

CHAPTER 1 - OUR GUIDE TO ASKING GOD

Let's energize how you pray.

In order to improve our tomorrows, we have to make an accurate assessment of today. Answer these next three questions very honestly. Do you pray enough? Do you ask God for the right things? Do you pray in confidence, believing he will answer what you ask? Very few followers of Jesus think that they pray enough. Many also wonder if they're asking for the right things, which means they don't have a lot of confidence that God will hear and grant their requests. Why is that? Why is praying to our Father in the heavens, who loves us more than we can possibly fathom, so challenging? And why are many of us undisciplined with our praying?

Praying is simply talking with our Father who longs to hear from us. But most of us lack the confidence that we know *how* to talk with him. We often feel like our requests are not worth God's time. We also get confused about what we should and shouldn't ask him. We believe he answers prayers, but we struggle believing that he will answer *our* specific prayers. If you had more confidence that your requests were very important to God, how

might that change how often you pray to him? If you knew without a doubt that he always listens to your every request, how might that change the way you pray to him? Let's face it, we could all use more confidence in knowing what we should be asking God to do.

Children often pray with confident honesty: "Do animals use you too or is there someone else for them?" "Is Pastor Johnson a friend of yours or do you just know him through business?" "Thank you for my baby sister, but I asked for a puppy!" "It made my dad really mad when it rained our whole vacation. He said things about you that people shouldn't say, please don't hurt him anyway, signed, your friend, but I'm not gonna tell you who I am."

Jesus came to show us who his Father really is, what he is like and how to have a meaningful and personal relationship with him. Relationships are always dependent on conversations. That's why Jesus prayed to his Father all the time. If *he* continually talked with his Father about all of his life's challenges, then *we* certainly need to do the same. And Jesus knows it's not easy for us. After all, he knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows that we lack assurance in praying. He knows you fall asleep sometimes when you pray. He loves you even when, after praying for two minutes, your mind is fixated on if it's time to change the oil in your car or if you paid your cell phone bill. It happens, right?

Who is one of your closest friends? How often do you talk, text or email them? What makes your friendship work? Isn't it that you have honest and open communication? Don't you enjoy sharing your life, both the good and the bad, with your friend? What if you began to have a similar kind of relationship with your heavenly Father?

Relationships take effort. You can't have a solid relationship with God and not pray. It's just not possible. It is your responsibility, as a follower of Jesus Christ, to learn how to communicate in confidence with your heavenly Father. This is a learned behavior, which is why we readily join in with the disciple's request in Luke 11:2, "*Teach us to pray...*" This book is about building the kind of confidence that will launch you into regular and vibrant conversations with God. We will explore how Jesus taught his followers to pray so that we can grow in our confidence to develop an authentic habit of conversing with our Father in the heavens about what matters to us and to him. You are about to learn, directly from the Bible, how God wants you to pray and what he wants you to ask him to do.

How important is bread?

In Luke 11, Jesus taught his disciples an outline for praying. We typically call it "The Lord's Prayer". It is also found in Matthew 6:9-13. I remember reciting it in the locker room before every high school football game. Before we examine what Jesus taught us from that prayer, let's think about the story and the analogy he told immediately following that teaching. Both hold important keys for us to understand critical aspects about talking with our heavenly Father.

In the story, a visitor comes late at night and the man has no food for him. So he wakes his neighbor to borrow some bread for his guest but the neighbor isn't very happy with the request. He would wake his whole family if he got up to get his "friend" some bread. Apparently their friendship wasn't super tight! Jesus' story reveals that the only reason the bread was given was because the man was so annoyingly persistent. He

hounded his neighbor to the point where the guy was ready to *give him whatever he needs*. (Luke 11:5-8) Great friend, huh?

Jesus' point is that persistence is really important when praying to God. Jesus told another story to emphasize how much his Father values diligent determination. In Luke 18:1-8, a widow is bugging a judge to death about giving her justice against an adversary. She finally wears him down so that he gives her what she wants.

