

***What to Pray For, How to Pray***  
***Luke 11:1-13***

Georgetown Presbyterian Church  
 Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins  
 Sunday, July 25, 2010

One day, Joe, Bob and Dave were hiking in a wilderness area when they came upon a large, raging, violent river. They needed to get to the other side, but had no idea of how to do so.

Joe prayed to God, saying, "Please God, give me the strength to cross this river." Poof! God gave him Joe big, muscular arms and strong legs, and he was able to swim across the river in about two hours, although he struggled and got roughed up a bit by the roaring current.

Seeing how Joe fared, Dave prayed to God, saying, "Please God, give me the strength and the tools to cross this river." Poof! God gave Dave a rowboat and he was able to row across the river in about an hour, after almost capsizing the boat a couple of times.

Bob had seen how this worked out for the other two, so he also prayed to God saying, "Please God, give me the strength and the tools, and the intelligence, to cross this river." Poof! God turned Bob into a woman. She looked at the map, hiked upstream a couple of hundred yards, and walked across the bridge.

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When you pray, what do you pray for? How do you pray?

In this morning's lesson from the gospel according to Luke, Jesus was praying, and his disciples came up to him and asked that he would teach them to pray. They had been with Jesus for nearly three years at this point, and on many occasions they had seen Jesus pray. Luke has recorded Jesus praying at pivotal moments in Jesus' ministry: when Jesus was baptized and he began his public ministry, he went off to pray; before Jesus called his disciples, he went aside for a night of prayer; before the Transfiguration, Jesus prayed; after the disciples returned from a successful missionary journey, Jesus prayed a prayer of praise and thanksgiving to God.<sup>1</sup>

Luke will record other moments of prayer, as well: like Jesus giving thanks when he gathered at the table for his last supper with his disciples; or when agonized before God in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father, if you are willing, take this come from me; yet not my will, but yours be done"<sup>2</sup>; or the words prayed from the cross, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing"<sup>3</sup>, and "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."<sup>4</sup>

The disciples have seen, and will continue to see, that prayer was a vital part of Jesus' ministry, and so they wanted to be taught in the Jesus school of prayer. "Lord, teach us to pray."

Jesus answered the question from three different angles. First, he gave the basic content of prayer—what should we pray for? Second, he gave an example of the manner by which we ought to pray.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 3:21; 6:12; 9:28; 10:21

<sup>2</sup> Luke 22:42

<sup>3</sup> Luke 23:34

<sup>4</sup> Luke 23:46

And third, Jesus gave us an assurance of what we can expect as God answers our prayers.

First, Jesus provided the basic content of our prayer. When you pray, this is what you should pray for. And the content of the prayer Jesus taught the disciples is what we know as the Lord's Prayer. The version we find in Luke's gospel is a condensed version of the prayer we pray every Sunday in worship; the prayer we pray is based on Jesus' teaching on prayer found in the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel according to Matthew. But we do find the same basic elements in this morning's text: we find petitions that seek the glory of God's name, the coming of God's kingdom, the provision of our daily needs, the forgiveness of sins, and protection in times of trial.

It is a model for what we should pray. We should pray first and foremost for the hallowing of God's name—for the exalting and glory of the name of God. The Westminster Catechism begins with the affirmation that the chief end of man (that is to say, the primary purpose of human life), is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. When we pray, we should direct our hearts toward the glory of God. No matter what else is on our hearts and minds, first and foremost should be the glory of God, for seeking the glory of God will inform everything we say and do and even think.

Thy kingdom come... When we pray, we should pray that God's kingdom would be manifested in our world. We should ask for God's peace, and grace, and justice, and righteousness, and steadfast love to be known in the world. The truth is, the kingdom of God has come. God is sovereign. God already rules heaven and earth. The problem is, not everyone acknowledges God's rule, and not everyone lives obediently to God's rule in their own lives. When we pray, "Thy kingdom come," we are praying for a turning of our hearts and the hearts of all people toward God, to submit to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and to walk in obedience. When we pray, "Thy kingdom come," we are praying that the whole world will love the Lord their God with all their being, and will love their neighbor as themselves.

