

PRAYING WITH
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GETTING TO THE HEART OF THE LORD'S PRAYER

ADRIEL SANCHEZ

— FOREWORD BY MICHAEL HORTON —

“Most of us really want to pray, but we haven’t yet figured out how to become people of prayer, people for whom it is as natural and consistent as breathing. Adriel Sanchez helps us in this quest, not by becoming a guru for prayer himself, but by showing us how Jesus comes alongside us in our feeble efforts to pray, helping us to rightly see who we’re praying to, how we should approach him, and what we should talk with him about.”

Nancy Guthrie, Bible teacher; author of *I’m Praying for You*

“No one wants to ‘spam’ God with prayer, but it happens, and it probably occurs more frequently than we’d like. It’s why I love Adriel Sanchez’s new book, *Praying with Jesus*. The author exposes tired, old habits that wheedle their way into our prayer life while affirming the delight we discover when conversing with the God of the universe. The book you hold in your hands will dismantle all pretenses in prayer so that your praise, confession, and petition are renewed and refreshed. The author offers the right mix of tender pastoral soul and a firm commitment to solid theology, and what he writes about Jesus’s teaching on prayer will enrich your time with the One who cups his ear to hear your heart. I happily recommend this book.”

Joni Eareckson Tada, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

“In *Praying with Jesus*, we encounter a profound exploration of the most important and well-known prayer in the Bible. Adriel makes it exceedingly accessible and illuminates its significance for our daily lives and our relationship with God. He offers refreshing wisdom, theological reflection, and practical insights on this timeless prayer.”

Justin S. Holcomb, Professor of Theology and Apologetics, Reformed Theological Seminary; bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Central Florida; author of more than twenty books

Praying with Jesus

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OF THE LORD'S PRAYER

by Adriel Sanchez



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For my grandmother, Amelia Rodriguez.
Thank you for always reminding me to pray.

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Foreword

“I’m not feeling it,” my kids say sometimes. When it comes to prayer, I’ve had those moments too. I *know* that God speaks to me through his Word and that I commune with him in prayer. I also *know* that communication is the heart of any relationship. It would be strange to pretend a loved one isn’t actually living with you except when you’re “feeling it.” Another thing I *know* is that if I only prayed when I felt like it, I’d miss out on some of the best conversations. But it’s easier sometimes to let the moment pass, like the morning jog or that long-overdue call to a close friend.

There’s a difference, however, between knowing what’s important, doing it, and feeling it. That’s where this book on prayer can help.

I’ve benefited from meaty studies on the meaning of prayer. Meditation on God’s character and all he has done to bring me into this communion stirs the embers, to be sure. But pondering the Lord’s goodness isn’t quite the same as actually talking to him.

I’ve also benefited from resources that focus on methods and regimens for daily prayer. But a danger to this approach is that I think more about checking the boxes and going on to

the next thing. It's a shame when I turn privileged access to the throne of grace into a chore.

This book transcends theory and practical techniques. I cannot say you won't want to put this book down. In fact, it may lead you to put it down frequently—to pray. Drawing on rich biblical truths and meditations from counselors across the ages, *Praying with Jesus* is less a book *on* prayer than a book *of* prayer. Guided by Adriel Sanchez's pastoral insights, wisdom, and crisp prose that reads nearly like poetry, you will find yourself drawn by the triune God into his everlasting rest.

We are invited to come to the triune God just as we are, happy and heartbroken, restful and restless, in praise and lament, by ourselves and with the body of Christ. And, as Pastor Sanchez emphasizes, we come *with Jesus Christ*—not only as our mediator who prays for us but as our elder brother who prays with us. It is when we come in and with Christ, emboldened by the indwelling Holy Spirit, that we cry, “Abba, Father!”

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14–16)

Michael Horton
Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics,
Westminster Seminary California;
Founder and Editor-in-Chief, Sola Media

Introduction

Not too long ago, scientists discovered that they could store 215 petabytes of information in a single gram of DNA. For reference, that'd be like storing all the information *ever* recorded by humans in a space not much larger than your living room! Remarkably, something so small can contain more data than you could consume in a lifetime.