Jesus' point in both of these stories is definitely *not* that we have to find a way to wear down the Father. He is helping us to see that if it is really important to us, we need to talk to God about it. We need to continue to ask him for his help. Jesus is building our confidence by using an obvious contrast: the reluctant friend and the unjust judge are completely contrary to God's character. How much more does God want to help us out in our time of need?

How important was the bread to the man who had a midnight caller? It wasn't a life and death matter. They both could have waited until the markets opened in the morning. Because of their friendship, it was important that this man give his worn out and hungry fraternity brother something to eat, right then. Friends don't let friends go to bed hungry! That's why he risked his friendship with his neighbor.

In the grand scheme of things, it seems odd that Jesus chose a story about a non life-threatening need. It's not like he was demon possessed or lying by the roadside, robbed and beaten (Luke 10:29-37). The guy was hungry! He wanted something to eat.

Jesus followed the story with a startling teaching that his disciples had already heard: "*And I tell you, ask and it*

will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. (Luke 11:9-10)

Jesus doesn't mean that we're to ask and seek and knock one time. The entire context of his teaching is focused on our persistence. So the question for us, regarding our part in praying to our Father in the heavens, is this: Do we really want it? Is it so important to us that we will continue to bring it up in our regular conversations with our Father?

God loves to give us what's good

Next, Jesus emphasized his Father's part in prayer. And this is by far the best part of the story. It also shows us that Jesus had a great sense of humor. He enjoyed making his disciples laugh!

“What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? (vs11-12) Can't you picture Jesus cracking a big God-shaped smile while giving this super-exaggerated illustration.

When my son used to ask me for a Happy Meal, and that was daily, I never gave him d-Con pellets to munch on. When he asked for a Wendy's frosty, I didn't give him some ice-cold Round-Up! I met his need (although the Happy Meals were purchased with much less frequency than requested.) As parents, we love to give our kids what they need and want, at least most of the time.

How much more does our Father in the heavens want to meet our needs? Since he knows what we truly need in every situation, he is the perfect One to ask to meet those pressing needs. Because we don't often know

what's truly best for us or for others, it's very important that we keep on asking and keep seeking and keep knocking so that during this process, we can learn from God what actually is best. You may be asking him to do what he wants to do. What you are asking for may be exactly what God wants to give you, but the timing may not be quite right. That's why persistence is required. You have to learn how to trust your Father's timing as well as his decisions about what is best and if your request is good for everyone involved.

Jesus admits that all of us fathers are lacking in goodness. He even calls us *evil*. He deliberately chooses these words because he is using the power of contrast once again. We earthly fathers know how to give good things to our kids, and we usually work hard to give them the best. I loved giving my kids what they wanted, as long as I believed it was good for them. In parenting, sometimes much wisdom is needed to know if our child's request is truly good for them or not. How much more does our Father, who is perfect love, want to give us his absolute best?

Jesus' crescendo to his teaching in this passage comes at the end of v13 when he concludes; "*how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*" The very best thing that God could ever give to you is his Spirit. And he freely gives his Spirit *to those who ask him!*

How does the Spirit meet your needs?

"Now hold on Jesus. You gave an outline about praying and immediately told a story of a man whose need for food was met by his persistence. What does all that have to do with the Holy Spirit?"

I'm so glad you asked! Jesus' analogy is powerful, even

if it is a little fuzzy at first. Just as the man's midnight guest needed food, you and I need the Spirit to meet all of our needs. The Spirit of God has everything you will ever need for the rest of your life! That's right. He has all the answers to all of life's questions including each one of your specific questions about the details of your life and relationships. He knows everything about everything including everything about your past, present and future. There isn't anything that the Spirit of Jesus doesn't know about you and your life, your work, your family, your health, everything. He knows quantum physics, automobile repair and the intricacies of every Microsoft Office product. He knows how your cell phone works and where you put your glasses. He knows all the details of each one of your relationships and what every person is thinking and planning. The Spirit, like the Father and the Son, is all-knowing.

The Spirit knows all about your relationships. He knows what is needed in your marriage to make it all you both dreamed it would be. Jesus' Spirit knows who you should date and who you shouldn't. He knows how your co-worker will react to the email you need to send them about the problem in the office. The Spirit of God knows the results of the scan before your doctor even orders it. The Holy Spirit knows the beginning from the end and everything in between. He is our conduit for all of God's wisdom to flow into our hearts and minds.

