
 3. We pray for the manifestation of the kingdom that we hope for. "Our wish is that our reign be hastened, not our servitude protracted" (*On Prayer*, chapter 5)
- v. "Give us this day our daily bread..."
1. Tertullian saw this request as not just referring to our material needs, but to our need for *spiritual bread*, as well.
 - a. Jesus is "the bread of life".
 - i. "And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst." (**John 6:35**, NKJV)
 - b. Jesus' body is reckoned (considered to be) in bread, "This is my body" (**Matthew 26:26**)

- vi. “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors...”
 - 1. We need to acknowledge our own spiritual debt to God, and our need for forgiveness from Him.
 - 2. In the Scriptures, debt is a figure for guilt; as in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (**Matthew 18:21-35**).
 - 3. With the measure we use toward others (in forgiving those who sin against us), *the Lord will measure to us*, in turn.
- vii. “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One”
 - 1. The Lord Himself does not tempt us to sin; we are asking the Lord to protect us from Satan, who is the one seeking to tempt us.
 - 2. We are asking the Lord to lead us away from temptations devised by Satan, and to convey us away from the Evil One.
 - 3. Although God may put the faith of people to the test (as He did in calling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, in **Genesis 22**), God does not tempt us to sin (as Satan does).
- d. Tertullian’s recap of the Lord’s Prayer (from *On Prayer*, chapter 9)
 - i. “In summaries of so few words, how many utterances of the prophets, the Gospels, the apostles—how many discourses, examples, parables of the Lord, are touched on! How many duties are simultaneously discharged! The honor of God in the ‘Father’; the testimony of faith in the ‘Name’; the offering of obedience in the ‘Will’; the commemoration of hope in the ‘Kingdom’; the petition for life in the ‘Bread’; the full acknowledgment of debts in the prayer for their ‘Forgiveness’; the anxious dread of temptation in the request for ‘Protection’.
 - ii. “What wonder? God alone could teach how he wished Himself prayed to. The religious rite of prayer therefore, ordained by Himself, and animated, even at the moment when it was issuing out of the Divine mouth, by His own Spirit, ascends, by its own prerogative, into heaven, commending to the Father what the Son has taught.”
- e. After praying the Lord’s Prayer, we can add our own specific petitions. (from *On Prayer*, chapter 10)
 - i. “Since, however, the Lord, the Foreseer of human necessities, said separately, after delivering His Rule of Prayer, ‘Ask, and you shall receive’ (**Luke 11:9**) and since there are petitions which are made according to the circumstances of each individual; our additional

wants have the right—*after beginning with the legitimate and customary prayers as a foundation*, as it were—of rearing an outer superstructure of petitions, yet with remembrance of the Master's precepts."

IV. Attitude in Approaching God in Prayer (from *On Prayer*, chapters 11 & 12)

- a. Tertullian wrote in chapter 11 of *On Prayer*: "That we may not be as far from the ears of God as we are from His precepts, the memory of His precepts *paves for our prayers a way unto heaven*; of which precepts the chief is, that we go not up unto God's altar before we compose whatever of discord or offence we have contracted with our brethren."
- b. This calls to mind what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:
 - i. "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. *First be reconciled to your brother*, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison." (**Matthew 5:23-25**, NKJV)
- c. Jesus added the prohibition of being angry with our brother to the command regarding *murder*.
 - i. "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire." (**Matthew 5:21-22**, NKJV)
- d. We also have the example of Joseph in **Genesis 50:15-21**, who forgave his brothers for their wickedness toward him.
- e. We must deal with anger quickly and pursue personal righteousness (including in our relationship with others) to pray as God intends.
 - i. "If ever we must be angry, our anger must not be maintained beyond sunset, as the apostle admonishes. But how rash is it either to pass a day without prayer, while you refuse to make satisfaction to your brother; or else, by perseverance in anger, to lose your prayer?" (from *On Prayer*, chapter 11)
 1. Whenever we have conflict with others, let us reconcile quickly so that we don't have to go a day without prayer!

- ii. “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord; looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled...” (Hebrews 12:14-15, NKJV)
 - iii. “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.” (Ephesians 4:26-27, ESV)
 - iv. “Husbands, likewise, dwell with them [your wives] with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.” (1 Peter 3:7, NKJV)
 - v. “I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting...” (1 Timothy 2:8, NKJV)
 - vi. “...The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” (James 5:16, NKJV)
- f. Humble attitude and posture in prayer
- i. But we more commend our prayers to God when we pray with modesty and humility, with not even our hands too loftily elevated, but elevated temperately and becomingly; and not even our countenance over-boldly uplifted. For that publican who prayed with humility and dejection not merely in his supplication, but in his countenance too, went his way “more justified” than the shameless Pharisee. The sounds of our voice, likewise, should be subdued; else, if we are to be heard for our noise, how large windpipes should we need! But God is the hearer not of the voice, but of the heart...” (from *On Prayer*, chapter 17)
 - ii. Women, whether married or unmarried, should be veiled when praying. (from *On Prayer*, chapters 21-22)
 - 1. “But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head...” (1 Corinthians 11:5, NKJV)

V. Special Times for Prayer

- a. The only clear direction in the Scriptures regarding times of prayer is to pray at all times, and in every place. (*On Prayer*, chapter 23)
 - i. “...praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints—” (Ephesians 6:18, NKJV)
 - ii. “...pray without ceasing...” (1 Thessalonians 5:17, NKJV)

