

# HOW NOT TO PRAY

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## Introduction

Apostle Paul gave a prediction for the endtimes in 2 Timothy 4:3, "A time will come when they will not endure Sound Doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth and be turned aside to fables."

These days, I believe, are already upon us. Everywhere, even though there is an abundance in preaching, we find that the Scriptures of God are highly twisted and there is so much of famine for the Word of God. We hear more of stories and personal experiences from pulpits than pure exposition of God's Word. This study is based on two admonitions that Paul gave, one to Timothy and the other to Titus. 2 Timothy 4:2, "Preach the Word." Titus 2:1, "But as for you, speak the things which are proper for Sound Doctrine." "As for you..." This means Paul was speaking to a minority and he was calling for a difference that these young men should maintain in the ministry of God's Word.

## How not to Pray

You may wonder, "Why teach how NOT TO Pray" instead of, "How TO Pray." Why this "negative" approach? This was the method Jesus Christ adopted while teaching divine truths. Recollect His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5,6 & 7. In Chapter 6, He dealt with three spiritual disciplines: Charity, Prayer and Fasting. This is how He proceeded:

"When you do a charitable deed, **do not** sound the trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets that they may have glory from men" (Mt 6:2).

"When you pray, you **shall not** be like the hypocrites for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of streets" (v 5).

"When you fast, **do not** be like the hypocrites with a sad countenance" (v16).

I would like to follow this pattern in this study, because I believe that unlearning is a prerequisite for learning. Unlearning is of course more difficult than learning. Nevertheless it is absolutely necessary and important. God called Jeremiah to be a Prophet to the Nations. The Commission God gave him was to first of all "to root out, to pull down, to destroy and to throw down." Only afterwards he was "to build and to plant" (Jer 1:10). Dear friends, be mentally prepared to unlearn all that is unscriptural in the exercise of prayer so you may learn what is proper. Here are 10 lessons on *How not to Pray*.

## Do not force God.

You might be aware of the popular doctrine that is widely prevalent in Christian circles today. This novel doctrine teaches that we can “command” God in prayer. The argument is from Isaiah 45:11, “Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel and his Maker, ask Me of things to come concerning My sons; and concerning the work of My hands, you command Me.” If you would refer to more modern translations you would find that there is actually a translation error. It’s not God telling the people to command Him but it’s He challenging His people, “Will you command Me?” The KJV says, “Command ye Me,” but the NIV renders it as, “Do you give Me orders about the work of My hands?” Also if you look at the verse in its context, it brings out the sense of this passage. Verse 9, “Woe to him who strives with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherd of the earth! Shall the clay say to him who forms it, What are you making? Or shall your handiwork say, He has no hands?” One more illustration is served in verse 10: “Woe to him who says to his father, What are you begetting? Or to the woman, What have you brought forth?” Verse 12 follows: “I have made the earth and created man on it. It was I—My hands that stretched out the heavens, and all their host I have comman-ded.” The clay cannot question or command the potter, nor the son his parent, nor the creature the Creator. Contextually interpreting this passage, it is not, “**You do** command Me!” but, “**Do you** command Me?” It’s a question and not a prescription.

Look at the prayer life of the Lord Jesus Christ. He mastered the art of prayer. Never once He commanded His Father. The first Messianic Psalm is Psalm 2. What did the Father tell the Son? “You are My Son; Today I have begotten You; Ask of Me and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance” (Psa 2:8). It is, “**Ask** of Me,” not “Command Me.”

We find another classic passage in the Book of Hebrews about the prayer life of Jesus. “In the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear. Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered” (Heb 5:7,8). He “cried” unto His Father with tears. He never “comman-ded” Him. At the Garden of Gethsemane the Lord Jesus was going through the agony of death. Leaving the three disciples at a distance He went further on and fell prostrate before His Father, and prayed, “Father, if it’s possible, let this cup be removed from Me.” Later He prayed, “If it cannot be removed from Me, let Your will be done” (Mt 26:39,42). Beloved, when there’s such a clearcut teaching, especially from the life of the Lord Jesus, we must not entertain the novel doctrine that we can command God in prayer.

In this context I also want to make a reference to God’s **perfect** will vs. His **permissive** will. Christian maturity demands that we walk in obedience to God’s perfect will and not pester God to move into His permissive will. How do the perfect will and the permissive will of God differ from each other? Visualise a dad taking a child for a stroll. The child asks if she could cross over to the other side. Knowing the danger of crossing the road at that time, the father says, No. But the child keeps pestering. At one point of time the dad says, OK. This is not his perfect will, just permissive will.

An illustration from the Old Testament serves us a warning. God was taking His people from the Egyptian bondage, through the wilderness, to the Promised Land. On the way they began to murmur against God about what they could not have and what they were missing. They wanted meat right in the desert. God made a wind to blow from the seaside and it brought lot of quails. But the Bible says, “While the meat was still between the teeth, before it was chewed, the anger of the Lord was stirred against them” (Num 11:33). Later we read about this incident in Psalms, “God gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul” (Psa 106:15). Friends, be reverential when you approach God in prayer.

Yet another illustration: God was ruling over His people. They had no human King. God was leading them through His prophetic voice. But the people came to Prophet Samuel and said, “Make for us a King to judge us like all the nations” (1 Sam 8:5). That request very much displeased the Prophet. He went to God in prayer. God told him, “Don’t feel bad, they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me. I will grant them their request. Tell them they would get a King. But also warn them of the behaviour

that King would manifest in course of time.” We know how King Saul made a mess. In other words, the grant of a King was not according to God’s perfect will. It was just His permissive will. Friends, keep yourselves within the confines and boundaries of God’s perfect will and not move into the circle of His permissive will.

Does that mean that we cannot expect God to answer all our prayers? No, God does answer our prayers. But the answers may be different. Sometimes the answer will be, “Yes.” Many times the answer will be, “No.” Oftentimes the answer will be, “Wait.” And more often than we think the answer will be just silence! Mature Christians will know the difference between these answers. Any parent knows when to give, what to give and to which child. Prayer is not to change God’s mind, but it is to change us to fit into His plan and purposes.

At this juncture, a question about the Parable of the Unrighteous Judge might be posed! (Lk 18:1-8). That woman kept on pestering the Judge and finally she was answered. This Parable was just to teach us the lesson that we must not lose heart in prayer (v1). That unrighteous Judge did not answer that woman out of delight. He simply wanted to avoid further disturbance from her. That’s all!

Paul had a thorn in his flesh. He did not “command” the thorn to get out of his body! On the other hand the Bible says that he “pleaded” with the Lord. God gave a different answer than what he expected: “My grace is sufficient for you. My strength will be made perfect in your weakness.” Paul accepted God’s perfect will “gladly!” (2 Cor 12:8,9). That was victory and deliverance in the true sense.

