

Learning to Pray with Dependence

Part 1 – The Disciple’s Prayer

Luke 11:1-4

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ February 26, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹He 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.” ²He 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.” (Luke 11:1-4, NRSV)

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You may recall that last year the leadership of our congregation set out a vision of some specific ways we believe God is calling us as a congregation to move and grow. One of those visions focused on dependent prayer. We have recognized that in the New Testament there is always a connection between Kingdom mission and dependent prayer. In other words, the task before us as a church is much too great to accomplish on our own. This means if our church has any hope of being used by God in this world in ways that make an eternal impact in the Kingdom, we must learn to pray with the sort of desperate dependency which recognizes that unless God intercedes we will merely be playing church.

Church historian Richard Lovelace writes, “If ordinary church members in Western Christendom were to intercede daily simply for the most obvious spiritual concerns visible in their homes, their workplaces, their local churches and denominations, their nations, and the world and the total mission of the body of Christ within it, the transformation which would result would be incalculable.”¹ This vision for dependent prayer ought to captivate us. We are praying that it will.

This is the reason for this six-week sermon series on prayer which begins this morning. You see, dependent prayer can’t just be the task of our leaders but something taken up by us all. So over the course of this series we will explore some of the most foundational teachings on prayer that we find in scripture. We begin this morning with the most foundational of all, the Lord’s Prayer. Before we look at the prayer itself, however, let me offer a few general reflections.

First, let me confess that I approach this task of preaching about prayer with some level of trepidation. Haddon Robinson is one of the greatest preachers of our generation. Before a sermon on prayer he once prayed aloud this prayer, “Lord, if these people knew about me what you know about me, they wouldn’t listen to a word I’m about to say.” I can relate. Henri Nouwen was a Catholic priest whose writings impacted the lives of millions. His books have been deeply influential in my life. Not long before his death he once wrote this about his prayer life, “After sixty-three years of life, and thirty-eight years of priesthood, my prayers seem as dead as a rock.”

My point is this – the discipline of prayer is not easy. We *all* struggle with it. It’s been something I’ve wrestled with constantly for fifty years of life and 21 years of pastoral ministry. Still, it is so essential that we learn to pray that we must remain in the struggle so that perhaps, by God’s grace, we can learn to pray in the ways Jesus teaches us to pray. Along with you, I stand to learn a great deal from Christ in this central area of the Christian life.

And that leads to the next point. Prayer is, in fact, something we learn. One day Jesus’ disciples see Jesus praying and ask him to teach them how to pray. In response, notice that he does not say to them, “You don’t need to *learn* how to pray. Just do what comes natural. That will be enough.” I’ll tell you what comes natural for me when it comes to

¹ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Intervarsity, 1979), 160.

prayer: praying only for myself and my desires alone, and praying with timidity rather than boldness, and often not even praying at all. That's what comes naturally. No, Jesus makes clear here that prayer is a learned and practiced discipline. In some ways, it's a discipline that takes a lifetime to learn.

The Lord's Prayer, as we'll see spelled out in a moment, also teaches us that prayer is not formulaic. These words Jesus gives his disciples are not secret words which must be said in this exact way to illicit a response from God, like magic words said as you rub the enchanted lamp to get the genie to emerge and give you three wishes. I don't know about you, but when I pray the Lord's Prayer like that, simply reciting the words in rote fashion, it's hard for me to even pay attention to what it is I'm praying.

I've actually come to believe that it wasn't Jesus' *primary* intention for us to pray the Lord's Prayer as we usually pray it, in twenty seconds all in one breath without straying from any of the words in the script. There's nothing wrong with praying the Lord's Prayer like that, of course, I just don't think Jesus' *primary* intention was to give us a script for prayer but rather to give us an *agenda* for prayer, and perhaps an order for that agenda.² Writer Ben Patterson encourages us to think about the Lord's Prayer like a Christmas tree. Each phrase in the prayer is a bare branch inviting us to decorate it as we go along.³ "Give us each day our daily bread" is the branch. Now decorate it. Before you move on in the prayer, get specific about the kinds of "daily bread" you and others need from God today. In a moment, as we walk through the prayer, branch by branch, I'll flesh this out for you some more.

This prayer is traditionally called *The Lord's Prayer* because the Lord is the one who gave it to us. But I think it could also be called *The Disciples Prayer* because the prayer is gift to all those who are seeking to follow Jesus through life on this kingdom-journey. In it we find a complete list of all the things Jesus wants us to include in our prayers along the way. Nothing is left out so we shouldn't leave anything out.

