

## **Best Practices – Prayer, Part 2**

**From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”**

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### **Introduction**

We’re going to start today by going back in time. We’re going to visit the scene of an important historic event: - The first time someone built a house. The builders are two cave dwellers, Cory the Caveman and his wife, Claudia. They’re newlyweds. They had a great wedding. They went on a wonderful honeymoon. Now, it’s time to settle into a cave. All they have to do is find a cave that’s unoccupied. But, they are met with disappointment. Sadly, they find out that all the caves in the area are full. There are no empty caves left.

Fortunately, Cory is the creative type. He gets an idea. He says, “Let’s get some rocks and pile them up so that they sort of look like a cave”. Because they’re newlyweds, Claudia is still in the stage where she thinks anything her guy says is brilliant. So, she agrees.

After a while, Cory and Claudia Caveman have quite a pile of rocks. But there’s a problem: The rocks keep caving in on themselves. The cave couple has a nice pile of rocks, but they can’t live inside. Claudia is pretty creative herself, so she has an idea. Some of the rocks came out of mud, and they were hard to get out. What if they put mud in between each rock? Maybe that would hold the rocks together? It turns out that this works. Cory gets on one side with rocks, and Claudia stands on the other side with mud. After a while, they have a nice circular wall of rocks.

The time comes: The final rock is put into its place. But now they have another problem. Cory hears a muffled voice: “I’m stuck – I can’t get out.” Claudia is on the inside - There’s no way to get in and out of this new man-made cave. Cory would sort of like to spend time with his new bride, so this is bad.

Being a macho guy, Cory says, “No problem”. I’ll just take my club and knock out a hole. After a few swings, he’s successful. He knocks a suitably sized hole in the wall. But now the young couple has another problem: The hole makes the whole wall weak. A few minutes after the hole was created, the house falls down. Fortunately, Claudia had exited the house by that time.

So, it turns out that the first house in history didn’t go very well.

Let’s fast-forward through time. Lots of different people learn how to make houses. Along the way, they learn that there are standard problems in a house. How do you build strong walls? What kinds of materials do you use?

Let's look at the problem of the cave-couple. What do you do when you want to get in and out of your building? If you want to get in and out, you need something called a door. To have a door, you need more than a hole in the wall - You need a door frame. To make one, you put some wood around the opening you want to use as an entrance. This strengthens the opening so the whole house doesn't come down. Problem solved!

Over the centuries, we began to have a whole field called "architecture". The architects are trained in all the problems and challenges you face when making buildings. They know the answers.

The answers are called something: They're called "Patterns". When you need to get into a building, you add a door. A door is a kind of pattern. It's an answer to a problem. Today, a good architect knows patterns for everything from digging the hole for the foundation of one building to managing whole communities.

Here's the point of all this: No architect starts from scratch figuring out how to build things. They have patterns. Patterns are so common that no one thinks about them anymore. No one builds a house without thinking about how to get in and out. It's all been figured out.

We're in our series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe" We're in chapters 5 through 7, a section we're calling "The Christian Manifesto". A few sessions ago, we started a new sub-series called, "Best Practices for followers of Jesus." Last week, we began learning the best practices for Prayer. There's a lot to learn about prayer, so we're using multiple sessions.

In the last session, Jesus told us about many of the wrong ways that people have come up with over the years to pray. They're kind of like the cave people who tried to build a house, only to see it all fall down. For example, sometimes people think that they just need to mindlessly pray the same things over and over. Jesus says that's like babbling.

Some people pray for show - They want to impress other people. Jesus says that if you pray just to impress others, you have your reward in full on this earth. You get nothing eternal.

So, now, after telling us the wrong way to do it, Jesus will now tell us the right way. And he's going to do it the way that a master architect would do it: He's going to give us a pattern for prayer. Let's find out what that pattern is by reading in Matthew 6.

9 "This, then, 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 today 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.' (Matthew 6:9-13)

Some translations add “For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.” We’ll talk about that in a later session. For now, let’s break this apart.

