



UNIT: CULTURE VS. CHRISTIANITY

LESSON 1 | DISTINCTIVES OF PRAYING AS A BELIEVER

WHAT WE WANT STUDENTS TO LEARN: That prayer in the Christian faith is distinct because it relies on the power and understanding of God rather than the wisdom or capability of humanity.

WHAT WE WANT STUDENTS TO DO WITH WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED: Devote themselves to practicing prayer in the way that God calls us, knowing that this will be a testimony to others about the power of God.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS: Philippians 4:4-7, Daniel 3:13-19, Matthew 5:9-13, 6:5-14, James 5:13-18.

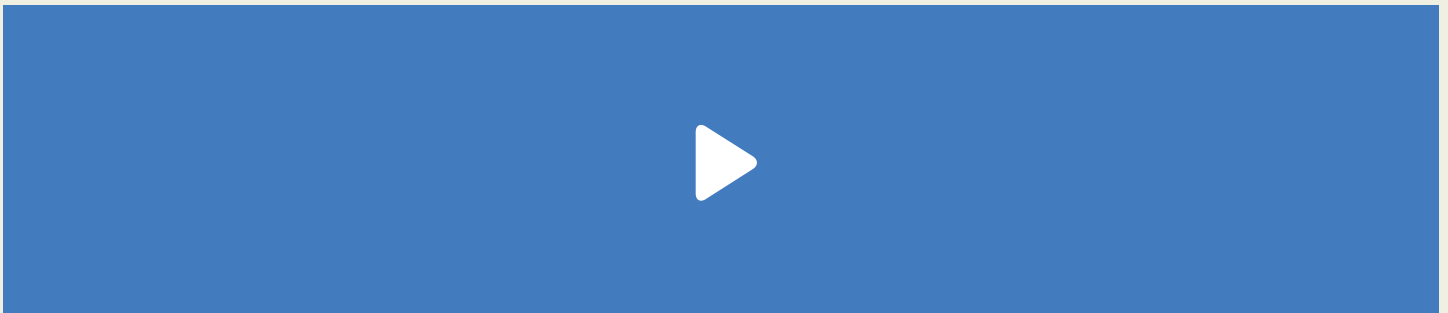
ANCHOR STATEMENT: Praying as a believer is distinctly different. Our prayers are meant to bring glory to God and to deepen our faith in His sovereignty.

OVERVIEW:

Prayer is not something that is lost on the world today. We hear things all the time, like “thoughts and prayers,” when something bad happens. Many people today practice some form of prayer. Whether that is meditation or asking God to help them on a math test that they haven’t studied for, people define what they are doing as prayer. But what exactly is prayer, and how is prayer different for believers? This lesson is intended to highlight what prayer is and how believers are called to pray differently from the world around them.

TEACHER PREP VIDEO:

Each *Anchored* lesson comes with a Teacher Prep Video. These short videos are designed to help you grasp the lesson’s main point as you prepare to teach.



BIBLE BACKGROUND

The *Bible Background* is a focused, brief overview of some of the background info for the main passage you will be teaching.

- **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “CONTEXT”?** In every YM360 Bible study lesson, you’ll notice we make a point to encourage you to provide the context for the passages you study. By “context” we mean at the very least helping students know *who* wrote the book, *when* it was written, and *why* it was written.
- **WHAT’S THE BIG DEAL?** When we teach the Bible without giving context, students don’t get a “big picture” understanding of the story of the Bible. But this view is vital to grasping the story of God’s plan of redemption for humankind. As you teach, use the *Bible Background* to help summarize the context.

THE DETAILS

Philippians

- *Author:* The Apostle Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians. Of course we know Paul as the one-time chief enemy of the Church. After his miraculous conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul would go on to have a position of great importance in the early Church and beyond. He wrote 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament.
- *Time frame:* Philippians was one of the last letters Paul wrote before he was martyred, sometime around A.D. 62.
- *Purpose:* Philippians was written to Paul's close friends at the Philippian church, thanking them for their kindness and prayers while he was in prison. And he was encouraging them not to lose their faith because of his persecution.

