

# What Jesus Said About Prayer

by Dr. J. Vernon McGee



Published and distributed by  
***Thru the Bible Radio Network***  
P.O. Box 7100  
Pasadena, California 91109-7100  
(800) 65-BIBLE  
[www.ttb.org](http://www.ttb.org)

All Scripture references are from the *New King James Bible*.  
(This message is also included in the hardback book,  
*J. Vernon McGee On Prayer*, copyright 2002 by Thru the Bible Radio Network.)

Following Jesus in the days of His flesh, we are struck by the prominence He gave to prayer. He gave a great reservoir of truth in this field. He not only talked about it, but, as you read the Gospels carefully, you will find that He Himself spent a great deal of time during His very busy ministry of three years *in prayer*.

Prayer today is the most neglected area in the life of the believer and in the life of the church. It is the weakest member of the body of truth. In fact, prayer deficiency has weakened every vital organ in the life of the believer and in the church today. It was the late A. C. Gaebelien who asserted that being alone with God and communing with Him is the strength of the Christian's life. There is a steady erosion that has worn away this strong foundation in the lives of believers. Andrew Murray, a great man of prayer, said that prayer is an index of the spiritual life. Most of our trouble and our problems can be traced back to the poverty of our prayer life. The neglect of prayer has affected all areas of the Christian's personal life and the total life of the church.

In the Gospel of Luke, our Lord uses a few brush strokes to produce four parable portraits of prayer. They are simply snapshots that can be slipped into your wallet—which makes them very practical. Putting these snapshots together gives us a composite picture of prayer.

Our Lord concluded chapter seventeen of the Gospel of Luke with a discourse on the last days and the fact that He would be coming again. He likened the last days to the days of Noah—that they would be difficult days, days that would not be conducive to faith. Now He talks to His disciples about a life of faith in days that are devoid of faith.

***Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart.*** (Luke 18:1)

We are living in days, as He indicated, when men's hearts are failing them for fear. That is the reason why prayer is so pertinent for this hour.

The King James Version reads, "He spake a parable unto them to this end," that is, for this *purpose*: that men should always pray and not lose heart. He opens two alternatives to anyone who is living in difficult days. You and I must choose to do one of the two. Men in difficult days will either lose heart or they will pray; either there will be days of fear or days of faith. During World War II, when the bombing on the city of London was so intense, a sign appeared in front of one of the churches in London that read: "If your knees knock together, kneel on them!" That is practically a restatement of what our Lord has said, "Men always ought to pray and not lose heart."

It is the same thought that Paul put a little differently: "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This does not mean you are to go to an all-day or all-night prayer meeting. Prayer is more an *attitude* of life than an *action* of the lips. Remember that Paul said to the Romans, "...the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Romans 8:26). That is, they cannot be put into our *words*. Many times we do not have the words to pray, but we are praying nonetheless. Someone has put it in poetic language:

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,  
Uttered or unexpressed;  
The motion of a hidden fire  
That trembles in the breast.  
Prayer is the burden of a sigh,

The falling of a tear;  
The upward glancing of an eye,  
When none but God is near.<sup>1</sup>

It is the entire life behind the words spoken that makes prayer effective. There was a famous preacher years ago who had many very unusual expressions. One of them was this: “When a man prays for a corn crop, God expects him to say ‘Amen’ with a hoe.” You can’t just stay on your knees all the time and pray for a corn crop. That’s pious nonsense. But to pray for the corn crop, then go to work, is the thing our Lord is talking about in days when men’s hearts are failing them.

### **Parable of the Unjust Judge**

What we have in this first parable is a relevant paragraph on prayer for the present hour. It is my firm conviction that our Lord never used a fictitious story when giving a parable. When Jesus told this story about the unjust judge and the widow, it probably was well known to the hearers of that day. They knew exactly the situation He was talking about. The story begins like this:

*...There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, “Get justice for me from my adversary.”* (Luke 18:2, 3)

We’re told that this judge was a godless fellow. He was an unscrupulous, scheming, cold, and calculating politician. Everything he did had to minister to his own advancement and satisfy his own ambition. He did not fear God. God had no place in this man’s thinking. And since he did not fear God, he had no regard for man. He had no respect for this widow who was being treated unjustly and forced out of her little home. So the widow went to this prominent judge for help. She asked his secretary if she might talk to the judge, but the secretary told her, “He’s very busy. If you will just tell me the nature of your complaint....”

So the widow told her, “I’m just a poor widow. I live out here at the edge of town, and I’m about to lose my place. It is unfair and unjust, and I want to appeal to the judge.”

