

PRAY HONESTLY

MATTHEW 6:5–13

Honesty is fundamental for any healthy relationship, and our relationship with God is no exception. We might not think we have to be particularly up front and honest with God in our prayers, because God already knows all the things we have thought and done, right? We may wonder why we need to talk to God about these things. One explanation for why we pray rests on a double understanding of openness: openness about ourselves and openness toward God's will.

When we are honest about ourselves in prayer, we bring what we wish to change about our lives out in the open. This allows us to acknowledge any shame, fear, or hesitation we have about that change, allowing God to clear away these barriers and help us move forward. When we honestly listen for God's response to our prayer, we open ourselves up to what the Spirit is calling us to do and how she is acting in our lives.

One of the most honest kinds of prayers we can pray are prayers of confession, when we admit to how we have failed to live up to God's desire for our lives and the world. While prayers of confession might seem like a guilt trip, the true point of confession is not to make us feel bad about ourselves. Confession allows us to acknowledge what we have done and what we have failed to do so that we can repent (turn around) and move forward in better ways.

Confession may also enable us to admit things that we did not realize or have not been willing to acknowledge. For instance, imagine learning that something you have done your whole life has contributed to harming others or destroying creation. For many, this painful realization can lead to denial to avoid feeling guilt or shame. Instead, in prayer we can bring before God our sorrow over the pain that action has caused.



In her widely read book, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, Brené Brown explores appropriate ways to be vulnerable with others. With people, appropriate vulnerability *does not* mean simply spewing out our entire life story at every opportunity. Brown insists that this is often a defense mechanism meant to *avoid* true intimacy and relationship. But our relationship with God is different. With God, it is entirely appropriate to lay out every single bit of our lives. The difference is that other human beings, who have their own needs and mistakes, cannot bear the weight of our vulnerability in the same way that God can.



In Matthew 6, Jesus provides a lesson in prayer, a bit of a roadmap for how to pray. It is one of the first prayers that many of us learn: the Lord's Prayer. It begins by addressing God as both a being with whom we have a personal relationship—saying “Our Father” (or other parental language)—and One who is sacred and holy—(“who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name”). We orient ourselves toward God's will and ask for the sustenance we need for our lives. We ask to be forgiven and for help as we forgive those who have harmed us. Frequently, we end with a doxology that proclaims God's glory. These elements of prayer Jesus taught are found in most all prayers: adoration of God, trust in God's will, requests for guidance and help, confession, and praise.

➤ What do these prayers or phrases communicate to God? To you?

➤ What prayers, or phrases from prayers, can you recite?

Give thanks to God, for God is good.
God's steadfast love endures forever.
Who hears us when we pray—
God's steadfast love endures forever.
Who invites us to draw close—
God's steadfast love endures forever.
Who welcomes us with open arms—
God's steadfast love endures forever.
Give thanks to the God of heaven and earth:
God's steadfast love endures forever.



FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

We are not left on our own to figure out how to pray. Jesus teaches us to pray in Scripture through the prayer that has now become known as “The Lord’s Prayer” or the “Our Father.” The most famous prayer throughout the Christian tradition, the Lord’s Prayer is a staple of many worship services and Sunday school classes.

VARIATIONS OF THE LORD’S PRAYER

The Gospels were originally written in ancient Greek, Jesus spoke Aramaic, and we’re reading the Bible in English. A lot of translation has happened throughout the millennia! We see the effect of this in different versions of the Lord’s Prayer. The most notable differences are the sins/trespases/debts debate and whether it is said in archaic (“thee/thou”) or modern styles (“you”). Most of the differences go back to balancing translation, understandability, and tradition.

The Lord’s Prayer is found in two of the four Gospels in the New Testament: Matthew 6:9–13 and Luke 11:2–4. In Matthew, it is found in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, which is a collection of teachings of Jesus found in Matthew 5–7. Matthew 6 begins with Jesus reminding people to practice their faith sincerely and not just for show: “Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:1). He proceeds to give instructions on spiritual practices. As he discusses each of these practices (almsgiving, prayer, and fasting), he focuses on not the *what* of the practice but the *how*. He does not say how much of our income

we should give but instructs us to give in secret so that we are truly giving as part of our faith rather than for earthly recognition. Similarly, in his instructions for fasting, Jesus tells us not to mope around and look miserable as we fast so everyone knows we are fasting, but to stay cheerful so that our reward will come from God alone.