Think of the Lord's Prayer like DNA. As short as it is, it contains deep theological treasures that a lifetime of study couldn't exhaust. Born in the second century, the African theologian Tertullian said that in the Lord's Prayer one finds, "the whole record of Jesus's instruction, so that, without exaggeration, a summary of the whole gospel is to be found in this prayer."¹

In the third century, the bishop Cyprian wrote,

How great dearest brothers, are the mysteries of the Lord's prayer, how many, how magnificent, gathered together in a few words, yet abundant in spiritual power. There is nothing whatever with regard to our

pleading and our prayer omitted, nothing not contained in this summary of heavenly doctrine.²

In less than one hundred words, the prayer Jesus taught encapsulates not only the gospel, but the entirety of heavenly doctrine! A wonderful example of the impact of this prayer was the story told by Professor Kenneth Bailey. When he was in Riga, Latvia, ministering after the fall of the Soviet Union, he was struck by the fact that the seeds of faith were already beginning to sprout so soon after the rock-hard soil of communist totalitarianism had been tilled. Curious as to how this could be, he asked a young woman where she had learned about Jesus. She replied:

At funerals we were allowed to recite the Lord's Prayer. As a young child I heard those strange words and had no idea who we were talking to, what the words meant, where they came from or why we were reciting them. When freedom came at last, I had the opportunity to search for their meaning. When you are in total darkness, the tiniest point of light is very bright. For me the Lord's Prayer was that point of light. By the time I found its meaning I was a Christian.³

The Lord's Prayer is a beam of light piercing us through with the good news of who God is and what he's done to redeem his people. Yet despite this, many Christians have a difficult time with prayer generally, and don't grasp the Lord's Prayer specifically.

Prayer is a gift that eludes many of us. Like the sighting of a rare animal, it's there for a moment, or even a season, and then gone again to hibernate somewhere we can't seem to reach it. We struggle to capture the habit of prayer with any consistency.

Jesus tamed prayer when he gave us the Lord's Prayer. Here is a prayer that even children can say. I remember my mother leading me in the Lord's Prayer when I was just three or four years old. Once I had it memorized, I'd recite it nightly, thinking then that it was mostly a ward against nightmares. More than thirty years later, I've come to see that the Lord's Prayer *is* a safeguard against evil—but it's also much more. It's the gift of fellowship with the Holy Trinity, insight into God's purpose for your life, and a shovel for unearthing the treasures of grace. I hope to share this all with you in the pages ahead.

If you're already familiar with the Lord's Prayer, I trust this book will still benefit you. Even though it's the most well-known prayer in history, it's also the most misunderstood. Martin Luther observed, "Together with the name and Word of God, the Lord's Prayer is the greatest martyr on earth. For everyone tortures and abuses it; few joyfully use it correctly for comfort."⁴ Luther recognized the difference between merely reciting the prayer and understanding the theological scaffolding upholding each petition. I want to take you beneath the surface of the words to understand the heart of the Lord's Prayer. As we uncover the rich and practical theology in each petition, there's less of a danger that the prayer will suffer another martyrdom at our hands.

In addition, it's my prayer that this book will strengthen your prayers, both in their consistency and in their content. I want to help you lay hold of what Jesus has captured for you: sweet communion with God through divine conversation. In his first sermon on the Lord's Prayer, fourth-century bishop Gregory of Nyssa said, "The effect of prayer is union with God."⁵ I'd like you to experience something of this union as you read and put what you learn into practice.

This book is broken into two parts. In the first part, I'll define what prayer is and address some of the challenges we

encounter when praying. I hope to give you some concrete ways to begin rediscovering the heart of prayer in your own life as we look at two warnings from Jesus, what the Bible says about how our bodies can aid us in prayer, and the ancient custom of daily morning and evening prayer. The second part of the book is an explanation of each petition in the Lord's Prayer. I've tried to draw out some deeper theological truths presupposed by the petitions, while also providing practical and pastoral insight. My hope is that this combination of theology and application will transform how you use the Lord's Prayer each day.

