Prayer for Dummies

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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I titled this sermon, *Prayer for Dummies*. This week, I had to be careful in referencing this sermon. Occasionally, I slipped and told people my sermon was *Praying for Dummies*, which sounds unflattering, I know. *Prayer for Dummies* is a take-off on the popular books for dummies series. These beginner books are distinctive with their yellow and black covers and the triangular-headed cartoon figure called Dummy Man. There are 2500 books for dummies in print. There is a *Bluegrass Banjo for Dummies, Beekeeping for Dummies*, even *Congress for Dummies*. I will resist saying anything about *Congress for Dummies*! These books target people who have zero or little knowledge of the intended subject matter.

I do not mean to insult you with a beginner’s sermon on prayer. Thomas Merton writes in his bestselling book, *Seven Storey Mountain*, “We will never be anything but beginners [in prayer] all our lives.” Merton was hardly a novice about prayer. He was a Trappist monk who viewed prayer as his central vocation in life.

I identify with Merton’s words about being a beginner in prayer. Even after all these years, I am still a novice when it comes to prayer.

Prayer is hard; prayer is easy. Prayer is easy enough for a child to master yet hard enough that Jesus’ disciples ask, “Lord, teach us to pray.”
It is obvious to the disciples what prayer means to Jesus. Luke’s gospel makes repeated references to Jesus breaking away from the crowd to pray. In chapter 5, Luke writes, “Jesus often withdrew to quiet places to pray” (5:16).

When the disciples ask Jesus how to pray, he provides them a sample prayer called the Lord’s Prayer. Matthew supplies the longer version that we commonly recite together in worship. Luke provides the abridged version. The variant forms of this prayer indicate that Jesus intends to use this prayer more as a guide rather than a fixed formula for prayer.

In Luke’s version, the Lord’s Prayer begins with a single name for God: “Father.” The Greek word for father, pater, is a family term. The word is even more vivid in the language Jesus spoke, Aramaic, a dialect similar to Hebrew. The Aramaic word for Father, Abba, is a family term of endearment meaning papa or daddy. The New Testament scholar Jeremias said Jesus’ use of Abba is without parallel in ancient Jewish prayers. It was shocking to hear Jesus speak of God in such personal terms.

Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer contains five petitions. The first two petitions, “Hallowed be your name” and “Your kingdom come,” center on God’s name and kingdom. These petitions challenge my predilection to order life on preserving my good name and promoting my little fiefdom. Essentially, I am praying, may Your name be hallowed in my life. May Your kingdom come through me.

First two petitions addressed to God:

1. Hallowed be Your name
2. Your kingdom come
The last three petitions shift to everyday concerns like food, forgiveness and deliverance from evil. The appeal for forgiveness is the only petition with a rider attached to it: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” We will never enter into the fullness of God’s forgiveness so long as we withhold forgiveness from other people. Jesus also uses sins as a substitute for words we commonly associate with this prayer, debts and trespasses.

### Last three petitions address our needs:

1. Give us each day our daily bread
2. Forgive our sins as we forgive sins against us
3. Lead us not into temptation

The final petition in the Lord’s Prayer, “Lead us not into temptation,” merits some consideration also. Does God really lead us into temptation? James writes in his letter, “No one should say ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone” (1:13). We are praying for God to preserve us in times of trial. Do not let us succumb to temptation. When we are tested, Lord keep us strong.

Following this sample prayer, Jesus launches into a parable about prayer. A man learns unexpectedly that he has out of town company. Since he lacks food to serve his houseguests, he goes next store to borrow three loaves of bread. It’s midnight when the man knocks at his neighbor’s door. “Don’t bother me now,” his neighbor says through locked door. “My family is already fast asleep.” Come back in the morning. The man begging bread will not let up. He keeps knocking until his neighbor responds to his midnight request.

The point of the parable is not, if we nag God enough, He will give us what we want. Rather, Jesus underscores the
value of persistence in prayer. That’s why he follows it with the words, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (11:9-10). Each imperative implores us to persevere in prayer—keep asking, keep knocking and keep seeking. Persistence helps clarify and refine our prayers. It delineates sheer whims from deep-seated desires.

