

**First session:
Introduction ("Teach us to pray")
and prayer as an experience of not being left alone**



In this session I will introduce affirmative prayers or arrow prayers, and prayer as listening to God. There will be two handouts: a) Create your own affirmative prayer and b) listening to God.

The disciples asked Jesus, “Teach us to pray”, and even today many people within the Church and outside the Church have the same request, we want to know how to pray, and we want to know the secret power of prayer. We have a longing for a deeper prayer life personally, and we want to know how to pray together and how to pray for one another, and for the world around us.

This course will take you through three sessions. We’ll embark on a journey through different aspects of prayer life. But let us begin with Luke’s gospel chapter 11 where the disciples ask about how to pray.

1One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”

2He said to them, “When you pray, say:

“ ‘Father,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.

3Give us each day our daily bread.
4Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation.’ ”

In Mathew 6:9-12, Jesus teaches his disciples a longer version, adding among others a prayer of protection

13And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

and a praise of God

for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

From this we learn how to approach God. Our relationship with God is one of trusting love. There is an uncomplicated, unsophisticated and spontaneous intimacy between us and God as between a small child and his/her parents. That why Jesus teaches us to address God as Father. Jesus may have used the Aramaic word Abba for father. Abba is almost like Dad or Daddy. In the version in Matthew God is addressed “Our Father in heaven” thus stressing the intimacy in our relationship but also that God is Father in a way that transcends human parenthood. God is the true parent, all parenthood should be a reflection of God’s caring for us, God’s unconditional love. In our second session we will go deeper into the experience of this love.

Prayer is addressing God. We set our focus at God. Often we are very much preoccupied by ourselves, and because of this we loose our orientation in life. We can’t find our way, because we only have our own perspective on our life and the situation we are confronting or the needs we feel. Prayer opens to another perspective on our life. We praise God; we thank that he has a name to be called upon, we ask that his kingdom come, that God will rule things after his good will. Therefore the version of the Lord’s prayer in Mathew adds, “your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Jesus teaches us to mention our basic needs to God, that is what concerns our material needs: food, job, education, family, housing. But our basic needs are also about forgiveness; we need to be set aright with God, where we have failed, and we need to set things aright with those who have wronged us. Nobody goes through life without being tempted, because we live in a world where the evil one shows his power, and thus we pray for protection. Knowing that God is the caring Father who listens as we call out for him, we give God praise.

The Lords prayer is providing us with a good pattern for our own prayer – as we pray together as a community or as we pray for ourselves. In our third lesson we return to the Lord’s prayer, as a pattern for praying for others.

In Mathew we find the Lord’s prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. In the preceding verses Jesus warns his disciples of making a show of their spiritual life. Prayer is not meant to be a means of getting the praise and recognition of other people.

Matth 6:5: “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

If you apply this to praying together in Church, in the cell group or just coming together, this means that your focus in praying is addressing God, and not if your words are judged stupid or bright by others. Just relax, it is God you are addressing, not the persons present. No formulation is the right one. What is important is that the prayer comes from the heart and that you express confidence in God. If this is the case – even though you may find it difficult to find the right words or stammers or stumbles – your prayer will be pleasing to God, and eventually help others to pray.

Jesus also says that is not the number of words that is important:

Matth 6:7-8: And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Sometimes a sigh is enough. Jesus taught us the Lord’s prayer to show us a simple way to pray.

The important thing in prayer is our relationship to God as we have met God in Jesus Christ. To stress the importance the personal relationship between each believer and God, Jesus says:

Matth 6:6: When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

When you pray together with others, you pray out of your experience of fellowship with God as our Father, with Jesus as our savior, and the Holy Spirit as our comforter and guide. Praying together is sharing with others your own relationship with God. And those who pray with you are welcoming you into their intimacy with God. Praying together is shared hospitality. And when you pray with an unbeliever or a spiritual seeker, you are bringing them into the field of experiencing your own fellowship with God in Christ, and for this reason prayer may be the strongest testimony of God’s love to others.

