

Anne Woodcock

Real Prayer

*Connecting with Our
Heavenly Father*



 7-Session Bible Study

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✔ **7-Session Bible Study**

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Introduction

One of the Bible writers described God’s word as “a lamp for my feet, a light on my path” (Psalm 119:105, NIV). God gave us the Bible to tell us about who he is and what he wants for us. He speaks through it by his Spirit and lights our way through life.

That means that we need to look carefully at the Bible and uncover its meaning—but we also need to apply what we’ve discovered to our lives.

Good Book Guides are designed to help you do just that. The sessions in this book are interactive and easy to lead. They’re perfect for use in groups or for personal study.

Let’s take a look at what is included in each session.

Talkabout: Every session starts with an ice-breaker question, designed to get people talking around a subject that links to the Bible study.

Investigate: These questions help you explore what the passage is about.

Apply: These questions are designed to get you thinking practically: what does this Bible teaching mean for you and your church?

Explore More: These optional sections help you to go deeper or to explore another part of the Bible which connects with the main passage.

Getting Personal: These sections are a chance for personal reflection. Some groups may feel comfortable discussing these, but you may prefer to look at them quietly as individuals instead—or leave them out.

Pray: Here, you’re invited to pray in the light of the truths and challenges you’ve seen in the study.

Each session is also designed to be easily split into two! Watch out for the **Apply** section that comes halfway through, and stop there if you haven’t got time to do the whole thing in one go.

In the back of the book, you’ll find a **Leader’s Guide**, which provides helpful notes on every question, along with everything else that group leaders need in order to facilitate a great session and help the group uncover the riches of God’s light-giving word.

Why Study *Real Prayer?*

What does the word “prayer” make you think of? For many, it’s a religious activity for old people and vicars. Or a weird superstitious ritual. Or something they’ve done in a moment of desperation. For Christians, the word often conjures up a heavy sense of duty—something we ought, and struggle, to do.

“Prayer” is one of those words that can make us cringe inwardly. Perhaps we feel confusion because we don’t really understand what prayer is or how it works. Or we feel frustration because great things that people promise will happen when we pray never materialise. Or we feel guilt, because actually we do have some idea of what prayer is and why we should do it, but we still don’t!

Yet despite the confusion and mixed feelings, at one time or another just about everyone prays. Millions worldwide do it habitually or devotedly, every day. And in moments of terror, even atheists may cry out to the God they don’t believe in. We’re humans, so we pray—but often as though we’re shooting in the dark.

Wonderfully, the Bible—and Jesus especially—shows us what real prayer is: why and how we can talk to the real, living God with humble confidence, knowing that he will hear and answer.

That’s not true of all or even most of what is claimed to be prayer in our world. Some prayer is not really about talking; some is not talking to the real living God; and some is done in a way that God will not respond to. It’s only through Jesus Christ that we can “connect” with God.

This Good Book Guide looks at what the Christian message tells us about how and why we can talk to God knowing that he will listen and respond. Forget formulas and techniques. This is about real communication with the real God—the unique Christian privilege of real prayer.

1

Why Pray?

Luke 18:9-14

Talkabout

1. How do you answer the question: why pray?

Investigate

The Bible says a lot about prayer, but—surprisingly perhaps—it doesn't specifically answer the question: why pray? And although the Bible assumes that it is important and right for people to pray to God, it also highlights a fundamental problem with our prayers to God: "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2).

Jesus' story of two men in the Jerusalem Temple, contrasting a prayer that God won't listen to with a prayer that he wonderfully answers, reveals the first and foundational reason for why we should pray to God, and the kind of prayer that will connect us with him.

 Read Luke 18:9-14

DICTIONARY

Righteousness (v 9): goodness; being right in God's eyes.

Parable (v 9): a simple story with a deeper meaning.

Pharisee (v 10): member of a religious group that was very strict about Jewish law.

Tax collector (v 10): a deeply despised job that involved collaborating with the Roman occupiers of Israel, and cheating taxpayers.

Justified (v 14): given a verdict of "not guilty".

2. The two men in Jesus' story—the Pharisee and the tax collector—are based on real people that Jesus has already met in Luke's Gospel. What do the following passages reveal about Pharisees, tax collectors, and Jesus? (Complete the table below.)

	Pharisees	Tax collectors	Jesus
Luke 15:1-7			
Luke 16:13-15		X	

3. Contrast the two men in Jesus' parable. Think about...

- their way of life.

- their posture in the temple.
- what they pray about or for.
- The Pharisee isn't lying when he says, "I am not like ... this tax collector", so what's the problem with saying this?

4. The Pharisee's prayer begins, "God, I thank you..." but look at his next sentence (v 12). What is the real focus of this prayer?

- What, then, would you say is the real purpose of his prayer?

Alternative translations of the beginning of verse 11 are: "The Pharisee ... prayed thus with himself" (NKJV) or "... prayed to himself" (ESV footnotes). The effect of the Pharisee's prayer is that he doesn't speak to God at all!

5. Compare the tax collector's prayer. How is it opposite to the Pharisee's prayer?

- How does Jesus show that this kind of prayer "works"?

6. Why does Jesus tell this story (v 9)?

- What is his message to these people (and us)?

7. From this story, especially verse 14, how do you think Jesus would answer the question: why pray?

- How would he answer the question: what kind of prayer moves God to act?

Apply

It's possible to think that we're praying, and yet that might be so far from talking to the real God based on the reality of who he is and what we are like that it isn't real prayer at all!

8. What antidote to this have we seen (see question 2, Luke 15:1), and how can we encourage this antidote in our own lives and churches?

Unlike the tax collector, many—because of shame and guilt—don't pray when in fact they can and should.

9. What antidote to this have we seen (see question 2, Luke 15:3-7), and how can we encourage this antidote in our own lives and churches?

Getting Personal | OPTIONAL

Who do you most often resemble—the Pharisee or the tax collector? Think through these questions:

- How often do you confess sin?
- How much of your praying involves thanking God for what he has done for you?
- How often do you go without praying at all?

If your first two answers are "not much" and your last one is "quite a lot", chances are that you are still struggling with your "inner Pharisee".

Take time right now to pray the tax collector's prayer and think about Jesus' words in 18:14.

Apply

11. Write down the last three things you have prayed for. If your prayers rarely reflect the themes highlighted in question 10, why do you think that might be?

Getting Personal | OPTIONAL

Write down something you hope to learn about prayer in this Bible-study series, or some way in which you hope your praying will change.

Pray

Learn from the error of the Pharisee. How have you talked yourself up and done down others? How do you need to humble yourself? Take time now to confess these things to God.

Learn from the tax collector. What things do you need God's mercy for? Spend time asking God for these things.