God is our Father. We are His children. But because He is God, we are to approach Him with reverential fear. Ask Him. Plead before Him. Cry unto Him. Yield to Him. Wait before Him. Never ever attempt to command Him. God keeps asking, “If I’m your Father, where is My honour? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence?” (Mal 1:6). We are God’s “sons” and “servants” at the same time! Privileges must not overstep reverence.

May be there’s a prayer that’s unanswered for long in your life. Say, “Lord, let Your will be done!” This kind of prayer does not indicate lack of faith. It’s actually an expression of trust and confidence. God knows what’s best for us!

## How not to Pray

# 2

## Do not accuse Satan.

In the matter of dealing with Satan and the demonic spirits, there are two extremes that must be avoided: One is denying the very existence and the influence of the evil spirits; the other extreme is attributing all our failures to Satan. A story is told of someone sitting in a street corner, covering himself with a thick black blanket and sobbing. When a preacher, who was a passerby, lifted up the blanket and asked him why he was crying, he said, “I am Satan. The Christians in this locality do whatever they want, and finally blame it all on me.” The preacher is said to have assured him that he would point out this mistake to Christians and correct them!

Here’s what the Bible teaches about temptations and failures: “Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by **his own** desires and enticed. Then when desire is conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers” (Js 1:14-16). Our own desires draw us away into temptation. When we yield to temptation, it becomes sin. When we persist and dwell in sin, it ultimately results in death. We understand from this passage that Satan can only **tempt** us as he tempted Jesus. He cannot **defeat** us without our cooperation.

Look at the first sin of our first parents. If Satan had been solely responsible for their sin, God need not have pronounced curses on Adam and Eve, isn’t it? Why should He have ever brought curses on Adam and Eve: the curse of hard work and painful labour? (Gen 3:16-19). A murderer cannot throw the blame on the spirit of murder. An adulterer cannot throw the blame on the spirit of lust. A thief cannot throw the blame on the spirit of covetousness. Each one must take moral responsibility for his own

failures. That is why Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us **our** sins" (Lk 11:4). This truth has to be clearly kept in mind all the time.

There is another wrong practice that is prevailing in the so-called spiritual circles. It is binding Satan in prayer. Satan cannot be bound and we should not attempt to bind him. The Scripture that is normally quoted to support this practice is Matthew 16:19, the words of Jesus to Peter: "I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven." This simply means exercising heavenly authority on earth, nothing more. God used Simon Peter to open the Kingdom of Heaven for Jews and non-Jews to enter it in thousands. This has no reference to Satan. If, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven," refers to binding of Satan, the question arises, "Is there Satan in Heaven?" Another text that is quoted to support this wrong practice is Matthew 18:17,18. This passage is about Church discipline. If the erring individual refuses to listen to personal counseling, the matter, depending on its nature, must be brought to the Church. If he refuses to listen to the Church also, he must be treated as an outsider. Then Jesus went on to say, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven." This simply means, God from Heaven would back up the decision of His Church on earth that operates on Biblical principles.

This "binding and loosing" was a common judicial phrase in the Jewish culture. That's the sense in which it's used in Matthew 16 and 18. In Matthew 16, the reference was to evangelism. Jesus had asked the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?... Who do you say that I am?" Peter came up with a heavenly revelation: "You are Christ the Son of the living God!" Immediately Jesus said, "I am giving you the keys; now you can open up the doors of the Kingdom for the Jews and Gentiles alike. You can exercise Heavenly authority on earth." The 18th chapter is not about evangelism for outsiders, but about discipline for insiders. When there is a regular indiscipline or misbehaviour on the part of a Christian, you can say, either "We forgive you" or "We excommunicate you." Whatever you say as a Church will be endorsed by Heaven. That's all.

Beloved, we can cast out demons (Mt 10:1,8), We must refuse to give place to the devil (Eph 4:27). We must resist the devil (Js 4:7). We are to watch against the devil (1 Pet 5:8). But we cannot arrest the devil! Do not cross the Biblical boundaries. It's God's will that the devil roams about freely on the face of the earth today. Jesus had many encounters with Satan. At the maximum He said, "Get behind me, Satan!" Nothing beyond that. The time when Satan would be bound is not now. It will be during the Millennium. See Revelation 20:1-3, "I saw an angel coming down from Heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that Serpent of old who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a 1000 years. And he cast him into the bottomless pit and shut him up and set a seal on him so that he should deceive the nations no more till the 1000 years were finished. But after these things he must be released for little while." If you bind Satan today, you cannot cast him out; you will have to only carry him away!

In prayer we address God, not Satan. Jesus called His experience in Gethsemane as the "hour and power of darkness" (Lk 22:53). He simply resorted to prayer in reverential fear unto His Father (Heb 5:7,8). In a sense, on the Cross, the Lord has already bound Satan the strong man. "Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it" (Col 2:15). It was by disarming Satan that Jesus defeated him on the Cross. Jesus the "stronger man" bound the "strong man" (Lk 11:20-22). It's because of this victory that today we are able to release Satan's captives and bring them into the Kingdom of God.

Don't try to "banish" Satan either. God has let him to be here around. He is to be thrown into the "bottomless pit" during the Millennium only (Rev 20:1-3). And don't try to "burn" Satan. That is not your job. 2 Thessalonians 2:8 tells us when that will be done. "And then the lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming." If there was no need for Satan to be here today on the earth, God would have fried him years and years ago!

Don't ever "blaspheme" or curse Satan. Referring to false teachers, Apostle Jude writes, "These dreamers...speak evil of dignitaries. Yet Michael the Archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke you!" (Jude 8,9). Even as the Archangel remained cautious, we are to. Don't ever cross the limits and get into unnecessary trouble.

Folks quote Daniel's prayer as their supporting illustration for binding or banishing Satan (Dan 9,10). Daniel prayed and was heard up in Heaven. But the answer to his prayer was delayed. He did not address the King of Persia. He kept on praying and waited in the presence of the Lord. God dealt with the King of Persia through an angel. Daniel did not cry aloud and say, "O, you, King of Persia, come down! Give way for the answer to my prayer to reach me." That's not what he prayed. He kept on praying, "O Lord... O Lord... O Lord" (Dan 9:19).

Beloved, let's stick to the Biblical pattern. Be God-conscious, not devil-conscious, in prayer. We have the Throne of Grace open for us (Heb 4:16). The blood of Christ is sprinkled for us (Heb 10:19-22). The Heavenly Advocate is pleading for us (1 Jn 2:1). He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world (1 Jn 4:4). Think on these things. In the name of spirituality, oftentimes the devil distracts us from Biblical teaching and we are not aware that we are deceived. It is important that we are **spiritual**, but it's even more necessary that we stay **Scriptural**.

