

Skye Jethani wants you to know that prayer is so much more than a two-way transaction with a heavenly vending machine. Jesus didn't pray like that. And with a pastor's heart, Skye wants to take you deeper into what Jesus had to say about talking with God.

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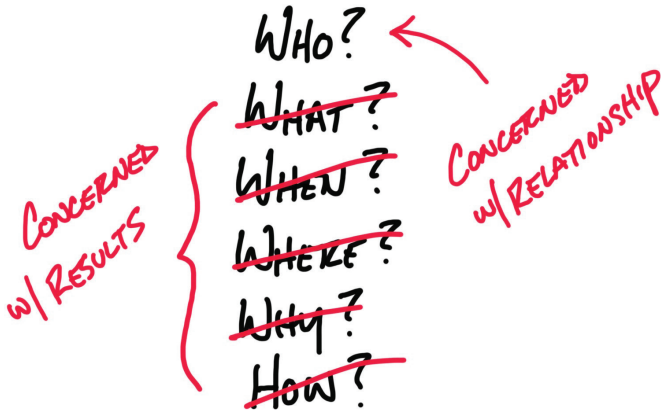
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# THE ISSUE OF PRAYER:



1

## IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS ... THEN TO WHOM WE PRAY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN HOW WE PRAY.

**JESUS DIDN'T PRAY** like most people, and He certainly didn't pray like other religious leaders. In the first century, Jewish prayers were liturgical, usually recitations from Scripture, and spoken in formal Hebrew. Jesus, however, prayed in Aramaic—the informal, common dialect—and He spoke to God with intimate, even casual language.

It was evident to His disciples that Jesus related to God very differently than other rabbis related to Him. Therefore, they

asked Him, “Lord, teach us to pray.” In response to this request, Jesus told them two parables. One about a neighbor asking for bread in the middle of the night, and the other about a son asking his father for a fish.

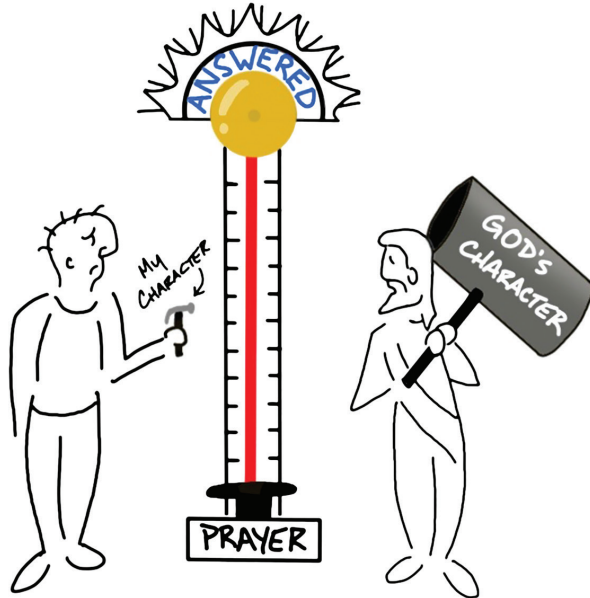
We often misread these stories as containing some hidden formula about prayer; a tactic for approaching God in order to receive one’s request. Some have even understood these stories to mean we must nag God with our prayers in order to motivate Him to act on our behalf.

Before jumping into the actual meaning of these parables, we must first recognize Jesus’ focus. The stories aren’t primarily about how to pray, but rather about the person to whom we pray. In other words, these parables are designed to shift our understanding of God, not instruct us about the proper process for praying. Unlike other rabbis and teachers who saw prayers almost like magical incantations—formulaic words designed to control and compel a reluctant God to act—Jesus saw prayer as the intimate connection between a dependent child and a loving parent.

As a result, rather than offering a mechanical process for prayer, Jesus wanted to shift His disciple’s vision of God. He knows that how we see our heavenly Father will determine how we commune with Him. Our vision of God defines our practice of prayer. Abraham Joshua Heschel put it this way: “The issue of prayer is not prayer; the issue of prayer is God.”<sup>2</sup>



**READ MORE** [Matthew 6:5–8](#); [Romans 8:15](#)



2

## **IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS... THEN GOD'S CHARACTER MATTERS MORE THAN OURS.**

**THE ASSUMPTION IN JESUS'** culture was that God's response to prayers depended upon a person's righteousness. Being honorable and upright wins God's favor and He will grant your requests. Most people still think this way about prayer, but Jesus' story about a neighbor asking for bread in the middle of the night challenges this popular assumption.

The story is often misunderstood by modern audiences because we do not recognize the social dynamics at play.

