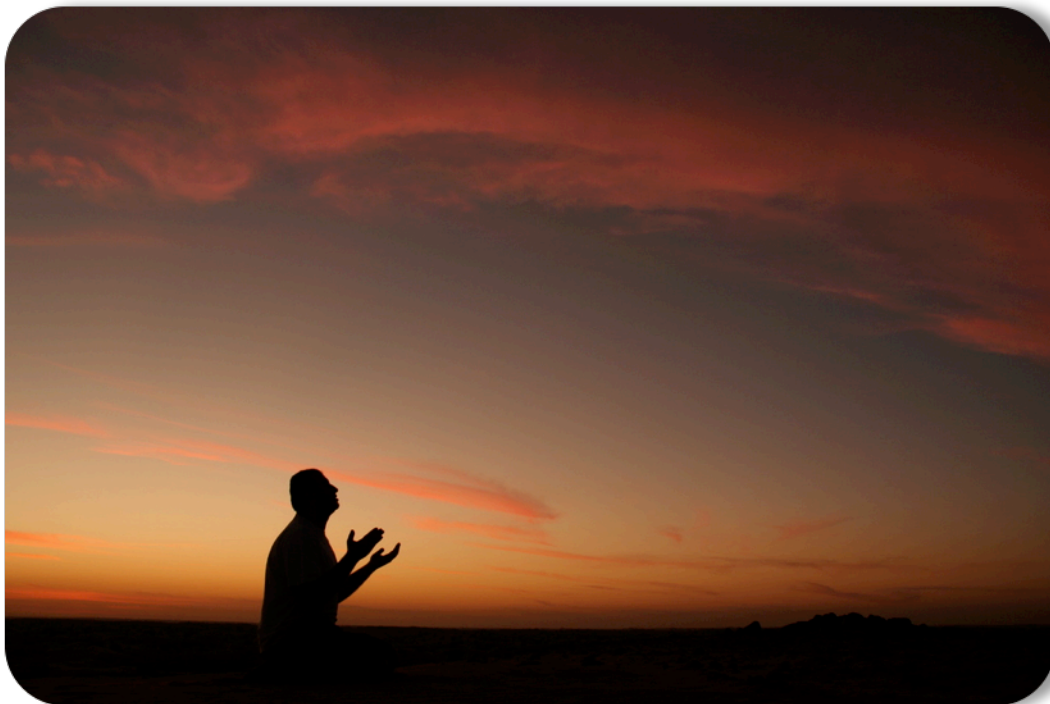


The Preconditions of Prayer

Parameters of Prayer 3



T. M. Moore

The Fellowship of Ailbe

A ReVision Study

The Preconditions of Prayer
Parameters of Prayer 3
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Susie Moore, Editor and Finisher

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *The Preconditions of Prayer*

Welcome to *The Preconditions of Prayer*, Part 3 of a five-part study on *Parameters of Prayer*.

We need to prepare for prayer if we hope to gain the promises God holds out to us, and if we're going to become so dependent on prayer that we learn to pray always and in everything.

There are certain preconditions attending to prayer, things that have to be met before we launch into whatever our prayer agenda might be. If we have not taken the time to prepare, by making sure all these preconditions are met, our prayers will not have the desired effect.

Indeed, they may not be heard at all.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

Visit our website, www.ailbe.org, to subscribe to our free instructional newsletters, including *ReVision*, *Scriptorium*, and *The Week*, and *Crosfigell*, featuring insights from Scripture and our Celtic Christian forebears.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Faith

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Hebrews 11.6

“And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.” Matthew 21.22

Not a blank check

In Mark 11.24 Jesus said, “Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive *them*, and you will have *them*.” This sounds very much like His promise in Matthew 21.22. Whatever we ask from the Lord, whatever we need, if we just *believe*, the Lord will grant our request.

Yet this is not intended as a blank check, so that we may use prayer for whatever ends *we* choose. Jesus is not saying that if you *believe* that you’re going to get what you want, you’ll get it. When we come to God in prayer we are seeking mercy and grace to help in our time of need (Heb. 4.16). Certainly we may put our *requests* before the Lord boldly; but God knows better than we precisely what form His mercy and grace should take, as we have seen. The form in which He chooses to answer our prayers is ultimately *His* to decide, not ours.

This leads us to a consideration of the *preconditions* involved in the privilege of prayer. These are criteria or qualifications that must be met *before* the Lord will even hear our prayers. So important are these preconditions that we cannot *believe*, except foolishly and in vain, that *anything* we might ask in prayer will be ours unless these preconditions have been met as we come to the throne of grace.

However, these preconditions being met, we may be bold in our prayers, confidently, joyfully, and expectantly seeking from the Lord whatever we will, and believing that He will grant our requests according to His mercy and grace.

