

A VISUAL
GUIDE TO THE
SPIRITUAL
PRACTICE MOST
OF US GET
WRONG

WHAT IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS

ABOUT PRAYER?

SKYE JETHANI

MOODY PUBLISHERS
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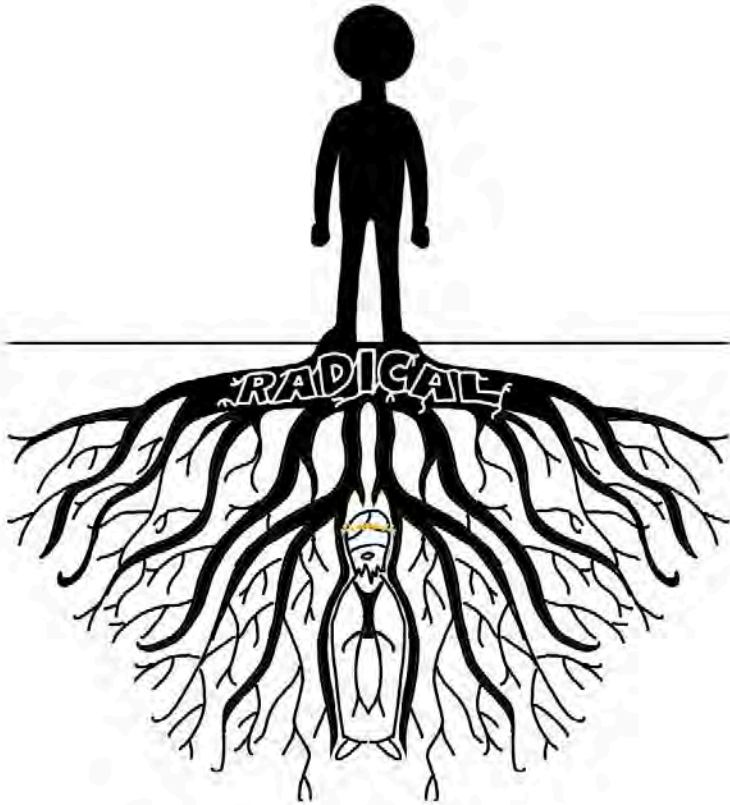
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Introduction

PRAYER (IN PARENTHESES)

“I WANT TO LIVE A RADICAL life for God.” That’s how one college student responded when I asked why he was no longer planning to attend medical school. He was convinced that saving lives as a cardiologist was too mundane a calling for a Christian. Instead, like so many other young adults, he believed social activism was a higher calling.

“I want to go overseas and impact lives,” he said.

“How will you do that?” I ask.

“I don’t know yet,” he confessed. “Maybe I’ll start a nonprofit, or a church, or something to transform a city.” His combination of enthusiasm and naivete is why I enjoy students so much. “But whatever I do, it has to be something radical!”

It became evident through our conversation that the young man wasn’t just ambitious to improve the world, but to prove his significance. As we talked, the word radical was used repeatedly. He employed it as the antonym for *ordinary*. In fact, he not only wanted to transcend an “ordinary life,” he also carried a disdain for Christians who did not.

“Do you think Jesus lived a radical life?” I asked.

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“Of course,” he laughed at my question. “Jesus changed the world.”

“Yes, but His ministry was only about three years. He spent most of His life—*decades*—as an obscure carpenter. Was that radical?” The young man looked confused. “If Jesus fails the definition of a radical life you’re applying to yourself,” I said, “could your definition be wrong?”

I’ve had some variation of this conversation with dozens of young adults in recent years. My goal is never to extinguish their sense of mission or hunger for justice, but instead to redirect where they find their value away from an external impact upon the world and toward an internal communion with God.

They’ve been told by the culture—both outside and inside the church—that a radical life is determined by visible influence. Our impact must be obvious, measurable, and shareable on social media. This definition, however, is betrayed by the word’s origin. *Radical* comes from the Latin *radicalis* meaning “root.” It speaks of the *invisible* part of the plant that gives it strength and life. The truly radical Christian is not the one who’s life *appears* extraordinary; but the one who’s *unseen* communion with God is extraordinary. Living radically is about prayer, not prominence.

Through most of church history this has been understood. A very long tradition affirms the centrality of prayer, going back to the New Testament. It’s notable that the apostles did not ask Jesus about the proper way to heal the sick, organize a church, or teach the Scriptures. But they did ask Him how to pray (Luke 11:1). Although prayer was a common practice in their Jewish

culture, they recognized something different about the way Jesus prayed.

Unlike other rabbis who employed prayer to control God or to display their piety, Jesus prayed to *relate* to His Father. For Him prayer was intimate, unending, and the *root* from which His life found strength and power. That explains why He spoke so frequently to His followers about the importance and nature of prayer, and why His closest disciples desired to emulate His example. They recognized that apart from a life rooted in communion with God, nothing else Jesus commanded was possible.

This is also what makes our neglect of prayer so bewildering. In many Christian communities, language about having a “personal relationship with God” is ubiquitous, but the practice of prayer—which is how we actually *have* a personal relationship with God—is largely absent. And while Jesus’ disciples wanted to learn how to pray above all else, our priorities are precisely the opposite. A nationwide survey asked pastors to identify their highest ministry priorities. Among the top results were evangelism and outreach (46%) and preaching (35%). Prayer ranked dead last (3%).¹

This data fits my own experience, and maybe yours as well. As a teenager and young adult involved in a number of ministries, I was taught how to read and study the Bible. I was taught how to share my faith and debate nonbelievers. I was taught how to organize programs and lead ministry events. I was even taught how to manage my money and date girls. But no one taught me how to pray. Simply put, popular forms of

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Christianity are obsessed with teaching us how to live *for* God, but they rarely equip us to actually live *with* Him.

