

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

Luke 11:1-13

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

We have a strange relationship with prayer, don't we? We think it's important...it's an essential practice of the Christian life. We even think that we need to learn more about prayer...it doesn't come easily to us. Perhaps that's why there are over a quarter of a million books about prayer listed on Amazon.com. Yet, we find it difficult to find the time to pray. We aren't sure how to pray or what to expect when we pray. We might think that God has more and bigger things to do than be concerned with our own desires.

And yet, all of us cry out to something outside of ourselves on occasion...let me pass this test...let it rain...let Soriano get a hit on this at bat...get me out of this mess. Knowing we are beyond our ability to make things happen might make us turn heavenward. With all of our confusion about prayer, let's begin by praying... Lord God, our lives often feel like you are far away, yet in Jesus Christ, you have come close. In these next moments, let us hear his voice as he teaches us what we need to know about prayer. Amen. . . . A family was hosting a rather large dinner party for folks from their church. When they sat down, one of the guests asked the young daughter of the hosts to pray before the meal. The six-year-old girl said that she didn't know how to do that. Trying to be helpful, the guest tried to give a quick lesson in prayer and said to the little girl, "Just say what you hear your mother pray." So, the little girl piped up, "Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?"

We are like that little girl. We need someone to teach us how to pray. The disciples of Jesus want to learn to pray. They have seen Jesus praying and they know that John the Baptist has taught his disciples to pray. They knew prayer was important because they were devout Jews.

As Jewish faith and practice had developed since the people had been sent into exile, prayer had become central. What do you offer the Lord, when you have been sent away from the Temple, the place of sacrifice? If you can't offer a sacrifice, you offer prayer. In fact, in the Psalms and Prophets, prayer is referred to as sacrifice. Prayer was not seen as a spiritual substitute for the sacrifice, in a sort of evolutionary progression from primitive animal sacrifice to a more sophisticated spirituality.

To the contrary, the person who prayed was the substitute for the sacrificial animal. In the act of praying, the pray-er was giving himself or herself to God. To pray was to commit all that one was and all that one had to God. Keep that in mind as we see how Jesus answered the disciples' requestLord, teach us to pray. On one level, they were asking Lord, teach us how to give ourselves to you. That puts a different spin on the whole concept of praying doesn't it?

For those who think of prayer as the means by which we get something from God, this may seem a little radical, perhaps a little distressing. You may even have theological objections: How can we, who have nothing, give anything to God, who has everything? This sounds a little like we have to earn God's favor. Just bear with me as we unfold what Jesus actually teaches his disciples. My hope is that by the time we get to the end, you, too, will want to ask Jesus "How can I give myself to you?"

This version of the Lord's Prayer is much simpler than the version we find in Matthew's gospel, but it contains all that is in Matthew's version. This prayer became a key element of Christian worship from the very beginning and remains so to this day. It's memory and words are so powerful that often Alzheimer's patients who can't remember their own names, remember that they belong to God as they remember these words.

But it is not a magical incantation. It is not a short list of the things God guarantees to give us. It is what we are supposed to say when we pray. Jesus simply said, "When you pray, say. . . ." It's good to have this kind of structure, isn't it? I mean, we could go crazy with 'wishing' for things. That would be a never-

ending list. That's why John Calvin said that this prayer "guides and restrains our wishes. Or, we could get lost in sentimental emotionalism or spirituality. Then our feelings become the focus of our prayer and there is no room for any thought of God. That's why we need this model for prayer to guide us.

But it is more than a model, a guide and a restraint. It is a window into the very character of God. In teaching them this prayer, Jesus is teaching them about the One to whom they pray. How we pray and what we pray depends upon what we think of God.

If we think of God as a cosmic vending machine, we will have a very mechanistic view of prayer. Worse, God becomes our servant, although the vending machine outside our offices provides another model – it keeps our money and tells us "No" when we press the button. It doesn't do what a vending machine is supposed to do and it disappoints us.

The vending machine idea of God will get us into trouble. It's like that joke you've all heard about the hunter who was out in the woods. He tripped and fell just as a bear was coming at him. His rifle went sliding down an embankment. As the bear got closer, he prayed, "O Lord, make this bear a Christian." Immediately the bear fell to his knees, put his paws together and said, "For the food we are about to receive, we give you thanks."

Those kinds of prayers keep us in control. . . "Well," we think, "we're in control." We know we're in trouble. We think we know what will get us out and so we pray limiting prayers based on limited knowledge of ourselves, of our circumstances and of God.

We may think that God is someone who has to be convinced to come to our aid – that he is not inclined to care for us. We may even think that he is angry with us or someone to be feared. That will shape how we pray, or whether we pray at all.

That's why Jesus tells us to pray, "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come." There are many who say that we should refrain from calling God "Father" because so many have had abusive relationships with their fathers. My sense is that unless we reclaim the biblical understanding of fatherhood, which challenges all human definitions and practices and sets the model to which human fathers should aspire, we will see continuing erosion in father-child relationships.

The Father of Jesus Christ is a non-patriarchal father. You know the story of the Prodigal Son – that's the kind of father we are talking about. This is not some kind of Freudian super-ego or philosophical first cause. To call God Father is to describe the One who gave us life and who turns toward us when we run away and who runs toward us to bring us back home. This is a God who thinks being in relationship with us is worth giving us everything he's got – and he does that when he sends Jesus, who gives his life on our behalf. That's the One to whom we pray.