And, naturally enough, the first precondition of prayer is that we come to the Lord in faith.

Coming in faith

What does this mean? The writer of Hebrews explains that faith has both a *subjective* and an *objective* dimension (Heb. 11.1). Faith is *assurance* that what we hope for is already ours. Further, faith supplies *evidence* that our relationship with God is according to His will.

Let’s look a bit more closely at each of these dimensions of faith.

When we come to God in prayer, we must come in faith, *believing*. We show that we believe in God when we come to Him *assured* that, because of *Jesus* – not because of anything in us – we will find mercy and grace to help in our time of need (Heb. 4.16). We come to God in prayer assured of Jesus, that we belong to Him and that He intercedes for us. If we come to God in prayer by any other means, or seeking anything other than mercy and grace, then we are not *coming* in faith.

We come to God in faith when we believe that He will show us mercy, because of the work of our Lord Jesus Christ in forgiving our sins; and that He will give us the grace we need, so that we may learn Jesus and follow Him in all things (Eph. 4.17-24). We do not *prescribe* to God what He should do for us. We *appeal* to God for what is right and best, which only He knows.

Thus, we are *assured* in faith, because of Jesus’ mercy and grace, that our prayers will be heard, that God the

Father knows what we need even before we ask, and He will meet our need for mercy and grace so that we may serve Him as disciples of Jesus.

Going in faith

Then, second, believing that what we seek in prayer – mercy and grace to help us live for Jesus – because it falls within the parameters of what God has promised to provide, is already ours, according to the good pleasure of God, we must *act* on that belief, in line with God's riches in glory in Christ Jesus. We will not know the specific *form* God's answer will take, but, hoping in the unseen God and relying on His Word, we go forth from prayer, *convinced* that He *will* answer, and therefore rejoicing in anticipation of His response.

When we have come to God in faith, trusting in Jesus, we can know that our prayers have been received according to His good pleasure, and that He will answer our prayers with a measure of grace sufficient for our time of need as disciples of Jesus. He will not fail us, and He will not forsake us (Heb. 13.5). His answer will come, and when it does, we will recognize His answer to be just exactly what we *need*.

Thus we should come away from prayer neither fearing, fretting, nor doubting, nor simply waiting around to see what happens; rather, we come away in peace, filled with assurance and joy, looking toward Jesus, and pressing on in our Kingdom-and-glory calling as agents of grace to the world (Heb. 12.1, 2). If we have *made* our requests boldly in faith, seeking only mercy and grace to help in our time of need, then we can *go forward* in faith, knowing that our God will supply all our needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

Faith – inward assurance *based* on Jesus, and outward evidence *seeking* Jesus – is the first precondition, the access and egress, of prayer.

For reflection

1. Why is it that we can come *boldly* before the Lord's throne in prayer? Does coming boldly mean we don't come humbly? That we can't come when we're sorrowing? Or fearful? Or doubting?
2. Why is it important that we come to prayer knowing both that God already knows what we need, and that He knows better than we how that need should be met with mercy and grace?
3. If we truly believe God has heard our prayers, how should that affect the way we go forth from prayer to our daily lives?

Next steps – Transformation: Would you say that you enter and leave your times of prayer in faith? Why or why not?

2 Confession of Sin

*If I regard iniquity in my heart,
The Lord will not bear.* Psalm 66.18

*Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened,
That it cannot save;
Nor His ear heavy,
That it cannot hear.
But your iniquities have separated you from your God;
And your sins have hidden His face from you,
So that He will not hear.* Isaiah 59.1, 2

Eyes too pure

Shockingly, the prophet Habakkuk declared that God is of purer eyes than to behold evil (Hab. 1.13). He insisted that God “cannot look on wickedness.” The reason for this is simple: God hates sin (Ps. 45.7; 101.3; 119.104). He commands His people to hate sin (Ps. 97.10), and insists that one cannot fear God without also hating evil (Prov. 8.13). God hates sin, and He commands us to hate it, because sin is antithetical to everything God is, and all His good and perfect will for His creatures.

Sin challenges and denies the authority of God. Sin prefers lies to the truth, self-indulgence to true worship, the ways of the world to life in the Spirit, and the follies of the flesh to the glory of God. Sin corrupts and degrades all that God has made holy and good. Sin wounds and corrodes what God intends for health and goodness. Sin is so awful in the sight of God that He will turn His face away from it. He will not commune with it, not grant it audience, not allow it any space to assert itself. This is why Jesus’ characteristic response to the presence of demons, especially those which sought to speak to Him, was simply, “Shut up and get out!”

