

Praise for *Pray First*

“There’s no one better to lead you into a deeper relationship with God through prayer than my friend Chris Hodges. *Pray First* isn’t just another book release, it’s a lifestyle Pastor Chris models consistently and the engine behind the phenomenal breadth and impact of his ministry. Get ready to have your entire life revolutionized as you begin to pray first!”

—LOUIE GIGLIO, PASTOR, PASSION CITY CHURCH/PASSION CONFERENCES; AUTHOR, *DON’T GIVE THE ENEMY A SEAT AT YOUR TABLE*

“From cover to cover Pastor Chris Hodges is just so practical and points you directly to what God’s Word says about prayer. What an incredible resource and necessary reminder that prayer isn’t about being more ‘religious,’ but it is all about a relationship that our heavenly Father craves to have with us.”

—SADIE ROBERTSON HUFF, AUTHOR, SPEAKER,
AND FOUNDER OF LIVE ORIGINAL

“Many people believe in the power of prayer but lack the confidence to pray boldly. In his new book, *Pray First*, Pastor Chris Hodges takes an in-depth look at the kinds of prayers that touch the heart of God. This book will spiritually motivate and equip readers to get to know God more intimately through a rich and meaningful life of prayer.”

—CRAIG GROESCHEL, PASTOR, LIFE.CHURCH;
AUTHOR, *DANGEROUS PRAYERS*

“I’ve heard it said, ‘When we work, we work, but when we pray, God works.’ In this insightful and extraordinary book, Pastor Chris practically guides us in taking steps to put prayer in its proper place: a first response and not a last resort.”

—DR. DHARIUS DANIELS, AUTHOR, *RELATIONAL INTELLIGENCE*; LEAD PASTOR, CHANGE CHURCH

“Prayer changes everything. Prayer is heaven’s Wi-Fi and Chris Hodges is the brilliant technician connecting us with God’s life-changing 5G network. In *Pray First* you’ll receive a powerful activation manual that will ignite a prayer life that will prompt heaven to invade your earth.”

—SAMUEL RODRIGUEZ, NEW SEASON LEAD PASTOR

“I have been greatly inspired by the life of Chris Hodges, especially his prayer life and his emphasis of prayer at Church of the Highlands. In *Pray First*, Pastor Chris seeks to dismantle the obstacles to prayer that we create in our hearts and minds. This book aims to empower readers and set in motion a life where prayer is a lifestyle and meaningful conversations with God are daily. I would wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone looking to grow in their relationship with God and being more active in prayer with all areas of their life.”

—CHAD VEACH, PASTOR, ZOE CHURCH LA; AUTHOR, *WORRIED ABOUT EVERYTHING BECAUSE I PRAY ABOUT NOTHING*

“Is there anything more important in our relationship with God than a life of prayer? I don’t think so. . . . I am so grateful for Chris Hodges and the book *Pray First!* It has inspired me and given me a renewed heart and vision for my relationship with prayer and, ultimately, with God. Through the highs and lows of this life, we were created to walk and talk with our Creator. This book is the North Star pointing us and guiding us to a fulfilled life of prayer.”

—CHRIS TOMLIN, ARTIST, SONGWRITER, AUTHOR

“When I think of the words ‘Pray First’ I think of Pastor Chris Hodges. He has lived this message for thirty-nine years and it has deeply impacted our church in Miami and countless communities around the globe. The prayer models shared within will bring practical guidance to your conversations with God and his wisdom on corporate and personal prayer will awaken your heart to yearn for all that awaits in God’s presence. Forever grateful for this life message!”

—RICH WILKERSON JR., VOUS CHURCH

pray first

the transformative power
of a life built on prayer



Other Books by Chris Hodges

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The Daniel Dilemma Study Guide

What's Next?

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Out of the Cave

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CHRIS HODGES



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Pray First

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*This book is dedicated to my personal intercessors:
Hamp Greene, Colette Greene, Jim Laffoon, Gary Larson,
Sherrill Larson, Kirby Sevier, and Tim Spurlock.*

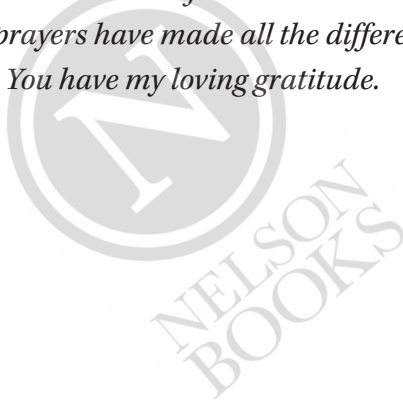
Your prayers have covered me.

Your love and support has comforted me.

You have fought with me and for me in the heavenly realms.

Your prayers have made all the difference.

You have my loving gratitude.





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Introduction

Make Prayer Your First Response— Not Your Last Resort

Prayer is easier than you think and
more important than you realize.

**Prayer is often the most misunderstood part of following
Jesus.**

Many people view prayer as if it's an innate talent. You may not even realize you hold this perception, but your thoughts and actions reveal otherwise. You've learned to pray because you grew up in church or because that's what your family did, but it still seems awkward and unfamiliar. Prayer seems like athletic speed, musical talent, or a quick sense of humor: some are born with it and others are not. So you admire people who pray with confident ease and do what you can to get by because you've always heard that prayer is such an important part of being a Christian. But you

feel like you're not much good at it and consign praying to church services and mealtimes.

Or maybe you regard prayer as more of an acquired skill. Being a prayer warrior is simply a matter of putting in the time and effort, you think, so you practice daily and constantly try new techniques to improve your prayer life. You view it as a spiritual discipline—which it is of course—but it has never become something you particularly enjoy or do spontaneously.

Others consider prayer as a supernatural SOS, a cry for help when they don't know what to do or find themselves desperately in need of help. When you lose your job or the car breaks down, when the medical tests come back positive or your child's addiction reveals itself—*that's* when you pray because circumstances are suddenly overwhelming.

Based on what I've experienced and witnessed in nearly forty years in ministry, I believe people *know* they should pray and *want* to pray, but don't really understand what to do. We have plenty of books on prayer, perhaps more than any other topic in the faith-based category. Inspiration isn't the problem—most of us are sufficiently inspired and want to make prayer central to our relationship with God.

Many people don't have a working definition of prayer. Prayer is simply talking with and listening to God. That's it!

Yet, even if we have that working definition of prayer, we still don't know what to say when we pray. We don't know how to prioritize prayer in our lives.

