



Real prayer

**CONNECTING WITH
OUR HEAVENLY
FATHER**

by Anne Woodcock

Real prayer

The Good Book Guide to Real prayer

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Introduction: Good Book Guides

Every Bible-study group is different—yours may take place in a church building, in a home or in a cafe, on a train, over a leisurely mid-morning coffee or squashed into a 30-minute lunch break. Your group may include new Christians, mature Christians, non-Christians, mums and tots, students, businessmen or teens. That's why we've designed these *Good Book Guides* to be flexible for use in many different situations.

Our aim in each session is to uncover the meaning of a passage, and see how it fits into the “big picture” of the Bible. But that can never be the end. We also need to appropriately apply what we have discovered to our lives. Let's take a look at what is included:

- ↔ **Talkabout:** Most groups need to “break the ice” at the beginning of a session, and here's the question that will do that. It's designed to get people talking around a subject that will be covered in the course of the Bible study.
- ↓ **Investigate:** The Bible text for each session is broken up into manageable chunks, with questions that aim to help you understand what the passage is about. **The Leader's Guide** contains **guidance on questions**, and sometimes ☑ additional “follow-up” questions.
- 🗉 **Explore more (optional):** These questions will help you connect what you have learned to other parts of the Bible, so you can begin to fit it all together like a jig-saw; or occasionally look at a part of the passage that's not dealt with in detail in the main study.
- **Apply:** As you go through a Bible study, you'll keep coming across **apply** sections. These are questions to get the group discussing what the Bible teaching means in practice for you and your church. 🗉 **Getting personal** is an opportunity for you to think, plan and pray about the changes that you personally may need to make as a result of what you have learned.
- ↑ **Pray:** We want to encourage prayer that is rooted in God's word—in line with His concerns, purposes and promises. So each session ends with an opportunity to review the truths and challenges highlighted by the Bible study, and turn them into prayers of request and thanksgiving.

The **Leader's Guide** and introduction provide historical background information, explanations of the Bible texts for each session, ideas for **optional extra** activities, and guidance on how best to help people uncover the truths of God's word.

Why study *Real prayer*?

What does the word “prayer” make you think of? For many, it’s a religious activity for old people and vicars. Or a weird superstitious ritual. Or something they’ve done in a moment of desperation. For Christians, the word often conjures up a heavy sense of duty—something we ought, and struggle, to do.

“Prayer” is one of those words that can make us cringe inwardly. Perhaps we feel confusion because we don’t really understand what prayer is or how it works. Or we feel frustration because great things that people promise will happen when we pray never materialise. Or we feel guilt, because actually we do have some idea of what prayer is and why we should do it, but we still don’t!

Yet despite the confusion and mixed feelings, at one time or another just about everyone prays. Millions worldwide do it habitually or devotedly, every day. And in moments of terror, even atheists may cry out to the God they don’t believe in. We’re humans, so we pray—but often as though we’re shooting in the dark.

Wonderfully, the Bible—and Jesus especially—shows us what real prayer is: why and how we can talk to the real, living God with humble confidence, knowing that he will hear and answer.

That’s not true of all or even most of what is claimed to be prayer in our world. Some prayer is not really about talking; some is not talking to the real living God; and some is done in a way that God will not respond to. It’s only through Jesus Christ that we can “connect” with God.

This Good Book Guide looks at what the Christian message tells us about how and why we can talk to God knowing that he will listen and respond. Forget formulas and techniques. This is about real communication with the real God—the unique Christian privilege of real prayer.

1

Luke 18 v 9-14

WHY PRAY?



talkabout

1. How do you answer the question: why pray?



investigate

The Bible says a lot about prayer, but—surprisingly perhaps—it doesn't specifically answer the question: why pray? And although the Bible assumes that it is important and right for people to pray to God, it also highlights a fundamental problem with our prayers to God: "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59 v 2).

Jesus' story of two men in the Jerusalem Temple, contrasting a prayer that God won't listen to with a prayer that he wonderfully answers, reveals the first and foundational reason for why we should pray to God, and the kind of prayer that will connect us with him.