God hates sin, and if we think we can come to God in prayer, even if we insist that we believe in Jesus and want to be more like Him, yet be harboring sin in our lives, we will gain no access to the Father in prayer. If we cherish sin in our hearts, God will not hear our prayers. It’s not that He *can’t*, as if He were lacking in power, it’s rather that He *won’t*, because He hides His face from the very presence of sin, and refuses to hear us when we pray.

No hope?

What hope do we have, then, of ever having our prayers come before the Father? For we, like Isaiah, are sinful people, and we dwell in the midst of sinful people (Is. 6.1-6). A law of sin operates within us, even in those who have been redeemed and saved in Jesus (Rom. 7.14-23), so that if we say we have no sin, then we are simply lying to ourselves and making God to be a liar, for He insists that *all* have sinned and fallen short of His glory (1 Jn. 1.8, 10; Rom. 3.23).

Wretched people that we are! Who can deliver us *from* our sin *into* the presence of our heavenly Father, so that we may find mercy and grace to help in our time of need?

Our holy hope for access to and audience with God is through our Lord Jesus Christ. As we *hope* in Him we may be *assured* that His blood is sufficient to pay for all our sins. And this hope can lead us to *confess* our sins to God as the second precondition for His hearing our prayers and granting us mercy and grace to help in our time of need.

Confession

But what *is* confession?

Briefly, to *confess* is simply to *agree* with God that we are sinners, and to *agree* with the Holy Spirit concerning whatever *specific* sins He may convict us of at any moment. The Greek word for *confess* means literally, *to say the same thing*. The Holy Spirit has come to dwell in the hearts of all who believe, and one of His primary duties there is to *convict* us of sin (Jn. 16.8). We are convicted of sin when, as we wait on the Lord in the anteroom of prayer, we ask the Spirit to search our minds, hearts, consciences, words, and deeds, so that He may discover in us any thoughts, affections, priorities, or deeds – whether of *commission* or *omission* – that may hinder our prayers. Then, when these are brought to light, we agree with the Lord and His Word that these are wrong, that they are contrary to God’s will for us, detrimental to our walk with Him, and a hindrance to our prayers. We express contempt for these sins, thus mirroring our Father’s attitude toward them, claim the forgiveness of which we are assured in our Lord Jesus Christ, and resolve before the Father to take a new course in life, one more consistent with how the Lord Himself would walk (1 Jn. 2.1-6).

In His mercy, God will renew us in His forgiveness, refresh our spirits in His presence, and receive us as His children, so that we may in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, make our requests known to Him.

Faith is the key to the anteroom of prayer, where, in the company of God’s Spirit, we divest ourselves of all our sins, and are clothed anew in the righteousness of Jesus, so that we may come boldly and confidently before the throne of grace.

For reflection

1. Both Paul and John indicate that the knowledge of sin comes through the Law of God (Rom. 7.7; 1 Jn. 3.4). Do you think it would be helpful, in making us sensitive to sin, if we meditated on the Law of God (cf. Ps. 1)? Explain.
2. Meditate on the promise of 1 Jn. 1.8, 9. If we confess all the sins we *know about*, what does God promise concerning those we have *failed* to note?
3. What is repentance? Can we truly confess a sin without also repenting of it? Explain.

Next steps – Preparation: How should confession work in your times of prayer? What might signal you, during the day, that you need to confess some sin?

3 Attention to God's Law

*One who turns away his ear from hearing the law,
Even his prayer is an abomination. Proverbs 28.9*

Averse to God's Law

I have a hard time understanding the present aversion of so many believers to the Law of God. Or, for that matter, to any fixed laws to govern their lives as followers of Christ.

“How can we be free,” some ask, “when we’re expected to submit to some yoke of law? Shouldn’t we just follow the Spirit’s leading, as He guides us moment by moment? Isn’t it enough simply to be like Jesus, and to follow in His path? We’re under grace, not law. Why should we, who have been set free in Christ, be expected to come under the yoke of God’s Law?”

Yes, we should follow the Spirit’s leading, and to have the mind of the Spirit is to submit to the Law of God (Rom. 8.5-9). And yes, we should do what Jesus would do, and walk as He would walk. Jesus fulfilled the Law and expects His disciples to keep the commandments of God (Matt. 5.17-19; 1 Jn. 2.1-6). No, we’re not under the Law concerning salvation; but we *are* under the Law for good works (Eph. 2.8-10). The Law of God has been established for us, as a standard of holiness, righteousness, and goodness, and as the true measure of liberty and love (Rom. 3.31; 7.12; Jms. 2.8-12; Matt. 22.34-40; 1 Jn. .1-3).

And with respect to our prayers, God has made it plain: He regards as abominable in His sight the prayers of those who turn away their ears from hearing His Law. If you want God to hear your prayers, then you need to make sure you’re paying attention to His Law, and to *all* His Word.

