

# Kingdom Conversation

## The Language of Prayer

### Matthew 6

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This excerpt is adapted from "Love God-Given Assurance," a study of Deuteronomy 5:21-6:13 by David Shelley.

#### What language describes a relationship with the Savior?

Language is not an optional accessory. It is what enables us to think clearly. One of the values in studying another language is that it gives us a broader vocabulary by which to understand life. Language is the organization of ideas, so additional languages enable us to have additional ideas. For example, studying Koine Greek, the language of the New Testament, showed me one of the weaknesses of our English.

In English, we speak in the active voice or the passive voice. The active voice describes the one who initiates an action that goes to something else. The passive voice describes the one who receives the action. If Penelope passed the pecan pie to Peter, Penelope is the one actively passing the pecan pie. If Peter was pampered by Penelope, Peter is passively receiving the action of Penelope. Active describes what you do; passive describes what is done to you.

But Koine Greek uses a third voice, called the middle voice, which is neither exclusively active nor passive. Since English doesn't really have a middle voice, we struggle to translate not only the Greek sentences but also the New Testament ideas. The middle voice can describe a person's *participation* in an action that someone else initiated and continues.

If I joined Penelope in passing out pecan pie, I might use the middle voice. But since we don't really have the middle voice in English, the idea of participating in something that someone else was already doing doesn't fit as easily into the way we think. (Eugene Peterson develops this further in "The Contemplative Pastor," 1989, Eerdmans, pp. 102ff.)

And this gets to some of our difficulty in understanding the relationship with God which the Bible describes. Does God work the life of faith in us? Or do we work out the life of faith by doing what He tells us? We're asking who's active, who's passive.

Some people argue that it is all God's work, which it is, but that leaves us thinking that we are completely passive, unable to do a thing. Are we mere energy cells plugged into *the Matrix*? If that were true, why does the Lord keep speaking to us, calling us? After saving us, why give us all these instructions on how to live the free life?

Other people argue that God only invites, but the response is all up to us, as if we were active while God sat passively, drumming his fingers and waiting for us to get on with it. But in the Bible, God is never passively waiting. He is actively sustaining every part of cosmos. He is not a detached observer. He speaks to His creation.

So do we initiate anything, or does everything simply happen to us? What if those are not the only options? What if neither of those accurately describes the *relationship* into which God calls us? What if we need a *middle* voice in which to understand our participation in something God began and has been doing all along? What if God is sovereignly working in all of it to bring it to creative, redemptive fulfillment, AND He calls us into involved, interactive participation in what He is doing?

Jesus said He is the vine, and we are the branches. Apart from Him we can do *nothing* (**John 15:5**). And there is a corollary: *With Him we cannot* do nothing. Or, as **Philippians 4:13** puts it, I can do *all things through Him* who gives me the strength.

We're not talking about *self*-righteousness. Christ is our righteousness, and apart from Christ, we will never be righteous, we will never know righteousness, and we will never experience the glory of God. We don't follow Christ's directions in order to make ourselves righteous apart from Him. We follow His directions because He calls us to be with Him as interactive participants in a life He is giving. **God speaks to us for a mutual relationship of interactive blessing.**

That's different from the way most of us learn to think from our culture. But it is the way God teaches us to think.

### **What is the language of interactive blessing?**

The Biblical term for it is *prayer*. We have to understand what that means, but to do that we have to clear away some of the clutter of false impressions.

First, prayer is not incantation. We talk about "saying prayers" as if the activity gave us some magical power to make things happen. That's not the way the Bible uses the term. Saying a prayer is useless unless you're truly in a *mutual* relationship with the Lord.

*Mutual* means the relationship involves *sharing*. Your relationship with God is not a relationship of equals, but if you know Him as the Lord and Savior He is, then you are brought into the relationship as a participant. Communication is both ways: God speaks through His words, and you *respond* to His words. You don't merely say prayers. You have a relationship.

So by *mutual* I mean that God knows you, His words speak to you, and He tells you of the love and honor He has for you, AND you know Him and give back to Him the love and honor of embracing His grace to you. Prayer expresses a *mutual relationship*.

Second, because prayer is mutual participation in a relationship with God, prayer is not merely making a speech. It is two-way communication. The Lord speaks and we respond to what He says. Biblical prayer is interactive. Biblical prayer is not merely speaking my mind. The Lord already knows everything I think. Prayer includes recognizing what God has revealed about Himself as it applies to our needs.

