

LEARNING TO PRAY

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*Presented by*

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## LEARNING TO PRAY

"Lord, teach us to pray...".

Luke 11:1

Have *you* ever felt the urge to pray? If you or like most people, *you* don't pray. But I wonder if you ever feel something stirring inside that comes awfully close to being a prayer. But then you remember that *you* don't believe there is a god at least not a personal one, so you wait a couple of minutes and the feeling goes away. But every once in a while it comes back. Is this an accurate description of what happens to you sometimes?

Now, possibly I shouldn't even be talking with *you* about prayer at all if you feel as you do. Because, you see, if *you* don't really believe that there is a personal god and you get over those brief urges to pray rather easily, we should just forget this subject. After all, if the reason you don't pray is that you don't believe there is a god, we should engage in a lengthy discussion about the existence of God before we talk about prayer.

There is no use, for example, talking to people about learning how to swim if they hate water and are afraid of it. We first have to develop their interest in being in the water and help them conquer their fear of it before we talk about swimming. So, too, it's rather foolish to talk to a person about prayer unless we have first talked about God.

But just a minute. We were talking about swimming and fear of water a few seconds ago. We agreed that we would first have to get people over their fear of water before we could teach them to swim, and so, too, we would first have to convince a person that there is a God before we could expect a person to pray. Is this really true? Fear of water and swimming—do you have to get over your fear of water before you learn to swim? I

don't think so. I believe that the best way to get over being afraid of water is to learn to swim. Do you have to learn to like being in the water before you can learn to swim? I don't think so. I believe that once a person learns to swim, he then can begin to enjoy the water.

And you know, the same is true when it comes to prayer. Have you ever thought that perhaps your faith in the existence of God could begin to grow if you start praying to Him?

I know that this seems backwards, and some may even think it to be dishonest. Some might object that it is not really moral to suggest that people start praying before they get their beliefs straightened out. If they started praying because of such proddings, whatever praying they did might just be a psychological exercise, and they might end up talking to themselves. Then, they might just as well not pray at all.

I would agree that it would be dishonest to try to get a person like you to pray before you had your belief in God straightened out, except for one thing. You see, the fact that some might not be too sure there is a God, or that God is personal, does not mean that there is no God. Unbelief, atheism, and agnosticism are not able to destroy God. The simple fact, which many know, is that God exists, and He is a personal being who enters into personal relationships with His people. Just because some think there is no God does not mean that those of us who know that God is and that He hears and answers our prayers have to agree. We cannot deny reality. And God is reality, whether a person chooses to believe in Him or not.

Therefore it would benefit you to think about prayer and praying even if you don't believe in God right now. I can't help hoping that even though you may be somewhat puzzled by this

proach, you're curious. So let's consider learning to pray, but before doing that, I want to say something to another group of people.

They are those who are interested in this subject because, even though they do believe in God, they do not pray very much. Is this the way it is with you?

I was listening to a talk show the other day, and a woman who called in to voice her opinion about the ordination of women in the church began by saying, "I'm a backsliding Episcopalian, but I think..." Well, many people are backsliding "something or other." Maybe you are a backsliding Episcopalian, or a backsliding Methodist or Baptist or Presbyterian, or a "jack" Mormon. You have heard people pray. You used to go to church. You believe there is a God, and you believe that if you could find a way to break the silence that has existed far too long between you and Him, He would probably listen to you. But you just don't pray. If you are married, you never pray with your wife or husband. Your children never saw you pray. Yet, sometimes when the old grey matter starts working and you catch yourself thinking a bit deeper than usual about yourself and your future, you find that you still believe in God, and you would like to talk with Him. But you don't really know how to start anymore. Maybe several things have come between you and God during the last few years, and, frankly, you are embarrassed to knock on His door. Therefore, you know that somehow if you could learn to pray, your life would improve. You know it. But how can you begin?

Well, learning to pray is simple. Let me give you three rules to follow: learn from the right teacher, find the right place, and use the right words. I say *simple*. By that I mean the rules can be stated simply. But there is a lot involved in each of them.

And it's worth taking the time to examine each of these rules rather carefully.

The first rule is, learn from the right teacher. What does that mean?

The person to learn from, if you want to pray is, very simply, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. I wish I could point you to this or that great man and say, "Let him be your example." I wish I could say, "Just let me be your example." But I cannot say that, because I have problems with prayer, too, just like you do, and I am learning about it just as well as you are. To start with, a person should have the best teacher of all. That's Jesus. Those who were closest to Him during His earthly ministry understood that He was qualified to teach about prayer. The Gospel of Luke records their asking Him, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1.)