Whose law?

It’s no use denying the place of law in our lives. Everyone lives by law. We all have values, priorities, and ideas about right and wrong which guide our daily decisions and actions. Even if we’re only a law unto ourselves, ruled by our passions, whims, or passing thoughts, we’re still living by law.

So if we will not live under *God’s Law*, then our only recourse is to *decide for ourselves* on some other standard or standards by which to live. That is, we become a *law unto ourselves*, reserving the right to choose whatever guidelines for living we think will be in our best interest.

And here it’s easy to see why God considers the prayers of those who neglect His Law to be an abomination. Two reasons especially should be clear.

First, by rejecting God’s Law and preferring to be a law unto ourselves, we actually put ourselves in the place of God, presuming to *be* God by insisting we know better than He how we ought to live. Of course, we would probably not say this, but by choosing our own best ideas about morality over what God has clearly revealed in His Word, is this not the practical effect? Why would God even consider hearing the prayers of such a person? Why would He not rather condemn the impudence and preposterousness of such a claim?

Second, if we neglect the Law of God, and if our attitude toward the entire Word of God is not as it should be, how will we be able to deal with the sin in our lives? Will we even be able to recognize when we are in sin, apart from God’s Word revealing it to us? And will we be likely to *agree* with God concerning sin, when we reserve the right to decide what’s best for us, how we ought to live?

If we want God to hear our prayers in our time of need, we will not want to show up before Him with

anything abominable to Him, thus hindering our access and shutting off our audience. Hearing God's Law and all His Word is a precondition for access to God and an audience in prayer.

Delighting in God's Law

So we need to make sure our attitude toward the Law of God, and all the Word of God, is what it should be. This doesn't mean we need to *know* the Bible in its entirety, or be scholars or theologians, before God will hear our prayers. It's not *how much* we know about His Word that God is seeking from suppliants; it's *the attitude of heart* toward His Word that we bring with us into His presence.

The Apostle Peter counsels us to *desire* the Word of God, so that we may grow thereby (1 Pet. 2.1). If we have truly tasted of the graciousness of the Lord, we will want to know more about Him. God makes Himself known to us in His Word, beginning in His Law. Our desire should be to *seek* the Lord in His Word, to *delight* in His Law, *hunger* for His Word, and *esteem the Word of God* more than even our necessary food (Ps. 119.77; Jer. 15.16; Job 23.12), so that we come increasingly to *love God's Law and all His Word* as that alone which can equip us for every good work (Ps. 119.97; 2 Tim. 3.15-17).

Delighting in the Word of God, and submitting to His Law, is a precondition for God hearing and answering our prayers. Make sure, when you come before the Lord in prayer, that He sees in your heart that longing for Him and His truth that finds you daily feeding upon His Word and meditating in His Law (Ps. 1).

For reflection

1. Why do you think so many Christians don't regard the Law of God as all that important?
2. Why do you think God does?
3. Suggest some ways to encourage your fellow believers in delighting in God's Law and Word, in hungering for it and loving it as we should.

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with a fellow believer about what it means to delight in and love the Law and Word of God. How can we know that we actually do love God's Law and Word?

4 Jesus' Name

“And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” John 14.13

Jesus I know; but who are you?

One of the more dramatic moments in recent presidential campaigns came during a 1988 vice-presidential debate between Senator Dan Quayle and Senator Lloyd Bentsen. Senator Quayle was challenged by the moderator to defend his qualifications to serve as president, should that eventuality arise. He responded by saying, in part, that he was at least as experienced as President Kennedy was at his young age to serve in the highest office of the land. To which Senator Bentsen replied, “Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you’re no Jack Kennedy.”

Senator Quayle was offended, but, I think, duly chided. He’d overstepped the bounds of legitimacy in comparing himself with President Kennedy, and everyone in the audience, and most Americans, understood this was so.

A similar situation occurred in Acts 19 with the seven sons of Sceva, who were Jewish exorcists. Seeing the success of the Apostle Paul in his teaching and casting out demons, they decided to up their game a bit by imitating the Apostle, and tried to cast a demon out of a man by invoking *both* Paul and Jesus. To which the demon replied, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know: but who are you?” Whereupon the demon-possessed man beat the foolishness out of the seven pretenders, sending them away naked and wounded (Acts 19.14-16).

There’s a moral to these two stories: If you invoke someone’s name, seeking some personal advantage, make sure the identification fits.

And this leads to a corollary as a precondition of prayer: When you come before the Father in prayer, be sure you come *in the right Name*, and be sure you know what it means to *pray in that Name*.

Your name enough?