You can see this in the Psalms. The Psalms teach us how to talk with God. What they tell us about God is at least as important as what needs they bring to God. So Biblical prayer is responding to what God has already revealed about Himself, His purposes and His ways. The Lord reveals, and we respond. The Lord shine the light of his reality into our thoughts and circumstances. Prayer is *interactive*.

Third, prayer is not merely complaining. Because we do not pray to an unknown god. We pray to the Lord who has already revealed Himself as sovereign Savior. His eternal plans are good, and He works good through every situation. So Biblical prayer calls to mind what God has already revealed. That kind of prayer *blesses* God. “*Bless the Lord, my soul, and forget not all His benefits*” (**Psalm 103:2**).

To *bless* is to speak good of someone. When we trust the Lord, and we call to mind the assurance of His goodness, then our response blesses the Lord. The infinite, wise Creator blesses us by speaking good to us, as He spoke good into existence in Genesis 1; and we bless Him in return by agreeing that His gifts and His ways are good forever. Prayer is blessing the Lord.

So a mutual relationship of interactive blessing with the Lord is expressed through prayer that takes in what He reveals, responds to His revelation, and expresses both your need and your trust in His assuring goodness. **God speaks to us for a mutual relationship of interactive blessing.**

In **Matthew 6** Jesus teaches us to pray:

*Our Father in Heaven, hallow Your name.* That means: Creator of all, make yourself known as the Brilliant Creator, Wise Judge, Loving Savior, and Present Spirit you really are. Real living includes knowing God not as we wish he was, but as He really is.

*Your Kingdom come.* Real living includes a desire to experience His ideally beneficial Lordship. Not only do we desire to know the real God, but we also desire to live in true relationship with Him: He is King, and I am honored to be loved and entrusted with assignments from Him. But far beyond what I can do, I desire His reign in all people—beginning with those He allows me to know relationally.

*Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.* That’s what we’re all dying for—for His good purposes to be experienced here as they always are in Heaven. I want more of Heaven on earth. I want His “good, pleasing and complete will” (**Romans 12:2**). That defines the purpose of our lives: to experience His good will on earth.

The *Lord’s Prayer* is describing what we really need: We really need God’s eternal goodness to be revealed. We really need His loving-kindness to reign in our world and our relationships. We really need His will to be done here as it is in Heaven. That’s what we’re dying for.

We desire far less, but the true God will not settle for giving us less. He wants to bring us to His banquet hall and share food and healing and love and celebration with us—and we cower outside the door like life-drained drug addicts praying, “I just need one more fix. Just let me have this one thing, and I won’t bother you again.”

As addicts, we can’t see reality. We’re enslaved to what we think we need. But the Father desires relationship, participation in interactive blessing, knowing Him, desiring the fruit of his Spirit, praying for his grace for others.

God initiates it. He brings us into it. And He does not leave us uninvolved, sitting in caves waiting for the world to end. Eternal life is unbroken by physical death, because it is life received in unbroken relationship with the Life-Giver trusting His assurance.

And when Jesus taught us to pray, He taught us to pray in the plural:  
Our Father . . . Give us . . . Forgive us . . . Deliver us . . .  
We're not praying for ourselves alone, but for our community, our relationships.

I have an Asian friend I get to meet with weekly. He's a doctoral student. Whenever I ask him to tell me what a statement in Scripture is saying, he comes up with a personal experience to describe it, and it's always relational. Recently we read, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." I asked, "What is that saying?"

He said, "As an undergrad in my country I played in a band. I used to criticize the other band members for caring less about the band than I did. They wanted time to plan weddings or spend with their families. I thought I was the one putting up with their irresponsibility.

"But now I am married and I understand better. I was not being patient with them; they were being patient with me. I was the one falling short of good relationships. Now I understand that we won't know glory without good relationships. I haven't lowered my standards, but I am learning to pursue them in a different way."

Now that is an unusual answer. He understands "all have sinned" to mean his way of doing things had him missing out on better relationships. By ignoring God's glory he was experiencing less of it.

When I asked how he came to that realization he said, "My wife and I pray every night. After we started to do that I started to see that we worried less, argued less, and did many things better." My friend sees that a relationship with this Father in Heaven shapes our lives in this world in very practical ways.

My friend and I are both from pragmatic cultures that devalue relationships in favor of obligation, efficiency and success. But here he was telling me that the glory of God shapes him as a husband, as a friend and as a musician. And it does so as he daily asks the Father bring his Kingdom on earth, to do on earth as is done in Heaven.