Read Luke 18 v 9-14

2. The two men in Jesus' story—the Pharisee and the tax collector—are based on real people that Jesus has already met in Luke's Gospel. What do the following passages reveal about Pharisees, tax collectors, and Jesus? (Complete the table on the next page.)

DICTIONARY

Righteousness (v 9): goodness; being right in God's eyes.

Parable (v 9): a simple story with a deeper meaning.

Pharisee (v 10): member of a religious group that was very strict about Jewish law.

Tax collector (v 10): a deeply despised job that involved collaborating with the Roman occupiers of Israel, and cheating taxpayers.

Justified (v 14): given a verdict of "not guilty".

	PHARISEES	TAX COLLECTORS	JESUS
Luke 15 v 1-7			
Luke 16 v 13-15		X	

3. Contrast the two men in Jesus' parable. Think about:

- their way of life.

- their posture in the temple.

- what they pray about or for.

- The Pharisee isn't lying when he says, "I am not like ... this tax collector", so what's the problem with saying this?



4. The Pharisee's prayer begins, "God, I thank you..." but look at his next sentence (v 12). What is the real focus of this prayer?

- What, then, would you say is the real purpose of his prayer?

Alternative translations of the beginning of verse 11 are: "The Pharisee ... prayed thus with himself" (NKJV) or "... prayed to himself" (ESV footnotes). The effect of the Pharisee's prayer is that he doesn't speak to God at all!

5. Compare the tax collector's prayer. How is it opposite to the Pharisee's prayer?

- How does Jesus show that this kind of prayer "works"?

6. Why does Jesus tell this story (v 9)?



- What is his message to these people (and us)?

7. From this story, especially verse 14, how do you think Jesus would answer the question: Why pray?

- How would he answer the question: What kind of prayer moves God to act?

➔ **apply**

It's possible to think that we're praying, and yet that might be so far from talking to the real God based on the reality of who he is and what we are like that it isn't real prayer at all!

8. What antidote to this have we seen (see question 2, 15 v 1), and how can we encourage this antidote in our own lives and churches?

Unlike the tax collector, many—because of shame and guilt—don't pray when in fact they can and should.



9. What antidote to this have we seen (see question 2, 15 v 3-7), and how can we encourage this antidote in our own lives and churches?



getting personal

Who do you most often resemble—the Pharisee or the tax collector?

Think through these questions:

How often do you confess sin?

How much of your praying involves thanking God for what he has done for you?

How often do you go without praying at all?

If your first two answers are “not much” and your last one is “quite a lot”, chances are that you are still struggling with your “inner Pharisee”.

Take time right now to pray the tax collector’s prayer and think about Jesus’ words in 18 v 14.



explore more

optional

In Athens Paul proclaimed the truth about God to people who knew nothing about him. Although the word “prayer” is not mentioned, Paul speaks about seeking, reaching out for and finding God.

▶ Read Acts 17 v 24-31

What reasons for why we should pray can you work out from what Paul says here? (See v 25, 27, 30 and 31.)

What here should humble us, and what should encourage us to pray?

Imagine someone asks you to explain prayer. Use this passage to explain why humbly asking God for mercy is the only way to truly pray.



 **investigate**

10. Followers of Jesus have now received God's mercy in Christ. So why do we need to keep praying? Find reasons from the following passages:

- Luke 21 v 34-36

- Romans 15 v 30-32

- 1 Timothy 2 v 1-4

- How do these reasons to keep praying underline the lessons of Jesus' parable in Luke 18?

 **apply**

11. Write down the last three things you have prayed for. If your prayers rarely reflect the themes highlighted in Q10, why do you think that might be?





getting personal

Write down something you hope to learn about prayer in this Bible-study series, or some way in which you hope your praying will change.



pray

Learn from the error of the Pharisee. How have you talked yourself up and done down others? How do you need to humble yourself? Take time now to confess these things to God.

Learn from the tax collector. What things do you need God's mercy for? Spend time asking God for these things.

