

*The*  
PRAYER  
*of the*  
LORD



R. C. SPROUL

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *The Holiness of God*

## *Endorsements*

R. C. Sproul has an amazing gift for explaining difficult truths in pithy, memorable, and easy-to-grasp ways. He is the ideal teacher for a study of the Lord's Prayer, because the prayer itself is a profound lesson on a difficult subject, given by Jesus to His disciples in an amazing economy of words. You will be greatly blessed and edified by this book.

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Pastor/teacher  
Grace Community Church  
Sun Valley, California

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—DR. SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON  
Senior minister  
First Presbyterian Church  
Columbia, South Carolina

I love listening to R. C. Sproul teach, and this book sounds just like him—penetrating truths strikingly illustrated. His good quotations and pastoral wisdom make him as easy to read as he is delightful to listen to (and the short chapters help!). Sproul clearly explains the Scriptures with sentences that are simple and accurate. He knows enough to say important things concisely and clearly—truths about the kingdom, the fatherhood of God, history, and, of course, prayer. There’s even a helpful question-and-answer section at the end. This little book now takes its place with the classics on prayer.

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Senior pastor  
Capitol Hill Baptist Church  
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—DR. HARRY L. REEDER, III  
Pastor/teacher  
Briarwood Presbyterian Church  
Birmingham, Alabama

Dr. R. C. Sproul was my first theology teacher. As a new Christian, I learned a ton of theology, philosophy, and church history while listening to the *Renewing Your Mind* radio broadcast. Now, in *The Prayer of the Lord*, Dr. Sproul brings his considerable theological, philosophical, and historical gifts and resources to bear on the vital subject of prayer. A subject of such great importance deserves a teacher of such great skill. In addition to all the other things Dr. Sproul has taught me, it is a privilege to have him guide me through our Savior's priorities in prayer. Read this short book and have a pattern for a life of prayer unfolded before you.

—REV. THABITI ANYABWILE

Senior pastor

First Baptist Church

Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands



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A DIVISION OF LIGONIER MINISTRIES · ORLANDO, FLORIDA

THE PRAYER OF THE LORD

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Published by Reformation Trust

a division of Ligonier Ministries

400 Technology Park, Lake Mary, FL 32746

[www.Ligonier.org](http://www.Ligonier.org)

[www.ReformationTrust.com](http://www.ReformationTrust.com)

Printed in the United States of America

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Cover design:

Cover illustration:

Interior design and typeset: Katherine Lloyd, Colorado Springs, Co.

All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version®.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sproul, R. C. (Robert Charles), 1939-

The prayer of the Lord / R.C. Sproul.

p. cm.

Includes indexes.

ISBN 978-1-56769-118-4

1. Lord's prayer--Criticism, interpretation, etc. 2. Prayer--Reformed Church.

I. Title.

BV230.S65 2009

226.9'6077--dc22

2009001247

*To the people of Saint Andrew's Chapel.*







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# HOW NOT *to* PRAY

A FEW YEARS AGO, when I happened to be in San Diego for a conference, I unexpectedly ran into an old friend of mine, George Miladin. George is a pianist and a master teacher—he used to host a televised teaching program for the piano called the “See and Hear Piano Series.” Seeing George again presented me with a golden opportunity, so after one of the plenary sessions of the conference, I grabbed George and said, “Let’s go find a piano.” So we looked through the church until we found a choir rehearsal room, and we went in there and closed the door. I said to George, “Teach me some things about the piano,” because I love to play the piano and learn new little things. So George, the master teacher, sat down at the piano and showed me a couple of little techniques that he uses in his repertoire.

I thought about that afterward, about how eager I was to get George aside so that he could teach me to do something I didn't know how to do. I will go out of my way to ask a person to teach me something if I have great admiration for his ability or prowess in a particular skill or art, particularly if it's something I'm interested in.

