

A GUIDE TO SUNDAY PRAYER

PRACTICAL INSTRUCTION FOR PRAYING DURING THE WORSHIP SERVICE

PRAYING IN PUBLIC

The way we pray in secret (Matt 6:6) is different from the way we pray in public. Private prayer is heightened by the reality of our personal relationship with God. Though we pray as part of the Church, remembering others in our prayers, we are praying in such a way that our personal relationship with God is cultivated and deepened. Though you are coming to a King with reverence, there is nevertheless an intimacy to the prayers we pray.

Public prayer is different. When one prays in public he or she prays not as an individual, but as one representing the entire church. Public prayer is offered remembering those who are listening to us, praying with us. Thus, our prayers to God are also meant *to edify and build up those that hear us* (1 Cor 14:13-19). So while you shouldn't think it's necessary to write down your prayer, you should be intentional in putting thought into the content and manner of the prayer.

The following are some simple directions meant to be a help with public praying. These are appropriate for anyone offering prayer during a worship service. These directions are both practical and theological in nature. Remember that these directions are *meant to be a help and not some rigid pattern to follow*. They are not part of a check-list to tick-off or a series of requirements to follow. Instead, they are designed to help make our public prayers to be the most glorifying to God and edifying to his people.

1. Pray in the Plural. Remember again that when you pray in the worship service, you are praying on behalf of the entire church. You are leading everyone to the throne of God. Thus, you should not say things like, 'I pray' or 'I'm asking.' Pray in the plural with phrases like, 'We come before you this morning' or 'We pray now,' etc. This also follows the pattern of prayer the Lord gave us (Matt 6:9).

2. Pray the Scriptures. The language of the Bible is always right, safe, and edifying to God's people (2 Tim 3:16-17). It is always powerful and effective at gripping the believer's heart (Heb 4:12-13). It will always lead us to pray with kingdom priorities (Matt 6:33). Therefore, whenever possible, you should try to use the very words of the Bible as well as its themes and priorities in your public prayers.

3. Pray the Gospel. There is nothing more encouraging to God's people than a prayer that is full of Christ and the grace we have received through him. Whenever possible, offer praise and thanksgiving for Christ's saving work through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Tie the gospel to your words, making its reality the basis and motivation of your prayers (Eph 3:7-14).

4. Pray an Appropriate Length. Various occasions call for varying lengths of prayer. Basically, we are saying that one should offer a prayer that is neither too long nor too short (Ecc 5:2; Matt 6:7). Often, wisdom in this area comes over time as you listen to the prayers of others and gain personal experience in praying publicly. For the most part, a basic rule of thumb is 1 to 2 minutes for public prayers in a service.

5. Pray with an Appropriate Tone and Attitude. Because God desires the prayers of his people, we should come boldly to his throne with confidence that he will hear us (1 John 3:21-24; Heb 4:16). This does not mean that we should go carelessly before God in prayer. It is still the humble person that attracts God's gaze (Isa 66:2). But it does mean that our prayers should be full of hope and joy in the goodness and power of the Lord to whom we are praying. Furthermore, those praying in public should not use pretentious, overly familiar, or irreverent language. Language that is flippant and jokey is never befitting prayer (Ex 20:7; Heb 12:28). Neither is language that is exaggerated in its importance appropriate. Public prayer should not seek to impress anyone (Matt 6:5).

6. Pray with Focused Concerns. Think about what you want to say before you pray. Paul gives us some good, basic directions for prayer (e.g. Eph 6:18-20; 1 Tim 2:1-7). But you cannot and should not cover everything in one prayer. Do not begin with a vague list that meanders around all of the church's members and ministries. Plan for your prayer, even using a simple outline if you need to. What kind of prayer have you been asked to offer? A prayer of adoration to God? Then think about a short list of specific attributes for which to praise him. Are you going to offer a prayer of confession? Again, think of a list specific enough that it would cover most people, but not so specific that you would be singling out people who are listening. If you're praying after the sermon, bring in some of the themes you just heard proclaimed from the passage.

7. Pray with Spiritual Preparation. Make sure that before you pray, your heart is right before God (Ps 66:18). Spend time in prayer during the week, especially the night and morning, before you are to pray, examining your life and making any necessary confession and repentance. As much as possible, prepare to bring God's people to the throne of grace by spending time there yourself beforehand (Heb 7:27).

PRAYING AFTER THE SERMON

After that general consideration of praying in public, here are some specifics of what we are looking for when it comes to the prayers offered in response to the morning sermon.

1. Pray with Balance. These prayers are meant to be a response to the message we have just heard from God's Word. So, in our prayers, we should include: *adoration*, praising God for who he is and what he has done for us; *confession*, admitting sin and seeking grace as we repent; *thanksgiving*, expressing our gratitude for the Word and it's work in our lives; and *supplication*, asking for God to be at work bringing about change in our lives (Eph 6:18).

2. Pray with Specificity. The goal isn't simply to pray for whatever is on our mind, no matter important that may be. You will be leading the entire congregation in asking God to work in our hearts a lasting application of the sermon. Thus, the goal is to pray about the specific issues brought out from the sermon's explanation of the Scripture text. God's Word should be directing our prayers during this time (Rom 10:17).

3. Pray for Believers and Unbelievers. The bulk of the prayers offered after the sermon will be for God's people. We should be asking God to graciously apply his word to our lives that we might become more mature in Christ (Col 1:28). But we shouldn't forget that not everyone in the service is a believer. We should include even a small prayer for those that are lost, asking God to open their eyes to the gospel that they might trust Christ as Savior and Lord (2 Cor 4:3-6).

4. Pray to be Heard. This seems simple but it's important. You are praying for the edification of the entire assembly (1 Cor 14:13-19). No one can be edified by you if they can't hear you. So, when you pray, lift your voice's volume above what is normal. Seek to be heard by the congregation. This instruction goes hand-in-hand with what follows.

5. Pray from Where You're At. There's no need to come to the front when you pray. Simply stand where you're at and, depending on where you're at in the auditorium, turn to face the congregation. For example, if you're in the front, turn around. If you on the sides, turn towards the center of the room. If you're in the back, there's no need to turn at all. The rule of thumb is that you want to be facing the most amount of people. Related to this, pray where you're at in the order given to you. Rather than leave it up to the group praying who will go first, risking long pauses or people praying over each other, we will assign an order. Please make a note of this order and follow it to ensure a smooth and edifying prayer time (1 Cor 14:40).