

Lord, Teach Us to Pray!

Today's Gospel Reading is from **Luke 11:1-13**, as we consider what Jesus teaches us about prayer:

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."² 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,*

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial."

⁵ *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;⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.'⁷ 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.'⁸ 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.*

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. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give 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!"*

Just about everyone is curious about prayer, and at some time or other, has prayed. Occasionally it's simply a reaction to danger or distress, gasping in desperation, "Help!" looking to a higher power for deliverance. There are few "foxhole atheists." Unbelievers, facing real and present danger, often become momentary believers..

In 1962, the Supreme Court passed a law forbidding class participatory prayer in public schools, in deference to First Amendment religious establishment clause of separation of church and state. Decades after this law was established, a notice was posted on the bulletin board of the elementary school where my wife was teaching: "*NOTICE! In the event of a nuclear attack, the ban on prayer will be temporarily suspended.*"

Even with us Christians, we resort to prayer to obtain God's protection or provision of something we want, either for ourselves or for others. We know the importance and prevalence of prayer in the Bible, particularly in the Psalms. We know we should pray, and yet we find that our practice, discipline and experience of prayer often leaves us disappointed, either with ourselves or with the results we expect from prayer. If we're honest, we'll admit there are times when we doubt if prayer works. Maybe we need to go to Jesus and ask, "Lord teach us to pray!"

Jesus tells us that **prayer is a priority (verse 1)**. As John the Baptist's disciples had learned to pray from him, Jesus' disciples wanted to learn from their Master. It may well be that the request was not only *how* to pray but to make prayer a priority. "Lord, teach us how to pray and teach us *to* pray, that we *ought to* pray." Maybe they were voicing what we often think: "Teach us that prayer is worth the effort."

The disciples had seen the importance of prayer for Jesus. The One whom they had come to believe and follow as the Messiah, the anointed Son of God, was a man of prayer. They had seen him perform mighty works and give wise teaching that seemed to flow out of his life of prayer. The disciples saw Jesus slip away to spend all night in prayer, such as when he chose them to be his followers (Luke 6:12). No doubt they must have thought that if their Master and Lord so depended on prayer, how much more should they! They needed to be taught the importance of prayer.

Prayer was a priority in Jesus' teaching. Jesus admonished his disciples to pray. When Jesus came upon the scene of his frustrated disciples, who could not deliver or heal the boy with an evil spirit, Jesus immediately healed and delivered the boy. When asked the reason for their failure, Jesus replied, "This kind (of demon deliverance) can come out only by prayer" (Mark 9:29). Jesus repeatedly taught his disciples the priority of prayer for life and service.

Jesus taught them how to pray, following the **pattern** of what we call the Lord's Prayer (verses 2-4), an important part of our worship liturgy, (the somewhat different and longer form in Matthew's Gospel, 6:9-13, in the context of the Sermon on the Mount). There's good reason to believe that Jesus gave this prayer on more than one occasion because of the way it summarizes the heart of his teaching and the core of what should be the concern and passion of his followers.

Jesus taught us to address our prayers to the Father. Although the exact form of address isn't important, and whether we address our prayers to the Lord Jesus or the Holy Spirit as well as the heavenly Father we're always speaking to our one Triune God. But we do well do listen to Jesus, who teaches us to address our "Father" (verse 2), and in Matthew's account, "Our Father in heaven" (6:9).

Jesus dared to address God as his Father personally, using the intimate Aramaic word, "Abba." And amazingly, Jesus invited his disciples into this same relationship with the heavenly Father, teaching them to call him, "Abba," our Father. Through prayer we address God as a Father of love and care who desires a personal relationship with us. This relationship with God as Father is possible only through faith in Jesus, who has opened the way for us to the Father. Through faith in Jesus and repentance from sin, the barrier is removed, our sins are forgiven and a relationship is established with God (Romans 5:1). Prayer is personally and intimately talking with God our Father, who invites us to share with him the concerns he already has for us and the world.

Prayer is joining God in his agenda, seeking his honor and kingdom. "Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come" (verse 2). Prayer is not about getting on with our wish list, but is first of all centering of our lives before the throne of holy God. The first thing we realize in God's presence is his majesty and holiness. This desire for the honoring of God serves to keep our prayers from being petty and self-centered.

We also pray that the kingdom of God will come. As disciples of Jesus, we learn to share his passion for his rule to be re-established in this fallen world. Our primary loyalty and passion is no longer with this world order, but with the kingdom of God. We seek to join Jesus with his agenda to redeem all creation. Through intercessory prayer, we join in God's local and worldwide work of healing the sick, rescuing the lost and bringing peace to the nations.