Daniel

- *Author:* Daniel wrote this book while in exile (Babylon)
- *Time frame:* Daniel was written around or about 165 B.C.
- *Purpose:* The book of Daniel is written as a prophecy for God's people. Although in the middle of exile, God's people would eventually be delivered just as Daniel (and his friends) were delivered.

Matthew

- *Author:* Matthew, a former tax collector, was a disciple of Jesus and a firsthand witness to the stories he relates in his Gospel.
- *Time frame:* Most people hold to Matthew's Gospel being written in the late A.D. 50s or 60s, though there are some who think it was written after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.
- *Purpose:* Matthew was writing to a primarily Jewish audience to convince them that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. But he was probably aware of a Gentile audience, as his Gospel makes the case that the saving truth of Christ is for all nations.

James

- *Author:* James, who was Jesus' brother and the leader of the Jerusalem Church.
- *Time frame:* Most people believe the date was sometime in the mid-40s A.D.
- *Purpose:* James was seemingly writing to a Jewish audience. His message was pretty straightforward throughout the book: don't let your faith be one of words only, and live your faith powerfully. It's a message that James hammered home in direct, easy-to-grasp language. It's what makes James such a practical book for all believers.

THE SETTING

Philippians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the Church in Philippi. In our main passage, Paul refers to prayer and its role when we face anxiety and hard times in life. What is remarkable about this passage is that Paul writes it from prison. Despite being in chains and facing death, Paul can write to the Philippians and encourage them that prayer to the One True God is the way to true peace.

THE MAIN POINT

What does it mean to pray as a believer? People who do not believe in Jesus offer up prayers all around the world, hoping that some higher power will intervene and help them. But this is not how believers are called to pray. We are called to bring everything we have to God. Will this always mean we get what we want? Not at all. But, when we align ourselves with God and trust Him with our whole selves, we create room for Him to do what only He has the power to do. We display faith in even the darkest circumstances, and by that, we give God glory in a way that the world around us can marvel at. Our prayers are about what God can do, which is far more than we can ever imagine!

LESSON PLAN

The *Lesson Plan* contains three elements: an introductory activity called *The Lead In*; the Bible Study section called *The Main Event*; and an application-focused segment called *The Last Word*.

THE LEAD IN

- *Goal*: To help students see that the world has very different views of prayer.
- *Set-Up*: None needed.

FIRST, explain to students that we will be talking about prayer today. But before we discover what the Bible says about prayer, we are going to look at a few quotes about prayer from a variety of sources. Below are a few different quotes to choose from. These quotes on prayer range in perspective and are only meant to start conversations. *After each one that you read, ask students to share their thoughts about whether the quote is similar or different from their own view of prayer.*

THEN, read a few or all of the following quotes:

- *"If I feel myself disinclined to pray, then is the time when I need to pray more than ever."*
 - Charles H. Spurgeon (1800's Preacher/Theologian - Encouraged to Pray: Classic Sermons on Prayer)
- *"With new projects, I get my team together for a prayer. I make sure we are all clear on the intention and what the deeper meaning is. I do my best, and I try to push everyone around me to do the same."*
 - Beyonce (21st Century Singer/Songwriter - ELLE Magazine Interview)
- *"I have never made but one prayer to God, a very short one: Oh Lord, make my enemies ridiculous. And God granted it."*
 - Voltaire (18th Century Writer/Philosopher - Letter to Étienne Noël Damilaville)
- *"In prayer it is better to have a heart without words than words without a heart."*
 - John Bunyan (17th Century Preacher/Writer - Pilgrim's Progress)
- *"I should have prayed to the ancestors for luck." [Hua Li] "How lucky can they be? They're dead!" [Grandmother Fa]*
 - Grandmother Fa (1998 Disney Movie – Mulan)

FINALLY, explain to students that there are a LOT more thoughts out there about prayer than they may have realized. Not only do other religions claim to practice prayer, but non-believers also talk about prayer. Today, we want to look at why prayer as a believer differs from all of these other cultural ideas of prayer, along with what God tells us about how to pray.