The secretary went into the judge’s office and said, “There is a widow out there who wants to see you.”

“Well,” he said, “I can get rid of her in three seconds. I’m a politician, I know how to handle her. Let her come in.” So she came in, he listened to her for three minutes, and then he said, “I’m sorry, but that’s out of my realm. I’d *love* to do something for you, but I am unable to do anything. Good-day.” The next day when he came into the office, there was the widow. He hurried into his office, called his secretary in and asked, “What’s that widow doing back?”

“She says she wants to see you.”

“You go back and tell her I am busy until lunchtime.”

“I’ve already told her that. But she brought her lunch. She says she will stay here as long as necessary.”

The widow stayed all that day and didn’t get to see him. He thought he had gotten rid of her. But the next morning when he came in, there she was! She did that for several days, and fi-

---

<sup>1</sup> Author unknown.

nally he said, "I'll have to do something about this. I can't go on like this."

Notice that our Lord records what the judge said to himself:

***...But afterward he said within himself, "Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me."*** (Luke 18:4, 5)

The word "weary" is a very poor translation. I only wish it were translated literally. What he said was this: "I must see her lest she give me a black eye!" I don't know if he meant a literal black eye—we are not told that the widow had threatened him—but the very fact that a widow is sitting in the judge's office every day doesn't look good. You see, he was thinking of himself. He had gotten into office by saying, "I'm thinking of the poor people," but he wasn't—he was thinking of himself. "And lest she give me a black eye, I'd better hear her."

So he told his secretary to let the widow in. This time he said to the widow, "I'll give you legal protection." He called up his man in her area and told him to take care of the matter. I imagine the man out there, who was also a politician, said, "But she has no vote! She has no influence!"

"I know it," the judge says.

"Then why are you doing it?"

*"I have been coming into my office every day for a week, and she's sat here every day!*

She is giving me a black eye. I've got to help her."

Parables were stories given by our Lord to illustrate truths. The word *parable* comes from two Greek words. *Para* means "beside," and *ballo* is the verb meaning "to throw"—(we get our word *ball* from it). A parable means something that is thrown beside something else to tell you something about it. For instance, a yard stick placed beside a table is a parable to the table—it tells you how high it is. A parable is a story our Lord told to illustrate divine truth. There are two ways He can do this: one is by comparison, but the other is by *contrast*.

This parable which our Lord gives on prayer is a very simple story, yet it has been greatly misunderstood. I have heard many Bible teachers say that this parable teaches the value of importunate prayer. Although I don't like to disagree with men who are greater than I, that isn't so. This is not a parable on the persistency of prayer—as though somehow God will hear if you hold on long enough. This is a parable by *contrast*, not by comparison.

Listen to what our Lord had to say about this parable:

***...Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?*** (Luke 18:6, 7)

He is saying, "When you come to God in prayer, do you think that God is an *unjust judge*? When you come to Him in prayer, do you think He is a cheap politician? Do you think God is doing things just for political reasons?" My friend, if you think this, you are wrong. God is not an unjust judge.

Why are God's people today so discouraged in their prayer life? If this unjust judge would hear a poor widow because she kept coming continually, then why do you get discouraged going to God who is *not* an unjust judge but who actually *wants* to hear and answer prayer? Don't you know, my friend, He is not an unjust judge? We act as if we have to hold on to Him or

He will not hear us at all. We don't have to hang on to His coattail and beg and plead with Him. God *wants* to act in our behalf! If we would come into His presence with an attitude of knowing that He *wants* to hear, it would transform our prayer lives.

### Parable of the Persistent Friend

*And He said to them, "Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within and say, 'Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you'? I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs."* (Luke 11:5-8)

Let's bring this parable up to date. Imagine it's midnight and you are standing on your neighbor's front step, ringing the doorbell. He calls out, "Who's there?"

"It's me—your neighbor next door."

"What do you want?"

"I'm in grave difficulty. Remember I told you my aunt from Iowa and my uncle from Texas were coming out to visit? I didn't know they were going to arrive here at the same time, but they both drove in tonight! Now, I was going down to the market tomorrow to lay in a supply of food to feed these folk because my aunt from Iowa and my uncle from Texas are accustomed to *eating!* I really wanted to feed them well. But I don't have anything. Would you mind getting up and letting me have a loaf of bread and maybe a little butter? If you've got a little bacon or ham there, would you let me have it?"

