

# Teach Us to Pray

by Billy Sunday

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of prayer in the Christian life, highlighting the need for humility, truth, and action in prayer.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 59:1, Ezekiel 14:3, Matthew 6:6, Matthew 7:7, Mark 1:35, Luke 9:29, Luke 18:13, John 11:43, John 14:13, James 1:27

**Topics:** "The Power of Prayer", "Humility in Prayer"

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## Description

Billy Sunday emphasizes the vital role of prayer in a believer's life, arguing that neglecting prayer leads to spiritual weakness akin to physical weakness from lack of exercise. He challenges the congregation to engage earnestly in prayer, highlighting that many fail to receive answers due to selfish motives or unresolved sin. Sunday illustrates the importance of humility in prayer, urging believers to seek God's will genuinely and to act in accordance with their prayers. He shares examples from the lives of historical figures who were powerful in prayer, reinforcing that true prayer leads to action and transformation. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper commitment to prayer as a means of drawing closer to God and fulfilling His will.

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## Transcript

We live and develop physically by exercise. We are saved by faith, but we must work out our salvation by doing the things God wills. The more we do for God, the more God will do through us. Faith will increase by experience.

If you are a stranger to prayer you are a stranger to the greatest test source of power known to human beings. If we cared for our physical life in the same lackadaisical way that we care for our spiritual, we would be as weak physically as we are spiritually. You go week in and week out without prayer. I want to be a giant for God. You don't even sing; you let the choir do it. You go to prayer-meeting and offer no testimony.

You are a stranger to the great privilege that is offered to human beings. Some of the greatest blessings that people enjoy come from prayer. In earnest prayer you think as the Lord directs, and lose yourself in him.

Some people say: "It's no use to pray. The Lord knows everything, anyway." That's true. He does. He is not limited, as I am limited. He knows everything and has known it since before the world was. We don't

know everybody who is going to be converted at this revival, but that doesn't relieve us of our duty. We don't know, and we must do the work he has commanded us to do.

Others say: "But I don't get what I pray for." Well, there's a cause for everything. Get at the cause and you'll be all right. If you are sick and send for the doctor, he pays no attention to the disease, but looks at what produced it. If you have a headache, don't rub your forehead. In Matthew it is written, "Ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you" (Matt. 7:7). If your prayers are not answered you are not right with God. If you have no faith, if your motive is wrong, then your prayers will be in vain. Many times when people pray they are selfish. They are not gripping the word. I believe that when many a wife prays for the conversion of her husband it isn't because she really desires the salvation of his soul, but because she thinks if he were converted things would be easier for her personally. Pray for your neighbors as well as your own family. The pastor of one church does not pray for the congregation of another denomination. I'm not saying anything against denominations. I believe in them. I believe they are of God. Denominations represent different temperaments. A man with warm emotions would not make a good Episcopalian, but he would make a crackerjack Methodist. Oh, the curse of selfishness! The Church is dying for religion, for religion pure and undefiled. Pure religion and undefiled is visiting the widow and the fatherless (James 1:27) and doing the will of God without so much thought of yourself. I tell you, a lot of people are going to be fooled the Day of Judgment.

Isaiah says the hand of God is not shortened and his ear is not deaf (Isa. 59:1). No, his hand is not shortened so that it cannot save. He has provided agencies by which we can be saved. If he had made no provision for your salvation, then the trouble would be with God; but he has, so if you go to hell the trouble will be with you.

In Ezekiel we read that men have taken idols into their hearts and put stumbling-blocks before their faces (Ezek. 14:3). God is not going to hear you if you place clothes, money, pride of relationship before him. You know there is sin in your life. Many people know there is sin in their lives, yet ask God to bless them. They ought first to get down on their knees and pray, "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

Some people are too contemptibly stingy for God to hear them. God won't hear you if you stop your ears to the cries of the poor. You drag along here for three weeks and raise a paltry sum that a circus would take out of town in two hours. When they give things to the poor they rip off the buttons and the fine braid. Some people pick out old clothes that the moths have made into sieves and give them to the poor and think they are charitable. That isn't charity, no sir; it's charity when you'll give something you'll miss. It's charity when you feel it to give.