I often overhear people, especially in hospital waiting rooms, say, "Well, I guess there's nothing left to do but pray." Similarly,

I've met with families in crisis and heard the same refrain. While sometimes prayer is the *only* thing we can do, it is always the *best* thing we can do.

Too often, prayer becomes our last resort.

But God wants prayer to be our first response.

Lifeblood of Faith

The importance of prayer in sustaining and strengthening our faith cannot be overestimated. If we define prayer as connecting with God and confronting the Enemy, then prayer ought to be an ongoing conversation with God about every area of our lives. In the Bible prayer is not mentioned occasionally as an option or consideration; prayer is essential to knowing God. We're told to "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17 NIV) and to be "faithful in prayer" (Romans 12:12 NIV), not just sporadically or on Sundays or when we feel like it.

Praying continually may sound challenging or even impossible, but connecting with God in the midst of every part of your day is more than worth it:

- **Prayer overcomes anxiety and fear.** Prayer keeps us anchored in truth and helps us maintain an eternal perspective, freeing us from circumstantial worries and temporary trials. "Do not be anxious about anything," we're instructed, "but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to

God” (Philippians 4:6 NIV). When you immerse yourself in regular prayer, “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7 NIV). Prayer is a place to “offload” cares and give them to God.

**If prayer is the lifeblood
of the Christian faith,
then I’m afraid many
believers are anemic.**

- **Prayer connects us with God.** Prayer keeps your faith alive, your hope in Christ strong, and your relationship with God healthy. If prayer is the lifeblood of the Christian faith, then I’m afraid many believers are anemic. We know prayer is essential to our faith but still struggle to make it part of our daily lives. Prayer intimidates us. Despite all we’ve heard and learned, we still feel uncomfortable praying, whether in private or in public. Prayer feels old-fashioned and quaint to some, while others consider prayer sacred and unfathomable.

God wants us to view prayer as the vibrant foundation of our relationship with Him. A lifestyle of prayer is the secret to an authentic Christian life. How do we make prayer a lifestyle? By weaving it into the fabric of our daily lives as we make it the priority God intended. Once we realize how talking and listening to God draws us closer, we enjoy the intimacy we’ve longed to experience. Only then can we know the peace that passes all human understanding (Philippians 4:7) and take shelter in the unconditional love of our heavenly Father (Romans 8:38–39).

- **Prayer reveals God’s purpose for our lives.** Prayer can change us from the inside out as we experience more of who God is and less of who we are. Curiously enough, though, prayer also helps us become more our true selves, more authentic as we discover God’s unique purpose for our time here on earth.
- **Prayer empowers us to live supernaturally.** Relying on our relationship with God is the only way to accomplish all that He has created us to do in this life. Prayer is necessary because God calls us to do things that we can never accomplish on our own. In order to rely on His power continually, we need to be in constant communication. We need His help because our efforts aren’t adequate. All of us have areas of our lives where we need God’s help to pull it off, to persevere, to push through and do what we know He wants done. The good news is that God never intended us to live naturally. He wants us to live *supernaturally*. Prayer is that access point, where heaven touches earth, where we maintain our lifeline with our Creator, our Savior, and our Redeemer.

You don’t have to take my word for it—consider God’s. His Word urges us, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 NIV). In the early church, followers of Jesus “all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers” (Acts 1:14 NIV). New believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’

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teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42 NIV).

Most compelling of all is the example and instruction Jesus gave us on prayer. Throughout His life and ministry, Christ retreated to quiet places for private time with His Father. Taking note of their Master’s example, the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, and the outline for prayer He gave them in response is what we call the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13). This model demonstrates how prayer can address all areas of our lives as we connect to God and immerse ourselves in His perspective.

Tethered Together

What would it look like if you brought God into every area of your life throughout each day? The key in allowing prayer to permeate your life is to put it first, literally. When the Bible instructs us to pray continually or constantly, the emphasis is not on perpetual repetition but on importance and consistency. God wants us to *pray first* in any and all situations. He wants us to thank Him, ask Him, trust Him, seek Him, listen to Him, and enjoy all the blessings He gives.

- When you wake up in the morning, pray first and thank God for the day ahead.
- Before you go to sleep at night, pray first and praise Him for getting you through the day’s demands.
- When you’re leaving your home for school, pray first.

- Merging onto the busy highway, pray first.
- About to lead the Zoom meeting at work, pray first.
- Reconnecting with a friend over coffee, pray first.
- Helping your kids with homework, pray first.
- Waiting in the doctor's office, pray first.
- Paying for groceries at the store, pray first.

No matter what you're doing throughout your day, praying first keeps you tethered to the One who loves you most.

Prayer is not just for Sunday school and mealtimes. It is not to be reserved only for your daily quiet times. Prayer is for *all times*. Communicating with God throughout your day brings Him into everything and everyone you encounter—your spouse and kids, your boss and coworkers, friends and neighbors, baristas and customer service reps, delivery people and mechanics, bankers and teachers.

When you pray first, you keep in constant contact with Almighty God, the Creator of heaven and earth, who also happens to be your Abba Father, your lavishly loving Papa. When you pray first, you have access to God the Father through Jesus the Son, who has paid the price for your sin and now intercedes on your behalf without ceasing. When you pray first, the Holy Spirit sticks with you closer than any friend. He'll help you pray even when you don't know how to express yourself with words.

When you pray first, your faith matures and you bear the spiritual fruit God has planted in you.

Prayer Matters

I wrote this book to help you experience the full abundance of the Christian life. While I would never presume to call myself an expert, I humbly offer all I've learned in many decades of personal practice and public teaching. The first section of this book will help you make prayer an unshakeable priority in practical ways—by focusing on a place, a plan, and the Persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) with whom you're communicating.

Next, we'll look at different models of prayer drawn from Scripture, including the Lord's Prayer, the Prayer of Moses, the Prayer of Jabez, and others for protection, provision, and power in overcoming the Enemy. By studying the situation, intention, and outcome of these various prayers, we will see how they apply to us and our conversations with God.

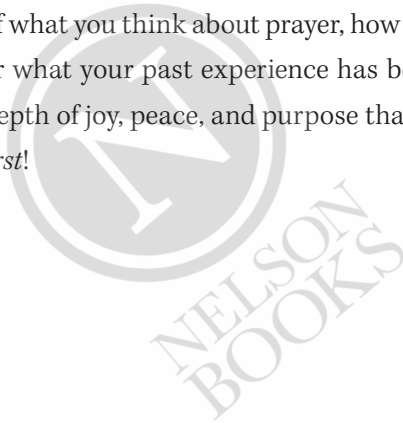
Our third and final section focuses on the often-misunderstood pairing of fasting with praying. We will explore the link between these two spiritually related exercises and discover how they facilitate intimacy with Him in unique ways. You may be surprised to discover how fasting can help take prayer to a deeper place of spiritual intimacy between you and God.