This is true for all who have been rescued by God and drawn to faith in Christ through the power of the Spirit. You are saved. Once you have been forgiven of all your rebellion against God, past, present and future, you belong to him. Jesus put it this way; "*All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.*" (John 6:37) I highly recommend you study this

entire 6th chapter of John on a regular basis.

Once we are made his by his goodness and grace, life is all about being transformed into people who think and act like the Lord Jesus. The technical word for this is sanctification. Therefore, once you come to believe in Jesus as God's Son and your Lord, all you need is more and more of the Spirit's power and influence in your life. It's not that we need more of the Spirit, like we begin with 25% and hopefully increase from there. It's that the Spirit needs more of us. When Jesus said that the Father longs to give us the Spirit, he meant that the Spirit will be a greater and greater force in our lives.

When Jesus first taught the model for prayer, what we call "The Lord's Prayer" in Matthew 6, it was very early in his public ministry. The scene in Luke 11 is about two years later. Jesus was with his disciples, not the crowds, and they were growing in their faith and understanding. Jesus was able to reveal more to them in Luke 11 because they were ready for it. They were still foggy about many things, but Jesus knew it was time to help them, and us, see that our true need is to align our lives more and more with his Spirit.

He is your helper

Jesus' Spirit is also our *Helper* (John 16:7-15), which literally means that he is the one who comes alongside us. As he comes along beside us, he empowers us to love those who are difficult to even like, to overcome all kinds of temptations, to stand strong in our beliefs and convictions, and to know how to patiently tolerate annoying personality types. The Spirit is the one who can embolden you to tell others about the hope you have in Christ, to answer his leading to do certain things, to remember God's words and how to apply them to

specific situations and to obey all that Jesus taught. It was the Spirit who drew you to believe in Jesus, to understand your sinfulness and his sacrifice, and it is the Spirit who guides your every move in life. If there's one thing in your life that you need above all else, it is the Spirit of Jesus guiding and leading and strengthening you.

As the apostle John neared the end of his extraordinarily long life, he wrote; *By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.* (1 John 4:13) We remain as followers of Jesus because of the Spirit's help and presence within us. *You know him for he dwells with you and will be in you.* (John 14:17b) When Jesus promised that he would never leave us or abandon us, he wasn't referring to himself literally, but to his very Spirit. That's also why Jesus said that it was better for his disciples that he return to the Father so that the Spirit could then come to be in them. Having the Spirit in us is better than hanging out with Jesus!

This is why Jesus concluded this profound teaching on prayer with the promise that his Father will *give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.* How often do you ask the Father to give you his Spirit? How much are you depending on the Spirit's help for your life's challenges? The secret to fully enjoying the abundant life that Jesus came to give you is found in your daily dependence on the Spirit of God to strengthen you in the core of your being.

How many times is enough?

Jesus gave us an amazing promise. If we will ask the Father, and keep on asking, he will give us all we need. When we seek him and keep seeking him for his help, he will lead us to his answers for our circumstances and

situations. When we knock and keep on knocking, he will open the doors that he wants us to enter, and he will close the doors that are not right for us. So when is enough, enough?

Persistence is part of learning how to be a follower of Jesus. The man in Jesus' story didn't stop knocking on his neighbor's door until he had what he wanted. The old widow didn't stop pestering the judge until she had what she wanted. Isn't Jesus implying that we are to keep asking and seeking and knocking until we get what we need? And the contrast is critical between the sleepy neighbor, the ornery old judge and our Father in the heavens. If the neighbor and the judge finally caved in, how much more will our loving Father give us what he knows is the absolute best for us? Don't stop asking him!

Do you remember when you were a kid and all you could think about was that gift you wanted for your birthday or Christmas? Maybe it was a bike or a doll. For me, it was a drum set from Sears that included a Ringo Star wig! Yes, I became a Beatle! What did you do to ensure you'd get that dream gift? You pestered your parents to death. I bugged my poor mom every day about my Christmas dream, that drum set, beginning in early October. I was sure that I knew what was best for me. Funny how I never considered how me banging on a drum set in our home might not be the best thing for the other five residents. Didn't you ask and keep on asking, hoping your persistence would convince your parents that they really needed to buy you that gift?

