

Best Practices for Followers of Jesus – Prayer, Part 3
From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”
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Introduction

I worked with a church many years ago that, like many churches, had a lot of very nice people in it. Among those people was a couple that I will call, “Mr. and Mrs. Jones.” Let me tell you about Mr. and Mrs. Jones. She was a teacher. He was an engineer. Along with being very nice people, they were both bright - Very bright.

One day, the church’s pastor announced that he was called to move on to another church. People were sad to see him go, but this is how things sometimes work in churches. After he left, Mr. and Mrs. Jones got an idea. They looked in the pastor’s office. It looked a little old to them. So, they decided that they would redecorate to make the office look good for the new pastor. The color was a little bit boring, and the walls were made of painted cinderblock. The answer to a boring wall? Wallpaper!

So, Mr. and Mrs. Jones went to a nearby store that specialized in wallpaper. They picked out some - Along with the necessary supplies. They dedicated an entire Saturday to the effort. After a lot of work, hard work, the office had fresh wallpaper. The next day was Sunday, and it was time to show off their efforts. Sadly, only a few hours after all their hard work, problems began to show - Big problems.

Problem #1: You can’t put wallpaper on cinderblock walls. Mr. and Mrs. Jones thought the paper would cover all the spaces in between the blocks. It looked like that would be the case when the paper was wet. When the paper dried though, the paper molded into the spaces. You could see every cinderblock line showing under the paper. In fact, the paper was stretched by this process, so it ripped in a few places.

Problem #2: Mr. and Mrs. Jones had neglected to tell anyone that they were going to do this. This was a bit odd, since Mr. Jones was an elder in the church. Now, if you make a mistake, you can expect some criticism. If you make a mistake without getting permission first, the criticism gets worse.

There were two criticisms that stood out. One person asked, “Did it occur to you that the new pastor might want to have some say in how his office looks?” That’s a good question. Maybe the new pastor will like the colors and decorations chosen by Mr. and Mrs. Jones - Then again, maybe not. As an alternative, it could be attractive for a new pastor if the board would say something like, “We’ve budgeted X amount of dollars for you to renovate your office. We’ll let you choose the design.”

Add to this a personal observation: I don't want to be sexist, but let's say the wallpaper looked very much like Mrs. Jones made the final selection. The effect of this wallpaper, had it worked, would make for a very nice room for a ladies' tea party. Maybe not so much a professional office.

One member of the church had a criticism that he didn't share with anyone - Anyone that is, except me. Here's what he said: Doesn't anyone in this church know what I do for a living? It turns out, he was a contractor who did a lot of things like, guess what, hanging wallpaper. He said, "if you want to put wallpaper over cinderblock there are ways to do it, but you need to know what you're doing." If someone had asked me", he said", "I would have been happy to do the job." Then he added, "And I would have volunteered my time and supplied all the materials for free." "Now" he said, "somebody is going to have to scrape all this off - It's going to be a whole lot of messy work."

We're in our series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe." A little while ago we hit chapter 6. There, we started a sub-series called, "Best Practices for Followers of Jesus." In this session, we'll look at the third part of best practices for prayer.

If you've read previous articles from this series, you know we've shared stories involving people like the Three Stooges and Cavemen. We did that to show situations where people who didn't know what they were doing created a big mess.

Why did I start today with Mr. and Mrs. Jones? Because you don't have to be idiots like the Three Stooges or primitives like the cavemen to make a big mess. Mr. and Mrs. Jones were nice people and smart people. They tried to do something good and helpful. But, they didn't know what they were doing - And they didn't talk to anyone to ask for help. Because they didn't know what they were doing, and because they didn't ask for help, instead of doing something good and helpful, they created a big mess.

Jesus does not want you to create big messes. He wants his followers to lead effective lives. That's why he gives us best practices for things like prayer.

In our last session, we learned that when it comes to prayer, our Lord has given us a pattern to follow. That pattern is often referred to as the "Lord's Prayer". But we're calling it a "Pattern for Prayer."

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)

The Parts of the Pattern

We said that this pattern for prayer can be divided into two parts: One part is concerned with God. The other part is concerned with us. We covered the first part in our last session, so in today's session we'll look at the second part. Before we do, we need to discuss just two more things about the first part.