One thing this means is that when we pray *The Lord's Prayer*, either word-for-word or like decorating a Christmas tree, we can be confident that we are praying according to God's will because it is God himself who told us to pray like this. And that's a good thing because as I John 5:14-15 declares, **"This is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him."** Think about what this means. If we pray according to God's will we can be assured that our prayers will be answered in the affirmative. His timing, of course, may be different than our timing, but eventually God will do whatever it is we ask God to do when we pray according to His will.

This shouldn't be that hard to understand. My own children make countless requests of me. Now if they would just learn to ask from me only things which are according to my will then everything would go smoothly! Imagine my children asking, "Dad, would it be okay if we all got right to work on our homework this afternoon before we do all the other things we'd rather be doing?" Or, "Dad, would it be okay if we all got along with each other on this long car ride today?" Or, on a more serious note, "Dad, I'm not feeling well. Can I have some medicine?" Or, "My shoes have holes in the bottom; can we go buy some new shoes?" In these instances it is easy for me to give my children what they ask for because they are asking for things that align with my will for them. It's no different with God when we learn to pray according to his will, as The Lord's Prayer teaches us to do.

But even when my children ask for things which aren't according to my will and receive "No" or "Not now" as an answer from me, it's still good that they ask because even in those instances they learn a little more about my will for their lives. Same with God. In fact, I would have you consider that in prayer God is usually not the one being changed. It's not that the mind of God cannot be changed by our prayers. I think that it can and there are instances in scripture when it clearly is. Still, prayer primarily changes *us*. As we pray God uses our prayers to help us learn his heart, his will, his purposes, so that we might be better shaped for this life of discipleship. It's good if we approach prayer this way, humble enough to realize that as we pray it's likely that we are the ones who are about to be transformed.

² Again, there is nothing wrong with rote prayers. I like what writer Eugene Peterson says on this matter: "There is a prevailing bias among many American Christians against rote prayers, repeated prayers, 'book' prayers—even when they are lifted directly from the 'Jesus book'. This is a mistake. Spontaneity offers one kind of pleasure and taste of sanctity, repetitions another, equally pleasurable and holy. We don't have to choose between them. We must not choose between them. They are the polarities of prayer."

³ Ben Patterson, "Schooled by the Psalms", *Christianity Today* (October, 2008). Read this excellent article at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/october/34.87.html>



With all this in mind, let's turn now to the Lord's Prayer itself, looking at each bare branch one at a time and asking how we might decorate each of those branches. The prayer, at least in Luke's version, begins with these words: **Father, hallowed be your name.**

Right off the bat we see that the wording here is different than we are used to. Most of us are more familiar with the version Matthew records in chapter 6 of his Gospel.⁴ A main difference we see right away is that Luke leaves off the "Our" at the beginning of the prayer. Even so, let me use this as an opportunity to point out that every pronoun in both versions of the Lord's Prayer is plural. It's not "my" Father, or "my" daily bread, or "my" sins alone which need to be forgiven.

You see, the prayer itself reminds us that the life of Christian discipleship is never a solo journey. It's always lived out in the community of the church, this family which God has created, and this ought to be reflected in our prayers. Prayer isn't just about my relationship with Jesus, my sin, my needs, my salvation. Even when we are physically alone as we pray, we are still spiritually connected to one another, and so even when you pray alone don't leave others out of the conversation. Remember your brothers and sisters before God in prayer, their indebtedness as well as yours, along with their needs, their salvation, their protection as well.

We're so familiar with the language here that it may not shock us that Jesus teaches us to address God as "Father". But for the Jews in that day who first heard Jesus' prayer, it was a shock. Remember, they believed that God was so transcendent that it was improper to even speak the name of God. And yet here Jesus teaches us not only to address God but to address him as Father, a familial term of intimacy. In other places, in fact, Jesus uses another word that's most accurately translated "Daddy". As somebody once said, "It's the kind of word you can say even if you don't have any teeth, the kind of word for infants and the helpless."⁵ But this is who God is to us, and who we are to God, his children. That is a radical truth Jesus is teaching us in this prayer. As I John 3:1 declares, **"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are."**

Of course, I know there are challenges here. For one, not all of us have had human fathers who have treated us well. And all of us have human fathers who are less than perfect. Therefore, even those of us with kind and loving earthly fathers have to use our imagination to some extent to imagine that God is a Father who has all the best qualities of our earthly fathers, magnified a thousand times over, and none of their bad qualities. Furthermore, though Jesus teaches us to address God as Father we know that God is not confined by gender. In fact, God is spirit and no title or name, including any of the male or female imagery used in scripture to describe God, can fully capture God's divine nature.