If there are no questions, transition into the Main Event.

THE MAIN EVENT

- *Goal*: To help students see that prayer as a believer differs from worldly or secular prayers. It does not focus on the gains of the individual but rather on the worship of God.
- *Set-Up*: Make sure students have a Bible or Bible App.

FIRST, explain to students that we are going to be starting a unit called Culture vs. Christianity. Even though it sounds like the two are in a boxing match against one another, we don't want students leaving with the idea that everything in culture is ALWAYS opposed to Christianity. In fact, our hope in this particular lesson is that students will see an area of culture where non-believers are desperately searching for an answer that Christians can provide them with! Inform students that today's lesson is about prayer.

THEN, ask:

- What are some examples of things that make you anxious?
 - Answers may vary.

Read or have a student read Philippians 4:4-7.

THEN, explain to students that anxiety is a feeling that all of us can have from time to time when we are worried or scared. Paul was NOT presuming that his audience struggled with mental illness and providing a prescription for anxiety disorders. Anxiety disorders, which are when a person feels anxiety in abnormal amounts more frequently than is typical, are not what we are talking about today. *Make sure you draw this distinction.*

NEXT, ask students:

- **How does prayer help us deal with anxiety?**
 - *Answers may vary.*

Say something like:

- **There are so many things that can cause us to feel anxious. Things like giving a class presentation, unidentified sounds late at night, and even watching a friend try to parallel park for the first time. These things are a part of what it means to be human. And when we pray to God, one of the first misunderstandings about prayer as a believer is that we are praying for Him to take these human experiences away so that we don't feel anxious anymore.**

Explain to students that a common misconception that many believers and non-believers have about prayer is that the goal is to get God to take pain, worry, and even suffering away from us. There is certainly nothing wrong with praying that God will take these things away- even Jesus prayed that God would let the cup pass from Him. But Paul is challenging us to pray with a different goal in mind. **Say something like:**

- **When we pray, we are asking for God's peace, presence, and comfort in the things that make us anxious, or sad, or scared, or whatever it is that you are feeling. We are essentially saying, "Hey God, things are pretty scary right now. I could spend my time worrying that they won't turn out well. Instead, I'm asking that, regardless of what happens, you will make your presence known to me. Plus, regardless of what happens, I know that Your plan is still in action."**

THEN, read or have a student read Daniel 3:13-19. **Say something like:**

- **This passage isn't about prayer, but stick with me for a moment. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were faced with death in the furnace because they refused to worship King Nebuchadnezzar's false gods. By God's standards, they were doing what they were supposed to, and yet, they were about to be burnt to a literal crisp. That doesn't seem fair, does it? But let's take a quick look at how they respond. Instead of letting their faith rest in whether or not God delivers them from the furnace, they say, "You know what- God's got this. We know that He CAN rescue us, but we also know that He is in control even if He chooses not to rescue us." WOW! What a display of faith!**

Explain to students that this boldness is the type of attitude Paul encourages us to bring to our prayer life. Their statement made King Nebuchadnezzar angry- so angry that he bumped the furnace up six times hotter than it would normally be. Help students see that when we submit ourselves in prayer, it's not just about what happens to us. It is also a statement to the world about who God is! **Ask:**

- **How does this attitude toward prayer set our prayer lives apart from the rest of the world?**
 - *Answers will vary.*

NEXT, explain to students that in secular forms of prayer, we often see people attempting to bend the divine to their own human will rather than coming to God with humility and thanksgiving in ALL circumstances, as Paul says in Philippians 4:4-7. **Say something like:**

- **Praying as a believer is remarkably different than how the world defines prayer. In pagan circles, for example, prayer is a ritualistic practice that carries 'mystical' elements. For example, many documented pagan prayers**

are akin to incantations or spells. For the majority of other religions, prayer is something that is done to gain favor from the gods they serve or believe in. It is a good work in a works-based righteousness. For them, praying is like cleaning your room before you ask your parents to hang out with your friends on the weekend. Unfortunately, this attitude toward prayer has also infiltrated the Church. Jesus actually addresses this type of belief before giving His followers instructions on how to pray!

