

What is NOT Prayer

I would like to start with a story from Greek mythology. There is a hunter called Narcissus, and he's incredibly handsome. One day while hunting in the woods, he became very thirsty.



He went to a river to get a drink. Leaning down over the pool of water, he sees his own reflection. He was so handsome, he fell in love with his own image. Here you can see the picture of Narcissus. He was so enraptured by his own beauty that he was unable to pull away, and stayed frozen like a statue.

He just stayed in that position, motionless. So he wasted away and eventually died of thirst and starvation. From that spot where he died, there emerged a flower. They named it after him, Narcissus. You might know that the daffodil belongs to the Narcissus class of flowers.



Today, there are many wannabe Narcissuses. In modern times, we call it the selfie. How many are admiring themselves in the beautiful image that is reflected off the surface of the handphone! In fact, Narcissus

was the first ever recorded selfie in history, and he died because of that. The selfie generation today finds its parallel in Narcissus.

The English word 'narcissism' comes from the name of the person in the story, Narcissus. Now when we say someone is narcissistic, it means that they have an excessive admiration for themselves. They are totally self-absorbed. They are selfish. So, be careful about the kind of flowers you send to someone. You send a narcissus flower, and they will wonder if you are hinting that they are self-absorbed, narcissistic!

What is a narcissistic prayer?

Let us consider what a narcissistic prayer would look like. What would a self-absorbed prayer look like?

Well, we can find an example in Genesis 28:20-21.

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, ²¹ and I return to my father's house in safety, then the LORD will be my God. ²² This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

Jacob is making a promise. He makes a vow, and in fact, this is his prayer to God.

Let's try to analyze what Jacob's prayer is like. He says to God, "**If** You do x, y, z, **then** I will....." We would call this transactional.

What is the nature of your relationship with God?

Prayer assumes a relationship. Jacob's prayer reflects his relationship with God. And, we can see the transactional nature of his relationship with God in his prayer.

A transaction means there is an exchange of goods or services between two parties. For example, I use my money to pay for a meal in a restaurant. I pay the barber, and I get a haircut. So, a transactional relationship is one in which I offer something to that person, and the aim of my offer is so that I can get something in return. Of course, I would be doing it for my own advantage. You would not enter into any transaction if you did not gain something from that transaction. It is what we call a *quid pro quo*, an exchange, where I give you this, and I expect to get that from you in return.

In a sense, all relationships are transactional. You do not enter into an agreement, or into a relationship with someone if you do not get anything out of it, or if you do not get something in return.

What we find is that our relationship with God is almost always, without exception, transactional in nature. When we look into our prayer, if we were to record our prayer, we would see the kind of prayer that we make before God. If, somehow, you can record the content of the prayer, you will be able to see whether that prayer is transactional in nature.

What kind of prayer is Jacob making?

1. The Focus?

Look at how many times the personal pronoun in the first person occurs. "I", "me", "my" — how many times does it occur?

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, ²¹ and I return to my father's house in safety, then the LORD will be my God. ²² This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.”

We have highlighted it in red, and we count nine times. What does this tell us? It tells us that even while Jacob is praying to God, the focus of the prayer is not God! He himself is the focus even while he is talking to God. Obviously, he was actually talking to himself.

So, we find ourselves in this strange situation where you are talking to God yet you are actually talking to yourself.

We are reminded of the passage in Luke: “The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself....” (Luke 18:11) He was praying to God, but in fact he was praying to himself. He was absorbed in himself.

Sometimes, in town we see a man walking along the street talking to himself. People would say that he belongs to the mental asylum. Actually, our situation is far worse: it is idolatry. In fact, it's the worst form of idolatry, since you worship yourself. The Pharisee was so caught up with himself, he did not realize he was basically worshiping himself.

The first thing we learn from our analysis so far is about focus. The focus of this kind of prayer is me, myself; the focus is not God. This prayer is selfish in nature

2. The Terms and Conditions?

The second thing we see in Jacob's prayer is that it is conditional in nature. By conditional, we are referring to this construct "If..., then...". You can see it highlighted in green. Jacob says, "**If** God will be with me, and keep me in this journey, and give me food and garments to wear, and let me return to my father's house in safety...." — that's a whole string of conditions that Jacob has in his prayer!

All this sounds very familiar, doesn't it? For example, we recall our student days when we knew we had not studied very hard, and before the exam, we pray, "Sorry God, I know I haven't studied hard enough to pass. But if You let me pass, just this once, then I promise You that I will....." You see it echoes the vow that Jacob is making.

