

Prayer life: staying on track



*“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 11:2-4

Jesus' response

I've never met anyone who says that developing a consistent prayer life is easy. Jesus' disciples fell asleep on the job (Luke 22:45-46)!

Earlier, the same gospel records his disciples asking Jesus to teach them how to pray. His response was to give them a short version of what we know as the Lord's prayer, together with a short picture story and some encouragement. Jesus told them,

"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 11:2-4

My guess is that Jesus intended this to be used as a pattern for personal prayer – a sort of framework to keep us on track – but also when we come together as a church to be said corporately as a shared prayer from memory.

When we pray it individually, we can pray the lines and also expand with our own thoughts and words between them. With this in mind, I offer a few thoughts.

Father

We begin by thinking of the person to whom we are praying. He is God and also father, which reminds us that he is lovingly disposed

towards us and ready to listen.

Hallowed be your name

It is good to begin with an appropriate subordinate posture; reverence, thanksgiving, prayer and worship. He is Father but He is also God. He is Holy. We are speaking to the creator of the universe. Before we start to mention our requests and seek His help, it is good to connect with Him. There is so much about God to appreciate and acknowledge. He blesses us in so many ways. There is a great deal to be thankful for. Sometimes it is good not to say anything at all but simply listen and give Him the space to speak to us.

Your Kingdom come

These are words of alignment with God's Kingdom purpose. This is the big picture into which our lives fit. God prepared for the Kingdom over many centuries but it was inaugurated by Jesus during his earthly ministry. The ongoing advance of His kingdom has continued through the centuries but it will be completed and consummated when the gospel has been fully proclaimed and Jesus returns. Kingdom thinking gives us perspective and a sense of proportion. It gives us vision, purpose and a hope for the future. Our asking will be aligned with God's purposes when we have a Kingdom vision.

Give us each day our daily bread

Jesus encourages us to ask God to provide for our basic needs. He wants us to depend on him and trust him a day at a time, just as the children of Israel experienced provision of manna during their journey. It is also good to remember that our receiving is linked to our giving. Jesus also said, "Give and it shall be given to you." The life of faith is a life of trust and dependence.

And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us

For God to be able to release provision to us, our relationship with Him must be clear. If we confess our sins, he forgives us and cleanses us from all unrighteousness, wrote John. When it comes to confessing sins, we need to consider the things we have not done as much as the things we have done. But there is a condition. We can only receive forgiveness from God if we ourselves forgive others who have wronged us.

And lead us not into temptation

We ask for God's leading – his guidance, his help to stay on the right track. There are so many possible distractions, diversions and enticements in our lives. We need His help to order our priorities and commitments. We need his help to recognise what is important and what is urgent and what is trivial and inconsequential.

There's a great deal in this short prayer if we take it slowly and thoughtfully.

It is worth reading on in Luke because Jesus also emphasised the importance of persistence in prayer. He added a little illustration of a man who woke his friend up in the middle of the night when he had a great need (11:5-8). The exhortation was to ask, seek and knock. Don't give up.

"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

He encourages them to believe that God will hear the request and meet the need. He will not fob us off with inferior substitutes.

What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?"

Luke 11:11-12

And then there's an intriguing sentence at the very end.

"So, if you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

Luke 11:13

Jesus obviously expects his followers to ask for the Holy Spirit. Is this something we regularly include in our praying? Do we ask Him to give us the Holy Spirit? Christians of a Pentecostal or charismatic background often emphasise an experience of receiving the Holy Spirit, sometimes powerful and transformative. I suspect that Jesus here is implying something ongoing. If that is the case, why would he do that? Perhaps it is because it is the Holy Spirit who helps us to maintain our relationship with the Father. He guides us in our praying. He helps us to pray and he teaches us how and what to pray.

Jesus is explaining in this passage some of the basics of prayer but is also saying that to progress and maintain a rich and effective prayer life, we can't do it alone. Our frail minds will wander and get distracted or we'll fall asleep or we'll get into a mechanical routine lacking freshness! But, with the help of the Holy Spirit we will be able to pray like Jesus did. So, when we bring our requests to God our Father, perhaps high on the list should be, "Please give me an increased measure of your Spirit!".

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