

How Do We Pray?

Luke 11:1-13

July 29, 2007

He 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."

He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

And 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; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." And 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." I 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.

"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. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If 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!

This may not come to you as much of a surprise, but among all the topics that I've studied intensively, there is none that I've studied more intensively than prayer. And that's saying a lot because I've had the opportunity to study an awful lot on an awful lot of topics. For example, I've studied all sorts of topics related to psychology: child psychology, adolescent psychology, developmental psychology, experimental psychology, abnormal psychology, motivational psychology, physiological psychology, and a ton of other topics.

I've studied anthropology, sociology, political science, management theory, gerontology, and a lot of other social science topics.

As part of my studies to become a pastor, I've studied biblical history, religious history, Christian history, biblical hermeneutics, Christology, soteriology, eschatology, Protestant and Catholic theology, pastoral theology, pastoral care, ecclesiology, church administration, evangelism, and church growth theory

To become a counselor I studied the techniques of Rogerian therapy, Reality therapy, Freudian and Jungian analysis, psychodynamic theory, behavioral therapy, cognitive therapy, family therapy, marital therapy, Lacanian therapy, social learning theory, group therapy, and a ton of other topics related to counseling.

For my Ph. D. in spirituality, I studied spiritual direction, mystical spirituality, the philosophy of spirituality, formative spirituality, and almost anything you can learn about spirituality.

And I can honestly say that there's no topic that I struggle with more than prayer. No matter how much I learn, I still struggle with the basic questions: how to pray, how to listen to God in prayer, and how to know when we've actually heard God, and how to tell what God has said. No matter how much time I devote to studying prayer and actually praying, it's still a mystery to me. The questions I asked when I first became a Christian are still the questions I ask today I ask,

- ☞ *Am I praying the right way?*
- ☞ *Does God really care about my petty concerns?*
- ☞ *Does God really answer prayers, and if God does, will God answer mine, and if God does, will it be in the way I want?*
- ☞ *How do I tell if God is listening to me, answering me, caring about me?*

These are the same questions you probably ask, and if you do, you may be comforted to know that we are asking the same questions Jesus' followers asked 2000 years ago. And I've come across no answers to these questions that are better than Jesus' answers in our passage for this morning. So what I want to do this morning is just to look at what Jesus says, and see if it helps you and I to pray. Because as Christians there is nothing more important than prayer.

When you look at what Jesus has taught about prayer in our passage this morning, it's obvious that it became the basis for the Lord's prayer that we say every Sunday. Words have been added to the prayer over time, words that clarify what Jesus meant. Still, the prayer is essentially the same. I think that when Jesus taught it, he wasn't just teaching it as a rote prayer to be said all the time. I think that what Jesus was doing was teaching an outline for prayer. I can imagine him teaching them by reciting the words to a sentence, and then pausing for while, indicating that they were to spend time praying on that topic.

For instance, when Jesus says, "*When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be your name,'*" you can imagine him pausing so that they could reflect on what that meant. What does it mean? It means that whenever we pray, we are to spend time praising God. We are to hallow God's name, or to "honor it as holy." This is something that we mainstream Protestants aren't necessarily as good at. Jesus is saying to us that even before we begin to ask God for anything, we should spend time praising God and recognizing God's majesty.

We don't usually think that globally about God. We're used to thinking about God in somewhat confined terms, but do a thought exercise with me and I think you'll get a glimmer of the need to praise God. Think about how large we think buildings and mountains are. Then think about them in perspective next to the size of a continent. Then think about how large a continent is next to the size of the world. Then think of the size of the earth compared to the size of the sun. And then think about the size of the sun, which is a relatively small star, in comparison to the galaxy, which scientists estimate may have around 6 billion stars, many of which are up to 100 times larger than our sun. Then think about the fact that God created not only our galaxy, but the whole universe, which scientists estimate may contain between 6 and 16

billion galaxies. And now recognize that God created all of it, and yet we are told that God loves us, individually, as much as God loves the universe. That's an awe-inspiring thought. To begin our prayer in a state of awe and reverence, recognizing how tremendous and wonderful God is means to begin our prayer in the right state of mind.

Sometimes we mainstream Protestants are guilty of failing to praise God in our prayer. Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians rarely make that mistake. I think there are other mistakes they make, but they do understand the important of praise. In fact, if you go to an evangelical worship service, they often call it a "praise service" because they know that praising God is important. My problem with them is that often they don't realize there are other ways of approaching God other than praise, but that's a relatively minor criticism. They understand that we have to begin by hallowing God's name. And that's what we are called to do in prayer. Before we start praying about ourselves, which is what we normally do, begin our prayers by coming to God in awe and reverence.