In his instructions for prayer, Jesus continues to focus on the spirit with which we pray. He warns us not to pray for public approval but for God’s ears alone. Beyond this, Jesus notes that prayer is not about heaping on word after word but rather approaching God with gratitude, humility, and openness. God already knows what we need, Jesus says. In praying how Jesus teaches us, we pray for our own will to diminish, for God’s to thrive, and for us to be forgiven with the same spirit we forgive others.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

While memorizing the Lord's Prayer is a helpful way to imprint Christ's words on our hearts, we run the risk of rushing through the prayer without stopping to think about what the words actually mean. As you read through the Scripture, take time to flesh out what this prayer is encouraging us to bring to God. Respond to the prompts before moving on to the next line of Scripture.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name. //

➔ How can I better reflect God's holiness in this world?

Your kingdom come. Your
will be done, on earth as it is
in heaven. //

➔ What would it look like for God's will to be done on earth as in heaven?

➔ How can I contribute to that?

Give us this day our daily
bread. //

➔ What gifts and blessings am I grateful for?

➔ Do I have enough for today?

And forgive us our debts, as
we also have forgiven our
debtors. //

➔ Who do I need to forgive?

➔ What have I done that I must be forgiven for?

And do not bring us to the
time of trial, but rescue us
from the evil one. //

➔ Where do I face temptation?

➔ How can I change to stay on the right path?

THE CLOSING DOXOLOGY

Many of us are used to reciting a version of the Lord's Prayer that ends with "For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours forever," yet that line does not appear in the biblical text. This added line is a *doxology*, a concluding prayer lifting praise to God. Evidence of the use of this doxology reaches back to the early church, but it became standardized by King Henry VIII in the mid-1500s. Some traditions include the doxology, but others do not.

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Some prayers, like the Lord's Prayer, have been preserved throughout history and are still found in prayerbooks today. While it's easy to gloss over these prayers as historical artifacts, we can see the honesty in Christian prayers throughout history, learn what was on their hearts, and see if what guided them to God can guide us as well.

HAIL MARY

Hail Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou amongst women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death. Amen.



This prayer, particularly important in Catholic traditions, is based on two stories in Luke 1: the angel appearing to Mary to announce her role as the mother of Jesus Christ, and the visit Mary has with her cousin, Elizabeth, while they are both with child. The Hail Mary prayer acknowledges the blessedness of Mary and Jesus and asks for Mary to intercede with God on our behalf. Different denominations have different ideas about asking saints or other figures to pray on our behalf; Protestant denominations in particular often see this as a form of idolatry. For others, however, the practice is one way of connecting with the whole body of the church, past and present.

THE COLLECT FOR PURITY

Often used at the beginning of services in Anglican and Episcopalian traditions, this traditional prayer follows the form of prayer called a *collect*. A collect generally has five parts. It addresses God, acknowledges an attribute of God or something God has done, states a petition of God, describes the desired result, and concludes with a doxology. This one evokes Psalm 51's petition to "create in me a clean heart, O God," as we try to live according to God's example.

Almighty God,
to you all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from you no secrets are hid:

Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy Name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.¹

THE PEACE PRAYER OF ST. FRANCIS

This classic prayer inspires us to counteract the evil and hurt so present in our world by seeking to bring goodness and healing. It also encourages us to look beyond our own needs to the needs of others, promising that if we do so, our needs will be met as well. The poetry of this prayer has led to it being set to music by many different composers. While this prayer is strongly associated with St. Francis, there is no evidence that he actually wrote it. It originally appeared in print in a French publication in 1912.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.²



THE SERENITY PRAYER

God, grant me the serenity to accept the
things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference.

This short version of a longer prayer is most commonly attributed to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, though there are debates about its origin.³ The prayer acknowledges that there are situations that are out of our control, but also ways that we can take responsibility and work for change. It has become an important prayer for Alcoholics

1. "The Collect for Purity" in *The Book of Common Prayer* (Huntington Beach, CA: Anglican Liturgy Press, 2019), 106.
2. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 1109.
3. Laurie Goodstein, "Serenity Prayer Stirs Up Doubt: Who Wrote It?" *The New York Times*, July 11, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/07/11/us/11prayer.html.

Anonymous and other recovery communities, sometimes printed on the backs of chips given to signify how long someone has been in recovery. The longer version is as follows:

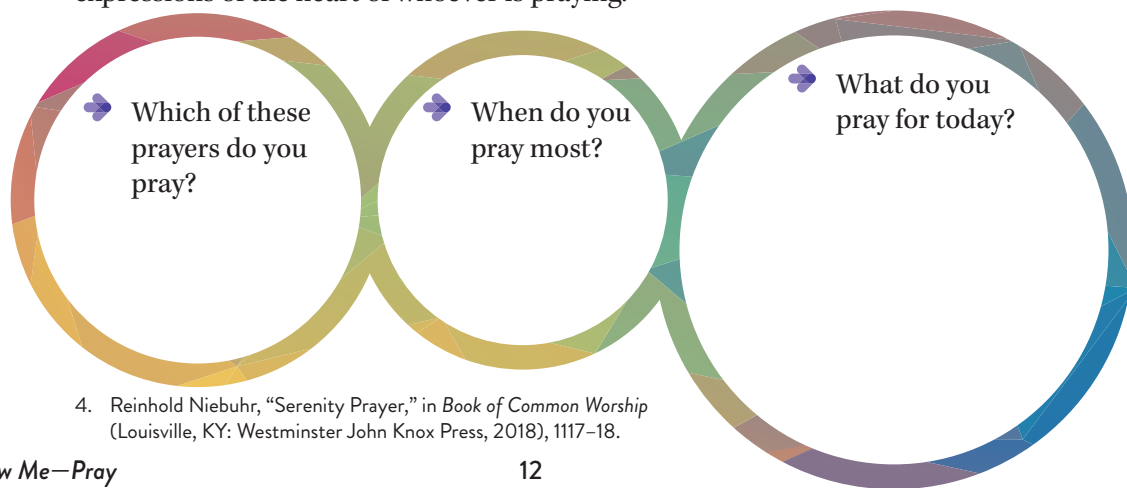
God, give me grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.
Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time,
accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
taking, as Jesus did,
this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it,
trusting that you will make all things right,
if I surrender to your will,
so that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
and supremely happy with you
forever in the next. **Amen.**⁴

—Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971)



EXTEMPORANEOUS PRAYER

Not all prayers are scripted. Extemporaneous prayer is a practice where we pray whatever comes to our minds at the time. It is a combination of listening for what should be lifted up in prayer, and voicing that prayer before God and sometimes others. Extemporaneous prayer can be approached in many ways. A prayer leader may offer prompts and space for a gathered community to voice the prayers on their hearts. (“We pray for all who are ill . . .” “We pray for the joys we have experienced . . .” with silence held for people to speak.) A pastor or other leader might gather prayer requests and weave them together, or give each person time to offer their prayers to all worshippers. These prayers do not have to be polished or grammatically correct, but honest expressions of the heart of whoever is praying.



4. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Serenity Prayer,” in *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 117–18.

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

CREATING SPACE TO PRAY

As we move through this unit, we will be practicing different forms of prayer. As we do, it may help to create a specific prayer space to help center you in your practice of prayer. It's easy to tell ourselves to clear our minds of distractions and open our hearts to prayer, but it is quite another thing to actually do it! As you come to this time of prayer, choose a physical space where you will practice these prayers. Create a worship space for yourself, engaging your senses. Perhaps an image, figure, or symbol helps center you on God. Try lighting a particular candle, or burning the same kind of incense each time. By consistently creating the same environment, we teach our bodies and souls to be quiet and centered, opening ourselves up to a time of prayer.