“This, then, is how you should pray...”

Jesus starts by saying “this, then...” He has just told us some wrong things to do in prayer. So, now he’s saying, “Because I just identified the ways that people get prayer wrong, **this, then** is how you **should** pray.”

Jesus isn’t going to contradict something he just said a few sentences back. Recall that one of the things one of those things was mindlessly repeating lots of words. So, Jesus isn’t going to give us words to mindlessly repeat. He’s giving us much more. It’s ironic that for many people, this is exactly what happens with this prayer. They mindlessly repeat it over and over again. That’s sad.

We believe that this is a **pattern** for prayer. It’s a place to start when we pray. Having said that, this is Scripture. Is it wrong to memorize and recite scripture? No. So, it’s not wrong to memorize and recite these words - Just make sure your mind is engaged when you say the words.

Part of keeping our minds engaged is to understand that words. We’re going to work on that today.

So, Jesus says this is how we should pray. As it turns out, this prayer has two parts. The first part concerns God. We will concentrate on the first part in this session. The second part concerns us. We’ll talk more about it in the next session.

The first part involves 3 things: God the Father, his kingdom, and his will. Let’s look at each of those things.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name” (Matthew 6:9)

Jesus gives us the most important aspect of prayer in the first words: **We pray to our Father in heaven.**

Note: It’s “our” father. Jesus presents this as a group prayer. It can certainly be done by one person alone. There’s nothing wrong with that and many people do that. However, using the word “our” indicates that Jesus is thinking about groups of people. In another place, Jesus said this: “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” (Matthew 18:20) We don’t have time to go into the reasons for this. For now, let’s be reminded that there are many things we do as individuals for God’s kingdom, but there are also many things we do as a team.

Let's get back to the initial sentence of this pattern for prayer, "Our Father in heaven". Let's look at what this tells us about God.

First, there are many ways to refer to God. We can say, "Creator". Or, we can say, "Lord", which has the connotation of "Master". Here, Jesus tells us that God offers himself to his followers in a very special way. He wants us to relate to him as children relate to a loving Father.

The apostle Paul talks about this in the book of Romans:

14 For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. 15 The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." 16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. (Romans 8:14-16)

When we make a decision to follow Jesus, when we follow him in faith, we receive God's Holy Spirit. Prior to meeting Jesus and the Holy Spirit, we lived in fear of punishment. We lived as slaves. Now, with the help of the Spirit, we are adopted as children of God. Because of these things, Paul says we use a very special word for God: "Abba". That's the Hebrew word for "daddy".

I knew a man once who gave music lessons. He would travel to a person's home and give the lesson there. One time, he had a Jewish student. As he was giving the lesson, he heard a young child running around in the distance. Then, he heard the sound that no one wants to hear: The sound of a child falling down the steps. Then he heard something even worse: Silence. Just as he was about to jump up, he heard a better sound: The child started running around again. And as he ran, the child called out, "Abba, Abba, Abba!" In English that would be, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!"

When a little child is afraid or hurt, they cry out to their daddy. And their daddy comes running with open arms. And he lifts up his child and holds that child close.

What other things do children do with a loving father?

- They go when they need something.
- They go just to spend time; they go fishing, they throw a ball around in the backyard.
- They go to learn about life.
- Maybe they just talk.

So, the pattern of prayer that Jesus gives to us starts by reminding us of the special relationship that God offers to his followers - That of a loving father.

It's also important to be reminded of the one we are praying to and how. We pray to the Father. That's obvious here. Now, how do we do it? That's implied by the speaker. Who is telling us all of this? Jesus is! So, we pray to the Father by the authority of the Son - We pray in the name of Jesus.

As we learned a moment ago, we pray by the power of the Holy Spirit. We pray with his help.

So, this is how the dynamics of prayer look: We pray to the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Spirit.

This is important. To understand why it's important, let's look at some other ways that people pray - wrong ways.