With all these good things to be said about prayer, why don’t we pray more often? Maybe it has something to do with the problem of unanswered prayer. We prayed for something but did not receive the answer we were seeking. In truth, there is only one answer acceptable to us.

Parents know how this works. Your children ask to stay up late or request a snack before the evening meal. You decline their request. You explain your rationale in saying no but they are not buying it. Finally, you tell them that you cannot explain it to them in ways that will make sense to them. You have to take my word on it.

P.T. Forsyth observes, “We shall come one day to heaven where we shall gratefully know that God’s great refusals were sometimes the true answer to our truest prayer.” We ask God to change our circumstances when God uses our circumstances to change us.

We do not pray only to get things from God. We pray to get God—to enter into a relation-ship with Him. Even if God does not bring the answer we want, God gives us Himself.
Maybe beyond all the asking, what we are really asking is more of God. I think of St. Augustine’s prayer, “You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I have four suggestions for deepening your prayer life.

First, identify a fixed day and a time to pray. You have morning time, drive time, lunchtime, exercise time or free time from which to choose. Start with 15 minutes daily. Over the course of a year, that amounts to eleven eight-hour days. Madeline L’Engle writes, “Prayer is like playing the piano. You don’t do it well every single day, but unless you do it every single day, you are never going to do it well at all.”

Second, take time to quiet your heart. Allow your noisy thoughts to die down. Let them recede in importance. Slow down your breathing and settle in. The Quakers have a name for it. They call it “centering down.”

There is no set posture for prayer. We ordinarily close our eyes to eliminate distractions but we can also pray with our eyes open. I sometimes pray with my hands. I place palms down on my worries and concerns. I turn my palms over to relinquish my worries and concerns to God. Palms down on worry. Palms up to God.
Some people do their best praying while moving. Go for a walk in your neighborhood to pray about your everyday concerns. Walk through each room of your house and pray about what takes place there. Go to a school near you and pray for those who work, play and learn there. Next Sunday after church, we are inviting you to go to a neighborhood school to pray for their safety and well-being.

Third, read the Word as preparation for prayer. God speaks to us through His Word, the Bible. We listen to God through Scripture before we speak in prayer. Martin Luther spoke about reading the Bible as “warming up the heart for prayer.”

I talked previously in a sermon about the value of praying the Psalms. Pray a Psalm aloud each day. Substitute your name in the Psalm. Since there 150 Psalms in the Old Testament, this exercise will last you a half a year. I must forewarn you. The biblical Psalms pray about everything.

Allow me to illustrate using Psalm 139. There are so many memorable verses in this Psalm yet near the end are troubling words: “If only, God you would slay the wicked.” Then a few verses later, “Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord” (139:19, 21). Can we really pray this way? Apparently so, it’s in the Bible. While the Psalmist prays his hate, he refuses to act on it. He leaves his hatred for God to sort out. He closes the prayer, “Search me and know my thoughts. Test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting” (139:23-24).

I find it helpful to pray other people’s prayers. I have assembled, with help from our staff, a collection of my
favorite prayers. These prayers provide words for things I struggle to name. This booklet of prayers is available this morning in the lobby. You can also access this prayer booklet online.

Fourth, pray for whatever concerns you. We tend to pray about remote, noble things such as world peace, yet lack the courage to pray for what matters most to us. Don’t worry about praying for yourself. Richard Foster offers this helpful advice: “Don’t worry about being the subject and center of your prayers. In God’s time and in God’s way a Copernican revolution will take place in our hearts. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, there is a shift in our center of gravity. We pass from thinking of God as part of our lives to the realization that we are part of His life.” In time, the circle of our intentions will widen in the largeness of God’s love.

What happens when we become distracted in prayer? Pray your distractions. Your distractions may tell you something you need to know about your real concerns.

I challenge you to take the next step in prayer. John Chapman was a much sought-after spiritual director and authority in prayer in a former day. His oft-quoted advice is a good note to end on—“Pray as you can, not as you can’t.”