Jesus is making a bold contrast between the reluctant friend and his heavenly Father who loves us enough to sacrifice his Son. How much more does our Father want to use his unlimited resources to give us his best? The friend was very reluctant to get up but our Father is

more than willing. The judge only helped the widow because she wore him out, not because he was just. Our Father never sleeps or grows weary and he is only just and faithful.

Jesus' prayer outline brings us into understanding of what we truly need. On so many occasions, I have asked the Father to do certain things for me or others, only to find that as time passed and I continued to ask, my request changed. The more I prayed the more clarity he brought to my mind and the more I understood what was truly needed. The more we grow in dependence on the Lord, the easier it becomes to discern how the Spirit is leading and what we should be requesting from the Father. As you continue being honest with God, you will realize how he is shaping your heart to desire the things that he longs to give you, which is his absolute best. He will open the eyes of your heart to see more of him.

Continuing to ask him is a tangible expression of how much you need God. I continued to ask my parents for the drum set because they were the only ones who could buy it for me. I had very little income at 9 yrs. old. I needed them to answer my request. They were my only hope. That's how persistence works with God.

If you are fine on your own, let's say with a problem at work, you'll simply land on the solution that works for you and go for it. But if you are living in dependence on the One who knows all things, you will incorporate him more and more into your plans and problems to seek his answers and to have him open the right doors. Aren't you tired of kicking in doors for yourself? Wouldn't you rather learn to wait for the Father to open them for you, when the time is just right?

In expressing our absolute need for God to help us, Peter encouraged all of Jesus' followers to stop acting

independently and instead to cast all their anxieties and concerns on God. The word for “cast” is very literal. It’s what you do when you throw your clothes on the bed. Why are we instructed to throw our burdens on his shoulders? Because he cares deeply about the things that weigh his people down. (1 Peter 5:6-7) God is the only one qualified to relieve your burdens, so he instructs you to throw them on him as you are praying.

In a similar passage, the apostle Paul instructed the believers of the church in Philippi to face all anxieties and worries through prayer. As you persistently pray about the things that trouble you, because you are relying on your loving Father, his peace will guard your emotions and guide your reasoning: *The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* (Philippians 4:5b-7) Notice how prayer is set in the context of an intimate relationship with God the Almighty; *The Lord is at hand*. He is here. Because he is present in your hardship, you don’t have to be anxious or worried because you can unload on the Almighty. His peace will guard your emotions and your thinking as you learn to rely on him through your praying about the situation. Worry will likely return and when it does, pray some more, until the Lord’s peace returns to you. Continue that cycle as long as you need, knowing that the Lord is always with you and in you.

In Jesus’ name

Do you have to end every prayer with, “in Jesus’ name”? Many have been taught that every prayer should end this way. Were you taught that saying “in Jesus’

name” was the only way to pray so that God will listen, and hopefully answer? Does ending your prayer requests “in Jesus’ name” make you feel better about your lack of confidence in what you just asked God to do? What does “in Jesus’ name” really mean?

It is critically important to understand this phrase because Jesus made the most amazing promise to his disciples, and to all believers, on the Thursday night before he was crucified: “*Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.*” (John 14:13-14) He didn’t make this promise just one time that night. He repeated it three more times! (John 14:26, 15:16, 16:23-24) We most definitely need to know what Jesus meant!

Asking in Jesus’ name can’t be some type of magical formula. It makes no sense at all to think that we can ask for something that is directly opposed to God’s will, like coveting, for example, and it be okay because we ended the prayer with the right words. “Father, thank you for bringing to me the new love of my life, the woman I’ve always dreamed about. My wife no longer understands me. Thank you that this woman does. I know our adultery is wrong, but I thank you for how she makes me feel alive again. Please bless us and help my wife and kids to understand. In Jesus’ name.” Crazy, right? This example might seem a little extreme but similar prayers happen all too frequently. Not only is this a ridiculous way to pray, it breaks the third of the Ten Commandments by taking the Lord’s name in vain. (Exodus 20:7, Deuteronomy 5:11) So how are we to understand what God means when we read phrases about his name or the name of Jesus?