For years our church has practiced 21 Days of Prayer twice each year. In January we pray with an emphasis on fasting, and in August we pray with an emphasis on reaching people with the life-giving message of Jesus. When people ask me the secret to our enormous growth and expanding impact, I never fail to mention the vital importance of being people who pray—and take prayer

seriously enough to fast. Based on our experiences, I'll share an easy-to-follow 21-day plan to help you incorporate fasting as part of your practice of prayer. We'll look at different kinds of fasts and how to practice each in a healthy manner.

Having the right prayer resources at the right times has made a huge difference in my relationship with God and how I live my life. I've written *Pray First* in hopes it will be this kind of relevant, how-to resource for you. I want you to see how prayer naturally envelops all aspects of your life when you make it a consistent, deliberate part of your daily routines.

Regardless of what you think about prayer, how often or how little you pray, or what your past experience has been, it's time to discover the depth of joy, peace, and purpose that only comes when you *pray first!*





part one

Learning About Prayer

Prayer is the difference between the best
you can do and the best God can do.

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o n e

the priority of prayer

It's not "all's well that ends well"—
it's "all's well that begins well"!

People often flash their bracelets at me.

Just the other day I was coming out of Lowe's when I heard someone shout across the parking lot, "Hey, Pastor Chris!" Beaming with pride, a man in jeans and a T-shirt held up his arm and with his other hand pointed to a familiar rubber bracelet on his wrist.

"Hey," I yelled back, returning his smile. "Pray first!"

"Pray first!" he echoed before turning to load the rest of his purchases into his truck.

As strange as it may sound, there's no greeting I enjoy

pray first

hearing more than “pray first.” You are likely aware of the popular practice of wearing colorful bracelets with a name or slogan on them to show support for a particular cause or to remind others of someone or something significant. Several years ago I was preaching on the importance of putting prayer first in our lives, and someone on our team suggested making hundreds of rubber-band bracelets inscribed with PRAY FIRST on them.

We had no idea if these bracelets would catch on, but we ran out that first Sunday they were available and have ordered thousands more in the years since. I urge people to wear it, remember it, and do it—no matter who they are or what they are doing. As a result, “pray first” has become an enduring anthem at our church, a kind of rallying cry, and I always love it when I catch a glimpse of one of our bracelets on someone at the store, in a restaurant, or at a ball game.

Granted, it’s not the bracelet that’s significant—it’s the message to make prayer your first priority.

Child’s Play

Your prayer life anchors your relationship with God. Yet so many believers seem to struggle with the daily practice of prayer. They consider prayer to be something they know God wants them to do, but it feels awkward and a little scary. After all, how do you talk with the God of the universe? So they come to God in prayer like a nervous defendant approaching

the stern judge in a courtroom or like Dorothy apprehensively stepping before the Mighty Oz in his smoke-filled inner sanctum.

But God doesn't want prayer to be this formal kind of communication that requires particular words and proper phrases. We may feel afraid to reach out to God, thinking He will judge us or that He won't reveal Himself to us. But He's not judging us; His Son has already lived the perfect life and made the sacrifice to pay for our sins. He's not hiding behind smoke and mirrors or remaining aloof and distant. God simply wants us to talk with Him, to tell Him everything, to ask for His help, to thank Him for all our blessings, to trust Him with our pain—and all our other emotions too. God is ready to welcome us to an ongoing conversation with Him. He doesn't want us to be a nervous wreck trying to perform or deliver a monologue. He simply wants our whole hearts to depend on Him and rest in Him.

Think about the children in your life and how they communicate with you. Depending on their age and stage, the words they use may vary, but their open, loving, unselfconscious style is often the same. It's one of the things I love most about being a grandfather, or Papa, as our grandkids call me. "Papa, do you want to play?" or "Papa, look what I drew!" or "Here I come, Papa!" sounds like music to my ears. Their faces light up with bright eyes and wide smiles as if they couldn't be happier to see me and talk with me.

I wonder if little ones' communication style is one of the reasons why Jesus told us that we must be like children in order to know God.

pray first

He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:2–4 NIV)

Based on this truth, we could learn a few things from children about how to approach God in prayer. After all, through our relationship with Jesus, we have received the Holy Spirit and become adopted heirs. We are God's own children who are urged to cry out, "Abba, Father"—a heart cry to a loving Father (Romans 8:15). Rather than viewing God as distant and unrelatable, we can approach Him as a parent who lavishly loves His children.

Children are innocent and humble, unassuming and eager to share their experience of the world and to bask in their parents' loving attention. Kids want to be seen and heard, to be valued and protected and appreciated. They know communication is essential to make their needs known. However, as adults I suspect most of us don't relate to God in this way. Instead we make communication with Him more difficult than it needs to be.

But what if prayer is easier than you think?

Start Fresh

In addition to how we think about our approach to God in prayer, we may consider prayer a kind of one-and-done activity, something

we do on Sundays at church or before mealtimes. Maybe we say the Lord's Prayer at certain events or pray for someone battling illness. Prayer has a place in our lives, maybe even a regular place, but it's limited by our narrow view of the Christian life.

For people who grew up in the church, dislodging this compartmentalized view of prayer can be challenging. In the South where I grew up, most people went to church, said they were Christians, and prayed when they were supposed to pray. Praying was like singing hymns, observing Communion, or collecting the tithes and offerings—part of “church stuff” that had its place but wasn't all that relevant in daily life.

Other people tell me they grew up in a religion or faith system that focused on set prayers as part of a liturgy, a regular order of service based on the seasonal church calendar. They memorized the necessary prayers, recited them together at the appropriate times in the service, and didn't think about them again until the next service. Based on their experience, they viewed the prayers they learned as something similar to the Pledge of Allegiance or a well-known poem—culturally, historically, and religiously significant but not personally relevant.

Yet others tell me that learning to pray is like learning a new language. They have none of the baggage from their upbringing that others may have, but they feel like a tourist trying to learn native phrases while on an exotic vacation. Praying makes them feel uncomfortable and self-conscious, especially in public or with other people. They want to know the basics of how to pray without embarrassment but struggle to find clear biblical models or helpful answers to their questions.

pray first

Regardless of your past associations and prayer practices, it's time to approach it with a fresh desire to draw closer to God.