But wait, there's more...we pray that the name of this Father, this God will be honored. In other words, we pray that God will be treated as God. This means, among other things, that we acknowledge the things that come from God. They don't come to us as a matter of luck or coincidence, or because we deserve it, but from the gracious hand of God. And we need to say so.

This is why we pray prayers of thanksgiving. I read a story about a woman who had to run out to the drugstore to get some medicine for her sick daughter. She was in such a hurry that that she locked her keys in her car (a scenario I am not unfamiliar with). When she came out she was in a panic and she prayed in a panic. At that moment a scruffy looking guy came up with a coat hanger and popped the lock. She told him that he was answer to prayer. He replied that she didn't understand. He couldn't be an answer to prayer – he had just been released from prison where he had been for grand theft auto. At that point she shouted, "Thank you Lord...you sent a professional!"

Hallowing God's name means that we recognize everywhere and all the time the presence of God. Walter Lüthi, in his book on the Lord's Prayer says:

God has a name. The misery on this earth is nameless; the evil among men is nameless, for the powers of

darkness love to be without a name. Nameless, anonymous letters, letters without signatures are usually vulgar, but God is no writer of anonymous letters; God puts his name to everything he does, effects and says; God has no need to fear the light of day. The Devil loves anonymity, but God has a name.

And Jesus tells us to honor it. The very act of thanking God for everything, no matter how little or huge has the effect of making us aware that God is with us. Moses told the people of Israel that they had better give thanks always for the gift of the Promised Land or else they would soon forget that it was God's gift to them. They would think that they themselves had brought them to this new land. And within a few generations, they did, in fact forget about God's faithfulness. If we forget to give thanks, to honor God's work in our lives, then we run the risk of dying spiritually as we wallow in abundance.

So, we call God "Father." We ask that he be honored as God and nothing less. Then we pray the thing that is most likely to turn our world upside down. We pray that God's kingdom will come. We ask that God would rule in the world, in history and in our hearts. We lay down any claim to be in control. Notice that this prayer comes after we have established the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord. Even so, it is a radical prayer and reminds us of that great line about Aslan from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. When the children ask Mr. and Mrs. Beaver if Aslan is a safe lion, Mrs. Beaver responds, "Oh no. He's not a safe lion, but he's a good lion."

When God rules, order comes out of chaos. The very first words of scripture tell us how God orders the world and brings light and life into a good creation. When God rules, sin does not control us forever and death does not have the last word. When God rules, our rebelliousness is defeated and the powers that would undo us are destroyed. And the very last words of scripture tell us that when God rules, he will make all things new. We can see that promise every Sunday in our transept window.

When we pray for God's kingdom to come, we see that God is determined to set things right and that he will not abandon his creation. He will not abandon us to our own puny efforts to manage our lives. It is an unspeakable advantage to us that God is in charge.

This is what we learn of God when we pray, "Father, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come." What do we get out of that prayer? We get to know God. Then, after giving us this prayer, Jesus goes on to tell a couple of stories that help us get the point of the prayer. These parables tell us in more detail about the God to whom we pray.

First, God is like someone who has everything in order until we come bursting in on the scene. This request for bread, by the way, is not like asking for a cup of sugar from a neighbor. It is a plea for help in fulfilling God's will for hospitality to the stranger. And God will answer that request, especially if we're not embarrassed to admit that we need help.

That's what the persistence and boldness is about – it's about shamelessly saying "God I can't do what you ask me to do. Give me what I need to be your faithful disciple." And he does. What a God – he calls us to a way of life and then gives us everything we need.

Then he says, "Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened." I have heard two very different and extreme interpretations of this. One is from the "Name It and Claim It" School. You just keep asking, seeking, and knocking and God is gonna give it to you. The other simply says, "Gee, I don't know what it means. I know it doesn't mean that, but I just don't know."

Well, the answer to ask, seek and knock is in Jesus' last description of the One to whom we pray. He says that human fathers give good gifts. You then expect that the next thing Jesus will say is that if human fathers give good gifts, then God will give better gifts. But that's not what he says. He says that we should then expect the Heavenly Father to give us the Holy Spirit. This is the One to whom you pray – the One who gives you himself in the Holy Spirit.

Now, I'm thinking...this prayer may be a little dangerous. I mean, the Holy Spirit leads us into truth, which we may not want to hear; helps us understand the Word of God, which we may want to ignore; tells us where we've gone off track, which we may not want to admit; and gives us gifts for ministry, sending us

out into the world to represent God and his gospel.

When our son was little, he loved the Chronicles of Narnia...read them over and over. On one vacation, we stopped by Wheaton College to see the actual wardrobe that was the inspiration for The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. I started to open the door, but he wouldn't let me. He went to the far side of the room, pressed himself up against the wall and then said I could open the doors. He just knew that Narnia was in there and he wasn't ready to get sucked in for an adventure...just yet.

This is what happens when you approach God in prayer and knock on his door. He's in there and you will see the grandeur and grace of the God who has been asking for you to join him, who has been seeking that your will be conformed to his and who has been knocking on the door of your heart. Now, knowing this God to whom you pray, are you ready to ask, "Lord, teach us to pray"? Are you ready to ask, "Lord teach us how to give ourselves to you"? Let us pray.

Lord of the universe and lord of our lives, Out of sheer thankfulness may we give our lives back to you for the sake of Jesus who gave his life for us. Amen.

Footnotes:

1. John Calvin, Harmony of the Gospels, Volume I, 318
2. Jan Milic Lochman, the Lord's Prayer, 21
3. Ibid, 34-35
4. John Calvin, Harmony of the Gospels, Volume I, 319
5. ibid, 318