



And When you Pray... Promoting Personal Prayer in Youth and Leaders

What is prayer? How, when, and why do we pray? What does the Bible have to say about prayer? These may seem like basic or overly simplistic questions, especially amongst youth group students or church workers. We know that prayer is speaking to God in words and thoughts. However, cultivating habits of prayer in our lives can be a challenging and even confusing.

Teens are likely to profess that they pray on a regular basis, since they participate in public prayer during a church service or family blessings uttered before meals. Yet if questioned about spiritual disciplines or individual devotion time, many young people (and even adults) admit that their daily habits could use more attention. They might not be aware of or nervous to approach prayer on a personal level.

Prayer is a critical component of Christian living. As Martin Luther wrote, "To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing." Scripture invites and urges us to pray "without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Consistent communication with God is a strong weapon against the enemy and provides us with peace that passes understanding (Philippians 4:7). Prayer ought to be as much a part of daily routine as bathing—well, perhaps more frequent than that, in the case of some. It should not be treated as a chore, but as a privilege and blessing that we appreciate as children of God.

It's important to support confident prayer habits in teens, so that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, they carry those practices into adulthood and genuinely cling to them. When encouraging personal prayer, though, it can be difficult to strike a balance between rote recitation and vague "meditation" or "spirituality." On one hand, students might easily rattle off the Lord's Prayer or Luther's Morning Prayer since they have them memorized. In doing so, they might give little thought to the power or purpose behind the words.

On the other hand, prayer is not just quiet time for contemplation, but a meaningful practice. Providing substance and structure can assist in establishing patterns in approaching our Heavenly Father. Prayer should be directed to Jesus with firm trust that the God who saved us from our sin will listen. As youth leaders, we can offer a variety of resources, suggestions and support systems to encourage prayer. We must also remember to demonstrate it in our own lives.

So how do we do it? What is the secret fail-proof formula to teaching teenagers how to pray and establishing positive faith habits in their young lives? Well, there is no secret formula, unfortunately. In fact, we might at times feel just as perplexed as our students. However, there are things we can do to inspire and encourage the students in our care.



There have been various models offered to scaffold how we approach prayer, including things like the “five-finger prayer” for youngsters, or the “ACTS” (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication) outline. While these can be helpful, it is important to note that God’s Word provides the greatest foundation for our prayers. Christ demonstrated this throughout His life. He quoted Scripture to refute Satan’s temptations, to verify who He was, and to cry out in His final hours of suffering. Our modern calming techniques and breathing practices are fine, but they are no match for hiding God’s Word in our hearts for constant comforting access (Psalm 119:11).

In a general sense, we must communicate the importance of prayer, and describe circumstances and types of prayer, such as thanksgiving, contemplation, or intercessory prayer. Beyond the understanding of prayer, we must also develop tools to practically apply these methods. To encourage prayer practice, it is optimal to provide ideas that include specific details and follow-up opportunities. A few potential techniques follow:

- Start a lesson (or series) on prayer with a brief survey (*example below*) for the students. Include questions regarding current habits. Results can remain anonymous and be collected by a leader, or the survey can be used to help teens consider the status of their prayer practices. Ask about items such as frequency of personal prayer, topics or requests, and thoughts about the meaning of prayer.
- Provide a list of Scripture passages related to prayer, along with Psalms that can be used for reflection and prayers. (*example below*)
- Encourage students to complete intention cards to commit to pray regularly. (*example below*) Check back with them to see how things are progressing.
- Provide simple journals for youth or invite them to create their own. Suggest that they write out prayers, draw, or use the journals to keep track of needs and requests.
- Pair students with accountability partners. These can be other students or older adults in the congregation. Instruct these prayer teams to check in regularly (remotely or in person) and to pray for one another. They should also take an interest in each other’s lives and welfare.
- Give students reminder stickers. These can be as simple as small colored dot stickers. Encourage teens to place the stickers in strategic locations that they will frequently see, such as inside a car or bathroom, on a phone, or on the refrigerator. Noticing the stickers should prompt a reminder to pray, recall a favorite verse, or simply re-orient thought on God and on whatever is true and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8).