We do better than Jacob and slip in "I promise You," to our prayer — it adds seriousness, it adds weight to those words we are saying to God. "I promise You that I will be more diligent next time." What are we doing? What does conditional mean? It means we are invoking God with terms and conditions, "If You do this, then I promise I will do that."

How often we pray this kind of prayer! "God, if You heal me this once, I promise You I will commit my life to You." "God, if You get me out of this mess, I promise I will dedicate my life to You." Have you ever made this kind of prayer? I have. "God, if You help me overcome this weakness, I promise You I will serve You for the rest of my life."

We often make this kind of conditional prayer to God. We promise this, and that, in exchange for something we want to get from God. We expect God to reciprocate, to return the favor.

Consider this kind of conditional prayer very carefully.

What would happen if God did not do His part? What if God did not keep to His agreement?

Jacob was saying to God, “If God will be with me.... Then the LORD will be my God...,” but what if God was not with him? What if God didn’t grant Jacob His presence? Then how would Jacob react?

That’s the nature of the conditional prayer; it is based on reciprocity.

If God does not comply with those conditions, will Jacob take the LORD as his God? It is all conditional, and therefore it is obvious what the outcome will be — the relationship will turn sour, of course. He will not take the LORD to be his God.

How many times have you heard this type of prayer? “God, if You are real, reveal Yourself to me. If You reveal Yourself to me, then I will believe.”

Do you see the conditions embedded in such a prayer? If God is real, He will reveal Himself to me. If He reveals Himself to me, then I will believe, and only then I will commit my life to Him.

But what if God doesn’t reveal Himself to me? Then what happens? Do you see the logical consequence of this kind of prayer? If God doesn’t reveal Himself to me, then I will not believe in Him!

Someone has actually said this to me. “God is not real, because when I pray, He doesn’t answer my prayer. He is not there. And therefore, I won’t believe in Him. I’ll leave the church.”

Not having an answer is itself an answer

Think on this very carefully. The fact that He doesn't answer your prayer may in itself be His answer. Instead of coming to the conclusion that God is not real, a totally opposite conclusion can be drawn: If God doesn't answer your prayer, perhaps that is His answer.

How so?

We ask with wrong motives

The first possible reason is that perhaps you have been asking it wrongly. James 4:3 says,

“You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.”

If it is a selfish prayer, God isn't going to answer.

If you ask with wrong motives, you do not receive. The silence is deafening — it is telling you that the prayer is wrong. It is selfish prayer. Your motives are wrong.

We ask for something that is not in line with His nature

Another reason could be that we are asking God for something that is not in line with His nature. We tend to misunderstand God. We don't know how God functions. We don't know His heart. We don't share His concerns.

We pray for sunshine when we have planned a picnic, and expect Him to grant our request. However, it often happens that it rains anyway. We wonder why God does not grant our request. This is because it is not His practice to alter circumstances. As a rule, He does not intervene in nature, or in natural circumstances. He intervenes only

when it is absolutely necessary, in order to serve His Kingdom purposes. Therefore, on those rare occasions when He does intervene, we must understand that it is an exception to the rule. Usually, it rains just as it was forecasted, why? Because in Matthew 5, Jesus reminds us that God sends His rain on both the kind and the unkind. The Father in heaven causes His sun to rise on everyone, without partiality. (See Matthew 5:45)

We go through exactly the same kind of misfortune, pain, and suffering that people in the world go through. We are not exempt; the rain falls and the sun shines on them—and on us. God does not show any partiality. Do you see? So, to pray so that God will answer this kind of prayer is to misunderstand how He functions.

We ask for God to coerce someone to do something against his/her will

Yet another aspect we don't understand about prayer, is that it is not in God's nature to coerce. He will not force you to do something against your will. He does not impinge on our will and force us to comply. I heard a joke about a boy who comes up to a girl and says, "God told me in my prayer that you will be my future wife." Can you guess what she said in reply? She said, "Well, God didn't tell me that you would be my future husband." You see, this boy must have been hoping that God would somehow pressure her into marrying him. And that was his prayer. He didn't understand that God is not like that; God would not cause that girl to somehow like him, let alone compel that girl to marry him. That would be going against God's nature.

