

SERMON TITLE: "Teach Us to Pray"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 11:1-13
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: Sept. 1, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

All through this month of September, we're going to focus on the theme of prayer. In children's Sunday School, which begins next week, the kids will use a variety of methods—like story-telling, games, drama, science, crafts, spiritual practices, and cooking—to learn The Lord's Prayer. Here in the worship services, we'll read and learn from a variety of biblical prayers.

Maybe you've heard the story about the friends who were engaging in a little friendly competition about their knowledge of the church, the Bible, and Christian faith when Sam said to Fred,

"Why, I'll bet you ten dollars you can't even recite the Lord's Prayer."

Fred replied, "It's a bet." Then he prayed, "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep."

Sam responded, "OK. Here's your ten dollars. I didn't think you could do it."¹

As this joke shows, many people have a lot to learn about prayer. In Luke 11:1, that's what the disciples were thinking too, when one of them said to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray."

1—WHAT SHOULD WE SAY?

You get the idea that Jesus was glad for this request, as he immediately launched into his lesson on what the disciples should say in prayer. While Jesus could have begun with candles and incense or prayer postures and attire, instead he began with these words we now recognize as "The Lord's Prayer."

The Lord's Prayer comes in several different forms. The Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew is different from this one here in the Gospel of Luke. United Methodists say, "Forgive us our trespasses," Presbyterians say, "Forgive us our debts," and Roman Catholics have more words at the end of the prayer. These versions of The Lord's Prayer are all similar enough, however, that the basic elements of praise, respect for God's will, petitions for basic human needs, confession of sin, desire for forgiveness, and yearning for spiritual strength are all the same.

We can't know that Jesus intended for his disciples to memorize these words and repeat them for 2000 years. But memorized prayers can really comfort and help us. Some families have a standardized prayer they speak or sing as grace before meals. Persons who attend AA meetings learn another set of words: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Those words form a powerful prayer for someone who struggles with alcoholism or other addiction.

Memorized prayers give us a starting place of ideas and themes upon which we can expand. Other prayers are based on acronyms. For example, you can pray an A.C.T.S. prayer, like the Book of Acts in the Bible. With an ACTS prayer, you begin with Adoration. Then you offer Confession for your sins. Next you tell God, "Thanks" for your many blessings. Then you end up with Supplication, which is a fancy word for requests. If you can remember A-C-T-S, you can put together a prayer on the spur of the moment. Begin with adoration or praise. Then confess and repent of your sins. Say, "Thank you," to God. Then, in supplication, ask God for whatever is on your heart.

Another, even simpler prayer method, which I have used a lot with youth groups, is to just have them go around a circle and each person say two things: 1) "Thank you, God, for something, and 2) please, God, help me (or another person) with something."

Of course, there are also times when we know we're going to lead prayers in worship or at the start of a class or a meeting, and we can carefully and thoughtfully write out those prayers in advance, or look up a prayer in a book or on the internet. It's important to remember, though, that God doesn't expect us to fill our prayers with flowery speech. God just wants to hear what's on our hearts and minds. Prayer is simply conversation with God, and, ideally, prayer conversation with God should come as naturally to us as speaking with a close friend.

If we're struggling to put our thoughts into words, however, God understands and hears us anyway. Romans 8:26 says that, when we don't know how to pray as we ought, the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf. And sometimes it's actually good just to be quiet and listen for God to speak

to us. If we think of prayer as a conversation, we really ought to stop talking sometimes and let God get a word in edgewise. Sometimes God has something to say to us too.

2—WHEN IS THE RIGHT TIME TO PRAY?

After Jesus instructed his disciples what they should say, then he moved on to tell them a hypothetical story of going to a friend's house at midnight to ask for bread. This was Jesus' way of addressing a second question about prayer: "When is the right time to pray?"

This same question must have been on the mind of the preacher who spoke with a young boy:

"Do you say your prayers at night, little boy?" inquired the preacher.

"Yes, sir," answered the [boy].

"And do you always say them in the morning, too?"

"No, sir," responded the [boy]. "I ain't scared in the daytime."²

One of our most basic human instincts is to pray when we're afraid or in a crisis. Almost everyone appreciates prayer when they're in the hospital or when a tragedy has just occurred. The saying, "There are no atheists in foxholes," comes from the fact that many a prayer has been spoken in a desperate moment. The question for Christians is, "Do we pray at other times too?"