Each chapter ends with a prayer from the past. These prayers are borrowed from some of the godly voices that came before us, and they relate to the content of the chapter. They're also a reminder that you're a part of the universal communion of believers spanning space and time and that you're never praying alone (an idea I unpack in chapter 4). I encourage you to read these prayers slowly and then make them your own.

Finally, you'll note that I've provided some exercises to help you apply what you're reading, as well as some discussion questions for group interaction. Whether you read this book alone or with others interested in discovering the heart of prayer, it's my desire that the chapters ahead equip you to pray with—and like—Jesus.

Part One

General Teaching on Prayer

Chapter One

The Heart of Prayer

Let us not then make our prayer by the gesture of our body, not by the loudness of our voice, but by the earnestness of our mind: neither with noise and clamor and for display, so as even to disturb those that are near us, but with all modesty, and with contrition in the mind, and with inward tears . . . For not unto men art thou praying, but to God, who is everywhere present, who hears even before the voice, who knows the secrets of the mind. If thou so pray, great is the reward thou shalt receive.

—John Chrysostom, fourth-century
archbishop of Constantinople

An old monk tells the story of an experience he had while walking one morning. Alone in the woods, it seemed at first like the whole world slumbered. But for the white noise of a cold creek running nearby, there was silence. Without warning, a new sound pierced the creek and interrupted his meditations. It was a voice that the monk described as intoxicatingly celestial. He immediately began to look around, curious about its source. His eyes landed on a branch opposite him where a tiny bird had perched. It was a nightingale. He was struck by

the beauty of the bird's song, how its throat puffed out and then exploded with praise. The monk couldn't help but cry as he heard the concert of the nightingale.

He asked himself, *Why is it doing this? Is it waiting for someone to praise it? Certainly not. No one is here. It didn't know that I would be passing by this way.* Struck by the fact that the nightingale raised such a melody for none but God, the monk exclaimed, "How marvelously you unceasingly carry on your duty, your prayer to God, O nightingale!"¹

In prayer, we are to be like that nightingale. Prayer is the song of your heart to God. Sometimes it's an explosion of praise, and other times it's a trickling lamentation. In either case, the source of true prayer is the heart. Jesus made this clear when speaking about a group of people whose hearts were unchanged by God's love. "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me" (Matthew 15:8). God draws prayer out of his people like a person draws water from a well. Here, the man doesn't need water, but he wants it. God desires our prayers, and while they echo from our lips, prayer doesn't originate with the tongue. It reverberates from the deeper chambers of your heart, the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23). God wants to hear your heartfelt prayers.

This struck me recently when preaching through the book of Revelation. In chapter 8, John had a vision of Jesus, the Lamb of God, opening a scroll. When he opened the last seal of the scroll, there was "silence in heaven for about half an hour" (Revelation 8:1). Why the heavenly hush? Up until chapter 8, John described heaven as a place of thunderous noise. Imagine the voices of an innumerable multitude singing to God with full-throated vigor, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen" (Revelation 7:12). Then suddenly, they all stop.

As a minister without a church office, most of my work happens at coffee shops. Occasionally I'll try to get work done at home, but we have five children crammed into a three-bedroom house in urban San Diego. The love that fills our home is matched only by the decibels. Every so often I'll be at the house when an important phone call comes. Right before I answer the call, I hold up my cell and let out a big "Shhhhhh." Only when I've gotten the attention of my noisy cherubs and things have quieted down do I pick up the phone so I can hear the person on the other line. We ask for silence when we want to attune our ears to something, like a phone call or an important message. God is no different. He hushes the heavenly beings to listen closely to the prayers of his people.

Consider how Revelation 8 continues in verses 3–4:

And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.

