

# Prayers That Pass The Ceiling

**Tony Evans**



*Tony* EVANS  
THE URBAN ALTERNATIVE

# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	3
How Not to Pray .....	4
The Person of Prayer .....	5
The Program of Prayer .....	7
Daily Bread .....	8
Debtors .....	11
Deliver Us from Evil .....	13
What Ceiling? .....	14

# Introduction

Have you ever turned around to discover that you were carrying on a “conversation” with someone who had left the room when you weren’t looking? There you are, thinking that a discussion was taking place when, in reality, you were simply talking to yourself.

If you can identify with the embarrassment and frustration of a situation like this, you’re on your way to understanding how some Christians feel about prayer. As their requests go unanswered, they conclude that the Lord has left the room. It seems as though, in the words of the old cliché, their prayers are “bouncing off the ceiling.” What does it take to get our prayers past the ceiling and into the throne room of God? I would suggest that we start with some proper instruction in the art of prayer. Fortunately, an appropriate lesson appears in Matthew 6:5-15. The teacher is Jesus Himself. Here is the example He left us:

Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

Every one of us has recited the familiar words of the Lord’s Prayer hundreds of times. Perhaps you learned it in your Sunday school class as a child. Maybe you repeated the words each night at bedtime as your mother or father looked on. If you were involved in sports during high school, it could be that your team nodded at God by reciting these words after practices or before games. Granted, the words themselves are deeply meaningful. But, they weren’t meant to be treated like some magical prayer or meaningless tradition. Jesus introduced his petition by saying, “This is how you should pray.” He did not say, “This is what you should pray.” The specific words are not as important as the principles behind them. In other words, the Lord’s Prayer is intended to be a pattern or outline that all prayer should follow.

# How Not To Pray

You can't appreciate the Lord's Prayer until you look at the prayers of the hypocrites and the pagans. For that insight, we look to the beginning of our passage, Matthew 6:5:

“When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corner to be seen by men. I tell you the truth; they have received their reward in full. When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”



No doubt you've heard people who can mesmerize entire congregations with their catalog of grammar. Maybe you've even said to yourself, "I wish I could pray like he can pray!" According to this verse, that might be an unwise wish. Eloquence impresses people, not God. The Lord is interested in humility

and sincerity, not stage presence.

One evening at bedtime, a little boy prayed loudly from his room, "Lord, bless Mommy and Daddy. And, Lord, give me a new bicycle!" His mother came in, holding her ears and said, "Son, you don't have to shout. God can hear." He answered "Yes, Mommy, but Grandmother can't. She's clear down the hall!" Obviously, the boy wasn't counting on God to answer his prayer. Don't let your prayer degenerate into a performance. Your goal is neither to impress nor inform other people. Instead, find a place to be alone with God. (Parents, be creative!) Private behavior should be an intimate encounter between Creator and creation.

“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Matthew 6:7-8)

Meaningless words do not transform into meaningful prayers. There's nothing wrong with teaching a child to pray, "Now I lay me down to sleep..." and so on. But if that's as far as you've gotten after 20 or 30 years of praying, that's worthless repetition. If you recite the same worn-out phrases before a meal and call it "grace," you may have quoted, but you have not prayed.

# The Person of Prayer

After Jesus shocked his audience with these examples of what prayer is not, he offered an example of the real thing, packed with the profound theological truth. He starts out, “Our Father in heaven...” Right off the bat, He has answered the question, “Who can pray?” The Lord’s Prayer is intended for believers; because only through Christ do we become sons and daughters who can legitimately call God, “Father.” This may come as cruel news to baseball and football teams and anyone else who treats the Lord’s Prayer like a good luck charm. Still, the fact remains that prayer is a part of a familial relationship that exists between God and His children. It is within this context that we call God “Abba father” or “daddy.”

At the same time, we must remember that we serve an awesome, all-powerful heavenly Father, the Creator of the universe. Familiarity must never give way to disrespect. We maintain this balanced perspective by giving God the honor and praise He deserves. “Hallowed be your name.” “Hallowed” means to sanctify or to set apart; to deem as special. What is it about God’s name that is so special? Well, in biblical time, names reflected character. So, if you can understand His person. If you take the time to understand who God is, you’ll know why He is waiting with open arms to meet you at your point of need.