Ancient Israel was an honor-based culture and highly communal. A person's reputation was of paramount importance, and their reputation was inexorably linked to their extended family and community.

Failing to provide bread to an unexpected visitor, which is the core problem in Jesus' story, would not only bring shame upon an individual but also upon the entire village. Therefore, the man with the guest wakes his neighbor in the middle of the night and asks for bread. At first the friend refuses. He is already in bed, but Jesus says, "I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of [*anaideia*] he will rise and give him whatever he needs" (Luke 11:8).

The Greek word *anaideia* is the key to the entire parable, and it's difficult to translate. Some English Bibles say "boldness" or "persistence," leading some to conclude that we must nag God to act on our behalf. This interpretation would mean God is a reluctant provider or disinterested in our needs. That is a terrible misreading.

A more literal translation is "without shame." Jesus is saying that the sleeping neighbor's friendship won't motivate him to get out of bed and help, but his desire to protect his own reputation will. He desires to be honorable and "without shame," and he does not want shame to come upon his community for failing to provide for a visitor. Therefore he will do the right thing.

Jesus' point about prayer is remarkable and simple: God does not answer prayers because of *our* reputation, but because of *His*. Jesus takes the focus off our righteousness or even our

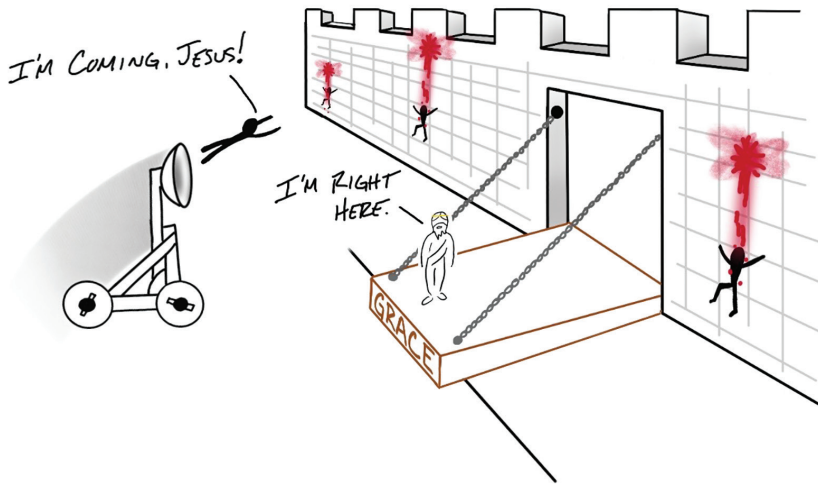
## WHAT IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS ABOUT PRAYER?

relationship with God, and instead emphasizes God’s desire to maintain His own honor.

This contradicts virtually every religious impulse, in every person, in every culture. We want to believe that a prayer succeeds or fails because of the person praying—because of a person’s holiness, righteousness, or devotion. But Jesus says it’s not about us at all. Instead, prayer is received and answered because our heavenly Father is holy and righteous, and because He is devoted to us. We do not have to convince God to act on our behalf, and prayer is not a religious way of nagging God. Prayer, at its most fundamental level, is simply asking God to be God.



**READ MORE** Ezekiel 36:22–23; Psalm 25:4–11



3

### IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS... THEN ALL PRAYER DEPENDS ON GRACE.

**IMAGINE GOD DWELLING** within an impenetrable fortress with walls too high to climb, too thick to penetrate, and too deep to tunnel beneath. Its security is so absolute that not even a signal or message may cross its bulwarks.

Nonetheless, people persist in the belief that they can break through to God. They devise all kinds of elaborate schemes to breach the fortress. *If I just run faster, maybe I can leap over the wall. If I say just the right words, at the right time*



*and standing in the right spot, maybe the gate will open. If I use the right tool, maybe I can dig through the wall a little each day. Perhaps together we can assemble a great balloon to carry us over the wall!* Over time, as each attempt fails, the next one grows more elaborate and more ridiculous.

This metaphor helps explain why human religion is often so odd and extravagant. It also explains why Jesus mocked the prayer rituals common among the pious of ancient Israel. They thought they could breach the fortress and be heard by God because of their eloquence, repetition, strict obedience, or expensive sacrifices. But Jesus knew that is not how prayer works.

Chapter 7 of the Westminster Confession of Faith correctly speaks of the great distance that exists between God and His creatures—a distance too vast for any person to overcome. Our only hope of engaging with God, therefore, is “some voluntary condescension on God’s part.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, we cannot invade the fortress from the outside, but God can choose to open the gate from the inside.