### How not to Pray

## 3

### Do not forget the Father.

Whom to address in prayer has not been properly taught to Christians today. Most of the modern Christians address their prayers to Jesus, because that's how many preachers pray. But the Bible consistently teaches that in prayer we must primarily address the "Father" in Heaven. Look at what the Lord Jesus has taught us in His great Sermon on the Mount: "When you pray ... pray to your **Father** who is in the secret place; and your **Father** who sees in secret will reward you openly" (Mt 6:6). He added, "In this manner, therefore pray: Our **Father** in Heaven,..." (v 9). Can words be clearer?

Elsewhere Jesus has given us a doctrinal teaching on this matter. John 16:23,24, "In that day you will ask **Me** nothing. 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." What does this mean? During the 3½ years when the Lord Jesus walked and worked with the disciples and taught them, whatever they wanted they asked Him directly. But in this passage He was talking about another dispensation, another era, that would usher in. "**In that day** you will ask **Me** nothing." He amplifies it further in the next verse: "**Until now** you have asked nothing in My Name." This is a dispensational change. When you come down in the same Chapter, the Lord reasons about this teaching. Verses 25-27, "These things I've spoken to you in figurative language, but the time is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but I will tell you plainly about the Father. In that day you will ask in My Name, and I do not say to you that I shall pray the Father for you, for the **Father Himself** loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came forth from God. I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father."

This teaching is in line with what Jesus in the Garden Tomb told Mary Magdalene, when He appeared to her after resurrection: "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God" (Jn 20:17). He was just saying, "You go and tell My brothers that the Father to whom I'm ascending is your Father too!" A new relationship! Hallelujah!

Who baptizes us with the Holy Spirit? It's the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what John the Baptist told his disciples: "I baptize you with water; one mightier than I is coming, whose sandals I am not worthy even to bear. He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mt 3:11). Yes, Jesus Christ is the Baptizer with the Holy Spirit. Even then the Lord has taught us to ask the **Father** for the Holy Spirit: "If you then being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly **Father** give the Holy Spirit to those who ask **Him**?" (Lk 11:13).

Are you able to see the pattern? This is a progressive revelation for this dispensation. It's thrilling to know that the early disciples very quickly grasped this change. Here's an example: The apostles were threatened that they should not speak in the Name of Jesus any longer. So they went back to their companions and reported the matter to them. Look at the prayer they raised to God: "Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth ... Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word ... and that signs and wonders may be done in the Name of Your holy Servant Jesus" (Acts 4:24-30). See how clearly they were addressing the Father and referring to Jesus as "Your Holy Servant." Friends, study this prayer again and again. We should pattern our prayer according to the Biblical prescription.

Apostle Paul was consistent in this practice of addressing the Father in prayer—

Ephesians 2:18, "Through Christ we have access by one Spirit TO the Father." We pray thro' Christ **to the Father** by the Spirit.

Ephesians 3:14, "I bow my knees TO the **Father** of our Lord Jesus Christ." Beautiful, isn't it?

These are not isolated texts. This practice runs consistently throughout the New Testament—

Romans 8:15, "You did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, **Abba Father!**" By the Spirit of God we cry out, "Abba, Father!"

The present Heavenly ministry of Christ is best understood and realised only when we address "God the Father" in our prayer. As the very "Son of God" He has become our "High Priest" to present our needs before the Father. Here's a passage which pictorially explains this truth: Hebrew 4:14-16, "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the Throne of Grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Not only as the High Priest but also as an Advocate the Lord Jesus Christ pleads to the Father on our behalf when we go to the Father. Apostle John puts it this way: "If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 Jn 2:1). When we confess our sins to God the Father, the righteousness of Christ covers us to make us acceptable before the thrice-holy God who cannot wink at sin!

Christ is not only our Advocate, but He is also our non-stop Intercessor to complete our salvation. The Bible says, "He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God *through* Him, since He ever lives to make intercession for them" (Heb 7:24,25).

Thus, the Trinity of Godhead is best understood when we follow the Scriptural teaching of praying **to** the Father, **in the Name** of Jesus, **by** the power of the Holy Spirit.

Does it mean that we cannot ever address Jesus in prayer? Addressing Jesus in prayer can be an exception. It cannot be a general rule. Folks quote Stephen's prayer at his martyrdom. When Stephen was being stoned by the persecutors, he was bleeding to death and he saw the heavens open and said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" (Acts 7:55). He saw Jesus, the One who had been seated, now standing up! Encouraged by that vision, as a prayer of commitment and dedication, he said "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (v 60). This is not a model prayer. We should deduce doctrine from the consistent teaching that runs through the Bible and not from such an isolated incident.

We may teach children to pray, "Jesus, bless me, keep me, come with me and so on." But when we grow out of childhood, we should embrace the Biblical pattern. We must teach likewise the non-Christian converts as they learn to pray. This change is not easy and cannot happen overnight, because for so many years we have been praying that way. However we must take a conscious effort to correct all our spiritual exercises to fall in line with the Biblical pattern.

The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are coequal. But they maintain an order. We must recognise it in all our spiritual exercises, especially in prayer. Do not forget the Father!

## 4

### Do not seek mediators.

Unfortunately the call of preachers every-where is, "Rush all your prayer requests to us immediately and we will pray for you!" People who are desperately seeking for some help would not try to find out whether this practice is Biblical or not. Keep your hearts open to see what the Bible says on this important issue.

There were two groups of people in the Old Testament, the priests and the ordinary people. This has had a paradigm shift in the New Testament. Now we don't have two tiers; we don't have two classes of citizens in the Church of Jesus Christ. Turn to 1 Peter 2:5, "You also as living stones are being built up, a spiritual house, a holy Priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." In verse 9, Apostle Peter repeats this truth: "You are a chosen generation, a royal Priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." The repetition here is to emphasize this basic New Testament doctrine. According to the New Testament, there are no two groups of people in the Church called clergy and laity. No! This applies to any Church and any denomination.

All the children of God are clergy! It cannot be proved otherwise from the New Testament. This new order began on the Day of Pentecost. People were filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in tongues praising God. The onlookers, unable to understand what was happening, asked the Apostles, "What is this?" Immediately Peter answered with a prophetic revelation made by Prophet Joel: "In the last days I will pour out My Spirit upon **all flesh**" (Acts 2:17). That word "all" means, every child of God, which was not so in the Old Testament times. Only the officers or leaders like Prophets, Priests and Kings had been anointed with oil. They were a special category. But now it is on "all flesh!" No sex distinction: "sons and daughters." No age distinction: "Young men and old men." No class distinction: "men servants and women servants" (vv 17,18). "Whoever" calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved and anointed! (v21). This understanding of the "priesthood of all believers" is basic to Christian life and ministry. This truth must be restored to the rank and file of our Churches. This is the Reformation truth that Martin Luther in the 16th Century stood for. If you are a Protestant, then you should protest anything that goes against the Bible. You protest anything that is unbiblical.

