

“Lord Teach Us to Pray”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 138

¹I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; ²I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything. ³On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul. ⁴All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth. ⁵They shall sing of the ways of the Lord, for great is the glory of the Lord. ⁶For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away. ⁷Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me. ⁸The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

New Testament Lesson: Luke 11:1-13

¹He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” ²He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.” ⁵And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ ⁷And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ ⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. ⁹“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”



Sermon: “Lord Teach Us to Pray”

As Christians, praying is something we do, or should do, a lot. But, probably one of the hardest things to do is pray in public. Anytime I’m gathered with a group of Christians and it’s time to close with prayer or say grace over a meal, people suddenly start getting real interested in the pattern of the carpet or in what’s going on up on the ceiling. In situations like that, I get asked to do the prayer a lot. It feels a little like being in a foreign country and I’m the only one who knows the language.

But praying, whether in front of a group or in the privacy of our own homes is often hard for people because we’re not always sure how to do it. In the 1956 John Wayne classic *The Searchers*, a group of Texas Rangers is hunkered down awaiting an imminent attack by a group of Comanche.

One of the men, facing combat and the possibility of imminent death decides to pray but in the moment, he can’t think of what to say, so he offers the only prayer he knows: “For that which we are about to receive, we thank thee, O Lord.”¹

In the movie *Bruce Almighty*, God, played by Morgan Freeman, invites Bruce to pray in a time of need. Struggling to understand what he’s supposed to be doing, Bruce closes his eyes and says, “Lord, feed the hungry and bring peace to all of mankind.” The he opens his eyes and asks, “How’s that?” To which God replies: “Great ... If you wanna’ be Miss America.”²

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I think that many of us fall into a rather common trap while attempting to pray: We try to make it more complicated than it needs to be. We try to say something that *sounds* appropriate rather than simply saying what is in our hearts.

When a child paints a picture for their parents, that child wants the finished product to be perfect. But as parents, we're just happy with a finger-painted flower to put on the fridge; the effort and the love behind it is what matters. That's how it is with prayer. We want it to be "eloquent" and "appropriate." I think God would just like it to be genuine and authentic.

I think part of feeling the prayer should be perfect, comes from the sense that talking to someone powerful and important requires that we use language that is worthy of the occasion. If you were meeting the President of the United States or the Queen of England, you'd probably feel the need to stand-up straight, put on your best clothes and use your most proper English. "Greetings, good sir. Capital weather we're having today, wouldn't you concur?" I think that's how our prayers must sound to God sometimes ... like we're trying to impress someone. But whether out loud, in front of other people or silently by ourselves, prayer at its essence is simply talking to God.

Jesus understands that this may be easier said than done so he gives his disciples the gift of instruction. This morning's New Testament reading contains Luke's version of how Jesus taught his disciples to pray. These familiar words have come to be known as the "Lord's Prayer" and while this version is somewhat shorter than Matthews's version, they are essentially the same words we recite each week and that many of us have had committed to memory since childhood.

The "Lord's Prayer" has become one of the most well-known and easily recited pieces of liturgy in the church. But as familiar as the words of this prayer are, it is the pattern those words follow that is so important. In teaching them this prayer, Jesus is providing his disciples not with the magic words to say, but with a formula for what prayer should be.

First Jesus begins by addressing God directly as "Our Father, hallowed be thy name." Here Jesus reminds us that God, though seemingly distant and beyond our ability to comprehend, is a caregiver and provider in the same way that our own parents have been. But we make too much of this if we see this as affirmation of the masculinity of God. What is intended here is not a statement on the gender of God, but reference to the intimate nature of the relationship between God and humanity. It would be just as appropriate and just as intimate and just as illustrative to begin by praying "Our Mother, hallowed by thy name".

By encouraging his hearers to understand the God to whom they are speaking as a mother or father, Jesus is teaching them that, as William Barclay has written, "...we are not coming to someone out of whom gifts have to be unwillingly extracted, but to a father who delights to supply his children's needs."³

But although here Jesus acknowledges the intimate connection between God and humanity, he does not forget to properly acknowledge the majesty of God. The word "hallowed" means "to be set apart as sacred."⁴

Shirlie Guthrie notes on this seeming paradox that "If we think of God only as father or mother, we will end up with a sweet, sentimental grandparent who is not the God of the Bible." But, if we think of God only as sacred - set apart, or other - we will end up with an unknown, distant God who is *also* not the God of the Bible.⁵

In speaking of God as both parental and sacred, Jesus reminds us that prayer always begins with acknowledging the nature of the one to whom we come. Before we begin to ask God to intervene in our lives, we must give praise and acknowledge that the God to whom we are speaking is greater than ourselves and greater than any power to whom we find ourselves subject. But we also acknowledge that God is with us, walking beside us in our victories and in our struggles.

As Barclay writes, "Before anything is asked for ourselves, God and his glory and the reverence due him come first."⁶

In the next statement "Thy Kingdom come" Jesus is noting that God's will is above all and that in the final analysis, whatever it is we may want, should always be held as secondary to what God wants. Even though we have definite ideas about what we need and about what is best for our lives, our prayers to God should always seek God's will first.

