

“I Will Pray with the Understanding”

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake)

Introduction:

- A. Though Jesus condemned praying in public for attention (Matt. 6:5-6), He often prayed in public.
 - 1. John 6:11 - A prayer of thanksgiving when He fed the multitude.
 - 2. John 11:41-42 - He prayed at the resurrection of Lazarus.
 - 3. John 17:1 - He prayed in the upper room after the Passover and His final instructions to the apostles.
- B. From the very beginning, the Lord’s Church has practiced collective prayer.
 - 1. Acts 2:42, 4:31, 20:36
- C. The New Testament church was instructed about prayer in worship.
 - 1. 1Cor. 14:13-19 - Prayer has always been part of public worship.
 - 2. As we are worshiping God, prayers that are led in the Christian assembly must meet the Biblical standard.

I. JESUS’ INSTRUCTIONS FOR PRAYER APPLY TO PUBLIC PRAYERS

- A. All prayer must be offered to God with great reverence - Matt. 6:9-10
 - 1. We’re told to go to God with boldness, but boldness is not arrogance.
 - a. Eph. 3:11-12; Heb. 10:19
 - 2. Even Jesus approached God with reverence - John 17:11, 25
- B. All prayer is an act of worship and must exalt God
 - 1. Psalm 34:3; James 4:10; 1Peter 5:6
- C. All prayer, public or private, must be an expression of faith, not a ritual
 - 1. Matt. 21:21; James 1:6; Eph. 3:20-21

II. INSTRUCTIONS SPECIFIC TO PUBLIC PRAYER

- A. The one who words the prayer leads the congregation. The prayer he leads must represent those being lead.
 - 1. His personal needs should be left to his private prayers.
 - 2. Use the collective pronoun “we” instead of the personal “I.”
 - 3. The concerns of the congregation as a collectivity must be addressed: upcoming Gospel Meetings, congregational works like evangelism, benevolence, Bible studies, congregational goals growth, giving, building projects, intercession for the sick, suffering, or grieving (by name, not “the sick of our congregation”)
- B. The one who leads in public prayer must consider how it affects the hearers.
 - 1. Jesus considered how His words affected the hearers - John 11:41-42
 - 2. Paul commanded Christians to consider those who hear their prayers
 - a. 1Cor. 14:15-16
 - 3. Prayer should not just draw men closer to God, but also to each other.
 - 4. Try to avoid that which will cause an offence or distraction.
- C. Common sense: “You are not leading if no one is following.”
 - 1. No one can follow if they cannot hear what is being said.

2. Face the audience and use the microphone. Your assumed right to lead from your pew does not supersede the right of our hearing impaired members to participate in the services by hearing the prayer
3. Hold your head up when you pray. Bowing is the common, cultural practice, but it is not commanded in scripture. Jesus looked up when He prayed - John 11:41, 17:1
 - a. OT prayers were offered with lifted eyes - 2Kings 19:22
4. Speak clearly using words understood by all. Use Bible words and prayer phrases. Jesus and the apostles did so frequently
5. Do not use disrespectful language, slang, theological language, or memorized phrases. Jesus prohibited repetitious language - Matt. 6:7
- D. Those who ask others to lead prayer must recognize the importance of what they are asking of them.
 1. Call on them with notice so they can prepare what they will say.
 - a. Calling on them at the last minute facilitates the practice of repeating memorized phrases.
 2. We want to help them to make the church a house of prayer - Isa 56:7
- E. The audience has a mandated responsibility to pray with the leader.
 1. Not a time to daydream or think of other matters, however important
 2. The brother is leading us in prayer, not praying as a proxy for us.
 - a. 1Cor. 14:16 - The implied expectation is that hearers say "Amen"
 3. If you know in advance who will be leading the prayer, ask him to include your petitions and intercessions. We often do so in the announcements
 4. You are to receive edification from the prayer - 1Cor. 14:17

III. PUBLIC PRAYER IS ALWAYS ADDRESSED TO GOD

- A. One must never lead a prayer to draw attention to himself; he is servant who should have checked his ego at the door
 1. Even though the audience must be considered, prayer is always directed to God - Matt. 6:5
 2. Do not use an approach the hearers will find distracting.
 3. Like a good sermon, do not make the prayer exceptionally long or short.
- B. Every word in the prayer must be addressed from the speaker's heart to God.
 1. Prayer is not the way to communicate with anyone in the audience.
 2. Don't preach, admonish, or rebuke in your prayer.
- C. The repetitious use of memorized phrases is not prayer; it is performance.
 1. Most of the memorized phrases used by brethren in the Lord's church were coined by Daniel Sommer over 100 years ago in opposition to denominational prayers. The irony is that it has become the catechism of churches of Christ. Talk to God; don't recite a memorized prayer nor use clichéd prayer phrases
 2. Often new Christians pray more from the heart than the seasoned leaders. Prayer must be a sincere expression of the heart of a servant to his Master.

IV. PUBLIC PRAYER IS APPROPRIATE FOR THE OCCASION

- A. It will never be true that one prayer fits all occasions
 - 1. At a funeral, it is inappropriate to pray for national leaders. At the Lord's Table, it is inappropriate to pray for the sick. A closing prayer closes; a communion prayer blesses the bread and the disciples, a prayer of thanksgiving thanks and praises the Lord.
 - 2. Prayers must express the heart of that group for that specific purpose. When a congregation is grieving, grief and comfort is in their prayers.
- B. When someone responds to the invitation, prayers are about their needs.
 - 1. The prayer for the penitent disciple must be specific and appropriate to the need, personal to the respondent, and brief. Don't use it to double as the dismissal prayer too
 - 2. The prayer must focus on God's role on the occasion and consider the effect it will have on the respondent and all who hear.
- C. Christians are often asked to lead public prayers outside the assembly.
 - 1. When we eat at a restaurant, we give thanks for our food. And if you don't, shame on you. "I don't want to put on a show." Translates literally to "I am embarrassed for strangers to discover I am a Christian."
 - a. Jesus gave thanks for the food before feeding the 5,000; how many of them were Christians? - Luke 9:16
 - 2. When called on in a civic gathering, remember that you are still praying to God and leading the hearers. Pray sincerely, unashamedly, faithfully, and appropriate to the occasion
 - 3. When praying in an religious gathering outside of the Lord's Church, please understand that a refusal communicates just as much as the words you would say in the prayer
 - a. Be faithful to the truth, but avoid being judgmental or condescending - Col. 4:5-6
 - b. What is the need of the group? Pray for it.

Conclusion:

- A. When we are called on to lead a prayer, remember it is an honor, privilege, and a grave responsibility
- B. A public prayer is unlike anything else we do in the assembly. It is often difficult to keep one's spirit directed toward God, pray from the heart, and consider the audience.
 - 1. We must give our responsibility serious thought.
 - 2. We must bring our hearts as well as those of the audience before God.
 - 3. We must prepare ourselves to do well.
 - 4. Frequent private prayer is the best preparation for public prayer.
 - 5. We develop our comfort zone for prayer in the closet on our knees.
- C. You prepare to lead other Christians in prayer by being a Christian whose life is a light for others to follow.
 - 1. "You can speak with spiritual eloquence and a holy appearance when you pray publically, but it is your behavior that will reveal your true character." (Steve Maraboli)