The Language of Formal Prayer

By Don E. Norton, Jr., Ensign, January 1976, 44–47.

If you’ve ever been flustered by “shouldst,” “thee,” or “dost,” try these simple exercises.

Is it important that we use the words thy, thee, and thou in addressing Deity? or is it proper when directing our thoughts in prayer to use the more common and modern words you, your, and yours?

President Joseph Fielding Smith’s answer to this question was clear and emphatic: “The Father and the Son should always be honored in our prayers in the utmost humility and reverence. … The changing of the wording of the Bible to meet the popular language of our day, has, in the opinion of the writer and his brethren, been a great loss in the building of faith and spirituality in the minds and hearts of the people.” (Answers to Gospel Questions, Deseret Book Co., 1958, vol. 2, pp. 15, 17.)

Two points are implicit in President Smith’s remarks: (1) Historically, the pronouns thou, thee, thy, and thine have always been the usage of English scripture and prayer; therefore, these forms come to us as the traditional language of religious respect and reverence. This argues strongly for our continuing this usage, in spite of the fact that many churches have recently begun to prefer you, your, and yours. (2) We Church members should cultivate carefully the correct use of these pronoun forms—not only because it is personally gratifying to be able to pray in private and public and know that we can use the forms correctly, but also because this usage can, when prayer is sincere, reflect an added measure of respect toward God that is entirely appropriate.

The purpose of this article is to help members of the Church gain greater confidence in the use of thou, thee, thy, and thine. In listening to Church members and talking to them about this subject for several months, I have found that the majority do have a command of the most common and basic patterns of these pronouns; however, few members have the confidence to depart from the very simplest forms. When they do, as often as not they make mistakes. But the fact of the matter is that the uses of these special pronouns are very simple to learn.

Start by taking the following brief quiz. It tests your present command of the pronouns thou, thee, thy, and thine, and of the verb forms that follow thou.

Directions:

1. Read each item aloud (as you would in a spoken prayer).
2. Insert in each blank either (a) one of the pronouns thou, thee, thy, or thine; OR as required, (b) the form of the verb that follows thou (the ordinary form of the verb is given in parentheses below the blank).
3. Count as your answer the first word that comes to your lips. (Remember, if you were actually praying, you wouldn’t take time to try to find the correct word.)
4. Check your answers. (Correct answers are found in the box below the quiz.)

Examples:

- We know that thou hearst our prayers.
- We ask thee to bless the sick in our ward.
- We ask that thou wilt bless the sick in our ward.
- We thank thee for the blessings which thou hast given us.
- We thank thee that thou dost protect us daily.
- We ask that we may worship as thou wouldst have us worship.
- We pray thou be with us in our homes and families.
- Our Father, who are in heaven. …
- Thou know our needs.
- We thank thee that thou didst bring us here safely.
- We acknowledge thou everlasting love for us.
- Have thou mercy on us.
- Our Father in heaven, who sittest on thy holy throne, hear our prayers.
- We are grateful to thee for all good which thou dost among us.


How to rate yourself:

Items 1-8: If you missed more than one, you need to review the basic uses of thou and its forms.

Items 9-15: These are less familiar uses. If you missed or hesitated on more than two of these seven items, you can improve your skill by reading the following article and doing the instructional drills.

The reason why many of us lack confidence in using the forms of thou is simply that we hear them infrequently—only in oral scripture reading and in a few minutes of prayer weekly. Our ears are incompletely trained in the proper usage. And it is through
hearing these forms that we learn their use. Some study and memorization may be helpful, and practice may also be useful; the ear
training, however, is essential.

This means that the best teaching aid to this article would be a lengthy voice recording of correct prayer language. By listening
carefully and repeating aloud the correct forms, you would be able eventually to conform to what you hear. Because the use of such an
aid is impossible here, some helpful drills and suggestions are offered, which, if followed conscientiously, will enable you to use thou,
thee, thy, and thine confidently.

Assuming the Special Attitude of Prayer

You will learn the correct uses of the reverential pronouns most quickly as you genuinely feel the need to use special language to
address your Father in heaven. When you pray with humble and sincere intent, you will feel a natural impulse to signal your special
moment of worship—the bowed head, the bent knee, the reverent tone, and the use of the special pronouns. The more honest and
contrite you are in your vocal prayers, the more strongly you will feel the need to learn and use the hallowed language of prayer.
Cultivating the attitude of prayer is an important preparatory step to learning to use thou, thee, thy, and thine.

