

# The Secret to Abundant Living: Learning How to Ask

By Herb Miller

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**How to increase the percentage of church attendees who pray daily:** Prayer is a powerful but often under-utilized resource in congregations.

Mother Theresa was right:

The fruit of silence is prayer;  
The fruit of prayer is faith;  
The fruit of faith is love;  
The fruit of love is service;  
The fruit of service is peace.

Few endeavors increase insights and spiritual maturity in adults more than prayer. Increase the percentage of members who pray daily by using, throughout the entire congregation, procedures outlined below. Ask people to include in their daily conversation with God the habit of praying (by name) for other members, the pastor, the staff, and various ministries.

Create a sheet or folder from the material on the next page in one of these ways:

- Photocopy it on a single sheet of paper.
- Or, print it front and back on one-half-page card stock.
- Or, print it on a billfold-size, two-fold (three-panel) card.

Insert a copy in each worship bulletin.

Preach through it as a sermon outline.

Ask people to commit to its use for fourteen consecutive days.

In preaching through the card as a sermon outline, feel free to use, without attribution, the material beginning on page 3 titled “Origin of the above Prayer Card.” This illustrative material is designed for that purpose and has been effectively used in hundreds of congregations.

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## **The Secret to Abundant Living: Learning How to Ask**

“Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7).

“And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:35).

### **Ten Steps to God**

Many people feel they should pray, but few know how. The following steps, if used fifteen minutes daily for fourteen consecutive days, enable you to experience God’s peace, joy, and power in a way you have never known before.

As you begin this adventure, remember that prayer is an experience, not an idea. Prayer is like riding a bicycle. You only learn by doing it, never by thinking about doing it.

Few people experience God’s presence as fully during their first three or four days as they do after several days of practice.

The experience of God’s presence is impossible to define. But when it happens, you understand why great Christian leaders of every century have so enthusiastically recommended and practiced prayer. You understand what Jeremiah meant when he said, “You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart . . .” (Jeremiah 29:13).

1. In preparation, set aside fifteen minutes in a location where you can be physically relaxed and uninterrupted. Read one or two chapters from the Bible, listening for what God says to you. This helps to erase distracting thoughts from the blackboard of your mind. The following passages are especially helpful in preparing for prayer: John 14, Psalm 23, Matthew 5:1-12, Romans 8:35-39, 1 Corinthians 13, Psalm 46, Romans 12, John 15, Psalm 27, Psalm 103, Psalm 121, Isaiah 55, Luke 15, Psalm 84, John 1:1-18, Psalm 90, Psalm 19, 1 John 4:7-21, Psalm 139, Luke 24, Psalm 130, and Luke 18:1-17.

2. Close your eyes and give thanks for three personal blessings of which you are especially conscious today. This helps you move toward God by moving away from a sense of your own self-sufficiency.

3. Ask God to help three other people you feel need God’s help today. This helps you move toward God by moving away from self-centeredness.

4. Ask God to forgive specific mistakes and sins from the last 24 hours and give you the strength to forgive others.

5. Ask God to help one person whom you find it hard to like. Ask God to give that person insights into his or her personal problems and ask for the power to let God’s love flow through you to him or her.

6. Ask God to give you sensitivity to the needs of one person today with whom you can share God’s love in word or deed.

7. Ask for insights into your personal problems.

8. Ask for help in achieving your personal goals.

9. Ask God to tell you the most important thing you need to do today to “seek first his kingdom” (Matthew 6:33).

10. Conclude by listening intently for three minutes to what God may say to you.

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Feel free to use, without attribution, any or all of the following illustrative material, titled “Origin of the above Prayer Card.” Thousands of pastors have found this material effective when used as a sermon, in conjunction with a copy of the Prayer Card distributed prior to the sermon.

**Origin of the above prayer card:** Several people asked a young psychotherapist at a medical clinic, “How can my Christian faith help me deal with these problems?” In response to that, the young man developed the prayer card above and gave it to people who wanted to connect their faith with their therapy. He asked patients to set aside fifteen minutes every day to praying in that manner.

Since the therapist typically saw each patient once a week, he could easily monitor the results. He found that some people made the following statement after their first seven days: “I felt a sense of the presence of God unlike anything I’ve ever before experienced.” At the end of their first week, other patients reported “no results, nothing happened,” but they *always* reported their experience in something like these words by the end of the second week (fourteen days): “I felt a sense of the presence of God unlike anything I’ve ever before experienced.”

During the years when the therapist was a pastor, he used the prayer therapy under quite different circumstances. For example, late one afternoon a few months after arriving in his first church out of seminary, the pastor visited the home of an inactive church member as part of his congregational get-acquainted ritual. As an oil field specialist called a “Pumper,” the man went to work early in the morning and arrived home about mid-afternoon. He welcomed the pastor and asked if he would like a cup of coffee. They sat down at the kitchen table to chat. The pastor opened with his standard line, “How are things going with you?”

