

Teach Us to Pray

Luke 11:1-13, Colossians 2:6-19, Psalm 85

July 25, 2004

Are you like me? Do you really want to learn to pray, or to have a more vital prayer life? Have you ever become discouraged because something you really prayed for wasn't given to you? Then you can understand some of the reasons the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray.

But there was another reason, too. Someone has pointed out that they didn't ask Jesus to teach them because he'd just given a great sermon on prayer. They didn't ask because he'd just given an inspiring lecture on the subject. They asked because he had just been praying, and because he was a person of prayer. He was their mentor, their example. They saw what a difference prayer made in his life.

Harry Emerson Fosdick in his book *The Secret of Victorious Living*, said

Note that this awakened interest in prayer came not at all from new arguments about it, but from a new exhibition of its power. Here, before their very eyes, they saw a personality in whom prayer was vital and influential! The more they lived with him, the more they saw that they could never explain him or understand him unless they understood his praying and so not at all because of new arguments, but because of amazing spiritual power released in him by prayer. They wanted him to tell them how to pray.

A preacher could give a whole series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer. Many preachers have. You may have heard some of them. You probably have your own insights about this special prayer. So what we think about this morning will be just a addition to the thinking that you have done and will

do about the Lord's Prayer.

We notice that the prayer as it appears in Luke is different, shorter than the one we usually pray, which comes from Matthew. Perhaps the writers received the prayer from two different traditions, perhaps Matthew added some explanatory phrases. In any case, the prayers are amazingly similar. Certainly Luke's version gives us plenty to ponder.

Notice first of all that the first part of the prayer focuses on God. As the mother said to her disrespectful son. "Boy, remember who you're talking to!" We need to remember, to be aware of, whom we're addressing, to take time to center our hearts and our thoughts on God. And the actual word we begin with is "Father." We are so used to addressing God this way that we don't realize how unusual it was. The Jewish People revered God--they were in awe of God. God was transcendent--far above them or their thoughts. They didn't even speak the name of God. Whenever they encountered God's name in their scriptures, they substituted another word, like "Lord." In all of the Hebrew Scriptures, in the hundreds of times God is addressed or spoken of, the word "Father" is used about 5 times. The word Father doesn't refer to the gender of God--God is beyond gender--it points rather to the intimate relationship between us and God. In Aramaic, the language Jesus probably used, the word is "Abba," which is better translated "Daddy" than father. Think of it--the great God of the universe, being addressed by us as Abba, Daddy.

There is a famous photograph of President Kennedy standing in the Oval Office as his little boy, John-John, crawls under the desk. Many, many great people -- powerful people -- rich people --were vying to see the president in the Oval Office. But this little boy, the president's son, enjoyed

the easiest entree of all. In that photograph, there was great pleasure in the father's face as he watched his son at play.

We have that kind of access to God. Our Father, our Daddy, invites us into his presence, wants us close, takes great pleasure in our company.

Since our focus is to be on God, the first three petitions are about God and God's kingdom. First we pray, "Hallowed be Thy name;" in other words, "God, let your name be honored, be held apart and sacred." Names are important. We've already seen how important, how sacred, God's name was and is to the Jewish people. It wasn't so long ago that parents would tell their children "Don't do anything to dishonor the family name." In praying that God's name be hallowed, we're not only asking God spread over the earth the knowledge of God's name, we're also pledging that as a part of God's family we'll try to bring honor, rather than dishonor to the family name. Similarly, when we pray that God's kingdom come, we're not only praying for God to bring in the kingdom, we're also committing ourselves, as citizens of that realm, to seek it and to do all we can to bring it more fully into being. It reminds me of the hymn we love, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." We could sing, "let your kingdom come on earth and let it begin with me."

This morning we watched Lance Armstrong ride to his sixth Tour de France championship. When we pray for God's kingdom to come, we should be pledging ourselves to work as hard for God's realm to come as those other Postal Service riders worked for Lance Armstrong. And what kind of kingdom are we working for? A kingdom where "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, where righteousness and peace will kiss each other."