"Look, I've already gone to bed! My children are in bed, and I don't want to disturb my household. So go on back and put your aunt from Iowa and your uncle from Texas to *bed*, and we'll feed them in the morning." Then your neighbor turns over in his bed and pulls the covers up over his head. But you put your finger down on the doorbell, and you begin to kick at the door. By that time the baby is crying. He says, "Look, *go home!* Let us alone!"

"But I've got to feed my aunt from Iowa and my uncle from Texas. I wouldn't *dare* go back over there without some food for those hungry folks who have just come in from a long drive!"

Finally your neighbor says to his wife, "Well, it sounds like our neighbor is going to kick the door down unless I do something." So he gets out of bed, half awake and half asleep, goes to the refrigerator, digs out what he's got, brings it to the door, and hands it to you.

Perhaps you are saying, "I've been knocking at the door of heaven, but there has been no answer. God has not come to the door." My friend, do you think that God is asleep when you pray? He is not. "Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:4). Do you believe that He does not want to answer your prayers? God *does* want to answer your prayers and He will. That is what this parable is saying. It is another parable by contrast and not by comparison. You do not have to storm the gates of heaven or knock down the door of heaven in order to attract God's attention. God is not reluctant to hear and answer you. He tells us in Isaiah 65:24, "...before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear." He knows what is in your heart before you ever put it into words.

Perhaps you are saying, “But He said no.” Well, then, that’s His answer. Our problem is that we do not like to take no for an answer. God *always* hears and answers the prayers of His own, but when He says no it is because we are not praying for that which is best for us. You have been answered. The difficulty was that you asked for ice cream, and when He came to the door He gave you cornbread. It wasn’t what you wanted, but cornbread was the best thing for you.

When you go to the door of heaven and knock—and He says to come and knock—you are not coming as a neighbor from next door. You are a child who has come to your Father. We come to God as a *child* comes to a father. My friend, He is hearing only the prayers of His children. Are you a child of God? You can attend church, you can be religious, and not be His child. How do you become His child?

***But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who [do no more nor less than simply] believe in His name.*** (John 1:12)

When you have received Him as your own personal Savior, then you become His child. And when you pray to Him you are knocking at your *Father’s* door. That changes prayer. You are not going to a God who is reluctant. You are going to a Father who wants to answer, and *will* answer. You do not have to storm the gate of heaven to get God to answer your prayer. God has not gone to bed. The door is wide open, and He says, “Knock, seek, and ask.” Take everything to God in prayer, and He will give you His very best.

But I say this very carefully: When we come into His presence we need to realize it is the Father’s will that must prevail. When we come we must recognize that God is holy, that we are sinners, and that the most important thing in our prayers is not that we get something but that God’s will might prevail. If you are His child and you desire the Father’s will, He graciously opens the door and gives you your request.

### **Parable of Fatherhood**

We come now to the picture of a son:

***If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?*** (Luke 11:11, 12)

Our Lord looked around at the crowd that day—there were many fathers there—and He said, “You, you’re a father. If your boy came to you and asked for bread, would you give him a stone?” Of course no father would do that! So where did we get the idea that we are better than God? If earthly fathers want to be good to their children, don’t you know that the One who put a parent’s heart in us has Himself a father’s heart? When you go to Him, you can expect Him to do the very *best* thing for you.

Before the Day of Pentecost, our Lord stated it this way:

***If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!*** (Luke 11:13)

Our Lord is saying here that the highest gift that any person can receive is the Holy Spirit. And in order for the Holy Spirit to be able to come and indwell every believer, God had to give His own Son to die for us. The Lord Jesus died, not only for our sins, but He died because you and I have an awful sin nature. Writing to the Corinthians—and they were carnal folk—Paul said:

***Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? (1 Corinthians 6:19)***

Everyone who trusts Christ—that is, becomes a child of God—is *indwelt* by the Spirit of God today. He dwells *within* us! This wonderful transaction began in believers on the Day of Pentecost.

God today has already done for you the best that He possibly can do. To the Romans Paul said again:

***He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? (Romans 8:32)***

He will give us *all* things that are needful in our Christian life. He didn't say He would give you everything you *wanted*, but everything that you *needed*. Listen, my friend, if God gave His Son to die for you—and now has given you the highest gift, the Holy Spirit, to indwell you—do you think He will withhold from you *any* good thing? No, sir! He has already done the best.

Dwight L. Moody, in his inimitable way, used to illustrate this verse something like this: Suppose I went to Tiffany's in New York, and Mr. Tiffany called me to the back of the store, opened the safe where he kept his most valuable jewels, brought out the biggest diamond he had, laid it on the showcase and said, "It's yours!" I would say, "It's mine? You mean I don't have to pay you for it?" And he would say, "I'm giving it to you." Then Mr. Moody would close his illustration by asking, "Do you think if he gave me that diamond that I would hesitate to ask him for a little piece of brown wrapping paper to take it home in?"