And when you stand praying, forgive if you have aught [anything] against anyone. It's no use to pray if you have a mean, miserable disposition, if you are grouchy, if you quarrel in your home or with your neighbors.

It's no use to pray for a blessing when you have a fuss on with your neighbors. It doesn't do you any good. You go to a sewing society meeting to make mosquito netting for the Eskimo and blankets for the Hottentots, and instead you sit and chew the rag and rip some woman up the back. The spirit of God flees from strife and discord.

People say: "She is a good woman, but a worldly Christian." What? Might as well speak of a heavenly devil. Might as well expect a mummy to speak and bear children as that kind to move the world God-ward. Prayer draws you nearer to God.

## Learning of Christ

"Teach us to pray," implies that I want to be taught. It's a great privilege to be taught by Jesus. A friend of mine was preaching out in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and had to go to a hospital in Chicago for an operation, and I was asked to go and preach in his place. Alexander was leading the singing, and one night Charles [Butler] called a little girl out of the audience to sing. She didn't look over four or five years of age, though she might have been a little older. I thought, "What's the use? Her little voice can never be heard over this crowd." But Charlie stood her up in a chair by the pulpit and she threw back her head and out rolled some of the sweetest music I have ever heard. It was wonderful. I sat there and the tears streamed down my cheeks. That little girl was the daughter of a Northwestern engineer and he took her to Chicago when her mother was away. Some one took her to Patti. Patti took the little girl to one of her suite of rooms and told her to stand there and sing. Then she went to the other end of the suite and sat down on a divan and listened. The song moved her to tears. She ran and hugged and kissed the little girl and sat her down on the divan and said to her: "Now you sit here and I'll go over there and sing." She took up her position where the child had stood, and she lifted her magnificent voice and she sang "Home, Sweet Home" and "The Last Rose of Summer" sang them for that little girl! And Patti used to get a thousand dollars for a song, too. She always knew how many songs she was to sing, for she had a check before she went on the platform. It was a great privilege the little daughter of that Northwestern engineer had, but it's a greater privilege to learn from Jesus Christ how to pray.

A friend of mine told me he went to hear Paganini, and the great violinist broke one of the strings of his instrument, then another, then another, until he had only one left, and on that one he played so wonderfully that his audience burst into terrific applause. It was a privilege to hear that, but it's a greater privilege to have Jesus teach you to pray.

Let us take a few examples from the life of Christ. In Mark we learn that he rose up early in the morning and went out to a solitary place and prayed (Mark 1:35). He began every day with prayer. You never get up without dressing. You never forget to wash your face and comb your hair. You always think of breakfast. You feed your physical body. Why do you starve your spiritual body? If nine-tenths of you were as weak physically as you are spiritually, you couldn't walk.

When I was assistant secretary of the Y.M.C.A. at Chicago, John G. Paton came home from the New Hebrides and was lecturing and collecting money. He was raising money to buy a sea-going steam yacht, for his work took him from island to island and he had to use a row-boat, and sometimes it was dangerous when the weather was bad, so he wanted the yacht. We had him for a week, and it was my privilege to go to lunch with him. We would go out to a restaurant at noon and he would talk to us. Sometimes there would be as many as fifteen or twenty preachers in the crowd, and now and then some of us were so interested in what he told us of the work for Jesus in those far-away islands that we forgot to eat. I remember that he said one day: "All that I am I owe to my Christian father and mother. My father was one of the most prayerful men I ever knew. Often in the daytime he would slip into his closet, and he would drop a handkerchief outside the door, and when we children saw the white sentinel we knew that father was talking with his God and would go quietly away. It is largely because of the life and influence of that same saintly father that I am preaching to the cannibals in the South Seas." It is an insult to God and a disgrace to allow children to grow up without throwing Christian influences around them. Seven-tenths of professing Christians have no family prayers and do not read the Bible. It is no wonder boys and girls are going to hell. It is no wonder the damnable ball-rooms are wrecking the virtue of our girls.