Recently, I listened to a presentation by Albert Mohler. He's the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has a daily podcast called, "The Briefing" which is excellent. Recently, he started a podcast with these words:

Have you been manifesting lately? Do you have any idea what that's even about? Well, evidently it's not only a new fad, it's a new cultural phenomenon. And our interest is really in the fact that what we're seeing is a resurgence of a very old idea, a very old heresy in American religion and in American history, the movement known as positive thinking. And evidently we're told it's catching on in a whole new way with a new generation. Ruth La Ferla reports for the New York Times, an article with the headline, "The Power of Positive Thinking Reborn." The subhead, "A New Generation is Manifesting in the Name of Wellness."

She begins by telling us about a young man who at age nine had set his heart on owning the Power Ranger Flip Heads. He said, "I never told anyone, but I wanted these toys so bad. I sat in my room holding this scenario in my head of how I would feel when I got them." The article then goes on, "He had in his new age tintured phrase, launched his dreams into the universe." And as he tells it, "The universe heeded his call." He said, "The very next day, my dad got me the Flip Heads. That's when I realized that there was something to this." What's the this? Well, it's the power of visualization, the power of attractive magnetic thinking, the power of positive thinking, the power of manifesting. That's the term that is now increasingly popular. (Albert Mohler, "The Briefing", Friday, January 29, 2021)

Manifesting. What is that? When you manifest, you imagine something, you picture it. You try to feel it. And then, the belief is, what you imagine will appear.

This is yet another topic that could be multiple messages, so I'll give a quick summary: Manifesting in essence is praying to yourself. As Doctor Mohler said, it's a very old heretical way of thought. It goes along with "The Power of Positive Thinking", "Name it and claim it", and all of the other names this thinking goes under. It's the belief that we have the power within us to change reality with only our thoughts.

In Genesis chapter 3 we learned about the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The final temptation of the Serpent was to suggest that if Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they could be like him. One of the things God does is: He speaks things into existence.

The kind of thinking that leads to the practice of "manifesting" is all wrong. You see, "speaking things into existence" is a power that only God has. We are like God in many ways, but not like that. If we want something, we need to ask him for it.

No other thing in creation can speak things into existence, either. For centuries, people have made up entities that they think of as gods. These are false gods or "idols". Those gods (small "g") are prayed to with the expectation that they will deliver. But they can not. That's why we pray to the Father.

Again, we pray to the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

One more thing before we move on to the next point: Sometimes we hit topics multiple times. Sometimes we hit them several weeks in a row. Then we don't talk about them for a while. Here's another one of those topics. Last week we spoke about the problem of mindless repetition. And again, with all due respect to our Catholic friends, we suggested that the Rosary represents a temptation towards this kind of mindless prayer - words repeated over and over again thinking that mere repetition is what makes things happen.

Again, we don't want to spend time every week attacking people or putting them down. However, this is another one we have to discuss: Mary. Many Catholics believe that you approach God through Mary and other saints. One Catholic friend of mine explained it this way: If you want something from a powerful person, you make friends with their family members. So, if people want something from God, it helps to make friends with his mother, Mary.

This is yet another big topic. For now, we'll just say that many Catholics believe this, and that's a shame. We pray to the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Spirit. Nowhere are we instructed to pray through Mary or the saints or anyone else.

People sometimes ask me why I almost always start with some kind of story. Today it was cave men. You see, I want people to get a picture in their heads. Imagine all the work those cave people did and the dreams they had for their house. Then, it's all a pile of rubble, because they didn't know what they were doing. Think of the waste!

You don't know how many of your friends and neighbors spend hour after hour praying to various gods in various ways, and seeing no effect. Praying to Mary and to saints is a terrible shame because God makes us an incredible offer: We can go directly to him as a child would go to a loving father. We only need to trust in him in this. We need to trust in his love. We need to trust that he wants us to come to him so that he can open his very heart and mind to us.

What kind of a being would offer this to us? A wonderful being. And this brings us to the next thing Jesus says:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name.”

The word that we translate as “hallowed” means, “to be set apart”. It's built on the word “Holy”. Practically, it means: “To be special – very, very, special” and “to be treated like nothing else”.

