

You Can't Get It Wrong

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When I was a sophomore in college, I borrowed my older brother's guitar and took it with me to school. A friend shared five basic chords with me, and in my spare time I began to pick up the basics and play. Within a few days I was learning songs. Two years later I was standing in front of hundreds of people, leading worship with a guitar. This random hobby became my paid profession when I was hired as a worship leader. I went from playing solo to leading bands with several musicians playing various instruments. Then I began to write and perform my own music. As my proficiency grew, I traveled the country, playing, and eventually recording a live worship album. I remember someone saying, "The guitar is one of the easiest instruments to learn but one of the hardest to master." I've found this to be true.

PRAYER INSECURITIES

Could the same be true of prayer? Is it easy to learn but hard to master? Have you ever felt any insecurity about prayer? Have you wished you knew more, wanted to pray more, hoped you were "getting it right"? Sometimes I still feel this way! When we feel these insecurities, it's good to remember that we are not alone. I have learned that even people we would label as "prayer warriors" have these same feelings at times. So, rest easy. We can feel inadequate yet pray with increasing priority, power, and purpose. Our confidence, knowledge, and proficiency can grow when we remind ourselves of a few prayer basics. I've found many parallels between learning to play an instrument and learning to pray. Let's look at three of them.

START WHERE YOU ARE

My early guitar songs were simple—basic meters, transitions, keys, and other components. But *it was still music*. As I progressed, my proficiency grew. I became more adept at complicated pieces of music. Every stage of my growing musicianship built upon the previous one. My repertoire expanded exponentially. My confidence grew with time and experience. And I gained a growing sense of authority over the guitar.

Jesus taught His disciples to start simply, too, when He taught them about prayer. He helped them understand that they approach God as their Father. In Luke 11:2 (which we know as the Lord's Prayer), Jesus' first word in His instruction about prayer is *Father*.

Jesus opened new doors of understanding for them—and for us today. Let this truth sink in: Our Creator isn't a distant and indifferent figure but rather a near and caring Father. We are God's children. And loving parents are aware of their child's level of communication. Good parents know that their three-year old won't communicate in the same way as their 23-year-old.

PRAY WHERE YOU ARE

Play the "song" you know how to play at this moment. Pray to the best of your ability now. *It is still prayer*. As you learn and grow in your practice of prayer, you will look back from time to time and see your progress. Don't worry about getting it perfect. Just pray in the present. Pray in the knowledge you have now, knowing and trusting that this knowledge will grow.

Remember Paul's words to the Corinthians, "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Cor. 13:11–12).

My guitar playing was a little rough around the edges in the beginning, but my skills grew as I continued to practice. And, yes, this is true for prayer. Our prayer lives and abilities increase as we continue to pray.

In my early days of following Christ, my prayers were rough around the edges, too, but I was doing my best then, just as I'm doing my best now. My knowledge, life experience, and ability to hear the Spirit's leading has

been growing. And the purpose and clarity of my prayers have been changing. Don't feel overwhelmed, thinking you should be more confident when you pray. Play the song that you can play today, and remember that your song will get better with practice. Your Father understands.

EXPAND YOUR REPERTOIRE

I have the privilege of interacting with middle-school and high-school students with our prayer ministry called Claim Your Campus, and with adults through America's National Prayer Committee and the National Day of Prayer. Through these relationships, I have found that all ages and stages can struggle at times with what to say when they pray. Recently, our organization conducted national research, surveying more than 3,000 adults and students about prayer. We gained some interesting insights. We asked, "Which of these would you like to understand most about prayer?"

Here are their top two responses:

1. Am I saying the right things? (49.85 percent)
2. Why doesn't God seem to answer? (38.81 percent)

Both responses speak to the idea that people want to make sure they are "getting it right" with the effectiveness of their prayers.

When I was learning to play the guitar, the more chords I learned, the more songs I could play. I also learned to play songs in various keys, and even modulate between them. My practicing, combined with my increasing knowledge, allowed me to expand my repertoire. I found it exciting to learn new rhythms, patterns, and tempos. Slow and fast, upbeat and reflective, simple and complicated—all became possible with more time and effort. Approach prayer as an adventurous, eager musician would. Try new things when you pray. Try praying through the Psalms, and let the various psalm types guide you in the many ways of expressing yourself to God. God uses information to bring revelation. Our prayer repertoire expands with time and training. The more we pray and learn, the more we understand that, just as in music, prayer has many genres: confession, thanksgiving, listening, private, public, intercessory—to name a few.

Don't be afraid to expand your repertoire. If you haven't prayed in public before, give it a try. The next time you are in a Bible study or worship gathering and there is an opportunity to pray out loud, go for it. Have you knelt in prayer, or taken some form of humble physical posture when you've prayed? If not, try it. Have you ever sat silently or meditated on a passage of Scripture, asking God to speak to you personally? Have you written out a prayer? Try "playing a new song" in prayer and broaden your communication

GAIN CONFIDENCE

As I practiced the guitar, my confidence also grew. I remember getting up the courage to invite my girlfriend (who is now my wife) to hear me play two songs I had learned. My stomach tied in knots when I first stood in front of our congregation and led worship. I made plenty of mistakes. But over time, my confidence in my abilities grew. I felt less and less scared. And I felt more and more secure. In my prayer life, too, I have experienced (and learned from others) the joy of a growing confidence. Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." We can have confidence when we pray. But unlike our musical analogy, that confidence isn't based on who we are or what we know. It is rather based on who He is and what He has done. The more I pray, the more I am reminded of this truth: *God* can make me bold and confident when I pray. I am His child, and you are too! We have been given the right to ask, and to ask with boldness. This boldness isn't based on our abilities, but rather on God's past track record.

I have a statement in my prayer journal: *Faith is the memory of God's faithfulness*. We can be bold because we know He is able and willing to help in our time of need! When you pray, are you recalling God's faithfulness? Do you remember the great things He has done for you? Is your confidence growing?

KEEP LEARNING

What amazes me about prayer is that we can learn it from the time we learn to speak as small children, yet we can practice it in every stage of our lives throughout mature adulthood. Like learning the guitar, learning a simple prayer “song” can begin with simplicity. Yet further down the road of faith, we can pray more fully expanded “songs” of praise, thanksgiving, and intercession to our loving Father. The longer you follow Christ and practice prayer, the more you will grow in this spiritual discipline. The way you pray now will be different than it was when you first began following Christ. And it will look different five years from now as you continue to follow Him. Prayer may be easy to learn and hard to master. But as we keep our hearts true to the Father, we can rest assured that He will “tune” His ear to us (Ps. 116:2). And perhaps in this journey we will discover exciting, different ways to bring new passion to our prayer lives.