What is prayer? It is the children of God asking God their Father. That's what Jesus taught: "Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened unto you" (Mt 7:7). He did not stop there. He went one step further, and said, "Because, everyone who asks receives" (v8). The emphasis is on "everyone." "Everyone" who asks receives. And after that Jesus said, "If you then being evil, know, how to give good gifts to your **children**, how much more will your **Father** who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him?" (v 11). If you are a child of God, God is your Father and you can directly and freely ask Him.

Jesus, before His ascension, told the disciples, "It is to your advantage that I go away ... I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Comforter" (Jn 16:7; 14:16). Which means, "I am the First Comforter. I am the First Helper. I will send you another Comforter. The Holy Spirit is the Second Comforter. The Holy Spirit is the Second Helper." Where are these two Comforters? Where are these two Helpers? The First Comforter is seated in Heaven for us (Rom 8:34). And the Second Comforter is resident in our hearts for us (Rom 8:26,27). Ask yourselves, "Do I need a third Comforter? Do I need a third Helper?"

The Roman Catholics worship Mary who brought forth Jesus into the world. And Protestants hero-worship preachers who bring them to Jesus. Both these groups need to repent. The Roman Catholics as well as the Protestants must come back to the Bible. I want to serve a warning: "If God does not listen to **your** prayer, nobody can recommend your case before Him!"

Apostle James in his practical Epistle gives us the right prescription on prayer while suffering. "Is anyone among you suffering? Let **him** pray. Is anyone cheerful? let him sing Psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the Church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in

the Name of the Lord" (Jn 5:13,14). If anyone suffers, let "him" pray. The sufferer is the one who is to start praying. If he is perhaps too sick or weak to exercise faith and pray, he can call for the elders of the Church. Here again, it's not an "elder" but "elders." It's in the plural. These are leaders, pastors and elders. Whichever Church you may belong to, call them. Don't say that your pastors or elders do not have the gift of healing. That is not what the Bible teaches here. Let your elders pray over you, anointing you with oil in the Name of the Lord. Then, the prayer of faith will save you, and the Lord will raise you up. God honours the Church leadership.

Then comes the important step of confessing sins "to one another," and praying for one another that you may be healed (v16). As we set right matters with one another we can experience the healing stream of God. That's what we read in the Book of Lamentations: "I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of His wrath. He has led me and made me walk in darkness and not in light. Even when I cry and shout, He shuts out my prayer... You have covered Yourself with a cloud that prayer should not pass through" (Lam 3:1,2,8,44). What should we do in such a situation. "Let him sit alone and keep silent, because God has laid it on him" (v 28). This is reflection. Then "let him put his mouth in the dust that there may yet be hope" (v29). This is repentance. "Let us search out and examine our ways and turn back to the Lord" (v 40). We try to bypass this vital step. When I become sick or go through some suffering, I must pray, I must sit, I must examine myself and I should set matters right. Then I can inform the elders of my Church. Instead of going through these steps, we are trying to take shortcuts.

A word about "anointing with oil." The Bible does not say, "anoint the oil," rather "anoint *with* oil." It's not anointing the oil but anointing "with" oil. The Christian ministry becomes a business when the Biblical prescriptions are violated and all kinds of commercialisation of religion creep in. God does not sanctify objects today. I can keep on praying for the oil, even with fasting. Nothing would happen to the oil. It does not get sanctified. We can use oil only as a point of contact to pray for the sick. Attaching sanctity to objects and places is outright idolatry. These are all relics of the Dark Ages. When Christians come back to the Bible, making prayer a business will end.

A mention must be made here regarding the so-called "blessed cloth" also. The Apostles never prayed over cloth pieces and sent them out to the sick. Rather, the people once took hand-kerchiefs and aprons from Paul's body to the sick. This was not the normal practice. It was "unusual!" (Acts 19:11,12). No such regular practice or prescription.

There's another unscriptural practice that's in vogue. Preachers pray over a glass of water and call it "holy" water to be sprinkled around the bed of the sick, on walls and doorposts. This is just paganism. The Scripture that's quoted to support this practice is John 5:1-9 where we read about the Pool of Bethesda. John was actually reporting the prevailing Jewish belief concerning the waters in this Pool. Undoubtedly there was no power in that water. That water would have splashed on the sick man so often, everytime someone stepped down into the Pool, during those 38 years! Neither did Jesus help him to get into the Pool!

Every preacher has enough of problems of his own. How can any preacher pray for you, that too with tears, "every day?" Don't be foolish enough to believe such impractical promises. God does not give more than 24 hours a day to any preacher! As a preacher myself for over 45 years, I tell you, "Beware of Preachers!"

### How not to Pray

## 5

### **Do not harbour hatred in your heart.**

In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount is a model Prayer which the Lord Jesus taught His disciples (Mt 6:9-13). We call this the Lord's Prayer. Notice what Jesus said immediately after teaching this Prayer: "If you **forgive** men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (vv 14,15).

Here is an interesting observation. There are totally seven requests in the Lord's Prayer. And the fifth request refers to forgiveness. Isn't it something that of all the seven requests the Lord picked up just that one which refers to forgive-ness? But these days there is an overemphasis on faith but very little is talked about forgiveness. But the consistent Biblical teaching is otherwise.

In the 11th Chapter of Mark's Gospel we come across the incident where the Lord cursed a fig tree because it had lot of pretense and no fruits. And the next morning when they came that side one of the disciples exclaimed, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that You cursed has withered away" (v21). Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God," and He added, "Assuredly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, Be removed and be cast into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says." Without stopping here He went one step further, "**And** whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, **forgive** him that your Father in Heaven may also forgive your trespasses" (v 25). Having spoken about the power of faith (vv 22-24), He went on to stress the absolute necessity of forgiveness. The two sides of the coin are faith and forgiveness. "Whatever" we ask must be with faith. "Whenever" we pray it must be with the spirit of forgiveness.

Prophet Isaiah thundered this truth in the ears of the people of his generation: "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, nor His ear heavy that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He will not hear" (Isa 59:1,2)." What were those sins? "Your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue has muttered perversity. No one calls for justice, nor does any plead for truth" (vv 3,4). This passage speaks about interpersonal relationships. That's what's meant by "hands full of blood" (1 Jn 3:15). If our interpersonal relationships are not proper, our prayers will not be answered. Isaiah stresses on lips and tongue (Isa 59:3,4). What we speak to men and what we speak to God are interconnected. If we are not right with men, we cannot be right with God.

Apostle James advocates this truth strongly. James 3:8-10, "No man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so!" We need to be extremely cautious about the words of communication. Do we use abusive language? Are our words angry? Do we make accusing statements? Do we pass arrogant comments? Unless we set these matters right, we cannot be effective in prayer life. That's why the admonition: "Confess your trespasses to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed" (Js 5:16). Confess to "one another." There is a mutuality of confession. Only after such confessions, our prayers will be effective. The latter portion of the same verse says, "The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." Our prayers become effective and avail much only when we confess our faults to one another, and set right our relational problems. Here is a call for reconciliation and restitution. Sit down in the presence of God, make a list of people whom you should forgive and to whom you should apologise, and act on it. Then your conscience will be clear. "If our heart condemns us God is greater than our heart and knows all things. If our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence towards God. And, whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight" (1 Jn 3:20-22).