“TERRIBLE!” the man answered. He added to that explosive beginning a long monologue regarding his newly appointed supervisor at work. “I don’t know what I’m going to do,” the man said, “I have a lot of retirement money built up, but I’m thinking about chunking it all and walking away. I just cannot tolerate the way this guy treats me.”

The second surprise came when, at the end of his long monologue, the man asked the young pastor, “What can I do about this?”

The pastor replied, “I can tell you what to do about that, but I don’t think you would be willing to do it.”

“Try me!” the man replied. “I’m desperate.”

The pastor responded, “I can give you a prescription that will help, but I’m skeptical about your willingness to use it. Before I give you the prescription, you would have to promise me you will follow it.”

After the man promised that he would comply, the pastor asked, “Do you have a sheet of paper?” After a brief introductory explanation that included, “Set aside fifteen minutes every morning to follow this prescription,” the pastor dictated the seven steps on the prayer card above as the man wrote them out on the first page of a yellow legal pad.

Several months later, the pastor had still not seen the man in worship. (A couple of years later, the man and his wife became active church members, but not at this point).

The pastor arrived home a bit early one afternoon. Since the oil field worker only lived three houses down the street, the pastor walked down the sidewalk and knocked on his front door.

The man welcomed him in. As usual, they sat at the kitchen table and drank coffee. The pastor fully expected to get “the rest of the story.” When he opened with, “Well, how are things going with you?” the man responded, “Just fine!” and shifted the conversation to a recent local event. As the minutes passed, the pastor waited, assuming the man would get around to discussing his “supervisor problem.” That did not happen. They talked about the rainstorms, the snowstorms, the sandstorms, the ball games, and local happenings.

Overcome with curiosity, the pastor thought, I’ll tell him that I’d better be getting on down the road. Then, when he knows that I’m leaving, he will bring up this sensitive, personal subject.

However, in this case, that time-tested technique (a form of which had virtually always worked forty-five minutes into a fifty-minute therapy hour at the clinic) failed to elicit the expected response.

Finally, as they walked toward the door, the pastor said, “Oh, I forgot to ask. How did that problem at work ever come out?”

“What problem?” the man asked, seeming puzzled.

“I seem to remember that when we talked several months ago,” the pastor said, “you were going through a stressful time with a new supervisor at work.”

“Oh, that,” the man replied.

“How did that ever come out?” the pastor asked.

“He changed!” the man said.

Prayer does not merely change the person who prays. Research by the parapsychology department at Duke University and medical research at several hospitals demonstrates that prayer sometimes has a scientifically verifiable influence that extends beyond the normal cause and effect elements of nature and human nature.

Later that year, the young pastor involved a group of twelve key leaders from his church’s governing board in an eight-week Bible study of 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy and Titus. During that study, the leaders made a commitment to use the seven steps on the prayer card. The results were dramatically helpful, both to the individual people in the group and to the atmosphere of the congregation. Financial stewardship improved. A couple of the lay leaders who would barely speak to each other, partly because of strife they had experienced as employees of competing oil companies, went to lunch, worked out their differences, and became good friends.

A few months later, the pastor had the prayer card printed on three-fold, billfold-sized cards. He distributed them at the midpoint of a sermon on prayer and wove the seven steps of the prayer card into the sermon content. The concluding “altar call” asked people to sign an accompanying commitment card, pledging to set aside fifteen minutes every day for the next fourteen days to use the card’s seven steps.

The content of that sermon, titled “Keeping in Touch,” included the following paragraphs, which have been slightly altered for use by other pastors:

“Advertising people touched a deep human yearning a few years ago when they developed the slogan, ‘Ford Brings You a Better Idea.’ We may have different opinions about automobile brands, but that is exactly what most of us need—a better idea. Most of us are struggling with a problem of some sort in our lives. For some of us, it is a very large problem; for others, it is a series of smaller problems. But whatever the problem, we need insight regarding how to deal with it. We need a better idea.

“If we are Christians, it is easy to ask, ‘Why doesn’t God give me the answer to my problem?’ We know that God knows the answer, so why doesn’t God tell us? The Bible is full of people with whom God communicated in amazing ways: Matthew, Peter, Moses, Amos, and Isaiah. And there are other illustrations of people closer to our own time, such as David Livingston, Albert Schweitzer, E. Stanley Jones, Mother Teresa, and countless others to whom the word and power of God came in special ways. Why, then, doesn’t God communicate with me in that way? Why doesn’t God give me a better idea when I need it?

“Herb Miller says he stumbled across the answer to this question a few years ago while speaking on a university campus in New Mexico. The campus minister was showing him around the student center. As they walked down the hall, looking in different rooms, they came by a door marked ‘Prayer Room.’ Herb says, ‘I don’t think he meant to show me that one, but as we went by, I pulled the door open.’ This is how Herb described the prayer room.