Later in the Sermon on the mount, Jesus ensures us that our prayers will be heard by God, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Matth. 7:7-8). Jesus wants us to have confidence in God as our good father, who knows our greatest needs. We do not need to worry – this is of course easy to say than to practice – we should focus on God, seek God’s will and God’s kingdom or rule in our life, aspire his righteousness i.e. walking in the right way with God and one another, and will know that God has good intentions for us.

Matthew 7:9-11: Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

In Luke, just after his version of the Lord's prayer, Jesus also urges us to pray fervently and with great intent, not taking no as an answer (Luke 11:8-13), and he ends his encouragement to pray, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

In the next part of this first session we will look further in how prayer may open to the experience of not being left alone.

Prayer as an experience of not being left alone

You probably have heard the story of a man who dreamt he was walking with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes of his life and for each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand; one belonged to him, and the other to the Lord.

As he looked back at the footprints in the sand, he noticed that somewhere there was only one set of footprints corresponding to the most difficult times in his life.

"Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. Why were you not there, when I needed you most?"

The Lord replied, "My precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that **I carried you.**"¹

Prayer will help us to experience that the love of God in Christ surrounds us on all sides. That was why Jesus Christ spoke about God as his Father and taught us to address God in prayer as our Father. In relation to God, we can feel as safe as children with their parents.

When we pray, we express our confidence in Christ's presence according to his promises. Sometimes it is against all odds. Everything seems to contradict God's shielding presence and care. The circumstances of our time may be troublesome for many reasons, e.g. unemployment, bad economy, crisis in society and social unrest. May be our family has been split up, or we have fallen apart from our wife, husband, or friends. We may have fallen ill, or sick, lost people close to us, or we may be ridiculed or persecuted because of our faith in Jesus.

In times of crisis, I have found a good help in praying the Book of Psalms. All kind of life situations and feelings are expressed in the psalms. Sometimes they spill over with joy and praise, realising God's goodness to the psalmist. Other times they express despair of being estranged from God due to sin, or the feeling of being abandoned by God unjustly, while God's enemies triumph. Some of

¹ Footprints © 1964 Margaret Fishback Powers.

the psalms presupposes a dialogue with God, and some even include God's answer – similar to the story about the footsteps in the sand.

In Psalm 91 the psalmist confesses the Lord as his refuge in the midst surrounding enemies. And God honours his confession:

14“Because he loves me,” says the LORD, “I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.

15He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.

16With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation.

In other Psalms despair and doubt alternates with remembering God's promises or former presence in the psalmist's own life or the life of God's chosen people. Psalm 22 is an example of this.

1My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?

3Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the one Israel praises.

4In you our ancestors put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.

6But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.

7All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

10From birth I was cast on you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.

11Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

16Dogs surround me,
a pack of villains encircles me;
they pierce my hands and my feet.

17All my bones are on display;
people stare and gloat over me.

18They divide my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garment.

19But you, LORD, do not be far from me.
You are my strength; come quickly to help me.

20Deliver me from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dogs.

And then in verse 21b the turning point of the psalm:
You answered me (Christian Standard Bible)

22I will declare your name to my people;
in the assembly I will praise you.

So, what does this mean for your prayer life?

Use the psalms as your book of prayer, individually and together. Praying the psalms, you pray with Christians in all generations. You pray with words that also the first Christians used when they gathered to prayer. And Jesus himself used the psalms; in his pain and affliction on the cross he prayed Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

When I pray the psalms, I usually recite them; I speak the words. In this way I pray and listen. They become my prayer, and they become God’s word to me. When I in psalms come across strong feelings, e.g., frustration, despair, and even hatred, I lend my voice to people in such a situation and bring it to God.

When you come together to pray, you may choose to start with one of the Psalms. You may recite it in way alternating between to groups. One group read the uneven verses, the second group the even verses.

Affirmative prayers

The psalmist remembered what God has done in the past and he remembered God’s promises. When you pray it is good to remind God of his good deeds in history and in your own life, and it is good to remind him of his promises. One way of doing this is creating short affirmative prayers, or arrow prayer.