Read or have a student read Matthew 6:5-14. **Ask:**

- **How does the prayer that Jesus lays out differ from the prayers of the world?**
 - *Answers:* Our prayers are not for the attention of others but the attention of God. God knows our needs; therefore, asking for all these other things is unnecessary! He is our Provider and will give us what we need (not always what we want).

THEN, explain that Jesus makes these distinctions on purpose. First, He does not want us to think that our prayers will gain us any accolades. In fact, He calls out the religious people who pray so that they can be seen by others. Make sure to let students know that Jesus is NOT discouraging us from praying together in groups or banning prayer in a large group setting. Not at all. In a modern context, it would be more like Him calling out the people who write out big prayers on Social Media so that they can get likes and follows. He distinctly says, “so that others can hear.” That is a works-based mindset, and Christianity is not a works-based religion. And conversely, He also challenges the pagan ways of prayer (referred to as Gentile). Some biblical scholars believe that the empty phrases Jesus refers to are actual ‘spells’ that the pagans believed would grant them their wishes. And part of the reason this is likely true can be seen in what Jesus says next: “... for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.” **Say something like:**

- **Every single one of us was an infant at some point. And when we were infants, the adults in our lives likely became experts at something called “anticipating our needs.” Since we could not communicate our needs yet, they would watch us to see if our cries meant we were hungry, sleepy, or just looking for something to chew as our teeth came in! They were our very first experience with customer service. But occasionally, they had trouble getting it right. Even the best and most attentive adults don’t always know how to anticipate our needs. But God does! He knows what we need before we even ask!**

Explain to students that our wants and needs don’t always match, which can make it feel like God doesn’t answer our prayers. And one of the things that pagans did to combat this feeling was to speak spells into their prayers. They assumed that if they found the right words, they might get what they wanted. But God is not a magical genie, and prayer is not a wish. Ask students to take another look at the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 5:9-13. Then **ask:**

- **What similarities do you see between how Jesus instructs us to pray and how Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego responded to King Nebuchadnezzar?**
 - *Answer:* There is an acknowledgment that God is in control, regardless of the outcomes around us. God is the only one that can provide salvation (or safety from death).

Say something like:

- **Jesus instructs us to pray with the goal of expressing our faith in God to God. Even though there are genuine requests that are involved, such as asking God to provide us with something like food, the focus of the prayer should be God’s power and promise to carry out His plans. And that is a really big change in mindset from the cultural norms of prayer. Think back to what Paul says in Philippians 4. Imagine how different it would look to pray like this the next time you feel scared or upset. Instead of saying, “God, please let me get an A on this test,” you might pray something like, “God, please let me get an A on this test,” you might pray something like, “God, please calm my nerves so I can do my best. I know that regardless of what happens, You are with me. My grade on this test will not thwart Your plans for my life.” That’s a pretty big difference, huh?**

Explain to students that sometimes all it takes is remembering that God is with you to help dispel whatever fear you are facing. But praying for ourselves is not the only way that prayer as a believer differs from the prayers of the world. **Ask students:**

- We've talked a lot about prayer in a personal sense. But what about prayer for others? How might God want us to apply these truths when we pray for another person who is sick or hurting?
o *Answers will vary.*

Read or have a student read James 5:13-18.

Ask students:

- What does this passage say about prayer for others?
o *Answer:* It encourages these prayers! In fact, it even tells us that these prayers can be answered.

AFTER THAT, explain that James is telling us to always pray for one another and ask for prayers when we are hurting and sick. He even uses the example of Elijah, who prayed for the rain to be withheld and was answered. **Ask students:**

- We all know that sometimes, even when we pray for healing for others, they are not immediately healed. Occasionally, the people we pray for even pass away. Does that mean that we should stop praying for others to be healed?
o *Answer:* Absolutely not!