The silence of heaven makes way for the prayers of the saints. Now of course, God isn't hard of hearing. John's vision here is meant for us, to show us that our prayers are not drowned out by the noise around God. In his commentary on Revelation, theologian G. K. Beale notes that there was a tradition among some Jews that taught the angels in heaven would praise God at night, while Israel slept, but then remain silent during the day so that the prayers of the people could be heard by God.² In a symbolic way, Revelation communicates something similar. God is listening closely to our prayers. He's not distracted or busy with other things. He quiets heaven to hear the cries of his children on earth.

Jesus introduces the Lord's Prayer in Matthew's Gospel in the context of his Sermon on the Mount. He began his Sermon with what are known as the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12), pronouncements of blessing by the King upon the meek and weak who long for God's grace. There, Jesus revealed to us that the kingdom we pray will come is given as a gift to those who are poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3). What does it mean to be poor in spirit? In part, it has to do with approaching God in faith. Greek scholar S. M. Baugh explains,

As a key ingredient of faith, being poor in spirit conveys coming to Christ in want and need. The poor in spirit are embodied in blind beggars crying out by the roadside, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" (Matt 20:30; cf. Matt 9:27). It is the cry of a father who desperately kneels before the Lord and cries out, "My daughter has just died!" (Matt 9:18) or of a mother who has no other hope, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon . . . Lord, help me!" (Matt 15:22, 25) even though she is an outsider and unclean and shunned by Jesus' disciples (cf. Luke 7:11–15).³

You don't need to be super spiritual to pray; you just need to be poor in spirit. On the flip side, the more self-confident you are, the less you'll tend to truly pray. Prayer requires humility in that it's made from either a sense of need or gratitude. When you express your needs to God, you do so because you trust he's able to accomplish what you can't. When you give him thanks, it's because you recognize that he is the source of true beatitude, and not yourself.

The heart of prayer is a faith-filled approach to God that recognizes who he is. "Without faith" the author to the Hebrews wrote, "it is impossible to please him, for whoever

would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). God is the giver in prayer, and we come to him as needy, but loved children. How much faith do you need to pray? Jesus said less than a grain’s worth would do the trick (Matthew 17:20). God doesn’t despise the mustard seed faith of one who is poor in spirit. Jesus even ministered to a man whose faith was mingled with unbelief (Mark 9:24)! Faith is the vehicle that carries the imperfect prayers of an imperfect people into heaven, and Jesus is the one through whom those prayers gain a favorable hearing. Without faith and Jesus, however, it’s a different story.

Two Types of Heart Disease in Prayer

Spiritual heart disease is the number one killer of an authentic prayer life. Before Jesus gives us the words of the Lord’s Prayer, he warns us against two heart diseases that can infect anyone committed to developing a healthy habit of prayer. The first thing you need to watch out for is *hypocrisy*:

“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 others. 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.”
(Matthew 6:5–6)

The word that Jesus used in Matthew 6:5, *hypokritai*, was often used in the ancient world for play actors. If you’ve ever been to a live drama production, you know that the actors in the theater are only putting on a show for you. The best actors can almost convince you by their ability to embody a character. If they stick around after the production and you’re able to meet them in person, you aren’t talking to Hamlet or Macbeth,

but Brian or Ted. One danger with prayer is that we can use it to put on a theatrical production for others. It becomes a mask we hide behind in order to pretend we're someone we aren't. The tragedy here is that if you only pray for other people to hear you, you're really trying to talk to them more than you're trying to speak with God. You're missing communion with God, which is the goal of prayer. God wants you to come to him and sincerely offer him the song of your heart.

Prayer should never be a performance for other people, but instead an offering to God. It's not your opportunity to display the depth of your theological knowledge or mastery of King James English. Corporate prayer is biblical (Acts 2:42), but prayer for performance's sake isn't. Jesus rebuked the hypocrites because they had reduced this means of union with God into a tool for their own self-exaltation. They were faking communion with God.

