

Praying Like Jesus - 10 Brief Studies in Prayer

By Pastor Rick Ezell

Courtesy of LifeWay's Proclaim Online (www.lifeway.com/proclaim)

The disciples only asked Jesus to teach them one thing: how to pray. Since learned behavior is easier caught than taught, it would do us well to observe the prayer practice of Jesus.

These ten studies glimpse into the prayer life of Jesus.

- Study 1: Jesus believed that prayer works.
- Study 2: Praying did not make Jesus passive.
- Study 3: Jesus prayed alone.
- Study 4: Jesus prayed in community.
- Study 5: Jesus prayed before meals.
- Study 6: Jesus offered thanks.
- Study 7: Jesus sang some prayers.
- Study 8: Jesus prayed before making important decisions.
- Study 9: Jesus prayed for his disciples.
- Study 10: Jesus continues to pray for us.

Suggested prayer resources:

- **And the Place Was Shaken:** How to Lead a Powerful Prayer Meeting by John Franklin
- **Disciple's Prayer Life:** Walking in Fellowship with God by T.W. Hunt and Catherine Walker
- **In God's Presence:** Your Daily Guide to a Meaningful Prayer Life by T.W. Hunt and Claude V. King
- **A House of Prayer:** Prayer Ministries in Your Church by John Franklin
- **The Life-Changing Power of Prayer** by T.W. Hunt
- **The Prayer of Jesus:** Living the Lord's Prayer by Ken Hemphill
- **Praying God's Word** by Beth Moore
- **And When You Pray** by Ray Pritchard

These and other studies available for purchase online at www.lifeway.com/shopping or at your local LifeWay Christian Store.

Praying Like Jesus

Study 1: **Jesus believed that prayer works.**

Matt. 21:22, Matt. 7:7-11, Mark 9:28-29, Mark 11:24, John 14:13-14, John 15:7, John 15:16, John 16:23-24

We often read biographies of great people to learn the secrets of their lives. When you read the biographies of Jesus' life, the gospels, you learn one of his great secrets. Jesus modeled prayer. If he prayed, we need to pray. If he needed time alone with God, we need time alone with God. We need to emulate what he did.

Obviously and practically, Jesus believed that prayer works. Let me say it again, Jesus *believed* in prayer. Jesus knew the effectiveness and the power of prayer. Obviously, he had an intimate relationship with the Father, like we will never know or experience. Yet from Jesus' example we can still have the same motivation and desire to spend time with the Father. We, too, need to believe in prayer.

Sometimes our motivation to pray is quenched because we doubt that our prayers will work or make any difference. The evil one chides us into believing: "Prayer doesn't work, so why pray at all." We link, all too frequently, prayer requests and prayer answered and miss the main business of prayer and that is conversation, dialogue, the building and maintaining of a relationship with our Heavenly Father. If we reduce prayer to nothing more than asking for things, we are no different than the spoiled child that comes to their parent only to make demands.

Yet making requests is one of the needed aspects of prayer. One cannot ignore or take lightly the boldness and confidence with which Jesus spoke about prayer. Over and over again he communicated the effectiveness of prayer.

- Matt. 21:22; 7:7-11
- Mark 11:24
- John 14:13-14; 15:7; 15:16; 16:23-24

Jesus taught that prayer works. But let's not interpret his words from a pedagogical point of view. Let's also hear his words from a paternal point of view. Jesus encourages us to pray because God, like a father, is overjoyed to meet the needs and fill the requests of a loving and obedient child. Obviously the positive answers to our prayers come when we are praying for his kingdom to expand, his will to be done, and his name to be glorified. In other words, God is most pleased and delighted to answer requests that see his family increase in size, his desires accomplished on earth, and his name promoted among the nations. Pray for family matters.

Jesus believed and acted on the confidence that God answered his prayers. We, too, can have that same confidence. Once we understand the mind and heart of Jesus and then pray accordingly. Then when our prayers are being answered it will only give us more confidence and boldness to pray for even greater things.

The first step to praying like Jesus is to believe in the incredible power of prayer. Do you believe in it?

Praying Like Jesus

Study 2: **Praying did not make Jesus passive.**

Matthew 25:31-46

For some reason—maybe we assume a virtue of spirituality—we have been led to believe that once we pray we don't have to do anything. We think that devotion to God and human responsibility are mutually exclusive. Not so. Jesus was never passive, even though he prayed long and often, and neither should we be.