Rather than being the irreplaceable root from which every aspect of the Christian life is nourished and grows, prayer is an optional accessory in many places. It functions parenthetically. We attach prayer to the beginning and end of our event or meeting to provide an air of spirituality. In grammar, parentheses are used to insert an afterthought into a sentence or paragraph that is already complete without it. Anything within the parentheses is superfluous; nonessential.

Likewise many of us have been formed into a faith that puts prayer in parentheses. It's an afterthought to a meeting, an addition to a worship service, or a custom before a meal. But in each case we suspect the meeting, service, or meal would be just fine without it. The peripheral place of prayer in the life of the church may explain why it remains peripheral in the life of so many Christians.

But the soul, like nature, abhors a vacuum. If prayer does not function as the root of our Christian life, something else will take its place. Some try to replace prayer with knowledge. They believe a head full of theology, doctrine, or Scripture is a suitable substitute. They mistake mere intellect for communion with the indwelling Holy Spirit. And yet we all know some of the meanest religious people are those with the most knowledge. As the Apostle Paul warned, "If I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2).

Others, like the young man who wanted to move overseas and change the world, root their faith in activism. They believe

meaning and significance will be found in their achievements. Very often their goals are admirable, and the work they hope to accomplish is aligned with Christ's kingdom, but when it takes the place of communion with Christ Himself—that's when we're in danger. Again Paul warns the activist: "If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:3).

Jesus was a brilliant teacher. He amazed the crowds with His knowledge and impressed the religious leaders with His wisdom. And Jesus was the activist par excellence who transformed lives and ignited a movement that changed history. Knowledge and activism are very good things—but neither was the root of Jesus' life and neither should be the root of ours. Instead, we are called to find our truest self, our deepest calling, and unconditional love as we abide in communion with God through prayer.

To do that we need to recalibrate our mundane understanding of prayer to align again with Jesus' truly radical vision. That means breaking it out of the parentheses popular Christianity has put it in so that it cannot only become the central practice that roots our faith, but also the practice which strengthens and nourishes all of the others. Let's begin . . .

PART 1

WHAT PRAYER IS (AND ISN'T)

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 impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. 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.

“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!”

LUKE 11:5-13

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.

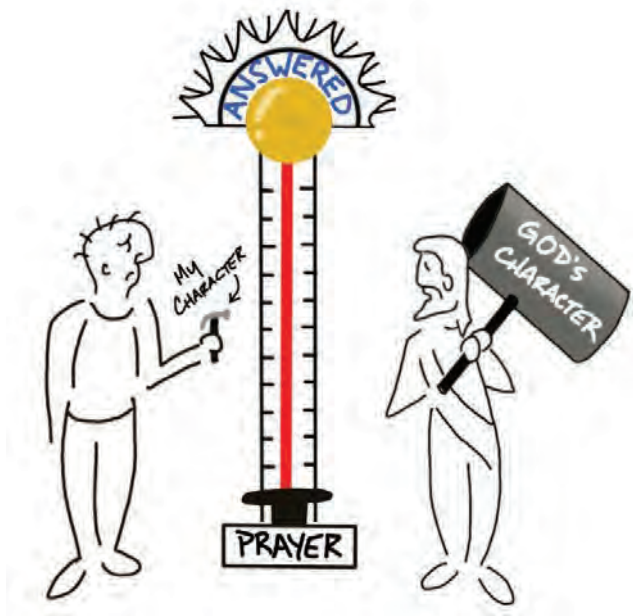
We often misread these stories as containing some hidden formula about prayer; a tactic for approaching God in order to receive one’s request. Some have even understood these stories to mean we must nag God with our prayers in order to motivate Him to act on our behalf.

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.”²



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 challenged 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

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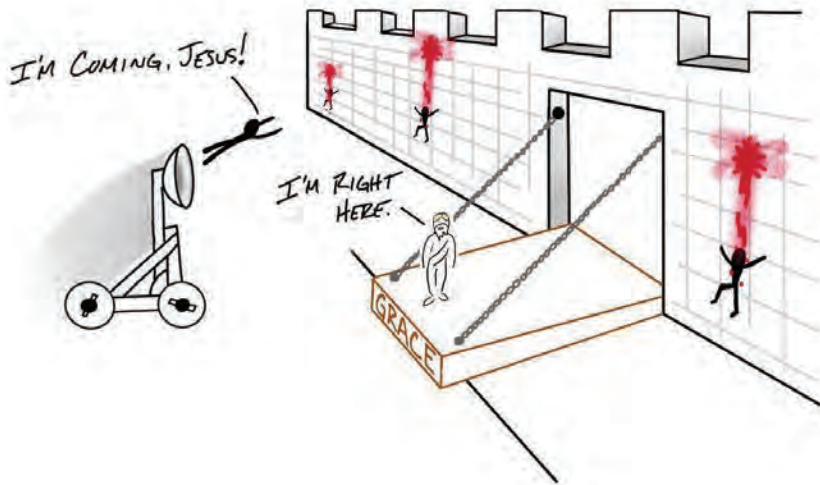
relationship with God, and instead emphasizes God’s desire to maintain His own honor.

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, 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.”³ 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 self-

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ish, 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.”⁴



READ MORE Matthew 6:5–8, Ecclesiastes 5:1–3