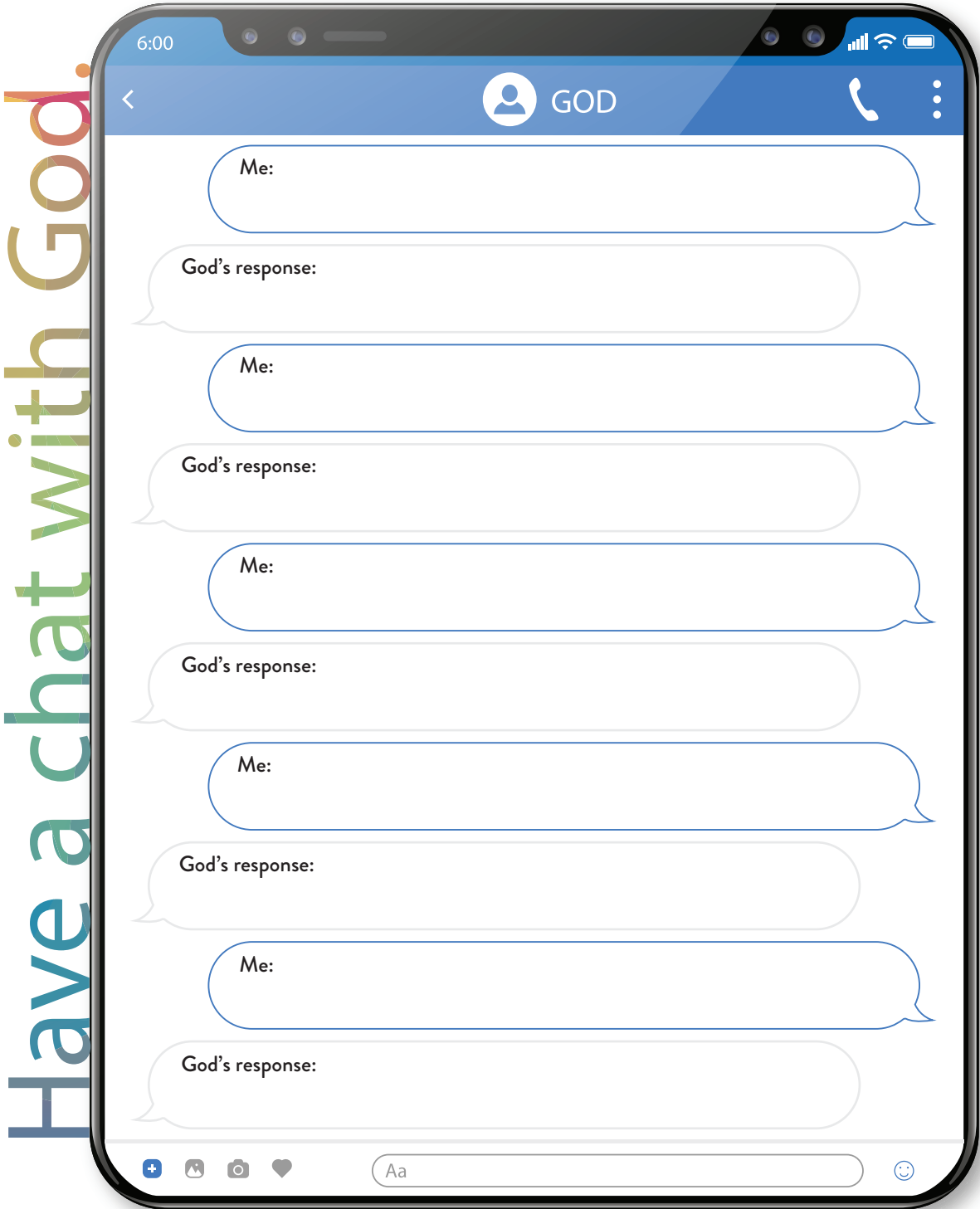
DIALOGUE JOURNALING

One way we can approach God with openness and honesty is through dialogue journaling where we both express our needs and listen for God's response. In dialogue journaling, we set up a piece of paper like a script for a play. We write our name followed by a colon, then describe to God what happened during the day. Next, we write whatever name we use for God followed by a colon. Then using our imaginations and listening for God's response, we begin writing down how we think God might respond. Sometimes it takes a while. This patient listening reminds us that prayer is a dialogue. After writing down what God might say, we respond, then go back and forth until the conversation ends.

Whether you feel that God is speaking directly to you in this practice, or that you are imagining how God might respond, dialogue journaling encourages us to slow down, be honest, and listen.



Use this chat outline to do some dialogue journaling. If your journaling takes you away from the prompts on the page, that is fine. Follow where the Spirit leads. You can always come back to the chat later.



CREATING A LORICA

Another way we pray honestly is admitting how and where we need God to guide and protect us. We can do this by creating a prayer of protection in the form of a *lorica*. A *lorica* (from the Latin word for “armor”) is a Celtic form of prayer that invokes God’s presence surrounding different parts of our bodies like armor. “St. Patrick’s Breastplate” is an example of the form.

The famous prayer, attributed to St. Patrick, was said to have been sung by Patrick when he became aware of an attempt to ambush him and stop him from spreading the faith. The Irish prayer is divided into eleven sections. The *Book of Common Worship* offers a modern translation of six parts of it. The most famous section is this one from page 1104:

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Fill in the prompts below with what attribute of God you wish to carry with you. Maybe you need the compassion of God in your heart; or, if you have a tough week ahead, God’s steadfastness. Maybe you need the strength of God in your hands for the work you must do, or maybe the kindness of God if you need to be more gentle.

May the _____ of God be on my head.

May the _____ of God be in my hands.

May the _____ of God be at my back.

May the _____ of God be on my feet.

May the _____ of God be in my heart.

FOLLOWING JESUS

When we pray, we approach God with honesty, humility, and curiosity. We might do this through prayers we memorize like the Lord’s Prayer or the Prayer of St. Francis, through praying whatever words come to our hearts, or asking questions and listening for God’s response as in dialogue journaling. While there are many forms prayers can take, approaching God with openness and honesty allows God to transform us through our prayer lives, that we might truly live out the words “Your kingdom come, your will be done.”



One form of prayer that is vital to many worship traditions is praying through music. Musical settings of familiar prayers can unlock new insights, meanings, and experiences in us as we pray. As you listen to this version of the Lord’s Prayer by Jim and Jean Strathdee, breathe in the words and let the music settle in your bones. This setting is a call-and-response version of the prayer, so feel free to sing along as led, dialoguing with the song leaders as you join in prayer.

Listen to the YouTube video: “Jim & Jean Strathdee—Our Father (1978)” ([bit.ly /FMSungLordsPrayer](https://bit.ly/FMSungLordsPrayer), 3:43).