

Ask, Seek, Knock

When my husband Bing travels on business, I want him to call me every night. When I go away for a few days to a retreat or on vacation with my sisters, he expects to hear from me as well. These are not phone calls to report what we've been doing every minute of every day, to seek approval or keep an eye on each other. They are not an obligation of marriage, but acts of love. We want to hear from each other – not legalistically, but out of concern for each other. I liken this to the way God feels about us, and how we should look at prayer.

Prayer is simple communication with God. It's not something He legalistically expects from us, but out of love and concern for us, He wants us to talk to Him about our lives. He invites us into fellowship with Him. Romans 12:12 says that we are to be constant in prayer. Colossians 4:2 says we are to continue in prayer. Ephesians 6:18 says that we are to be praying at all times.

I really don't even want us to learn to think about prayer as just obedience. God wants us to pray for *us*, not for Him. We have received an invitation to pray from the King of Kings! Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need!" In his book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald Whitney says, "We can be prayer pessimists and see the expectation to pray merely as obligation, or we can be optimists, who view the command to pray as an opportunity to receive the mercy and grace of God."

Sometimes I pray for so long about something that I feel like I'm nagging God! Sometimes I pray about things that seem so trivial that I imagine Him rolling His eyes – which I know He doesn't do, but I would, if someone kept asking me for something I hadn't given them!

One time, I prayed for quite a while and saw no earthly hope so, I left the matter in the hands of the Lord. Bing and I had just started attending a new church. Every April they went to a married couples conference at Sandy Cove. The first year we were there, we heard about this conference from before Christmas until it happened. I wanted to go so badly, but Bing just wasn't all that interested. Well, I prayed and prayed and along about February I just gave up. It was expensive and he just wasn't changing his mind. So, I stopped praying. My last prayer was something like, "Lord, if You want us to go, you will need to change his mind and I will not ask again. If my desire is from You, You will make it happen."

The Sunday before the conference, a couple who was on the planning committee of the event came and called us out of our Sunday school class. Very meekly, they asked us if the church could give us a scholarship to attend. The lady quickly explained that it wasn't that they didn't think we had the money but, every year they had a scholarship and that year no one had asked for it. We were new to the church so it was ours if we wanted it. Bing said, "Sure, we'll go if we can find someone to take the kids." And the Lord sent us to that conference!

So, how do we know what to pray for? How do we know how long to pray about it? And we might wonder, is there anything that is really too trivial for us to pray about? Can we pray for too long or too short a time? What do you think?

I've talked several times about my testimony to you, so you may remember that it was answered prayer that God used to really get my attention. I had heard in a sermon that everyone was a sinner. I didn't believe it because I certainly had seen no evidence of that in my own life! :->) So I prayed, telling God that He would have to show me if that was true about me.

Show me is just what He did. The sins He showed me initially were my selfishness and pride! The revelation of my sin did not surprise me. What really surprised me was that God was listening! I understood that I was a sinner and realized that it was actually God showing me my sin – just as I had asked Him to! He was there. He was real. He heard my prayers. That will rock your world if you didn't know it!

Scripture talks about prayer or records a specific prayer almost 400 times. Turn with me to Luke 11:5, “And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his boldness he will rise and give him whatever he needs.”

There's an example being set for us regarding our prayers. Most homes of the day would have been one room with a raised platform where the whole family slept. If this neighbor is awakened, his whole family will be disturbed. This man needed something and all he did was go to his neighbor and let him know the need, disturbing his sleep and the sleep of his family. He didn't try to con him into giving him the bread. He

didn't try to find his own way to get into the house and take the bread. He just knocked on the door to get his attention and asked. No flowery language or 100 reasons why I don't have my own bread ready just, "Hey, I have company and no bread. Will you give me three loaves?"

How often do we do a lot more than express a need? I have found myself praying for someone's salvation and then asking God to do it my way. I can't tell you how many times I've asked God to bring a woman who loves the Lord to get my son back on track – like "I know" what will get my son back to the Lord! I know that God is the only One who knows what any person needs to bring them to saving faith – but I tell Him how anyway! He is so patient with us!