Such a short prayer could reflect a spiritual truth, e.g.

I am a child of God.
I am loved,
And I am appreciated.
God, I thank you!

My favourite affirmation is inspired from an old Celtic prayer *St. Patrick’s Breastplate*. The original prayer expresses confidence in God’s presence. In the main section of the prayer it focusses on Christ, “*Christ to shield me today: from poison, from burning, from drowning, from wounding, so that there may come to me an abundance of reward.*” And Christ’s protective presence is called upon in all directions, and in human relationships: “*Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.*” I have extracted the central formulation of it:

Christ before,
Christ behind,

Christ to the right,
Christ to the left,
Christ above,
Christ below,
Christ around,
Christ within!

Affirmations springs from the expectation that it is possible to get in contact with Jesus Christ at any time and in any place, even the most stressing situations.

You may create your own affirmations and arrow prayers. Find some Bible verses, which appeal to you, and after pondering on these verses you may create a short prayer. As an example, you may read these verses: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39). These verses may be summed up in an affirmation:

No power on earth
can separate me
from the love of God
that is in Christ Jesus!

Using affirmations, you affirm the presence of Christ or God as well as your confidence in God-in-Christ to God himself, and to yourself, and you confront every life threatening power. Thereby reality is often experienced in a new way consistent to the content of your affirmation. This kind of affirmative arrow prayers helps us to experience that I am not alone, *Christ is with me*.

I should like to illustrate the use of affirmative prayers and arrow prayer with a parable from the Church Father Athanasios.

The citizens of a town are in deep despair and fear because their city is under siege from a mighty enemy. The enemy cries insults against the city. But the king has his secret way into the city, and he raises his banner to proclaim his presence. Now the enemy is overwhelmed by fear because of the king's presence and the enemy flees.

An arrow prayer or an affirmation is like the King's banner!

By the way, many worship choruses function the same way

A further lesson from the Psalms is to make prayer a dialogue with God. Prayer is being together with God, and prayer is an honest conversation with God. This means that prayer is not just you talking, pouring out all of your intentions and wishes – even though this is also good. A child can bring everything to his/her parents without fear of rejection and with the expectation of being heard.

But you have to be silent and stop your talking and the flow of your thoughts to realise God's presence and to hear Jesus' voice or the whisper of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is always with you. The Spirit of God flows everywhere. When we do not realise this, it is often due to the fact that we are preoccupied with our own concerns and do not listen. To make prayer become a time with God, a dialogue, you may start reading the word of God. Ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten what you read and ask God, what are you saying to me in these verses. I have prepared a handout for you with a quite elaborate instruction of how to do so.

It's good to have a notebook at hand as you pray in a listening way with an open bible. You write down your prayer requests, God's words to you, and the thoughts and images, which is given to you by the Holy Spirit. When you read your notes later on, you'll have a record of how God is guiding you and how you get more and more accustomed to listening to the voice of God, whether it is thoughts, feelings, conceptions, images or just sensing the presence of God in a given situation. If you are in doubt whether this comes from God, you may compare it the teachings and life of Jesus as told in the New Testament and share your thoughts with an experienced fellow Christian.

When you are in a situation where you need immediate guidance, or when you are challenged in other ways and need to experience God's presence, you may use an arrow prayer and then say, "Speak to me; Jesus, I am listening!" The answer may come in different ways: an inner voice, a thought, an image, a feeling of peace.

There will be two handouts for this first session: a) Create your own affirmative prayer and b) listening prayer.

We will conclude this session with St. Patrick's Breastplate as a body prayer. It may seem a little bit Sunday School like, but in fact sometimes we are more present in our prayer as we make use of our body.

Christ before,
Christ behind,
Christ to the right,
Christ to the left,
Christ above,
Christ below,
Christ around,
Christ within!

Some of the you might find my booklet *Christfulness - towards wholeness* useful: [Christfulness - towards wholeness \(lulu.com\)](http://lulu.com)