There was a point during the earthly ministry of Jesus when His disciples had the opportunity to do the same thing I did with my friend George. They had the opportunity to ask the Master Teacher to teach them something. Of course, Jesus had been teaching them on a daily basis for some time already. Each of them had enrolled in His school, becoming a *mathetes*, a "learner" or "student." They enrolled when Jesus said to them, "Follow Me." When He said that, He meant it literally. His school wasn't housed in a building and it didn't feature a regular schedule of classes. Jesus was a rabbi who had a peripatetic ministry; that is, He moved about from village to village, and His disciples went with Him, forming an entourage of sorts. When Jesus called the disciples, He wasn't just saying, "Follow my teachings." He literally wanted them to follow Him. So these men gathered about Jesus and walked behind Him, trying to memorize the teaching He gave them as they walked along the roads. Obviously they got more than they bargained for. Not only did they learn the great truths of the Scriptures by following after Jesus, they also were given the unspeakable privilege of being eyewitnesses of the multitude of miracles that Jesus performed.

Imagine what it must have been like to have the privilege of following Jesus around day after day, listening to His teaching

and watching Him perform His miracles. I can think of lots of things they could have asked Him to teach them. The disciples might have gone to Him and said, “Jesus, teach us how to turn the water into wine.” They might have asked, “Teach us how to walk on the water.” Or they could have said, “Teach us how to raise people from the dead.” Those are the kinds of questions I would have asked Him. But the New Testament tells us of a different request that the disciples brought to Jesus. They came to Him on one occasion, as Luke records it for us in his Gospel, and said, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1b). I find it fascinating that this was the burning question they brought to Jesus. They wanted to gain a special insight into prayer as a skill or an art.

### *The Master’s Prayer Life*

Why did they ask Him this question? My guess is that they saw the link between Jesus’ extraordinary prayer life and His power, His teaching, His character, His whole person. They must have noticed that after ministering to large crowds of people, Jesus often would withdraw by Himself. He must have felt drained from that ministry. During such times, Jesus would not simply withdraw for a half hour or so. Rather, He would go apart for long periods, and when He did so, He usually spent much of the time in intense seasons of prayer. We know of the intensity of His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He prayed with such stress and fervency that His sweat was like great drops of blood. We know that before He selected His disciples and called them to follow after Him, He spent the entire night alone in

prayer. The disciples could not help but notice this commitment to prayer. They saw the intimacy Jesus had with the Father and made the connection between His prayer and His power.

So they came to Jesus asking, “Lord, teach us to pray.” And they added a little statement to that: “. . . as John also taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1c). They not only had noticed Jesus’ extraordinary character, they also had seen it in John the Baptist and in John’s followers, many of whom had transferred their devotion to Christ after John had pointed to Him.

I’m not only surprised that the disciples brought this particular request to Jesus, I’m a little bit surprised by how He responded. Far be it from me to suggest that He could have given a better answer. I simply would have thought Jesus would have said to His disciples, “If you really want to learn how to pray, immerse yourselves in the Psalms,” because in the book of Psalms we have a collection of prayers that were given under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit. As the New Testament tells us, the Holy Spirit is active in assisting us in our praying. We’re not all that adept at prayer; it is a practice very few of us have mastered. We find it difficult to articulate our deepest feelings and our deepest concerns to God. Yet God is pleased to give His Holy Spirit to assist us in expressing ourselves to the Father in prayer. And He did that, obviously, for the psalmists of the Old Testament.

I’ve also been interested in some of the evaluations of church historians, which have showed that during those periods when the church flourished, when great spiritual vitality became manifest, and when worship reached its apogee—in short, during periods of special renewal—the Psalms were at the heart and

center of the liturgy of the church and the devotional life of the people. Clearly, those who learn to meditate deeply on the Psalms experience the supreme Old Testament model of prayer that is provoked by God the Holy Spirit. So I would suggest that if you really want to learn how to pray and to discover the kinds of prayers that are pleasing to God, you should immerse yourselves in the Psalms.

### *Avoiding Hypocritical Practices*

That wasn't how Jesus answered the disciples' question. Instead, He gave them what we now refer to as the Lord's Prayer, not because it was a prayer He Himself prayed, but because it was the prayer He provided for His followers. But before He gave the prayer, He made some prefatory remarks that we must not miss. In Matthew's account of the giving of the Lord's Prayer, which is recorded as part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus first said to His disciples:

“When you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret, will reward you openly. And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.” (Matt. 6:5–7)



The disciples were looking for instructions on how to pray, but the first thing Jesus chose to tell them was how *not* to pray. In these verses, He laid down two restrictions on prayer, and we need to take these restrictions seriously because God is neither honored nor pleased by prayer of the type Jesus addressed here.

