

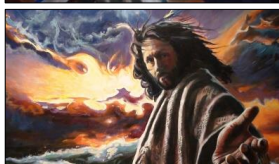
Pray by Ear

How to Stop Praying Like Pagans

July 16, 2023

Today we're opening our ears and learning to listen!

Because, the big question is: **Do you pray with faith?**



The last time we spoke, we were talking about, what Scripture calls, Jesus' "wings" – and the sneaky woman in the crushing crowd who touched 'em in faith, and was immediately healed. Because, unlike the *persistence* of the *pushy-people*, who were acting on *impulse* based on *desire*, **she was acting on hope based on faith in God's Word** (regarding the *promise* in *Malachi* (4:2) of the *healing* that was *waiting* in the *wings*).

So Jesus *stops* the *presses* and makes her *explain* her *actions*. Because, **if we're not trusting Him when we're coming to Him, we're acting more like pagans than children**. And we *can't* trust what we *don't* know. And so, taking a *tip* from His *wings*, we need to *know* His *Word*, so we can *reach out* in *faith* as we *hope* in His *promises* without *pushing* our own *agenda*. Which also means **we must trust His answers as we come to understand them**. And it's not all that complicated, cuz He's only got the three: **"Yes", "No", and "Yes, but not yet"**. Now that *last* one is the *tricky* one; cuz we can mostly *only* see it in *hindsight*. And in the meanwhile we mostly *mistake* it for "No".

So, **we should treat every apparent "No" as though it's a "Yes, but not yet"** until we *know* that we *know* it's a "No". This is quite *often* the *case* when praying for *healing*. And then, when you *know*, **don't view a "No" as though He didn't answer**. Trust that He *did*; and that He did what He did for the *eternal best* of *everyone* involved till the *end* of *time*. **Your prayer doesn't fail when He says "No"**; in fact, you *absolutely know* His *answer*!

And so, we must be *persistent* without being *pushy*. Which means **we must not pray harder, but truer and sincerer**. And *true sincerity* requires *regular practice*. One of the first things a good *coach* will do, is to help his *players unlearn* what they're doing *wrong*. Which is exactly what *Jesus* does with His *prayers*, when He *begins training* His *twelve* to pray ... *His way*. Saying:

When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father ... 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 6:6-8 NIV

So *what* should we do *instead*? Maybe *listen* for a *change*. *Pagans*, in *Jesus'* day, recited *formulaic* prayers in order to **appease** and **control** and **manipulate** their otherwise *indifferent gods*. They were more like *magic spells* than *prayers*.



It wasn't about *faith* or *trust* in their *love*. It was *often* the *opposite*: trying to *please* an *uncaring* god. And it was *strictly business*; “I offer (*this*) so that you'll do (*that*).” It wasn't a *partnership*, **it was a *business transaction* – a *quid pro quo*.** So why does Coach Jesus begin His *prayer-training* by warning His twelve young *apprentices* to “not keep on babbling like pagans”?

Because they *kept on babbling* like *pagans*! And the first thing He wanted 'em to do was to *please* not keep on *doing* that. Same goes for *us*. Even *more so*. I mean, this is His *chosen twelve* we're talking about! So *we* better *all* the more *beware* that **the *best of believers* can *carelessly practice* what Jesus calls *pagan-like prayer*** – mostly in a *well-meaning* but *misguided* attempt to *make* their prayers more *powerful* rather than more *sincere*. But *sadly*, **it *only* makes 'em more *offensive*** – by unwittingly attempting to *appease* rather than to *please* our loving Father.

Obvious observation: Jesus' *boys* were *Jews*; which means they were raised reciting the ten minute Amidah, three times a day, five days a week, 780 times a year. And besides the Amidah, there were prayers for waking, washing, eating, and finishing; morning, evening, and bedtime blessings; weekend prayers, holiday prayers, and special prayers for everything from seeing a rainbow to receiving bad news. **It isn't that the *boys* didn't know how to *talk* to God, they didn't know how to *stop*!** Which is why Coach Jesus helps them *unlearn* their *prayer-babbling*.

Imagine the *temptation* to *rattle* through these *pre-recorded* prayers as quickly as *babble-able*, **focusing on the *act* rather than the *attitude*,** in repetitive *pagan-esque* fashion. So Coach Jesus begins with the *warning* found in *Ecclesiastes* (5:2) to “let your words be few”.

But, more than that, the real question at the core is: **Do you pray with *faith*?** Because ...