What's the Frequency?

While we may be tempted to say God prefers quality over quantity when it comes to our prayers, I believe He wants both. The Bible makes it clear that emphasizing quantity alone is not the point. This kind of score-keeping becomes legalistic, detached, and obligatory. Praying just to check it off your to-do list misses the point and loses an opportunity to connect to your supernatural power source.

Some people slip into praying this way without even realizing it. When they first committed to following Christ, maybe they learned to have a quiet time first thing every morning. Perhaps they were told it should include reading a devotional, a psalm, a passage from the Gospels, or some other certain sequence. They might have been instructed to thank God for three things before they asked Him for one.

Having a model and sequence to your prayers is not a bad thing, as we'll explore in part 2. But when you cling to the way you were instructed to pray as a safety net to make sure you're a good Christian, then the emphasis has shifted. Instead of drawing closer to the Lord, praising and worshiping Him, and getting to know Him more intimately, you have focused on doing a job, completing a task, and moving on to apparently more important matters. This would be like having a date night with your spouse

but not enjoying each other's company. Instead, you are merely going through the motions because it's supposed to be good for your marriage.

If keeping count is not the answer, then you might think it doesn't matter how often you pray, as long as you engage wholeheartedly when you do. This conclusion could be drawn from noticing how certain people in the Bible pray for specific purposes. Noah prayed in thanksgiving and praise when the floodwaters receded and he and his family once again stepped on dry land (Genesis 8:18–20). Hannah prayed diligently for the Lord to give her a child, which He did—her son and God's prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1:9–19). Elijah prayed boldly for God to demonstrate His power over the false idols of Israel's king and queen (1 Kings 18:36–37).

However, we see Jesus demonstrating both quality and consistency in His prayer life. Throughout his public ministry, Jesus knew the importance of getting away from the clamor of the crowds to connect with His Father: "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed" (Mark 1:35 NIV). Over and over, we see this pattern of Jesus making time to pray alone (Matthew 14:23; Luke 9:18, 22:39–41).

Keep in mind, though, that these are not the only times Jesus prayed—nor likely the other individuals mentioned. Prayer was so closely interwoven into their lives that it blanketed all areas of who they were and what they did. We find at least three dozen mentions in the Gospels of Jesus praying. He prayed in public (John 11:41–42), before choosing His disciples (Luke 6:12–13),

pray first

before healing people (Mark 7:34–35), after healing people (Luke 5:13–16), and when feeding the 5,000 (John 6:11). Jesus also taught on prayer and gave us the perfect outline for how to pray, which we'll later explore in great detail (Matthew 18).

Prayer must be a priority if you hope to cultivate a lifestyle of prayer.

Engaging purposefully *and* daily is key.

Without Ceasing

In the early church, followers of Jesus devoted themselves to prayer (Acts 2:42) and prayed continuously: “They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers” (Acts 1:14 NIV). The apostle Paul urged, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 ESV).

**“Pray as much
as you can while
you’re doing
everything else!”**

If this amount of praying sounds unreasonable, if not impossible, to you, don't worry—you're not alone. A new believer once asked me, “How can I pray all the time and still get everything else done?” My answer to him reflects how I interpret the emphasis in these passages—making prayer a priority: “Pray as much as you can while you're doing everything else!”

If prayer is meant to be communion with God, then if we do everything we do with God in mind—remaining mindful

of His presence with us, His purpose for us, and His image in everyone we meet—then we can pray without ceasing, without it even being a question of quantity. This is how we pray “without ceasing.” Otherwise, it may just turn into a game of tallying how many times we talk to God with our words rather than living in prayerful communion with God, which could ultimately become an improper reliance on works rather than receiving the gracious gift of His presence with us all the time. There’s no “right amount” of times to pray—that’s the point of learning to pray first. To make it practical, I pray one-sentence prayers throughout the day—literally in every situation. It’s a constant conversation with God.

The goal is to make prayer a priority so that you don’t miss out on deepening your relationship with God and enjoying all the benefits that go with it. Making it a priority requires being intentional and deliberate, which involves having a place and making a plan—and we’ll discuss both in upcoming chapters. Keep in mind, however, that the goal of being focused and committed to prayer is *relationship*, not *religion*. Prayer is about our personal relationship with a personal God—who is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—not fulfilling a mandatory ritual for its own sake.

Making prayer a priority ensures that you won’t minimize it as simply your default SOS. While prayer is not *less* than turning to God for help in a time of need, we have to remember that prayer is so much *more*. So often we act first, and only when we experience the consequences or face the unexpected do we ask God to bail us out. Prayer is not about living life on your own terms until you realize your limitations and then turning to God.

Prayer is about living in connection to God and, through that

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is *relationship*,
not *religion*.

connection, living out His purpose for your life, which is why it's important to talk to God before you act, before you decide, before you're tempted, before you speak, before you risk.

Think for a moment: How would your life be different if you were to *pray first before everything you do*?

First Things First

Although we are to pray throughout the day, I believe starting each day with prayer is paramount to keeping it your priority. I've been faithful to give God the first part of each day for more than forty years. Trust me, that says much more about Him than me. Praying each morning before my day gets started helps me connect to my Father first thing. I want Him to know that He is the most important thing in my day and in my life. It's not just that I'm praying—I'm praying first!

God wants to be first. He wants to be the center of our attention, our affection, our attitude, and our actions. God told the people of Israel, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3 NIV), and the same command applies to us. When we give God the first of anything—our income, our time, our attention, our energy—we declare that God is first in our lives. What we have—*everything* we have—belongs to Him and it comes from Him. We honor God by our first practices.

There are many ways you can communicate the honor of priority in your relationship with the Lord. Going to church on the first day of the week shows that He takes priority over your entire

pray first

week. Paying your tithe before you pay bills or make purchases is another way. And praying first thing in the morning—regardless of whether you're a morning person or not, regardless of whether it fits your schedule or not—shows God that nothing comes before Him. Because praying first is not just for you and your benefit.

Praying first honors God.

Keep Talking

In every situation you face on any given day, consider the difference if you prayed first. Before getting out of bed in the morning, pray in thanksgiving for a good night's rest and ask in advance for blessings and guidance for the day ahead. Before the kids leave for school, pray for them to remain safe, for them to gain knowledge and wisdom, and for them to reflect God's love. First thing when you get in the car, thank God when it starts, and ask for protection on the highway.

