

Living in God's Kingdom

Lesson 8: Prayer

Notes for the leader: This is the eighth in a series of lessons about "Living in the Kingdom. This lesson focuses on several things Jesus taught his disciples about prayer.

Introduction

Jesus told people that the Kingdom of God is not a **place**. He said **that if you have given your life to God**, and let Him become your Lord and Savior, "**The Kingdom of God is within you.**" (Luke 17:21) This means **you can be part of the Kingdom of God** now, today. It's not something that will happen **someday**, it's something you can be part of **here and now**, if you're willing to let Jesus be the Lord of your life, and it lasts **forever!**

Being part of the Kingdom of God gives you one of the greatest privileges you can possibly imagine: **being able to talk directly with God Himself**, the Creator and Ruler of the Universe. We call this privilege of talking with God "prayer."

Let's start out by looking at several things Jesus taught his disciples about prayer. Turn first to Matthew 7:7-11.

Matthew 7:7-11

"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.

"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?

Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?

If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

This passage teaches us three important things:

- God wants us to communicate with him
- Like a loving father, he wants to give us what's best for us -- peace, joy, a full life...
- Therefore, we can come to talk with God in confidence, not in fear

Now turn to Matthew 6:5-8.

Matthew 6:5-8

"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. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

This passage teaches us that

- Prayer should be a **personal communication** with God. It should **never** be something we do to impress people.
- God **knows us completely**. Jesus said that he even knows how many hairs are on our heads. I don't know how many hairs I have, but God knows. He knows me better than I know myself! That means I can't **fool** him, and I can't "**con**" him. I **have** to be completely honest with him, because he knows everything I'm thinking. Prayer is **not** a **negotiation** with God. I can't make "**deals**" with Him. He doesn't **need** my deals. He doesn't **want** my deals. He wants **me!**
- God **knows what we need** before we ask him. Notice that Jesus says "what we **need**," not "what we **want**." What we want and what we need are often two completely different things!

Here's a question to think about: if God **wants** to give me what's good for me, and he **knows** what I need before I ask him **why do I have to ask?** Why doesn't He just go ahead and give me what I need?

We'll come back to this question later in the lesson.

The discussion questions for this lesson are a little different from the usual ones.

The assignment is to read through the "example" prayer that Jesus gives to the disciples -- the prayer we know as The Lord's Prayer, or the "Our Father" -- and to find and discuss as many different kinds of prayer as you can.

Matthew 6:9-13

This, then, is how you should pray:

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. "

Notes for the leader: Hand out copies of the Small-Group Discussion Questions to each person. Depending on the size of the group, have them break into small groups of four to ten. Make sure that each group has a capable leader, who can keep the discussion moving and well-focused. Make sure the groups understand how much time they have. 15 minutes should be a minimum. 20 minutes is better. Give each group a time warning three or four minutes before they need to reassemble as a large group, so they can bring their discussion to an orderly conclusion.

Follow-up Discussion

Notes for the leader: The various topics on the following list can be addressed in any order. Ask about the different kinds of prayer the groups found. Whenever one is mentioned, ask where they found that kind of prayer in the Lord's Prayer, and what they think it means. Make sure to discuss at least the following kinds of prayer:

Prayers of praise or devotion

(v. 9) "This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, Sometimes, when we pray, we may just **praise God** for who he is: our **Lord**, our **Creator**, our **Savior**, our **King**, our **Comforter**, our **Guide**, ...

Prayers of submission and supplication

(v.10) your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

When you pray like this, you're asking that God will **do his will** in the world -- to bring **peace** and **justice**. But not just to everybody else -- you're asking him especially **to do his will in your life**. When you pray this, **think about what you're praying!** You're telling God that you **want** him to work in your life, that you're **willing** to let him work in your life, that you're willing to **give your life to Him!** Don't pray this if you don't mean it!

Prayers of petition and dependence

(v.11) Give us today our daily bread

When we pray like this, we're asking God to **give us what we need**. We're admitting that we **depend on Him for our very lives**, for the **food** that we eat, for the **air** that we breathe. Not one of us can be sure that we will even be **alive** tomorrow!

Prayers of confession and forgiveness

(v.12) Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors

When we pray like this, we're **admitting that we have sinned**, and **asking God to forgive us** for these sins. But notice the second part of the verse. We're telling God **that we have forgiven those who've sinned against us**. If **we aren't willing to forgive** those who've sinned against us, we're telling God that **we understand that He can't forgive us!** This is the spiritual law that we studied in the lesson on forgiveness: **forgiveness leads to forgiveness. If we want to be forgiven, we must be willing to forgive.**

Prayers for protection and mercy

(v.13) And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

When we pray like this, we're admitting to God **that we can't deal with temptation by ourselves**. We need His help, His strength. He promises (in 1 Cor 10:13) **that He won't allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear**, but will **always make sure that there is a way out**. We need to ask his help whenever we face temptation, and look for the way out that He has promised to provide.