Your own name and needs are not enough to make your prayers effective with the heavenly Father. He loves you dearly, and cherishes you at every moment. He is eager to meet your needs, but only your *true* needs, those needs which are in line with the Kingdom agenda of our Lord Jesus Christ. Your *felt* needs – your needs as *you* experience them – may be little more than symptoms of something deeper, of a need your Father is trying to awaken in you, and that He intends to meet by His mercy and grace. *That* need may be totally unrelated to your *felt* need, and may or may not involve the meeting of that felt need.

So if you come to the Father in prayer *in your own name*, that is, *only* as a child of the Father, and *only* with a view to having your Father see and satisfy your need, as you have identified it, or if you come *in Jesus’ Name* seeking *only* something for yourself or some other person, you may be disappointed when the Father does not answer as you’d hoped.

When we come to prayer, even when we come with urgent felt needs, we must always remember that we are not our own; we have been bought with the price of Jesus’ blood, and we belong to Him and are His bondservants, for the purpose of seeking and advancing His Kingdom, according to His priorities, and not ours. We are called to the Kingdom and glory of God as agents of grace and truth in the world. We are citizens in the Kingdom of God and ambassadors of the Good News of salvation. Asking for anything in Jesus’ Name means we are asking God to do in, for, and through us whatever is according to the priorities and agenda of His Son and our Savior. And it is altogether possible that *we* may not understand what these

are, especially if we are blinded by some urgent felt need as we come to the Lord in prayer. If we invoke the Name of Jesus in prayer, merely for our own sake, or that of some other person, or if we pray in Jesus' Name merely for personal needs, then we fail to understand the Lord's promise; for it is the Father's intention to glorify *Christ* through all our prayers, and not just to satisfy *us*.

Yes, the Lord invites us to bring our needs and concerns to Him. The Apostle Paul prayed three times for relief from some malady, only to have the Lord remind him that this malady was to be a means of enhancing the grace of the Lord; it was not to be relieved, for if it were, Paul would be less potent as an object and agent of grace (2 Cor. 12.7-10). But in bringing our needs to the Father, we must remain at all times open to discerning the *Lord's will* with respect to our prayers, and not merely *our desire for relief or help*. Remember: We don't know how to pray as we should!

Praying in Jesus' Name

So what does it mean to pray in Jesus' Name?

It means that, when we come to prayer, we come as Jesus' disciples, to follow Him in His path of righteousness, service, suffering, and Kingdom power and progress. We come *in* Jesus, *through* His merit, *according to* His agenda, and to bear fruit *for* His glory. We come for the progress of *His* Kingdom, for the increase of righteousness, peace, and joy on earth as it is in heaven (Is. 9.6, 7; Rom. 14.17, 18; Matt. 6.10). Everything we bring with us in prayer has been supplied by our heavenly Father to fit us for this high and upward calling – even our sorrows, disappointments, pains, troubles, trials, and thorns in the flesh.

So when we come to pray in Jesus' Name, we must try to see all that we are and all that we intend to bring before the Father as gifts from Him, that Jesus can use to realize His purposes of transforming us into His own image, making disciples, building His Church, and advancing His Kingdom. To pray in Jesus' Name is to ask God to use *everything He has given us, and every felt need by which we are burdened*, for the glory of His Name and the progress of His Kingdom, according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

By all means, when you pray, pray in Jesus' Name. But make sure that *your intention* in so praying is a fit with *His promise* in allowing you to do so.

For reflection

1. When Christians end their prayers with “in Jesus' Name, Amen” what do you think they intend by this?
2. How is it possible that God could use the troubles and trials we face to further the agenda and glory of Jesus? If we prayed this way about such matters, would that make a difference in the kind of answers we might expect from the Lord? Explain.
3. Give an example of how you might pray for some felt need in Jesus' Name, and how you might expect God to answer such a prayer:

Next steps – Conversation: Ask several of your Christian friends who pray what they mean by praying in Jesus' Name. What can you learn from them about praying this way?

5 Selflessness

You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. James 4.3

I, me, mine!

We live in a time of increasing narcissism. Put the word *narcissism* in your search box, and you'll receive well over 4,000,000 results. In 1977 Christopher Lasch published the book *The Culture of Narcissism* to warn about our drift into self-seeking. His observations served to flesh out what the Beatles had surfaced in their 1968 *White Album* in the song, "I, me, mine."

What were only warnings nearly a generation ago have now become reality. Fueled by postmodern relativism and existential angst, and goaded into self-seeking by advertising and pop culture, people today tend to think of themselves and what they want and need as of supreme interest and concern to others. Hence the rise of Facebook and entitlement politics.