Jesus' words about *daily bread* seem to imply a *daily* prayer routine, and Jesus' story about getting bread from a friend at *midnight* indicates that we shouldn't hesitate to pray *any* time we have a need. In fact, another place in the Bible suggests we should "pray without ceasing."³ There are times when we should pray in such a way that our prayers are clear and distinct and we can easily identify our activity as prayer. But there are also times throughout the day and night when we whisper a sentence, or a thought passes through our brain, and that too can be considered prayer. For the Christian, prayer is an attitude and awareness of constantly being in the presence of God.

Usually, though, it's good to have some cues that help us remember to pray. First thing in the morning and last thing before sleep are sure times to say our daily prayers. Some people pray every time they hear a siren or every time they stop at a red light. I had a friend in college who had a little note attached to his car radio. As he reached for the radio knob, he would see his reminder, "Have you

talked to God yet today?” Some people put prayer cards above their kitchen sink or on their bathroom mirror to remind them to pray while doing the dishes or brushing their teeth. If you’re a regular Bible reader—which I hope you are—then you could, of course, have a prayer list in your Bible that reminds you to pray for certain people and situations. As you read the morning newspaper or watch the evening news on TV, you can say a prayer for persons who are suffering from various problems.

However you do it, the best time to pray is regularly, and whenever a need arises to your attention, and until you receive an answer. Jesus’ story wasn’t just about a friend asking for bread at the midnight hour. It was about asking again and again until a response was given.

3—WHAT KIND OF RESPONSE CAN WE EXPECT?

If we’re committed to pray until we get an answer, then the next logical question is “What kind of response can we expect?” Will we always receive when we ask? Will always find when we seek? Will the door always be opened when we knock? Like the friend in Jesus’ story, will God always come to our rescue with the bread we desire? As Jesus continued his instruction on prayer, his answer to this question was that God wants what is best for us. For sure, there are no snakes or scorpions in God’s answers to prayer! God wants to give us the good gifts that we need, all the way up to and including the Holy Spirit.

Just like a parent who does not give in to their child’s every request, God denies some of the things we wish for. God wants us to have what is best, not necessarily what we think we want. Consequently, sometimes we don’t get what we ask for. Sometimes, instead of “yes,” God says, “no.” Sometimes, instead of “now,” God says, “later.” Sometimes, instead of making our problems go away, God gives us the strength to cope with them. Sometimes, instead of making our lives simple and easy, God challenges us to grow smarter and more faithful.

The student who never cracks a book, but then prays just prior to an exam, isn’t likely to receive a high score. In contrast, the student who prays for help in understanding, who prays for discipline in

studying, and who prays for concentration while completing the test will probably see God's answer.

Prayer isn't a lazy way to fulfill dreams. Prayer is the desire of our heart,⁴ for which we must be willing to work alongside God. God doesn't always give us what we think we want, but God does give us the good we are willing and prepared to receive.

CONCLUSION

In the 1992 movie *Forever Young*, Mel Gibson plays a man who is very much in love. But, for some reason, he can't get the words out to tell his girlfriend how much he loves her. He practices his marriage proposal over and over again. But when it's time to pop the question, he gets tongue-tied and orders a piece of pie instead. As she gets up to leave the restaurant, he pulls her into a phone booth, but the important words elude him again.

Sometimes prayer is like that for us. We want to pray to God and say what's on our hearts and minds. Yet, it seems like we get all tongue-tied. We're afraid of saying something wrong and embarrassing ourselves. We aren't sure if this is the right time or if we have asked too many times already. We're afraid that our prayer won't be answered positively. We aren't sure we can trust in God.

It's natural for us to have a lot of questions about prayer. And that's why we're going to spend this whole month of September on this topic. In children's Sunday School and here in worship, I'll hope you'll plan to let Jesus and some other Bible characters teach us to pray.

¹Adapted from Hoover Rupert, ed., *Why Didn't Noah Swat Both Mosquitoes?* (Lima, OH: CSS Publ. Co., Inc, 1994), p. 20.

²Tal D. Bonham, *The Treasury of Clean Church Jokes* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1986), p. 95.

³1 Thessalonians 5:17.

⁴In his book, *The Meaning of Prayer* (1949), Harry Emerson Fosdick includes a chapter on "Prayer as Dominant Desire." The idea is that we must be sincere in what we pray for. If our prayer words don't match our heart's desire, then Fosdick believes our prayer (words) won't be answered. The prayers which will be answered are those which reflect our strongest desires.