
Prayer Bible Study

Matthew 6:5-15. 4 sessions of about 45 minutes, or one longer session. For small groups and personal study.

When his disciples asked how to pray, Jesus gave them a short prayer, now called the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13, Luke 11:2-4). It starts with God: his name, his kingdom and his will. Then it asks for daily bread, forgiveness and rescue from evil. Around it Jesus warns against praying to be seen or piling up words, and he tells his followers to keep asking a Father who wants to give.

READ TOGETHER: MATTHEW 6:5-15

⁵ And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. Truly I tell you, they already have their full reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your inner room, shut your door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not babble on like pagans, for they think that by their many words they will be heard. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. ⁹ So then, this is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread. ¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. ' ¹⁴ For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive yours.

Scripture from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), public domain.

BACKGROUND

Where the prayer sits in Matthew

The Lord's Prayer is in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 to 7). Tyndale's study notes say that in the sermon "Jesus summarizes the requirements of discipleship." Chapter 6 opens with three things devout Jews did: giving to the poor, praying and fasting (6:1-18). Jesus does not cancel any of them. He changes who they are for.

Each one comes with the same contrast. The hypocrites do it "to be seen by men" and "already have their full reward." The disciple does it in secret, and "your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (6:4, 6:6, 6:18). The prayer itself arrives as the answer to a bad habit: "do not babble on like pagans" (6:7).

Two versions of the prayer

Luke gives a shorter form, and a different setting. There a disciple watches Jesus pray and asks him to teach them, "just as John taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). Many scholars think Jesus taught the prayer more than once, in more than one form. Either way, the two versions show it was given as a pattern as well as a set of words. Matthew introduces it with "this is how you should pray" (6:9).

One day in a place where Jesus had just finished praying, one of His disciples requested, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." So Jesus told them, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation. '" (Luke

11:1-4)

Praying to a Father

Jews in Jesus' day kept set hours of prayer through the day, as the Bible dictionary entry on prayer notes. Jesus does not abolish set prayers. He gives one. What he stresses is the relationship. "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (6:8), so prayer is not a way to inform God or wear him down.

Luke follows the prayer with a story about a friend at midnight and a promise. Keep asking, Jesus says, because a good father gives good gifts. In verse 13 the gift he names is the Holy Spirit.

So I tell you: Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. (Luke 11:9-10)

When we do not know what to say

The Lord's Prayer is short. Paul admits that sometimes believers do not know what to pray at all, and he says the Spirit helps them. Christians have leaned on both: words Jesus gave, and a Spirit who prays when words run out.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know how we ought to pray, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans too deep for words. And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27)

THE PRAYER, LINE BY LINE

The prayer has two halves. The first three requests are about God. The last three are about us. Jesus then comments on one line, the one about forgiveness.

Our Father in heaven (6:9)

The prayer opens with a family word. "Our" means it is prayed with others, even when it is prayed alone. "In heaven" keeps the closeness from turning casual: this Father is also the Lord over all. Jesus has already said "your Father" five times in 6:1-8.

Hallowed be your name (6:9)

To hallow is to treat as holy. In the Bible a name stands for the person, so this asks that God would be known and honored for who he is. Most readers take it as both a request and a commitment. We ask God to show his holiness, and we ask to honor his name in how we live.

Your kingdom come, your will be done (6:10)

Tyndale's notes on Matthew say "Kingdom of Heaven" is "a roundabout way for Jews to say 'Kingdom of God.'" Jesus announced that kingdom as near (4:17). The prayer asks for it to come in full and for God's will to be done here as it already is in heaven. Jesus prayed the same words of surrender in Gethsemane (26:42).

Give us this day our daily bread (6:11)

The Greek word translated "daily" is rare, and it may mean bread for today or bread for the coming day. Either way it is a small request, for enough. Many readers also hear an echo of the manna in the wilderness, given one day at a time (Exodus 16). Later in the chapter Jesus tells his followers not to worry about tomorrow (6:34).

Forgive us our debts (6:12)

Matthew's word is "debts". Luke's version says "sins" (Luke 11:4). Sin is pictured as something owed to God that we cannot pay. The request is tied to how we treat others: "as we also have forgiven our debtors." Jesus tells a whole parable about a forgiven debtor who refuses to forgive (Matthew 18:21-35).

Lead us not into temptation (6:13)

The word for temptation can also mean testing or trial. James 1:13 says God tempts no one, so most readers take this as a plea to be kept from the kind of trial that would overwhelm us. "Deliver us from the evil one" can also be translated "from evil". The BSB chooses the personal reading.

Forgive, and be forgiven (6:14-15)

Jesus adds one comment after the prayer, and he picks the line about forgiving others. This does not mean forgiveness can be earned by forgiving. The prayer starts with grace from a Father. It means a person who has been forgiven, and who refuses to forgive, has not understood what they received.

SESSION 1 OF 4

Pray to your Father in secret

Read Matthew 6:5-8. See what Jesus warns against, and who prayer is for.

Also read: Matthew 6:1-4; Matthew 6:16-18; Luke 18:9-14.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. Jesus describes two wrong ways to pray in verses 5 to 8. What are they, and who does each one?
2. Read 6:1-4 and 6:16-18. What pattern repeats across giving, praying and fasting?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. What reward do the hypocrites get? What reward does the Father give?
4. If the Father knows what we need before we ask (6:8), why pray at all?
5. Does the "inner room" rule out praying together? Look at how the prayer itself begins with "our".

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Where are you tempted to pray, or to sound spiritual, for an audience?
7. Where and when could you have an "inner room" this week? Be specific.

