

# Sweet "Our" of Prayer

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January 4, 1987 by John Piper Scripture: [Matthew 6:5-9](#) Topic: [Prayer](#)

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And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: "Our Father . . ."

I want to talk this morning about why praying together with other people is important.

## Why We Begin the Year with Concerted Prayer

This is Prayer Week 1987 at Bethlehem. We begin the year with concerted prayer because what matters most in life cannot be produced by man, but only by God:

- new birth,
- conviction for sin,
- faith in Christ,
- forgiveness,
- a clean conscience,
- warm-hearted devotion to Jesus,
- love for the body of Christ,
- zeal for justice and purity,
- intensity in worship,
- boldness and meekness in witness to unbelievers,
- and fervor for frontier missions—for finishing the work the Lord has given us to do in the world.

These are the important things in life. These are the essentials. But whether I am healthy, or good looking, or accepted by others, or still in the same job, or making lots of money, or having a

nice vacation or car or home or clothes or VCR—these things are secondary. And they derive their relative importance from how they relate to the essentials.

But none of us, no matter how diligent or smart or good, can produce these essentials by ourselves. I can't make the new birth happen, or give faith, or forgive sin, or cleanse the conscience, or make anyone cherish Jesus, or love the church, or be bold and caring in witness. When these things flourish in a church, we call it revival or awakening because the Spirit of God is at work giving life where the resources of man have reached their limit.

That is why we begin the year with a week of concerted prayer, praying in the mornings, praying at noon, praying Wednesday evening and all night Friday. Prayer Week is an eight-day cry: We need you God—to do among us and in us what is really essential! Prayer Week is a church-wide admission that by ourselves we can't make happen the things that matter most. And it's a church-wide admission that we have great need of reviving and awakening.

## Our Great Need and Five Stages of Emotions

And we do. According to last Sunday night's survey which 255 of those in attendance filled out, 40% of our people said they read the Bible fewer than three times a week. 46% said they read the Bible on an average of less than five minutes a day. And 59% of our people do not set aside a daily time for prayer.

In the several hours after I saw these results of our questionnaire I went through five stages of emotions—from the less to the more mature I think.

### 1. The Desire to Quit

My first emotion was the desire to quit. If six and a half years of work produces no more devotion than this, maybe I am not in the right calling after all. I think that was about 90% self-pity. And last Sunday night's message about perseverance ([1 Corinthians 15:58](#)) had to be brought in for the counter attack.

### 2. Anger

My second emotion was anger—at the worldliness of so many hearts and at the forces of this world that hold so many Christians in bondage. That the Word of God and communion with him in prayer are so far down on the real life priorities of so many people is a sign of much love for the things of the world. But then I preached to myself the sermon on [James 1:19](#) ("Be slow to

speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God").

### 3. Grief

The third emotion that rose up in my heart was a kind of grief and disappointment that we will probably be powerless as a church to make any significant impact on this city if our dependence on prayer and our thirst for the Word of God is so small. It was a sobering postscript to **last Sunday morning's sermon** about the possibilities of reforming this city.

### 4. Contrition

The fourth emotion was contrition—a sense of being rebuked and broken for thinking that Bethlehem is some kind of remarkable church, when in fact it is a weak and sinful church with a weak and sinful pastor, all in desperate need of the out-pouring of God's Spirit.

### 5. Longing

And the final emotion that has begun to flicker is a longing, I believe the longing of love, that somehow by God's grace I might be used to make the Word of God as attractive and enjoyable for you as it was for David when he said, "Oh, how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day . . . How sweet are thy words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (**Psalm 119:97, 103**). And that I might be used of God to make you feel—not just know but feel—the freeing truth of these words of E. M. Bounds:

God's acquaintance is not made by pop calls. God does not bestow his gifts on the casual or hasty comers and goers. Much with God alone is the secret of knowing him and of influence with him. He yields to the persistency of a faith that knows him. He bestows his richest gifts upon those who declare their desire for and appreciation of those gifts by the constancy as well as earnestness of their importunity. (*Power Through Prayer*, p. 44)

### Focusing on Praying Together

So that is where I am today, desiring that here at the beginning of PRAYER WEEK '87 I might be able to help you feel more of the value and joy of meditating on the Word of God and praying. And this morning the focus will be on praying together with other people—what we sometimes call corporate prayer, or what used to be called social prayer.