It's only after these petitions about God and God's realm that we turn to petitions about ourselves. That's important, I think, because focusing on God first gets us centered, helps us remember who we are and whose we are. Then we can go on. When the writer of Colossians talks about our being "In Christ", he's talking about this same centeredness.

"Give us this day our daily bread." Notice first of all that all of the subsequent petitions say "us". Not "I", but us. Whether we pray this prayer alone or among fellow Christians, we pray for the whole community. I once heard a wonderful sermon, based on the Lord's Prayer as it appears in Matthew, that was about just the first word of the prayer, "Our" We are brothers and sisters, we pray for each other, we care for each other. Actually, that's part of what brings God's kingdom to earth. Did you ever see the musical "Oliver?" In the musical the little band of pickpockets sing to Oliver. "Consider yourself at home, consider yourself part of the family... It goes on to say, We haven't a lot to spare who cares, whatever we have we'll share." We're in this together and so we pray, give us, forgive us, lead us.

And we ask, not for a retirement plan, not to win the lottery, but for our daily bread, in other words, for our daily needs. Like the Israelites in the desert, who received from God just the manna they needed for each day, we depend on God, we ask God, to give us what we need day by day. It seems to me that, contained in this prayer is the wisdom that we can enjoy and appreciate what we receive each day only if pay attention to the day, not worrying and fretting about tomorrow. Perhaps we will remember that everything we need comes from God, if we receive it daily from God's hand.

"Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive those who are indebted to us." Jesus sees a connection between being forgiven and being forgiving.

Someone has said, whichever way the forgiveness is flowing, it uses the same channel. It may be that, if we are unable to forgive, we are unable to accept forgiveness. In the Book *Les Misérables*, the policeman Javert could never forgive the former prisoner Jean Valjean. When the time came that Javert was himself captured and condemned and Jean Valjean offered to forgive him, Javert could not abide the idea of being forgiven by this man he hated; he chose suicide, rather than forgiveness.

In the novel "The Great Hunger," a newcomer buys a farm near a little village. He refuses offers of friendship with his neighbors and puts out no trespassing signs. One day a little child crawls underneath his fence to pet his dog. The vicious creature leaps on her and kills her. The whole community turns against the man. When he comes to town no one will speak to him. Clerks refuse to wait on him. Spring comes and no one will sell him seed. Finally, the father of the girl who was killed comes to his farm and sows his field. This act of kindness is too much for the newcomer. "Why you of all people?" he asks. The father responds: "To keep God alive in my heart."

The experience of forgiveness is basic to our spiritual health. How do we forgive the unforgivable? By remembering that God forgives us for our sins against God.

"And do not bring us to the time of trial" To me this translation makes more sense than the words, "Lead not us into temptation." I do not believe that God tempts us, but God has been known to test people. God tested Abraham. God tested the Israelites in the wilderness. In this petition we're underscoring our relationship to God; we asking God to protect us from anything that would threaten that relationship. I have a friend who is a

recovering alcoholic. He knows that taking one drink would just lead to another and another, so he is committed to abstinence. His wife, knowing of his condition, doesn't drink either. In order to support him, in order not to test him, she abstains as well. Now this may be a small gesture, or it may be a profoundly helpful one. I don't know. But I think the wife is doing in a small way, for her husband, what we are asking God to do in a big way for us.

But this model Jesus gave us is just that--a model. It shows us that when we come to God we come aware of our desperate need for God. Our prayer is not effective because we have found the right words, but because God loves us and wants to give us what we need. It's been said that, where we bring our need to God's love in faith, that is prayer. In prayer we bring our need to God's love in faith.

That insightful Christian writer George MacDonald has said:

We find it hard to get what we want because we do not know what is best. God finds it hard to give, because God would give the best and we will not take it.

The good news is that if we turn to God in faith, trusting God's love, God will teach us to pray.