When you come to realize who God is and what he offers to us, you begin to treat him with great respect. You begin to want others to treat him that way, too. You want his name to be spoken with the most positive things we know about. You want his name to be spoken with respect, admiration, awe, wonder, and certainly, love.

This brings us to an important question: What is the name of God? This is complex, because God is complex.

When Moses stood before the burning bush, he asked God about his name. In the days of Moses, everyone had local gods. They all had names. Their names tended to be related to places and things. In Egypt, they had the goddess of the Nile. They had the god of the underworld. They had the god of the sun and the god of the moon. So, Moses wanted to find out what God's name was.

Let's read about it:

13 Then Moses said to God, “Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say to me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” 14 And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And He said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ” (Exodus 3:13-14)

God, the one true God, is complex. He is infinite. There is no one name that can be spoken by mere humans that can contain all the wonder of God. So, God gave Moses a starting point: “I AM” - “I exist.” This is the Hebrew word that we often pronounce as “Jehovah” or “Yahweh”.

As a note, the Jewish people don't even pronounce this name out loud. They say, "Ha Shem", which means, "The Name". That's yet another whole message.

Later, God would build on this starting point. Because we are limited, we can only experience one aspect of God at a time. God adapted his name to those situations. Sometimes there was a historical context. In that case, God said, "'I AM the God of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.'" (Exodus 3:6) If God provided in a special way, he was "Jehovah Jireh", which means, "I AM the one who provides". (Genesis 22:14) If God brought peace to someone, he was "Jehovah Shalom", which means, "I AM peace" (Judges 6:24). There were more variations on this.

So, to say, "Hallowed be your name", is to say, "However and whenever someone speaks of you, may it be spoken with the deepest reverence."

Sadly, this is not how God's name is spoken in our broken world. It's spoken in limited ways and false ways. Sometimes, it's spoken in hateful ways. To speak in this way is "blaspheme". Blaspheme breaks the heart of anyone who truly knows God. So, when we pray, we start by saying: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name."

Sadly, it doesn't stop at people merely speaking in ways that diminish the place of God in our world. We only have to look outside to see tragic behaviors of all kinds. Peter wrote about this. He wrote about the days when Abraham's nephew Lot lived in Sodom and Gomora.

8 ...for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard... (II Peter 2:8)

When you love God, you want to see people honor him. You want to see people speak his name well. You want to see people obey him. But we see something else, something that causes our hearts to ache. When someone has the Holy Spirit in their heart, they long to see something better. So we read:

...your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:10)

In God's kingdom, he is worshipped day after day, hour after hour. Angels obey the commands of God. He speaks and they do what they're told. So, we cry out, "Lord, let your kingdom come. Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That's where we want to live. And we want to live there now! That's the longing of a heart that is given to the heavenly Father.

Let's pull this all together.

## Conclusion

Today we've continued to learn about the best practices for followers of Jesus. In particular, we're learning the best practices for prayer. We've learned once again that God doesn't just tell us to pray and then leave it up to us to figure out how. Jesus gives us a pattern.

The pattern has two main parts. The first part concerns God. The second part concerns us. We've concentrated on the first part today.

We've learned to start by praying to our heavenly father. We pray to the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Spirit. We don't pray to idols. We don't pray to ourselves. We don't rely on the power of positive thinking. We don't "Manifest" – we don't rely on power within us to get what we want. And we pray through the Son, not through anyone else - No matter how good and noble that person may be.

We pray acknowledging the wonder of God. We want his name to be hallowed - To be spoken with everything good - With reverence, with awe, with wonder, and with love.

Our souls ache in this broken world where God's name is blasphemed and God's will is disobeyed if not totally ignored. So, we pray that his kingdom will come and that his will, will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

As followers of Jesus, we want to be effective. We want our prayers to be effective. This will happen if we implement the pattern of Prayer that Jesus gave us.

May God bless us as we seek to implement the best practices that we're learning from him.