



Primer on Prayer

Vienna Presbyterian Church
Rev. Connie Jordan-Haas
Matthew 6:5-15

February 21, 2016

I used to think prayer was something I “had” to do. There was a nagging, needling sense of guilt. What seemed to be so essential to the life of a Christian was not something I sincerely desired.

God has changed me and how I understand prayer. Your life story probably resembles mine though the “particulars” are different. I have been *placed* in life circumstances that have *forced* me to come to the end of my puny resources in order to *depend* on Jesus Christ. The vehicle of that dependency is prayer. And now, I cannot fathom a life without what I used to view as an obligation or duty.

What we as Christians believe about prayer is astonishing! The claims of Christian faith are unparalleled if we contrast them with any other world religion or system of thought. Hebrews 4:16 states this: “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

What does this mean? You and I have a *ceaseless* audience with the *MAKER* of the Universe. You and I have direct, unlimited access to the King of kings and Lord of lords. We don’t have to *wait* interminably in the sterile, outer waiting room, and then in the cold examining room. We don’t have to *cower in fear* like Dorothy before the Wizard. We don’t have to strategically *bide our time*, like Queen Esther, summoning our courage to gain entry into the throne room. We don’t have to *speak polished words* or make certain our “game face” is in place. We don’t even have to land a drone on the front lawn of the White House with the wild hope that we might gain access to the Oval Office to make our case.



When we pray, we're talking to the ONE who MADE us, who LOVES us, who LONGS for us to WANT to pray!

Here's what Scripture says is true about prayer:

The Lord of heaven and earth *delights* in us as we pray!
(Proverbs 15:8b)

The Holy Spirit *helps* us in our weakness. He *groans* and *prays* for us. (Romans 8:26)

And Jesus Christ, at the right hand of God, *intercedes* for us. (Romans 8:34)



The *very moment* Jesus died on the Cross, the Temple curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place was torn in two! (Matthew 27:51). Why was that literally an earth-quaking event? A Jewish high priest could only enter that inner sanctuary, that Most Holy Place, *once a year* in order to make a sacrifice, to make atonement on behalf of God's people, Israel.

The crucifixion changed everything, forever. By dying on the Cross, Jesus, the perfect, unblemished, sinless Lamb of God, took all sin upon himself *forever*. Sacrifices would no longer be necessary. Through Jesus, the Son of God, *our* Great High Priest, we all have *direct access* into God's very presence *continually*! Using anthropomorphic language, the psalmist says the Lord does not slumber or sleep (Psalm 121:4). And the ONE waiting for us is waiting for us in *love*. Our God is not waiting ready to pounce on us, or point a finger in condemnation or disappointment. The Father, *our* Father, says, "Come! *You are mine*. I love you."

If that truth is new to you this morning, Alleluia! And if that is something you already stake your life on, thank God again.

When we pray, we experience the *joy* of being in God's very presence. Jesus wants to teach us more about *how* we can pray. Part of this morning's Scripture includes the Lord's Prayer. Matthew places this prayer at the exact center of the Sermon on the Mount—116 Greek lines before it and 114 Greek lines after it!

Jesus' target audience for the Sermon on the Mount was his band of disciples. Imagine him teaching the original small group. But here's what's fascinating! Every time Matthew quotes Jesus as saying "your Father," he uses the *singular* possessive pronoun, *sou*, in the Greek. Our English language does not distinguish between singular and plural "you" or "your" unless you hail from certain parts of the country. Some of you roll off the word, "Y'all," as smooth as butter. Others, from my home state of Pennsylvania, use the dubious plural form of you, "Yous." Five times in this passage Jesus teaches about God using the singular form, "your Father." But when Jesus gets to the Lord's Prayer, he shifts to "Our Father," *ēmon* in Greek.

You're probably thinking, "That's nice, Connie. But what's the point? I didn't come for a grammar lesson!" *Jesus* is after disciples who pray as individuals AND as members of the Body of Christ. Jesus wants US to pray for ourselves AND for this church and God's work in the world!

Let's listen to the Word of God.

⁵ "When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. ⁶ But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

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⁷ “When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. ⁸ Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! ⁹ Pray like this:

Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. ¹⁰ May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us today the food we need, ¹² and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. ¹³ And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.¹

¹⁴ “If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

In verses 5 and 6, our first section, Jesus asks us to pray SECRETLY. Other translations use the word “privately.” We could also substitute the words, “in solitude.” Of course we need public prayer. But to guard against the possibility of hypocrisy, of drawing attention to ourselves, Jesus urges us to regularly pray with *only* the Lord as our audience. Dr. Dale Bruner, who was here in 2012, summarizes Jesus' point like this: “Don't pray for show, because God meets us mainly in the secret places.” (“The Christbook, Matthew 1-12,” Frederick Dale Bruner, pp. 286-7). Jesus teaches: “When you [singular “you”!] pray, go away by yourself and pray to your Father in private.”

