

# PRAYER... HOW NOT TO AND HOW TO

by Michael Gabizon PhD



אֲבִינוּ בְּשָׁמַיִם

## THE LORD'S PRAYER

MATTHEW 6:5-13

Before dealing with the subject of prayer, Yeshua first addresses the people on how **not** to give charity, asking, “Do you give it correctly, or do you just want praise from people?” God is obviously much more interested in the condition of our heart and what truly motivates our actions. Then he moves on to prayer: “Do you pray? Great! But do you pray correctly?”

From the start, Yeshua addresses the motivation and sincerity of our prayers: “*When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites [which means “actors”], for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men!*” (Matthew 6:5) When he says, “synagogues,” this does not mean that those who pray in synagogues are hypocrites; Yeshua himself went to synagogue (Luke 4). Instead, he is addressing those who only pray in public settings, like religious gatherings, in order to be seen by people.

The purpose of prayer is not to be heard by people, but to communicate with God. These then were called hypocrites because they were pretending; their motivation was dishonest. This is why the beginning of the Lord’s Prayer is so positionally important. “*Our Father, Who is in heaven*” (Matthew 6:9) — right from the start, we have the main focus: This is not between us and other people, but us and God. The statement is personal as it addresses Him as Father

(which was common in Jewish prayers), but it was also grounded in reverence, acknowledging that He is in heaven.

How can we be sure that we develop a sincere prayer life with God? Yeshua provides the answer in the next section: *“But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”* (Matthew 6:6). If our heart is more focused on our image rather than addressing God, it is best to practice prayer in solitude to avoid the danger of hypocrisy. Our public prayers should be molded by our private fellowship with God, spending one on one time to deepen our relationship with Him.

Now, does this mean it is wrong to pray in public or in groups? Of course not. Yeshua prayed in public when Lazarus was resurrected (John 11:41-42); the Apostles prayed in public at the Temple (Acts 3:1; 21:5); the early believers had prayer meetings together in Acts 12:12.

It is so vital to realize the influence prayer has on us. Prayer is not to inform God, but to transform us. Just like when you spend time with someone, you develop their expressions and habits, similarly, prayer helps conform our will to the Lord’s as we grow in fellowship. As the philosopher Kierkegaard said: “The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.”

## **Model for Prayer — The Lord’s Prayer**

### **How to Pray**

People often split up the Lord’s prayer into two sections: the first three statements are directed to God, and the following three reflect our needs. The prayer begins by addressing God (*Our Father in Heaven*) which, identifies the object of our prayer.

**Hallowed be Your Name:** The term hallowed (ἀγιασθήτω) means “sanctified” or set apart. This means that, in our lives, nothing is equal to who God is. The “name” of someone represents authority, reputation, and personal identity. Nothing else should take His spot. When we start to pray with this mindset, it impacts everything else that we pray about: this helps us align our priorities with His.

**Your kingdom come; Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.** The anticipation for God’s kingdom is a common theme; Yeshua’s whole ministry began in Matthew 4:17 with His proclamation: *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* In the Hebrew Bible, there were many prophecies about the establishment of God’s kingdom, led by the Messiah. At that time, all suffering would be eradicated, and there would be peace. Though we are not there yet, we can still today experience some of the realities of God’s kingdom. To pray “Your Kingdom come” in the simplest sense means that we want God to be our King. When we begin our prayer this way, it filters everything we are going to say after that, orienting our hearts.

At this point, our prayer begins to shift its focus on ourselves, so let’s be very careful how we move on. First, we must have the right motives. James 4:3 says, *“You ask and don’t receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your evil desires.”* To pray for our own well-being at the expense of others would never be the will of God because this is contrary to His revelation.

So, what should we be asking in order to check our motives concerning prayer?

- (a) Does it glorify God?
- (b) Does it advance the Kingdom?

- (c) Does it help people?
- (d) Does it help me grow and conform to the image of God?

Another important question is: do our lives reflect what we are praying? When we pray for God's will, we must also be involved in acting it out. We must remember the balance between prayer and activity: if we pray for the salvation of a friend, yet never share the news about the Messiah, what good is the prayer?

**Give us today our daily bread.** This addresses our physical and personal needs, acknowledging God as the provider of all things.

**And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors:** After addressing our personal need, Yeshua moves towards speaking about our "debts" or "sin." Here, we ask God to forgive us just as we forgive others. But what if we don't forgive others? What if we maintain a grudge against someone? Will we be forgiven? Let's remember that this prayer is not about salvation per se, but about the restoration of fellowship with God. In light of that, Yeshua is warning us that if we harbor sins against somebody, then we are not in proper fellowship with God. Remember the command in Matthew 5, that if you make a sacrifice to God, but realize you have something against your brother; leave your sacrifice, make things right with your brother, and then come back with an offering (Matthew 5:23-24). So, we see a direct correlation between our unity with one another and our fellowship with God. This is why Paul says: "Be at peace with all men."

This connection between God's forgiveness and forgiving others is important, because God provides a model for us, making us more willing to forgive one another. Forgiving somebody does not mean that you are OK with what happened. Instead, it means you are not holding a debt against them despite what happened. When God forgives, He does not say that your sin is no big deal. He forgives our debt in light of the Messiah's sacrifice, and that is what we must do as well. The incredible story of Corrie Ten Boom forgiving a German officer is well documented in her book, the *Hiding Place*. While few of us have stories as horrendous as Corrie's, hers teaches us that, when we understand and appreciate God's forgiveness through Messiah, we will be able to enact that same model as well.

**'And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.** Now, this phrase has also received a lot of attention because James writes: "God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone," (James 1:13). So, if he doesn't tempt anyone, why would we pray "do not lead us into temptation?" First, when considering that Yeshua spoke Aramaic, it is quite possible that a better rendition of this passage is, "Do not let us succumb to temptation" (cf. Mark 14:38) or "abandon us to temptation." This means always deliver us. An important element to consider is that the word "temptation" is better translated as "trials." Therefore, as one scholar puts it, a better way to understand this statement may be: "Do not lead us into a testing of our faith that is beyond our endurance, but when testing does come, deliver us from the *evil one* and his purposes." While temptation is the result of being enticed by sin that damages our faith, trials are an opportunity to grow our faith.

The main idea is that we do not want to get entangled in sin, which will in turn make us less effective for the kingdom of God. So, as we look at our passage, Yeshua has instructed us how

not to pray, (lack of sincerity and bad theology), and then how to pray, beginning by the sanctifying of God's name, and then making requests in light of growing His kingdom.