I know that we all often pray for things without thinking about God's will, but should we? Jesus said that He would answer prayers that are in His will. If we want a particular job or a particular position in ministry we should ask for it – but shouldn't we also add – if it's your will for me? As Christians don't we ultimately want what God has for us? Initially it may seem like we have a better idea, but in the long run we have to come to the place where we know that God's will is the place of blessing. We want God's blessing. It may just take a little examination of the situation to see that it isn't in God's will. We need to use our minds in prayer.

One other thing about the man borrowing bread is that he was completely shameless. He wasn't going to take no for an answer. He was persistent. The neighbor is probably offering one excuse after another. "It'll wake up the kids, It'll wake up the wife, the servants are already in bed, I'll catch cold if I come down there now." But his neighbor essentially says, "I'm not leaving until I get it." Verse 8 says the neighbor

doesn't give him the bread because they are friends. He gives him the bread because he's so bold about asking for it.

Are you and I this bold in our prayers? Is this how we approach God? He went to the neighbor because he knew him. There was a relationship already established, so he knew that he could expect kindness from him. He went boldly, asking for bread – a basic need, something he couldn't do without. If his problem wasn't too petty to bother the neighbor with at midnight, neither are our requests too petty for God to hear anytime.

Are you and I going to God in prayer because we know Him and we know we can trust Him or are we going only with our own list of wants without being sure if they are things He would want for us. We need to know God in order to approach Him boldly and we need to know about Him in order to pray in His will. How do we come to know Him? We know Him through His Word. We won't be able to pray effectively if we aren't also students of His Word.

If a disturbed neighbor will answer us when we're in need, how much more confidence should you and I have that God will? He is always patient and kind and ready to listen to our pleas for help, especially when it includes helping someone else. Remember, this man came to his neighbor because of the need of an unexpected guest. If God doesn't answer us immediately, these verses should be an encouragement for us to keep praying!

In Luke 11:9, look at the advice Jesus adds at the end of this story:

“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.”

It's important to remember that these verses are the continuation of Jesus teaching the disciples about how to pray, using the Lord's prayer. In the verses above He assures us that these requests are in the spirit of hallowing God's name and asking that His kingdom come and be established. These are requests in the will of God.

God is not some sort of spiritual sugar daddy who will respond to our every request for earthly goods, as if He were a God who cares more about our comfort than our character. Nothing is farther from the truth. He is so much more concerned about our character that many times he will not answer our prayers without a lot of asking, seeking and knocking. In fact, the words that are used here for asking, seeking, and knocking mean to keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking.

Luke 11 starting in verse 11, "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? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

It seems that this is an instruction of what we are to pray for. A good parent would not give his children something that would be harmful when they have asked for what is good. Every one needs the Holy Spirit to have all that we need for salvation and our own growth. God will not deny anyone who asks for the Holy Spirit any more than a father would give a scorpion to his child who asked for an egg.

So, as Jesus was teaching about prayer He instructs us to ask for the Holy Spirit and to keep on asking!

Sometimes as I'm preparing a lesson I wonder if God must shake His head at me. I can be so easily distracted by phone calls, emails, or the need to physically move that I

might come and go from my writing five times in a couple of hours. Every time I return, I ask God again to fill me the Holy Spirit so that I might get it right the first time. I don't think He took Him back when I got up, but I know that the Holy Spirit can teach me and help me. I want that reminder that He's there and will help me.

We have learned that we are to persistently and boldly ask for what we need from God and, from a spiritual and eternal perspective, expect that He will answer us. One of our prayers should be for our Father to give us the presence of the Holy Spirit.

A lie that many Christians believe is that we can make it without consistent time in the Word and prayer. If we don't get to know God and cultivate a relationship with Him, we'll never be the women He wants us to be. Without frequent prayer, we'll never know the abundant life He has for us.