Now, all these things are things that God has promised to provide... So let's go back to the question raised before the discussion: if God **wants** to give us these things, and he **knows** we need them, **why does he want us to ask?**

[Get a few thoughts from the group. Reinforce any comments that lead into the following conclusions:]

- God wants us to **communicate** with Him. **Communication is essential for any healthy relationship**. My wife knows that I love her, but it's still quite important that I tell her so, every day!
- God **uses His answers to our prayers as to teach us** about Himself and His will for us.

An excellent illustration of this principle is the story of an old professor who had taught in the same school for over 40 years. Three afternoons each week, he opened his office to any student who had a question or a problem. Over the years, many thousands of students came to his office. "I've heard most of their questions at least a hundred times," the old professor said. "After many years, I came to the point where I could usually tell what the student's question was within the first minute or so. Even though I could tell what his question was, I always let him go all the way through it, and I never interrupted. Why? ... Because I wanted to make sure he really knew what his question was.... **If he didn't understand what his question was, he wasn't going to understand my answer!**

This story can help us understand why God wants us to be **specific** in our prayers. He has things he wants to teach us, and He wants to make sure we understand His answers. **If we aren't sure what we've prayed about, we won't understand his answer!**

Sometimes, God's answer to our prayers is "no." Why would God say "no" to something I feel that I need and bring before him in prayer? Those of us who have raised children can think of many times we had to say "no" to them, even though we loved them very much.

When they were very young, they would ask for things that weren't good for them, or things that might even hurt them. They were too immature to know that even though what they wanted **seemed** like a good thing, **it could be very bad for them.** Sometimes God tells us "no" because he sees things from a much better perspective than we do.

When they were a little older, they would ask for things that weren't necessarily bad things, but I knew that they weren't yet mature enough to handle them. We'd have to say, "No. **You need to wait until you're bigger.**" Sometimes God has to tell us the same thing, because He knows we are not yet spiritually mature enough to handle what we're asking for.

When they were teenagers, they sometimes wanted "help with their homework." That's fine ... except when "help" turned out to mean that they wanted us to do it for them.! Then we'd have to say "no," because **if they were really going to learn something, they were going to have to work it through themselves.** Many times God has things He wants us to learn, so that we can grow, and the only way we can learn is by going through a situation ourselves.

If you are a Christian -- if you have committed yourself to following Jesus as your Savior and Lord -- but your prayers just don't seem to be getting through to God, then there's probably something clogging the communication lines. It's probably sin -- something you're not admitting to God, or a sin you're not willing to give up.

If you are not a Christian -- if you've never really turned your life over to God, asked him to forgive your sins, and asked him to be your Lord -- then the problem is that you're still outside of His Kingdom. Your sins are not forgiven, because you can't earn God's forgiveness on your own, and your sins are separating you from God. If that's your problem, you can resolve it here and now. Just confess your sinfulness, tell Him that you want to change, and tell Him that you're willing to follow Him as your Savior and Lord. Don't do this if you don't mean it, but if you do mean it, then you can you can pray this prayer right now:

Lord Jesus, I know I'm a sinner, and I want to change.

Thank you for dying for my sins.

I ask you to come into my life as my Savior and my Lord,
and to change me into what you want me to be.

Notes for the leader: Before the group leaves, make sure everyone has a copy of the "Take-Home Thoughts" handout. This will help them remember the things discussed in the lesson. Some of them may also use these handouts to explain the lesson to a cell-mate or in a letter they write to their families. You never know how far the lesson materials may travel, or whose life may be affected by them!

Take-home Thoughts about ...

Prayer

Becoming a member of the Kingdom of God gives you the privilege of being able to talk directly with God Himself, the creator and ruler of the universe. We call this privilege of talking with God “**prayer.**” Prayer includes **listening** as well as **talking.**

God **wants** us to talk to Him. He **wants** to give us the things we really need in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience (*Galatians 5:16*) He **knows** each of us, better than we know ourselves. You can't fool Him. You can't “con” Him. You can't negotiate with Him. He is **God.** He knows what's in your heart, even before you ask Him.

If that's true, **why does He want us to ask?** Why doesn't He just go ahead and give us whatever we want? Part of the answer is that, like all relationships, our relationship with God needs **daily communication** in order to stay healthy.

Sometimes the things we ask for wouldn't be good for us. God can see that, even when we can't. The way He answers our prayers is one of the main ways He has of teaching us and helping us grow spiritually. That's why He wants us to be **specific** in what we ask of Him, because **if we aren't sure what we asked Him, we may not understand His answer!**

If God doesn't seem to be answering your prayers, the problem is probably some sin you aren't willing to give up, which keeps you from hearing what God is saying to you. Or, maybe you've never taken the basic step of faith – **trusting in Jesus as your Savior and Lord.** If you haven't, your sins aren't forgiven, and they are disrupting your communication with God. If you haven't taken this step, **do it now!**

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