“The name of the LORD” is used frequently in the Old Testament. As just mentioned, it is so important to

properly use God's name that he made it the third of the Ten Commandments given to Moses. To understand the meaning, we need to slip our feet into the sandals of the ancient Hebrews. They understood that someone's name represented everything about that person. Children were given names that carried meaning and identity. Moses' name meant, "*I drew him out of the water.*" (Exodus 2:10) When God met with Moses the first time, he told him that his personal name was "Yahweh", which he defined as meaning : "*I AM WHO I AM.*" (Exodus 3:14-15) Both words come from the Hebrew verb "to be". The Hebrews understood that the name of God represented everything about him: what he was like, his nature, his actions, his power, his total being. Psalm 20:6-8 is one of the many references to "the name of the LORD" that helps us understand the significance of the phrase:

*Now I know that the LORD saves his anointed;
he will answer him from his holy heaven
with the saving might of his right hand.
Some trust in chariots and some in horses,
but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.
They collapse and fall,
but we rise and stand upright.*

It's clear that David was not putting his trust in a word, or in the letters of the name of God. He trusted in God himself to deliver Israel from their enemies. By stating that he was trusting in the name of Yahweh his God, David was emphasizing the trustworthiness of God's character, his power to deliver and his promise to establish David's kingdom. No matter how God chose to rescue them or when he chose to do it, David trusted in his faithful God.

Jews in the first century thought similarly about the

phrase “in the name”. Here is how the phrase is used in the New Testament: *in the name of the Lord* (twelve times), *in the name of the Lord Jesus* (seven times), *in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ* (once), *in the name of Jesus* (four times), *in the name of Jesus Christ* (four times), *in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth* (twice), *in the name of Jesus of Nazareth* (once) and *in the name of Christ* (once). Is there a formula we are to use? Which phrase is the best? Should we alternate using all of them?

There is no magic formula and one phrase is not better than the others. If you go by usage, you could justify that we should end every prayer with: *in the name of the Lord*, since it’s used the most frequently. However, if that reasoning were true, it would mean that the other twenty verses were wrong to use the other seven phrases. Of course, this idea is nonsense. Since the Bible is without error, all eight phrases are equally valid in how they call to mind the person of Jesus Christ. That is the key! Each phrase represents the totality of who Jesus is, what he did, all that he is doing and everything that he will do. They depict the essence of his very nature and his will, including all of his plans and desires.

A few verses will help to clarify it further. *But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.* (1 Corinthians 6:11) All who put their faith in Jesus are washed clean of the guilt of their sinfulness, set apart as holy to God (sanctified) and judged righteous (justified) in the person of Jesus, not in his five letter name (it has five letters in English, but that differs from language to language). We stand forgiven and redeemed in Christ, who suffered for us and rose from the dead. Salvation did not come about when you spoke the two syllable name, “Jesus”. Your rescue came about when you entrusted your soul to the

Son of God, to the totality of who he is and all that he did for you. Being in Christ is the same as being forgiven in the name of Christ.

In the beginning weeks of the church in Jerusalem, Peter and John were arrested and ordered by the authorities to stop speaking and teaching *in the name of Jesus* (Acts 4:18). Did the rulers mean that the apostles must not mention that name? That was a small part of it. They were forbidden from teaching people what Jesus did, all of Jesus' teachings and commands and who he really was, which would also include mentioning his very name. Thankfully, as Peter and John were being released, they were empowered by God and vehemently refused, telling the authorities to their faces: "*for we are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.*" (Acts 4:20) They had seen the Son of God, the Messiah. They were taught by *Emmanuel* himself, which means "God with us". They would give their lives to teach "in the name of Jesus", meaning everything about him and his kingdom.

