

“How Should We Pray?”

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Text: Luke 11:1-13

I was driving a rental car to see my mom in Florida. I shouldn't have been driving so late. It was about 1:30 in the morning. My daughter was fast asleep in the passenger's seat. Then, out of nowhere, I suddenly heard the bottom of my car being mangled. Shocked, I pulled to the shoulder, where I could get a better look at what happened. I saw that someone had left a massive sheet of metal in the road. I couldn't see it when I was driving, but when I drove over it, the pressure from my wheels, bent the metal up, it got caught on the undercarriage of the car, and continued to curl and cause havoc with the rental.

It was so late, I was in the middle of Florida, surrounded by swamps, alligators, and mosquitos. The car was still drive-able, as long as I went slowly. I finally found an open gas station, got a roll of duct tape, and used the whole thing to tape as much of the bumper together as possible, until I could get to my mom's.

I got the rental car settled. Then, a couple weeks later, it was raining in the grocery store parking lot. It was a torrential rain, sheets of it coming down, and a car hit me. Then, a couple weeks after that, as I was picking my car up from the body shop, I backed into another car. I was in three accidents within three months. My insurance rates were ridiculous, and I began to get nervous behind the wheel, jumping at every ghost in my peripheral vision.

Now, before I tell you this next part, I want you to know that typically I am absolutely, thoroughly Protestant in my prayer practices. I am not a superstitious person. I pray to God, not to saints. I don't use icons. But, after going 30 years without an accident, and suddenly having three in three months, I needed to do something desperate. So, I went to a Catholic store, bought St. Christopher prayer cards, and I put a prayer card in my wallet, a prayer card in my glove compartment, and I got a tiny icon that fit into a little cubby in my dash. And please don't tell my theology professor, but before big trips, I made my daughter, Calla, read the prayer on the backs of them—prayers for safety while traveling. My husband began laughing at me, because he said I was building a St. Christopher shrines in my car.

But I'm happy to announce, that I have only had one accident since those dreaded three months. And that was when I bought another car and I hadn't had the chance to transfer my shrine to it, and someone hit me. I'm really not superstitious. But there it is.

So, before I preach any lofty truths about how to pray, let me just throw out this disclaimer from the outset: my theology of prayer does not align with my practice of prayer.

My theology says that God is not a genie in a bottle, that I rub when I want every material object. But there are times when I have seen a lovely handbag, and I have mumbled to the Almighty Creator of the universe, that I wouldn't mind having it on my shoulder. Then I quickly remember that three million children who die of hunger each year, and it's definitely more important that God attends to them. My theology says that God is infinite and wise, and that suffering is inevitable. But a few months ago, when my mom had shingles, and the unbearable pain wouldn't go away, I prayed that she would find comfort. My theology understands that people die, and our mortality takes on all sorts of forms of sickness and disease. And yet, when I am sitting by the bedside of a young dying mother, I pray with all my might that she will pull through that dark valley.

There is a lot of confusion about prayer. We're trying to put three puzzle pieces together, that just don't fit—in our prayers, we are trying to acknowledge that God is all loving, God is all powerful, and yet we know that evil still exists, and suffering still happens.

We don't know how to make sense of our prayers. Why do we pray, if terrible things happen anyways? Does it do any good? Is the outcome the point of prayer? We have so many questions.

It heartens me a bit when I see people asking Jesus, "How should we pray?" Because it seems like they were as confused by all of it too. Jesus answers with what we now understand as the Lord's Prayer.

An acknowledgement that God is holy *and* intimate,
a hope that God will help us to make earth a bit like heaven,
An ask, for material things, like food to eat for today.
A longing that God will forgive us, and we will forgive one another.
A pleading that God will remove temptation from us.
And then, like a book end, we go back to an acknowledgement of God's power and glory.

The writer Anne Lamott talks about the most important prayer being summed up in three words, "Help! Thanks! And Wow!"¹ We can certainly see these elements in the Lord's Prayer, except I would add "Sorry!" That's it. That's how we should pray.