With all this in mind, however, let us not miss Jesus' main point here that when we address God we are to do so mindful that our core identity is that of sons and daughters. We are crawling up into the lap of one who loves us unconditionally and wants only the best for us. Commentator Dale Bruner puts it like this, "In the simple words 'Our Father' is the joy of the whole gospel. We will never be able to calculate the honor that has been done to us by being allowed to say, 'Our Father.'"⁶

All this is counterbalanced, however, by the next phrase, **"Hallowed [or, "holy"] be your name."** While Jesus reminds us here that there is deep and loving intimacy between us and God, he also reminds us this is no casual relationship. God is our Father, yes, but he is our Father *who art in heaven*, and whose name should be hallowed. This isn't the "big man upstairs". God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. With just a word from God's mouth, all of creation sprung into existence. At the sound of God's voice the mountains tremble and fall into the sea. God is all powerful, all knowing, ever-present. Some day every knee will bow before God's throne. There is a reason why the 3rd Commandment instructs us to never take God's name in vain. God is our Father, but our Father who is worthy of our worship.

All this is to say that Jesus is teaching us here that our prayers should begin focused on God rather than focused on ourselves, or even on our world. Praise is always the best place to begin in prayer, as it is in worship, praise for a God

⁴ Matthew 6:9-13

⁵ Source unknown.

⁶ Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 1 (Eerdmans, 2004), 295.

who is so close to us in his love that we are made his very own children, but also praise for a God who is so far above us that we can never even comprehend his nature. Before we move on in the Lord's Prayer it's good to stop and decorate this branch, to spend time praising God in specific ways, not only for what he has done but even simply for who he is.

"Your kingdom come." That's where Jesus leads us next in prayer.

What is Jesus teaching us to pray here? Think about it this way. When you have the audience and the focused attention of somebody who is in a position of great influence, whether it's an elected official, or the CEO of the company which employs you, or even a person with considerable financial wealth, you have been given a great opportunity. This is your chance to ask that person to act in ways that will benefit the city, or the company, or some other group which is in need. In prayer we have a similar opportunity, to petition the very God of creation to act in ways that set things right in our world. You see, things are right in God's Kingdom. They are not right in much of our world. Yet we know it is God's will to bring his kingdom to earth, to flood all creation with his rule and his reign. Jesus told us over and over that it was. And so Jesus urges us here to go before God and boldly ask that he would do so and do so quickly.

So how do we decorate this branch of the prayer? There are countless ways. Consider all the ways that things in this world are not playing out according to God's will. Relationships are broken. People are shackled by addiction. Violence permeates society. People are dying because they have no food to eat or clean water to drink. Leaders are abusing power. Racism divides and even kills. Neighbors hate each other. The list goes on.

When you come to this part of the prayer, I'd encourage you to pause and be specific with how you long to see things set right in this world. Begin locally and then eventually move globally. Pray first about the brokenness and injustice you see in your own heart and life, in your family and neighborhood. Then move to pray for our city and our nation. Finally pray for those you will likely never meet in parts of the world where people are crying out for kingdom justice. Pray boldly. Pray for the kingdom to break through in miraculous ways. And as you pray be prepared that God, who wants all these things far more than you want them, is likely about to enlist you to join him in bringing the kingdom to earth.

"Give us each day our daily bread." In this prayer we are called to recognize that everything we have and need comes from God, even, literally, the bread on our dinner tables. This prayer forces us never to forget our utter dependence on God for everything, not just bread but all things material and otherwise which nourish us body, mind and spirit. God, our Father and Ruler over all things, is able to give us what we need and so we, God's children, ought to ask boldly for those needs to be fulfilled.

As you pause to decorate this branch, remember two things. First, pray not only for *your* daily bread but for the needs of others as well. Second, pray only for *daily* bread, not for bread to last a lifetime. Proverbs 30:8-9 phrases such a prayer this way, **"Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need, or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, 'Who is the Lord?'**" or **I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God."** We need enough for the day, and that will be plenty. If we get too much, more than we need, we will be tempted to think it is the abundance of our bread which is our security rather than the One who provides the bread.

Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. We pray this prayer so often that we forget how bold a prayer this is. If you owe somebody an enormous sum of money it takes tremendous boldness to ask that person to simply forgive the debt outright. The most we usually ask for is extra time to pay it back. Because of our sins owe God a debt we can never begin to pay and yet Jesus teaches us to come before God and ask him to completely absorb the debt himself. It is only the person who knows that there is no other way forward that prays this desperate prayer.

In the end, however, I believe this prayer is more of a reminder than a catalyst. In other words, I believe God has already forgiven us before we ask for forgiveness. Our humble penance before God doesn't soften God's heart. He loves us and died for us, in fact, while we were still his enemies.⁷ What our confession does then is acknowledge our need for God's grace and, in doing so, make us ready to receive it. This is us, not God, being changed in prayer, changed so much that the grace we receive leads us to extend it on to others.