In the fourteenth chapter of Matthew it is told that when Jesus had sent the multitudes away he went up into the mountain and was there alone with God. Jesus Christ never forgot to thank God for answering his prayers. Jesus asked him to help him feed the multitude, and he didn't neglect to thank him for it. Next time you pray don't ask God for anything. Just try to think of all the things you have to be thankful for, and tell him about them.

### Pride Hinders Prayer

Pride keeps us from proper prayer. Being chesty and big-headed is responsible for more failures than anything else in this world. It has spoiled many a preacher, just as it has spoiled many an employee. Some fellows get a job and in about two weeks they think they know more about the business than the boss does. They think he is all wrong. It never occurs to them that it took some brains and some knowledge to build that business up and keep it running till they got there.

Here's two things to guard against. Don't get chesty over success, or discouraged over a seeming defeat.

"And when he prayed he said: 'Lazarus, come forth'; and he that was dead came forth" (John 11:43). If we prayed right we would raise men from sin and bring them forth into the light of righteousness.

"And as he prayed the fashion of his countenance was altered" (Luke 9:29). Ladies, do you want to look pretty? If some of you women would spend less on dope and cold cream and get down on your knees and pray, God would make you prettier. Why, I can look into your faces and tell what sort of lives you live. If you are devoting your time and thoughts to society, your countenances will show it. If you pray, I can see that.

Every man who has helped to light up the dark places of the world has been a praying man. I never preach a sermon until I've soaked it in prayer. Never. Then I never forget to thank God for helping me when I preach. I don't care whether you read your prayers out of a book or whether you just say them, so long as you mean them. A man can read his prayers and go to heaven, or he may just say his prayers and go to hell. We've got to face conditions. When I read I find that all the saintly men who have done things from Pentecost until today, have known how to pray. It was a master stroke of the devil when he got the church to give up prayer. One of the biggest farces today is the average prayer-meeting.

### Praying in Secret

Matthew says, "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father, which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." (Matt. 6:6)

Two men came to the Temple to pray (Luke 18:10) - the first was the Pharisee. He was nice and smooth, and his attitude was nice and smooth. He prayed: "God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican [tax-collector]. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all I possess," and he went out. I can imagine a lot of people sitting around the church and saying: "That is my idea of religion; that is it. I am no sensationalist; I don't want anything vulgar, no slang." Why don't you use a little, bud, so that something will come your way? And it will come as straight as two and two make four.

Services rendered in such opposite directions cannot meet with the same results. If two men were on the top of a tall building and one should jump and one come down the fire escape they couldn't expect to meet with the same degree of safety. The Pharisee said, "Thank God, I am not as other men are," and the

publican said, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." The first man went to his house the same as when he came out of it. "God be merciful to me, a sinner." That man was justified. I am justified in my faith in Jesus Christ. I am no longer a sinner. I am justified as though I had never sinned, by faith in the Son of God. That man went down to his house justified.

### Praying in Humility

How many people pray in a real sense? How many people pray in humility and truth? Some men pray for humility when it is pride they want. Many a man gets down on his knees and says: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name: thy kingdom come - " (Matt. 6:9) That is not so; they don't want God's kingdom to come. It is not so with half the people that pray. I say to you when you pray in the church pew and say that, it don't count a snap of my finger if you don't live it: You pray, "Thy kingdom come," and then you go out and do something to prevent that kingdom from coming. No man can get down and pray "The kingdom come," and have a beer wagon back up to his door and put beer in the ice box. No man can get down on his knees and pray "Thy kingdom come," and look through the bottom of a beer glass. God won't stand for it. If you wanted God's will done you would do God's will, even if it took every drop of blood in your body to do it.