The first type of prayer Jesus condemned is hypocritical prayer. The term *hypocrisy* in the New Testament is drawn from the culture of the day, where a hypocrite was one who engaged in drama, in the theater. He was play-acting. What he was doing was not real. So the original meaning of the term had nothing to do with insincerity—we don't charge actors today with being hypocrites or insincere simply because they're playing a role that does not correspond to their real lives. But Jesus applied the word to people who were going through the motions of prayer, making a great external show of piety, but whose real state did not match this outward show. Their piety was a sham; it was phony and fraudulent. It was a fake form of godliness, one that had been mastered by the Pharisees. Prayer, for them, was a business. Prayer was something that was expected from people in their positions, so they made a public display of their piety.

When I was a seminary student, I had the unfortunate experience of attending a school that was in its first year after the merger of two seminaries, and the new administration was committed to turning the seminary into a theological university rather than a typical divinity school. The administrators had lofty goals for the school's academic excellence. We students were the guinea pigs for that, before the administrators were able to make certain corrections. While I was in seminary, we were required to write term

papers exceeding two hundred pages per year. And our reading lists were so large that we would go through and read the first line of each paragraph of the book in order to meet the requirements. I remember writing a twenty-page report on a book I hadn't even read, and I received an "A" for my effort. I had been a philosophy major, and this was a book by Martin Buber. I had studied Buber's existential philosophy, so I just assumed that, in this book, he applied his existential philosophy to theology, and I criticized him for that. But, as I said, I didn't read the book—that was the kind of thing we had to do to get through those assignments.

What I thought to be the worst assignment was in my sociology of religion class, where we were required to write a twenty-page paper analyzing the image of the minister in contemporary culture. We were required to leaf through magazines and the comic pages of the newspapers to find images of ministers and to observe how ministers were portrayed on television and in the movies. When we got that assignment and walked out the door, we began to sing spontaneously, "M-I-C-K-E-Y M-O-U-S-E." This was an assignment that we considered "Mickey Mouse," hardly worthy of our time.

Yet, to my utter astonishment, when I did the study for that paper, I made a discovery that comes back to my mind every time I see a minister portrayed on television or in the movies. I found that, far and wide, the minister is caricatured in our culture today, first, as something of a sourpuss, one whose lips are pursed and who has an aura of superiority about him, and second, as something of a wimp, a man lacking in masculinity. That image is transferred from the minister to Christians in general, so that

believers are regarded as practicing a holier-than-thou posture.

During that time in seminary, I was grateful when a golf course opened near my home and the owner invited me to play there on a ministerial discount, even though I wasn't yet ordained, but was serving as a student pastor in a nearby church. But it so happened that when I came in and signed up, the person behind the counter looked at me and said, "You don't look like a minister." I said, "Really? What is a minister supposed to look like?" I don't remember his answer, but whatever it was, I didn't fit his image—and I was supremely grateful for that in light of this caricature that is rampant in our culture.

### *A Façade of Hypocrisy*

Where did this caricature come from? I'm afraid that it has come about because ministers far too often adopt the posture that Jesus teaches us to avoid—the posture that makes us appear to think we are holier than everyone around us. This posture is a façade of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy has a devastating impact on the life of the church and on the representation of Christianity to a dying world. And so our Lord warns us here not to parade our piety before the world.

We need to be careful here, because we Christians are enjoined to bear witness to our faith, which means making the invisible visible. But sometimes we think that one of the primary ways of bearing witness to people is by demonstrating our Christian spirituality with public prayer. That's dangerous, because the motivation for prayer is not to display our spirituality before the

watching world. Prayer is to be intensely private. That's not to say that Christianity is to be private. I've heard people on talk shows say, "I never talk about my religion because religion is intensely personal and private." Well, I grant half of that thesis. Certainly, Christianity is personal. But it is not private. The New Testament gives us all kinds of mandates to declare our faith publicly. There is no such thing as a closet Christian; we're to bear witness to the world of our commitment to Christ and not hide it. However, prayer involves a special kind of communion. It is part of the special relationship between God and a believer individually or the church corporately. It is not meant to show anything about the person who prays.