Teaching Children the Language of Prayer

The ideal place to learn the proper language of prayer is, of course, in the home. Children should have the chance to hear the correct
forms of the pronouns of respect often, in family prayer, and in frequent oral reading of the scriptures. Parents should carefully coach
their children in correct usage as the opportunity arises.

Learning the Rules in the Use of Thou, Thee, Thy, Thine

Fortunately, the rules that govern the use of these pronouns are simple and predictable. They are perhaps best illustrated through
comparison with other pronouns.

Rule 1: Use thou in the kind of sentence slot where I, we, he, and she would also fit (with a corresponding change in the verb).

Thou (I, we, he/she) art (am, are, is) holy.
Thou (I, we, he/she) knowest (know, knows) our weaknesses.

Rule 2: Thou goes with a verb. With few exceptions (noted below), this verb is formed by adding -st or -est to the present or past tense
stem of the verb:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thou</th>
<th>verb</th>
<th>present tense</th>
<th>past tense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>go</td>
<td>goest</td>
<td>wentest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>know</td>
<td>knowest</td>
<td>knewest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do</td>
<td>dost, doest</td>
<td>didst</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be</td>
<td></td>
<td>wast</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dwell</td>
<td>dwellest</td>
<td>didst dwell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The five exceptions you may have occasion to use are quite common and familiar:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thou</th>
<th>verb</th>
<th>present tense</th>
<th>past tense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(be)</td>
<td>art</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(have)</td>
<td>hast</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(will)</td>
<td>wilt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(shall)</td>
<td>shalt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(must)</td>
<td>must (no change)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two additional brief notes will complete the basic rules and exceptions.

Dost and doest. You will hear both forms of do: dost (pronounced dust) and doest.

Use doest when it is the main verb:

By what authority doest thou these things? (Matt. 21:23.)
We thank thee for all thou doest in our behalf.

Use dost when it is the helping verb:

Thou dost know the desires of our hearts.
We thank thee that thou dost protect us daily.

The past forms of verbs. It would be very awkward to speak such things as thou administeredst, buildst, protectedest, etc. The usual usage is didst + verb: didst administer, build, protect, etc. Your ear and your better
judgment will be good guides to the correct past tense forms.

Rule 3: Use thee in the kind of sentence slot where the pronouns me, us, him, and them would also sound proper:

God gave thee (me, us, him, them) a blessing.
We ask thee (him, them) to help us.

Rule 4: Use thy or thine where my, our, your, his, her, and their would also sound proper:

Thy (my, our, your, etc.) strength is great.
Give me thine (my, your, their) honor.
In biblical idiom, *thy* precedes a word which begins with a consonant sound:

*thy* will, *thy* son, *thy* church, *thy* one, etc.

*Thine* precedes words which begin with a vowel sound:

*thine* eye, *thine* honor, *thine* ear, and also *thine* hand (the *h* in *hand* was at one time silent)

Today, *thy* would probably be acceptable in all contexts.

**Rule 5:** Use *thine* as you would use *mine*, *ours*, *yours*, *theirs*, *hers*.

The glory is *thine* (mine, ours; yours, etc.)

For *thine* (yours, theirs, etc.) is the honor and the glory.

**Below is a summary of the information given in these rules:**

- Thou (I, we, he, she, they) + verb (past or present stem) + verb ending -st or -est
- Exceptions: *art*, *hast*, *wilt*, *shall*, *must*
- Thee (me, us, him, her, them)
- Thy (my, our, your, his, her, their)
- Thine (mine, ours, yours, hers, theirs)

The directions to the practice exercises will tell you how to use this summary.

**A Program of Self-Improvement**

As noted earlier, memorizing these rules is only a small part of mastering the uses of *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, and *thine*. The real learning will come in your being very attentive to the correct forms of these pronouns as you hear them in actual spoken prayers, and in your practicing aloud the special language of prayer. The rules you have just read may help you appreciate how simple the usage really is; the comparisons to other pronouns may help you attune your ear to hearing and using *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, and *thine* more accurately.

The following learning steps are suggested:

1. Review the rules carefully and proceed to the exercises. Do the exercises aloud. Follow all the directions carefully.
2. Listen alertly to all the prayers you hear in the next few weeks. Note patterns of usage. (You will find that most people get around the problem by avoiding constructions that require extensive use of *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, and *thine*: they either use simple, familiar forms, or they say “Please bless … .” “Grant us … .” etc.)
3. Read aloud those portions of the scriptures in which these pronouns are commonly used (Christ’s prayers, etc.); read the prayers of the modern prophets (the temple dedication prayers, for example).
4. Practice vocally several variations in the use of this feature of hallowed language as you pray privately and publicly.