Now then, Jesus is qualified to teach us to pray for at least a couple of reasons. First of all, contact with Jesus will help us get our God-thoughts straightened out. Obviously, your prayers will be meaningful and important only if there is a real God who hears your prayers and pays attention to them. Jesus Christ of Nazareth is supremely qualified to help us at this point because He has come to reveal God.

A few minutes ago, I said that if you don't have very clear ideas about God, perhaps your ideas would clear up and you would start believing if you started praying. Well, that can happen if Jesus is your teacher, but only if you get to know your teacher very well. To do this, you will have to take the time to read the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection from the dead. Maybe you would like to concentrate on one of the first books of the New Testament. A book like Mark is a very good book to begin with. The Gospel of John is very good, too. If Jesus is going to be your teacher,

you will obviously have to spend some time with Him.

And as you do that, you will gradually see that all our God-thoughts, our God-ideas, and our God questions are resolved when we concentrate our attention on Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Who really cares whether God exists if God is some kind of impersonal force? Who cares, if God is far away from us and uninterested in us? When we look at Jesus, we see that God not only exists, but He is love, and He wants to communicate with us, and He wants us to communicate with Him. Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). He reveals the love of God: "God is love . . . . In this is love . . . that [God] sent his Son to be the [payment] for our sins" (1 John 4:8, 10).

In the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, the Bible says, "whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6). You can believe that about God if you believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died for the payment of your sin, who has been raised from the dead, and who is now alive.

Jesus, who is God, reveals God, and thus He is the best teacher there is. But He's the best teacher for another reason, too. Jesus is the person who opens the door so that our prayers can actually come into God's presence.

Have you ever wanted to spend just five or ten minutes talking with someone who is very important, but you couldn't because there were too many barriers in the way? There were secretaries who wouldn't let you get near the man who was terribly busy. And most of all, he was terrifically important, and probably wouldn't listen if you got into his office. So you gave up trying to see him. He was just too big and remote for a person as small as you.

To tell you the truth, we have somewhat the same problem when it comes to talking with God. God is holy, and we are not, and God knows it. And we know it. The sin we joke about some times and enjoy committing other times is an insurmountable barrier between us and God.

Have you ever noticed how thick and impenetrable the door on a bank vault is? Well, our sin is like a bank vault door. We are on the outside and God is on the inside, and there's no getting to Him. And this is where Jesus comes in.

Jesus died on the cross, as you know. Do you know what that cross was all about? Did you think it was just a personal tragedy in Jesus' life? It was not that. The cross was the place where Jesus Christ of Nazareth paid the price of human sin.

And now what happens is this: everyone who confesses that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and claims Jesus as his life receives Jesus' righteousness as God's free gift. The big door swings open. And you and I can talk to God.

Jesus can teach us to pray because He took care of the sin problem. So, you see, those who go to Jesus and ask for instruction in prayer are going to the right place. He shows them what He's done for them, and as we're impressed by what He is and by what He has done, we learn to pray and our prayers get through.

He's a great teacher. And what's more, He's experienced, too. As you read the Bible and get to know Him better, you will discover Him time and time again, praying Himself to His Father in heaven. The Bible even says that Jesus is busy right now praying for His people: "He is able for all things, and he will save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). Intercession is a name for a special kind of prayer. And Jesus is busy at it.

Could you ask for a greater teacher than this? Of course not. Let Jesus teach you to pray.

The second rule for those who would like to learn to pray is, find the right place. It is very fascinating that when Jesus taught people to pray years ago, He began by talking about the place of prayer. Evidently He figured that environment was very important. We can understand that, because we know the importance of environment to ourselves. For example, if you are going to have an elaborate meal that features an expensive cut of meat with all the trimmings, you probably won't have it at Saturday noon in the kitchen on paper plates with the children wearing the clothes they play in. Environment makes good food taste even better. And if you have something important to discuss with your wife or husband, or with the person you are going to marry, you probably won't try to talk about it while you are riding in a subway at rush hour.

Prayer needs a place, too. Jesus said: "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:5, 6).

Jesus knew that prayer can twist and contort human personality. It can bring out the actor in a person. So when He began to talk about prayer, He talked about actors—that's what hypocrites were. In Jesus' day, the hypocrites played the role of the pious man, and they arranged their day so that the set times of prayer would occur just when they happened to be at a street corner or in the middle of a shopping center. There they would make a big show of their piety, lifting up

their hands, tilting their heads back, and they would mutter, frown, and smile in order to call attention to themselves.

