

Lord, Teach us to Pray

Matthew 6:5-15

May 22, 2016

Call to Worship

¹¹ *For I know the plans I have for you,*” declares the LORD, *“plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.* ¹² *Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.* ¹³ *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*
Jeremiah 29:11-13 (NIV)

Scripture Reading

⁵ *“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.* ⁶ *But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

⁷ *“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.* ⁸ *Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.* ⁹ *Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.*

¹⁰ *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

¹¹ *Give us this day our daily bread,*

¹² *and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

¹³ *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* Matthew 6:5-15 (ESV)

This morning is the introduction to a new series in which we will be looking at prayer. Most of it will be from the prayer that Jesus gave his disciples to pray, otherwise referred to as “The Lord’s Prayer.” Or if you grew up Catholic, the “Our Father.” But before we start I would like to ask you a few questions to reflect on: 1) How is your prayer life? 2) How much time do you spend in prayer each day? 3) What exactly is prayer?

Simply put, prayer is communication with God. It is about a relationship. Pastor and contemporary theologian Timothy Keller writes in his book *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* that prayer is a conversation or an encounter with God. It is continuing a conversation that God has started through his Word and his grace, which eventually becomes a full encounter with him.” It is clear from Keller’s definition of prayer that God is the initiator of the relationship between He and his people. God is a personal God who wants to be intimately known by His people. That is what Adam & Eve had in the Garden of Eden with God before their fall from grace.

While during this series we are going to be looking mostly at *The Lord’s Prayer*, the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray, as being the foundation for our prayer life. But in the Gospel of John 17 we have what is undoubtedly Jesus’ best prayer that he prayed as recorded in Scripture and in that prayer Jesus says:

*And this is eternal life, that they **know** you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*

John 17:3 (ESV)

4. To be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ

That is God's most important purpose for our lives.

I am still reading through Oswald Chambers' *My Utmost for His Highest* in my devotional reading for the year. Recently (May 14th devotion) he asked the question "why has God saved us?" or "what is God's primary purpose for saving us?"

Contrary to what our human selves want to say to us – God doesn't save us for ourselves. Chambers says that the primary reason God saves His people "is to manifest the life of the Son of God in our mortal flesh."

So, as Christians, if our ultimate purpose is to manifest the life of the Son of God in our mortal life, or to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ, then Jesus becomes our ultimate teacher on everything and that includes prayer.

While the most common version of the *Lord's Prayer* is copied from Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* in Matthew's gospel, Matthew 6:5-13. It is also found in Luke's gospel, Luke 11:

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ² And he said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³ Give us each day our daily bread, ⁴ and forgive us our sins, as we forgive everyone who is indebted to us and lead us not into temptation."

⁵ And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; ⁷ and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? ⁸ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. ⁹ And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ¹¹ What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; ¹² or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ 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!"

Luke 11:1-13 (ESV)

Jesus' disciples had watched Jesus pray at many different times and in many different ways. They had seen Jesus pray in the temple and the synagogue during worship. They had seen him pray during the different prayer times throughout the Jewish day – morning, noon and evening. They had seen him pray the Psalms which was the Jewish prayer book of the day. And they had often seen him go off by himself to pray alone with God. That seems to be the prayer that they are most concerned about. "Lord, we want that, teach us how to pray!"

I think that in order for us to get the full effect of Jesus' teaching on prayer, we need to combine the two accounts from Matthew and Luke. Most likely Jesus' teaching about prayer wasn't just a random event, like it is recorded in the *Sermon on the Mount*, but it came at the request of some of his disciples and that he gave them a format for prayer that could be used for all time.

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
10 Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us this day our daily bread,
12 and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
[and forgive us our sins, as we have also forgiven those who have sinned against us]
13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

I prefer to use the word sins, instead of debts or trespasses, because it is easier for us to understand today. And then some of the original manuscripts include the closing: *for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*

Starting next week we will be looking at each of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer but for this morning I think it is important for us to note what is in the prayer and what is not in the prayer. Most important is where the focus of the prayer is. Where we usually start our prayers about ourselves, what we want, the prayer that Jesus taught starts with God:

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
10 Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

And even though Jesus tells us to go off and pray in private – to our own room or closet – we are really not praying individually but collectively – "*Our Father.*" Jesus was not saying that there should not be times in which we pray collectively – like during worship or with fellow disciples. That was a given to the early disciples, or at least the early Jewish disciples. What he was trying to address was all those who made a public show of their prayer – whether it be in the synagogue, in the temple, or on the street corners. He said "those who do that, those who pray for show, they have already received their reward."

Our prayer life is not so much about ourselves as it is about God, so Jesus tells us it needs to start with Him. In fact when it comes to ourselves, the prayer that Jesus offers only contains two or three rather simple petitions:

- Daily sustenance: "*Give us this day our daily bread.*"
- Forgiveness of sins: that which is conditional on our willingness and ability to forgive others that sin against us.
- And to keep us from temptation, at least beyond our ability to keep us from doing evil.

A rather simple prayer.

Was Jesus saying that we shouldn't pray for ourselves, or those whom we love, our families, and for others? No! But we really don't need to be taught to pray for ourselves and that and those who are most important to us. Almost everyone does that. Christians don't have the monopoly on prayer. We might not even be the best at it. Muslims pray seven times a day. Jews three times a day. Buddhists, Hindus, American Indians and on and on, they all pray. Recent studies have shown that even some atheists pray. One study found 17%, another 30%. Of course one needs to ask, "who are they praying to?" If they're not praying to God is it really prayer?