If we should keep our conscience clear, we must obey His commandments, which are twofold—"Believe on Him," and "Love one another." Faith and forgiveness are inseparable. Beloved, unless we take a serious view of this matter, our praying will actually be losing ground. After clashing with someone we usually pray, "God, protect me as the apple of Your eye." We fail to remember that as much as we are precious to God as the apple of His eye, the other person is also the apple of God's eye—may be the next eye! All the children of God are various organs of the Body of Christ. If a particular part or an organ becomes defective we don't immediately amputate it and throw it away. We often forget how patient God has been with us. Let us be so patient with people. Don't take this teaching lightly. It is a priority.

Turn again to the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:23, 24, "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.” When God says “first,” He means “first.” Contextually speaking, “something against you” refers to abusive words. Verse 22, “Whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of judgement. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. Whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hellfire.” Did you notice the word “danger” comes thrice in one single verse? Danger of the judgement, danger of the council and danger of hellfire.

Everybody today is talking about revival. By improving a programme, revival does not come. By inviting a more popular preacher, revival does not come. By increasing the number of musical instruments, revival does not come. Revival will come when every member in the Church begins to set things right with one another. Don’t wait for it to start with the other person. **You** take the first step. Don’t argue in your mind about who should take the initiative. You who come to the altar, you who want to pray, you go and get reconciled and then come and offer the gift.

### How not to Pray

## 6

### Do not be selfish.

This generation is called the ‘me’ generation. The question everywhere and at every juncture is, What do “I” get out of it? Selfishness is more today than at anytime in all human history. These days are predicted as “perilous and dangerous times” when Paul was writing his second letter to Timothy. “Know this, in the last days, perilous times will come. Men will be **lovers of themselves**, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Tim 3:1-4). Of the 18 evils listed out here the first one is that men will be “lovers of themselves.”

This spirit of selfishness that has pervaded religion, especially into Christianity, reaches its climax and zenith in our prayer exercise. Our prayers are by and large self-centered. “My” needs, “my” job, “my” family... that’s what overoccupies us. If you turn to the model Prayer taught by our Lord, which we are referring to often, which most of us know by heart, it begins as, “**Our** Father who is in Heaven.” It does not say “my” Father in Heaven, but “our” Father in Heaven. Give “**us**” this day “**our**” daily bread; not give “me” this day “my” daily bread. Forgive “**us**” “**our**” debts as “**we**” forgive “**our**” debtors. Do not lead “**us**” into temptation, but deliver “**us**” from evil. Everything is in the plural. This is not accidental. Jesus wanted to teach us that we should be selfless in our prayer. God has no respect for selfish prayers.

In a prophetic message in the Old Testament God tells His people, “When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves and make yourselves clean. Put away the evil of your doing from before My eyes” (Isa 1:15,16). What did God mean when He said, “Your hands are full of blood?” The answer follows: “Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice, rebuke the oppressor, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow” (vv 16b,17). In other words, when our prayers are overoccupied with our own needs, with no concern for others, God has least respect for such prayers. He will hide His face from us.

Today there is a revival of praise and worship everywhere. When we get excited about this praise and worship we should not lose sight of the sufferings of people around us. Here’s a forthright admonition: Hebrews 13:15,16, “By Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His Name.” Yes, God encourages non-stop praise and worship. This is only one side. The next verse speaks of the other side: “**But** do not forget to do good and to share; for with such sacrifices God is well-pleased” (v 16). The tendency to “forget” the needs of others is checked here.

Learn to come out of your self-sympathy, whatever be your problem. Beloved, we must bear in mind an important truth: The problems and sufferings of other people are more and worse than ours. This is

best illustrated in the life of Patriarch Job. He lost everything he had, in quick succession (Job 1:13-19). But instead of sinking himself in self-sympathy, he started praying for his friends. He had three friends who kept counselling him with empty words. The Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "My wrath is aroused against you and the two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right as my servant Job did" (Job 42:7). We have no Biblical record of what misery actually came upon them. But I believe, it must have been terrible, because God said, "My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly" (v 8). Only the prayer of Job would arrest the tragedy that would otherwise come upon them. "The Lord restored Job's losses when he prayed for his friends" (v10). What a truth!

A Tamil proverb goes like this: "If you sumptuously feed someone else's child, your own child will grow well and on its own!" Let's take our eyes off from all our immediate, personal and selfish needs, and broaden and widen our horizon in our prayer exercise. May be you are already praying for others. Do you pray for strangers and your enemies? Look at what Jesus taught: "I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you and **pray** for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in Heaven, for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Mt 5:44,45).

Let's expand and enlarge our hearts to enclose and encompass those people who are outside, not necessarily belonging to our immediate circles. Let's have a big heart like our big God. He encompasses the good and the bad, the righteous and the unrighteous. God wants us to pray for all these people. That was the teaching Paul gave to Timothy: "I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions and giving of thanks be made for **all men**" (1 Tim 2:1). It's not a casual mentioning of "all men" in our prayers. We are called to "supplicate" for them, "pray" for them, and "intercede" for them. We are to "give thanks" to God for what He is going to do in and through their lives.

Pray for all men. Plead for them. Praise God for them. Give a new dimension to your prayers. Don't be selfish. Enlarge your heart and enclose as many people as possible. When your son or daughter is going to write an exam, don't stop with praying for him or her. Remember to pray for other students also who would be writing that examination, especially for those who are weak in studies, with all sincerity. Pray for those students who come from poor and disadvantageous backgrounds. That kind of prayer will gladden the heart of our loving God.

Another example: Suppose you have a son or a daughter in a marriageable age, it's natural that you pray with all burden and concern. At the same time, think of and pray for those parents who cannot afford to conduct a decent marriage for their sons and daughters. I will give you one more illustration: Suppose one of your own family members is killed in an automobile accident. You just cannot contain that sorrow. At the same time, don't forget to pray for the family of the paid driver who was also killed in that accident.

Keep stretching your imagination and include as many people as possible in prayer. Perhaps, as an exercise, you can write down all the specific needs of people that you could include in your regular prayer. Let "ours" become "others." Jesus did not live to please Himself. He always lived for others. Everything He did was for others. His prayers were not selfish. Take for example, His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. He did not pray for Himself to be protected by an angelic host. On the other hand, He prayed for His disciple, Simon Peter, and said, "Simon, Simon, indeed, Satan has asked for you that he may sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail" (Lk 22:31,32). In the wilderness, Jesus became hungry after 40 days of fasting. The devil suggested to Him, "Turn the stones into bread." Jesus replied, "I am living by every Word that comes out of the mouth of God." He did not perform a miracle for His own hunger. But He multiplied five loaves and two fish to feed the multitude. Let us follow Him and develop the spirit of selflessness in prayer.