After the pause, Jesus moves on: "*Your kingdom come.*" There's a tendency to think that this might refer to the hope that we would face God face-to-face when we die. That's not its intent. The sentence really isn't referring so much to what happens when we die as much as it is a prayer for what we hope to happen in the present. You can get the meaning just by remembering what is added to that sentence in our prayer: "*Thy will be done.*"

In this prayer, Jesus is talking about the real meaning of "the kingdom of God." We tend to think of the kingdom of God as where we go when we die, but it isn't. God's kingdom is all around us and in us. It is a reality that is everywhere, but to become aware of it we have to be open to God. I like to refer to God's kingdom as something akin to a "reverse fog." I realize that this is a strange term, and I'm not particularly fond of it, but it's the best I've come up with. Think about a fog. When you are in its midst, the fog surrounds you and clouds your sight. You can't see anything very well when you are in its midst. Everything becomes dimmer, and the thicker the fog, the less you see. God's kingdom is the reverse of this. When we are radically open to God's Spirit and kingdom, it surrounds us like a fog, but it makes everything clearer. We not only see the world from a human point of view, but we see it from a spiritual point of view. We begin to see what it is that God wills for us and the world, and then we seek to do it. That's what it means for God's kingdom to come. We are asking God to allow us to live in a state of mind, as well as a state of the world, in which all things, especially us, follow God's will inherently. And we are called to pray for this clarity, this "living-in-the-kingdom" way of life.

Next, Jesus says, "*Give us each day our daily bread.*" While I believe that this is meant to be literal, it is also meant to be figurative. What Jesus is saying is that now is the time for us to begin praying for our needs. *After* we have praised God in awe and reverence, and *after* we have sought to live in a state of seeking what God wants, *then* we turn to ask for what we want. And it is okay to ask for what we want, especially if we are asking for what we need. In Jesus' time, praying for food was a constant and urgent need. Today we might pray for other things we need: relief from loneliness, healing, a better job, better relationships, help with our lack of confidence, or any other need. These can be needs every bit as important as daily bread, and we are to ask for them, but always in the context of asking first for what God wants. We are not in competition with God. When we ask for what we want, but make sure that what we want is in

line with what we suspect is God's will, then we end up asking and receiving, seeking and finding, knocking and having the door opened for us.

Then Jesus says, "*And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.*" Jesus is getting to the heart of prayer. By focusing on forgiveness, he is focusing on the essential ingredient to love. Love has three main components: compassion, trust, and forgiveness. Compassion is having a heart for caring about others. Trust is the willingness to trust that if we love, we won't be hurt. Forgiveness is the largest part. Forgiveness is the willingness to keep being compassionate and trusting even if someone hurts us and betrays our trust. It is the willingness to keep loving no matter what, even if someone doesn't deserve our forgiveness. It is a willingness to put aside the slights, slings, and slaps of others and to stay in a relationship with them. And the basis of forgiving others is knowing that God forgives us, no matter how lacking in compassion, untrustworthy, and unforgiving we've been. Jesus is telling us to live in the kingdom where love flows freely, and to let God be the source of forgiveness in us as we share God's forgiving of us.

Finally, Jesus says, "*And do not bring us to the time of trial.*" In saying this, he is recognizing that human life is filled with temptation. We are constantly tempted by the lure of alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, affairs, stealing, cheating, and much more. Each and every one of these, on their surface, may seem harmless, fun, or as not hurting anyone else, but when we get caught in their grip it can become a huge problem. Few of these are terrible in and of themselves, but when we get caught up in them, getting caught in addiction or behaviors that slowly destroy our lives, they become a huge problem. Jesus is teaching us to pray for God's help to give us strength and courage when we face the temptations of life. Jesus tells us to pray for God's guidance and discipline in all things.

In all of this, Jesus is giving us basic instruction. He is teaching us that prayer always begins in awe and reverence. It must include a desire to seek God's will above everything else. It does include asking God for what we need. It needs to entail asking God to make us people of love who forgive, just as God is a being of love who forgives. Finally, Jesus teaches that we are to seek God's guidance and help in avoiding and resisting the temptations of life.

Above everything else, you and I are to be a people of prayer, making prayer the foundation of everything. Is that true of you? Are you a person of prayer?

Amen.