Think of a time in your life when you've "acted holy" to try and convince God, or others, that you were better than you are. My mind goes back to the first time I smoked pot in high school. The more stoned I became, the more the guilt of my Catholic upbringing plagued me. Convinced I needed to prove to God I was okay, I began to work my way through the Lord's Prayer while high. The twenty-second prayer seemed to last for hours, but my attempt gave me a bit of comfort. As strange as it sounds, we don't need a crowd to act like hypocrites. Sometimes we use spiritual things—like prayer—as a way of justifying ourselves before God. I was trying to use prayer for something it was never intended to be—a mask to cover deviant behavior. Tragically, some people never rise beyond abusing prayer in this way.

Consider many of the scribes, for example. They were a controversial group that had several run-ins with Jesus in the Gospels. The scribes were sort of like the Bible scholars of Christ's day. Alfred Edersheim noted how revered these Torah

teachers were, “[The scribe] pushes to the front, the crowd respectfully giving way, and eagerly hanging on his utterances, as those of a recognised authority. . . . Each scribe outweighed all the common people, who must accordingly pay him every honour.”⁷⁴ Beneath their pious frowns, many of the scribes in Jesus’s day hid the deadly heart disease of hypocrisy. How difficult it must have been for them to hear Jesus’s words: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (Matthew 15:8). Jesus notices how they would offer up long prayers, not because they were eager to speak to God, but solely for pretense. For them it was just a show, and because of this, Jesus promises that they would receive greater condemnation (Mark 12:40).

Interestingly, the root of the Greek word for pretense there comes from the word “to shine.” Prayer, Jesus says, is not your opportunity to shine before people. When our prayers become a way of trying to convince others, including God, that we’re righteous, they’ve been infected with hypocrisy.

The second heart disease that is equally deadly to the life of prayer is *superstition*. Jesus went on in Matthew 6:7–8, “And when you pray, 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.”

While the disease of hypocrisy is especially contagious in religious communities (like that of the scribes), this second sickness is prevalent among the pagans. We might refer to them today as “spiritual, but not religious.” In Jesus’s day, when the Gentiles prayed, they would heap up words and phrases thinking, *Maybe if I say this enough, or get the wording right, I’ll unlock some divine power.*

It’s been said that the phrase *hocus-pocus* can be traced back to the medieval mass. The priest, during the consecration of the bread and wine, would recite Jesus’s words from

the Last Supper in Latin, “*Hoc est corpus meum*” (“This is my body”). Unfamiliar with Latin, the average worshipper heard this as “hocus-pocus!” Certain that something miraculous was happening, the people came to believe the words carried some magical power. How easy it is for us to twist the things we don’t understand! When the heart disease of superstition sets in, the words of institution in the Lord’s Supper and the words of the Lord’s Prayer become little more than incantations—things we recite while remaining in the dark. The words themselves are true, but when used as magic formulas to procure divine blessing, they mirror the pagan way of praying.

Handling holy things superstitiously is an age-old problem. In 1 Samuel 4, the Israelites carried the Ark of the Covenant into battle against the Philistines, treating it as a talisman of protection more than a means of experiencing God’s presence. They were routed, and the ark was captured (1 Samuel 4:10–11). Similarly, the righteous King Hezekiah had to break in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses erected before the people because they had begun worshipping it (2 Kings 18:4). What had once been a great instrument of mercy (Numbers 21:4–9) had been turned into a staff of sorcery. In the New Testament, a group of Jewish exorcists once sought to invoke Jesus’s name to cast out demons, even though they didn’t have the Spirit of Christ living inside of them. The demon responded to their attempt by saying, “Who are you?” (Acts 19:15). Often, we want some magic object or formula to give us a sense of spiritual connection and blessing. However, prayer doesn’t work because it’s a magic formula. Prayer is a holy gift that must never be reduced to abracadabra or hocus-pocus.