Say something like:

- Just because we haven't gotten what we wanted in the way we want doesn't mean that God hasn't heard our prayers. In fact, if we had the opportunity to look at things from an eternal vantage point, we might find that our prayers WERE answered in a bigger way than we could have fathomed at the time.

Remind students of their Anchored Statement for this lesson:

PRAYING AS A BELIEVER IS DISTINCTLY DIFFERENT. OUR PRAYERS ARE MEANT TO BRING GLORY TO GOD, AND TO DEEPEN OUR FAITH IN HIS SOVEREIGNTY.

Say something like:

- The word sovereignty might be a little confusing, so let's define it. Remember how we talked about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego trusting that God was good regardless of what happened? They were trusting in God's sovereignty, or His supreme power and authority. In other words, God has a plan that is bigger than what we can see right now, and even when things don't seem right, we can still trust that He is looking out for us.

FINALLY, ask if anyone has any thoughts or questions, then transition to the Last Word portion of your lesson.

THE LAST WORD

- *Goal:* Help students apply what they've learned to their own prayer life.
- *Set-Up:* Make sure students have a piece of paper and something to write with.

FIRST, ask students to return to Matthew 6:9-13. Explain that as we close out our time, we are going to practice crafting a prayer that follows the model that Jesus gives us in Matthew 6. **Say something like:**

- To begin our prayer, we are going to think of a way to honor God. In Jesus's example, He begins by saying God's Name is hallowed, which means honored and holy. You don't have to write down anything elaborate to start your prayer. Something as simple as "Mighty and Wonderful God, I'm so glad to speak with you today."

Give students a chance to craft their 'opening phrase' and then **say something like:**

- **Next, we want to communicate that regardless of what happens, we know God is in control. If you want, you can think of a specific situation happening in your life right now that you feel comfortable writing down. For example, "I know that regardless of what I've done in the past, You can still do incredible work in my life."**

THEN, after students have a moment to write this down, **ask:**

- **When Jesus prays that God would give us our daily bread, what do you think he means?**
 - *Answer:* He is talking about the food that is necessary for us to live. Give us life!

Explain to students that this expression has a double meaning if we look closely. Not only do we need food to live, but Jesus uses bread specifically to also point back to Himself- a.k.a. the Bread of Life. Encourage students to think of something like this daily bread passage. It could be as simple as "Fill my cup with water daily." If this part is difficult for a newer believer, they can simply reword this verse and keep the bread as the focus since it still carries the meaning.

NEXT, point students to the final two verses **by saying:**

- **Jesus points out a few really important things in these last two verses. We are going to somewhat combine them so that you can close out your prayer more personally. First, Jesus calls us to ask God for forgiveness. This is important, because it implies that we NEED forgiveness, just like our daily bread in the verse before. He follows this verse by encouraging us to seek God's help to fight off temptation. So, as you think about what you are writing down next, I want you to think about some of the things you are struggling with. Again, only write down what you are comfortable with... if you need to write something vague, that is ok. I would just encourage you to bring those details to God when you are praying on your own later.**

Give students a minute to write down a sentence or two asking God for forgiveness from their sins and also protection against the temptation to continue sinning. Then **ask:**

- **Why do you think that Jesus includes the bit about us forgiving the people who are in debt to us?**
 - *Answers will vary.*

Explain to students that Jesus wants us to think about the forgiveness we are asking from God and whether or not we are extending the same forgiveness to others. When we pray, we aren't dismissed from the things that are going on in our lives when we aren't praying. Encourage students to think about a person in their lives to whom they need to show God's character. That could be forgiveness, love, kindness, etc. As they finish their prayer, challenge them to write something like, "Help me show _____ the _____ that You have shown me." For example, this can be filled in as "Help me show my brother the same patience that You have shown me."

THEN, once they are done writing, encourage students to take this prayer home and practice it each night before bed.

FINALLY, if there are no more questions, close the lesson in prayer.

- Don't forget to remind students about their devotions this week. If you're posting them on Social Media or some other means of electronic distribution, make sure you inform students of when they will be receiving them.