Faith comes by *hearing*, and *hearing* by the *Word of God*. – Romans 10:17 NKJ

A *fool* has no *delight* in *understanding*, but in *expressing* his own *heart*. – Proverbs 18:2 NKJ

[So] A *fool's* *mouth* is his *undoing*, and his *lips* are a *snare* to his *soul*. – Proverbs 18:7 NIV

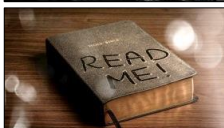
[So] Let the *wise* *listen* and *add* to their *learning*, and ... *get guidance* – Proverbs 1:5 NIV

[If you *sincerely* desire *answers* to *prayer*] When you go [to God] ... draw *near* to *hear* rather than to give the *sacrifice of fools*, for they [who '*delight* in *expressing* their own *heart*'] do not know that they do *evil*. [Cuz they *don't* *listen*] Do not be *rash* with your mouth, [nobody likes *rash-mouth*] and [since your *mouth* *speaks* what's in your *heart*] let not your heart utter *anything* *hastily* before God. For God is [our *Father*] in *heaven*, and you [are His *child*] on *earth*; therefore let your words be *few*. [And *open* your *ears* to *hear*] ... [For] a *fool's* *voice* is known by his *many words*. – Ecclesiastes 5:1-3 NKJ

[And *thus*] “When you pray, go into your room, *close* the *door* and *pray* ... for [babbling pagans] think they will be *heard* because of their *many words*.” – Matthew 6:6-8 NIV

I wonder what “door” Jesus is *referring* to, being He *knew* David's *prayer request* in Psalm 141, to:

Give ear to my voice when I call to You! Let my prayer be counted as incense [a pleasing aroma] before You ... Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips! Do not let my heart incline to any evil, to busy myself – Psalm 141:1-4 ESV



Ever watch a *movie* with a *nonstop talker*? “She’s the killer. Wait. He’s the killer. Wait. It was suicide.” Ever *pray* like that? “Lord, give me *this*. Wait. Give me *that*. Wait. Give me *this and that*.” In both cases: “Shh. You wait. And just watch. Cuz you’re *missing out* by *butting in*.” **We think of prayer as mostly talking, but it should be mostly listening. “Amen” shouldn’t mean “We’re done!” but, “Okay, I’m all ears.”** Because:

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. – Romans 10:17 NKJ

And, according to *Ecclesiastes*, **our words are an offering best served in small amounts.** Like Sen-Sen, a little goes a long way! Know why?

For we know in part and we prophesy [understand what God has revealed] in part. ... [It’s like] When I was a *child*, I spoke as a child, [cuz] I understood as a child, [cuz] I thought as a child; but when I became a *man*, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly ... [Because, for] Now [as a child of God] I know in part – 1 Corinthians 13:9-12 NKJ

And like children, **we forget to close the door and open our ears and let our Father get a Word in edgewise.** We love to *listen* to our children ... to a *point*. But when they won’t stop *talking*, and won’t *listen*, we *shush* ‘em to *help* ‘em to *hear* what they *need* to *hear*. So Jesus begins their prayer-training by saying, “Shh. Try to talk *less*.” It almost sounds like He’s saying to *pray* less. But He’s *not*. **He’s saying to speak less when you pray.** Turns out, there’s *another* – very neglected – *side* of prayer. Trouble is, we’re not sure *how* to *listen* to our Father. Because **it doesn’t mean sitting in silence straining to hear our own imagination.** It means actually *listening* to Him *speak*.

So **how do we pray by ear rather than by mouth?** Well, the answer is found in the *Bible*. No *surprise*. The *surprise* is: it is the Bible. Turns out, **reading God’s Word is praying by ear!**

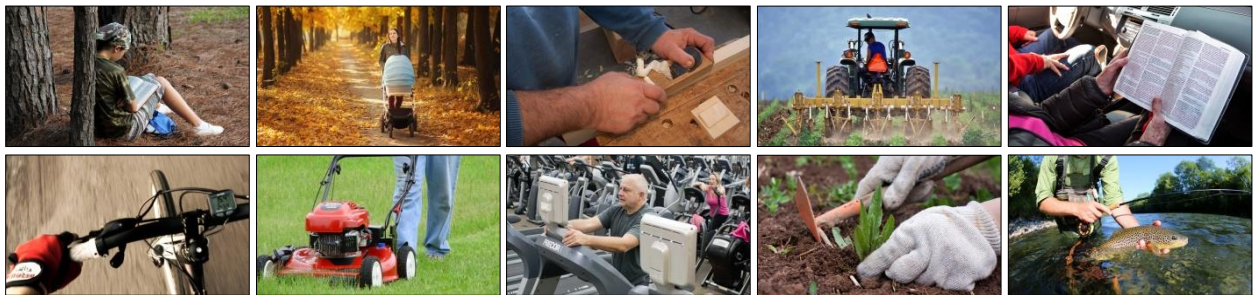
We’re told in Hebrews (12:6-7) that the Proverbs are *Father-God’s* instructions to *us*. So:

^{1:8} Hear, My child, your [Heavenly] Father’s instruction ... ^{1:23} I will pour out My thoughts to you; I will make My words known to you. ... ^{1:33} Those who listen to Me will be secure ... ^{2:1} My child, if you accept My words ... ^{2:10} wisdom will come into your heart ... ^{4:1} Listen, children, to a Father’s instruction ... do not forsake My teaching. ... ^{4:4} Let your heart hold fast My words ... ^{4:20} My child, be attentive to My words; incline your ear to My sayings. ... ^{5:1} My child, be attentive to My wisdom; incline your ear to My understanding ... ^{5:7} My child, listen to Me, and do not depart from the words of My mouth. ^{7:1} My child, keep My words ... ^{7:2} keep My teachings ... ^{7:3} write them on the tablet of your heart. ... ^{7:24} My children, listen to Me, and be attentive to the words of My mouth. ... ^{8:10} Take My instruction ... ^{8:32} My children, listen to Me ... ^{8:34} Happy is the one who listens to Me ... ^{10:14} The wise lay up knowledge, but the babbling of a fool brings ruin ... ^{10:19} When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but the prudent are restrained in speech. ... ^{13:3} Those

who guard their mouths preserve their lives; those who open wide their lips come to ruin. ... ^{13:13} Those who despise the Word bring destruction on themselves ... ^{15:5} A fool despises a Parent's instruction ... ^{17:27} [But] One who spares words is knowledgeable ... ^{17:28} Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close [the door of] their lips, they are deemed intelligent. ... ^{19:27} Cease straying, My child, from the words of knowledge ... ^{22:17} Incline your ear and hear My words, and apply your mind to My teaching ... ^{23:15} My child, if your heart is wise, My heart too will be glad. ... ^{23:19} Hear, My child, and be wise ... ^{23:22} Listen to your [Heavenly] Father who begot you ... ^{28:9} [Because] When one will not listen ... even [their] prayers are an *abomination*. – Proverbs NRS

Jesus' disciples saw prayer as mostly **repeating the words they thought our Father wanted to hear**. But, when we realize that praying is mostly about listening, and that **God will speak if and when we seek**, we'll begin to *rewire* our desire to read and reflect on His Word. Because, if we foolishly view reading Scripture as *studying* rather than *listening*, we'll justify not reading based on the *false fact* that it's not *relational*. And **we'll end up offering a fool's one-sided prayer**.

How *ironic* that the Amidah begins: "Lord, open my lips that my mouth may declare ..." And to Jesus' *flabbergasted* apprentices' utter *disbelief*, He edits the entire 10-minute Amidah to about 30 seconds! Because it isn't God who needs to hear us – He knows our needs before our prayers – which is why **listening prayer should take up the lion's share of our prayer time**.



So when do you allow Him to speak, whether by reading or reflecting? Cuz that requires *finding a way to get away to close the door and pray by ear*. Unlike the *religious rulers* who always found a way to make things too *difficult*, Jesus had a way of making things too *simple*. So we try to *complicate* it. But, *trust* Him, when it comes to prayer, **our Father prefers a few heartfelt words with a lot of listening**. Especially while *fishing*. He was always *fond* of that.

So close your door, open His book, and listen to our Father, who said:

"Receive into your heart *all* My words ... and *hear* with your ears." – Ezekiel 3:10 NKJ

So close the door and pray! Because **He can't open your ears till you open His Word**.

What do you call a *friend* who *won't listen*? **Who calls a friend who won't listen?!** They won't listen. Therefore, **if we're gonna answer the call, we better be the listening type**.

So what do you say we shut up and pray?

Father God, thank You for loving me in spite of my sin; forgive me and cleanse me by the sacrifice of Your Son, my Savior; and free me and lead me by Your Spirit and Word, as I seek to trust and follow Jesus Christ, as the Lord of my life. Amen.