‘I was amazed to see it stuffed with boxes, boots, clothes hangers, junk, and a general musty smell. On the altar stood a pair of cowboy boots, an old box that had at some earlier time contained a well-known brand of whisky, and a roll of toilet tissue. A little embarrassed, the campus minister told me that they used it for a storage area during the summer and hadn’t gotten it cleaned out yet.

‘At first glance, it seemed like a sacrilegious thing to me to stack a prayer room full of junk. I felt some righteous indignation was appropriate here. But then I realized what a dramatic picture that prayer room was of my own life. I had let important demands of my life crowd into the time I should have spent talking with God each day, until I could no longer get back into the habit of praying at all.’

“Take another look at the life of Christ. What made this man different from other people? One of the most observable differences was his prayer life. He was fully in touch with the hidden power of the universe. The disciples would often awaken early in the morning to discover Jesus missing from the camp. When they found him, he was out by himself, praying. At other times, even in the midst of great crowds clamoring to hear him teach and many people who needed his healing touch, Jesus withdrew to a quiet place by himself to pray. If Jesus, the Son of God, needed to do that in order to stay sufficiently in touch with God to live an effective life, how can you and I expect to get by without it?

“And yet we do try to do without it, don’t we? Much of our prayer is done either because of a crisis—like the old story of the man who said he prayed the most serious prayer of his life while standing on his head after falling into a well—and out of habit (when someone asks us to start or stop a meeting by praying an invocation or benediction or by saying grace at a family dinner).

“For me, the bottom-line question of faith has come down to this: Are we or are we not alone in the universe? Is there just us? Are we alone in this room? Or is there something more here—something that we cannot see but something to which we can relate as the generations before us have related—something they have called God? If we are not alone in the universe, if there really is something here besides us, why would we not talk to that mysterious other?

“There are two major reasons why you and I do not unlock the hidden power God has put into our lives. One is that we don’t know how. The disciples had the same problem. That is why they said to Jesus, ‘Lord, teach us to pray (Luke 11:1).’ They didn’t ask Jesus to teach them how to preach or how to do evangelism, or even how to heal; but they did request instruction in how to pray.

“We are going to look today at a contemporary answer to this question of how to pray. Thousands of people throughout North America have used the pattern of prayer I want to share with you this morning. I can guarantee that if you use this pattern faithfully every day, somewhere between the third and the tenth day after you begin, you will begin experiencing the presence and power of God when you pray. That may not happen the first day you use this pattern, but it always happens within the first two weeks.”

Ask the ushers to distribute the prayer cards. While that distribution occurs, read aloud to the congregation Matthew 6:5-13 and 7:7-11.

After everyone has a prayer card, read through it aloud and illustrate some of the points. Example: “Sometimes people respond to ‘4. Ask God to help one person whom you find it hard to like.’ with a denial that they have anyone like that in their lives. I say to such people, ‘Get away from me with that. You are either lying to yourself, lying to me, or you have a very bad memory.’”

“God is trying to communicate to our minds every day, every minute of the day. Like a gigantic radio station filling the airwaves of the world around us with love, wisdom, and peace, God is reaching out to us all the time. If we tune our minds to God’s mind in prayer, we will hear the words God is constantly sending us. If we, like the disciples, learn to relate to God in prayer, we will find insights about our problems, a sense of direction for our lives, and a new power to live in God’s will. That is the great good news of Christmas and Pentecost—not that God came to people once a long time ago but that God still comes to people today.

“‘But how can I do that?’ you ask. ‘I’m so busy. I am so short on time.’ But let’s put that question another way. If someone called you on the telephone and said, ‘If you will get up just fifteen minutes earlier every morning for the next several days, I’ll send someone to your house each day during that time. Each morning, he will knock on the door and give you a one-hundred-dollar bill.’

“‘What would you say? ‘I just don’t have time; I just can’t get up that early!’

“Isn’t it equally ridiculous to say that we don’t have time to pray? The real question, you see, is ‘Can I afford not to pray?’ With this kind of power available free, can I afford not to learn how to pray?

“A traveler was sitting at the counter in the Albuquerque airport restaurant, waiting on a plane and drinking coffee. The waitress was talking with a man seated next to him at the counter. From the conversation, the traveler realized that the two were old friends. The man asked her how she liked her trip to Japan. After recounting a few of her experiences, she said, ‘It was wonderful, but I sure am glad to be home. You know, if you don’t speak the language, it’s real hard.’

“That sentence stuck in the traveler’s mind like a spear: ‘If you don’t speak the language, it’s real hard.’

“That’s the way it is with God and us. Prayer is the language by which you speak to God, and more importantly, by which God speaks to you. And if you don’t speak the language, it’s real hard to know God is there. It’s real hard to receive from God the insights that God wants to give you.

“How is it with you? Do you speak the language?”