

SERMON TITLE: “Improving Our Lives through Spiritual Disciplines: Praying”
SERMON TEXT: Luke 11:1-13
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 22, 2023, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Every Thursday, our church sends out an email that has a prayer list on it. Then, on Sundays, we update and pray for that list. But even twice per week doesn't always adequately address all the requests that are raised in our congregation. So, this past Friday, I activated a text message group to ask the United Women in Faith to pray for a situation that had taken a sudden turn for the worse. In this big world that has so many problems beyond our control, there isn't always a lot we can do. But praying is certainly within our power. When forces of evil, extreme weather, violence, and scary health conditions threaten to overpower our sense of well-being, one thing we can do is lift our hearts to God in prayer.

In these first weeks of the New Year, we've been improving our lives through the spiritual disciplines of participating in Holy Communion, reading the Bible, and reaffirming our baptisms. Today, we're going to focus our attention on a conversation between Jesus and the disciples. As the disciples followed Jesus around and marveled at his miraculous interactions with people, they could see that Jesus' prayers were powerful. The disciples observed that Jesus went off by himself to talk with God and then came back to the crowds with strong faith and ability to heal the sick, the hungry, and the outcast. Jesus' prayers clearly improved people's lives. So, it's no wonder that, in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 11, the disciples wanted to learn these spiritual skills. Since we too would like to improve our lives and the lives of people around us, let's take a look at the questions the disciples asked and the answers Jesus gave them about this spiritual discipline of praying.

1—WHAT SHOULD WE SAY?

The first thing the disciples wanted to know was what they should say in their prayers. That's why Jesus taught them a specific prayer they could remember. We know *that* prayer today 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 the one here in the Gospel of Luke. United Methodists say "trespasses," and some other denominations say, "sins" or "debts." Roman Catholics add extra words at the end of the Lord's Prayer. And there's an "ecumenical version" that different yet. They're all similar enough, however, that the essentials are the same.

The Lord's Prayer contains praise, respect for God's will, petitions for basic human needs, confession of sin, desire for forgiveness, and yearning for spiritual strength. The themes of the prayer are what make it so great. The particular words are just the vehicles to convey that meaning. I'm sure God appreciated the prayer of the four-year old who repeated what she thought she had learned at church: "And forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets."¹ Whether the word is *trespasses* or *trash baskets*, *debts* or *sins*, the idea is still the same. When garbage clutters our lives, we need to forgive and be forgiven.

Memorized prayers can really help us. "Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep" is a comforting prayer for small children. Some families recite memorized prayers before meals. Persons who go to Alcoholics Anonymous 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 addiction.

Memorized prayers give us a starting place. They give us ideas upon which we can expand. Other prayers are based on acronyms. For example, you can pray an A.C.T.S. prayer. That means you begin with **A**doration and praise. Then you offer **C**onfession for your sins. Then you tell God, "Thank you," for wonderful blessings. Then you end with **S**upplication and requests. If you can remember A-C-T-S—**A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanks, and **S**upplications—then you can put together a prayer on the spur of the moment.

You can also read prayers from a devotional book. Some of you have hymnbooks at home. Lots of hymns are actually prayers that you can sing. If you don't feel comfortable singing the hymn prayers, then just read them like poetry, which is another way to pray. Nowadays, there are also thousands of prayers on the internet that you can read. If the prayers you read don't exactly fit your situation, then just change them up.

Please know that God isn't worried about flowery speech. Whether the words you pray are your own or someone else's, they don't have to sound like a Hallmark card or the King James Bible. God just wants to hear what's on your mind and in your heart. Prayer is simply a conversation with God. Ideally, it should come as naturally to us as speaking with a very close friend or family member. If you like to write in a journal, then write your prayers there. If your preferred method of communication is typing or speaking text messages into your cell phone, then I suppose you could even pray text messages to God. Just be careful not to send them to the wrong number!

Even if we are struggling to put our thoughts into words, 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 "with sighs too deep for words." Sometimes, our prayers don't need words at all. Sometimes it's better to be quiet and listen for God to speak to us. Whatever it takes to have a two-way conversation with God—that's what we should say in prayer.

2—WHEN IS THE RIGHT TIME TO PRAY?

When Jesus told his disciples the hypothetical story of going to a friend's house at midnight and asking for bread, he was answering 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 the little boy:

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

"Yes, sir," the child answered.

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

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

One of the 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 is lurking. 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 also?"

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 whenever we have a need. In fact, another place in the Bible suggests that 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 of constantly being in the presence of God.

Usually, though, it's helpful to have some cues that remind us to pray. First thing in the morning and last thing before bed are sure times to get our daily prayers said. Some people pray every time they hear an emergency siren or every time they stop at a red light. I had a friend in college who had a little note taped onto the radio in his car. 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. I've done a lot of praying while walking. I suspect many of you pray while you're writing get well and sympathy cards.

Pray regularly. Pray whenever needed. And pray until you receive an answer. Jesus' story wasn't just about a friend asking for bread at midnight. It was about asking again and again until a response is given. Someone has compared prayer to "seed thrown in God's garden. Some prayers are petunias—annuals that bloom quickly. Others are like irises—perennials that keep coming back. Still others are trees—palms, olives, cypress, redwoods." The trees take root very slowly, but if the person keeps praying patiently, an answer will sprout.⁴

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?" When we ask, will we always receive? When we search, will we always find? When we knock, will the door always be opened? Like the friend in Jesus' story, will God always come to our rescue with the bread we desire?

Jesus' answer to this question is that God wants to give us good gifts. The flip side is that God doesn't want to give us what's bad or wrong for us. Just like a parent who doesn't give in to their children's every request, God denies us some of the things we wish for. God wants us to have what's best, not necessarily what we think we want. Consequently, 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, to be more faithful, and to work harder.

The high school student who never opens 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 our dreams. Prayer is the desire of our heart, 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 prepared to receive.

CONCLUSION

Over the years, I've noticed that there are some people who are willing to say prayers at the beginning of meetings and classes, and other people who always defer to someone else. Well, folks, praying isn't just for the paid professionals or the super spiritual. Praying is for everyone. So I encourage you to memorize a prayer. Read a prayer. Write a prayer. Stumble through a prayer. Have a conversation in prayer. And, for sure, pray regularly, because God is eager to give good gifts to those

who ask. So let's apply ourselves to this religious practice. Let's improve our lives through the spiritual discipline of praying.

¹Tal Bonham, ed., *The Treasury of Clean Church Jokes* (Broadman Press: Nashville, 1986), p. 95.

²Adapted from Hoover Rupert, ed., *Why Didn't Noah Swat Both Mosquitoes?* (CSS Publ. Co.: Lima, OH, 1994), p. 20.

³1 Thessalonians 5:17.

⁴Author unknown.