ACTS and CATS

First, is the way that Jesus introduces this pattern: "This then, his how you should pray". If you've hung around churches for any length of time, you know that people have suggested other patterns for prayer. For example, you may have heard about "ACTS" and "CATS". Over the centuries, there have been lots of decent people who have wanted to learn how to pray effectively. And, they wanted others to pray effectively. So, they looked around the Scriptures and asked, "What do people in the Bible do when they pray?" The people who did this came back with four components of prayer. They are:

- Adoration (praising and worshipping God)
- Confession (admitting sins and asking for God to forgive)
- Thanksgiving (acknowledging God for the good things he's done)
- And finally, Supplication (asking for things from God)

Once they had the components we just listed, the people who did this suggested a pattern for prayer. Some of them said the pattern can be summarized with the word "ACTS". As you can see, that's "adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication." You should always start, these people say, with adoration. Then, you need to confess your sins. Then, you thank God for what he has done. Finally, after you have done all these other things, then, and only then, in humility can you bring your supplications, your requests, to God. This is all nicely summarized with initials that are easy to remember: ACTS.

Sometimes the theologians like to debate each other. Some like this collection of components, but they disagree on the order. Technically, our relationship with God is not right unless we confess. So, these people say, confession should be first. If you follow this plan, you get the word "CATS".

I remember as a young theological student getting into these discussions. Should adoration be first, or confession, or something else? Then, one day, I read the text we're looking at today. And it said, "THIS, then, is how you should pray." And it occurred to me: Maybe this is where we should start when we're teaching followers of Jesus how to pray? ACTS and CATS are fine and good, but perhaps we should start the way that our Lord specifically taught us?

The next thing we need to consider before looking at the second half of this pattern for prayer is the attitude it suggests to us. Jesus tells us to start with the words, "Our Father in heaven."

As we said, the first part of this prayer has to do with God. But it's not just God. We pray to "our" Father in heaven. So, we include other people when we approach God.

This is something that the other patterns for prayer like "ACTS" gets right. That pattern puts things having to do with God first, and us next. With the pattern that Jesus gives us, it's not so much that we're last - It's that we're not first.

When we approach God, we put him and others before us. Why is this? Here's what I want to suggest as the reason for this: God is very focused on others. We've spoken in our series on Matthew's gospel about things like God being humble, and God being a servant to others. Because God is humble, he focuses on others. And he wants us to be like him. This pattern that Jesus gives us encourages us to do that.

So, we've just been reminded that this is how we should pray. This is the pattern for prayer. Other patterns that people have come up with are fine. We can think about them, too. However, the prime pattern for prayer is this one.

We've also learned just now that this pattern encourages us to put God and others first when we approach God. We come next. So, having said all that, let's look now at the second part of this pattern for prayer. The part that is concerned with us.

The Part of the Pattern that Concerns Us

There are two things that Jesus wants us to concentrate on when we approach God with our concerns. Our physical needs (daily bread). Next, our Spiritual Needs. Our spiritual needs involve having a full and clear relationship with God. We achieve that through confession of sins. It also involves protection from temptation.

We'll hit spiritual needs in the next session. Today, we'll look at that first part; our physical needs. We read: "Give us today our daily bread." This sentence has three parts.

Bread (Physical Needs)

First, bread. To survive, we need food. The most basic kind of food is bread. Many commentators have suggested, and I think correctly, that bread represents our physical needs. It's anything we need to live on this earth for any length of time. So, that would include clothing, heat for our homes, etc.

This is where it's important that we start this pattern for prayer by focusing on our heavenly Father. That's because he is the source of every good thing.

17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights... (James 1:17)

Why is it important to remember that? Because it's tempting to think that we are the source of good things. It's tempting to think that our hard work is the sole source of what we want and need. We have farmers who work hard. They pass the food along to transportation people like truckers. They pass it along to distribution people in warehouses. They pass it along to the people who sell it, like supermarkets.