God respects our will and our choices. He respects us! It is not in His nature to force us to change, or go against our own will. How often have we prayed for someone, especially those closest to us whom we find difficult to cope with, that God would change that person? "All his

bad habits, oh, God please change him.” “All her shortcomings, her annoying habits — please, God, change her.” Some people take time to change, too long for our liking. And others never seem to change, much to our distress. “God, You change him, please.” But God will never answer that prayer. Why? Because He does not infringe a person’s will. If the person herself wants to change, then yes, but if she herself resists change, God will not force her to change, because that would be going against her own will. Do you see? In other words, to pray that kind of prayer is simply a waste of breath.

That is not to say that God never uses circumstances to achieve His purpose of salvation. His offer of the forgiveness of sins is for everyone. (Luke 24:47, Acts 17:30, 1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9) Some of us are so hardened in our hearts, we need an earthquake to wake us up to the truth. That earthquake may come in the form of a sickness, a fall, or a sudden misfortune — something that shakes us, and brings us to our senses. It could be a routine health check and the results come back, and it is cancer. Only then the person wakes up. It is just like the picture of the Prodigal Son. He has to go through suffering and deprivation, until he has nothing to eat. Only then it hits him, and he says, “Oh how good it was back when I was in my father’s house.” It is only then that he turns back to God, and he does so of his own accord.

Sadly, there are people who, despite going through hardship, despite their encounter with suffering, still will not turn to God. Yet even then God does not impose His will upon them. He does not force us to turn to Him.

We can summarise our discussion so far with this statement on the transactional or conditional relationship:

No conditional relationship can last.

It doesn't last because if one party does not keep to their side of the bargain, it falls apart — that relationship is finished.

When a relationship falls apart, it may not be that you leave that person. For example, when a marriage breaks down, it may be practically impossible to pack your bags and leave. You may still have to live under the same roof even though the relationship is no more.

It's worth repeating: This conditional relationship, or this transactional relationship — where you give in order to take — is not going to last. This kind of relationship is doomed to fail, sooner or later.

Jacob's prayer is built on this kind of relationship. It was a transactional, conditional prayer. Mercifully for Jacob, the LORD did grant his request — God kept to His side of the bargain, much to Jacob's delight, of course.

But, what would have happened if God hadn't granted him that request? That is the burning question.

3. Who set the terms?

The third point on how we assess a transactional prayer is to look at the actual agreement, or the exchange, just like you would find in any contract. In any contractual agreement, there are the terms of the agreement.

JACOB'S PRAYER 'CONTRACT' WITH GOD (TERMS AND CONDITIONS SET BY JACOB)		
God's responsibility		
v 20	His companionship	If God will be with me
	His protection	Keep me on this journey

	His provision	Give me food to eat and garments to wear
v 21	His Peace (shalom)	Jacob returns to his father's house in safety
Jacob's responsibility		
v 21	Worship and serve Him	The Lord will be my God
v 22	Provide Him a house	This pillar will be God's house
	Provide Him a portion of his possessions	All that You give me, I will give a tenth to You

Jacob lays down the conditions

You will notice immediately that it is Jacob who sets the terms of the contract, not God.

And so, what can we see here?

If ...

1. "You will be with me" — he wants God's companionship, God's friendship. Jacob is asking for God's presence.
2. "...keep me on this journey" — Jacob is asking for God's protection.
- 3a. "...food to eat" — God is to make sure he has enough food, that he won't starve.
- 3b. "...and garments to wear" — God is to see that he is clothed. Jacob is asking for God's provision.

4. “...and I return to my father’s house in safety” — Actually the Hebrew word there is *shalom*, peace in wellness, wholeness. Jacob is asking for God’s peace.

So we have these four elements that Jacob sets as the terms of the agreement — God’s presence, God’s protection, God’s provision and God’s peace. What Jacob is saying to God is, basically, as he sums up his prayer in v22, “As my God, You will give me all I need by providing for me in all these four aspects I have set out here.”

In turn, Jacob continues, “Okay, You agree to those terms, and now this is my part of the agreement: You will be my God.” In other words, Jacob’s part of the agreement is to worship and serve God.

This kind of prayer is all too familiar. We pray, “God, if You will help me overcome, then I will worship You. If You grant me success, then I will serve You till the end.”

Further, this is what Jacob said to God, “Out of what You are supposed to give me for my needs, I will give You back one tenth.”

Jacob’s conditions are lopsided

Jacob is basically bargaining with God. He is setting the terms of the agreement. He is asking for God’s presence, His protection, His provision, His peace. In return he offers to give God his due worship and provide God ‘a house’ and a tenth of what God gives to him.