A minister nearing retirement purchased a small abandoned farm outside town. The house was in dire need of maintenance. The windows were broken. The paint peeled from the scorching summer sun. The roof leaked. The porch had a series of potholes. Weeds were plentiful. Debris and litter dotted the landscape. The fence was all but gone. On his weekly day off the minister worked on the farm. He was diligent. He did a little here, a little there. In an amazingly short period of time, this once dilapidated farm became a showpiece. Friends and townspeople were impressed with the minister's work. One day the minister's neighbor from town came to visit the country cottage. The awed city-dweller gawked at the garden growing out back, the newly restored house and barn, and the beautiful landscape of the farm. He said, "You and the Lord really did a marvelous work here." The minister looked up from his workbench, where he was building garden benches. He wiped the perspiration from his eyes. He thought for a moment, and then replied, "Yea, but you should have seen it when the Lord had it all to himself."

Jesus does not separate faith from action.

Jesus prayed and He healed; He believed and He acted; He preached and He lived.

Jesus warns against inactivity and passivity.

The best example is found in his teaching about the final judgment in Matthew 25:31-46. Using the strongest possible terms, Jesus rejects a spirituality that is unconcerned about the tangible needs of people around us. People matter to God and their needs are important to God.

As God's hands and feet in the world, he demands and expects us to pray for and minister to those people. To fail to do so damages the reputation of God in the world. As the old saying goes, we should "pray as though it all depended on God; act as though it all depended on us." Isn't this what James, the brother of Jesus commended? "Show me your faith without works, and I will show you faith from my works." (James 2:18 HCSB)

Prayer is never an excuse for failing to act.

Unfortunately, we often use prayer as a scapegoat for action. In fact, it sounds so spiritual to say that we will pray about it; but highly hypocritical to have the tools and resources to do something about it but not act. I once served with a man, when asked about a problem or seeking his direction or merely performing the job the church had called him to do, would often say, "I'll pray about it." One day in frustration, I said to him, "It is time to stop praying and start doing or otherwise you can start praying about a new job." Or, as one wife told her husband after about the thousandth time of him saying, "I'm aiming to do that," "It is time to pull the trigger."

Because of what God has done for us—his action—should compel and motive us to act.

Yes we should pray, but we should also act. In the words of John Wesley:

"Do all the good you can, by all the means you can,
in all the ways you can, in all the places you can,
at all the times you can, to all the people you can,
as long as ever you can."

Like Jesus, we should pray as though it all depended on God, but act responsibly and obediently as though it all depended on us.

Praying Like Jesus:

Study 3: **Jesus prayed alone.**

Matt. 6:6, Mark 1:35, Matt. 14:23, Luke 5:16, Luke 6:12, Luke 9:18, Luke 22:39-41

Solitary prayer was a habit for Jesus.

It was typical of his life. As the scriptures say it was a “custom” or “usual” (Luke 22:39) for Jesus to go the Mount of Olives and to other deserted places to pray. Prayer for Jesus was not some issue tucked on the periphery of his life; prayer was at the center of his life. Jesus prayed because he needed to pray. Which would beg the question of us: If Jesus needed prayer, why do we think that we can get along without it? We need to treat prayer as a first priority not as a last resort.

Solitary prayer avoids attention, spiritual pride, showing off. (See Matt. 6:5-6.)

Why does Jesus model solitary prayer? All of us are susceptible to attention, spiritual pride, and showing off. Pride is an issue in each of our lives.

For example, when I rose early in the morning to run I wanted people to know so I would always squeeze that bit of information into conversations. It was my way of drawing attention to myself, exerting my pride, showing off. It was my way of saying, “See what I did,” with an underlying but unstated question, “Did you get up to run early this morning?” (By the way, I still run but I don’t let people know about it. God has delivered me from the sin or pretension.)

When we pray *with* others it is easy to pray *to* others, thinking it matters more to us what they think than what God thinks. When we pray alone it avoids this pitfall. If we pray where people see us, we are prone to enjoy the attention. Isn’t this the warning Jesus gives in Matthew 6:5-6?

Solitary prayer avoids distractions.

People can get in the way of communion with God. We become distracted. A child needs our attention. The phone rings. The television is blaring. The activities of the day scream for immediate attention.

Jesus had a geographical cure to the distractions to his time with God. (See Luke 4:42, Luke 5:15-16.) He got away from the crowds. It is both practical and wise to find an undistracted time and place to pray, just like good students who have a special place to study. The best students know that if they have a special place reserved for study, they become conditioned to study every time they sit at that desk. They can concentrate better and focus on the work at hand.