There are many more verses in the Bible that talk about prayer. In Matthew 6 Jesus tells us not to pray like hypocrites for everyone to hear, Romans 12 tells us to be faithful in prayer, Ephesians 6 tells us to pray in the Spirit and to pray for the saints. Philippians says to pray about everything and then not to be anxious. Colossians 1 says to devote ourselves to prayer and James tells us to pray if we're in trouble and to pray if we're happy. James says ask for prayer if you're sick and pray for each other. 1 Peter says God hears our prayers. Hebrews tells us that Jesus is our intercessor. In Romans we learn that the Holy Spirit prays for us when we don't know how. Is it any wonder that we're to pray continually?! In his book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald Whitney says that prayer should be a regular thing. Life should interrupt our prayers – not that our prayers interrupt our lives!

We need to pray and I don't like to say that you NEED a formula for prayer but I know that a lot of people find it helpful to have some sort of outline for their prayers. So, the one I got started with is the ACTS acronym. The letters stand for adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. Start with Adoration – praise God for who He is and what He's done for you. Look at His attributes and praise Him for them. If you don't feel like you have the right words look for the Psalms that sing His praises. It's good to use the words of scripture in your prayers to God. It's one way of insuring that they're biblical prayers. Choose a Psalm that praises God. Look at Psalm 145 and as I read it think about it as a way of praising God. In fact, think about how you might pray it from the first person. (Also Psalm 103 and 146). Great Is the LORD

A Song of Praise. Of David.

1 I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. 2 Every day I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever. 3 Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable.

4 One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. 5 On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate. 6 They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds, and I will declare your greatness. 7 They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

8 The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

9 The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made. 10 All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD,

and all your saints shall bless you! 11 They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom and

tell of your power, 12 to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. [The LORD is faithful in all his words and kind in all his works.] 14 The LORD upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.15 The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.16 You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing.17 The LORD is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works. 18 The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.19 He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them. 20 The LORD preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. 21 My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever.

Use the words of the Psalmists to adore God in an act of worship. Agree with him as you go through the Psalm and read slowly enough that your mind can praise God for specific acts He's done that are described for you by the words, i.e., look at verse 4. As we're reading that, can we thank God for faithful parents who did pass down the work that God had done for them to us? It may also prompt a prayer that we would be faithful in passing down the faith to our own children. With verse 7 we could be thinking about the goodness, the abundance with which God has blessed us and praise Him as we're reading the words. There are many places to look for praises to God. Turn to 1 Chronicles 29:10 and listen to David's prayer and hear Him praise God:

Then the people rejoiced because they had given willingly, for with a whole heart they had offered freely to the LORD. David the king also rejoiced greatly. (This is a prayer we

can use when we are thankful and grateful for some joy that God has brought us.)

Therefore David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly. And David said:

"Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.

"But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly?

For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding. O LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own. I know, my God, that you test the heart and have pleasure in uprightness. In the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you. O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you. (1Ch 29:9-18)

. This is a sidelight for a minute. You can do this with things besides praising the Lord. Having a bad day – look at Psalm 28. Need forgiveness, how about Psalm 51:1-9? Do you feel like God doesn't hear your prayers and people have forgotten you? Look at Psalm 88.

I need to move on. If you want more, go to your concordance – there’s one on-line at Biblegateway.com and put in “praise the Lord” or forgive, sin, love, confession, mercy, despair, pity, forgotten, and then go pray through the verses that come up.

After adoration, have a time of confession – yes, everyday! 1 John 1:9 says that “if we confess our sins God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

We need to be specific in our confession. “Please forgive me for all my sin” hardly tells God that we’re aware that we are sinners. When we confess and God cleanses us, we will see a change in our attitudes and behavior, but only if we have specifically acknowledged and confessed sin. Confession makes us aware of the areas where we need to change. Have we engaged in gossip? Has our pride caused us to lash out verbally at someone who didn’t deserve those words? Are we bitter or critical? Have we lusted after someone who was not our spouse?