## **Do not be earthlyminded.**

People wrongly think that Heaven is a supermarket, and prayer is a shopping list! We spend too much time asking God for our material needs and physical blessings. There needs to be a very strong and deliberate correction in this area. Once again, we will get back to the Lord's Prayer in His Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6:9-13). The seven requests in this prayer are: 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; Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; Lead us not into temptation; Deliver us from evil. If you carefully look at these seven requests, you will find only one of the seven refers to the material or physical or physiological need. The first three refer to the things of God: His Name, His Kingdom and His Will. And the last three refer to our "spiritual" needs: forgiveness of sins, victory over temptation and deliverance from evil.

Beloved, this should be the balance in our prayer. Yearn first for the things of God and then pray for your spiritual needs. These are the priorities. Only one out of the seven requests in the model Prayer is regarding our physical or material needs. This is where the people of Israel miserably failed. God brought them out of Egypt. He had large spiritual objectives concerning them. He wanted them to become a worshipping community. He wanted to use them to destroy all that was evil and wicked. He desired that they would be the chosen people through whom the entire world would be blessed. When they completely lost sight of these spiritual objectives, they got caught in their physical and material needs. They started murmuring against God: "We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic. But now our whole being is dried up. There is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes" (Num 11:5,6). God was angry towards this attitude of the people. He said, "The Lord will give you meat and you shall eat, not one day, nor ten days, nor twenty days, but for a whole month until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have despised the Lord who is among you and have wept before Him, saying, Why did we ever come up out of Egypt?" (vv 18-20). Yes, the Lord gave them the desires of their heart, but He sent leanness in their souls (Psa 106:15). Beloved, what happened to them is all examples and they are written for our own admonition. All the Old Testament incidents teach us spiritual lessons (1 Cor 10:11).

I often wonder why today, by and large, most of the Christians are overoccupied in their prayers with physical, material and physiological blessings. The pivotal reason for this trend is because of the most popular message that is heralded from most of our Christian pulpits, known as the Health and Wealth Gospel or the Prosperity Gospel. This is not the Gospel that Jesus preached. Take for example Matthew 6:31-33, "Do not worry, saying, What shall we eat, what shall we drink or what shall we wear? For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." "Worry" means overoccupation, anxiety, or something that would be bothering us all the time. Who are the Gentiles? Those who have not believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and have not become the children of God. They are those who are not worshipping the Living God. According to Jesus, only these unbelievers would be primarily going after these earthly things.

As for as God's people are concerned, they are to be seeking first His Kingdom and His righteousness, which mean spiritual things. The apostles very many times warned the believers of their time, about this very unhealthy practice. 1 Corinthians 15:19, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable." A poor man can go to Heaven. Why, a leper can go to Heaven. But a sinner, if he is not forgiven, cannot go to Heaven. As we seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, the secondary and circumferential things, in course of time, as God provides, will be added to us.

You must have gone to several Gospel Crusades. And you will find the video cameras being turned towards people who are sobbing and crying. I am not criticising it, but have you tried to find out why most of these people shed tears? They hear words from the pulpit, "Your husband does not love you...Your wife does not respect you... Your children do not obey you... nobody understands you. Fear not. Worry not. Jesus understands you!" Immediately tears roll down their cheeks. This is very natural and there is

nothing spiritual about it. No gospel preaching is necessary for that. You go to anybody and sympathetically say, "Don't worry, I understand what you are going through," anybody will cry! But there is a correction in the Bible about this situation. We can turn to the Bible for everything. The Bible is not only supreme, it is also sufficient. 2 Corinthians 7:10, "Godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation but the sorrow of the world produces death." There are two kinds of sorrow. One is sorrow over spiritual matters, which the Bible calls as "godly" sorrow. The other one concerns physical, material and financial problems, and the Bible calls it "worldly" sorrow. Worldly sorrow produces death. The end of it is no blessing. Initially there would be some excitement, but the end of it will be misery. But godly sorrow produces repentance, leading to salvation "not to be regretted." The call to weep, throughout the Bible, has chiefly been over spiritual condition: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep" (Jas 4:8,9). We are to weep for our doublemindedness and cat-on-the-wall walk.

You also must be quite aware of the habit of people making vows in prayer. "O God, if you do this for me, I will do this for You." Beware of making cheap vows unto God. Here is an example of a cheap vow: "Lord, if you give me a son, I will write a testimony for that magazine." Such folks are a liability to the Kingdom of God! Wastage of paper and ink! What happened to the standard of the Bible? There was a woman in the Old Testament. Her name was Hannah. She was childless and was reproached. She went into the presence of God and poured out her heart before Him in prayer. She made a vow: "O Lord of hosts! If you give Your maid servant a male child, I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life" (1 Sam 1:11). You see, she didn't even wait for him to graduate or take up a job. Even when he was still a "child," she took him and left him in the Temple in the care of priest Eli. How difficult it would have been for her to do so! She and her husband would visit him only once a year (1 Sam 2:19). She would stitch for him a "little robe" every year. Imagine her feelings with the needle and thread in her hand! That was real sacrifice. That you can call as a vow. Not writing a few lines for a magazine! This is where I see Christianity terribly backslidden. What did Hannah tell Eli? "What God gave me, I give back unto Him" (1 Sam 1:27,28).

Another classic example of spiritual-mindedness while making vows in prayer is King David. He was going through series of troubles and sufferings. Read his vow in Psalm 132:1-5, "Lord, remember David and all his affliction; how he swore to the Lord, and vowed to the mighty God of Jacob: Surely I will not go into the chamber of my house, or go up to the comfort of my bed; I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty God of Jacob." He vowed to sacrifice physical blessings— house...comfort... bed...sleep —for a spiritual cause.

Beloved, let's follow such lofty examples, and not come down to strike cheap bargains with God!

### **How not to Pray**

## **8**

### **Do not speak too much.**

In His very first teaching on prayer, the Lord Jesus spoke against vain repetitions. Even before He taught His disciples the model Prayer, and even before teaching them How to Pray, He taught them How not to Pray! Matthew 6:7, "When you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words." What is the modern practice corresponding to this? Suppose, you want a blessing, and you pray, 'Give Lord, give Lord, give Lord!' That's not the way any child talks to the father. That's the example Jesus presents in the very next verse: "Do not be like them. Because, your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him" (Mt 6:8). He does not say, "God" knows, but He says, "Your Father" knows. That makes all the difference. If we come to this fresh realisation, we will experience a great revolution in our prayer life.

Beloved, prayer is not to give informations to God but it is to develop intimacy with Him. Let me explain this. Suppose you have a problem, a need, a question, a crisis or a difficult situation. When you pray over that matter, you don't need to give God all the explanations about it, because your knowledge about your problem is much much less than God's knowledge about your problem. God knows everything.