Just imagine the rest of your day and all the demands, roles, and responsibilities of your life right now. Quiet times of intimate talks with God are wonderful and necessary, but prayers-on-the-run may be more practical on a daily basis. Pray first and then click to join the big Zoom meeting at work. Pray first and then take the dog to the vet. Pray first and then check your balance online. Pray first and then finish your studies. Pray first and then cook dinner.

When the unexpected happens, before you start panicking and wondering how you will pay the bill, heal the wound, fix the

fridge, find your next job, or repair the relationship—you guessed it—pray first. Maybe you are already in a difficult situation and feel like you don't know what to say to God. You haven't prayed because you're afraid of what you really want to say to Him. That's okay—He can handle anything you give Him.

God wants you to come to Him just as you are. You don't have to make sure you're all bright and shiny when you approach Him. He wants the real you, even when you're upset or angry. God would rather you whine, complain, cry, curse, rant, and rave than withdraw. He can handle your passionate anger and your bitter fears and would rather you maintain relationship with Him than walk away, dismiss Him, and refuse to talk to Him. Indifference to God is worse than your anger, resentment, or frustration.

What if you're moody one day and happy the next? God still wants you to pray.

When you do something you know you shouldn't have? He still wants to talk to you.

Whatever you're going through, wherever you are, prayer can always be your priority.

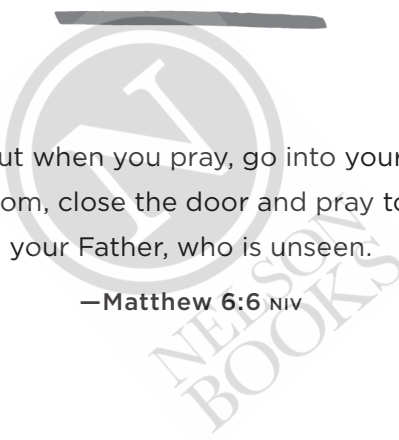
It's time to start praying *before* you act, not after.

No matter what you're doing, *pray first!*



t w o

the place of prayer



But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.

—Matthew 6:6 niv

Most mornings at home, I wake up while it's still dark outside. I've always been an early riser, and even when I change time zones or switch to daylight savings time, my body seems to awaken just before dawn. It usually doesn't matter how late I stayed up; just before sunrise, my body's natural alarm clock signals it's time to wake up. Over the years I've grown to love being a morning person, especially when it comes to prayer.

So I'll usually wake up while Tammy is still sleeping, just as

pray first

sunlight begins creeping over the horizon out our window. I'll head downstairs and make a cup of coffee, then head to my office. There's a chair we've had forever, with a matching ottoman that's torn on one corner, which is known as "my spot." I'll shut the door behind me, because when I pray, it can get pretty loud.

First, I'll turn on some instrumental worship music and adjust the wireless speaker on the table beside my chair. I love hymns and praise songs with words, but during my morning prayer time, I don't want lyrics distracting me from listening to God and expressing my heart to Him. I want our conversation to be the priority.

Then I'll grab my Bible and spend some time listening to the Lord speak from His Word. Sometimes I'm drawn to a particular passage, and other times I go to a spot addressing a specific topic that's relevant to the day. I'll sip my coffee and read that day's scripture as slowly as possible, savoring it and letting it sink into my spirit. If a word or phrase jumps out at me from the passage, I'll meditate on it and see what the Holy Spirit might be telling me.

After I've read the Word and listened to God, I'll choose a guide or resource to help me focus my prayers. I have a drawer filled with file folders and loose papers that I've collected over the past four decades. Most of the time, they remain scattered across my desk rather than tucked in my prayer drawer because I use them so often. Some are stapled together, while others are getting dog-eared at the corners from using them so often. My notes, comments, and edits are scribbled in pen and pencil on most sheets, indicating an idea, reference, or action based on that particular guide's instruction.

Then I pray, using my selected guide or resource—just like the ones I’m sharing with you in this book—to facilitate my time with God. I keep pens and highlighters handy to jot down anything noteworthy, such as someone I feel compelled to continue praying for or an idea or point for that week’s sermon. I move through the prayer time, always including a time of praise for all God is doing and worship for who He is. I’ll lift up my needs and the needs of my family, close friends, our staff at church, and others in our Highlands family.

By the end of my prayer time, usually somewhere between thirty minutes and an hour, I’ll have cranked up the praise-and-worship music, and there’s a good chance I might be singing. Then I’ll usually go grab another cup of coffee and head upstairs to shower and dress and get going.

Many mornings when I return to our bedroom, Tammy is up and in the midst of her own prayer time. She will be sitting in her special chair, reading her Bible or bowing her head. Sometimes she’s whispering in conversation with the Father, and many times she already has a tissue in hand for the tears that inevitably come. Seeing her so intimately connected to God always moves me. I can only imagine how He feels when she—or any of us, really—open our hearts to Him.

Aprons and Prayer Shawls

I share these details with you not to brag or imply anyone should pray like we do, but simply to make two important points about

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prioritizing prayer. First, *where* you pray on a consistent basis is important. Like all the other details of communicating with someone, your setting matters. Where we pray is important and often facilitates our ability to focus on God without interruption or distraction. Jesus had special places to pray, and we need one too.

The second reason I describe our prayer places is to show you a little of the variety. While it's important to have a special prayer place, there's nothing necessarily special about the place itself—other than it's your meeting place with God. It doesn't have to be a dedicated room or private chapel. In fact, it doesn't even have to be a distinct physical place but could be one you take with you, as the ancient Jewish tradition reminds us.

When Jewish people prayed, they were either in the temple or beneath their prayer shawl. Known as a *tallit*, this woven covering was usually held above or over the heads of those wishing to pray. In the intimacy of this individual tent, the person could shut out distractions while also signaling to others that they were not to be disturbed. The tallit was considered part of the standard apparel for Jewish men, draped over the shoulders or around their cloak, which made it portable and instantly available. They always had a place to pray that was all their own.

Many people, both Jewish and Christian, continue to use prayer shawls today. John Wesley, the great eighteenth-century evangelist, once told how his mother, Susanna, used her apron as her prayer shawl. She would raise it over her face to block out the many distractions of her nineteen (yes, nineteen!) children.¹ Even with her large family clamoring for her attention, Mrs. Wesley found a way to pray daily and privately.

That's what having a place to pray is all about—consistency and intimacy.