"In my name"

Yahweh used the phrase in the Old Testament as he warned the people through the prophet Jeremiah not to listen to the false prophets who spoke lies "*in my name*". (Jeremiah 14:14, 15, 23:25, 27:15, 29:9, 29:21, 29:23) The false prophets were wrongly representing God and telling the people what was completely counter to God's Word, his character and his coming judgment. Jesus learned to use this phrase of authority from his Father. He used the same phrase, "in my name", on five different occasions as recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke. But there is a sixth occasion that stands out from the rest. It was the night of his betrayal. And it was in the context of Jesus teaching his disciples, and all of us

followers, about prayer. Here are his statements from that sacred Thursday night recorded in John 14-16:

“Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.” (14:13-14)

“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” (14:26)

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.” (15:16)

“In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.” (16:23)

All but 14:26 are direct promises from our Lord Jesus that when we ask for something in his name, it will be done. That’s amazing! No, that is totally mind-boggling and astounding! But what did Jesus mean? If you and I had the confidence to know how to ask for things in Jesus’ name, we would do it much more frequently and with greater assurance. We find Jesus’ explanation of what it means to pray in his name here: *“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”* (15:7-8)

To abide in Jesus means to stay with him or remain in him. It means that Jesus truly is the Master of your life; he is the One who you worship and serve. To remain in him means that his words are staying in your heart and head. You are striving to know what Jesus taught and to

live by those commands and principles. This is the natural expression of your love for Jesus. If we are following him with our whole hearts, by seeking to live by his words, then and only then can we ask for whatever we want, and the Father will answer. If we are living by the words of Jesus then we are going to ask according to those same words and principles. Our prayer requests will align with what Jesus wants to happen, in us, in those we are praying for, and in our world.

Confidence in our asking doesn't come by ending all of our requests with the phrase "in Jesus' name!" Although, it is good to end some of your prayers this way. Just make sure you understand that this phrase is not some kind of booster rocket that thrusts your requests heavenward. It is equally fine to end your prayers with "Amen". You should also consider closing some of your prayers with a heart-felt, "Thank you" and "I love you", as expressions of your gratitude that you can pray and that the Lord of the universe listens intently. Our confidence in praying comes when we learn how to pray Jesus' way, with his words guiding our requests, so that we are asking the Father for the same things that Jesus himself asks for. What we are really seeking when we pray is for proper alignment with Jesus' life and values. We are asking that our life would be in harmony with his life. We want our devotion to the Father to become like his.

You can always ask him what is on your heart. He wants you to do that. That is, as long as your heart is not directly opposed to God's Word. You may not be certain of God's will in a given situation and you may have a strong desire about how you want things to happen. But we can all learn to pray like Jesus: "*Abba, Father, all things*

are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:36) The heart God wants to develop in you will pray along with his Son for the Father’s will to take precedence over anything that you would like to happen.

Read these powerful words from the old apostle John a few times and let them sink into your heart and soul: *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.* (1 John 5:13-15)

The purpose of this book is to help you understand how to keep the words of Jesus abiding in your heart and mind as you pray, so that you will know how to ask God for what he wants to give you. We will explore how to know God’s will so that you can ask accordingly. But there is one more truth to consider before we dive in.

Direct access

One of the most astounding truths in rescuing his people from sin, death and hell is that we now have direct access to the Father. In Christ, direct access is a radically new concept. God visibly demonstrated to the Jews, through how the temple was arranged, that his holiness was unapproachable for humans. You may know that there was one room in the Temple, the Most Holy Place, where God’s presence was always visible. By day there was a plume of smoke that hovered over this room and towered up into the sky. By night it was a column of fire. In God’s law, he gave the command that only one person could ever enter this room and that was the High Priest. However, he couldn’t go in whenever he

wanted; he could only enter one day each year for a very specific reason. This day was called Yom Kippur, which means The Day of Atonement. In 1 Timothy 6:15b-16, we read this same truth, that God is *the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.*