You’re familiar with spam emails: worthless information that fills your inbox; often someone trying to sell you something. Research has shown that nearly 50 percent of all emails that are sent are spam emails, billions and billions of emails *every day*. A very small percentage of people actually respond

to spam emails and get tricked into spending money or giving away sensitive information. Nevertheless, spammers keep spamming because they know that eventually someone will bite. If they send enough emails to enough people, one of us is going to help the Nigerian prince or purchase the miraculous diet pills. The Gentile nations spammed heaven with their prayers. *If we just keep clicking "send," even though the words are empty, maybe God, or one of the gods, will bless us. Maybe we'll get a response.*

Don't spam God with your prayers. God knows what you need better than you do (Matthew 6:8). A simple and short prayer rooted in God's Word and will is more powerful than ten thousand empty phrases that seek to manipulate God. I should add, repetition in prayer isn't bad, but *vain repetition* is condemned by Jesus. One Greek word translates the two English words vain repetitions: *battalogo*. The word is onomatopoeia (a word that mimics the sound it makes). It's like baby talk or babble. In Greek the word means to stammer, or to speak without thinking. You can't pray on autopilot and hope that the words you say are going to accomplish something magical without you having to think. That's superstition, not biblical prayer.

Ironically, both kinds of diseased prayer are ways we seek to manipulate. Hypocritical prayer seeks to manipulate others and cause them to believe that we're better than we actually are (sometimes we can even seek to deceive God by trying to demonstrate that we're okay, even though we aren't). Superstitious prayer seeks to manipulate God through the right words and repetition. Either way, in our attempt to manipulate, we're using the gift of prayer in a selfish and sinful way, which makes these kinds of prayer deadly.

Even mature Christians can contract spiritual heart disease. Praying for pretense and praying mindlessly can happen to you. The important thing is that you catch yourself

when it happens and recognize that it's taking place. We rob ourselves of the true intimacy with God that prayer affords us when we pray in these ways that Jesus warned us against. The good news is that God extends you mercy when you fail. Our prayers this side of heaven will never be perfect, but they're sanctified by the blood of Jesus. In the words of the great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon, "The Christian will tell you that he weeps over his very tears; he feels that there is filth even in the best of desires; that he has to pray to God to forgive his prayers, for there is sin in the midst of his supplications, and that he has to sprinkle even his best offerings with the atoning blood."⁵ The blood of Jesus Christ is the cure for diseased prayer. As we understand God's grace toward us in the gospel, we realize that we don't have to perform for others' sake or convince God we're something we aren't. We're free to let our hearts sing to the Lord without fear because we've been accepted in Christ.

A Prayer from the Past

Help us to set our hope on your name, Lord. You are the origin and source of all creation. You open the eyes of our hearts so we can know you. You alone abide highest in the lofty place. You are holy in the holy. You lay low the insolence of the proud, set the lowly on high, and bring down the lofty. You make rich and poor, give life and death. You alone are the benefactor of spirits and the God of all flesh. You look into the deepest places and see all our works. You help and relieve those who are in peril, and you are the savior of those in despair. You are the creator and overseer of every spirit. You multiply the nations and have chosen out all who love you through Jesus Christ your beloved Son, through whom you taught us, honored us, and set us apart. Amen.

—CLEMENT, FIRST-CENTURY BISHOP OF ROME

Prayer Practices

1. Make a habit of reminding yourself before each time you pray that God is attentive to you. Try beginning your prayers this week by saying, “Dear God, thank you that through Christ, you’re as eager to hear my cries as you are to listen to the voice of your beloved Son.”
2. Reread Jesus’s warnings in Matthew 6:5–8. Reflect on which of the two is most relevant for you and spend some time in prayer, confessing your own “heart disease” and receiving God’s grace and help.

Questions for Discussion

1. If prayer is the “song of your heart” to God, what genre of music would you most associate with your current prayers? Are they full of grief and lamentation (the Blues), full of hope and joy (Jazz), or perhaps completely wordless (Classical)?
2. What is the relationship between faith and the heart of prayer?
3. What are some reasons you find it difficult to believe God hears your prayers? What did you think about the image of God “hushing heaven” in Revelation 8:1–4 to listen to his people’s prayers?
4. Which of the two dangers Jesus warned against do you find yourself slipping into more: hypocritical or superstitious prayers?