So it is with prayer. Praying in bed is a case in point. The bed is a place where we sleep. If we pray while lying in bed, usually it is a short prayer. I don’t know about you, but I have a tendency to fall asleep. But, when we kneel beside our bed, which by the way is a great posture for prayer that becomes the only activity we do in that place helping us to concentrate and focus our attention in prayer.

Consider for a moment, if you have not found your geographical solitary place, where would be a good place to pray? If we want to pray like Jesus we would be well advised to get alone, finding a private place, free from distractions to spend uninterrupted time with God.

Praying Like Jesus

Study 4: **Jesus prayed in community.**

Matt. 18:19, Luke 9:28, Matt. 17:1, Mark 9:2

Jesus practiced what he preached. He not only prayed alone, as the previous study discussed; but he, also, prayed with other people in community and gatherings. Let's contrast two verses in close proximity to one another:

First, notice that Jesus prayed privately:

"While He was praying in private . . ." (Luke 9:18 HCSB).

But then he balances private prayer with group praying:

"About eight days after these words, He took along Peter, John, and James, and went up on the mountain to pray." (Luke 9:28 HCSB)

Our relationship with God is personal but not private. Jesus balanced his personal relationship with the Father with the community aspects of prayer. In other words, Jesus not only encourages us to get alone to pray; he also wants us to pray with others.

Praying with the people of God is foundational to worship.

Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there among them." (Matt 18:20 HCSB)

Community worship was a vital part of Jewish life. Community worship is a vital part of our worship, too. And, we can't worship without praying to God. Jesus reminded his hearers that the temple was to be a house of prayer for the nations (Mark 11:17). It is no accident that the Lord's Prayer begins not with "My Father," but with "Our Father." We have many recorded prayers of Jesus. Why is that? Because those prayers were uttered in the company of other people.

Jesus wants us to be on our guard with a "me and Jesus only" approach to God. Jesus criticized the Pharisee who distanced himself from others in his prayers.

Read Luke 18:10-11

Jesus pointed out that the Pharisee stood by himself. I think this is an intentional jab at an individualistic approach to God. We all have blind spots and we need the discernment and wisdom of others to point out those flaws. Praying with others helps identify our weakness and needs.

Group prayer strengthens private prayer.

Praying Like Jesus

Study 5: **Jesus prayed before meals.**

Mark 6:41, Mark 8:7, 14:22, Luke 24:30

Little Johnny and his family were having dinner at his Grandmother's house. Everyone was seated around the table as the food was being served. When Little Johnny received his plate he started eating right away. "Johnny, wait until we say our prayer," his mother scolded. "I don't have to," the boy replied. "Of course, you do," his mother insisted. "We always say a prayer before eating at our house." "That's at our house," Johnny explained. "But his is Grandma's house, and she knows how to cook."

Praying before meals was a common Jewish practice (and, most evangelical Christians do likewise.) Jesus followed that practice, too. We see that evidenced

- when he fed the five thousand with the boy's lunch of bread and fish (Mark 6:41);
- when he fed the four thousand (Mark 8:6);
- when he shared a meal with his disciples in the upper room the night before his crucifixion (Mark 14:22);
- and, following his resurrection, when he shared a meal with Cleopas and his wife in Emmaus (Luke 24:30).

We also see this practice evidenced when Jesus taught his disciples to pray in what we know as the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:11).

Praying before meals is a good thing. It reminds us that we are the beneficiaries of good things. That God has blessed us with the ability to eat as well as the resources to eat. It puts our life into perspective that without God's intervention, his help, we would perish. As we need food and water to survive, we need God's involvement in our lives, too.

Parenthetically, being thankful for God's blessings shouldn't end at the breakfast table.

- What about when you get in your car to drive to work?
- Or stop at the gym to work out? Or fill your car up with gasoline?
- Or pick up a book at the library? Or sit down at your desk at your job?

Let's not make prayer at meals a sacrament, but let's not ignore it either (and all the other benefits and gifts that God has provided.)

May I offer a few **suggestions** about **praying before meals**.

1. Pray, but don't preach. Be brief and to the point.
2. Be sincere, but don't be stale. Use variety.
3. In public, be a witness, but don't be a show off. I imagine that Jesus would pray before meals in a public place, but he would not draw attention to himself by praying ostentatiously. He prayed over the loaves and fish but the writers did not record his words, perhaps because they were brief. Remember you can pray with your eyes open and you can offer a silent prayer to God.
4. In public, don't pray, if you aren't going to leave a proper tip. I've been told that, generally speaking, the smallest tips are left at restaurants on Sundays by the church crowd. Don't be a positive witness through your prayers and then a negative witness through your tipping.