SESSION 2 OF 4

Your name, your kingdom, your will

Read Matthew 6:9-10. See why the prayer starts with God before it gets to us.

Also read: Luke 11:1-2; Matthew 4:17; Matthew 26:36-42.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. List the first three requests. Whose name, kingdom and will are they about?
2. Compare Luke 11:2. What is the same, and what is shorter?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. What does it mean to call God "Father" and "in heaven" in the same breath?
4. In Matthew 4:17 Jesus says the kingdom is near. Why would he teach his followers to keep asking for it to come?
5. Read Matthew 26:36-42. How does Jesus pray "your will be done" when it costs him?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. How much of your praying starts with God, and how much starts with your list?
7. Where do you find it hardest to pray "your will be done" right now?

SESSION 3 OF 4

Bread, forgiveness and rescue

Read Matthew 6:11-15. See what Jesus teaches us to ask for ourselves, and why forgiveness gets the extra word.

Also read: Exodus 16:4; Matthew 18:21-35; James 1:13-14.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. List the three requests in verses 11 to 13. How big is each one?
2. Which request does Jesus explain in verses 14 and 15?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Read Exodus 16:4. What might asking for bread one day at a time teach?
4. Read Matthew 18:21-35. How does the parable help explain 6:14-15? Does it mean forgiveness is earned?
5. James 1:13 says God tempts no one. What, then, are we asking in "lead us not into temptation"?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Is there someone you need to forgive before you can pray this line honestly? You do not need to say who.
7. What trial or temptation would you ask the group to pray about with you this week?

SESSION 4 OF 4

Ask, seek, knock

Read Luke 11:5-13. See why Jesus tells his followers to keep asking, and what the Father gives. Also read: Luke 18:1-8; Psalm 13; Philippians 4:4-7.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. In the story of the friend at midnight, why does the man finally get up?
2. What gift does the Father give in verse 13?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Jesus argues from the lesser to the greater: "how much more". What is he saying about God?
4. Read Psalm 13. How does an honest complaint fit with persistent, trusting prayer?
5. Does "everyone who asks receives" mean we always get what we ask for? Use the gift in verse 13 to answer.

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. What have you stopped asking God for? Why did you stop?
7. Close by praying the Lord's Prayer together slowly, pausing after each line for the group to add their own requests.

ONE-SESSION PATH

The Lord's Prayer in one evening

Read all of Matthew 6:5-15. About 45 to 60 minutes.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. What two wrong ways to pray does Jesus describe in verses 5 to 8?
2. Split the prayer in verses 9 to 13 into two halves. What is each half about?
3. Which line does Jesus explain afterward, in verses 14 and 15?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

4. Why might the prayer put God's name, kingdom and will before our bread?
5. If the Father already knows what we need (6:8), what is prayer for?
6. How can forgiving others be tied to being forgiven without becoming a way to earn it?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

7. Which line of the prayer is hardest for you to mean right now?
8. Close by praying the Lord's Prayer together slowly, pausing after each line for the group to add their own requests.

FOR THE LEADER

- Read the passage aloud at the start of every session. Most of your group will know the prayer by heart. Hearing it in context, after the warning about praying for show, makes familiar words land again.
- People will say the prayer the way their church says it: "debts" or "trespasses", with or without the closing words of praise. Let both stand. Neither one is a mistake.
- Do not turn the prayer into a formula that works if said correctly. Jesus gives it right after warning against prayers that rely on many words.
- Session 3 touches forgiveness. Some people in your group may carry real harm done to them. Forgiving is not the same as excusing, and it does not require trusting someone who is still dangerous. If it comes up, say so gently and follow up in private.
- Some will have prayed for something for years with no answer they can see. Psalm 13 is there for them. Do not explain their situation for them.
- Leave real time to pray at the end of each session. A study on prayer that never prays has missed its own point.
- If someone shares something that needs more than a group discussion, follow up with them privately and involve your pastor.

WHERE CHRISTIANS READ IT DIFFERENTLY

Debts or trespasses?

Matthew's word is "debts" (6:12) and Luke's is "sins" (Luke 11:4). Many churches say "trespasses", the word older English prayer books used, which also matches Jesus' comment in Matthew 6:14-15. All three name the same thing: wrongs we cannot repay. The difference is a matter of custom, not of meaning.

What about "For Yours is the kingdom"?

Many churches end the prayer with words of praise to God's kingdom, power and glory. Those words are absent from the earliest manuscripts of Matthew and Luke, which is why most modern translations, the BSB included, do not print them in the text. Christians were praying a form of that ending very early, and it fits Scripture's own praise of God (1 Chronicles 29:11). Saying it is fine. It is best understood as the church's response rather than as Jesus' words in Matthew.

Is it a prayer to recite or a pattern to follow?

Both have long support. Matthew says "this is how you should pray," which sounds like a pattern, while Luke has "when you pray, say", which sounds like words to use. Many churches pray it word for word every week. Many Christians also use its order to shape their own prayers. Jesus' warning in 6:7 applies to both: the words are not a technique.

Does God always give what we ask?

Jesus says "everyone who asks receives" (Luke 11:10). In the same breath he says the Father gives "good gifts" and names the Holy Spirit. Most Christians read the promise as a promise about the Father's goodness, not a guarantee of the outcome we wanted. Jesus himself asked for the cup to pass and then prayed "your will be done" (Matthew 26:39-42). Unanswered prayer is not proof that someone lacked faith.

SOURCES

Berean Standard Bible. Berean Bible. Public domain. Scripture text of Matthew 6:5-15, Luke 11:1-4 and 11:9-10, and Romans 8:26-27.

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