Go to Your Room

The consistency and intimacy we need in prayer come from following the instructions Jesus gave His followers about prayer. Before He gave us the model of prayer we know as the Lord's Prayer, Jesus emphasized the importance of making prayer relational and personal, not public and conspicuous:

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But 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.” (Matthew 6:5–6 NIV)

The contrast here implies that the purpose of a private prayer room is to avoid the temptation that often accompanies public prayer: the desire to attract the admiring attention of others. We tend to think we need prayer rooms to insulate us from our lives' many interruptions, diversions, and distractions, but Jesus says having a private prayer place also reinforces humility. While you and I may not be tempted to pray loud, eloquent prayers in public so that others will think

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us amazing Christians, the need to keep our conversations with God to ourselves still matters.

The word translated as “room” in Jesus’ instruction is from the Greek *tameion*, which refers to a storage chamber or secret room found in many Jewish households at that time. Such small spaces were practical for not only storing wine, linens, or other domestic items but also hiding valuables and money. Those who heard Jesus make this reference likely understood that He wasn’t being literal but figurative. He wanted them to understand prayer is about connecting with God personally, not performing for others to see.

This principle still applies to us even if we’re not praying publicly. Many people still take pride in performing for others in more subtle ways, wanting to be seen as someone admired and respected for their faith. The tendency to people-please causes some believers to work hard to be seen as a “good Christian.”

This might come out in the way you casually mention what you’re reading for your quiet time or making sure your coworkers know that you got up early to stop and pray at your church before clocking in at work. It might be making an effort to be obvious and noticeable when you pray before meals in restaurants. Anytime you shift the emphasis from focusing only on God to soliciting the approval and admiration of others, you run the risk of being like the hypocritical religious leaders of Jesus’ day.

“Going to your room” and “praying in secret” happens inside your heart.

Make It Your Own

Nonetheless, retreating with God in the privacy of prayer can be reinforced by where you commune with Him logistically. Whether you use your apron as a prayer shawl like Mrs. Wesley or have a dedicated room in your home where you pray, the key is to go there daily to talk with the Lord. I believe it's the best way to start your day, but you decide the time that works best for you. The key is consistency in an environment conducive to connecting with God.

I've known people who use duck blinds, skateboard parks, beauty parlors, and cafeterias as their regular place of prayer. Others have a designated spot at home, their office, or their church. It could be a closet, a walk-in pantry, a corner of the basement, or a window seat in the attic. Again, the place should help you be alone with God in your heart.

Many people tell me they like their place of prayer to be comfortable but not so comfortable that they doze off. Some people have bulletin boards in their place of prayer where they can post pictures of family and loved ones they pray for regularly along with specific requests or notes to remind them of upcoming events requiring prayer. You might have a favorite verse written large to remind you of a particular promise related to a need or request.

Others use their phones in a similar way. They use apps, keep lists, listen to music, and organize pictures expressly for their prayer times. This method works well for people who travel frequently or don't feel drawn to return to the same location each

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day. Using their electronic version of a prayer shawl, they can spend time with God outside, in a coffee shop, on a plane, or during lunch.

Keep in mind, though, that you can have all kinds of tech assistance to facilitate your prayer time without actually praying. You can assemble dozens of books on prayer, scented candles, and praise-and-worship music and *still* not truly connect intimately with God in prayer. You can decorate a dedicated room in your home with beautiful pictures, a giant cross, and stained glass windows, but those details may mean nothing if you're not regularly going there to pray.

Where you pray is a matter of personal preference—as long as it helps you connect with God.

Get Creative

Having a regular place of prayer usually helps you prioritize prayer—until it doesn't. If you begin to feel bored or in a rut in your designated spot, then it's time to get creative and break up your routine. There are many ways to be creative in your prayer life, and we'll explore more of them in the chapters ahead, but a good way to jump-start your time with God is to try a new location.

It makes sense that changing where you meet God affects the quality of your time together. Early in our marriage, Tammy and I would have a date night because we knew we had to prioritize our time together in order to stay connected and keep our bond

strong. Especially when our kids were little and I was focused on doing all that God called me to do, I looked forward to my regular weekly date with my wife—except for one thing: where to go. We were often both so tired that it became hard to be creative or spontaneous.

I'd ask, "Where do you want to go, honey?" and she would say, "Oh, anywhere is fine." Which meant I'd often choose the same restaurant where we usually ate because I knew the food would be good, prices were fair, and it was close to home. We enjoyed going there most weeks, and neither of us thought much about it—this restaurant became our default date-night place.

But after several months, when we realized we were going there almost every week, we knew it was definitely time for a change. By that time we had the menu memorized even though we typically ordered the same thing each visit. We knew the names of all the waitstaff and often the names of their spouses and kids. We sat at the same booth near the back corner because it was more private. While this familiarity was comfortable, it wasn't doing much to help us be closer and strengthen our relationship.

So we decided that we wouldn't go to the same spot twice for the next six months. We agreed to take turns deciding where we'd go and what we would do there. As a result, we ended up enjoying those new adventures much more because they forced us out of our comfort zone.

If your prayer life feels like it's on autopilot, maybe it's time to try different locations. Keep in mind that the emphasis is on spending alone time with God, so you might not want a place that's too crowded or noisy. Then again, that might be exactly

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where the Holy Spirit leads you to pray! Maybe go somewhere you normally don't. Try a place of worship you've never visited before. Pray for neighbors as you walk around the block. Volunteer at a shelter or food pantry and make it the center of your prayer time.

There's no right or wrong place as long as you pray—take God everywhere you go and keep the conversation going. Try to find the sweet spot in between having a consistent place and a creative catalyst for your prayer time. Just as going to the same restaurant for date night became monotonous and too easy, doing prayer in the same place for too long can contribute to spiritual stagnation. Don't be afraid to get creative and plan a special date with God!

Take It Outside

Perhaps one of the best places to connect with God is in the great outdoors. In a natural setting, you're sure to find details and vistas that cause you to marvel at their beauty—and the One who created them. Many people tell me they like praying on their porch, patio, or deck because it's never the same experience twice. Although their prayer place stays the same, the weather, lighting, and season create a unique environment every time.

Based on what we're told in the Bible about His time on earth, Jesus seemed to favor praying to His Father outdoors. In fact, nearly every reference to Jesus praying found in the Gospels mentions a natural setting. This makes sense in that Jesus didn't own a house or even have a regular place where He lived. As His ministry grew and He became more recognized, finding a

There's no right or
wrong place as long
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spot outdoors likely made it easier for Him to be alone without interruption. Here are a few of the key references to Jesus praying outside:

- “After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone.” (Matthew 14:23 NIV)
- “Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’” (Matthew 26:36 NIV)
- “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” (Mark 1:35 NIV)
- “After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.” (Mark 6:46 NIV)
- “One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.” (Luke 6:12 NIV)

Notice that Christ seemed to favor the mountains, the wilderness or desolate places, and the garden of Gethsemane. I’ve been to the garden of Gethsemane in Israel, located in the valley between the Mount of Olives and the eastern side of the Holy City of Jerusalem. Many times I’ve wondered if Jesus liked to pray there because He could be so close to the city He loved and the people He loved.