That can be a hard thing to pray when we know that sometimes God's will is not our own. In his 1991 hit "Unanswered Prayer," Garth Brooks sings about the girl he loved in high school. Convinced that she was the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, he had prayed fervently for God's help to make it happen. It did not. Many years later, he and his wife ran into that old flame and Brooks, reflecting on the ways God had blessed him in his marriage, realizes that not getting what he thought he wanted so long ago put him in position to receive what he has now. "Sometimes God's greatest gift is unanswered prayer."⁷

To seek "thy Kingdom come" is to put ourselves in God's hands, accepting that what God desires for the world is what is best for our lives, even if it is not necessarily what we would choose. When we pray for God's blessings in our lives, it is always with the desire that above all, God's will be done.

The third movement of the prayer is to take our needs and worries to God. Jesus teaches the disciples to make three basic requests:

- First: "Give us each day our daily bread" - In asking that God provide our daily bread, we're reminded of the way God provided manna to the Israelites in the wilderness following the Exodus. But we understand that God provides for all of what we need for today, not just food but also clothing, shelter, family, money, justice, vocation.

Shirley Guthrie notes that "Desire for these earthly [things] may lead to greed, pride, [and] envy ... but if God invites us to pray for them, then they are not sinful in themselves, and it is God's will that we be concerned about them, work for them, and enjoy them."⁸

- The second request is "Forgive us our sins" – In asking for forgiveness, we confess, as Paul writes in Romans, that we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."⁹ We express the need to be accepted by God and made right with God. To be in sin is to be estranged from God, but to be forgiven is to be told that what we have done is no longer held against us; that we are made right with God and that we are set free from a past we cannot change and invited into a new future in which we can be more closely conformed to God's image.
- And, finally: "Lead us not into temptation" – William Barclay writes of this petition that "Temptation means any testing situation. It includes far more than the mere seduction to sin; it covers every situation which is a challenge to, and a test of a person's... integrity and fidelity."¹⁰ Each day brings challenges and trials and worries. And in the "Lord's Prayer" we learn that we can and should take those difficulties to God - for even as we may feel overwhelmed, we know that there is nothing so large or so small that God cannot handle it.

With this structure, Jesus teaches the disciples (and us) how to pray - not with big words and empty phrases, but with honest and heartfelt requests; with simple acknowledgement of our need for God and of our dependence on God's goodness and mercy.

Noted author Anne Lamotte has written that she has two basic prayers: One is "Thank you, thank you" and the other is "help me, help me, help me."¹¹ For years I heard my father say grace at the dinner table almost every night with the simple prayer "Thank you Lord for supper." This was not a flippant disregard for the importance of thanksgiving but rather a simple, heartfelt expression of appreciation for what God had provided that day. Likewise, my mother has always celebrated moments when she sensed that God had answered her prayers with a simple "Thank you Lord, thank you." Again, not the most eloquent or intricate prayer but, like Jesus' own words we read today, uncomplicated and effective.

In scripture we are assured that God knows what we need before we ask it. But we are still encouraged to ask because in prayer we don't just make requests. Our relationship with God is after all, a relationship. In prayer we connect, we share, we listen, we confide. When we pray, we open-up our whole selves to God, sharing our needs and wants, expressing our hopes and fears and frustrations, admitting to God where we have fallen short, and putting our trust in God to make things right.

That confidence and trust in God should set us free to be vulnerable before God, *knowing* that God always hears us and that God cares.

Prayer is not the Miss America Pageant. It's not testifying in court. And it's not the SAT all over again. Our prayers are not graded for length, grammar, style or content. It's not even the words that matter, it's the feelings behind them. Our prayers need not be difficult, and they need not be complicated, they only need be honest.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ *The Searchers*. Dir. John Ford. Perf. John Wayne, Jeffrey Hunter, Vera Miles. Warner Brothers/C.V. Whitney Pictures, 1956. DVD.

² *Bruce Almighty*. Dir. Tom Shadyac. Perf. Jim Carrey, Morgan Freeman, Jennifer Anniston. Spyglass Entertainment/Universal Pictures, 2003. DVD.

³ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975. pg. 143. Print. The Daily Study Bible Ser.

⁴ "hallowed." *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*. HarperCollins Publishers. 19 Jul. 2013. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/hallowed>>.

⁵ Guthrie, Shirley C. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville, Ken.: Westminster/J. Knox, 1994. pg. 102 Print.

⁶ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975. 143. Print. The Daily Study Bible Ser.

⁷ "Unanswered Prayers." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 07 Aug. 2013. Web. 19 July 2013. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unanswered_Prayers>.

⁸ Guthrie, Shirley C. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville, Ken.: Westminster/J. Knox, 1994. pg. 159 Print.

⁹ Romans 3:23, NRSV

¹⁰ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975. 144. Print. The Daily Study Bible Ser.

¹¹ Wallace, James A. "Luke 11:1-13, Exegetical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Ed. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown. Taylor. Vol. 3, Year C. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008. 289. Print.