It seems so simple, but even after Jesus taught us how we should pray, we still struggle. Throughout history, we have wrestled with these ideas.

The Protestant Reformation had a lot to do with prayer. Historians write that medieval society had three distinct orders—those who prayed, those who fought, and those who worked.² And these three classifications had all sorts of customs and taboos attached to them. The historians speculate that this all made sense until the bubonic plague wiped out 30 to 50 percent of the

¹ Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (Riverhead Books, 2012).

² Giles Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1995)

European population, and then they weren't quite sure that the praying men were doing their jobs.

But there was more than just that perceived lack of efficacy. There was a philosophical humanism and the Reformation bubbling up. Both movements eventually encouraged people to read the text for themselves, and so the Bible was translated into the common vernacular, so sacred texts were not only in the hands of priests. In England, the *Book of Common Prayer* was translated into English. So common people began to pray. And if you pray, if you think about prayer, you will no doubt wrestle with how to pray.

I think that prayer, in its purest form, is not about getting it right, because sometimes the practical aspects of prayer do not match its philosophical underpinnings. Prayer not about making sure that our theology is perfect, and we can say the correct words. It is about acknowledging that our imperfect messed up selves can't fix everything, and there are times when we just might need to call out to *something* as an acknowledgement that we're not alone. It's not that the prayer will "work." It's not that the outcomes will be exactly the way that we want them to be. It is about the act of surrendering the outcomes of our lives. It is about praying for one another, knowing that we are surrounded by people who are yearning for us, rooting for us, wanting the best for us.

One of my favorite scriptures in the Bible is Romans: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We don't know what pray for, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." I love that verse, because it acknowledges that sometimes the pain is too deep to bear and God not only hears our groans, but the Spirit groans with us.

So if you don't have the right words, you can groan. And if you cannot groan, you can breathe. Seven deep breaths can make a world of difference, in our bodies.

Although we don't focus on the outcomes, there *is* some mystery to it. Even on a very human level, even when we take any notion of God out of the equation, even when we look purely at science, a person in a hospital has a much better chance of pulling through a horrible situation, if they know that there is a group of people hoping, wishing, longing for the best for them.³ That is why even though people are not going to church as much, chaplain offices in hospitals are more robust than ever. Because when it gets down to it, people pray.

Recently, a friend of mine, who was also a writer, Rachel Held Evans, got sick. It was strange. She was 37-years old, and a mom. One month, I was at her house, dancing with her four-year-old son while her 1-year-old daughter laughed from her stroller, and Rachel cooked us a meal. Then she was taken into the hospital with a routine infection, where she began to have seizures. They transferred her to another hospital, where they put her into a coma. And then they transferred her to another hospital, where they tried to take her out of the coma and found that her brain stem was dead.

³ Jeanie Lerche Davis, *Can Prayer Heal?* <https://www.webmd.com/balance/features/can-prayer-heal#1>

Everyone was praying—probably millions of people. And yet, Rachel died. We attended the funeral, completely confused. How could happen? How could someone so young, with so much to live for die like this? What good were those prayers? Why didn't they work? How did they help?

Even though the answer to my prayers didn't happen the way that I hoped, I have to believe that Rachel felt those prayers. I think of her, in her final days, breathing in the love of her friends, being fed with their longings for her. I imagined that the prayers gave her the gift of knowing that so many people were rooting for her, and that had to have given her the strength to pass from this world.

And her children? They may never remember exactly what happened when their mother died, but I have to believe that they will remember that feeling of being surrounded and embraced by such love.

Prayer is a mystery. Sometimes our theology of prayer does not match our practice of prayer. And that's okay. Sometimes, we don't know how to do it. Because Jesus gives us instructions, but even then prayer is not about getting it right. It's about calling out "Help! Thanks! Sorry! Wow!" It is about knowing that we're not alone in our struggles. It is about surrounding one another with hope, and yearning, and love. And it is about surrendering those outcomes to a God who groans with us, loves us, and is *for* us.

To the glory of God our Creator,
God our Liberator,
And God our Sustainer. Amen.