If you want to pray like Jesus, consider finding a spot overlooking your neighborhood, community, or city where you can view its panorama. You don’t have to go outside, though, to connect to

His heart for people, especially those lost and suffering. Wherever you pray, you can encounter the heart of God and be transformed. You will likely improve your ability to make prayer a priority if you have a designated spot, but the only prayer closet that's essential is within you.

Remember, a private place helps us pray—but pray wherever you are.





three

the plan of prayer



Lord, teach us to pray . . .

—Luke 11:1 NIV

NELSON
BOOKS

If you want to prioritize prayer, you need a plan.

While this may seem obvious, my experience tells me that having a plan for your prayer time may be so obvious that it gets overlooked. When people tell me they struggle to pray, I'll ask them to describe their prayer process. Consistency is sometimes the issue, which may have to do with having a regular place and time to pray. More often, however, consistency and place are not the issues—it's what to do when they get there. They need a plan

pray first

for their prayer time, to help them focus and go deeper than just a cursory communication.

Without a plan, we're likely to ramble in a stream-of-consciousness monologue. God knows our hearts, so ultimately the problem isn't lack of communication—it's the quality of the communication. When we don't have a prayer plan, we're much more prone to get in our own way, either rushing and rambling to check it off our lists or reciting and reading prayers without engaging our hearts.

Keeping It Real

Occasionally, someone will tell me that having a prayer plan hinders their spontaneity and ability to connect with God in various circumstances, moods, and settings. "Following a plan sounds like it will kill the romance and mystery of relating to God," one woman told me. "Real relationships don't require plans," she explained.

"Allow me to challenge that," I replied, confident we knew each other well enough for me to push back. "Do you and your husband ever discuss how to parent your children?"

"Yes, of course," she said, chuckling. "Usually when there's a problem."

"How about your finances? Do you two have conversations about budgets and bills on a regular basis?"

She nodded.

"What about your goals and dreams? Your fears and concerns for the future?"

“Sometimes. I see what you’re saying,” she said. “But those all come up based on our circumstances and contexts. Many times those issues will just come up in the course of everyday life.”

“I agree—that’s often the case when Tammy and I discuss things. But early in our marriage, we learned that it’s helpful to have regular check-in times when we focus on the kids, our finances, vacations and big events coming up, our physical health, and the health of our marriage. We don’t have big agendas—we simply want to connect and get on the same page. Our commitment to discuss our priorities makes sure we stay connected. Having a plan when you pray accomplishes the same thing.”

Rather than undermining true connection and a deeper relationship, having a plan when you pray does just the opposite. It frees you up to stay focused on what matters most. It prevents you from overlooking or neglecting certain aspects of your relationship. Having a prayer plan will help you take your time with God seriously.

Prayer Protocol

Using a plan when you pray also provides a protocol for your connection time with God. In other words, a plan not only focuses your topics and methods of praying but also facilitates the tone and attitude of how you meet God. It shows an awareness of how important God is to you and how much you love communicating with Him.

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Even though my kids know they can ask me anything, if they just barged into my office and directly asked for things without first acknowledging our relationship, I would feel disrespected. Instead of “Hey, I need some money!” they typically check in first and reconnect. Most times, they might knock on my door and look in. “Hi, Dad, how’s your day going? Is now a good time to talk?” Similarly, we enter into our conversation with God by focusing on Him before ourselves. Our focus should be on relational connection, including the kind of respect and honor God deserves from us.

When we don’t have a protocol in planning our time with Him each day, I wonder how God feels when we just start asking for things. Instead of showing honor and respect, instead of leading up to larger concerns, instead of focusing on our relationship, we often act like we’re placing an order at the Heavenly Drive-Thru. “Uh, yeah, Lord, I’d really like You to heal my sprained ankle, my cousin’s cancer, and that lady with bad arthritis at church. I need more money as well to pay all the bills that keep piling up. And You know I really want a promotion at work. Okay, thanks, God—that’s it for now.” If that’s how you’re praying, you might as well add a side of fries with that!

We don’t begin conversations with friends this way, and we shouldn’t begin our time with God this way either. It’s thoughtless, rude, and disrespectful to the relationship. It reflects an attitude that God is just there for what He can do for you. Such discourtesy treats God not as your Abba Father but like a genie. Obviously, that’s not who He is, and that’s not how your relationship with Him should work.

Let the Lord know you recognize and acknowledge who He is and that you love Him simply for being your Father.

Prayer Freeze

Some people who struggle to know what to talk about with God may have experienced what I call “prayer freeze” at an early age. I remember being part of “prayer circles” when I was a child in Sunday school. Our teacher had us put our chairs in a circle, hold hands, and go around so that each person could pray. When you were finished praying, you were supposed to give a gentle squeeze to the next person to signal their turn.

As a shy kid I was already nervous about having to say anything in front of others, and now I had to include God. The unspoken rule was not to repeat what had already been prayed, so I would sit there dreading the inevitable squeeze, afraid that I would stutter, stammer, or say nothing at all. I felt the available list of items get smaller and smaller with each classmate who prayed. Sometimes, I just kept the circle moving with a squeeze-squeeze because I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to pray to God but worried about how I’d sound to everyone else.

Other times when I knew I was supposed to pray, I learned prayers that made me wonder what I was actually saying. You know, like “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” I don’t know about you, but that always seemed a little creepy to me, like any kid wants to think about dying right before bedtime.

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Grace before meals wasn't much better. "God is great, God is good, now we thank Him for our food." My sister and I took turns trying to see who could say it faster, and the result was more like sound effects than prayers, much to our parents' disapproval. Again, not a great model for communicating with God.

No wonder I felt like I didn't know how to pray! Maybe you felt like that too. And it's not only kids wondering how we should pray. In fact, some of Jesus' disciples, who most likely learned traditional Jewish prayers growing up, overheard their Master praying and must have been stunned—because they asked Him to teach them to pray like that. "Once Jesus was in a certain place praying. As he finished, one of his disciples came to him and said, 'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.' Jesus said, 'This is how you should pray . . .'" (Luke 11:1–2 NLT).