Don't you know that if God has given His Son to die for you, and if He indwells you by the Holy Spirit, He will not withhold from you any good thing? Do you believe that? Not many Christians believe that. They say, "Well, He's sort of holding out on me." My friend, if you are His child, He will do for you the very best He can. And the best He can do is the *best!*

### **Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector**

We now look at our final picture. Oh, what trenchant and biting satire our Lord uses here! But He didn't do it to hurt them; He did it to help them.

***Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." (Luke 18:9, 10)***

You could not get any two as far apart as these two men were. The tax collector was at the bottom of the religious ladder; the Pharisee was at the top. Tax collectors were grouped right down there with the sinners; the Pharisees were considered to be the most acceptable ones to God.

This Pharisee went into the temple to pray and make his sacrifice. As he stood and prayed, his priest was yonder in the Holy Place putting incense on the altar. In other words, this old Pharisee had it made. But listen to how he prayed:

***The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, “God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.” (Luke 18:11)***

Isn't that an awful way to begin a prayer? Yet that is the way many of us do it. You say, “I don't do *that*.” Yes, you do! Oh, we don't say it exactly that way—we've learned to say it better than that. But we have our own way of putting it: “Lord, I thank You I can give You my time and my service.” How I hear that! What a compliment that is for the Lord! Friend, we don't get anywhere in prayer when we pray like that. God doesn't need our service.

The Pharisee said, “I thank You that I am not like other men,” and then he began to enumerate what he *wasn't*. “I'm not an extortioner”—evidently there was somebody around who was an extortioner. “I am not unjust. I am not an adulterer.” Then he spied that tax collector way outside the temple, and he said, “And, believe me, Lord, I'm not like that tax collector! I'm not like that sinner out there.” Then he began to tell the Lord what he *did* do:

***I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.* (Luke 18:12)**

My, isn't he a wonderful fellow! Wouldn't you love to have him in your church?

Our Lord said he “prayed thus *with himself*.” In other words, he was performing a Hamlet soliloquy. Hamlet went off talking to himself and saying, “To be, or not to be, that is the question.”<sup>2</sup> (And Hamlet is “off,” by the way—he is a mental case.) Well, this old Pharisee was in the temple talking to himself—he thought he was talking to God, but his prayer never got out of the rafters. All he did was give himself a pep-talk. He patted himself on the back and went out proud as a peacock. But God never heard that prayer.

Then there was the tax collector. Oh, he was a rascal! He was a sinner; he was as low as they come. When he became a tax gatherer, he denied his nation. When he denied his nation, as a Jew, he denied his religion. He turned his back on God. He took a one-way street, never intending to come back to God. Why did he do it? It was lucrative. He said, “There's money down this way.” He became rich as a tax collector, but it did not satisfy his heart. We know from the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 that a tax collector's heart was *empty*.

***And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” (Luke 18:13)***

This poor man in his misery and desperation, knowing that he had no access to the mercy seat in the temple, cried out to God. “God, be merciful to me a sinner” does not adequately express it. Let me give it to you in the language that he used: “O God, I'm a poor tax collector. I have no access to that mercy seat yonder in the temple. Oh, if You could only make a mercy seat for *me*! I want to come.”

---

<sup>2</sup> *Hamlet*, act 3, sc. 1, line 55

***I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*** (Luke 18:14)

Our Lord said *that* man was heard. Do you know why he was heard? Because Jesus Christ right there and then was on His way to the cross to make a mercy seat for him. John writes:

***And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.*** (1 John 2:2)

“Propitiation” means *mercy seat*. Christ is the mercy seat for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the *whole world*.

The tax collector’s prayer has been answered. Actually, today you don’t have to ask God to be merciful. He *is* merciful. Many people say, “We have to beg Him to be merciful.” My friend, what else do you want Him to do? He already gave His Son to die for you. He says to the very worst sinner, “*You* can come. There is a mercy seat for you.” I have to admit to you that I had to come to that mercy seat. And if you want to be God’s child, you’ll have to come to that mercy seat where He died on the cross for your sins and my sins. The penalty has been paid. The holy God is able to hold His arms outstretched. You don’t have to beg Him, you don’t have to promise Him anything, because He knows your weakness. You do not have to join something. You do not even have to *be* somebody. You can be like a poor tax collector. You can come and trust Him, and He will save you. God is merciful.