I don't know how many times I've been in a worship service and I've heard the minister pray the pastoral prayer in such a way that I've wondered to whom he was speaking. When that happens, you get the strange sensation that the minister isn't talking to God but to those of us in the congregation. He's got us there as a captive audience, our eyes are closed, we're being quiet, and we're trying to focus on what he's saying, but we really should be eavesdropping, as it were, on the pastor as he is addressing God for us. He is representing us before the presence of God; that means his words are not for our ears primarily. But if he is not speaking consciously to God, he is not praying properly.

Just as Jesus warned against praying publicly in a hypocritical fashion, He also encouraged private prayer. He said, "Go into your closet, shut the door, and get on your face before God, and the Father who hears you in secret will reward you in public." God is not interested in our public displays of piety. He's not interested

in religion in terms of the outward show. He's interested in godliness. Our spiritual lives are means to the end of godliness, and prayer is one of the key aspects of our spirituality.

### *Avoiding Pagan Practices*

The second kind of prayer Jesus condemned is pagan prayer. He said: "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words." Jesus was saying here that we must not regard prayer as some kind of magical incantation, for that is how pagans pray. They recite certain phrases over and over again, with no understanding of what the words mean. In these contexts, prayers are used as mantras, with the hope that they will change the environment or the circumstances in which a person lives. New Age thinking is filled with this type of thing. Jesus did not commend such exercises as godly forms of prayer; rather, He linked the use of vain repetitions to paganism.

Christians can easily fall into a pattern of praying in a repetitious fashion, without engaging their minds. It bothers me sometimes when Christians gather for a meal and the host will say to someone there, "John, will you please say the grace for us?" The host doesn't ask for someone to lead in prayer but to say the grace. That kind of language suggests a mere recitation, not a prayer that comes from the heart.

We can even treat the Lord's Prayer this way. The Lord's Prayer is an integral part of the worship of multitudes of Christians. Worship services often include the recitation of the Lord's

Prayer. The use of the Lord's Prayer has a rich history in the church, and whenever we pray it or hear it, we are reminded of those priorities that Jesus sets before us as objects for prayer. Don't get me wrong—I'm not opposed to the recitation of the Lord's Prayer. However, there is a danger that this use of the prayer may be nothing *more* than a recitation. The praying of the Lord's Prayer can become as mindless and as vain a repetition as the magical incantations and mantras that pagans use.

Jesus did not give the Lord's Prayer with the intention that it would be repeated mindlessly. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we need to pray it thoughtfully, giving attention in our minds to its content. It is not a mantra to be repeated without the engagement of the mind or heart. It is an example of godly prayer.

Of course, repetition has great value. I've often said that one of my favorite liturgies in the life of the church is the traditional marriage ceremony. You've heard it many times: "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here today in the presence of God and of these witnesses to unite this man and this woman in the holy bonds of marriage, which was instituted by God," and so it goes. It's a very brief service. It contains pledges, vows, charges, and prayers. For me, the more often I lead this liturgy or hear it, the more blessed I am by the content of it. That is, the more familiar I become with the language, the more I think about it and meditate on it, and I see afresh how rich it is in explaining to us the sanctity of marriage. So it is with the Lord's Prayer. Hearing it over and over again may lead us to mindless repetition, but it also may burn these words, and the underlying principles, into our minds. Repetition in and of itself is not a bad thing. In fact,

it's one of the most important ingredients of learning, because it's the rare person who masters a concept or a principle by hearing it once.

There was a great piano teacher who was teaching one of his students scales, and the student was bored to tears. The student said: "I don't want to play scales. I want to play like Van Cliburn. I want to play like a great piano virtuoso." The teacher replied: "You know, you may never be able to play the piano like Van Cliburn; in fact, in all probability you won't be able to master this instrument to the degree that he has. But there is one thing you *can* do like Van Cliburn." The student asked, "What's that?" And the teacher said, "You can play your scales." Then he added: "Don't ever think that Van Cliburn became Van Cliburn without doing the scales over and over again so that those tones became second nature to him."

That's the benefit of praying a prayer like the Lord's Prayer over and over again. It becomes part of the fabric of our thinking. It begins to become a part of our souls, so that we fall back on it when we're at a loss as to how we ought to pray. We can always pray the Lord's Prayer.