If you follow these steps, you will see rapid progress. In a few weeks you may wish to review parts of this article, to test your progress. In time, you will come to use the forms of *thou* and the proper verb forms confidently in your prayers. The result will be a show of greater deference and reverence to your Heavenly Father as you humbly worship him in prayer.

**Practice Exercises on the Use of Thou, Thee, Thy, Thine**

**Directions:** Read aloud each of the following sentences. Place in the blank the word *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, or *thine*.

If you wish to check the correctness of your answer without referring to the answer key, use the substitution test that the summary given earlier suggests.

**Example:** By what authority doest _______________ these things? (Matt. 21:23.)

**Substitution test:**

By what authority does _______________ these things? (Matt. 21:23.)

Because *thou* is the pronoun form that corresponds to *he* (see the chart), *thou* is the correct answer.

1. May our actions be pleasing in _______________ sight.
2. We thank _______________ for the blessings that _______________ hast given us.
3. Wilt _______________ help us each day to live worthy of _______________ blessings.
4. May we follow _______________ and _______________ ways.
5. We pray _______________ to bless our bishop and his counselors.
6. _______________ seest that we have gathered here to worship _______________.
7. We express gratitude for the gifts which _______________ hast bestowed upon us.
8. We entreat _______________ to turn to us _______________ ear.
9. We are thankful that _______________ didst restore the gospel through Joseph Smith.
10. May the glory of this work be _______________.

Answers: 1. thy; 2. thee, thou; 3. thou, thy; 4. thee, thy; 5. thee; 6. Thou, thee; 7. thou; 8. thee, thine (or thy); 9. thou; 10. thine.
Practice Exercises on Verbs That Go with Thou

Directions: Read aloud each of the following sentences. Insert the proper -st/-est form of the verb in each blank. The few exceptions to the rule are listed in the summary given earlier.

1. May we do what thou  (would)  have us do.
2. We pray that thou  (will)  be with us in our homes.
3. O God, who  (are)  our Father!
4. O thou who  (know)  our needs, …
5. Thou  (have)  appointed us righteous leaders.
6. We thank thee that thou  (do)  grant us rain for our crops.
7. We pray that thou  (will)  comfort the sick.
8. May our speaker say what thou  (would)  have him say.
9. May we do what thou  (want)  us to do.
10. We thank thee that thou  (did)  raise up good men to form our government.


General Summary Quiz

Directions: The following twenty items call for both pronouns and verbs. Again, read each item aloud and give your answers quickly. A score of 18-20 correct is excellent. If you get all the first ten items correct, you should have little trouble with the most common prayer constructions in English.

1.  (Will)  thou give us strength in body and, mind.
2. Grant  (thou, thee, thy, thine)  Spirit to be with us during this meeting.
3. We thank  (thou, thee, thy, thine)  for the atoning blood of  (thou, thee, thy, thine)  Only Begotten Son.
4. We thank thee that thou  (do)  comfort us in our distress.
5. We pray that thou  (will)  give us wisdom to make correct decisions.
6. We pray  (thou, thee, thy, thine)  to strengthen us in our weaknesses.
7. Teach us what thou  (would)  have us know.
8. O thou who  (know)  all things. …
9. Thou  (are)  our strength.
10. Sustain us with  (thou, thee, thy, thine)  own hand.
11. Thou  (dwell)  in the heavens. …
12. May we be diligent, that thou  (may)  be pleased.*
13. We give thanks for the marvelous works which thou  (do)  among us.
14. We are grateful that we may serve those whom  (thou, thee, thy, thine)  loveth.
15. We know that thou  (must)  deal justly, but also that thou  (are)  merciful.
16. We are grateful that thou  (was)  ear to our prayers.
17. Grant us strength and courage, as thou  (see)  fit.
18. Help us to repent, O Lord, that thou  (may)  * have no reason to withhold  (thou, thee, thy, thine)  blessings.
19. May our works be such that thou  (delight)  to behold them.
20. We thank thee for the understanding that thou  (have)  bestowed upon us.

Answers: 1. wilt; 2. thy; 3. thee, thine (or thy); 4. dost; 5. wilt; 6. thee; 7. wouldst; 8. knowest; 9. art; 10. thine (or thy); 11. dwellest; 12. mayest; 13. doest; 14. thou; 15. must, art; 16. wast; 17. seest; 18. mayest, thy; 19. delightest; 20. hast.

* Many who pray may wish to prefer might in this context. Might is discouraged in prayer generally, however, because it suggests doubt. May is the more affirmative idiom.