But when it comes to prayer, if you are thinking about bringing your "I, me, mine" to the Lord as the substance of your conversation, think again. You cannot pray in Jesus' Name if all you're really seeking is to add a little comfort, convenience, or pleasure to your life.

When you come to the Lord in prayer, while you're in the anteroom of confession, you'd better check self-interest at the door, and leave it there when you go.

The example of Jesus

It can be helpful, as we come to prayer, to recall our Lord Jesus Christ. We come to prayer in His Name, after all; thus, it would be appropriate, as we finish our confession and before we begin making our requests known to the Lord, to review in prayer and praise our gratitude to God for Jesus, His work, and His calling on our lives.

Recall that Jesus *emptied Himself* of divine privileges and perquisites in order to do the work appointed to Him by the Father (Phil. 2.5-11). Thank the Lord for His *selflessness* in coming among us in the form of a mere Man, and as an obedient servant. Praise the Lord that, though He had no place to lay His head, He never ceased to meet the needs of others for the sake of His Kingdom. Rejoice and give thanks that Jesus endured the scorn and violence of sinners, died to self in order to triumph over sin, and was raised to glory by the Father. Give thanks and praise to the Lord that He has poured out His Spirit for your salvation, and called you to His Kingdom and glory, to be His witness in the world.

Then, linger in meditation on the Lord, exalted in glory. Think of how John saw Him in Revelation 1, as well as in chapters 4 and 5. Let the Psalms guide you to admire and adore the King of Glory and Mysteries – such as Psalms 2, 23, 45, 47, and 110. Focus the eye of your understanding with the Apostle Paul, as he guides you to contemplate the exalted greatness and majesty of King Jesus, Whose Name is above every Name in heaven and on earth, and Who is filling all things with Himself (Eph. 1.15-23; 4.10). Sing a hymn exalting Jesus in His greatness and majesty, and looking forward eagerly to His return. Let the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ set the tone for your prayers, as you come in His Name to make your requests known to the Father.

By reviewing the work of Jesus in an attitude of thanks and praise you may find your own requests, which you have brought with you, will receive clarification and sharper focus concerning what you should seek from the Father in prayer.

Checking self-interest

But you'll need to be on guard in prayer against the ever-present tendency merely to want to satisfy self-interest. How can you do this? Here are some suggestions:

First, cloak your requests, whatever they may be, in the Name of Christ, and for the cause of His Kingdom and glory. Just as we are commanded to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” for each day’s walk and work, so we can put His Name and glory onto our every request, if only by preceding each request with something like, “For the glory of Jesus and for His Kingdom...” This will help us to *phrase* our request more in line with Christ’s agenda, and to *steer* every request away from merely self-serving ends.

Let me also caution you in your prayers from settling too much on yourself, your needs and concerns, and your preferences or desires. Too much thinking about ourselves can be dangerous and even destructive, as King Solomon learned late in life. In Ecclesiastes 2.1-11, where Solomon, in his frustration, misery, and disappointment, is recounting all his many achievements and experiences, I count no less than 36 usages of some form of the first person personal pronoun! No wonder that section ends with Solomon saying, “All indeed was vanity and grasping for the wind.”

Prayer is a time for seeking the Lord and His will, not for gratifying our desires, justifying our shortcomings, pining over our wants, or pleading for our concerns. If you hear yourself referring to yourself too much in prayer, you might begin to question whether more of self and less of the Kingdom and glory of God is beginning to occupy your conversation with the Lord. Then you can seek the mercy and grace of God to help you get your prayers into a proper focus.

We cannot expect the Lord to hear and answers our prayers if our prayers are simply all about us. Come to prayer in Jesus’ Name, then work hard in prayer to keep your focus on Him. God will supply your needs through His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

For reflection

1. How do you keep watch over your prayers, to make sure they’re not just all about you?
2. Why would it be a good idea to review in prayer the work of our Lord Jesus Christ? How can this help us to keep focused on the proper goals of prayer?
3. How can you improve your vision of Jesus – incarnate, exalted, and returning in glory – so that He fills more of your time in prayer?

Next steps – Boasting about the Lord: The more we talk about Jesus with others, the more He will be the focus of all our lives, as well as all our prayers. With whom will you talk about the Lord today?

6 Kingdom and Spirit

“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” Matthew 6.33

But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.” Matthew 16.23

“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” Luke 11.13

Focus for our prayers

The problem many of us have in prayer, and one reason more people don’t pray always and in everything, is that we tend to focus on the wrong things.

Early in his career as a story-teller, the late Andy Griffith did a shtick which he called, “[What is was, was football.](#)” In this brief monolog, Andy Griffith recounts his first experience of being at a football game. Swept by a crowd into the local stadium, he reports what he saw in terms familiar to him, but without knowing anything about what was going on. His story focuses on all the familiar details of a football game, but naively, and without any sense of the larger situation or context of why he was there or what he or anybody was doing. He described the game as the “awfulest fight” he’d ever seen in his life, over a “funny little punkin” everyone seemed to want, but why, he couldn’t tell. Meanwhile the audience laughs hysterically.