### *Praying to the God Who Already Knows*

After warning His disciples against hypocritical prayer and pagan prayer, Jesus went on to say, "Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him" (Matt. 6:8). With these words, Jesus echoed the thoughts of David, who wrote: "O LORD, You have searched me

and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O LORD, You know it altogether” (Ps. 139:1–4). Jesus is simply seconding the psalmist’s affirmation that the Lord knows what we need before we ask it.

One of the most frequently asked questions in the theology of prayer is, “Does prayer change things?” The answer is evident. The New Testament makes it clear that prayer changes all kinds of things. We’ll explore that issue more deeply later, but the next question that comes is, “Does prayer change God’s mind?”

What would induce God to change His mind? Perhaps new information, some knowledge He lacks until we communicate it to Him for His consideration. However, the Bible tells us that when we come to our King in prayer, He already knows what we are going to ask for and He knows what we need better than we do. We have to remember that this One we’re talking to is omniscient. He doesn’t learn anything new. So if you’re going to change His mind by your prayers, it won’t be because you give Him new information.

Sometimes we change our minds because we realize that what we had intended to do was a bad plan, that we made a mistake in taking such a course. Perhaps we get counsel from someone who says, “Oh, R. C., you shouldn’t do that because if you do, A, B, or C is going to follow, and it’s going to mess everything up.” Is this what happens with God when we come to Him in prayer? Can we come to Him and say: “God, what You’re



planning to do is not good. Let me counsel You to do the right thing”? That would be absurd. God never does anything that is not perfectly good, and we fallen human beings are certainly in no position to counsel Him.

In short, no prayer of any human being ever uttered in history ever changed the mind of God in the slightest, because His mind doesn't ever need to be changed. Sadly, when I say that to people, they react in horror. They say: “Why should we pray? What good is prayer if we can't change God's mind? Why should we even engage in this exercise? It's an exercise in futility.” At that point, I have to remind them that, as I mentioned above, prayer *does* change things, all kinds of things. But the most important thing it changes is us. As we engage in this communion with God more deeply and come to know the One with whom we are speaking more intimately, that growing knowledge of God reveals to us all the more brilliantly who we are and our need to change in conformity to Him. Prayer changes us profoundly.

God did not give prayer to the church for His benefit. The Sovereign has condescended to give us an audience. He has invited us into the heavenly palace. He has lifted the scepter and told us to enter. We have access to His very throne. But sometimes we come into His presence far too casually. We come to Him and say, “Hi, God, how are you doing?” We talk to God with the kind of familiarity that breeds contempt. It's a familiarity that reveals we have forgotten who He is and who we are. We have forgotten that we are peasants in the presence of the King. Not just *a* king, but *the* King, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the One who is absolutely sovereign.

I want you to notice that in the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, there is a word that recurs. The petitions speak of "Your name," "Your kingdom," and "Your will." The word *Your* keeps coming up in reference to things that are God's. Finally, in the fourth petition, we read, "Give us this day our daily bread." We have to go a long way into this prayer before we find any attention or concern given to us. The attention at the beginning of these petitions is on the exaltation of God and His concerns. In the initial phrases of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus fixes our gaze not on ourselves but on God.

People come to me and ask: "What are the rules for prayer? How should we approach God in prayer? What's the right way to pray?" I tell those who ask these kinds of questions that there are really only two rules that you have to keep in mind when you're in prayer, two things that should drive and govern and control your prayer life with the Almighty. You should remember who is being addressed and who is doing the speaking. That is, the first thing you are to remember in prayer is who it is you're talking to, because nothing will condition your prayer life more deeply than remembering that you're in conversation with God, the sovereign Creator and Ruler of the universe. Second, you are to remember who you are. You are not God. You are a creature. So prayer is not a conversation between peers; it is not a fireside chat among equals. This is the creature speaking to his sovereign Creator.

Finally, it is important to note Jesus' final words before beginning to spell out the Lord's Prayer itself. He did not say, "Pray *this*." Rather, He said, "In this manner, therefore, pray" (Matt. 6:9a). Jesus did not give His disciples a prayer they should

slavishly repeat, though, as I noted above, repeating the prayer can be good and useful if it is handled correctly. Jesus' intent was to give His disciples a model prayer, an example to follow, one that would teach them transferrable principles for conversation with God. Beginning in the next chapter, we will look closely at those principles.