All sorts of good and hardworking people present the face of those who supply our daily bread. But, as much as we appreciate those good and hard-working people, the Bible tells us that the source every good gift is God.

After that, it's tempting to think that the systems we create are the source of what we want and need. Perhaps government?

For Americans: is Uncle Sam the source of all good things? Are you sure? He sure gives us a lot. Uncle Sam was thought of for a long time as someone who was demanding. He could ask things from us like service to our country. That's the classic image: "I want you..."

Some would say that Uncle Sam has been replaced by Aunt Samantha. A grandmotherly figure who hugs us and gives us everything we need.



But no, as much as we appreciate Uncle Sam or Aunt Samantha, they are not God. That's very important to remember. God may use all the people and all the systems that we've mentioned here (and more) but he is the source of every good and perfect gift.

So, bread, our physical needs, is the first part of this sentence. Let's look at the next part.

Daily

Jesus tells us that we are to ask for enough bread for one day - One day only. Why does he do that? There are likely lots of reasons. Let me suggest one. Here's something Peter tells us:

11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. (II Peter 2:11)

Look at those words, "foreigners and exiles". The New American Standard translation says, "aliens and strangers". The King James says, "strangers and pilgrims". Here's the point: This earth is not our permanent home. We are just passing through. Our home is God's Kingdom. That's why we pray "Your kingdom come". We want to go home, and as soon as possible! God does not want us to get too comfortable down here. So we pray for enough to get us through the day.

Because we live in a broken world, our provisions take on many forms. In America, we live in a country and a time when the things we need appear in abundance. The shelves in every store are brimming full with not only the things we need, but the things we want on a whim. We have so much food, our biggest problem is figuring out what brand to choose.

But, as you know, there are many places in our world where things are not the same. And there have been many times in history where food supplies were nowhere near as plentiful as we know in America and other modern, wealthy nations. In this history of the world, there have been many times where getting the food you needed for one day was a triumph. For most of history, this prayer was a prayer of faith - A lot of faith.

And as we said, we live in a broken world that is not our home. I have to say some things at this point that are a little bit challenging. There used to be a saying on the streets of New York City: "Don't wanna this should scare ya." I hope everyone within the sound of my voice lives a happy and prosperous life. However, the wealth and privilege that we enjoy today in America is much more fragile than many would like to admit.

We just assume that what we enjoy will last forever. God, in his grace, gives us warnings. We see what happens to store shelves in our country when a bad storm is approaching. They have an alarming way of emptying out. Now, after the storm, after the emergency, the shelves fill up again. But in 2020, we had COVID-19. The shelves emptied out. They filled up again, but it was not fast.

Our world is in rebellion against God. Our world is led by people who want to kick God off his throne. Could there be worse disasters on the horizon? We live in the wealth and abundance we enjoy in America for one reason, and one reason only: God has been very generous with us. There is no guarantee that generosity will last forever.

The instruction of Jesus to us is the same that it has been since he walked on the earth: Ask for what you need for one day: Today.

For those who pray this way, there is hope. Towards the close of his life, King David had seen many things. Here's a comment he made based on his experience:

25 I was young and now I am old,
yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread.
(Psalm 37:25)

We're told in the Scriptures that God protects and provides for the faithful.

This is what I will call a "99 percent plus" rule. It's true most of the time - In fact, the vast percentage. There are rare times in history though, such as times of persecution. These are tough times for believers. In those times, Christians may find themselves stripped of their possessions. They may find themselves in prison. Even in those cases, God gives people what they need. One of the ironic things about prison is that the people who run prisons feel an obligation to feed the prisoners. It may not be the finest fare, but there's food.

During those times, we have a promise from our Lord. There is a certain number of days that God has ordained for us on this earth. For as long as he wants us here, we'll have what we need.

Note: We do not always have what we **want**. The text here doesn't say: "I have never seen the righteous lacking a color TV." It doesn't say: "I have never seen the righteous lacking a nice car." It doesn't say: "I have never seen the righteous lacking a spacious home." It says, "I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread."

Give Us

There's one final part of this sentence: "Give us". We are told to ask. We are to pray for our daily bread. This indicates several things.

