

SERMON TITLE: "When You Pray"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 11:1-13
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 12, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Those of you who have attended our First United Methodist Church for a while know that Chris Green has played his cello for us several times over recent years. Chris is a fine musician, so when he offered to play for us again this summer, I was pleased. And when Chris told me that the title of the piece was "Prayer," it seemed natural to create a whole worship service around that theme. Prayer is something we Christians believe in and practice a lot even in normal times. Now, during this pandemic and all its ill-effects on our physical, emotional, and financial well-being, probably most of us have found ourselves praying even more. So let's take a look this morning at Luke 11, and see what Jesus said you should do when you pray.

1—YOU SHOULD HONOR GOD

According to the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, the first thing you should do when you pray is honor God. We begin this honoring of God by acknowledging our relationship with God. That's why the Lord's Prayer here in Luke begins with the familial word *Father*. The Lord's Prayer has some variations in the ancient biblical manuscripts, and some denominations say it a little differently than we United Methodists do. But the prayer always begins with *Father* or *Our Father*.

We honor and relate to God as we would respect a parent who is raising, nurturing, and loving his or her children. God is a divine parent who supplies the basic and material needs of our human existence, and God is the divine parent who corrects and guides us in the best possible way. When we say *our* Father, we honor God by indicating that we choose to be in this relationship, dependent upon and learning from God. When we claim God as our *Father*, we accept and relish in the fact that we are God's children, and we rejoice in our opportunity to grow and mature so that we can continue God's

legacy of benevolence. We claim the familial privilege and responsibility of representing God's name and God's love in our community and world. And so, when we pray, "Our Father," we are speaking accolades and praise for all the ways God provides for our human life.

We also honor God by hallowing God's name. We respect God's righteousness, and we proclaim with the angels, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty." We don't belittle God by taking God's name in vain or associating God with evil. Rather, we exalt God as the one who is able to lift us up out of the messiness of life and make our spirits soar on wings like an eagle. God turns our darkness into light and offers us salvation. God transforms sinners into saints. God shares the Holy Spirit with all who ask.

Another way we honor God in our prayers is by acknowledging God's rule over both heaven and earth. When we extol and serve God as the leader over such a kingdom, we acknowledge that God isn't only in relationship with me or you as individuals, but God is engaged in a relationship with all of us as a collective group and a human society. God cares not just for the wealthy, the smart, and the capable; but also for the poor, the homeless, and the disabled; and for everyone in between. In fact, God's kingdom also includes the natural world of animals, plants, water, and air. Thus, we honor God when the words of our prayers are matched by our personal and collective efforts to bring about God's just purposes not only in our own individual lives but also in our whole society and world. So--as we pray to God as our Father, the Holy One, and the Ruler of heaven and earth--we honor God.

2—YOU SHOULD PETITION GOD

A second thing you should do when you pray, said Jesus, is petition God. You should ask God to meet your needs. That's what Jesus meant when he taught his disciples to pray for their daily bread. I have read that, in Egyptian Arabic, the word for bread and the word for life are the same. Bread makes life possible, so bread becomes symbolic for life itself. When we ask God for our daily bread, we are in a sense asking God for every material thing we need for our physical life: our health, a home, an education, a job, and more.

This time of coronavirus has given us plenty of reasons to pray for these aspects of our material well-being. We heard that 867 new cases of coronavirus were diagnosed in Utah on Friday. That record-breaking number represents real people with families, neighbors, co-workers, and caregivers. The mounting death toll and diminishing hospital capacity rightfully causes us concern. Not only are people getting sick and dying, those who have lost jobs and businesses are naturally worried about economic fallout. Many people have felt the mental and emotional strains of social distancing and not being able to be close to friends and family. Teachers and families with children are worried about the implications for education. But God never meant for us to carry such burdens and stress alone. Jesus taught his disciples and us that we should petition God about these matters of health and life.

Because we are *spiritual* creatures as well as physical and social ones, we also need to pray for God's help with matters of the heart and soul. We should ask God to forgive our trespasses and sins. We should petition God for the spiritual strength to forgive others who sin against us. We should ask that God will steer us away from temptation and evil, so that we can follow the righteous path of God. We should pray that God would keep us focused on the spiritual ideals of faith, hope, love, joy, justice, and peace—instead of wallowing in self-centered pity and negativity. As children of our heavenly Father, as citizens of God's holy kingdom, we have every right to ask for what we and others need—be it material, social, or spiritual. Jesus has taught us that, when you pray, you should petition God.

3—YOU SHOULD TRUST GOD

OK, so far so good. But what if, when you pray in honor and petition to God, the result you desire doesn't come to pass? What if you or someone you love still suffers from a chronic health problem? What if you or someone you love can't seem to get or keep a job? What if you or someone you love is suffering from a broken heart, a lack of moral courage, or the grief of tragic death? What if the problems of our society continue? Then you need to keep in mind Jesus' third principle of prayer: When you pray, you should trust God.

As we read in Luke 11, Jesus taught more than just the words to the Lord's Prayer itself. Jesus also spoke in verses 5-13 about praying with persistence and believing that, when you ask, it will be given, and when you knock, the door will be opened. Jesus also emphasized the fact that our heavenly Father wants to give good gifts to those who ask. In other words, said Jesus, trust that God will give you what you need. Trust that God is in charge and that somehow everything is going to work out. Trust that, if you don't understand it now, you will later on. Trust that, no matter what happens, God will give you the strength to cope. Trust that, if you follow God's guidance, you might become an instrument of God in answering your own prayer.

Maybe sometime you've seen the 2007 movie *Evan Almighty*. It was a pretty goofy film about a congressman who became a modern-day Noah. Evan had prayed that his family would be united and happy. In response, God told him to build an ark. Of course, Evan resisted. It didn't make any sense. Twenty-first century, suburb-living, U.S. congressmen don't build arks. But God kept reminding Evan of his prayer. And God was too persuasive for Evan to ignore. So finally Evan trusted God and built the ark. They barely got the animals and his family on board before a dam broke and a reservoir flooded the entire valley, washing right up to Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. The ark definitely drew Evan's family closer, and it protected them from drowning in the flood. Some bad legislation that would have hurt the environment was also averted. Those good results came because Evan prayed and then trusted God's guidance in fulfilling that prayer.

When we're in the midst of struggle and confusion, we may not always understand what God is thinking. We may wonder if God is there, if God cares about us, if God has stopped listening, or if God is absolutely crazy. But, if we're going to be a praying people, we have to believe that God knows a lot more than we do about what is good for us. We have to believe that, even if we suffer hardship, God will be with us faithfully through thick and thin. In other words, when you pray, you should trust God.

CONCLUSION

Whenever I need help in praying, I have a couple of go-to places. The first is the Book of Psalms, which is a great source of prayers that honor, petition, and trust God. The second is our hymnal, which is also full of so many prayer songs and songs about prayer. Listen to these lyrics, and say them along with me, if you know them:

What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge; take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In his arms he'll take and shield thee; thou wilt find a solace there. (Joseph Scriven, 1855)

Prayer is good medicine for any ill. As Jesus taught, honor God, petition God, and trust God—
when you pray.