You know only what you see and hear. But God knows what is unseen and untold. God knows the end from the beginning (Isa 46:10). So don't make prayer an elaborate presentation of facts before God but let it be the pouring out of your feelings to Him (1 Sam 1:12-16).

The Bible says that too much of talk in prayer is a sacrifice of fools. Ecclesiastes 5:1-3, "Walk prudently when you go to the House of God, and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. Don't be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth. Therefore let **your** words be few. For a dream comes through much activity, and a fool's voice is known by his many words." Is this not in the context of prayer?

David once prayed to God that God would set a watch over his mouth. Psalm 141:2,3, "Lord, let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting of my hands as the evening sacrifice. Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips." What David made as a prayer, his son Solomon gave as a prescription (cf. Eccl 5:1-3).

Prayer must be a two-way communication with God. Keep on listening to God, and in response speak to Him. Hear more and speak less. Apostle James has excellently presented this truth. James 1:17-19,21, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of Lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the Word of Truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures. Therefore, my beloved brothers, let every man be swift to hear, and slow to speak... Therefore receive with meekness the implanted Word, which is able to save your souls." Do you get the logic? The initiation for our spiritual birth is by God. "Of His own will ..." (v18). He caused our spiritual genesis by His Word. Therefore, let Him speak more. You be swift to hear rather than to speak. "Receive the Word with meekness"—This means a readiness and an earnestness to hear than being anxious to speak. The point is, we must be more interested in learning to change ourselves— "save your souls"—rather than lecturing to God.

The above truth was exemplified in Paul's life. He had a thorn in his flesh. It was bothering him all the time. It was actually "buffeting" him. And he sought the Lord in prayer. When he waited before the Lord, God gave him a Word: "My grace is sufficient for you... My strength will be made perfect in your weakness" (2 Cor 12:7-9). Did Paul receive that Word with meekness? Yes! This passage was written perhaps several years after this experience. He confessed, "Lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me." In other words, "It's easy for me to turn arrogant. It's possible that I go around parading with my spiritual revelations. I really tend to exalt myself. But in that situation, God implanted a Word. I received it with meekness. Today I don't exalt myself, I don't feel proud about my strength and skill. I will rather boast in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

Yes in prayer we must become earnest to hear what God has to say than being anxious to speak out volumes of words to Him. This is one reason why I encourage new disciples to read the Bible on their knees. I want to testify that most of my Biblical understanding was received when I studied my old Bible in the posture of kneeling. Keep your Bible open. Keep your heart open. Heaven will open up for you!

As you wait before the Lord in prayer, soak yourself with the Scriptures. That's what Jesus said, "If you abide in Me, and My **words** abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you" (Jn 15:7). Once you are saturated with the Bible you will not ask or pray for anything that is unscriptural or would not please God. Because, God's Word is God's will. That becomes your boundary. You will ask according to God's will and it shall be given to you. This was the one thing that David was constantly craving to get in his lifetime. Turn to Psalms 27:4. Most of us must have memorised this verse in Sunday School. "One thing I have desired of the Lord, that I will seek: That I may dwell in the House of the Lord all the days of my life." He gives the reason why he wants to always dwell in the Temple of the Lord: "To behold the beauty of the Lord; and to enquire in His temple." That is, I want to search His Word.

Don't preach to God in prayer! There was little Samuel. What did he say? "Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears" (1 Sam 3:9). But what do we say? "Hear, Lord, for Your servant speaks!" This should

change. Do not speak too much. Never forget the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The former presented his long biodata before God, whereas the latter just begged for God's mercy in a single sentence. He who emptied himself of words in prayer returned empty.

### How not to Pray

## 9

### **Do not act artificially or unseemly.**

Praise God for the Holy Bible. There is an interesting Name given to the Holy Bible in the Bible itself. It's the "Word of Truth" (2 Cor 6:7). It not only teaches us what truth is, but it also exposes to us errors. We are not aware of our errors until and unless the Word of God opens up our eyes.

Here is the 9th lesson on "How not to Pray"—

Do not be artificial. Do not act unseemly in prayer. This is an area where most of us need a genuine correction. We should not think that more noise in prayer means more power. More often than we think, shouting may actually mean lack of substance. If there is yelling and screaming, words become void of content and substance. We are mistaken if we think that praying in the Spirit means shouting aloud. We are called to worship God not only "in Spirit" but also "in truth."

Without apology I want to make a statement that too much of shouting is more pagan than Christian. I want to quote prophet Elijah here. We are aware of what happened at Mount Carmel (1 Ki 18). This was a confrontation between the prophet of God and the prophets of Baal. Prophet Elijah threw an open challenge on the prophets of Baal. He said, "God who answers by fire, He is God." The people started yelling and shouting and doing all sorts of things. Elijah started mocking at them. He said, "Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating or he is busy, or he is on a journey or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened" (v27). In response, "They cried aloud, and cut themselves as was their custom with knives and lances" (v28). This is paganism. Do you remember what we considered previously about what Jesus said? Excessive shouting is pagan. The prophets of Baal were doing what "their custom" was.

True there are times when our emotions are deeply stirred in prayer. Take the example of the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Luke 22:44, "Being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. And His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground." This is commented by the author of Hebrews, Hebrews 5:7, "Jesus in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear." Are you able to see there was nothing artificial here? You cannot artificially create a situation in which you would sweat blood, isn't it? The sins of the whole world came upon the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. He became sin for us (2 Cor 5:21). In that hour of agony and anguish, surrounded by the power of darkness, Jesus cried so. We have seen "shedding" blood but never "sweating" blood. There was nothing artificial about it.

Beloved, we should not mistake that quiet praying is powerless or Spiritless. There's a classic example in 1 Samuel 1. We meet Hannah who was in great bitterness and anguish of soul. "She was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the Lord and wept in anguish" (v10). We read, "As she continued praying before the Lord that Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard" (vv 12,13). It's possible, beloved, you can express your deep anguish of soul and vocalise your feelings to God in quietness. Hannah was pouring out her soul before God (v15). She said, "Out of the abundance of my complaint and grief I have spoken until now" (v16). Here was a woman who didn't even pray aloud but just moved her lips and expressed her deep desire unto God. She brought forth into the world a mighty prophet who was known for praying, even after his retirement (1 Sam 12:23). Here is where we must experience the depth, meaning and genuineness of prayer. Emotions can be there, but emotion-alism will rob prayer of its depth and sweetness.

A fact we should always remember when we come to God in prayer is that God is not far away. I have watched people answering overseas telephone calls. The way they shout and raise their voice, it appears as if they want to be heard in California from Calcutta! See what Moses reminded the people: "What great nation is there that has God **so near** to it, so as the Lord our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him?" (Dt 4:7). This was so under the Old Testament. The New Testament blessing is that God is "in the midst" of us and He is "inside" of us —not just near us! I want you to restore this forgotten truth in your exercise of prayer.

