

Praying In The Assembly

Lesson 4

Just as the disciples had asked Jesus to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1-4), I hope that you are willing to learn from the Lord those things that are important to know when you are praying to God, especially in the assemblies of the Lord's church. Prayer is a way for us to communicate with our heavenly Father through Jesus, His Son. Prayer is a privilege whether it is conducted in a private or public setting. Jesus died in order to give us the avenue of prayer (Heb. 4:15-16). God wants us to cast all our cares on Him because He cares for His people (1 Peter 5:7). We come, in Jesus name (John 16:23) to bring our every burden and blessing to God in prayer. The power and providential care of God among His people are requested and received when we talk to Him.

The goal of this lesson is to help us lead others in prayer during our assemblies together. Certainly if we are leading the congregation in prayer, we ought to pray for things that were petitioned by the local church or that are meaningful to the congregation. Just as with any other part of service in the church, we must be prepared and stand ready to make a list of important requests and thoughts that we want to carry before God on their behalf. Remember you are giving voice to the prayers of others. Take this work of service seriously.

Prayer to God is obviously important in the assemblies of the church since Paul made it clear that just as he would sing with the spirit and the mind in the assembly, he would also pray with the spirit and the mind (1 Cor. 14:15-16). When we examine the early church it is clear that prayer was just as much a part of their service before God as continuing in the apostle's teaching, fellowship and breaking bread together (Acts 2:42). Prayer is something that both Jesus and the apostles taught should be a constant part of the life of the Christian (Luke 18:1; 1 Thess. 5:16-18). This would include our meetings together as brothers and sisters in Christ (Jam. 5:16).

The first thing to remember when leading a public prayer before the congregation is that even though you are praying on behalf of the church, your main focus must be on God as you address Him. Our mind and spirit must be focused during public prayer on the One that we are talking to. We are to pray in every place with reverence toward God (1 Tim. 2:8). This means that our prayer must be preceded by proper living (Prov. 28:9). Prayer must be in faith (Jam. 1:5-8). This would include the assemblies of the Lord's people. While we are to offer petitions for all the saints (Eph. 6:18), it is important to see ourselves as speaking with God on their behalf (Eph. 6:19).

If you struggle in your personal prayer life, congregational prayers will not be a comfortable area of service for you. In reality, those who don't spend time talking to God on a daily basis will find it difficult to come before Him even once a week. Those people who don't see the value of their relationship with God and who underestimate the privilege and power of prayer will come to see this part of our assembly together as a spiritual exercise that makes other people feel better about the situations they are going through in life. When you rarely talk with someone you will not be able to express your deepest thoughts and concerns with them until you establish an open relationship. It takes time to develop relationships, even our relationship with God. Spend time in prayer!

Those who lack this relationship with God will be found at a loss for words. This usually leads to using coined phrases and Christian jargon to fill their time in leading a prayer. They often

see prayer not as a time to talk with God, but as a time to do their duty in vocalizing the requests of others in a way that would be satisfactory to those assembled. Keep in mind that as soon as the last item on your prayer list is written down and you invite the congregation to go to God in prayer that you are simply sharing the petitions, requests, thanksgivings and confessions of your brethren with God. The verbalizing of what you have prepared is between you and Him. If we have our focus in the wrong place we end up leading a performance rather than a prayer. Be sure to look upward instead of inward or outward in prayer.

While it is true that our focus is on God, since we are praying on behalf of others, we need to make sure that our prayers are heard by all. Some prayers are so mumbled or rushed that few can hear what is being said. In order for those present to give a heartfelt, "Amen" to the prayer, they must be in agreement with what is being expressed. If they can't hear the prayer, then there is no way that they can say, "Amen". The "Amen", is a way for people to acknowledge that the prayers offered are their prayers too. People need to know that the thoughts being verbalized are biblical and that the requests being made are accurate. We need to be clear in the prayers that we offer so that people can hear the words that are being offered to God. If this is not taken into consideration, often the only way to know when the prayer is completed is when you hear the "Amen" of someone else in the congregation or the commotion of those assembled.