Does it sound like a good deal? Does it sound like a fair contract? Of course not. In fact, I would say God gets a raw deal, wouldn’t you? He’d get cheated in this deal, wouldn’t He?

Do you think God should sign this contract? Do you think He should put His signature on this agreement? He's getting peanuts but He has to fork out a lot.

Jacob says he'll make Him his God, but the heavenly hosts worship God all day and all night. They are serving God all day and all night.

Jacob says he'll make a 'house' for God using one stone that's the size of a pillow, probably. (See v18) Well, he's going to set that pillow-stone vertically to make it a pillar, and then call it a house.

God would say, "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. And are you going to build Me a house?" (cf. Isaiah 66:1)

Anyway, Jacob then says he'll give one tenth out of all that God gives to him. We are just like Jacob when we think that giving tithes means we have fulfilled our responsibility and our part of the bargain. What's worse is we think we are doing God a favor by giving the tithe. In fact, according to the agreement, Jacob is going to get all he needs from God. Jacob would have nothing if God didn't first give it to him the first place. Jacob keeps the 90 percent and God gets back a measly 10 percent. How is that fair?

These are the terms of the agreement. Show this to any lawyer — it's almost laughable, isn't it?

Jacob's conditions are exploitative

In sum, it is Jacob who sets the terms of the 'contract'. The conditions he sets are lopsided. And so, Jacob is set to gain far more from this agreement. He puts in very little, but he stands to make huge gains from God.

This is the nature of bargaining. It is what we call a good bargain. We all revel in this feeling of a good bargain. Look at the popular online shopping platforms during a sale. I'm sure many of us were ready for the bargains that began at the stroke of midnight. Fingers on our devices. We all love good bargains. I'm a cheapskate. I want to get something but not at its normal price. I want to pay very little and yet get the full value. We love the word 'discount'. 20% discount! 30%! And if you get a 50% discount — half price! I pay only half, but I get the full amount. That's really something. When I can get this kind of a deal, I'm so happy. Why? Because I got more than what I gave. It feels good. I have that sense that I've won.

A good bargain makes us feel good. And so, even when it comes to our relationship with God, we want a good bargain. We want to give very little, but we want to get a lot out of it.

There is a story about a benevolent king who wished to host a big feast in a village. So, the announcement was made of his imminent visit inviting the whole village. "Everybody! Come to my banquet! The table will be laden with the richest of foods. It will be a feast you will never forget. All I ask is that you each bring a bottle of wine so that we can share in the joy of being together."

On the day of the feast, every villager turned up. Their eyes lit up at the sight of the banqueting table laden with sumptuous food. Every conceivable delicious delicacy is there — fish, meat, vegetables, fruit, desserts, cakes.

What's more, the good king himself is there welcoming everyone. He says, "Come right in! Here is the barrel for the wine you have each brought. Just pour in the wine into the barrel. My servants will serve the wine as you enjoy the meal I have prepared for you. Welcome!

Welcome!” And so, one by one, each villager entered and emptied their bottle into the huge barrel, and took a seat.

When they were all seated, the King asked for his goblet to be filled for the first toast.

“To your health!” and he raised it and drank from it.

He stopped short at the very first sip.

“This is not wine,” he said, “this is just water.”

Imagine that! Every single one of those villagers had come to the king’s feast bringing water instead of wine. They each had thought to themselves, “Well, I’ll just bring water. I’m not going to spend any money getting a bottle of wine. Everyone else will be bringing wine, so my little bottle of water won’t make a difference.” Little did they know that everyone else was thinking the same thing.

Everyone thought, “I can get away with it. What a bargain! A huge feast and it’ll cost me nothing. Wonderful!”

Unfortunately, this is our human mentality. We want everything yet give nothing. We want the best bargain. We want the maximum while putting in the minimum.

This is the problem when we come to prayer. Jacob is, in fact, reaping a lot out of God. We use God for our own purposes. We use God for our own ends.

Is this the way to treat God Almighty, Creator of the Universe?

In summary, we see the characteristics of this kind of relationship:

The focus is on me. I gain in this relationship. It's me, me, me. I'm the center. I give in order to take. The terms are not fair; it is not an equal share, one-for-one, where we give and we get. Oh no, in this transaction, we give very little, and we get a whole lot in return! It is so lopsided.

Our whole motive is to get something out of this agreement. In fact, we extract so much out of it, the only word to describe this transactional relationship is that it is exploitative. We are using God for our advantage. This kind of prayer is selfish prayer. It is narcissistic prayer. If we come to God with this kind of transactional relationship, then that relationship will go nowhere. No wonder it so difficult to get through to God!