Let's look first at [Matthew 6:5-9](#) and then close by walking through the book of Acts to see what happened when the early Christians prayed together like we are planning to this week.

## The Lord's Prayer: An Invitation to Corporate Prayer

In verse 9 Jesus says, "Pray then like this: Our Father . . ." Verse 11: "Give us this day our daily bread . . ." Verse 12: "Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors." Verse 13: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

When crafting a summary prayer for his disciples, Jesus puts it in a form that will commend it for social or corporate use more than private use. Of course, you can say, "Our Father . . . Give us our daily bread, forgive our debts, and lead us not into temptation," when you are praying alone. But if you do, you have to at least bring to your mind the truth that you are praying as part of a family of other believers. The prayer naturally lends itself to group prayer because of its using "our" instead of "my" and "us" instead of "me" and "we" instead of "I."

So I see the Lord's Prayer as an invitation not only to pray but to pray together with other believers. There is something self-contradictory about praying with the words "our," "us," and "we," but never experiencing the our, us, and we in prayer.

Now let's refine this observation by going back to verses 5-8 and letting each verse make its contribution to our understanding of praying together.

### Verse 5:

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward.

This verse teaches us that praying together must never be motivated by the desire to be admired by other people for our piety or devotion. This verse is not an indictment of praying aloud with other people. The evil of the hypocrite in this verse is the desire to stand out from the group and be exalted above the group for his superior zeal. This is very different from loving those you pray with and wanting to be caught up into a genuine unified togetherness of prayer to the God who is equally Father of all his children.

One of the values of praying together, in fact, is that it can cut the root of pride by exposing us to the humility and heart-searching longings that get expressed in the prayers of others. My

own prayers have often been reproved and corrected and deepened just by being in a group of godly people of prayer.

In fact, I wonder if we should expect our private prayer life to advance in maturity and depth and intensity if we never pray with others who can lift us higher and take us deeper. Wouldn't that be like expecting a young person to become a gifted conversationalist, but always sending him away to play by himself whenever there was a serious conversation?

So in view of verse 5 praying together is not for the sake of exalting our individual strengths but for the sake of becoming one with the family and helping each other mature in the life of prayer.

### **Verse 6:**

But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

This verse teaches that private prayer is indispensable and that praying together should never take the place of praying in solitude. All the words for "you" and "your" in this verse are singular (unlike English, Greek distinguishes plural and singular "you"). But all the rest of the pronouns in verses 5–15 are plural. So this verse stands out as a caution lest the pendulum swing too far to the social side of prayer.

Both are crucial. They serve each other. The more earnestly we pray in solitude, the more powerfully we will pray in a group. And the more intense the prayer of the group, the more we will be helped to go hard after God in private.

### **Verse 7:**

And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words.

This verse teaches us not to let idle, careless talk come out of our mouths when we are praying, and not to think that endless repetitions with many words will somehow constrain God to answer. I assume it is possible to pray all night without falling under the condemnation of "many words" since Jesus prayed all night ([Luke 6:12](#)). It's the empty, mindless repetition that this verse warns against, not the intense and fully engaged pleading with God about something from dozens of fresh angles.

Praying together is a great antidote in my own life to mind-wandering and mindless talk. Alone I have to wrestle ten times as hard to keep my mind engaged as when I am with someone or the staff or the church on Wednesday evening.

### **Verse 8:**

Do not be like them [the Gentiles, who multiply empty words], for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

This verse is a great encouragement to remember that God is not disinclined to do you good. He is a Father, not a mortgage holder. And as a Father he is up on what you need as his child. And as a Father he is very eager to give it.

You can tell that this is the meaning of this verse by comparing the same phrase in 6:31–32,

Do not be anxious, saying "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.

The point is: since he knows your need, you don't have to be anxious about your need. Which implies that he is the kind of Father who loves to meet the needs of his children for the asking.