Praying Like Jesus

Study 6: **Jesus offered thanks.**

Matthew 11:25

Jesus gave thanks when he prayed (Read Matt. 11:25-26). He set for us a model that we should follow. To fail to give thanks reflects on the condition of our relationship with God. If we are not thanking God, we are probably unaware of God's merciful and generous provision.

How often do we forget the gracious hand of God and his bountiful blessings on our lives. Let's stop for a moment and consider the blessings of God:

- Born in America.
- Finest medical care in the world.
- Freedom to worship.
- Wealth.
- Family.
- Friends.
- Church.
- Job.
- Health.
- Home.
- Spiritual blessings. Etc.

We should always be thankful and express thanks to God for each of those blessings and more.

Why give thanks? It is only good manners to return thanks for a kindness done to us. It is courtesy, politeness, acceptable behavior for those who have been the recipients of favor and kindness and blessing.

Thanksgiving is essential to prayer, since all that we are, all that we have and all that we receive comes from our gracious God. Consider these verses:

- Psalm 50:14
- Philippians 4:6
- Colossians 4:2
- Psalm 92:1; Psalm 106:1; 107:1; 118:1

Jesus has model a lifestyle of thanksgiving; we are commanded to give thanks, but we have a propensity to forget God's goodness in our lives. (See Luke 17:11-19). In a village north of Jerusalem Jesus healed ten lepers, but only one returned to give thanks (Read Luke 17:15-16).

Jesus affirms him even as he confronts the thanklessness of the others (Read Luke 17:17-18). Jesus gave thanks when he prayed and considered it a normal response to a loving God who answers our requests. Let's not forget our manners. Let's give thanks to a good, merciful, and kind God.

Praying Like Jesus

Study 7: **Jesus sang some prayers.**

Mark 14:26, Matt. 26:30

Jesus sang. Have you ever thought about that? And, amazingly only a few hours before his crucifixion Jesus sang. Following his time with his disciples in the upper room, Jesus sang with his disciples a hymn (Mark 14:26). Most likely this song was the traditional Passover hymn based on Psalms 115-118.

Singing hymns and prayers was part of Jewish tradition. Five-hundred-seventy-five references to praise, singing, and music are found in the Bible. At the very center of the volume is a 150-song hymnal known as the Psalms, the Jewish book of hymns and prayers. This great collection of songs and prayers express the heart and soul of humanity. In them, the whole range of human experiences is expressed. Honestly, the writers pour out their heart, their true feelings, their hurts. The Psalms proved the expression of praise, worship, and confession to God.

The key verse is the final verse of the Psalms, Psalms 150:6:

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord. Hallelujah! (HCSB)

Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord (NIV)

Let everything alive give praises to the Lord! You praise him! Hallelujah! (LB)

Music is a vehicle that stirs the emotions and expresses our hearts.

Singing prayers was adopted by the early church.

Read Ephesians 5:18-20

Throughout the Christian tradition, believers have sung the Psalms, written new songs to sing.

Why is singing such a powerful prayer tool?

- Singing causes our bodies, our minds, and our spirits to work in concert.
- Singing seizes our attention and helps focus our thoughts.

Prayer can and should include some singing, especially those songs that help us focus on God, his attributes and character. Some of those songs for me are (list your favorites):

"Holy, Holy, Holy," "How Great Thou Art," "Great Is Thy Faithfulness,"
"Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," "Great Is the Lord," "How Majestic Is Your Name."

The hymnal and song books are wonderful tools in our prayer time. Use them often. Listen to the worship and praise songs of others. Join with them as they sing to God.

But, when we pray we need to do more than just sing or listen to music. As wonderful and powerful as music is, we still need to listen for the still, small voice of God that comes in the quiet times.

Praying Like Jesus

Study 8: **Jesus prayed before making important decisions.**

Luke 6:12-13

It was Jesus' practice to pray before making important decisions. The more important the decision, the longer he prayed about it. An example of that is when "During those days He went out to the mountain to pray and spent all night in prayer to God." (Luke 6:12 HCSB)

Why would Jesus pray all night?

1. He knew the opposition against him was strong. It would finally result in his crucifixion.
2. He needed the strength to face the path that lay ahead of him.
3. He wanted the father's guidance as he selected the twelve disciples. They would carry his message after he was gone. They were the future of the church. It has been said that the most important decision in any organization are the people decisions. These men were essential to Jesus' mission and purpose on earth.
4. He knew that strategic decision required longer time to process.

Why is praying before a decision important to us?

Prayer keeps us in tune with God's will and God's purpose.