Let's spend a few more minutes on using appropriate word choices in our prayers instead of common clichés. Listen to the following prayer example and you will understand exactly what we are talking about:

Liturgical Prayer of the Orthodox Church of Christ

"Our dear heavenly Father; we continue our thanks unto thee--For this another opportunity we have to come together to study another portion of Thy Word, and to worship Thee in spirit and in truth without fear of molestation from any source. Bless all those for whom it is our duty to pray, the world over, but especially for those of the household of faith. If it be Thy will, restore them to the much wanted and needed health. In like manner, we thank you for Thy word and he who breaks unto us the Bread of Life. Give him a ready recollection of the things he has prepared; and help us as hearers that we might study these things to see if they are true and right; if they are, help us to apply them to our everyday walks of life. Help us to live closer to Thee in the future than we have in the past. Forgive us of all those sins we have committed since we last sought pardon at Thy bountiful hand. And now Father, continue on with us through this service, and through the remainder of our lives here on this earth. Guard, guide and direct us; and be with us as we depart to our respective places of abode; and bring us back at the next appointed time; and if in the end we have been found faithful, give us that home with Thee in heaven. In Christ name we pray, Amen." (*Author unknown [adapted]*)

It was obvious wasn't it? Even though you have probably attended many different congregations of the Lord's church, almost all of us have heard some of this learned language. While it is not unscriptural, one must ask how sincere a repetitive or rehearsed prayer can be. Make sure that no matter what you say before God in prayer that it is coming from the heart and it is genuine.

Choosing our words carefully is important not because we want to impress others with our vocabulary, but because we can be misleading. For example, when a brother speaks in prayer and says, “Thy kingdom come”, when the kingdom (the church) is already here (Mark 9:1; Matthew 16:18-19; Col. 1:13), he is misleading others. Another example would be that it is more appropriate when leading public prayers to say, “we pray” (II Thess. 1:11-12) instead of “I pray” (Eph. 1:18) since the prayer is a conglomeration of the requests of many individuals. Be careful also with using language that does not relate to the culture and time in which we live. Yes, I am referring to Old English which uses words like, “Thee”, “Thou”, “Thy” and “Thine”, in referring to the Lord. There has been a false notion circulated that these words are somehow “more sacred” than the words, “You”, “Your” and “Yours”. When you realize that the Old English language was not used in any biblical time period, nor do biblical scholars suggest that different pronouns were used with God as opposed to man, then the whole idea is absurd. Remember we are mainly communicating with God, but at the same time we are trying to be clearly understood by those in the congregation. Use wisdom when choosing what you say and how you say it in prayer.

Another point of interest is our position in prayer. I am not talking about posture, since all kinds of postures were portrayed as acceptable in the Bible.

- ⇒ Standing (Mark 11:25)
- ⇒ Sitting (Luke 22:14-17)
- ⇒ Kneeling (Acts 20:36)
- ⇒ Prostrate (Matthew 26:34)

When I speak of position, I am referring to making sure that we are not talking to the floor where the sound of our voice cannot be projected. Often we can hinder our ability to be heard by not coming to the front and or turning toward the congregation. It is wise to take advantage of the microphone if your voice doesn’t carry well.

In addition to the points we have already made, let us mention the importance of keeping prayers in their proper context. What we mean here is that you should not pray for everything at the beginning and end of a service. Some prayer requests may need to be kept for certain times in the service. For example, when praying at the Lord’s Table do not use this time to pray for the sick. During prayer be sure not to preach a sermon (or better yet, re-preach the sermon for that day). Ken Cooper says when it comes time to dismiss the congregation in prayer, “Just do it. Dismiss us brother, dismiss us.”

While prayers do not have to be short, we certainly do not want to be like the Pharisees who were condemned for long showy prayers (Luke 20:47). When the disciples asked Jesus how to pray, He used 65 words to teach them what is known as the “model” prayer (Matt. 6:9-13). The idea is that we say what needs to be said, avoiding repetition, and then we conclude our prayer. If God knows what we need before we ask, and we know that our main purpose in prayer is talking to Him, extending the length of a prayer can appear to be for personal glory and recognition.

Let us give God the glory and recognize Him as the source of every good and perfect gift that we receive. Prayer in the assembly is for the congregation to show their reliance upon God and in addition to give Him thanks and praise. Let us serve well by being good leaders in prayer.

Prayer Request List:

Fill out the prayer request list above during one of our assemblies. Below, write out a prayer as a letter that you are writing to God on behalf of the congregation. Once you have finished, read it to yourself and ask if this would be the way you would offer a public prayer.

Dear Heavenly Father,

We want to ask you...

We want to thank you for...

In Jesus name,

Amen