Clearly, the way Jesus prayed must have been different from the methods and prayers they had experienced growing up.

The Lord's Prayer . . . or the Lord's Outline?

In the Jewish culture of their time, these men probably learned traditional Jewish prayers that had been passed down from generation to generation, memorizing the words as they matured into adulthood. These would have included prayers to pray at different times, events, and holy days. But like so many things we're told we must learn, these prayers may have seemed disconnected from having an actual conversation with God.

They became set pieces tied to religion instead of open doors to relationship.

There's nothing wrong with praying such prayers—and we'll be looking at several of them in part 2—but the key is *how* and *why* you use them. Simply put, prayers should draw you closer to God. Prayers that are treated as a script, rote recital, or ancestral throwback don't facilitate a vibrant, communicative relationship between you and God.

That's likely one of the qualities the disciples noted when they overheard Jesus praying. He addressed God as His Father in a tone that was probably personal, conversational, and intimate. Some of the words and phrases they heard Jesus use may have been similar to the Jewish prayers they already knew, but *how* Jesus used them to address His Father must have seemed different.

In part 2 we'll carefully explore the model of prayer Jesus taught His followers, but for now let's consider that He didn't teach them a specific prayer to pray but a *plan* for prayer. What if Christ was not passing along special poetic phrases to be recited as an incantation to open heaven's gate? What if what we now call the Lord's Prayer is actually what we should be using as the Lord's Outline?

There are two gospel accounts of Jesus teaching this prayer model. In Luke, one of the disciples specifically asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. In Matthew, the Lord's instruction on how to pray is included as part of the Sermon on the Mount: "Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them" (Matthew 5:1-2 NIV).

Simply put, prayers should draw you closer to God. Prayers that are treated as a script, rote recital, or ancestral throwback don't facilitate a vibrant, communicative relationship between you and God.

In both gospel accounts, Jesus wanted to instruct His followers, to teach them how to connect with God as their Father as opposed to reciting a memorized set of traditional words. Rather than going through the motions, Jesus stressed the importance of examining one's motives for praying—and frequently called out the Pharisees for focusing on external appearances rather than their internal connection to God. In one confrontation with them, Jesus called them hypocrites and said, “You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. . . . Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

“These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.”

(Matthew 15:6-9 NIV)

By referencing Isaiah (29:13), Jesus indicated that this tendency to give God lit service while remaining far from Him was nothing new. This was the radical aspect of the prayer Jesus taught His followers to use—it provided a plan for maintaining an intimate relationship with the living God.

Don't Perform Your Piety

Based on how Jesus prefaced His model of prayer in Matthew, some people had apparently been using prayer as a status symbol

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of their righteousness. “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them,” Jesus warned. “If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:1 NIV). Notice that He didn’t tell them not to pray in public. Rather, Jesus cautioned them not to pray in public *in order to impress others with their righteousness*. To drive home His point, Jesus continued:

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But 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. 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 6:5–8 NIV)

Two points stand out in this elaboration. First, don’t pray as a performance of your piety in hopes that others will notice how spiritual you are. That’s what hypocrites do. They’re not praying to connect with God—they’re praying to appear better than others. Instead, keep your prayers quiet and private, personal between you and God. Second, don’t assume that God rewards you by your word count. Jesus cited the way pagans kept babbling in hopes that using words would be more effective. We don’t need to worry about quantity as much as quality when we pray; our heavenly

Father already knows our needs without our articulating them. Again, prayer is not about performance or “doing enough.” Prayer is about connecting with God.

Jesus then taught His followers the perfect plan for how to pray. Based on how He prefaced this model, I believe being deliberate about a plan for prayer matters because it forces you to consider why you’re praying. Every plan has a purpose. The hypocrites and pagans didn’t need to follow a plan when praying because they weren’t pursuing a relational conversation with God. One group just wanted to look holy and morally superior, while the other wanted to keep talking in hopes they’d get what they requested.

Putting a prayer plan in place helps you stay focused on the real purpose of prayer: knowing and staying close with God.

Creative Planning

Think of your prayer plan as a compass to help you navigate your relationship with the Lord. The plan you choose will vary depending on where you want to go in knowing Him each time you pray. You may want to focus on His grace and mercy, so you use the Psalms as a guide for exploring this aspect of God’s character. Perhaps you want to pray on behalf of loved ones who are struggling, so you make prayers of intercession (prayers on behalf of or for the needs of others) your focus. You might be struggling with ongoing temptation, so you rely on spiritual warfare prayers based on relevant passages of Scripture. Choosing a plan for your

pray first

prayer time can help you clarify your most pressing concerns before you turn them over to God.

Knowing when to change your plan and shift focus is also important. Plans often reinforce your consistency but can become stale over time. You don't want your plan to become a rut or a shallow way to pray without connecting with God on a deep, personal level. Creativity and variety in your plans can help keep your relationship engaging and dynamic. Including music, using different devotionals and Bible commentaries, and using various formats often keep your prayer plans fresh and exciting. The more plans you have on hand, the more options you have in how you spend time with God.

I've spent my life collecting plans for prayer. Basically, the result is everything I'm sharing with you in these pages. Beginning with the prayer-starters I learned from some of my pastors and mentors, I've accumulated a dozen pages with various prayer plans, lists, verses, and prompts. Some are handwritten, others are old-fashioned copies, and a few are handouts given to me. If there's been a secret to sustaining my relationship with God, it's using these plans to seek Him, know Him, worship and praise Him, and love Him. I've always loved teaching prayer, not because I've mastered it, but because I'm determined to know God and grow our relationship as much as possible in this lifetime.

Prayer plans aren't only for your individual prayer times, of course. Some of my favorite memories of pastoring are the prayer services I've been privileged to experience. Early in my ministry career when I was a youth pastor, I led the Wednesday night service at our church. To help prepare for that service, I would invite

the entire youth group to my house on Tuesday evenings to pray. Usually, at least a hundred or so kids would show up, raiding my fridge and piling on cushions along the floor. They would all laugh and joke around until it was time to pray and get serious. Pulling from my own collection, I'd make copies to pass out to guide our time.

Those handouts eventually became the curated booklet we now use at Highlands entitled—you guessed it—"Pray First." And that booklet has been expanded into the book you're now holding. There's nothing magical about the models and methods of prayer that I love to share with others. But I believe having a plan when you pray can be a conduit for the supernatural connection between you and God.

Don't just pray first—*plan* to pray first!