Jesus said on another occasion: "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish his work" (John 4:34 HCSB).

Notice the pronouns.

- Whose will does Jesus want to do? (God's.)
- Whose purpose does he want to accomplish? (God's.)

To know God's will and to know God's purpose, we must know God. And the only way to know God is to spend time with God in prayer.

How does this apply to us? It is easy to go through life making all sorts of decisions without considering what God may want in each of those circumstances. There are two records of our decisions that present a clear picture of what is important to us:

Our checkbooks and our calendars.

Based on these two documents whose will and whose purpose are we trying to accomplish with the use of our time, money, and energy?

Praying before important decisions reorients us toward God. It causes us to ask:

- What does God want for me?
- What is his mind and wisdom about this opportunity?
- Why have I been placed in this circumstance?
- What gifts has God called me to exercise?

Praying Like Jesus

Study 9: **Jesus prayed for his disciples.**

John 17:9-26

The prayer Jesus prayed in John 17 has been called the “high priestly prayer,” but it could be also called “The Lord’s Prayer.” (The prayer commonly known as the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6 would be better labeled “The Disciple’s Prayer, since that is the model we are to pray.) The prayer in John 17 Jesus prayed for his disciples (and for us). Jesus prayed for the ones he was most invested in. His practice affirms our natural inclination to pray for those closest to us. It echoes almost every element of the model prayer in Matthew 6. Jesus’ prayer can show us how to pray for others.

Jesus prays for our perseverance as Christians. (17:11, 15, 24)

Living the Christian life is hard. How many people do you know that were once active and faithful followers of Christ, but now have drifted away?

Jesus prays for our unity. (17:11, 21-23)

Twenty centuries of church history demonstrates the importance of this prayer. Why is unity so important? It improves our witness to a watching world, it brings us together as one to accomplish God’s purpose.

Jesus prays for our spiritual satisfaction. (17:13)

Struggle and suffering attend the faithful Christian life, and this makes Jesus’ prayer for joy that much more poignant. As Augustine is often quoted as saying, “We are restless until we find our rest in God.” Jesus prays for the fullness of our joy—that it may completely satisfy us—a joy overflowing, running over kind of thing.

Jesus prays for our growth in personal holiness. (17:17)

We have not yet arrived where we should be in our walk with Christ. Sanctification is that process of making us saints. PBPGINFWMY: Please be patient God is not finished with me yet. We have imputed righteousness—we are declared holy through Christ’s saving work, but we need imparted righteousness through the cleansing and character development of the Holy Spirit’s work within us. Thus Jesus prays for this process to run its course and accomplish its full effect.

Jesus prays for our witness to those who are not yet Christians. (17:20, Matt. 28:16-20, Acts 1:8)

His prayer is that we will fulfill his marching orders to go into the entire world to make disciples of all nations. We are blessed to be a blessing to others. So he prays, “I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in Me through their message.” (John 17:20 HCSB)

Praying Like Jesus

Study 10: **Jesus continues to pray for us.**

Hebrews 7:25

The most encouraging news found in the Bible about prayer, at least in my estimation, is that Jesus has made it his continuing purpose to pray for us: "He always lives to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:25 HCSB). Allow me to break this verse down word by word.

"He."

Jesus stands in the gap making petitions to God on my behalf. He is our representative. He is our mediator in salvation and our mediator in heaven.

"Always."

Permanence and authority are in the role that Jesus plays. Jesus never stops praying for us. He is always at our disposal before the throne of heaven pleading our case and sharing our cause with the Father.

"Lives."

Jesus is alive to fulfill his role. His resurrection proves that Jesus is alive, but what is he doing with all that time at his disposal? He is praying for you and me. Christ's life in heaven is his prayer for us.

"To intercede."

The word means "to meet, to approach, to appeal, to make petition." Intercession involved our Lord's representation of his people at the throne of God. Through Christ, believers are able to draw near to God in prayer. Sometimes I do not know what to pray or even how to pray, but Jesus does. He goes before the Father with my concerns. Jesus always knows how to pray as he should.

Read Romans 8:26-27.

"For them."

Jesus is praying for us, his disciples, his followers, his friends. Jesus lives for that relationship with God and keeps you and me in mind as he communes with the Father. When we pray, we join a prayer meeting that Jesus is already leading on our behalf.

I often falter in my prayer practice, but Jesus is always alert and always ready to pray for me and you.

As we incorporate these practices of prayer modeled by Jesus into our behavior, then we will see the power of prayer as manifested in Jesus' life a living reality in our lives.