It’s a funny story, and a little bit like the way many of us approach the work of prayer. We get swept into prayer because we’re Christians, part of the praying crowd, you know. We’re not all that familiar with the terrain of prayer, but we know what we *are* familiar with, and what we want, and that’s what we bring with us into prayer. We understand that prayer involves talking with God, making our requests and intercessions before Him. We’ve got most of the details in view, at least, as we understand them, but we end up coming out of prayer not quite sure what that was all about. Because we don’t understand the *larger framework* and *overarching purpose* of what we’re doing, our attempts to pray can be laughable, if not sad.

The context and end of prayer

Prayer, in the last analysis, is not about the things of men, but the things of God. It’s not about *seeing* things or *making requests* as *we* see or want them to be, but as God does, according to His agenda in Christ Jesus. If we keep trying to make prayer be about the things of men, we’ll never get to the things God really wants us to realize through prayer. A precondition for effective prayer, therefore, is that we make up our minds going in, that what we want in prayer is *God’s* will, not *ours* – the world and our lives as *God* intends them, not as *we* might wish they could be.

We want God’s Spirit, Christ’s glory, and the progress of His Kingdom – these, and nothing more.

It’s instructive to consider that a passage that begins with Jesus’ disciples asking Him to teach them how to pray, ends with Him promising that God will give His Spirit to those who ask Him (Lk. 11.1-13). *En route* to that conclusion, Jesus taught the disciples a version of the Lord’s Prayer, together with a parable and instruction to pray persistently, continuously, and expectantly. And He capped it off by promising that God will give His Spirit to those who pray like this.

So the short answer to the disciples’ request that Jesus would teach them how to pray is this: Pray for the Spirit and Kingdom of God. If this is what’s on your mind when you come to the Lord in prayer, you can be

certain that the Father in heaven will grant your request.

Spirit and Kingdom

Is it really possible that *anything* and *everything* we might want to ask of God in prayer boils down to His Spirit and Kingdom? Well, let's consider.

Jesus said that we are to be His witnesses (Acts 1.8). That's why we're here, to testify to the reality of Jesus – His life, death, and resurrection – and to seek His advancing rule on earth as it is in heaven. In order to empower us for this work, He has given us His Spirit, Who brings the Kingdom with power into our lives. The Spirit comes to dwell in us for salvation, and then to teach, convict, correct, comfort, and empower us for a certain kind of life, a life in which all things are being made new. The Spirit brings the power and reality of Christ's Kingdom into our lives so that, as His rule unfolds within and through us, we increase in righteousness – all the fruit of the Spirit, the tokens of love, and the virtues of holiness – and in peace and joy. In the Spirit we receive gifts so that we can minister the grace of God to others from within the Body of Christ, which is His Church. In the Spirit we can know all that God reveals to us about Himself and our Kingdom-and-glory calling (1 Cor. 2.12, 13). By His Spirit God is working to make us willing and able to live within His pleasure; He is stretching us into exceedingly abundant newness; and He is equipping us to live for the glory of God.

So, what more than this could you or I or anyone want?

As we come out of prayer, we should be able to say about our experience, with great confidence and joy, "What it was, was the Spirit of God!" Come to prayer seeking the Spirit and His Kingdom power, whatever your needs and requests, and you'll come away from prayer more firmly established in that realm of righteousness, peace, and joy in which, in spite of all adversity and difficulty, Christ Jesus is making all things new.

For reflection

1. Think of a typical request you might make in prayer. How would you phrase that as a request for more of God's Spirit and Kingdom?
2. How might you pray for your daily work in order to frame that work in the context of the Spirit and Kingdom of God?
3. How should you be able to tell as you begin to experience more of the Kingdom and Spirit power of God in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with a Christian friend about how you can learn to set all your prayers in the larger context of the Spirit and Kingdom of God.

7 For the Glory of God

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10.31

*For the earth will be filled
With the knowledge of the glory of the LORD,
As the waters cover the sea.* Habakkuk 2.14

This above all

Why does God want us to seek His Kingdom and Spirit as the overarching, all-defining end of our prayers?

Because this is how He will be glorified. This is how He will be known through all the earth. Only by His Spirit, and within His Kingdom, will people come to hear His truth, share in His grace, and enter into newness of life in Him, so that they can glorify and enjoy Him in every area of their lives.