So do you do this? Do you invest time *alone* with the Lord? Do you have a habit, a spiritual practice of praying alone? I used to avoid or short-change this kind of private prayer. God has changed me. I love to pray with others in times of worship, in small groups, on Great Banquet weekends. What a privilege it was to pray on the rooftop of

Isaiah House under the stars during our mission trip to Haiti last month. David and I pray together almost every morning. But there is NO substitute for being alone with the Lord in prayer. This kind of private prayer builds trust and intimacy as nothing else can. When we pray like this we learn to *enjoy God's presence*. How God *yearns* for us to have a *well-worn path* into the throne room of mercy and grace.

In verses 7 and 8, our second section, Jesus teaches us to pray SUCCINCTLY. Am I hearing some “Amens?” (I confess that when I was in high school and weekly sang in our church’s youth choir, we would actually *time* the length of the pastoral prayers! Egg (or “slushie!”) on me: God called me to be a pastor!) Here’s the context for what Jesus is teaching: there was a prevalent belief that one had to pray long, repetitive prayers to catch the attention of someone from a pantheon of gods who might then deign to listen and perhaps answer.

“Not necessary!” says Jesus. “Short is okay with me.” “I’m after sincerity of heart, not vain attempts to impress me with fancy words or theological airs or undue length.” Let’s hear from Dr. Bruner again: “The paradox of prayer is that only when it is relieved of the *necessity of much* will people experience the *freedom for much*. When disciples know they don’t have to pray *much*, they will, surprisingly, desire to pray more” (Bruner, p. 289). “Less” really is sometimes “more.”

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Dale Bruner

Jesus assures us: “Your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!” So you might be thinking, “Well, if my Father already knows my needs, why bother to pray?” It’s an imperfect analogy, but think about what takes place in our closest human relationships. We let our guard

down! We talk freely. Unreservedly. We don't measure our words or strive for impression management. We realize our truest companions *already know* our needs, our desires, our fears, our aspirations, our failures. But we keep talking, and disclosing, and revealing, and peeling the layers of the onion to build more authentic relationships. That's precisely what our Father God longs to have with us. And so we pray, like the psalmist: "Lord, search me and know me" (Psalm 139).

Secretly. Succinctly. And, finally, Jesus asks us to pray SIMPLY. He gives us a pattern. We call it "The Lord's Prayer." We could also call it "The Disciples' Prayer." We can pray it exactly as Jesus taught it. We can use it as a springboard or template for prayer.

YOU YOU YOU

US US US

There's a reason *this* prayer stands the test of time. But don't let its brevity deceive you. Don't let its familiarity lull you into rote, perfunctory reciting. We could not mine its depths this side of heaven. Six petitions. Three about God, *then*, three about us. YOU YOU YOU. US US US. A right, humble estimation of ourselves in relation to the Lord of the universe is a not a bad way to pray!

Prayer is the engine of revival. Our church is praying for the Lord to *renew us*. Come for prayer and worship during our Wednesday night Lenten services in the Chapel. Save March 11th and 12th to learn more about prayer from and with Adele Calhoun. These are marvelous opportunities for our growth!

But let's come back to Jesus. How did he actually *live*? Jesus didn't just TEACH us about prayer. He LIVED a life of prayer. He needed prayer. He depended on prayer. *Just like us.*

Jesus prayed secretly. He often awoke in the middle of the night to enjoy prayer alone with his Father. He left the crowds and even, sometimes, his disciples, to have solitude with his Father.

Jesus prayed succinctly. Read the accounts of him feeding the multitudes or taking children up in his arms and blessing them. Our Savior was not long-winded! (John's gospel does record Jesus' most extensive prayers on the night of his betrayal and arrest. See his 17th chapter.)

And Jesus prayed simply, with full sincerity of heart and clarity of purpose.

Especially, now, as we are walking through Lent, ponder this anew: most of Jesus' final words, uttered from the Cross, were actually *prayers* to his Father:

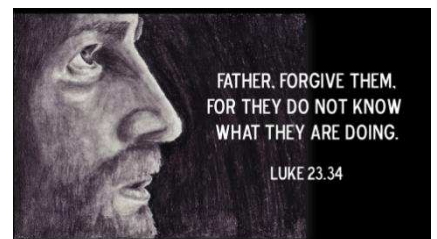
“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Luke 23:34

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Matthew 27:46

“I thirst.” John 19:28

“It is finished.” John 19:29

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Luke 23:46



Jesus taught prayer. Jesus modeled prayer. But we can't stop there. We don't just emulate him as a great moral, ethical teacher. That's the path, frankly, that many choose, as they “cherry pick” what portions of the Bible they like. We believe that Jesus Christ, *in himself*, is *the* linchpin who makes prayer possible:

“Therefore, brothers [and sisters], since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of

Jesus...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith..." (Hebrews 10: 19, 22).

Right now. Right now. Right now our prayers are ascending to the throne room. (Read Revelation 5:8 and 8:3.) The psalmist writes: "Accept my prayer as incense offered to you, and my upraised hands as an evening offering" (141:2). So how will you respond? Where and how is the Lord asking you to change, to deepen, to re-commit to being a person of prayer? Our gracious, loving, always faithful Lord is waiting with joyous anticipation for you.

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Hebrews 10:19,22