"That, my friend, is not what I mean by prayer," says Jesus. No, Jesus tells us to go off somewhere all by ourselves and do our praying in secret. Prayer is a secret. It's not a secret to God, but it is a secret so far as those who know you are concerned. Oh, of course, there are times when we are called on to pray publicly, and often we pray in the presence of our wife or husband or with other members of our family. But if that's all the praying we do, our prayers are probably worth less. Behind all observable prayer there must be secret prayer. How much you pray is nobody's business. No one has to know. But you will know. And God will know. Jesus says, "[Your] Father who sees in secret will reward you." That's good news, isn't it?

It seems to me that this is extremely encouraging for people like us who would like to start praying or who would like to pray better than they do. Here is something you can do and you don't need any special equipment for it. Sometimes there are sports that intrigue us, but we are discouraged because there is so much involved in storing. You have to buy special shoes. You need special equipment. You have to wear the right clothes when you play. And you have to become a member of a club. And you say, "Forget it—if all that is involved, I'll just get my exercise running around the block." Well, prayer isn't like that.

All you have to do is come just as you are and find a secret place and there start talking to God, depending on Christ for guidance and confident that because of Jesus' sacrifice God will hear. Surely, you have a secret place somewhere, don't you? Maybe you live all by yourself, and you are often lonely, to tell the truth. Well, here's an ad-

vantage to living alone-you've got a secret place ready made. Or, Mom, when the children are finally off to school, you've got a secret place ready made for you, too, haven't you? Or, Dad, what about those long drives you have to take when you call on your customers during the day-you can pray with your eyes open, you know. Why, you have a secret place, too.

Each of us . . . somewhere. A teenager can slip into her room and close the door and pray. Some people like to get up early in the morning and pray. But the secret place is where praying starts. All the other praying people do must flow from their prayer in the secret place.

Now there is one more rule for those who want to learn how to pray: use the right words. Our great teacher of prayer, Jesus, was fussy about this. This is what He said: "And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do . . . Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:7, 8).

"Heaping up empty phrases"-avoid that! It's an easy trap to fall into. Once people believe in God, they often start trying to browbeat Him. They repeat themselves ad nauseum. They get themselves all worked up. Sometimes they even use words which they don't understand themselves and they think that God is going to be impressed. He's impressed all right. He is impressed with how stupid such prayers are. He can tell by their use of repetition and empty phrases that they don't understand Him at all. Prayer like that turns God off.

Don't use empty words. Use full words. Use words that express the fullness of your own thought. A praying man has to be a thinker. He must have a thoughtful approach to life. He must really understand himself, his dear ones, his environment, and his world. He doesn't just rattle on and on, but sometimes he says a few sentences

and then thinks about what he has been talking about.

Full words-this is what we need. And you know, Jesus gave us special instruction so that our words will be full. This is how the Lord's Prayer serves us. You have heard about it, I'm sure. The Lord's Prayer is designed to help us to pray with full words. Notice its full words: "Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy 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." You can say it in 20 seconds. But when you understand the meaning of this prayer and you allow its concerns to become your concerns, your prayer becomes more and more meaningful. Those who understand the meaning of the prayer we call the Lord's Prayer are kept from heaping up empty phrases. Actually, we shouldn't even call this the Lord's Prayer. We should call it the People's Prayer. It's ours. The Lord has given us this prayer so that we wouldn't heap up empty phrases when we talk to God.

I believe that Jesus Christ is coming to you right now with an invitation to consider the possibility of praying to God. How long has it been since you prayed? Maybe you never have. Maybe you don't believe that God exists--at least you haven't up until now. God does exist, and He has revealed Himself through Jesus Christ, who died on Calvary's cross so that stubborn, calloused sinners like us could pray and have all the benefits of answered prayer in our lives. God exists, and He has made provisions so that people like you could receive the benefits of His unbounded love. And God invites you to go and meet Him in the place of prayer.

Maybe the best thing you could do, for a start, would be to take the words of the Lord's Prayer

on your lips. Start with that. And then think about that prayer. Think about God's honor, and His kingdom, and His will, and think about your need for bread, for clothing, for shelter. . . for self fulfillment, and for meaning.

God is inviting you to pray; isn't it marvelous that He planned your day so that you could read this? God bless you as you go to the secret place.

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