It is important to note that in telling us what to pray, Jesus taught us the proper priority of our petitions. Only after we have sought the glory and will of God should we turn our attention to ourselves. We are instructed to pray for our basic needs—that which we need for today; give us this day our daily bread. Prayer helps us understand that it is God in whom we live and move and have our being—it is God upon whom we depend for our existence each day. Each day is a gift, a new opportunity to trust in God's provision and to seek God's care.

It is also critical that we pray for reconciliation—both between us and God, and between fellow humans. "Forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone who is indebted to us."<sup>5</sup> If we are to live in relationship, we need to be forgiven, and we need to forgive. Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, notes that "no more ignorant words were spoken than 'love means never having to say you're sorry.' Love means precisely the opposite: the willingness to admit where one is wrong and has wronged another and, at the same time, the willingness to forgive the wrongs others have done to us. This is the only way... human community can be sustained."<sup>6</sup>

And we pray for strength in our struggles against sin and evil in our world. "Lead us not into temptation." It is a prayer, not so much that we will be spared from the troubles that are a part of life, but that we will not be tempted to give up on God, that our trials will not lead us away from our faith in God.

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 11:4

<sup>6</sup> Cynthia Campbell, "Pray Like This," July 29, 2007, [www.fourthchurch.org](http://www.fourthchurch.org)

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, the first thing Jesus taught was what we should pray for—for the glory of God, for God to rule not only in heaven, but on earth as well, in your heart as well as mine; and that God would provide for our needs, renew our relationships and strengthen our fellowship, and keep our faith strong.

The second thing Jesus taught was the manner by which we should pray. That is to say, he not only taught us what to pray for, but also how persistently we are to pray. He told a strange story which could be misconstrued to make us believe that God will answer us just to make us stop pestering him, but nothing could be farther from the point. His disciples and Luke's original audience would've understood that in the day of Jesus such an attitude as that of the man who helped his neighbor just to make him go away would be absolutely unthinkable. Showing hospitality to the stranger was a matter of survival in those days, and the reputation of the whole village was at stake, and so it was inconceivable for Jesus' audience that the man would not have gotten up and helped his neighbor. Rather, the focus of the teaching is that Jesus urges the same persistence as the neighbor who is seeking help for the stranger. With that same sense of urgency, we are to present our requests to God.

Ask, seek, knock. Don't give up. Keep on asking. Keep on seeking. Keep on knocking. That's the persistence by which we are to pray.

And Jesus promised this: Everyone who asks, receives; whoever seeks, finds; whoever knocks, the door will be opened. It is a promise that God will answer your prayers. I know that creates problems for some, because some will say, "I have asked God for such and such, and I never got it." But prayer isn't like that. It's not a magic formula to get whatever we want. It's not a list we present to Santa Clause, or a genie in a magic lamp.

God will answer our prayers, but according to God's wisdom and love for us. A good parent won't give their child something to harm them; neither should we expect that God will grant us anything that doesn't have our best interest at heart. God will answer our prayers, not by giving us whatever we ask for, but by giving us himself. God grants us the gift of the Holy Spirit. God promises to be with us, to remain at our side, to accompany us and guide us along the journey of life. God promises never to leave us nor forsake us. God gives us the Holy Spirit, God gives us what we need for strength and for growth.

And in the end, isn't that what prayer is all about—about drawing us into God's presence?

Many of you are experienced boaters. You know that when you set your anchor on a rock and pull on the rope, the distance between you and the rock will decrease. The perception may be that you are pulling the rock closer to your boat. But the reality is that you are pulling yourself closer to the rock.

Prayer is like that. When we pray, we might think that we are pulling God closer to us. In reality, we are the ones who are being pulled—toward God.

Lord, teach us to pray; draw us toward God. Amen.