- Practice corporate prayer within the group. Students are often nervous about praying in front of others. Remind them to focus on communicating with God, rather than on what others might be thinking of them. Gently urge teens to pray with their friends, but do not force it if they are highly uncomfortable doing so.
- Create a wall of prayer requests and praises. Have a space in a youth room where students can use post-it notes or note cards to write anonymous prayer needs and post them for others to notice and pray for. This is also a great place to write out thanks for the blessings God has provided.

Select activities and techniques that will best aid the students you serve. Remind teens to approach prayer with thanksgiving, reverence, and trust. God loves His children and wants to hear from us.

As youth leaders, it is essential that we lead by example. We can become so wrapped up in planning lessons and activities, studying Scripture and Catechism, or talking *about* God that we neglect to spend time *with* Him ourselves. We might benefit from taking inventory of our personal devotion habits and committing to improve them if necessary.

We can apply to our lives the same methods and reminders that we offer our students. It is also essential that we take time to earnestly pray for our youth, and to let them know they are being prayed for and cared for. There will be times when we do not feel God's closeness. Yet we can take comfort in the power of the Holy Spirit. "*For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words*" (Romans 8:26). This truth applies to us and to the students God has entrusted to our teaching.

God hears and answers every prayer when we call upon Him. But His answer to our prayer may not be what we desire or expect. But His answer is always the perfect one to our prayer, an answer according to His perfect will. Paul indicated this as he wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:8-9 concerning his thorn in the flesh, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" This wasn't the answer Paul expected, but it WAS an answer which showed God's perfect will in answer to Paul's prayers.

Whether we pray out loud, wordlessly, on our knees, in the car, in the shower, in church, or in a closet, God is present and at work in our lives. Amen.

Prayer Inventory

Please answer the following questions honestly and thoughtfully. This isn't for a grade. Some of these questions are designed to help gauge your understanding of prayer. Others are to help you to think about the meaning and methods of prayer.

Why should we pray?

How often do you pray by yourself? (Do not include mealtime prayers)

- a. At least once a day
- b. Once or twice a week
- c. Once or twice a month
- d. Hardly ever
- e. Other:

What do you pray for when you pray?

When, where and how should we pray? Do we need to be in a certain place or position?

Would you like to pray more regularly? What keeps you from prayer?

Does God always hear our prayers?

Do you feel comfortable praying with friends? Family? Other people?

Do you have any questions about prayer?



And When You Pray...

Here are some helpful passages of Scripture that discuss prayer. Use them to consider the importance of regular communication with God and use them to assist your own prayers.

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

Give thanks and pray always!

Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

-Romans 8:26

It's okay if you don't have all the "right words." God knows what you need.

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

-2 Chronicles 7:14

O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.

-Nehemiah 1:11

Pray when something big is happening!

I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me; hear my words. Wondrously show your steadfast love, O Savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand.

-Psalm 17:6-7

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.

-Psalm 42:11

I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving.

-Psalm 69:30

I cry to you, O Lord; I say, "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living."

-Psalm 142:5

The Psalms are full of wonderful prayers!

When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.

-Daniel 6:10

Daniel knew this would get him a date with hungry lions, but he prayed and gave thanks anyway!



Personal Prayer Proposal

_____ 's Spiritual Discipline Intentions

Note: this is not a sports goal or a New Year's Resolution. Prayer is not a task or a chore. It is about your relationship with God. However, planning to incorporate prayer into your daily routine is a great way to develop positive habits.

Prayer plan: I will try to spend _____ minutes (roughly) a day as devotion time, reading the Bible and privately praying.

I will do this (describe the time of day you'd like to use) _____

Here are some items I might like to pray for or about me (add to this list as necessary):

Here are some items I might like to pray for or about others (add to this list as necessary):

Here are some things I can give thanks for:

To remind me and assist with this practice, I will... (put an alarm on my phone, listen to music, put a sticky note in the bathroom, etc.)

I will check in with _____ to see how things are going with my personal prayer practice.