In the area of collective praying in Churches and Fellowships, there are certain guidelines and principles laid down for us by Apostle Paul when he was writing his First Epistle to the Corinthian Church. These truths are timeless. 1 Cor 14:32, "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets." No one should say, "What can I do? The Spirit came upon me; I could not control myself!" That's not what the Bible says. The Bible teaches that "we" are to control our spirits.

Then, "God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints" (v33). "All" the Churches mean Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal, mainline and free Churches. Verse 40, "Let all things be done decently and in order." This means you have freedom to do anything that exalts the Lord and edifies His people, but these should be done in order. I will give a simple example. Suppose there are twenty people gathered together for collective prayer for a time of intercession. When one person starts praying for a particular point, all others can follow him in a soft voice, agreeing with that person. But what generally happens is that all the rest start raising their voice and this poor fellow has to shout still louder. It sounds like a voice competition! When one person prays, others must softly support him and not suppress his voice.

Do not copy any preacher in prayer. God has blessed us with a daughter, and I know how she talks to me. If suddenly one day she starts talking to me like my neighbour's daughter, I will not cherish that. My daughter should not imitate another person's daughter. She has her own naturalness and originality. That's what I as the daddy will like in her. Don't copy a preacher but catch the spirit of prayer of that preacher if he or she is a prayerful person. God loves variety among His children. Do you know there are no two individuals who are exactly alike among the billions in the whole world? They say, even two complexions are not the same. That's the beauty of variety. That is the creative beauty of God. Why do you want to become a xerox copy of somebody? Be yourself. Be natural. Don't lose your originality. If you lose your originality, in course of time, you will rob yourself of your creativity also. Naturalness in prayer is real supernaturalness. Naturalness is genuineness. Be as you are and be real. That's what God loves.

If we maintain reverence in prayer, there will be no place for artificiality. That's why I always stress to people not to forsake and forget that old habit of kneeling in prayer. Have you noticed that the posture of kneeling in prayer is slowly becoming extinct in Churches today? Kneeling is transcultural, not eastern or western. It's Biblical culture. Even when the decree was signed by the King that no one should call on anybody else other than the King, the Bible says, "Daniel **knelt** down on his knees three times a day and prayed" (Dan 6:10). Apostle Paul in the New Testament says, "I bow my **knees** to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 3:14).

When you read all these instructions, you may have a question: "Can we not ever raise our voices in prayer?" No. The Bible says, "There's a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" (Eccl 3:7b). Psalm 46:10 exhorts us, "Be still and know that I am God." The very next Psalm calls us to "shout to God with a voice of triumph" (Psa 47:1).

Putting all these exhortations together, the lesson becomes clear that we must not act artificially or unseemly in prayer.

## Do not boast of praying.

This is the very first lesson that Jesus Christ gave on prayer. Matthew 6:5,6, “When you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men.” Here’s an excellent quote from a man of prayer by name E.M. Bounds: “The secret of prayer is praying in secret!” (If you want to grow in the art of prayer, read *The Complete Works of E.M. Bounds on Prayer*. He was a lawyer turned pastor, 1835-1913).

If you have been praying for somebody’s problem and that person tells you that his or her problem is sorted out or solved, you are tempted to say, “You know how much I prayed for you!” A school boy after his history examination tells a praying aunty, “Aunty, I did my History paper extremely well today!” She responds, “Son, do you know how much I prayed for you?” The following day was Geography paper, in which he fared poorly. He reports it to the aunty. What would she say then? When a prayer is answered, the credit should not go to the person who prayed but the Lord who answered prayer. Then you may ask, Did not Jesus tell Peter that He had prayed for him? Jesus prayed for Peter and told him “before” the crisis that He had prayed for him. And it was just in order to encourage Peter lest he would sink to the rock bottom (Lk 22:31,32). It’s wrong to quote this passage to get credit for our prayers. It was as if Jesus told Peter, “You would come up, don’t worry; I have prayed for you!”

Along with prayer comes fasting. Fasting is an integral part of prayer. Here again Jesus stressed that fasting should be as secretive as possible. “Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they appear to men to be fasting. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees you in secret will reward you openly” (Mt 6:16-18). But unfortunately fasting is perhaps the most advertised event in Christian circles. No wonder we accomplish little. You don’t need to go around telling people, “I am going on a 40-day fast... 20 days over, 25 days over, 27 days over... and so on.” Beloved, we have gone millions of miles away from the Biblical teaching on Christian disciplines. Pray, pray, pray, but don’t depend on your prayer. Depend on God.

I want to give you some reasons from the Bible why we should never ever boast about our prayers.

⌘ What God has given us of His own will and desire is much more than what He has given in answer to prayer. Most of what we have received from God is what we have received even before we uttered the first syllable in prayer. Look at James 1:17,18. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of Lights. Of His own will He brought us forth by the Word of truth.” Our very rebirth is because of God’s initiative. That’s why Jesus said, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you” (Jn 15:16). This is the right theology. The modern theology is becoming more and more man-centered. I want to stay with the Biblical theology which is: “**Of Him and through Him and to Him** are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen” (Rom 11:36).

⌘ Another reason why we should not boast of our prayers: Hebrews 2:4 says that all the signs, wonders, miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit are granted to us “according to His own will.”

⌘ God Himself has taught us and commanded us to pray. But He does “exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us. To Him be glory” (Eph 3:20,21). When God blesses us much more than even what we “think,” where’s the place for boasting about our prayers? So at the end of the day, it’s not the one who offered the prayer who should get the credit, but the One who answers the prayers. To Him belongs all the glory and honour. Never ever boast of praying.

## How not to Pray

# Conclusion

Interestingly all these 10 lessons are beautifully enshrined in the Lord's prayer.

1. Do not force God.  
*"Your will be done."*
2. Do not accuse Satan.  
*"Deliver us from the evil one."*
3. Do not forget the Father.  
*"Our Father who is in Heaven..."*
4. Do not seek mediators.  
God is our *"Father"* and we, as His children, can go to Him directly. He is in *"Heaven"* which is now open for us.
5. Do not harbour hatred.  
*"Forgive us as we forgive others."*
6. Do not be selfish.  
*"Our"* daily bread, not my daily bread.  
Forgive *"us our"* sins, not just my sins.  
Deliver *"us,"* not just me.
7. Do not be earthlyminded.  
Only one of the seven requests is about our material needs:  
*"Give us this day our daily bread."*  
  
*"Your Kingdom come."*  
Yes, we are to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.
8. Do not speak too much.  
The Lord's Prayer is the shortest but the sweetest and the stoutest prayer.
9. Do not act artificially.  
*"In this manner, pray: Our Father..."* Pray naturally as a child talks to his father.
10. Do not boast of praying.  
*"For yours is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, forever."*

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