One of my favorite ministries is [Biglife Ministries](#), a church-planting effort headed by John Heerema, which is helping many to realize Kingdom progress in the US and beyond. Biglife has a lot going on, and people scattered around the globe who work with them in a loose but effective affiliation to start house churches and win people to Christ. Biglife's overarching goal, however, is not starting house churches, or even winning people to Christ. The staff and associates of Biglife remind themselves of their larger purpose by their logo – the name Biglife followed by a forward slash set at 115.1 degrees – which refers them to Psalm 115.1: “Not to us, O LORD, not to us, But to Your name give glory.”

What Biglife has settled on as its guiding purpose should also guide and inform all our prayers. The final and most important precondition for prayer is that we enter prayer, not to glorify ourselves, but to bring glory to God alone. We could all do with some reminders like this.

Hindrances to glory

As simple and focused as that is, certain things can keep us from achieving this end in and through our prayers.

First, if we don't know what we mean by *the glory of God*, we're going to have a difficult time seeking, realizing, or expressing it. The glory of God is not, in the first instance, something *we say* – as in, “Lord, we glorify Your Name!” The glory of God is simply the *presence* of God, realized by us in some unmistakable way. The Spirit of God brings us into the presence of God's glory, revealing Him to us in His majesty, greatness, immensity, power, holiness, mercy, and love. As God *shows* us His glory, the Spirit works to impress that glory on our souls, in order to transform us into that same image of glory (2 Cor. 3.12-18). In prayer we seek the glory of God. We plead with God and wait on Him, to show us His glory, make Himself and His presence known to us, and bring us near to Him in powerful and transforming ways.

We learn to experience the glory of God, and to express it, by daily, diligent, careful reading and study of the Scriptures. Here God makes His glory known, especially through the glorious Face of His risen and reigning Son, as He is revealed everywhere throughout God's Word (2 Cor. 4.6; Jn. 5.39). Your prayers will fall short of God's glory if you are not continuously *seeking* that glory in God's Word *before* you seek it in prayer.

A second hindrance to having God's glory as the end of all our prayers is trying to make ourselves the focus of prayer. We might do this when we're praying in a group, by seeking to impress others with our Biblical language or references, by our glibness or passion in prayer, or by the length of time we take up in prayer.

But we can lose focus and end up seeking our own glory in our private prayers as well, especially if we try to short-cut our way into God's favor by omitting any of the preconditions of prayer. By coming to prayer out of a sense duty, rather than in faith; failing to confess our sins, or to rehearse and focus on the work of Christ; or making anything other than His Spirit and Kingdom the framework and goal we seek through prayer, we're pretty much ensuring that God's glory will be absent from our times of prayer.

God listens as we pray as He intends, submitting to all His preconditions. He draws near to us as we pray like this, to show us His glory and assure us that He hears and is already moving to answer our prayers. But He withholds His glory when we come with some self-serving agenda or try to short-cut our way into His favor.

Obviously, the most common reason people don't experience the glory of God in prayer is that they don't pray – at least, not as Jesus taught us to pray, always, and in everything. If we don't invest time, attention, and strength in prayer, seeking the Lord in His glory, we certainly have no reason to expect that He will show us His glory. And if we do not meet with God in His glory, we will not be able to live for His glory in all the daily details of our lives.

It's all about the glory

Prayer certainly falls into the category of “whatever you do” in life. So when we *seek* the glory of God in prayer – the glory we have learned from Him in His Word – we will be more likely both to *meet* God in His glory *as* we pray, and to *go forth* from prayer to live for His glory in the life-transforming power of His Spirit.

Seek the glory of God in prayer. Prayer is not about us and our glory; it's all about God and His prayers. And your prayers can be a true and transforming experience of God's glory if you will focus on this end and outcome each time you to before the Lord in prayer.

For reflection

1. How would you counsel new believers to seek the glory of God? What should they do? What should they expect? What should happen in them? To what should this lead?
2. Is it really possible to do “whatever you do” for the glory of God? Explain. Is it possible to do this without meeting God in His glory in prayer?
3. What are some verses of Scripture that you might bring with you into prayer, to remind you to seek the glory of God above all else in and through your prayers?

Next steps – Transformation: How might you change your reading and study of Scripture, and your prayers, to focus more clearly and consistently on meeting God in His glory?

For reflection or discussion

1. Why should there be *any* preconditions at all for coming to the Lord in prayer?
2. Are you beginning to work the preconditions of prayer more consistently into your times of prayer? Explain.
3. What does it mean to pray in Jesus' Name? How can we keep that focus in our prayers? How should the Spirit and Kingdom of Christ fit into our prayers?
4. How can we know when we are encountering God in His glory? Where can we learn about the glory of God, and how then should we seek that glory in prayer?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned about the preconditions of prayer from this study?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.