Let’s examine some of the names of God found in the Old Testament and explore the lessons they teach us about Him. We have heard God called Elohim, the Creator God. He is Adonai, the Lord. We know him as Jehovah; the God who keeps is covenant. Here are some others:

- El Elyon: “The Most High God.” El Elyon describes the God who sits in heaven, looks down and says, “Everything is in My hand.” All circumstances are under His control. When you call on El Elyon, it is way of saying that no matter what’s going on, everything is under His control.
- El Olam: “The Everlasting, Unchanging God.” No matter how unpredictable your circumstances, no matter how unstable your life may seem, you serve a God who is consistent and steadfast over all time.
- El Shaddai: “God Almighty, full of grace.” When I need what I don’t deserve, El Shaddai is there to make up the difference.
- El Roi: “The God who sees.” When I’m hurting, I need El Roi, for God is so intimately connected with my circumstances that He hurts with me.

- Jehovah Raah: “The Lord, my Shepherd.”  
When I don’t know which direction to take in life, I get down on my knees and call on Jehova Raah. I know that my Shepherd will aim His sheep in the perfect direction.
- Jehovah Sabbaoth: “The Lord of Hosts.”  
When I find myself in a while load of trouble and nobody seems willing to come to my aid, I remember Jehovah Sabbaoth. If necessary, He wills the angels of heaven to get me where I need to go.
- Jehovah Jireh: “The Lord will provide.”
- Jehovah Shalom: “The Lord, my peace.”
- Jehovah Shammah: “The Lord who is always near.”

Lest you think we’ve slipped into the pit of pantheism, make no mistake—there is only one God. These names only describe parts of our multidimensional Father in heaven. Hallowed be His name.

## PRAY

Lord, Thank You for reminding me that I serve an all powerful heavenly God. Forgive me of my sins and give me the tools I need to walk with You daily. Help me to remember that you can and will provide all of my needs. Your many names equipp me with the knowledge I need to follow after You. I know now that You are full of grace, feel my hurt, come to my aid, provide, give me peace, and are alwaysnear. Help me to remember these truths when the road gets hard.

Amen.



# The Program of Prayer

We have seen that successful prayer requires an understanding of the person of God. But we must also align ourselves with His program. Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. God's "kingdom" cannot be found on any map. The Kingdom of God exists wherever His divine rule is acknowledged. Our lesson in prayer suggests that we must begin by surrendering ourselves to that rule. When we do so, we actually become part of the territory that makes up the Kingdom of God. In that kingdom, God' will is done, just as it is in heaven.

To understand this phrase, we must take a trip to heaven and see just how God's will is done. First, the angels do it without question. There is no debate, no discussion. The last citizens of heaven who followed a different agenda don't live there anymore. In heaven, the angels respond to God's commands readily, eagerly, fervently, and constantly.

If we are going to follow Jesus' instruction to pray "like this," we need to count the cost. If we're not willing to offer angel like obedience to the Lord, we might as well get up off our knees. We're not praying the way Jesus taught us to pray.

## PRAY

Lord, thank you for making me a part of the territory that is the Kingdom of God. Your grace in my life is evident. I ask that Your will be done in my life. You are all-knowing and have my best interest at heart. Help me to be obedient to You in every area of my life so that I may fully surrender to Your will. Give me opportunities to demonstrate my obedience to You. Help me to respond readily, eagerly, fervently, and constantly. I know that the cost for following Your instructions may be high but, I am willing and ready to obey You even though I know it will be difficult at times.

Amen.



# Daily Bread

“Give us this day, our daily bread.” Notice that Jesus did not say, “Give us this day a Mercedes Benz.” He’s teaching us to pray about sustenance, not lavishness. If all God hears from you is “Give me this home,” “Give me this possession, job, power, social status, car, wardrobe, etc.,” you have missed the point of prayer. Does this mean that we must pray only about our needs? Are we not supposed to bring our desire before our heavenly Father? Of course we are! Psalm 37:4 says,

“Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.”



Do you see the structure of this verse? It is built like an “if/then” statement: if you delight yourself in the Lord, then He will give you the desires of your heart. When we delight ourselves in the Lord, His agenda becomes our own. His priorities outrank ours. We determine importance according to His standard. A person who is delighted in the Lord may very well desire a house (or one of the other

items I mentioned early). But he will pray, “Lord, give me this house so it can become your house. Meet my need so I can build you kingdom.” It is as though God is saying, “If you want My blessings so you can build a kingdom of your own, don’t expect much. I’m only interested in answering the prayers of people who say, ‘Thy kingdom come’ and mean business.” There’s a great statement about which prayers the Father will and will not answer in Matthew 7:7-11:

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; everyone who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!”