Matthew's version adds, "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (6:10). When our desire is for God's name to be honored and his kingdom to come, that *is* God's will being done. If we sincerely desire his glory and agenda to be advanced, then necessarily we submit to his will for our lives. I have to confess, submission to God's will has been most difficult for me lately, even as it was supremely for Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

When we seek the kingdom we and submit to the Father's will, we're ready to ask for our daily bread. What does this mean in our day and culture of fully stocked cupboards and refrigerators? It means that we're to realize and to never forget our absolute dependence on God, for even the material needs of life. This sense of dependence also cultivates gratitude. We are spiritual but also creatures of real flesh and blood. And we need to sense Christ's presence even in the food we eat, upon which we depend for our mortal life.

But also, as Jesus said, we're to seek the food that never perishes, the life of God, our life in the Spirit (John 6:25-58). Jesus rebuked the crowd who sought him only for his power to provide their physical food and who spurned his offer for the true spiritual Bread of Life through a vital personal relationship with him (John 6:26-27).

This Lord's Prayer is in the plural, so we're praying for the Father to meet the needs of others, in the awareness of our responsibility to help meet their needs—whether material, emotional or spiritual. Prayer without compassionate action in behalf of the needy is empty.

“Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone indebted to us” (verse 4). Our relationship with God is possible only because of his forgiveness. As forgiven sinners, we have a daily need to maintain our fellowship with Christ (1 John 1:9). And we can't enjoy or expect God's forgiveness of us if we're not willing to forgive others (Matthew 6:14-15).

We're to pray, “do not bring us to the time of trial,” or temptation (verse 4). We pray for grace to conquer in spiritual warfare. We know that Satan hurls his fiery darts at us, and so we must always and constantly put on the armor of God through prayer (Ephesians 6:10-18). I know that the greatest battleground for Satan in my life is within my old, sinful flesh. That's why I must pray for God to give me victory over the downward tug of the sinful flesh. I'm often my own worst enemy in this matter of spiritual warfare. We also face trials of all kinds that test the strength of our faith. I'm praying daily that I'll pass the test of faithfulness as caregiver to my wife.

We'll be motivated to pray when we learn an important **principle** (verses 5-8). Jesus creates an image familiar to his audience. In this culture, hospitality was an important responsibility, not just for individual families, but for entire communities. Often, because of extreme heat, travel was done at nighttime. It wouldn't be strange for a friend to show up late at night, expecting you to show hospitality by providing food and lodging. And so, a man, whose own groceries are in short supply, goes to a friend at midnight to borrow enough bread for his guest.

This is a story of contrasts between the friend in bed, with the provisions the man needs, and God, who never sleeps, and who has all the provisions we need (Psalm 121:4). But more than the fact of God's ability to meet all of our needs is the fact of his willingness. The man in the story is a friend, but somewhat short of being a friend willing to eagerly jump to meet his friend's need. You might say that he comes across as a grouch. Jesus contrasts this reluctant grouch with our heavenly Father, who invites us to come and even to come at midnight. Midnight is the time when urgent needs are pursued and when many things that are most important to us, which cannot wait till the next day, are pursued. Lately, Nancy

and I have had some midnight visits to the UW Hospital Emergency, and I'm glad I didn't have to disturb any of you for assistance!

Jesus teaches us to continue to pray to the Father with continual asking, seeking and knocking (9&10), literally "Keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking." Prayer is an ongoing conversation that is the essence of our relationship with God. Through persistent asking we learn that God's ways are best, and he may be saying "wait a while," until we have grown in faith or until the timing is right. It's interesting how our little grandchildren will beg for something as though it were desperately important and then, two minutes later have forgotten that request and are asking for something else. Sometime our prayers are that immature. The Father may be waiting until the thing we desire grows less important and his will becomes clearer.

We're encouraged when we realize Jesus' **promise** (verses 11-13). Jesus gives another illustration to assure us "how much more" our Father in heaven, far greater than the best earthly parent, is certain to keep his promise to give us what we need. It's important for us to think more highly of the kind of God who invites us to pray. Jesus contrasts the parenting of a perfect heavenly Father with imperfect earthly parents. Even bad parents are not usually cruel to their children. And so, if we as fallen parents are likely to give our children food for survival, how much more likely is a gracious, faithful and loving Father in heaven likely to give us the things we need? The cross of Christ proved once and for all that God deeply and tenderly loves us. Paul expresses this concept of God's love that should inspire our every prayer:

"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32).

Truly, our Father in heaven will give us the best gift of all. Jesus ends this lesson by talking about the Holy Spirit. Here again is the "how much more" principle. The Father in heaven will give to us his greatest gift, so how much more will he not give us the other things we need? And this greatest of all gifts is the Holy Spirit. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says the Father in heaven "will give *good gifts* to those who ask him" (7:11). I take this to mean that God gives us himself!

But you may say, "But what I really need is a job, a house, healing from my debilitating illness, or restored relationships with my wife and/or children. I already have the Holy Spirit. What I need are some practical, physical and material things, not spiritual." When we live in the awareness of his presence and in good fellowship with the Father, we're in a position to receive all of his "good things." Through prayer God changes us instead of convincing God to do something for us or even for other people. Prayer as the way we join Christ in his continuing work in this world.

Jesus teaches us to pray and how to pray.