Our prayer life needs to start with God.

Throughout the years I have picked up many books on prayer, trying to help me in my own prayer life. The most recent one is Timothy Keller's (2014), *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*. Actually I am still working my way through it.

What I have found most helpful is Keller's remarks that "prayer is a balanced interaction of praise, confession, thanks, and petition." It reminds me of the acronym which I learned many years ago which I try and remember each time I pray: ACTS

Adoration (praise)

Confession

Thanksgiving

Supplication (intercession or petition)

The Lord's prayer moves from adoration and praise ("Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done"), then to confessing our sins and asking for inner change ("forgive us our sins as we forgive others their sins") and thanksgiving or back to praise ("for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory").

It's important that we have all four of those elements in almost all of our prayer times. It doesn't necessarily have to be in that specific order, but I have found that it is good to start with adoration and praise and end in adoration and praise. It's a good reminder of where the focus of our prayer life is supposed to be – on God instead of ourselves. The best example of that is the Psalms which contain all four elements. I usually begin all my prayer times praying the psalms.

In his book on prayer, Timothy Keller, offers what he calls "touchstones" on prayer. A "touchstone is a small rock that was rubbed against a piece of gold or silver to test its degree of purity or genuineness." Just like every element of our Christian walk, all our prayer falls short.

These are some of the "touchstones" on prayer which Keller offers us:

1. Prayer is both a duty and a discipline – there are some places in the Bible that say that not praying is sin.
2. Prayer is responding to the Word of God – As Christians it is impossible to have a full and vibrant prayer life without consistent interaction in God's Word. That is how we come to "know God" best.
3. Prayer is a balanced interaction of praise, confession, thanks and petition.

4. Prayer requires grace – Christian prayer is based on the Gospel found in Jesus Christ.

Keller writes, “Our prayers must be in full, grateful awareness that our access to God as Father is a free gift won by the costly sacrifice of Jesus the True Son, and then enacted in us by the Holy Spirit, who helps us know inwardly that we are His children”. Hence, we begin our prayers with the words “Our Father.”

5. Prayer is the heart engaged in loving awe – often referred to in the Bible as “Holy fear.” The ones who don’t know God, or haven’t put their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation have reason to be fearful. For those who do “know God” and believe in Jesus, that fear has been replaced by “loving awe.”

6. Prayer acknowledges our own helplessness, weakness and dependence on God – To pray is to accept that we are, and always will be, wholly dependent on God for everything.

7. Prayer changes our perspective to God’s perspective.

8. Prayer is spiritual union with God –

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. Ephesians 6:38.

The apostle Paul says we should pray and pray and pray. Pray without ceasing.

9. Prayer requires honesty and self-knowledge – we come to know God correctly when we come to know ourselves correctly. If we are not open to the recognition of our smallness and our sinfulness, we will never be able to take in His greatness and His holiness. Our prayer life is most effective when we can get to the place of the prophet Isaiah and with honesty share his words, “*Woe to me! I am ruined for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty*” (Isaiah 6:5).

10. Prayer requires and creates surrender of our whole life to love in God.

But we also need to remember, that just like every other aspect of our Christian life, we fall short in our prayer life as well. I especially appreciate Timothy Keller’s words in this regard: “all prayer is somewhat impure. It is never done with fully proper motives of heart or with language worthy of its object. It is received and answered by God, therefore only by grace.”

“You should not begin to pray for all you want until you realize that in God you have all you need.”
Augustine

So how much time do you spend in prayer? We can read about prayer all we want. We can use the Lord's Prayer as the foundation of our prayer life. We can read Jesus' great prayer in John 17. I find myself doing all those things, quite often. But I have found that the best way to learn how to pray is by finding and taking the time to pray.

Start small. If you don't spend any time now – start with 15 minutes. If you do a little time now – try 30 minutes. Maybe the goal should be an hour a day. While an hour might seem like a lot – is there any relationship more important to us than our relationship with God? Most of the great saint's of the past spent lots of time in prayer. Martin Luther is said to have not started each day without spending two to three hours alone with God. And for those of you who have very busy lives (which is probably around 90% of you) break it up. 15 minutes four times a day or 30 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes in the evening, or when you are driving to and from (shut the radio and the cell phone off).

Don't just recite the Lord's Prayer but stop and make sure you are praying the different elements of it. Growing up in the Catholic Church I prayed the Lord's Prayer over and over again without really thinking about what I was praying. Someone else has referred to it as being like living next to a train tracks or near the airport runway. After a while you just tune it out. Or use the ACTS acronym or something similar to ensure that your prayer life is balanced. That is isn't just about us coming to God asking for things. As parents how do you feel when your children just coming up to you all the time and asking for what they want? That's how God must feel when we his children come up to Him all the time just asking for what we want and not acknowledging all that He has done for us in His Son Jesus Christ, offering thanks to Him, confessing all our sin and shortcomings and recognizing that we already have all that we need.

My prayer is that we may all grow in our prayer life during this series – individually and collectively. I would recommend the Taize prayer service this Tuesday evening at 7:00 p.m. at *The Grove* if you are available. And in the front this morning is a touchstone for whoever who would like one to place in his or her pocket or somewhere else over the next six weeks as a reminder to take the time and pray.