On the Day of Atonement the High Priest would symbolically make atonement for all of Israel's sins through a blood sacrifice. Since the time of Moses, the Jews celebrated this momentous day. Jewish tradition says that the Jews were so fearful of entering into this room where God dwelt, that they tied a rope around the High Priest's ankle so that if he did something wrong and God struck him dead, they could drag his body from the room. They knew that if anyone else entered the Most Holy Place to retrieve the body, they too would be struck dead by God. That might sound harsh, but God was demonstrating the truth that he is completely holy and thus lives in unapproachable light. That is his holiness. The purpose of the Day of Atonement was to point to the day when God would atone for the sins of his people through the blood sacrifice of his Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The power of Jesus' sacrificial death was demonstrated in a very visible way to the Jews when Jesus breathed his last breath on that sacred Friday afternoon. *And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.* (Matthew 27:50-51) The gigantic curtain that served as the door into the Most Holy Place was now opened up for anyone to enter! God demonstrated to the world that through his Son's sacrifice, people

could now have access into his presence, but only through accepting that Jesus is the Lamb of God that atones for the sins of those who believe.

In Hebrews 10:19-22, this astonishing new reality is described: *Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*

We get to draw near to God! In Christ, we can have absolute confidence, even though we can't see him, that we are praying directly to God and he is listening to our every word. Our confidence is in Jesus. Only sinless people can stand to be in God's presence. You and I certainly are far from being sinless, practically speaking, but we most definitely are sinless *positionally*. Jesus has atoned for all of our sins and we therefore stand before his Father and ours, covered in Jesus' righteousness, in his holiness. Have full assurance that when you pray, you are speaking directly to your heavenly Father, just as if you are standing right in front of him, not quibbling and terrified like Dorothy and her friends were when they stood before the powerful Oz. Rather, it's like a dearly loved child sitting on his father's lap because he adores and trusts him so completely.

Another amazing truth is that our prayers are not lost in space. God not only hears us, he also captures our requests, confessions and praises. Here is the indelible picture from Revelation 5:8: *And when he had taken the scroll (Jesus), the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.* Our prayers

are forever captured in golden bowls of incense; our prayers are a sweet aroma in the Father's nostrils. Revelation 8:3-4 give the same image. What a picture! Shouldn't that reinforce our desire to want to pray according to the will of God? If our prayers are that precious to the Father, we can strive to do better, much better. We can learn to pray in truer alignment with how God wants us to pray, using his way and his words. How could you possibly go wrong praying to the Father according to the pattern that his Son gave to us?

The Followers' Prayer

Luke 11:2-4 and Matthew 6:9-13 are usually referred to as "the Lord's Prayer". But is this what Jesus actually prayed? Did he intend for us to memorize these very words and recite them as we pray? No. This is not the Lord's prayer but "The Followers' Prayer". Jesus gave us a very detailed outline, or framework, for how we are to ask God for the things he wants to give us. It's the pattern for all of us as the people of his kingdom for talking with our heavenly Father about all the things that concern both us and him. This outline is how we develop a powerful habit of engaging in rich, meaningful conversations with the God of the universe.

In the next chapter, we'll discover how to use this outline for praying in order to better understand how to ask the Father for what he wants to give us. But let's be perfectly clear: we are not learning how to manipulate God to get what we want. Praying the way God wants you to pray isn't the end goal. Our praying is all about developing an intimate relationship with our Father, his Son and the Holy Spirit. Seeing God answer our prayers is about building up our faith in him as we watch him work in and through us to bring about his kingdom in a

broken and dark world.

The way to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength is completely dependent on learning how to converse with him regularly, as you think like Jesus while praying. Never forget that what Jesus told his disciples on that Thursday night, he also spoke to you and me; *“No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father, I have made known to you.”* (John 15:15)

Small Group Questions

1. What keeps you from praying more frequently?
What do you think a good remedy might be for you?

2. Have you prayed for something for a long time?
How did God answer your request? What did you learn during the process?

3. Discuss what stands out to you the most in Luke 11:1-13. Compare and contrast the story of the friend with the analogy of the father and Jesus' promise of v13. How might these truths impact your praying?

4. How is the Spirit all that you need? Discuss a current situation in your life and determine how the Spirit is the answer to that situation.

5. How do you understand what Jesus meant about praying in his name? What does it not mean? Why does it matter how you begin and end your prayers?