That is a very, very powerful verse of scripture because it simply says, “ask.” Asking is not a difficult thing to do. In fact, if you have children, you know that they are almost constantly in “asking” mode. When was the last time your child came to you and said, “Dad, Mom, what can I do for you today?” Well, God invites his children to be children. Ask, seek, knock. And if those statements are not staggering enough, notice to whom he delivers that invitation: everyone! The natural reaction at this point is, “Wait a minute! I’ve been asking for years. I’ve been knocking longer than that. I’ve been seeking, and I haven’t found anything.” Sometimes, when our requests seemed to be met with silence instead of solutions, it appears as though this passage does not line up with real life.



Isn't this a contradiction? Doesn't this passage offer an open-ended promise of provision? Not, quite. That's why reading the Bible in context is so important. You can do almost anything with a verse if you choose to ignore the rest of the story. Look again at verse 9 and pay special attention to the two comparisons: bread and fish to stone and snake. What is the point? Very simply, bread and fish are good for you; stone and snake are not. The earthly son has requested two good items, the earthly father responds accordingly. The reverse is also true. If an earthly son asked for a stone to eat, any loving father would refuse. (Everyone needs minerals in their diet, but this goes a bit to far!)

To follow through with our analogy, God is not saying, "Ask for whatever you want." Instead, He is saying, "Ask for what is good." When you ask for good things, our heavenly Father will surely approve-and He would never substitute something harmful. If you have prayed for something you desire with all your heart and have not received it, it is because what you have asked for is either no good or not good for now. God is either saying, "no" or "wait." You may say, "But wait a minute. My circumstances right now are miserable. Everything I touch is falling apart; my world is crumbling. I've been praying faithfully about it, and I've heard nothing! If God does not give His children stones or snakes, why doesn't He act on my behalf?" Let me suggest that you read Romans 8:28:

*"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."*

If you love God from your gut; if you love him deep down where you live on the inside, then I have some good news for you. The mess you're in today will become your trophies on your wall tomorrow. I watched my wife cook about 15 different dishes for the holidays, including desserts. (It tried all 15 of

them!) When she is mixing the cake batter, it's messy, gooey... and anything but appetizing. Then, the batter is poured into the pan and starts to take shape. But, it is still little more than a partially coagulated mess. Finally, it is put into the oven. Given enough time in that crucible of pain, anguish, and burning, a delicious cake will emerge.

If you love God, it doesn't matter how hot the oven may be. When the allotted time is over, the same people who paid little attention to you while you were dough will wonder where this delectable pastry came from. Ask. Ask!! And you shall receive. Make sure that, to the best of your knowledge, what you're asking for is good. If it is, you shall receive. That's a promise!

How can you determine that your request qualifies for the "good" category? I suggest asking yourself two questions. First, is there anything in Scripture that justifies the request? For example, James 1:5 says,

*"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him."*

Obviously, asking for Godly wisdom is a prayer that will surely be granted. But suppose that there is no direct biblical support for what you have requested. Let's assume that we're dealing with a desire instead of a need. While there's nothing necessarily wrong with this, it does bring us to our next question: "If God grants my request, what will He get out of it?" How will He be glorified and in what way will His kingdom be promoted if He does as you ask?