If you can see down to the root of why we pray, you are going to see the problem of this kind of prayer. How are we ever going to communicate with God with this kind of attitude to prayer? How is it possible to come into intimacy with God with this kind of prayer?

God is all-sufficient — He has no need for help from anything or anyone. Yet, He is reaching out to us. But, if we come to Him with this selfish attitude of a transactional relationship, how can we ever get close to Him? Two persons who do not share the same heart cannot become intimate with one another. In fact, this exploitative attitude makes intimacy with God impossible.

How then should we pray?

If now we understand how selfish this transactional relationship is, then what steps must we take to build intimacy with God?

Let's start with the first, and fundamental step.

The Lord Jesus has already given us a big clue. In Matthew Ch 6 he points us to the secret of prayer.

Matthew 6:9

Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.'

The Lord starts with, "Pray, then, in this way...." Of course, from what he had said in v7, we know he isn't saying we should just mouth the words that follow, and pick up a rosary to count how many times we repeat them. That would be vain repetition. Rather, the Lord is saying, "Pray in this manner...," as in, "Pray with this attitude...." In the Greek, it is very clear what he means: "Use the following words with this attitude of prayer."

So, what is this right attitude of prayer?

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father who is in heaven	
1	Hallowed be <u>Your</u> name.
2	<u>Your</u> kingdom come.
3	<u>Your</u> will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
1	Give <u>us</u> this day our daily bread.
2	Forgive <u>us</u> our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
3	Do not lead <u>us</u> into temptation, but deliver <u>us</u> from evil.

It starts with "Our Father who is in heaven" and then it goes 1-2-3, 1-2-3. Do you see? It begins with "Our" and the first 1-2-3 is "Your": Your

name, Your kingdom, Your will be done. And only then it comes to “us”. Give us, Forgive us, Do not lead us into temptation.

The sequence therefore is first, “Our Father”, followed by “Your” and only then we come to “us”.

What is so striking here is that the Lord’s prayer is devoid of “I, me and my.” These do not appear at all.

We would have prayed the first line, “**My** Father who is in heaven.” We are so individualistic, all we think about is me, my, and I. My Father. Well, here there is no “my”. There is only “our”. There is no “me”. There is only “we”.

You have to invert the “m” in “me” in order to make it become “we”. So, that’s what has to happen within — there has to be an about turn, a complete 180-degree turn, from me to we. From me to you.

Do you see it now? That’s the whole point of the Lord’s prayer. It’s transformative!

Jesus is giving us this prayer not so that we can just mouth these words — he is giving to us a transformational prayer.

In other words, with this attitude toward prayer, we can be done with transactional prayer. The Lord’s prayer transforms us within. It turns us completely around. From me to we. From me to you. It turns transactional prayer into self-giving prayer!

I would like to recommend this prayer to each one of us. Say goodbye to transactional prayer that only seeks to exploit God’s generosity.

Let's instead use the Lord's prayer, to really pray in the way the Lord teaches us. "Our Father..." Stress the "Our". Focus on the pronoun "Your", because the "me" is so deeply ingrained in us — every time we come to God it has been "me" — my needs, my interests, how I am suffering, how life is so difficult for me.

The moment you stray back to "me", life will become miserable, and it will only get more miserable, because "me" is like a black hole that will not let you go. The Lord Jesus shows us the way out of this. And the way to come out of the self-absorbed life is to realize it is not about you. As Rick Warren says, "It's not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career."

It's not about you. And so, we have to start right: "Our Father..." When you pray, it is about God, it is about others. It's not about you. When you learn to focus in this way, you will be so surprised to find that your worries anxieties begin to melt away. Why? It is simply because you have lost sight of yourself. And when you lose sight of yourself, all your anxieties vanish.

This is the secret to transformation. It's simple to understand, but so difficult to put into practice because we are so used to everything centered around "me". Therefore, when you pray today, and every day, morning, noon and night, remember, "**Our** Father who is in heaven, hallowed be **Your** name. **Your** kingdom come. **Your** will be done...." Pray these words until they become part of your life. Pray these words until you are living out the prayer.

So, this is the secret then. I hope that each of us can take this prayer with us wherever we are. Whether you are driving on the road, whether you are at work, or whether you are at home, you can pray this prayer: "**Our** Father who is in heaven...."