If you find that you can’t identify any sins, use the time to ask God to reveal your sin to you so that you can confess it and remove any obstacles between you and Him. He answers that prayer every time!

Follow this with a time of Thanksgiving. Thank God for the seemingly smallest of blessings, especially if your circumstance don’t seem to be worthy of all that much thanksgiving. Don’t forget to thank Him for the time you have to spend with Him. The more you do it, the more you’ll realize how life sustaining it is. It’s a privilege to be able to pray to God and KNOW that He will hear you because of your relationship with Him. Thank Him for your daily bread. If nothing else, thank Him for listening, hearing, saving you, and answering your prayers even if you may not like the answer.

Last, is a time of supplication. These are our own requests for ourselves and those we are going to intercede for. Again, be specific. God bless my family is hard to look for an answer to. In God's common grace, we all receive some kind of blessings every day! (Sun, rain, work, etc.)

I think it was John Piper who said that you should pray as if you were a stream heading toward a river. It will widen as it gets closer to the river. You start narrowly – pray for yourself, your needs and your relationship with the Lord. Then pray for your spouse and family, your Pastors and church family. Do you have specific causes that God has placed on your heart, revival, abortion, human trafficking, prayer in the schools, etc? Then for the ministries of the church, your neighbors and community, city, state, national, and world leaders. Be as specific as you can. Don't forget to pray for your enemies – that's a command. We need to be reminded that we have it great in this country and pray for persecuted Christians around the World – and the persecutors!

I keep a notebook for prayer. If someone asks me to pray for them, I do one of two things. Either I write it down in my book so I will remember for my devotional time or I say to them, "Can we do that right now?" I don't want to have to confess later that I promised to pray and didn't. Praying right then and there is often the most appropriate thing to do.

Keep another list if you have missionaries you've agreed to pray for, or prayer requests from your church, your family or your friends who may be ill or in need. If you keep a notebook, you can have a daily prayer list and a weekly prayer list. Even a monthly prayer list. (Vivian and David neighbors prayed for them weekly and last! Now in Morocco among Muslim population forming relationships and sharing the gospel.)

The last page of my prayer book is those for whom I'm praying for salvation. Family members, friends, neighbors, or co-workers. I ask God to use me as He will in that and try really hard not to tell Him how to save someone.

So, what does it mean to pray in Jesus name? John 14:13 says, "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. John 16:23 In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name."

First, we can only pray in His name if His name is in us! It is because we have received salvation and the presence of the Holy Spirit that we are able to pray in His name. If His blood has been the atonement of our sin, then we can pray in His name. His character has unlimited credit in heaven, He is the Son of God, His name is significant to God. We need to know and desire the will of God and pray for His purposes.

Do you realize that God is not obligated to answer our prayers if we are in sin? Our sin can actually cause God not to hear our prayers. Listen to Isaiah 59:1-2, Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. This is one reason we need to search our hearts and confess our sin everyday! We want God to hear our prayers, don't we?

Now, some of you may not like the formal ACTS, adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication suggestion. You may want to pray by just taking time with the Lord and letting the Holy Spirit lead you. You may certainly do it that way. There are no real rules. When I do that, I find myself asleep or my mind wandering in a few minutes. I need to keep my mind on what I'm doing. I ask the Lord to remind me of the things I forget to pray for. I try to keep my mind on HIM and His ability to answer all

my prayers. After all, we want all the answers to be for His glory and not necessarily our comfort. In the book “The Fight” by John White, he made a great point about this wandering off during prayer. We’re women so we’re used to multi-tasking. We pray for someone’s salvation or spiritual growth and we think, “O, they’re coming for dinner on Sunday. I wonder what I should make?” This leads into thinking about what’s in the freezer. That leads to thinking that we haven’t cleaned it out in awhile. That leads to thinking about the mouse droppings we saw the last time we got behind the freezer. That leads to thinking about the pest control guy. That leads to thinking about his wife who works at the grocery store, who was so rude to me. Suddenly we kind of wake up and realize that we should pray for her and say “O, I am praying!” Then we beat ourselves up for a minute or two rather than returning to prayer. John White says the instant that you realize you’ve wandered off, praise God for bringing you back and get on with your prayer. Interestingly – and I agree with this – he says that we make it all about us when we beat ourselves up. It’s God who brings us back to His attention, so we should focus on Him and keep praying!