So when Jesus teaches us to begin our prayers with "Our Father," he is teaching us to remember that we belong to a family that has this kind of Father; and that is just what praying together is intended to do for us—to intensify our sense of belonging to a family bigger than ourselves and all cared for by a Father who knows all our needs and loves to meet them.

### **Summary**

So let me sum up now in four sentences what we can say from these four verses about praying together.

1. Praying together helps us guard against the individualistic pride that seeks to be admired for outstanding devotion.
2. Praying together does not take the place of private prayer; instead they deepen and strengthen each other.

3. Praying together helps protect us from carelessness and mindlessness in prayer.
4. Praying together reminds us that we are part of a larger family with a Father who knows our needs and loves to meet them.

## When the Early Church Prayed Together

So I ask in conclusion, Did the early church pray together, and if so what happened when they did? To answer this let's go to the book of Acts and just walk through it together and see for ourselves.

### **Acts 1:14**

After Jesus had ascended to heaven the 11 apostles gathered to pray: "All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers." There were about 120 in all and they prayed for about ten days.

The result of this season of praying together was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost described in 2:1–4.

### **Acts 2:42**

After Peter's sermon at Pentecost, and the conversion of 3,000 people, Luke describes their life together like this: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

The following verse describes the result of this life together: "And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles."

### **Acts 4:24–30**

Peter and John were arrested for teaching in the temple about Jesus. They kept them over night, threatened them, and then let them go. They went to their friends who were praying together. **Acts 4:24–30** records the prayer that went up from the group—a prayer that magnifies the sovereignty of God and glories in his power.

Then verse 31 records what happened because of this praying together: "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken and they were all filled with

the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness."

### **Acts 6:6**

When the first deacons were chosen in the early church, it says in **Acts 6:6**, "These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them."

Verse 7 describes what happened next: "And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith."

### **Acts 12:5, 12**

Herod was holding Peter in prison after killing James the Lord's brother. The response of the church was to get together to pray: "So Peter was kept in prison; but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church."

The result was that an angel of the Lord released Peter. And right there in the middle of the night Peter goes to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark because this must have been the prayer house. Verse 12: "He went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying." So the prayer of the gathered church was powerful to rescue Peter from prison and keep the gospel advancing.

### **Acts 13:2-3**

In Antioch some teachers and prophets were together worshiping and fasting, and the Lord spoke to them that Barnabas and Saul should be set aside as frontier missionaries. So they prayed and fasted some more and then laid hands on them and sent them off.

### **Acts 14:23**

In all the churches that Paul and Barnabas established they prayed together as they appointed leaders for the churches.

### **Acts 16:25**

Paul and Silas are in prison in Philippi. It is midnight and they are singing hymns and praying. The result: an earthquake, an open jail, the conversion of the jailer, and a new church.



**Acts 20:36**

At his final departure from Asia, Paul met the elders of the Ephesian church on the beach at Miletus and spoke to them one last time. Then verse 36 describes their final act together: "And when he had spoken thus, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they wept and embraced Paul and kissed him."

**Summary**

So let me sum up what we have seen this morning, and let us pray that the words of the Lord (in **Matthew 6:5–15**) and the inspired story of how the early church prayed together have a deep and lasting effect on us at Bethlehem.

Jesus taught us to pray, "OUR Father," not just my Father; and so he led the church toward the powerful experience of praying together and not just alone.

The early church learned the lesson well. The results:

- the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost,
- signs and wonders at the hands of the apostles,
- bold witnessing to the Word of God,
- the conversion of many priests,
- the sending out of frontier missionaries,
- the establishment of new churches,
- the rescue of apostles from prison,
- and last, but not least, the sweetening of a final farewell on a beach in Miletus . . .

. . . and the sweetening of my family circle each day at the breakfast table, and the sweetening of my love for Tom Steller and Char Ransom and Dean Palermo and Peter Nelson and David Michael and Kurt Swanson when we pray together on Monday mornings, and the sweetening and deepening and strengthening of our life together in this week of concerted prayer. I will be at all the meetings. I look forward to praying with you at some of them in the sweet "our" of prayer.

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