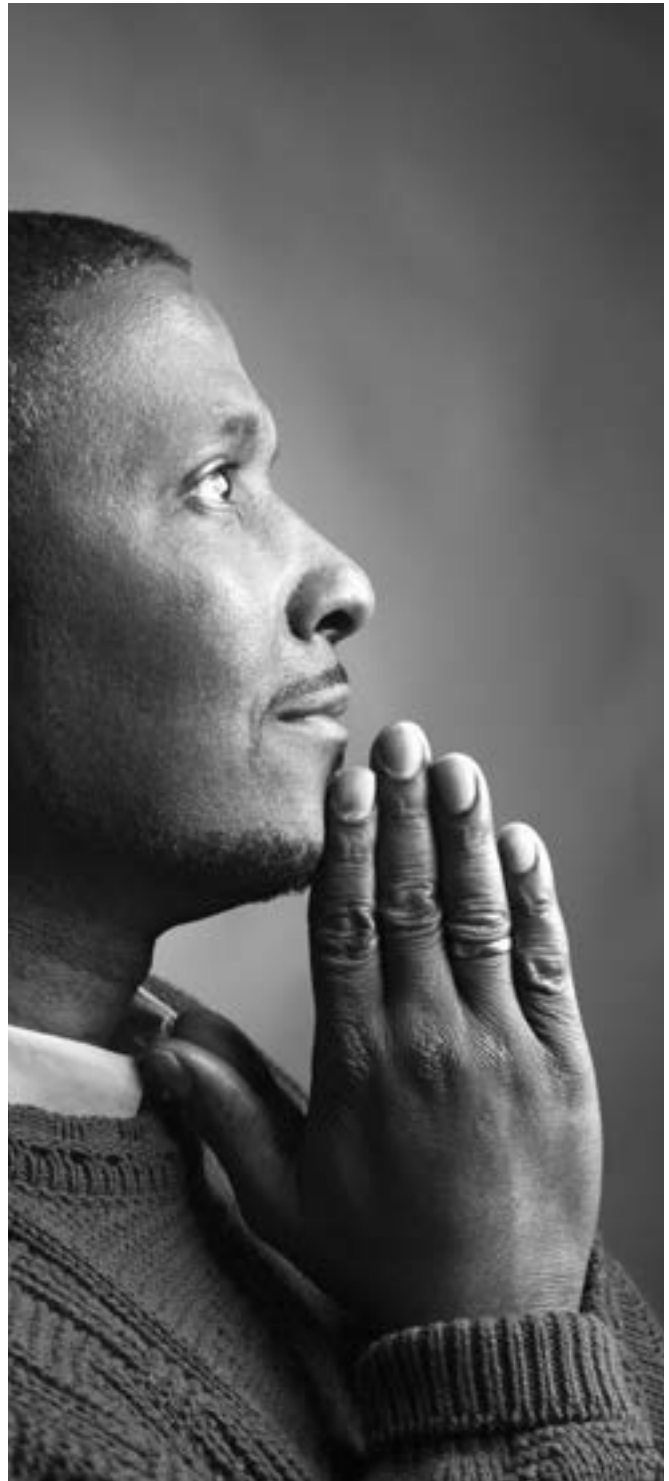
You may be familiar with LeTourneau College. LeTourneau College is named after R.G. Le Tourneau, who asked God to make him so prosperous that he could live on 10% of his income, and contribute the rest to the Lord's work. (A sort of "reverse tithe!") God not only answered his prayer, but also provided

so abundantly that the remaining 10% made LeTourneau a millionaire. LeTourneau's request was rooted in his desire to glorify God. King Solomon made a similar plea. He asked the Lord for wisdom instead of riches, because he knew he couldn't lead God's people without it. As a result, God not only gave Solomon what we requested, but unprecedented wealth as well. Ask. If it is good you shall receive.

Notice Jesus' choice of words: "Give us this day, our daily bread." God wants you to walk with Him one day at a time. He wants us to trust Him for tomorrow, next week, next year. That's why He says, "Ask me for today." Think back to the story of manna in Exodus 16. While the nation of Israel wandered through the wilderness on its way to the Promised Land, God provided white, fluffy manna for them to eat. Every morning, without fail, there it was on the ground for the people to pick up and eat. But there was a catch. Manna couldn't be stored. Those who had tried discovered that it bred worms. (The interesting exception to this rule was that manna could be stored over the Sabbath. No gathering was done on the Lord's Day.) What was God's point? He didn't want His people living on yesterday's manna. The Lord was teaching Israel to depend on Him to provide their daily bread.

Now, you may have enough bread in your freezer to last you for weeks. But, you still may be metaphorically living on yesterday's manna. God wants you to remember each day where your blessings, your forgiveness and your very life come from. Lamentations 3:22 says,

*"The Lord's lovingkindness never stops for His compassion never fails. It is new every morning."*



# Debtors

We have prayed for our physical needs. Now we move to our spiritual needs.

“Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” (Matthew 6:12-14)

There are five key Greek words in the New Testament for sin. One is hamartia, which means “missing the mark.” It describes a bowman who takes his best shot, but fails to put the arrow in the bull’s eye. It falls short. (“For all have sinned and fallen short.” Romans 3:23) Another is tarabasis—“To step across a line.” God established the boundary on our behavior, and we cross the line. The next word is anomia, which suggest lawlessness or rebellion. “God, I’m just not going to do it!” The fourth word is paraptoma. It connotes the idea of slipping or falling. It’s an unintentional mistake or sin. None of these words is used here.

Our passage contains the word, ophilema. It has to do with a balance owed. Here’s why, even though it denotes sin, it is translated “debt.” Every time you sin, you go into debt to God. You have taken on an obligation that you cannot possibly meet. It’s like charging 100,00 to a credit card with a 1,000 limit when you have only \$1 bank account balance. Sooner or later, the collection agency is going to come looking for you. Sin makes us overdrawn debtors to God—even if we’re already Christians. As a result, our fellowship with God is broken. Only confession and forgiveness can balance the books.

There’s a condition in Jesus’ model of prayer. God forgives our debts “as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Just as we can sin against God, others can

sin against us. How we deal with those debts will set the stage for how God handles our “balance due.”