"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." When you say this in your pew on Sunday it means nothing unless you live it on Monday. You say "Thy kingdom come," and then go out and do the very thing that will prevent God's kingdom from coming. Your prayers or anything you do in the church on Sunday mean nothing if you don't do the same thing in business on Monday. I don't care how loud your wind-jamming in prayer-meeting may be if you go out and skin somebody in a horse deal the next day.

The man who truly prays, "Thy kingdom come," cannot take his heart out of his prayer when he is out of the church. The man who truly prays "Thy kingdom come," will not be shrinking his measures at the store; the load of coal he sends to you won't be half slate. The man who truly prays "Thy kingdom come" won't cut off his yardstick when he measures you a piece of calico. It will not take the pure-food law to keep a man who truly prays "Thy kingdom come" from putting chalk in the flour, sand in the sugar, brick dust in red pepper, ground peanut shells in breakfast food.

The man who truly prays "Thy kingdom come" cannot pass a saloon and not ask himself the question, "What can I do to get rid of that thing that is blighting the lives of thousands of young men, that is wrecking homes, and that is dragging men and women down to hell?" You cannot pray "Thy kingdom come," and then rush to the polls and vote for the thing that is preventing that kingdom from coming. You cannot pray "Thy kingdom come" and then go and do the things that make the devil laugh. For the man who truly prays "Thy kingdom come" it would be impossible to have one kind of religion on his knees and another when he behind the counter; it would be impossible to have one kind of religion in the pew and another in politics. When a man truly prays "Thy kingdom come" he means it in everything or in nothing.

A lot of church members are praying wrong. You should pray first, "God be merciful to me a sinner," and then "Thy kingdom come."

Saying a prayer is one thing: doing God's will is another. Both should be synonymous. Angels are angels because they do God's will. When they refuse to do God's will they become devils.

Many a man prays when he gets in a hole. Many a man prays when he is up against it. Many a man prays in the time of trouble, but when he can stick his thumbs in his armholes [i.e., swagger] and take a pair of

scissors and cut his coupons off [collect his interest], then it is "Good-bye, God; I'll see you later." Many a man will make promises to God in his extremity, but forget them in his prosperity. Many a man will make promises to God when the hearse is backed up to the door to carry the baby out, but wilt soon forget the promises made in the days of adversity. Many a man will make promises when lying on his back, thinking he is going to die, and load up just the same when he is on his feet.

### Men of Prayer

Every man and every woman that God has used to halt this sin-cursed world and set it going Godward has been a Christian of prayer. Martin Luther arose from his bed and prayed all night, and when the break of day came he called his wife and said to her, "It has come." History records that on that very day King Charles granted religious toleration, a thing for which Luther had prayed.

John Knox, whom his queen feared more than any other man, was in such agony of prayer that he ran out into the street and fell on his face and cried, "O God, give me Scotland or I'll die." And God gave him Scotland and not only that, he threw England in for good measure.

When Jonathan Edwards was about to preach his greatest sermon on "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," he prayed for days; and when he stood before the congregation and preached it, men caught at the seats in their terror, and some fell to the floor; and the people cried out in their fear, "Mr. Edwards, tell us how we can be saved!"

The critical period of American history was between 1784 and 1789. There was no common coinage, no common defense. When the colonies sent men to a constitutional convention, Benjamin Franklin, rising with the weight of his four score years, asked that the convention open with prayer, and George Washington there sealed the bargain with God. In that winter in Valley Forge, Washington led his men in prayer and he got down on his knees to do it.

When the battle of Gettysburg was on, Lincoln, old Abe Lincoln, was on his knees with God; yes, he was on his knees from five o'clock in the afternoon till four o'clock in the morning, and Bishop Simpson was with him.

"And whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13). No man can ever be saved without Jesus Christ. There's no way to God unless you come through Jesus Christ. It's Jesus Christ or nothing.

"Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1)

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