⁷ Romans 5:8 declares, **"But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."**

You see, praying for God to forgive us and for God to help us forgive others is one prayer. These two are always connected, almost in the same breath, for as St. John Chrysostom, an early church father, once put it, “To ask forgiveness from God as a great benefit, and [then] to deny the same to others, is to mock God.” I love the way The Message translates this part of the prayer, **“Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.”** But forgiving others is not easy, even when we know we’ve been forgiven. We need God’s help with this. And sometimes the road to forgiving others begins in prayer. Perhaps we simply don’t have it in us to forgive somebody and so all we can do is pray that God would help get us to that point. We then decorate this branch of the prayer when we pause here and get specific about our sin before God and also specific about the people we need help in forgiving.

Finally, **“And do not bring us to the time of trial.”** If nothing else, this last part of the Lord’s Prayer reminds us that the disciple of Jesus is traveling on a road that will not be easy. At one point Jesus promised his disciples, **“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”**⁸ In Matthew’s expanded version of the prayer we see that this trouble comes from two places. There, Jesus teaches us to pray, **“Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.”** Sometimes the trouble comes from within as we are tempted to trust in ourselves or in something else other than Jesus and his ways. Other times the trouble comes from without as there is a presence of evil in this world which is working overtime to separate us from God and God’s purposes.

Either way, this part of the prayer helps us remember that we cannot stand against either attack on our own. We need God’s protection from not only the devil but also from ourselves. We should ask for it boldly, confident that because Christ has already overcome the world he can certainly overcome anything in the world that stands against us.



There is, of course, so much more that could be said about this prayer which is such a gift to us. Let me say again that I believe the Lord’s Prayer is given to us to *teach us* how to pray. Praying these words straight through is one way to pray this prayer. Nothing wrong with that. But we begin to plumb the depths of this prayer when we slow down and let each line serve as bare branch ready to be decorated. It is no accident that the Lord’s Prayer begins with the worship of God. We ought to stay there in our prayers before moving on too quickly. Then the prayer moves us to ask for God’s will to be done on this world, for his kingdom to come. It’s only after we have spent time being specific about ways we want to see that happen should we then turn our attention in prayer to the immediate personal concerns of provision, forgiveness and spiritual deliverance. Even with these, however, take time to decorate each branch as the Spirit leads you to do so.

Now, if we only talk about praying the Lord’s Prayer in this way it will be of little benefit to us or to anybody else. The benefit comes when we begin to practice what we are learning. So here’s what I want you to do. I have provided an insert in your bulletin I want you will take home today and use as a guide this week to pray the Lord’s Prayer in the way we’ve talked about praying it this morning. Along with me, would you take some time each day this week to try this? Instead of praying it all through in one breath, take a few minutes and decorate each branch as the guide will lead you to do. See where the Spirit leads you in this. You may be surprised at how this practice expands and enlarges your time of prayer.

Lent, by the way, is the perfect time for this, this season of the year when Christians have traditionally sought to deepen their focus and commitment to Christ. Again, I truly believe that dependent prayer is a practice we must learn as a community if we have any hope of seeing God work in and through us in ways which make an eternal impact in the Kingdom. The Lord’s Prayer, or the Disciples Prayer as it might be called, is probably the best place for us to begin, for it is the way the Lord himself taught his disciples to pray.

Amen.



⁸ John 16:33

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the text again from Luke 11:1-4. What is the first thing that stands out to you here?
2. What does the Lord's Prayer mean to you? When you pray the Lord's Prayer, how do you usually pray it?
3. Do you think the order of the prayer is important? If so, what does the order teach us about how we ought to pray?
4. What is your favorite part of the Lord's Prayer? And what is your least favorite part? What does this teach you?
5. Do you agree that prayer is a discipline that must be learned and practiced? Or do you think prayer is something we are just supposed to do naturally, like breathing?
6. Take a moment to go through the prayer line by line (branch by branch) and imagine how you might decorate each branch. What are the sorts of things each line might specifically prompt you to pray about?
7. What is one way your understanding of the Lord's Prayer has changed after this message?
8. What do you think of the declaration made by church historian Richard Lovelace, "If ordinary church members in Western Christendom were to intercede daily simply for the most obvious spiritual concerns visible in their homes, their workplaces, their local churches and denominations, their nations, and the world and the total mission of the body of Christ within it, the transformation which would result would be incalculable."



Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Go through the Lord's Prayer together as a family and see if you can put each line in your own words.