Jesus told a parable along this line. In Matthew 18, we read about a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. A man who owed him several million dollars was brought in. Since he was unable to pay, the king ordered the man’s wife, children, and possessions be sold. As these instructions were being given, the man dropped to his knees and begged for an extension. “Be patient with me,” he pleaded, “and I will pay you back everything I owe.” Now, a gracious king might have granted the man’s request and set up a payment schedule with interest compounded daily. But not this time. The king was so moved with pity that he forgave the entire debt. “Forget it,” the king said. “The money is yours.” The servant should have been humbled by such a display of mercy. Instead, he happened upon a fellow servant who owed him a few measly bucks. Grabbing the man by the throat, he demanded payment. “Be patient with me and I will pay you back,” came the reply. (Doesn’t that sound familiar?) But the servant refused. He had the man thrown into debtor’s prison. As you might expect, word of this incident reached the king. He summoned the servant and said to him, “You wicked servant. I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” The king reinstated the multi-million dollar debt and had the servant thrown into prison, where he probably spent the rest of his life.

Jesus wrapped up this parable with these words:

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.” (Matthew 18:35)

You can confess your sins until you're blue in the face. But if you're holding a grudge or refusing forgiveness—no matter how serious the offense—you're robbing yourself of the joy of fellowship with God. In the end, you can wind up paying a price far greater than the person who wronged you. Jesus says that proper prayer considers both the vertical and horizontal relationships. If both are not in order, we're wasting our time.

“If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First, go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23-24)



## PRAY

Lord, Thank You for Your forgiveness. It is a gift that I do not deserve. Help me to give the same grace and forgiveness to others that you give to me. I want to be in close fellowship with You. I know that in order to draw closer to You I need to forgive those who may have wronged me. Open my heart so that I am able to love those around me even though the world may tell me to do differently. Give me the strength I need to let go of the wrongs and embrace others. Your mercy is never-ending and I my goal is to be like You. Thank You again for not turning your back on me when I have done wrong.

Amen.

# Delivered From Evil

First of all, we pray for our physical needs, one day at a time. We pray for our spiritual needs, regularly asking for and granting forgiveness. Finally, we pray for our emotional needs. “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” Now, here we have a problem. How can Jesus say “lead us not into temptation” when the Bible has already told us that there is no sin in God? Are we saying that if we do not pray, God will try to trip us somehow? Of course not. What Jesus is really saying is:

“Lord, as I live out this day, keep me away from situation that might cause me to wind up sinning—even though there may be nothing wrong with the situations themselves.”

This is a cry of the emotion; a call from the heart. It is similar to Jesus’ own prayer in the garden of Gethsemane:

“If it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.”  
(Matthew 26:39)

You might pray, “Lord, I want to live this day for You. Don’t let anything cross my path that may wind up giving a victory to the evil one. Lord, I’m on my way to work, and the folks there will try to get me to compromise my faith. I can handle some of them. But don’t let me get in over my head. I don’t want to compromise your

Kingdom. Watch out for me today, Lord, so that even if people blow up at me, I won’t go near the one who will make me retaliate. I don’t want to make you look bad. Lord, lead me down the paths that enable me to glorify you and resist the evil one. When you do that, Lord, you’ve taken care of my physical needs, you’ve taken care of my spiritual needs and you’ve taken care of my emotional needs, so thine is the Kingdom! Not, ‘thine should be the Kingdom,’ not ‘thine will be the Kingdom,’ but thine is the Kingdom! You rule is what I want, you are the God I serve, and yours is the name I will praise forever and ever!”



# What Ceiling?

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us everything we need to know to develop a vital, intimate, and powerful prayer life. If we follow His model, no ceiling can stand between us and the throne room of heaven. Like any worthwhile endeavor, prayer requires practice and persistence. You've heard this advice a thousand times, but only because it is so important: discipline yourself to set aside time each day for personal prayer. The more demanding your day, the more important that prayer time becomes.

If you have not been in the habit of talking with God and the concept seems unnatural or uncomfortable to you, make this the subject of your prayer. Be honest with God about your feelings—it's pointless to try to hide anything from Him. The bottom line is pray. If you're tired, sick, emotionally overwhelmed—pray. If you're on cloud nine and life seems perfect—pray! If you lack direction—pray. If you doubt that prayer makes any difference—pray. If the circumstances of your life are out of your control—pray. If the circumstances of your life seem well within you're your control—pray even harder. Whatever you do—pray.

Don't let Satan trick you into giving up the priceless privilege of communicating with our Creator.