There are no “rules” listed in the Bible for how to pray. We’re told to pray without ceasing, to give thanks always, to ask, seek, and knock, to offer sacrifices of praise to the Lord, and rejoice always. But God doesn’t offer specific words or phrases – He just wants us to talk to Him about everything!

If you want some examples of prayer go to the Bible. There are some great prayers recorded for us. Let’s look at Hezekiah’s prayer from 1 Kings 19. I’ll read from verse 14. Hezekiah is in a terrible position before Sennacherib, King of Assyria.

14 Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it; and Hezekiah went up to the house of the LORD and spread it before the LORD. 15 And Hezekiah prayed before the LORD and said: "O LORD, the God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. (He's praising God for who He is and recognizing God's sovereign rule over himself but also over Sennacherib) 16 Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; and hear the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. 17 Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands 18 and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. (Lord, we've gotten rid of our idols – we've put you back in place as God). Therefore they were destroyed. 19 So now, O LORD our God, save us, please, from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O LORD, are God alone." (Save us for Your glory Lord!)

He praises God, makes his case for what he has done and against what Sennacherib had done and then petitions God to save them and all for God's glory!

There were also David's, Solomon's, Daniel's, and Hannah's prayers, plus others. Use them as examples to guide your prayers, You can always use the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 as your outline for prayer.

Ladies, over and over again – at least five times in the book of John -- Jesus promises to give us what we ask for in prayer. Listen to these verses: **John 16:23** 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. **John 16:24** Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full. And **John 16:26–27** In

that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.

Because we have an advocate in Christ, we have an open line to God the Father. He not only loves Jesus – His own Son – He loves all who love Him. He promises the one who will go to the Father in the name of the Son that their joy will be full! We don't just ask, but we will receive.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16 we're told to rejoice always. You may want to look at this and mark it in your own Bibles because verse 17 says to pray without ceasing and give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you! Look at the punctuation – one sentence. It is one thought, they all go together. If we want to be rejoicing in the Lord you and I need to be praying and offering thanksgiving all the time. Prayer is nothing more than regular communication – conversation – with God the Father through and in the Name of God the Son, with the power and the words driven along by God the Holy Spirit!

Do we *really* believe that He will answer our prayers? When we believe that He will answer, we are far more motivated to pray. You may want to keep a journal of your prayers.

I went to look for a book on a shelf in late January. I saw one of my older prayer journals there from January 2009 and opened it to the same date last year. I saw there – and I really had no idea that I had been praying about this for so long – but I saw a prayer for God to sustain my husband's company – to bring work. I was definitely rejoicing! He had sustained that company for a whole year (as of this writing it is 22 months!). What a

gift and you can bet I was glorifying God for days (I'm still doing it) that I had been able to see His faithfulness to us.

If we ask God the Father for anything in the name of Jesus and in the will of God, we're promised that we will receive it! That's huge! Think of the work you'd like to do for God – have you asked Him to open the doors to that ministry? Think of the people you'd like to see saved before you die – have you asked God to save them, persistently asked Him to save them? What about your marriage, your parenting skills, your workplace problems or relationships? Is there some sin in your life that you can't seem to shake? Do you bring these things before God regularly in prayer believing that HE can change hearts and arrange circumstances for your good?

Remember that God does not need us to pray – He offers prayer for our good. We should not pray out of a sense of obligation but as a gracious response to God's invitation to come with confidence to the throne of grace.