First, since we pray for daily bread, it's a hint that we pray at least once daily. If you really know Jesus, it's not unusual to come to him in prayer many times each day. However, there's a hint here that we should come at least once. I hope that your prayer life is something more than listening to others doing it once a week in church. We are encouraged to something more - Something better - And certainly, something more frequent.

Next, we pray as children of the heavenly Father. Hopefully, this fits into the “daily” or “often”. If we’re speaking to a distant and mysterious God, or even an angry God, it makes sense that we wouldn’t be too motivated to go often. But, we’re speaking to a loving Father.

At this point, we reach an important amplification. We are speaking to a royal Father. This is the king of the universe. Notice something interesting here: The word “please” does not appear in this pattern for prayer. It doesn’t say, “Please give us our daily bread.” It just says, “Give us.”

When we accept Jesus as our Savior, a lot of wonderful things happen. The main thing we think of is forgiveness. Another is adoption. We are adopted by the King of the Universe as his children.

4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ... (Ephesians 1:4-5)

If you have accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, you are now a member of a royal family.

The word “please” as we use in modern language is interesting. It’s a kind of abbreviation. If we spoke the full sentence, we would say, “If it pleases you, do something for me.” If used correctly, the word “please” is a way of saying: “You are a significant person. You have worth. I understand that you are not obligated to serve me. So, if it is pleasing to you, I would like something from you.”

The word “please”, if used sincerely, is a way of expressing humility. In that sense, it’s not wrong to remind ourselves that God is the king of the universe, and he is not required to serve us. So, the word “please” is not wrong when we pray. However, it’s not required within a royal family.

Sometimes, the word “please” becomes something more than an expression of humility. It’s a form of extreme need. It’s even a form of begging: “Please, oh please, don’t leave me here in the cold...”

If a pauper were to approach a wealthy man, he might beg. When the children of a great king come to him, there is no need to beg. God, the great King, has promised us that he will take care of us. He will care for us as his children - Royal children. When we come to him asking for things within his will, there is no need beg.

Notice something even more interesting: Not only is the word “please” missing from this pattern for prayer, but the word “Thank you” is also absent. That’s surprising at first.

It's surprising because when we search the Scriptures, there are lots of times when people express thanks to God. Once again, a thankful heart is a good thing. It is good to express thanks to God. That's why the patterns that humans have created include it.

Why is it left out of this pattern for prayer? Let me suggest something. When sincere and good people put together those patterns for prayer, ACTS and CATS, they were well intentioned. However, there is a little bit of room for error here. We as humans have some bad habits. When we talk about being effective in activities like prayer, we sometimes slip into the habit of assuming that there are things we can do that obligate God to act. So, a pattern, a suggestion, becomes a formula. Do this, then do this, then do this. If you do all that correctly, it is thought, you obligate God to reply. You start with Adoration. You follow with Confession. Thankfulness is required, of course. Then, give your supplication, or your requests. If you do all that right, some would say, sit back and just watch as God answers.

But the problem is: God is never obligated to do anything by our actions. Thankfulness tends to appear in the lives of believers after they recognize the wonderful things God has done for us. It is not a way to manipulate God. People who do this are surprised and disappointed when their prayers are not answered as they suppose. In other words, they start with good intentions, but they wind up making a mess of their lives and the others who follow them.

Again, it's never wrong to thank God when you feel thankful. But it's wrong to take good things and make them into formulas. This is the great king. He does as he pleases. If you have accepted Jesus as your Savior, he has adopted you as his child. ***When you need something, you need only ask.***

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

Today, we've learned more about the pattern for prayer that Jesus gave to his followers. We've learned that good people have attempted to create patterns for prayer. They can be useful. However, if we're not careful, they can become formulas. People who approach God with formulas can create a mess.

Jesus gave us the first and most important pattern. So, his followers can start there with confidence. We're reminded that this pattern encourages us to focus on God and others, not ourselves. And then we learned that God wants us to ask for our physical needs. We ask for one day at a time. We ask as children of the King of the universe. We don't beg. We ask. We ask with confidence, knowing that our prayers are heard by our Father in heaven, who loves us.

May God bless us as we seek to learn the patterns that he has given us.