- b. On the other hand, Tertullian expressed the view, shared by other early Christian writers, that there were some especially suitable times for prayer: at 9am, noon and 3pm.
 - i. These marked the time of Jesus on the cross. Note that He was on the cross for 6 hours on the Friday of the crucifixion.
 - 1. The crucifixion of Jesus began at 9 am, which corresponds to “the third hour”, based on the hours of the day starting at sunrise, or about 6 am (**Mark 15:25**).
 - 2. There were three hours of light, until 12 noon (the sixth hour).
 - 3. Then there were three hours of darkness from noon until 3pm (the ninth hour), at which time Jesus breathed His last and died (**Mark 15:33-37**)
 - ii. Tertullian noted that in the Book of Acts, the apostles are found praying at these specific times. From *On Prayer*, chapter 25:
 - 1. “Touching the time, however, the extrinsic observance of certain hours will not be unprofitable—those common hours, I mean, which mark the intervals of the day—the third, the sixth, the ninth [*that is, 9am, noon and 3pm*]*—which we may find in the Scriptures to have been more solemn than the rest.*
 - 2. “The first infusion of the Holy Spirit into the congregated disciples [*at Pentecost*] took place at ‘the third hour’ (**Acts 2:15**).
 - 3. Peter, on the day on which he experienced the vision of Universal Community [*prior to the conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile*], (exhibited) in that small vessel, had ascended into the more lofty parts of the house, for prayer’s sake ‘at the sixth hour’ (**Acts 10:9**).
 - 4. “The same (apostle) was going into the temple, with John, at the ninth hour, when he restored the paralytic to his health. (**Acts 3:1**)
- c. Tertullian also noted that the practice of Christians praying (at least) three times each day was foreshadowed by Daniel, and that this practice also reflects the three persons of the trinity. From *On Prayer*, chapter 25:
 - i. “Albeit these practices stand simply without any precept for their observance, still it may be granted a good thing to establish some definite presumption, which may both add stringency to the admonition to, pray, and may, as it were by a law, tear us out from our

businesses unto such a duty; so that—what we read to have been observed by Daniel also (**Daniel 6:11**), in accordance (of course) with Israel's discipline—we pray at least not less than three times in the day, debtors as we are to Three—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: of course, in addition to our regular prayers which are due, without any admonition, on the entrance of light and of night.

- d. Tertullian noted the practice of Christians in the early church to pray before meals (no surprise to most of us), *before “going to the bath”* (which certainly surprised me), and before brothers part from one another. From *On Prayer*, chapters 25 and 26:
 - i. “But, withal, it becomes believers not to take food, and not to go to the bath, before interposing a prayer; for the refreshments and nourishments of the spirit are to be held prior to those of the flesh, and things heavenly prior to things earthly.
 - ii. “...You will not dismiss a brother who has entered your house without prayer.”

VI. Enriching Our Prayers with Psalms of Praise

- a. Tertullian pointed out (in *On Prayer*, chapter 27) that some of those who were especially diligent in prayer would often add psalms of praise to God as part of their prayers.

VII. Closing Comments on the Power of Prayer

- a. From *On Prayer*, chapter 29 (the closing chapter of that work):
 - i. “For what has God, who exacts it ever denied to prayer coming from ‘spirit and truth’? How mighty specimens of its efficacy do we read, and hear, and believe! Old-world prayer, indeed, used to free from fires, and from beasts, and from famine; and yet it had not (then) received its form from Christ.
 - ii. “But how far more amply operative is Christian prayer! It does not station the angel of dew in mid-fires, nor muzzle lions, nor transfer to the hungry the rustics’ bread; it has no delegated grace to avert any sense of suffering; but it supplies the suffering, and the feeling, and the grieving, with endurance: it amplifies grace by virtue, that faith may know what she obtains from the Lord, understanding what—for God’s name’s sake—she suffers.
 - iii. “But in days gone by, prayer used to call down plagues, scatter the armies of foes, withhold the wholesome influences of the showers. Now, however, the prayer of righteousness averts all God’s anger, keeps guard on behalf of personal enemies, makes supplication on

behalf of persecutors. Is it wonder if it knows how to extort the rains of heaven—(prayer) which was once able to procure its fires? Prayer is alone that which vanquishes God.

- iv. “But Christ has willed that it be operative for no evil: He had conferred on it *all its virtue in the cause of good*. And so it knows nothing save how to recall the souls of the departed from the very path of death, to transform the weak, to restore the sick, to purge the possessed, to open prison-bars, to loose the bonds of the innocent. Likewise it washes away faults, repels temptations, extinguishes persecutions, consoles the faint-spirited, cheers the high-spirited, escorts travelers, appeases waves, makes robbers stand aghast, nourishes the poor, governs the rich, upraises the fallen, arrests the falling, confirms the standing.
- v. “Prayer is the wall of faith: her arms and missiles against the foe who keeps watch over us on all sides. So let us never walk unarmed. By day, be we mindful of Station; by night, of vigil. Under the arms of prayer guard we the standard of our General; await we in prayer the angel’s trumpet.
- vi. “The angels, likewise, all pray; every creature prays; cattle and wild beasts pray and bend their knees; and when they issue from their layers and lairs, they look up heavenward with no idle mouth, making their breath vibrate after their own manner. Nay, the birds too, rising out of the nest, upraise themselves heavenward, and, instead of hands, expand the cross of their wings, and say somewhat to seem like prayer.
 - 1. [Note: The idea of animals praying may seem strange to us! However, consider what the Scriptures say in **Job 38**, **Psalms 104** & **Psalms 147** -CP]
- vii. “What more then, touching the office of prayer? Even the Lord Himself prayed; to whom be honor and virtue unto the ages of the ages!”