Applying this truth to prayer, we must understand that our prayers do not reach God because of who we are or anything we do. We possess neither the power nor the righteousness to be heard by Him. Therefore, all prayer relies on God’s grace; His unearned hospitality to welcome us into His presence and receive the overflow of our jumbled hearts. Richard Foster put it this way:

*The truth of the matter is, we all come to prayer with a tangled mass of motives—altruistic and*

## WHAT IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS ABOUT PRAYER?

*selfish, merciful and hateful, loving and bitter. Frankly, this side of eternity we will never unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure. But what I have come to see is that God is big enough to receive us with all our mixture. We do not have to be bright, or pure, or filled with faith, or anything. That is what grace means, and not only are we saved by grace, we live by it as well. And we pray by it.*<sup>4</sup>



**READ MORE** [Matthew 6:5–8](#); [Ecclesiastes 5:1–3](#)

# 4 STAGES OF PRAYER\*

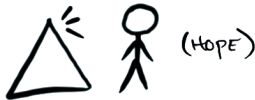
① PRAYING AT GOD



② PRAYING TO GOD



③ LISTENING TO GOD



④ BEING WITH GOD



\* FROM MARK THIBODEAUX, S.J.

4

**IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS...  
THEN PRAYER IS WHAT WE MUST  
DO, NOT JUST WHAT WE OUGHT  
TO DO.**

**ALL PEOPLE PRAY** for one of two reasons—either because they *ought* to or because they *must*. The ought-prayers do it because it is the expectation of anyone who takes religion seriously (or who wants to be perceived as taking it seriously). They occasionally turn to God in prayer as if they are doing Him a favor, or perhaps to tone their “spiritual life” the way one gives extra attention to

diet and exercise after the holidays. Deep down the ought-prayers suspect their lives would be just fine without prayer.

The must-prayers are very different and are most easily spotted in hospital waiting rooms or recovery groups. They are desperate souls that have had their illusion of control obliterated by the harder realities of life. They pray because they are utterly convinced of their need for God and His grace. Despite what others may conclude from their appearance, the must-prayers know that apart from God’s presence their lives would unravel. For them, prayer is not optional.

If ought-prayers see prayer like perfume, a welcome but nonessential addition to the air, then must-prayers see it like oxygen, the element of the atmosphere their life depends upon.

We have all had must-pray moments triggered by acute fear or insecurity, but then we drift back into the ought-pray mindset when our circumstances return to normal and our illusion of control is restored. To cultivate real communion with God, however, we must not lose sight of our dependency and our poverty. If we do not believe we need God, we will not receive Him. As Augustine said, “You must account yourself ‘desolate’ in this world, however great the prosperity of your lot may be.”<sup>5</sup>



**READ MORE** Psalm 73:23–26; 1 John 1:5–10



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5

## IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS... THEN PRAYER IS ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE.

**A FEW YEARS AGO** I was invited to speak at a large trade show where suppliers of theatrical equipment (stage lighting, sound systems, fog machines) showcased their products to church leaders. I was asked to speak about “The Future of Ministry.” The event organizers specifically asked me to discuss trends and research related to young adults and how churches could better engage them.

Part of my presentation included a survey that asked

young people, “What has most helped you grow in your faith?” The top response from millennials was “prayer.”<sup>6</sup> When I revealed that answer, there was an audible gasp in the room I hadn’t anticipated. Sensing the surprise from the audience, I decided to take things a step further. “Do you know what’s great about prayer?” I asked the ministry leaders. “It’s very affordable.” That got a laugh from the crowd, but not from the conference director.

When I came off the main stage he was livid. He explained that the goal of the event was to sell theater equipment to churches so they can create “bigger and better” experiences. My presentation, he said, was not appreciated by the vendors. I explained that I was invited to speak to the pastors not the vendors, and to present data about young adults, not to sell smoke machines. I have not been invited back.

The incident illustrates one of the core dilemmas facing consumer Christianity. It always wants to produce, package, and sell communion with God, but this agenda relies upon people believing communion with God requires some special knowledge or skill they do not possess. If experiencing God’s presence requires millions of dollars in theatrical equipment, then I *need* a massive church building and its army of employees to grow in my faith.

But a new generation is discovering a dangerous truth—all the pyrotechnics and hologram projections in the world are no substitute for the simple practice of prayer. And prayer is accessible to anyone, anywhere. As Madame Guyon said, “This way of prayer, this simple relationship to your Lord, is so suited for everyone; it is just as suited for the dull and the ignorant as

## WHAT IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS ABOUT PRAYER?

it is for the well-educated. This prayer, this experience which begins so simply, has as its end a totally abandoned love to the Lord. Only one thing is required—*Love*.”<sup>7</sup>



**READ MORE** [Matthew 11:25–30; James 4:8](#)

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